



**Laura Izarra. *O Trauma Cultural: Ressonâncias literárias Irlandesas/ Cultural Trauma: Irish Literary Resonances*. São Paulo: FFLCH/USP, 2020, pp. 108, ISBN 978-65-87621-42-5.**

Since its outset, the English imperial enterprise not only has changed the social, economic, and natural landscape of the western world, but has become an indomitable source of creation and, at the same time, of destruction. According to Hannah Arendt,

Not that anybody began to doubt the irresistibility of the process itself, but many people began to see what had frightened Cecil Rhodes: that the human condition and the limitations of the globe were a serious obstacle to a process that was unable to stop and to stabilize, and could therefore only begin a series of destructive catastrophes once it had reached these limits. (144)

Although imperialism became an unstoppable and, as Arendt pointed out, an irresistible force, by the early twentieth century its harmful and traumatic effects were gradually brought to light. Laura P. Z. de Izarra writes about the impacts of the specific case of the aftermath of British imperialism in Ireland and South America in the critical essay *Cultural Trauma: Irish Literary Resonances*, which offers the results of her full professorship, obtained in 2018, as the outcome of different research projects on trauma and imperialism undertaken at the University of São Paulo.

The forerunner of Irish Studies in Brazil, Munira H. Mutran, writes in the “Preface” that Izarra broke new ground by introducing the Irish diaspora in South America, chiefly in Argentina and Brazil, to the international academic milieu. Mutran also underscores the connections Izarra makes between colonial oppression and the experience of collective trauma as her principal contribution to Irish Studies.

In the main essay, “Cultural Trauma and Literary Resonances in the Irish Diaspora and Contemporary Ireland”, Izarra sustains that since the twentieth century was the age of traumatic events, it must be viewed through the lens of cultural trauma. In this regard, Izarra examines three different narratives that are “stories of oppression, violence, discrimination, and emigration, which reveal the vestiges and effects of over seven hundred years of subjugation by the British Empire” (64), namely, the Great Famine, the Rubber Cycle in South America and the 1916 Easter Rising.

Apart from providing an outline of trauma theory and some of its most influential exponents, e.g., Cathy Caruth, Piotr Stompka, Shoshana Felman, Dominick La Capra and Ron Eyerman, one of the strongholds of Izarra's essay is the way in which she intertwines postcolonialism and trauma studies. This argument can be supported by the way Izarra sees at the heart of the traumas that have affected the western world "The suffering caused by colonial oppression", which she examines from the perspective of cultural trauma. To Izarra, postcolonialism is reconceived as a "post-traumatic cultural construct" (68) which enables the understanding of "themes of colonial trauma, such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, expropriation, racism, segregation, political violence, slavery and genocide" (68). In this respect, Izarra questions the role of collective memory and its relationship with cultural trauma. The answer lies in the events themselves, which are carefully dealt with in this publication.

After an assessment of the first traumatic event, the Great Famine and the Diaspora, Izarra postulates that a traumatic event is transformed into cultural trauma when a particular incident eventually becomes a symbolic text that transcends temporality (69). This can be perceived, according to Izarra, in monuments, such as Rowan Gillespie's "Famine", located on Custom House Quay in Dublin from where hundreds of immigrants left to the USA. Izarra affirms that these sites, which Pierre Nora has termed *lieux de memoire*, reveal a "freezing of time", with a materialization of memory.

At the end of the nineteenth century, memories of the past haunted the early immigrants that arrived in South America as the circumstances they found did not meet with the expectations they had prior to immigrating. In this regard, Izarra examines the Dresden Affair in Argentina and the establishment of the first British colony near Bahia Blanca, Buenos Aires, in 1889, with the arrival of 1.800 Irish immigrants. This incident, which resulted in the death of men, women and children due to disease, cold and lack of food, is narrated more than a century later by Santiago Boland, of Irish descent, in the poem "Los niños mártires de la Vitícola"<sup>1</sup> [The Child Martyrs of La Vitícola]. Apart from this, on the St. Patrick's Day celebrations of 2005, Boland placed a commemorative plaque beneath the Irish and the Argentinian flag by way of remembering this first colony. Izarra concludes that his act transformed La Vitícola into a *lieu de memoire*, which brings to the fore the reconstruction of the collective memory of a group that otherwise would have remained obliterated from the history of immigration.

