

“WHAT PROBLEMS DOES FOREIGNNESS SOLVE FOR US?”: INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN GALICIAN AND IRISH LITERARY SPHERES

Manuela Palacios (2023)

Us & Them: Women Writers' Discourses on Foreignness
(Berlin: Frank & Timme)

What does the polysemic term “foreignness” truly mean? What kind of configurations has foreignness taken in women-authored literary works from Galicia and Ireland? How is foreignness linked to patriarchal, colonialist, and anthropocentric issues? How are the notions of Irishness and Galicianness intertwined with the concept of foreignness? What sort of effects did the circulation of discourses on foreignness have through time and space? In her recent book *Us & Them: Women Writers' Discourses on Foreignness* (2023), published in the Ibero-Romance Studies on Literature and Translatology series (Berlin, Frank & Timme), Manuela Palacios seeks to answer these questions, although without a universalizing claim. Associate Professor of English at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and director of five research projects on contemporary Irish and Galician literature, Palacios, in this book, centres her research on the comparison between these two literary systems. She analyses several literary works, produced by women since the beginning of the 1980's, in Galicia and Ireland, focusing on how they reflect on foreignness, difference, and (non)belonging issues.

According to the author, the aim of her book was “not merely to delve into the representation of the foreigner in literature but to examine the nature of difference: whether the Other is recognized or negated” (11). By recalling, in the introduction, how the concept of identity is intimately linked with otherness, Palacios evokes Julia Kristeva's famous statement that “the foreigner lives within us” (1991: 1) and starts by problematizing the dichotomy between the notions of *native* and *foreigner*. The book establishes a connection between foreignness and gender, showing how contemporary women's writing helps to shed a new light on gender and cultural differences. Connecting gender issues with the ambiguous notions of Galicianness and Irishness, Palacios

recalls Anna Triandafyllidou's sociological theory of the "Inspiring Others" (when social groups develop affinities and positive bonds), suggesting that the cultural relationship between Ireland and Galicia confirms the Canadian sociologist's proposal. On the one hand, according to the author, through part of the nineteenth century, and the whole twentieth century, Galicia saw Ireland as an "inspiring other". This may have been due to their common Celtic heritage but also to seeking recognition of their cultural differences. On the other hand, Ireland recognized in Galicia the origin of their own culture, as the Sons of Mil had founded their Land, departing from Galician shores.

Apart from their common myths, origins, and past yearnings, Palacios identifies some circumstances that similarly affect both countries, such as "migration flows, increasingly multicultural societies, constant renegotiations of national identity, and the growing visibility of women in the public sphere" (11). Both placed at the Atlantic coast in Western Europe, Ireland and Galicia share several cultural characteristics, since they are both bilingual communities, have had trouble in the revindication of their cultural singularity, and were affected by political and economic conditions that promoted various migration waves and increased their *in-between* cultural location. Under the influence of feminist theories and movements, Ireland and Galicia have also witnessed, since the beginning of the 1980's, the emergence of influential women authors that changed the literary spheres of both communities. In fact, these authors not only brought new insights about literary tradition but also introduced a feminine and feminist point of view on the Galician and Irish narratives. After the co-edition of works such as *Palabras extremas: Escritoras gallegas e irlandesas de hoy* (2008) and *Writing Bonds: Irish and Galician Contemporary Women Poets* (2009), in *Us & Them: Women Writers' Discourses on Foreignness*, Palacios analyses the continuities and disparities between both literary territories, "with the conviction that what Irish women writers have to say is relevant to Galician women writers and vice versa" (11).

The book is structured in three main parts: I. The Genres of Foreignness, II. Glocal Identities in Translation, and III. Mixing Memories and Desire: Women Writers' Emigration and Wanderlust. The first section is divided in four parts according to the literary genres under investigation: poetry, short fiction, novel, and drama. In each part, Manuela Palacios individually analyses the literary materials from both communities, and, at the end, the author includes a section called "Correspondences", where she emphasises both similarities and differences between the Irish and Galician works, by means of a

comparative perspective. Throughout this first section, Palacios shows how the literary works under analysis cross lines between different times, spaces, cultures, and identities, calling the reader's attention to the reductionist binary comprehension of the binomials *us* and *them*, *here* and *there*, *local* and *global*, *now* and *then*.

In 1.1. "*Us & Them* in Contemporary Irish and Galician Poetry", Palacios delves into the dialogues between two recent collections of poetry: Mary O'Donnell's *Massacre of Birds* (2020) and Alba Cid's *Atlas* (2019). In these works, both authors explore the predicament of migration and show how it creates tensions between the local and the global, enabling the encounter with foreignness. Palacios notices not only the impact of colonial and post-colonial debates on both collections, but also an awareness about the footprint of touristification, climate change and biodiversity loss. Both works also manifest, in different ways, the linguistic dilemma that Galician and Irish authors live, due to their bilingual heritage.

