



**González-Arias, Luz Mar (ed.). *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 248 pp.**

The people in the Western world liked Africans the way you enjoyed animals in a zoo; you could visit them, feed them, play with them, but they must not be allowed outside their environment (Okorie, 2018).

This quote, taken from Melatu Uche Okorie's debut collection of short stories, *This Hostel Life* (2018), denounces the imperfections in the celebratory myths of multiculturalism and integration in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. In this publication, the Irish Nigerian writer, who was one of the guests in the 2018's edition of the International Literary Festival Dublin, tells stories primarily, but not exclusively, about her own experience as an asylum seeker living in direct provision for almost nine years, and as a black African woman and single mother struggling to fit the profile of her newly granted Irish citizenship.

Okorie's denunciation parallels the issues addressed in the recently released *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness*, edited by Luz Mar González-Arias and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017. In her introduction, the editor revisits the works of artists from diverse backgrounds such as Marina Carr (theatre), Celia de Fréine (poetry), Amanda Coogan (performance) and Carmel Benson (painting) in order to argue that imperfections are a "strategy of resistance against the tendency to turn the collective memory of a country (...) into a record of glossy images" (p.4).

Following on that, the book is organised in five main areas of imperfections. The first part, "The Tiger and Beyond: Political, Social and Literary Fissures", reveals the face of capitalist Celtic Tiger Ireland. The articles analysing Peter Cunningham's *Capital Sins* (2010) and John McGahern's *The Barracks* (1963) and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) consider unbridled consumerism, political corruption, and the transformations in rural Ireland in the period. The opening article of the section, "What Plenty Laid Bare! Ireland's Harsh Confrontation with Itself: 1999-2014", challenges national sovereignty in the face of twenty-first century fluid capital. In it, Ciaran Benson makes a thought-provoking analysis of the housing boom and crisis. To him, the Irish who became rich and had financial conditions to own an estate chose to mimic their Anglo-Irish colonisers.

When the boom arrived, and people had more choice and means to build what they wanted in the countryside, they could have chosen as ideals the modernized cottage in continuity with their roots. (...) But by and large they were not for 'us', at least not for those of 'us' who live in the countryside. What many of 'us' wanted was our very own Big House. (...) By electing the focus on the isolation of the stand-alone house (...) [,] rural dwellers have also committed themselves to a reliance on the car. (...) That in turn has led to the destruction of small villages (...) and the weakening of communal ties (p. 32-33).

However, the article does not deepen into the discussion about the challenges of national sovereignty in the face of capital as a broader international phenomenon. According to Jürgen Habermas (1998), the nation-state is being confronted economically to open its territorial and political boundaries in the globalised era. It is not conceived as indivisible anymore, but as a shared institution with international agencies. Similarly, Bauman (1998) quotes G.H. von Wright in his *Globalisation – the Human Consequences* to affirm that the nation-state is waning and that its erosive forces are transnational. For the sociologist, the nation cannot fight back globalisation. In a world where capital does not have a home and financial flow is beyond national governments, nation-states become weak and dominated by global capital. Thus, although Benson criticizes the Celtic Tiger and makes a very interesting delivery of how it affected housing and identity, the correlation with the wider international capitalist phenomenon menacing the sovereignty of nation-states, could have been discussed in the article.

“Disruptions of Religion, Family and Marriage” are the concern of the second part of the book. Patricia Coughlan ponders over family relations in twentieth century Irish literature. Her article looks at the transformations in representation over time, investigates continuities, opposes monolithic and biological perspectives, and finally, explains how family structures are shaped by power – by the state and religion – in different epochs. Marisol Morales argues for the celebration of the mother-child bond as a form of resilience and survival in her reading of Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010). The closing chapter of the section, Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides’s “The Fallen Sex Revisited: Imperfect Celibacy in Mary Rose Callaghan’s *A Bit of a Scandal*”, debates the prevailing scapegoating, “demonization and marginalization of women within religious discourses” (p. 104). The chapter follows the trajectory of the novel’s protagonist, Louise, a young journalist working for an Irish Catholic press who starts an unofficial relationship with a priest and gets pregnant. She is vilified and degraded by her cleric partner who eventually asks her to have an abortion.