The pain of the Great Famine and migration as a result of colonialism can be linked to the second example, the Rubber Cycle and its effects on the Amazonian indigenous peoples. As a result of official investigations undertaken in the Belgian Congo and in the South American Putumayo, the Irish revolutionary Roger Casement recognized that the violence

enacted by empires is part of a global cultural trauma. While analysing Roger Casement's *Amazon Journal*, Izarra first draws attention to his poetic style, his use of terms in Irish as well as his aesthetic descriptions of nature. After that, Izarra draws from the Colombian anthropologist Juan Alvaro Echeverri's metaphor of the "basket of darkness", where the trauma is held, being transformed into a "Basket of life", which contains the seeds of hope as a way of curing future generations, which have transformed the Casa Arana into a secondary school. Moreover, Izarra writes about what she calls a "multidirectional form of memory" with Casement's linking the suffering of the Amazon indigenous peoples to that of the neglected Irish in Connemara suffering from a typhoid epidemic. This illustrates, according to Izarra, a multidirectional perception of traumatic incidents as a way of making sense of the transformations in collective identity that engender new forms of solidarity and justice in the present.

The ultimate hanging of Roger Casement for High Treason by the British Crown is connected to the third example, which is the cultural trauma of the 1916 Easter Rising and the collaborative project *Signatories*, commissioned by UCD, to commemorate its centenary. The project conjoined eight contemporary writers along with the director Patrick Mason, and premièred in Kilmainham Gaol, the site of the imprisonment and execution of the 1916 rebels. This last example reveals an important stage when coping with a collective traumatic incident, for, as Izarra highlights, when in face of a traumatic event, representation is crucial for it to be comprehended and given meaning.

Patrick Mason described the *Signatories* project as an artistic response written as a monologue by different dramatists, from the rebels' surrender to the final moments preceding their executions. It opens with a monologue by Emma Donoghue as Elizabeth O'Farrell, which is followed by the monologues representing the seven signatories of the proclamation of the provisional government. According to Izarra, the *Signatories* project generates a spiral of new meanings, for memory not only preserves, but recreates past events. Mason organized the sequence of the monologues that recall historical elements of the past permeated by a strong sense of nationalism: ballads, poems, etc., by Frank MacGinness as Éammon Ceant, Marina Carr as Thomas McDonagh, Hugo Hamilton representing James Connolly. Izarra ends this last section by referring to Rowan Gillespie's sculpture, "Proclamation", created as a *lieu de mémoire*, which stands before the court of justice and Kilmainham Gaol and that epitomizes the execution that transformed rebels into martyrs.

The traumatic events scrutinized by Izarra have proved Hannah Arendt's argument that the United Kingdom was incapable of building "an imperial structure in which many different people could live contentedly together" (127). However, the great leap given by Izarra is the way she proves that despite the deleterious aftermath of British imperialism, there is a message of

hope put forward either by those who have experienced these traumas, as is the case of Roger Casement, or by the future generations, as Santiago Boland and the *Signatories* project.

Thus, *Cultural Trauma: Irish Literary Resonances* has come to fill an important gap in Irish Studies in South America, and it is written in a bilingual format, in English and in Portuguese in order to reach a wider audience. Also object of attention, are the illustrations which were carefully selected and epitomize that Pierre Nora's idea of the *lieux de mémoire* employed by Izarra in her analyses. To conclude, I recall the image of Gillespies's sculpture "Looking for Orion", which Izarra explains, reminds us that that constellation can be seen by both hemispheres, implying that collective memory is transnational and open to possibilities of healing and resistance.

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## Notes

1 The poem "Los niños martires de la Vitícola", by Santiago Boland, is included in the Appendix.

## Works Cited

ARENDT, Hanna. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1973[1951].