

María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, ed. 2016. *Ex-Sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. x + 223 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4438-8700-7.

NOEMÍ PEREIRA-ARES

Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

noemi.pereira@usc.es

*Ex-Sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures* constitutes a thought-provoking collection of essays and is a valiant critical undertaking on the part of its editor and contributors, engaging as it does with geographies, literatures and subject positions traditionally deemed peripheral and subaltern. Drawing on feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist approaches, the volume offers startling insights into the intersections between gender and mobility in the work of contemporary women writers in Ireland, Wales and Galicia. As such, it focuses on women's literary production in three Atlantic regions existing, as the editor notes, "on the margins of their respective colonial metropolises [...] of their dependent economies" (2) and, one could even add, of their hegemonic literary traditions. Irish, Welsh and Galician literatures are nowadays each a thriving field in their own right, but much critical work is still necessary to rectify the conspicuous absence of female writers from their respective literary canons. The controversies surrounding *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Deane et al. 1991) are emblematic in this respect, and scholars working on Galician and Welsh literature have also denounced the difficulties faced by women writers to edge their way into literary canons that continue to be overwhelmingly male (González Fernández 2005; Dix 2016). The volume under review here contributes to redressing this imbalance, adding to previous publications on Irish, Welsh and Galician literature of female authorship (Entwistle 2013; Gramich 2007; Nogueira Pereira, Lojo Rodríguez and Palacios González 2010; Palacios González and González Fernández 2008; Palacios González and Lojo Rodríguez 2009). *Ex-Sistere* nonetheless incorporates new layers of criticism, hence its originality and scholarly value. It is specifically concerned with exploring the discourse of female mobility, thus counteracting the gender myopia that permeates much scholarship on migration. The need to critically address female mobility is indeed highlighted in the "Foreword" to the collection, written by the renowned Irish scholar Declan Kiberd, who invites, *inter alia*, the thought of women being "the main agents (as well as subjects) of a new phase in the culture of travel

and resettlement” (x). The “Foreword” is followed by an introduction by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, the editor of the collection. The introduction pertinently unpacks the significance of the concepts featuring in the title and, whilst acknowledging the volume’s indebtedness to other scholars and disciplines, Lorenzo-Modia succeeds in laying bare the book’s novel interventions in the field.

The collection is divided into three main sections—“Galician Literature,” “Irish Literature” and “Welsh Literature”—with a total of ten contributions that combine critical essays with autobiographical pieces of creative writing. María López Sandez’s “Women’s Mobility in Contemporary Galician Literature: From ‘Widows of the Living’ to ‘I Too Wish to Navigate’” inaugurates the section on Galician literature. In it, López Sandez traces shifts in the relationship between gender and mobility along a broad spectrum of texts, from Rosalía de Castro’s *oeuvre* to works by contemporary Galician women writers such as Xohana Torres, Begoña Caamaño, Lupe Gómez and Luísa Villalta, amongst others. The essay examines travelling as a “metaphor for the construction of identity” (10) and argues that, in the work of contemporary Galician women writers, eroticism, sexuality, eco-feminist perspectives and refashioned myths such as that of Penelope are all elements that work in tandem to deconstruct stereotypical notions of femininity and their projection onto the Galician geographical imaginary. Albeit from a different perspective, the emergence of novel imaginaries is also explored in María Xesús Nogueira Pereira’s “Naming the Foreign: External Toponymy in Galician Poetry Written by Women (2000-2009).” The essay aptly relates the analysis of foreign toponyms with the volume’s main concerns—gender and mobility—providing ample evidence from works by María do Cebreiro, Chus Pato, Yolanda Castaño, Eli Ríos, Doris Tembrás, María Reimóndez and Luz Pozo Garza. Particularly revealing is Nogueira’s comment on the political dimension underlying much foreign toponymy in Galician poetry, which shines a light on the political agenda underpinning the work of contemporary Galician women poets.

The remaining two contributions in the volume’s first section focus on Galician emigration to the UK during the Franco regime. In “The Chronotope of Galician Migration in Eva Moreda’s *A Veiga é como un tempo distinto*,” Olivia Rodríguez-González proposes an analysis of Moreda’s latest novel in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotope.” Her essay sagely reveals the non-linear structure of the novel and interprets its narrative disposition as a formal attempt to create and recreate “the chronotope of emigration” (72), that is, the disruption between past and present, between home and abroad, that impinges on the diasporic condition. Rodríguez-González’s theorisations on the “chronotope of emigration” could productively be applied to the interpretation of Xesús Fraga’s “Virtudes and Isabel: Two Galician Women in London,” an autobiographical text where, intriguingly, Galicia and London each become the abandoned place for different characters. The author reconstructs here his mother’s and grandmother’s life-stories as emigrants in London, while dramatising his own experience of dislocation as an individual transplanted

from London to Galicia at a tender age. The text evokes multiple tropes characteristic of diasporic fictions, but many readers might be surprised by the uncomfortable truths that Fraga reveals. As a case in point, the writer narrates how, on passing the UK border controls, his mother had to keep her pregnancy secret, for pregnant women were not accepted as foreign workers.

