

*Disruptive Community: The Irish in Argentina.  
Readings of Rodolfo Walsh and Juan José Delaney*

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**Abstract:** *A community is principally characterized by the collectivity of its members and is defined spatially in terms of arbitrary boundaries that consistently separate its inhabitants from 'Others' and the "otherness" of the external world. For a number of centuries the diasporic Irish community has been able to forge communal spaces in Caribbean and Latin American nations, most prominently in Argentina. Nonetheless, these Irish communities in Argentine literature are often represented as insular and, therefore, disruptive to the monolithic national discourse of the host country. The portrayal of the diasporic Irish figure, which deviates from patterns of social normativity, constitutes an important facet of these individuals that permits an analysis of the ways in which their presence interrupts the Argentine literary imaginary. As Hellen Kelly observes, "'deviancy' in its variant forms has become, therefore, the most accessible and fruitful approach to assessing levels of integration amongst Irish immigrant communities" (128). In order to examine and comment on the various forms of deviations and, at the same time, the levels of integration of the immigrant Irish community, I offer my readings of the three short stories which comprise the "Irish series" by Rodolfo Walsh and Juan José Delaney's novel *Moira Sullivan*. I look to interrogate the elements of the diasporic Irish experience which have informed and given shape to representations of diasporic Irish individuals and the spaces they occupy. I also seek to problematize previous readings of the selected texts that have, in general, omitted any critical consideration of and reflection upon their imbued 'Irishness' within the context of Argentine literary imaginaries.*

**Keywords:** *Rodolfo Walsh; Juan José Delaney; Irishness; Irish immigration.*

As Irish immigration reached an historical peak during the 1830s, continuing through the Great Famine and into the twentieth century, the United States did not always represent a land of opportunity for numerous Irish sojourners. Having been subjected to centuries English imperialism, justified by established "hostile depictions of the Gaelic Irish as uncivilized" (Garner 72) with an "unruly, violent nature," many diasporic Irish sought to allude the same pseudo-racialized discourse and subsequent oppression they had endured under British rule. Regrettably vast amounts of Irish emigrants to the United States found that, "America was an English derivative society, and to the Irish it appeared that the traditional Anglo bias and hatred against the Irish was simply carried over into the United States" (Hogan 103). Edmundo Murray, author of *Becoming Gauchos Ingleses*, writes that "during most of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century, encouraged by their families and community leaders, and favored by their condition of British subjects, nearly 45,000 Irish immigrants contributed

to build a community [in Argentina] that was atypical within the Irish Diaspora” (9). In Buenos Aires the “favorable” aspect of British subjugation to which Murray refers was the fact that the Irish were “nativized” speakers of English and, consequently, able to assume the role of “Ingleses” within a Spanish-speaking society. This ethnic and social (mis)categorization allowed many diasporic Irish to ascend in Argentine society as landowners and achieve economic stability and prosperity.

This phenomena was noted by James Joyce, in his short story “Eveline” In it he tells the tale of Frank, a “kind, manly, open-hearted” Irishman who has returned on holiday to the old country from Buenos Aires where has emigrated and “fallen on his feet” (32). During his brief visit Frank falls in love with the young Dubliner Eveline who he plans to marry and whisk away to Argentina where “he had a home waiting for her” (31). Nonetheless, at the moment when she is to board the “night-boat” (31) bound for South America with Frank, “a bell clanged upon her heart,” (34) and Eveline proves to be incapable of abandoning her family and homeland. Thus, Frank returns to Buenos Aires alone. The story that Joyce does not tell is that of the experiences of Frank, and the many diasporic Irish like him, as they sought to establish a new Irish diaspora community in Argentina. In *Global Diasporas*, Robin Cohen lists the nine qualities he believes individuals of diaspora communities share, the three most relevant of which are, “a dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions”, “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness,” and “the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (26). Though Cohen categorizes the Irish diaspora with the preceding adjective “victim,” the aforementioned motivators play a more important role than does “victimization” in literary representations of the Irish diaspora in Argentina. As diasporic subjects, the spaces they inhabit, “the lush and boundless land between the city of Buenos Aires and Southern Santa Fe” (Murray, 2), can be viewed as what Avtar Brah and Laura Zuntini de Izarra call “diaspora space” which “is the intersectional location of three immanent elements — diaspora, frontiers and (dis)location, and it is inhabited not only by diasporic subjects but equally by those who are constructed and represented as “indigenous” (139). The fictional diasporic Irish characters under study here, as I argue, are represented as “(dis)located” diasporic subjects in that their identity is in a state of reconstruction and reaffirmation caused by new “(dis)locations” and mottled attempts at enmeshing themselves with “indigenous Others.” In this case the Argentines are those represented as perhaps more “legitimate” but often segregate. As Peter Childs observes, “diasporic identities work at other levels than those marked by national boundaries” (52), and, even more so here as these boundaries are dictated and defended by a deviant diaspora community rather than a set of state sanctioned interactions. Just as Jennifer Slivka warns, “The foreigner or exile is ambiguous—his selfhood is fluid as a result of his constant wanderings—and so she/he disrupts the native citizens” (117).

