

Beyond Philology No. 13, 2016  
ISSN 1732-1220, eISSN 2451-1498

***Ex-sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary  
Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures***  
**edited by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia**

MARTA PORTELA FERNÁNDEZ

Lorenzo-Modia, María Jesús (ed.) (2016). *Ex-sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 230 pp. ISBN 978-1-4438-8700-7.

The Latin word *ex(s)istere*, to exist, refers to the act of being born, of moving from the maternal womb to the world outside. Hence, to live is to move, to travel, to progress. So how is it possible that in traditional historiography women have been ignored in such an elementary component of human nature? Lorenzo-Modia's collection of essays brings women's mobility to the fore, analysing works from three Atlantic European literary traditions: Galician, Irish and Welsh.

These three nations experienced heavy migratory flows in the 19th century, owing to the drawbacks of agriculturally based economies and their peripheral positions in relation to centres of power. Nowadays, they are once again seeing an increase in migration, this time due to their governments' policies of economic austerity in the context of the current economic recession. This is reflected in their literature, which is formed to a great extent by works written in their numerous diasporas. Moreover, such similarities facilitate the study and analysis of mobility in fiction through comparisons between

these migratory waves and the literary production associated with their diasporas.

Traditional literary criticism dealing with diasporic narratives of these countries has typically focused on male writers. However, sociologists such as Breda Gray (2004) and María Xosé Rodríguez Galdo (2009) have recently turned their attention to the role of women in migration. The essays collected in *Ex-sistere* seek to address mobility in literature from a gendered perspective, thus creating a bridge between literary criticism and sociology, helping to bring to light women's experience. In order to analyse the discourse of women writers on mobility, their studies take feminist, postcolonial and post-structuralist approaches.

Feminist and postcolonial criticism has tended to see travel and mobility as transgressive acts within the patriarchal models of Western societies, which have traditionally confined women to the private sphere. Bearing in mind that such theories used to refer mainly to middle-class white women, it is interesting to see that some critics, such as Judith Butler, have noted that when women are migrants, thus finding themselves isolated and in a different environment, they can be seen as belonging to a different ethnic group. Therefore, it is necessary to address notions of otherness (Butler 2005) and of women as nomadic subjects (Braidotti 1994), regarding both physical and psychological displacements from a gendered perspective.

The comparative analysis presented in *Ex-sistere* aims to find connections and intersections between three different nations and literary traditions on the basis of both their similarities and distinctive features. The three communities share a number of social and historical circumstances regarding their struggle to reconstruct a national identity, their official though minoritized vernacular languages, their massive migratory flows and, nowadays, their peripheral position within the European Union. Such parallelisms are visible in the literary

production of these nations, and are the starting point for *Ex-sistere*.

The book is divided into three sections, reflecting the three different literary traditions analysed in the essays. The first section deals with Galician literature. In the opening chapter, María López Sánchez discusses women's mobility in Galician literature, considering the historical background of different literary periods as well as focusing on contemporary women writers. The reworking of the classical myth of Penelope waiting for Ulysses to return home is especially important in her analysis from Díaz Castro's representation of Galicia as a passive Penelope to Xohana Torres' "Eu tamén navegar" [I too wish to navigate], a vindication of women's desire to take charge of their lives and travel. A good number of contemporary Galician women writers are part of the most recent generation of migrants; for them, mobility is a normal part of life. López Sánchez analyses how mobility affects the perception of Galicia in these writers' works. She argues that they have taken the traditional geographical imaginary and transformed it through an eco-feminist perspective, and thus that "women stop being the subject of a metaphor to become subjects implicated in the defence and protection of the territory" (López Sánchez 2016: 21).

In the next article, María Xesús Nogueira examines the use of foreign toponymy in contemporary Galician poetry by women, analysing works by María Reimóndez, Luz Pozo Garza and María do Cebreiro, among others. Apart from the way in which this reflects these poets' personal experience of travel and mobility, Nogueira also notes how external place names are used to create new imaginaries and hence to serve a political function: "These uses seek the visibilisation of forgotten places, the criticism of areas of conflict and new relationship models for external spaces, principally with those which occupy peripheral positions" (Nogueira 2016: 51).

The following article, by Olivia Rodríguez-González, analyses migration through Eva Moreda's short novel *A Veiga é como un*

*tempo distinto* (2011). Rodríguez-González pays special attention to the concept of chronotope. The story follows two characters who emigrate to London during Franco's dictatorship. The title itself, which considers the village A Veiga to be in a "different time", conveys the chronotopical value of the novel: "it occurs in the chronotope of emigration that the place which is abandoned, and thought of from a distance, remains frozen in the psychological time of the character" (Rodríguez-González 2016: 63).