“Ireland, Spain and Galicia in the Work of Honor Tracy,” written by José Francisco Fernández, brings together Ireland and Galicia through a close exploration of Tracy’s writings on Éire and Spain. Ireland and Galicia, as Fernández amply demonstrates, are often depicted in a negative light in Tracy’s work, whereas England “appears as the model to follow” (100) and Spain is frequently romanticised. Reading against the grain, Fernández thus unveils the imperial perspective that Tracy casts upon Ireland and Galicia, offering insights into Tracy’s political ideology and her views on nationality and identity. Identity, coupled with issues of migration, is also a central concern in “The Discourse of Identity and Emigration in Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup*” by M<sup>a</sup> Dolores Gómez Penas and M<sup>a</sup> Amelia Fraga Fuentes. The only contribution in the collection to be centred on drama, this essay examines how Reid problematises the impact that migration might have on identity and vice versa. The principal character Theresa’s Catholic identity, the article argues, becomes “less significant” (128) in London—her diasporic locus—than in 1960s Belfast—her original homeland. However, in London, Theresa’s cultural identity jeopardises her position as an “insider,” potentially turning her into a “cultural ‘outsider’” (128)—which gives credence to Lorenzo-Modia’s words when she notes, in the “Introduction” to the volume, that “even white women may be considered as belonging to a different ethnic group when they are migrants” (2).

The act of staying might entail a political declaration as powerful as that of leaving, and this is precisely what María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia argues in “On Not Leaving Belfast in Trouble: Medbh McGuckian as a Symbol of Irish Resistance.” Looking back to Northern Ireland during the Troubles, Lorenzo-Modia reads McGuckian’s decision to remain in Belfast as a “symbol of resistance,” a significant and “valiant rejection of escapism” (137). In a convincing exercise of hypertextual deciphering, Lorenzo-Modia also tracks the links that McGuckian’s poems establish with a wide range of fictional and academic works. Especially thought-provoking is the critic’s interpretation of McGuckian’s use of hypertextual and “ex(tra)territorial” references (150) as a mechanism of figurative mobility—an argument that recalls Nogueira Pereira’s comments on the role of foreign toponyms in contemporary Galician poetry by women. A different form of intertextuality is analysed by Manuela Palacios in “Stand Still: Photographs of Irish Migrating Women.” In it, Palacios gathers together, and critically examines, a series of descriptions by Irish women writers of photographs depicting migrating women—and this includes pieces of writing by Evelyn Conlon, Celia de Fréine, Rita Kelly, Catherine Phil MacCarthy, Máighread Medbh, Paula Meehan, Lia Mills, Mary O’Donnell and Lorna Shaughnessy. Their texts emerge as

historical archives that retrieve multiple stories of female mobility and “give voice to a formerly silenced experience” (155). Palacios’s subsequent analysis does not simply examine these texts and their contexts. It also offers a compelling exploration of the “intersection of visual representation and creative writing” (154) and, by extension, of the very process of writing. One should congratulate Manuela Palacios on bringing out this hybrid contribution which, besides many other strengths, certainly fulfils its aim of “rescuing women’s experience from the limited circle of oral accounts [...] and plac[ing] them in the wider public sphere” (155).

The last section of the collection, focused on Welsh literature, is shorter in comparison, which arguably constitutes the main weakness of the book. In “Indian Defences: Mobile Identities in Nikita Lalwani’s *Gifted*,” Kevin Mills deals with a novel written by an Indian-Welsh author which revolves around an Indian family transplanted to Cardiff in the 1980s. Mills’s article offers a refreshing change in focus, as it engages with a different diasporic community and with a text where Wales features not as a nation of emigration, but rather of immigration. Approaching Lalwani’s novel as a *Bildungsroman*, Mills provides a systematic analysis of the conflicts that distance the heroine, Rumi, from her parents, and reads *Gifted* (2007) not only as a text on transnational migration, but also on Rumi’s “inner travel towards self-realization” (196). Mills’s essay gives way to Chris Kinsey’s “Mobility, Migration and Settling in Mid-Wales.” Combining prose and poetry, the contribution deals with the author’s own experience of mobility within and without Wales and, in this way, as throughout the volume, the section closes with a sample of creative writing. In Kinsey’s highly evocative text, the experience of migration is intertwined with other more figurative forms of mobility, including “pilgrimages of self-discovery” (207) along the course of various rivers. Kinsey’s narrative, with its multiple references to nature, lends itself to being read under an ecocritical perspective, and it even recalls the communion with nature that features in some of the works analysed by López Sandez in the first article of the volume. This provides further evidence of the concomitances that can be established between the different texts analysed throughout the collection, while simultaneously adding to the cohesion of the volume and potentially hinting at future lines of research.

Combining critical essays with pieces of creative writing, *Ex-Sistere* offers a kaleidoscopic and multi-angled approach to the collection’s main subject-matter. The editor is to be congratulated on the overall high standards of the publication, on selecting and structuring a range of original and insightful contributions, and ultimately on having brought out a volume that fulfils its promises. The collection is of interest to researchers and academics in various disciplines. It could appeal to scholars working on gender and mobility from perspectives as varied as feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism and literary and cultural studies, and it constitutes a valuable intervention in the field of Irish, Welsh and Galician literary criticism. Its close exploration of female mobility in the featured texts is extremely pertinent to those

critics concerned with mining this specific vein, and yet the literary concerns, patterns and tendencies adumbrated throughout the collection might also prove engaging to many other scholars working on Irish, Welsh and Galician literatures.

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Noemí Pereira-Ares is a member of the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Santiago de Compostela. She holds a PhD from the University of Santiago de Compostela, and her main research interests include South Asian diaspora fiction, migrant literature(s) in English, fashion and cultural studies.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filología. Universidad de Santiago de Compostela. Avda. Castelao, s/n. 15782, Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Tel.: +34 881 811 976.