Now, who is to tell us the “disruptive” stories of the Irish diaspora community in Argentina that Joyce did not? David Spurr in his forward to *Becoming Gauchos Ingleses* believes that Murray does so “with clarity, historical mastery, an eye for detail and an ear for anecdote...[by having] written the definitive account of Irish-Argentine literature” (ix). Although Murray’s work is quite comprehensive and eloquent, it is, in his own words, “a discussion about the literature in Argentina” (xi), unlike *Dubliners* which is a masterpiece of creative fiction. Therefore, it may be more congruent and fruitful to explore texts written by other fiction authors in order to discover the stories they have imaginatively penned about the

diasporic Irish in Argentina. For these narratives I look to Rodolfo Walsh's collection of three short stories posthumously titled *Los irlandeses* (or *la serie/el ciclo de Los irlandeses*) and Juan José Delaney's novel *Moirá Sullivan*. Both are Argentine-born authors of Irish heritage who took from personal experiences and intimate images to portray the Irish diaspora community in Argentina through their fiction. Yet, how do we read these narratives? Or more immediately, how have these narratives been read thus far by critical scholars? Worryingly, as Zuntini de Izarra notes, "Irish immigration to South America [and the Caribbean] has been studied from few historical perspectives and very little has been done to trace contemporary Irish literary diasporic voices in these geographical locations" (137). More worrying, as I contend, academic readership and criticism has offered, for the most part, few insights or textually entrenched reflections while approaching these "Argentine" texts so permeated by "Irishness" and profoundly representative of this distinctive diaspora community.

Much scholarship on Walsh to date has been plagued by lackluster criticism when addressing his "Irish texts." For instance, Horacio Verbitsky in the prologue to *Cuentos*, the first collection specifically featuring the "serie de los Irlandeses" in complete form, comments on almost every other work written by Walsh except the short stories at hand and concludes that, "*Operación Masacre* brings him to another region, to a summit that only texts of national stature inhabit. It is our *Facundo* and a solitary incursion into the future"<sup>1</sup> (12). Similarly, great Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco in his *Nota preliminar: Rodolfo J. Walsh desde México*, which prefaces Walsh's *Obra literaria completa*, feels that "the Irish collection probably constitutes the nucleus of a work that, for lack of a better term, we can call 'imaginative'" and that "this intimate literature...is no less social nor political than *Operación Masacre*"<sup>2</sup> (6). Pacheco, like Verbitsky, appears equally awed by Walsh's paramount novel and misconstrues the intimate and autobiographical underpinnings which motivate these stories as being simply "imaginative". More recently, the 2007 El Aleph edition of *Los irlandeses*, forwarded by Ricardo Piglia's succinct interview with Walsh, was printed with "Los oficios terrestres" ("Earthly chores") first, inexplicably confusing the original narrative and intertextual coherence of the series that begins with "Irlandeses detrás de un gato" ("Irish boys after a cat"), followed by the aforementioned story and closing with "Un oscuro día de justicia" ("A dark day of justice"). Finally, the title of Eleonora Bertranou's 2006 study *Rodolfo Walsh: argentino, escritor, militante*<sup>3</sup> plainly summarizes the prevailing type of uniform readings given to Walsh's work. Although Bertranou generally addresses the Irish presence in Argentina, her consideration of Walsh's Irish series is only in relation to his genealogy and she fails to offer substantive literary reflection on the series, concluding inferentially that "we have seen in this study how the estrangement from his Irish ancestors influenced Walsh's life"<sup>4</sup> (170). With all of the above, it would appear then that the Irish series" presents an inaccessibility for many critical scholars because of evident "misreadings" of the inextricable "Irishness" Walsh so skillfully weaves into his writings.