That was modern life: priests were jumping ship, as Vatican II hadn’t lived up to expectations. After all the promises, nothing had changed. Holy Catholic Ireland was still in the Dark Ages: married clergy, contraception, and abortion were verboten and always would be. Despite Jesus being the son of an unmarried mother, there had been Magdalene laundries until recently, and if you got in trouble, your family would give you a suitcase (p.103).

The article compares this novel with the medieval story of the lovers Abelard and Heloise. It explores the continuity of archaic ambivalence and misogyny towards women. Indeed, in one of the most important law codes applied by the Inquisition, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Kraemer, 1484), it is prescribed that women are sinners by nature, destroyers of souls, bitter than death, “the secret enemy and the deceiver” (p.98).

This section dialogues with 2018’s winning campaign to repeal the 8th amendment from the Irish constitution in the referendum held on May 25th to allow the passing of abortion laws. The repeal was chiefly opposed by Catholic groups and some of the agenda presented in the articles, as signaled above, were part of the dispute.

In the “Ex-Centric Bodies and Disquieting Spaces”, the debate on gender, sexuality

and religion lingers on, now with primary focus on physicality. Form and content converge in Rui Carvalho Homem's comparison of Paul Muldoon's post-modern aesthetics with unruly bodies. Phallic imperfections and matrixical borderspaces are analysed in Anne Enright's works by Hedwig Schwall. Although the article makes an in-depth examination of the matter, it lacks a more comprehensive introduction of the theoretical concepts applied so the reader who is not familiar with them can follow the reading. The female body is approached as monstrous and subversive in Aida Rosende Pérez's examination of Emer Martin's *Baby Zero* (2007). Lastly, Dublin is addressed as a living urban body in transformation in MacDara Woods, Paula Meehan, Eavan Boland and other poets' works.

The section "Stereotypes and distortion of Irishness" includes two articles. In "Irish Drinking Culture on Screen", Rosa González-Casademont investigates how the stereotype of the heavy drinking Paddy is represented on screen and how it defies rigid Catholic codes. "The Actor's Search for the Perfect Irish Accent", by Shane Walshe, motivated by the contention over authentic Irish accents in production of Irish plays in the U.S., evaluates a number of dialect handbooks used to learn Irish accents.

To conclude, the final chapter "Absolutely Imperfect": in Conversation with Lia Mills" grants the reader an interview that considers the failures of twenty-first century Ireland. Luz Mar González-Arias and Lia Mills discuss Ireland's most shameful and imperfect aspects of the day, such as direct provision and the deportation of asylum seekers, sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and women, as well as the Magdalene laundries. They also talk about Mill's novel *Fallen* (2014), Unesco's 2016 Dublin One City One Book, the Easter Rising, national memory and Mill's memoir, *In Your Face*.

*National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness* provides a myriad of perspectives on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The reader can largely observe the persistence of traditional imperfections of Irish identity such as the controversial relationship with the Catholic Church that affects family, gender and sexuality. In addition, the shadow of the coloniser still inhabits the Irish collective unconsciousness reproduced in housing, consumerism and class divisions. Finally, new imperfections are dealt with when asylum seeking, human trafficking, political corruption, and the devastating power of fluid capital are addressed.

The book touches open wounds and discusses disturbing but necessary issues. It projects us onto the twenty-first century Ireland, one in which imperfections force us to look at one another. The volume should be praised for its delivery on gender, sexuality and bodies as marginalised aspects of Irish identity. However, it is desirable that in the future further publications on the subject investigate other marginalised aspects of Irish identity, like non-European migrant communities – including Africans, Brazilians, etc –, and travelers, whose national status as an Irish minority ethnic group was only recognised by the Irish government in 2017.

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