In 1.2. "*Us & Them* in Contemporary Irish and Galician Short Fiction", the authors in question are Fiona Barr, Anne Devlin, Mary O'Donnell, Ánxela Gracián, Rosa Aneiros and Iria Collado. While the Irish authors address the effects of British colonization, Galician authors explore the nomadic experience of their female characters. By relying on Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory but also on ecofeminism and ecocriticism, Manuela Palacios demonstrates how the encounter with the Other, in the short stories chosen, can be simultaneously violent and inspiring. According to the author's analyses, Galician and Irish short stories show how the contact with difference may create new configurations of the notions of home and belonging and explore the intersections between human and non-human life.

In 1.3. "*Us & Them* in Contemporary Irish and Galician Novel", Palacios analyses two novels that explore experiences of emigration in different times and spaces: Evelyn Colon's *Not the Same Sky* (2013) and Eva Moreda's *A Veiga é un tempo distinto* (2011). These two novels deal with female diasporas: one to Australia, during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the other to England, during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Both novels delve into gender inequality issues in the context of the cultural shock between the foreigner and the cultural identity of the countries of destination. For Palacios, these novels are two key examples of the re-emergence of migration narratives after the 2007 financial crisis, which had a huge impact on the political and economic conditions of both communities.

In 1.4. “*Us & Them in Contemporary Irish and Galician Drama*”, Manuela Palacios examines Lorna Shaughnessy’s *The Sacrificial Wind* (2016) and Luz Pozo Garza’s *Medea en Corinto* (2003). Palacios notices the near absence of women’s dramatic production in Ireland and Galicia, due to the difficulty that women authors face to participate in fields other than acting or costume design. However, these two plays, or, as Palacios calls them, “dramatic poems/poetic plays”, assume an important role in the renewal of the theatrical repertoires. By recovering and rewriting ancient myths and female characters, such as Iphigenia and Medea, respectively, Shaughnessy and Garza actualize those Greek figures, demonstrating their relevance to denude structures of domination that are responsible for marginalization and episodes of injustice in today societies, similarly to Adrienne Rich’s strategy of “re-vision”.

Responsible for the creation of cultural bridges between Galicia and Ireland, Manuela Palacios edited and co-edited important poetry anthologies such as *Pluriversos: seis poetas Irlandesas de hoxe* (2003) and *To The Winds Our Sails: Irish Writers Translate Galician Poetry* (2010). Thus, in II. *Glocal Identities in Translation* (the second part of the book), the author elaborates on the importance of translation as a tool to disturb the notions of globalization and nationalism, that promote the homogenization and isolation of different cultures and territories. In this section, Palacios emphasizes the role of the translation process between two minoritized idioms, Irish and Galician, describing particular translational practices that include hybridity, and collaboration. These negotiation strategies in translation express the differences between languages, enable the comprehension of cultural specificities, and give relevance and visibility to those vernaculars, albeit diminished languages. In this chapter, Palacios demonstrates how the task of translation is intimately connected with political and cultural resistance.

III. *Mixing Memory and Desire: Women Writers’ Emigration and Wanderlust*, the third part of the book, results from a questionnaire, which was used by Palacios to interview a number of women writers from Galicia and Ireland on their perspectives and experiences of migration, exile, and traveling. In this last section, Palacios summarizes the authors’ answers, highlighting both similarities and differences regarding their testimonies. At the end of this section, there are two appendixes. The first one includes short biographies of the women authors inquired of and the last one presents the set of questions that Palacios posed to the authors’ group.

After reading *Us & Them: Women Writers' Discourses on Foreignness*, the very same question posed by Palacios in the introduction — taken from Bonnie Honig's book *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2001) — will probably come back to the readers' minds: "What problems does foreignness solve for us?" (2001: 4). Another question that we may ask is what kind of problems Comparative Literature solves for us. By comparing Galician and Irish women-authored discourses on foreignness, on the one hand, Palacios' analysis shows precisely that foreignness can be a reason for oppression and marginalization, leading to dehumanization of the Other (with all its layers). On the other hand, foreignness appears as a consequence of the diversity, multiplicity and dynamism of literary works, cultures, identities and bodies that inhabit our planet, which turns difference into a natural and predominant component of human and non-human relations. In a sense, what is at stake in Manuela Palacios' book is the problematization of notions such as border and frontier, that promote linear, dichotomic, categorizing, limited, and exclusionary reflections not only on literary works and systems, but also on time, space, and identity. However, if we are all relational beings and in constant movement, changing in every contact with difference, isn't it true that literature, poetry, or a piece of art are nomadic subjects, forever foreign inconstant, and strange, but always in relation to other forms of art? Isn't a book always incomplete and unfinished, looking for a foreigner — a reader — that can weave intertextual relations and provide it with a new life, throughout each new reading?