The case of Juan José Delaney is much simpler than that of Walsh; Delaney remains a severely under-read author to present. The only serious scholar to give a measure of attention to his body of work thus far has been Zuntini de Izarra who writes, "Delaney transcends the theme of geographic dislocations and explores the inner human conflicts that arise not only out of the duality of the self but mainly out of the encounter of two cultures producing an art of his own or "cross-border writing" where reality, diaspora history and fiction are in constant tension" (1). Delaney, like Walsh, has produced texts which detail simultaneously the inner and outer tensions of a community caught in the interstice between two cultures; the Argentine

and the Irish. In order to approach the selected works by Walsh and Delaney it is crucial to keep at the forefront of my readings theorizations of communities and their relevance to the Irish diaspora. Benedict Anderson in his study *Imagined Communities* proposes that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). For Anderson, a community (or a nation which he claims is an imagined political community) is always imagined as “‘limited’ because it has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other communities” (7). Inherent in his theory there is a dynamic contrast of members in one group to those of another, or an entire group in contrast to the whole of another, though not necessarily an active opposition of one to the other. As such Anderson argues that, “no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (7). A nation or a community recognizes its sovereignty yet must simultaneously compare and measure itself against “others” in order to affirm and reaffirm its unique identity and place in the world. Nevertheless, although Anderson does not imply conflict between two distinct imagined communities he does state that members of a particular nation or community do not envision a day when all members of the human race will join them, forming one all-encompassing global community sharing the same outlooks and values (7). In the case of the Irish community in Argentina we shall observe that the “others” occupy the spaces on either side. For author Hellen Kelly, however, it is “‘deviancy’ in its variant forms [which] has become the most accessible and fruitful approach to assessing levels of integration amongst Irish immigrant communities” (128). Indeed, the difference indicators most commonly used in racialized assessments of the Irish are language, behavior, or their “bad habits”, like laziness and drunkenness. In the Argentine context it then becomes their shared “lifestyle”, meaning poverty and “mischievous [or deviant] practices” (Bahri 61), which dominates in analytical discourse.

The way in which Walsh imagines and represents the Irish community in his fiction is via the Instituto Fahy, an isolated Catholic school for poor Irish boys outside Buenos Aires. The protagonist in this bubble world is “the boy who they later called *el Gato*”<sup>5</sup> (87), son of Argentine father Bugnicourt, and Irish mother O’Hara. Upon arriving to the Fahy, *el Gato* suddenly finds himself “on the edge of the enumerated patio, immense, deep like a well, surrounded on its four sides by immense walls that high above cut a metal sheet in the dark sky”<sup>6</sup> (89). While *el Gato* observes “the one hundred and thirty Irish boys that were playing”<sup>7</sup> the insularity of the Fahy is reinforced by “those terrible walls, rambling and vertiginous”<sup>8</sup> (89) that separate it and its inhabitants from the external world. As the new arrival, *el Gato* is forced to measure himself against the other Irish boys in fist-fights in order to place him in their ranking, the established hierarchy of combative prowess. This confrontation he desperately attempts to avoid but is inevitably cornered and outnumbered and must then engage in the violent initiation process through which his membership in the community is consummated. Walsh employs the terror of ever-immanent violence, not only from without but also from within, to intensify the claustrophobic sensation of this communal diaspora space informing the reader that “[*el Gato*] was intensely frightened [of the other boys], just as he was frightened of himself, of those hidden parts of his being which until then had only manifested themselves in fleeting forms, like in his dreams or his unusual fits of rage”<sup>9</sup> (90).

Having endured his trial by fisticuffs in the episode of the series, in the next, “*Los oficios terrestres*”, we find *el Gato* settled into his position among the ranks of orphaned and poor Irish boys for whom the outside world remains grey and impalpable. His “*oficio*