The closing chapter in the section on Galician literature is an autobiographical text by Xesús Fraga, who writes an account of his family's experiences of migration, focusing on his mother and grandmother. The story begins with the former's journey to London, afraid that the immigration control authorities might discover that she is pregnant and deny her access to the country. Her experience is contrasted with that of her own mother, who emigrated to London after her husband left for Venezuela and was never heard of again, forcing her to falsify his signature in order to be able to travel alone – a requirement for women during Franco's dictatorship.

The first article in the section on Irish literature considers the work of Honor Tracy, an English writer who lived in Ireland. José Francisco Fernández examines the depictions of Ireland, Spain and Galicia in Tracy's collection of travel writing. Fernández remarks on the different treatment that both Ireland and Galicia receive in Tracy's works, as opposed to that of Spain or England, thus illustrating the colonial mindset with which she travelled, leaving her unable to understand the idiosyncrasies of two colonized regions.

In the next article, María Dolores González Penas and María Amelia Fraga Fuentes analyse the discourses of identity and emigration in the play *Tea in a China Cup*, by Christina Reid. Through its main character, Beth, the audience sees the story of an Irish-Protestant family in Northern Ireland, as well as the protagonist's development. González Penas and Fraga Fuentes focus their analysis on an aspect of the play which usually

goes unnoticed by critics – the portrayal of emigration. By opposing the characters of Beth, a non-migrant, and Theresa, a migrant, they study issues of mobility in the play.

María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia presents the case of emigration in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Many people left the country at that time in search of more peaceful surroundings, among them intellectuals and writers. However, Lorenzo-Modia focuses on the poet Medbh McGuckian and her decision to remain in her homeland. This lack of mobility is addressed as “a symbol of resistance, of the active defence of the land and the people” (Lorenzo-Modia 2016: 136); meanwhile, the act of leaving can be understood as a form of surrender.

In the final chapter of this section, Manuela Palacios presents a collection of photographs of migrating women and the descriptions provided by their relatives, including Irish women writers such as Celia de Fréine, Paula Meehan and Lia Mills, among others. In an exercise both of memory and creative writing, these authors seek to rescue the previously silenced experience of women’s migration and to denounce the oppression suffered “on the grounds of class, ideology and gender” (Palacios 2016: 155) which these women had to endure in order to improve their and their families’ lives. The descriptions explore the personal and socio-economic transformations brought about by emigration.

The last section of the book, on Welsh literature, includes two articles. The first, by Kevin Mills, looks at mobile identities in Nikita Lalwani’s *Gifted*. The novel is an account of an Indian family living in Cardiff and the cultural alienation they face. The main character is a teenager who feels divided between the poles of India and Cardiff, and the different cultural expectations which these entail. At home, the poles are represented by her parents: her father accepts the move to Cardiff and feels comfortable there, but her mother rejects the relocation. The poles, then, function “as indices of a conflicted sense of (not) belonging” (Mills 2016: 190) for her daughter’s identity.

In the closing chapter of this volume, the poet Chris Kinsey shares her personal experiences on mobility, migration and settling in her home in Mid-Wales. Through her poems and reflections, she explores the natural world of her adoptive surroundings from an eco-critical perspective.

*Ex-sistere* provides ample analysis of the issue of women's mobility in the literature of Wales, Ireland and Galicia, thus helping to shed light on the experience of women, within the fields of cultural and historical studies. By establishing connections between the Atlantic countries that form the background of those moving subjects under examination, the collection highlights the similarities shared by these three peripheral European regions and provides the reader with a theoretical framework to analyse this literary production. The collection thus represents a valuable contribution to the field of gender and mobility studies, offering new research perspectives and rescuing those experiences of women overlooked in traditional historiography.

## References

- Braidotti, Rosi (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler, Judith (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Gray, Breda (2004). *Women and the Irish Diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- Lorenzo-Modia, María Jesús (ed.) (2016). *Ex-sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Rodríguez Galdo, María Xosé (2009). "Lugar y presencia de las mujeres españolas en la emigración exterior". In X. Amancio Liñares Giraut (ed.) *El protagonismo de la mujer en las corrientes migratorias españolas*. Vigo: Grupo España Exterior, 17-38.

Marta Portela Fernández  
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela  
Rúa Carballeira de San Lourenzo, 3  
Baixo A  
15705 Santiago de Compostela  
Spain  
Email: [martaportela@gmail.com](mailto:martaportela@gmail.com)