In some way, since its emergence as a field of Literary Studies, Comparative Literature has provided deep insights into what "foreignness can solve for us". As George Steiner stated, in his famous 1994 Oxford lecture, "[e]very act of the reception of significant form, in language, in art, in music, is comparative. Cognition is re-cognition, eighter in the high Platonic sense of remembrance of prior truths, or in that of psychology" (1995: 1). Every act of interpretation is never isolated or solitary, but a comparative act, which deals with identity and otherness issues. It is informed not only by our own reading experiences but also by our memory, history, political and situated knowledge. Thus, Comparative Literature constantly deals with foreignness, trying to recognize, through a relational reading, continuities, and discrepancies between distant works, thereby showing how their distinction can be useful for productive analyses of each other.

Palacios' comparative approach demonstrates how readings solely based on the national literature framework can limit the meaning of literary works.

It also shows how comparative perspectives beyond borders may be useful for the creation of political, cultural and identity bonds between distinct and distant communities that we usually think about in an isolated way. Her comparative approach seems to be a way of resisting the globalizing and homogenizing forces and the rising of ultranationalist discourses in the European Union, arguably contributing to the indifference and erasure of minor cultural identities, to the loss of memory of society outcasts, and therefore to the discrimination of foreignness, diversity, and multiplicity.

In a recent book, *Anomalia Poética*, Silvina Rodrigues Lopes, an influential Portuguese intellectual and researcher in Literary Studies, stated that literature should not be conceived as an easily categorizable object, as it is what actually resists the market logic, and normative thought. Reflecting on literature necessarily requires the acceptance of what Rodrigues Lopes calls its “anomalia”, which means its anomaly, its irregularity in relation to normativity. If we think about Rodrigues Lopes’ proposal in relation to Palacios’ book, it is fair enough to suggest that “anomalia” is intimately connected with the notion of foreignness. In her book, Manuela Palacios doesn’t focus on the enduring foreign condition of literature itself. However, the author demonstrates how Irish and Galician women-authored discourses on foreignness, migration, exile and the peripheral female condition challenge discourses on identity and nationalism, and homogenization processes, privileging the right to difference. Palacios’ book approaches foreignness as an ontological condition, a characteristic that by being intrinsic to ourselves, allows us to recognize the Other as equal, despite its differences and anomalies.

In conclusion, I am reminded of Ana Luísa Amaral’s poignant Portuguese poem, “Ode à Diferença”, honoured with the Rainha Sofia Award for Ibero-american Poetry. Her poem not only illuminates poetry’s condition of foreignness, and the allure of diversity, but also intricately examines the parallels and distinctions between Portugal and Spain. Delving into this poem alongside Palacios’ collection may serve as a catalyst for future scholarly endeavours, potentially yielding a rich comparative exploration of contemporary poetic landscapes within Iberian contexts. Such an inquiry holds promise in deepening our comprehension of the interplay between literary traditions and geographical boundaries, while also amplifying the visibility of marginalized discourses from Spain within Portugal. Specifically, it could shed light on overlooked voices, such as Galician poetry, which currently struggles for recognition with-

in limited spheres. One might wonder whether the foreignness of Galician, Basque or Catalan literatures may help understanding the foreignness of Portuguese authors and vice versa.

ODE À DIFERENÇA

Felizmente.

Somos todos diferentes. Temos todos
o nosso espaço próprio de coisinhas
próprias, como narizes e manias,
bocas, sonhos, olhos que vêem céus
em daltonismos próprios. Felizmente.
Se não o mundo era uma bola enorme
de sabão e nós todos lá dentro
a borbulhar, todos iguais em sopro:
pequenas explosões de crateras iguais.

.....
Começa por aí: no mundo divi-
dido — e continua em raças e
raízes. Nós somos portugueses,
tão felizes, com tanta história atrás
e tantos feitos, tantas coisinhas próprias
de delícia: o mar que nos gerou,
e o resto tudo, são bolas pequeninas
de sabão a atestar da diferença
do nosso irmão do lado, esse infeliz
cheio de recalques de tradições e línguas,
paella e calamares. Tem boca como
nós: não canta o fado. Tem pernas como
nós: não dança o vira. Contenta-se
— coitado — com flamencos chorados
e falanges doridas. Somos todos
diferentes, felizmente [...].

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(Amaral 2022: 44).

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