terrestre” is, quite simply, to take out the trash with the help of el pequeño Dashwood. In doing so Dashwood, who longs for a life outside Fahy, abruptly leaves, despite the fact that “there was no path in sight, but he knew that he was leaving forever”<sup>10</sup> (33). Dashwood, in an act of self-exile, disappears “among the late visiting fog”<sup>11</sup> (33) as he has crossed beyond the imagined limits of the community. In the final story, “Un oscuro día de justicia”, Walsh demonstrates that individuals who reside outside Fahy may seem as part of an extended Irish diaspora community, however, we soon see this is not so. At the top of the social hierarchy in the Fahy is “el celador Geilty,” an imposing bully who organizes disproportionate battles, ironically referred to as “el Ejercicio,” among the younger boys to satisfy his own sadistic pleasures. Sylvia Lago believes that Walsh utilizes Geilty to transform “the world inside the school into the first ring which trains them, relentlessly, for the subsequent aggression that each one will have to face”<sup>12</sup> (62). Shifting focus from el Gato who is “strong now, sure of himself”<sup>13</sup> (25), Walsh now brings el pequeño Collins forward in the narrative, a smaller boy that calls for the help of his “tío Malcolm” to come to his defense, and that of other boys like him, and defeat Geilty in his own vicious game. With the odds stacked in his favor, uncle Malcolm arrives to the Fahy only to be brutally bested by Geilty and at that moment, “the people learned that they were alone, and that they would have to fight for themselves...and that within their own conscience they would find the means, the silence, the ingenuity and the strength”<sup>14</sup> (52). It is here that Walsh demonstrates the impenetrable insularity of the Fahy because those outside its closed walls are powerless to correct the aberrant structures within.

For Delaney’s protagonist and title character, Moira Sullivan, her integration to the Irish diaspora community is multifaceted. The author begins her story in the U.S. after her family’s immigration from Ireland to Pennsylvania. Later, Moira as a young adult with the aspirations of a singer/actress, moves to New York where, “...she had insisted on clarifying to her New Yorker friends that her family had never been a part of the secret society of the Molly Maguires, an Irish mafia that since illegality got control over the mining business in Pennsylvania”<sup>15</sup> (13). Distinguishing her family and herself from the most deviant of Irish diaspora societies, Moira instead inserts herself into the Irish art community in New York, which meets at the Irish pub Mulligan’s Place. Here she also meets her one true love and first husband Konrad Storm. Unluckily Konrad abruptly dies and Moira, a short time later, finds herself in the arms of her future second husband Cornelius Geraghty who carries her away to Buenos Aires. Now she becomes, “Mrs. Moira Sullivan de Geraghty, North American of Irish origin, recently arrived to a remote country of equally remote language and culture, a two-time immigrant, maybe three”<sup>16</sup> (104) and must navigate an unknown diaspora space with her skewed sense of ‘Irishness’ as her only compass. Delaney’s novel, which combines omniscient narration, transcribed sheet music and the epistolary, prefers the latter to give testimonial credence to Moira’s criticisms of the Irish community in Buenos Aires, one that she evaluates with unbridled subjectivity. In a letter dated “18 March, 1932”<sup>17</sup> to her friend Allison back in the U.S. she writes at length:

I know it will be hard for you to understand but to this remote place in the southern cone arrived thousands of Irish from the second half of the last century and into the beginnings of this one, pursued by the Famine and seduced by the myth that the streets were paved with gold. Gold? Golden piss! Cornelius’ new friends make fun in precarious Spanish, although it is quite evident that they feel grateful towards a country that has received them with generosity and sympathy. Moreover, just as it happens there, it is difficult for a person who has the desire and will not to find

possibilities here to develop their talents. I am talking about the Irish, but in reality there are many foreign peoples who have congregated in Argentina. I should say that the sons of Erin boast about having integrated with the rest of the population, the truth isn't exactly so. They have their own schools, their own temples and their club...they isolate themselves or are slowly but relentlessly segregated. In truth this happens with almost all the foreign communities that reside here: Arabs, Armenians, Ukrainians and, quite particularly, the Jews. Not to mention the British for whom they add a certain ancestral cynicism to their unjustified disdain. On the other hand I know colleagues of Cornelius, of Irish origin, that pass themselves off as English to get ahead in their jobs. It makes them feel more distinguished! Can you believe that? That all seems disgraceful to me.<sup>18</sup>

Moira's disillusionment with the Irish community in Argentina is not unwarranted as she condemns their xenophobic and dubious practices. Declan Kiberd in his extensive work, *Inventing Ireland*, deduces that the intent of English colonial policy in Ireland was straightforward: "to create a new England called Ireland" (15). Delaney represents the diasporic Irish as a post-colonial product intrinsically tied to England and Anglo-Saxon culture and underscores their appropriation of the language and tactics of their former colonizers. The Irish diaspora community that Delaney portrays could be viewed as beholden to English colonial policy in their attempts to "create a new Ireland called Argentina."

Joyce ends his short story "Eveline" with the image of Frank as he leaves Ireland and Eveline's eyes, like the eyes of a cold and stagnant Irish nation, "gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (34). For Joyce, the vacancy of emotion in her stare represents the irreparable rupture diaspora has created between the diasporic Irish and the Irish in Ireland. Thus, neither Walsh nor Delaney uses their fictional characters to evoke nostalgia for the homeland. At the other extreme, while Argentina "grappled with forging a sense of nation state," the Irish diaspora community "struggled equally to reconcile its own internal conflict in reasserting an Irish identity" (Kelly 157) and subsequently disrupted the formation of a monolithic Argentine nation state. Walsh and Delaney, when read against each other and through a lens of 'Irishness', elucidate the inner-workings of a disruptive community, a community in an unresolved conflict with its own insular in-betweenness.

## Notes

- 1 "*Operación Masacre* lo eleva a otra región, a una cumbre que sólo habitan los libros nacionales. Es nuestro *Facundo*, y una incursión solitaria al futuro". Please note that the translations in English are mine.
- 2 "el ciclo de los irlandeses constituye probablemente el núcleo de la obra que, a falta de mejor término, podemos llamar 'imaginativa' de Walsh" y que "esta literatura íntima...no es menos social ni menos política que *Operación Masacre*".
- 3 Argentine, writer, militant.
- 4 "hemos visto en este trabajo como influyó en la vida de Walsh el desarraigo de sus antepasados irlandeses".
- 5 "el chico que más tarde llamaron el Gato".
- 6 "al borde del patio enumerado, inmerso, hondo como un pozo, rodeado en sus cuatro costados por las inmensas paredes que allá arriba cortaban una chapa metálica de cielo oscureciente".
- 7 "los ciento treinta irlandeses que jugaban".
- 8 "esas paredes terribles, trepadoras y vertiginosas".
- 9 "[el Gato] les temía [a los otros chicos irlandeses] intensamente, como se temía a sí mismo, a estas partes ocultas de su ser que hasta entonces solo se manifestaban en formas fugitivas, como sus sueños o sus insólitos ataques de cólera".

- 10 “no había camino a la vista, pero sabía que se estaba yendo para siempre”.
- 11 “entre los tardíos visitantes de la niebla”.
- 12 “el mundo dentro del colegio [en] el primer ring que los adiestra, inexorablemente, para la agresividad posterior que cada uno deberá enfrentar”.
- 13 “fuerte ahora, seguro de sí mismo”.
- 14 “el pueblo aprendió que estaba solo, y que debía pelear por sí mismo...y que de su propia entraña sacaría los medios, el silencio, la astucia y la fuerza”.
- 15 “...se había empeñado en aclarar a sus amigos neoyorquinos que su familia jamás había integrado la sociedad secreta de los Molly Maguires, mafia irlandesa que desde la ilegalidad procuró controlar el negocio minero en Pennsylvania”.
- 16 “la señora Moira Sullivan de Geraghty, norteamericana de origen irlandés, recién llegada a un país remoto de lengua y cultura también remotas, dos veces inmigrante, quizá tres”.
- 17 “18 de marzo de 1932”.
- 18 “Sé que te costará entenderlo pero a este remoto punto del cono sur se llegaron desde la segunda mitad del siglo pasado y hasta principios de éste, miles de irlandeses perseguidos por la Hambruna y seducidos por el mito según el cual aquí las calles estaban pavimentadas con oro. “¿Oro? ¡Orín!”, se burlan en precario castellano los recientes amigos de Cornelius, aunque es muy evidente que sienten gratitud hacia un país que los ha recibido con generosidad y simpatía. Además, tal como ocurre allá, es difícil que quien tenga deseos y voluntad de progreso no encuentre aquí posibilidades de desarrollar sus talentos. Hablo de los irlandeses, pero en realidad son muchos los pueblos que se han congregado en la Argentina. Debo decir que los hijos de Erin se jactan de haberse integrado con el resto de la población, la verdad no es exactamente así. Tienen sus propios colegios, sus propios templos y su club...se aíslan o son lenta pero inexorablemente segregados. En verdad esto ocurre con casi todas las comunidades extranjeras que se han radicado acá: árabes, armenios, ucranios y, muy especialmente, judíos. Para no hablar de los británicos que a su injustificado desdén agregan cierto cinismo ancestral...Por otro lado sé de colegas de Cornelius que, siendo de origen irlandés, se hacen pasar por ingleses para progresar en sus empleos. ¡Les parece más distinguido! ¿Puedes creer eso? A mí todo esto me resulta indigno”.

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