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REFERENCES


1 The collection of essays *The Black and Green Atlantic. Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, edited by Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd brings together a series of essays addressing the issue of resistance, complicity and the circulation of ideas about equality, race and independence in an international, Atlantic context, extremely sensitive to the sometimes circular flow of ideas and to the polyphonic palimpsest of traditions and voices. Consciously continuing, as the editors themselves show, Paul Gilroy’s call in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* for alternatives to the nationalist focus of cultural criticism, but also recalling earlier internationalist perspectives such as that of Cedric Robinson, the essays open new ground for analysis and reflection by superposing two Atlantics, black and green, effectively bringing the Irish world into the dialogue. The impact of the endeavor is, one might argue, twofold.

2 Firstly, the essays on the whole contribute to an expansion of the fruitful framework provided by Gilroy and which, as Michael Malouf aptly explains, is itself “under revision,” as the term diaspora seems favored by critics who try to capture more subtle forms of transnational dialogue, obscured by the Atlanticist model. While identifying the problem of raising “the issue of a Green Atlantic comparison at the moment when the Black Atlantic model seems to be critically devalued,” thus perhaps contributing to the danger
of reification of Gilroy’s metaphor (149), Malouf favors a metaphorical approach to the
issue, one that to an extent underlies the approach of most essays in the volume, with a
focus on the “intersection of these Atlantics” and “cross-cultural politics and forms of
solidarity that emerge from reading overlapping diasporas” (149).

3 Secondly, the essays focus on the sometimes manifest, historically documented
intersections and at other times on subtle yet no less present intimations of points of
solidarity and confluence between the two worlds, showing how political and cultural,
social and individual practices are embroiled in a representation of the Atlantic world
that is sensitive to echoes, contradictions and subtle rewritings of histories that can run
parallel, and that are sometimes characterized by ruptures and contradictions. In this
sense, the essays provide excellent points for further investigations into the subtle
nuances and histories that shape our understanding of transatlantic exchanges of people
and ideas. The meanders of these narrations are thematically divided into sections
reflecting the facets of these comparisons, and cover aspects from race, gender to the
performance of modernist identity.

4 One of the most evident merits of the volume is that it suggests what the editors call a
“relatively new” approach (xvi) to the study of Irish identity, a discipline hitherto
marked by a certain sense of “exceptionalism” and in which notions such as “encounter,
competition and solidarity,” as well as “the circulation of bodies and ideas” are only
beginning to be accepted. Examples of new readings of Irish identity (which spiral back to
offer a new glimpse of the points constituting the comparisons) are afforded in analyses
of the gender dimension of Irish identity. Thus Marjorie Howes focuses on gender as a
relatively new dimension in accounts of the Irish migration experience, and proceeds to
compare the modernists’ experiments in self-fashioning, which implied imagining
themselves as black, with the modernist identification with and focus on the Irish maid –
as Howes shows, an iconic figure of the transatlantic world, associated “in the Atlantic
imaginary” with “elements of modernity: geographical movement, the cash economy,
sexual transgression, and urban life” (99). From W. B. Yeats and James Joyce to George
Moore, to Norah Hoult, depictions of the scullery maid as avatar of laboring femininity
matching the figure of the laboring artist, or as flâneur, show how imaginative
appropriations of the Irish woman make the latter a modernist instance of a
consciousness aware of the unreadability of the world, yet “an artful survivor, making
meaning amid order and ambiguity” (111). The interest for literary recuperations and
constructions of versions of femininity, this time a mother tongue, is also the concern of
Stacy J. Lettman’s analysis of Eavan Boalnd’s and M. Nourbese’s writings. A surprising
corollary of the gender dimension is that depicted by Peter O’Neill, who demonstrates
how the Irish woman, along with the Chinese man, are historically and imaginatively cast
as the representatives of the domestic labor force and also perform identity-building
work, serving as a counterpoint for the definition of convincing versions of American
femininity and masculinity, but also embroiled in their own imagological battle which
reaches out to include, even if only to displace, the image of the black woman.

5 Another significant contribution of the volume is the implication of the sometimes
gratifying, other times troubling stories of solidarity or racial competition in which black
and green Atlantics have been embroiled, and which ranges, as the editors show, from the
Irish desire to “access a multicultural ethical capital that accrues to those who can
demonstrate a history of suffering comparable to that of (other) racialized minorities” to
the “associated tinge of disappointment” when Irish chose to identify with the white
rather than “oppressed” (xvii). The crucial ethical dimension of the comparison, whether it fulfills an ethical wish or not, is essential, especially in light of what –one might argue– is the implicitly ethical dimension of a necessarily global encounter of the type promoted by these analyses of trans-Atlantic, and cross-Atlantic, dialogues. A significant aspect is the highly volatile transatlantic political, social and moral configuration shaping Irish identity. As David Lloyd shows, Irish positions with regard to race issues are “not the consequence of any volitional yearnings on the part of the Irish, but an effect of their differential positioning within emerging state formations of divergent kinds” (3). Such examples are brought in Amy E. Martin’s histories of circum-Atlantic insurrection movements, providing an international context for radical movements. A counter-point is offered in Nini Rodger’s account of the multiple ways the color line was enforced to provide a white –or green– Irish identity in America. An illustration of the complex power play staged in an imaginary black and green Atlantic is tellingly exemplified in Fionnghuala Sweeney’s account of Richard Robert Madden, in whose writings “domestic failures of empire – the Irish peasant – provides an avenue for beginning to explore the possibilities of a new metropolitan understanding of the enslaved Creole community” (181) but also in Anthony R. Hale’s account of the problematic figure of Irish rebel John Mitchel, whose “unapologetic celebrations of slavery’s status quo” actually “unexpectedly illuminates facets of Black-Irish commonality” (198-199).

In fact, in line with Michael Malouf’s invitation towards a metaphorical reading, the imagist vortex used by Lee M. Jenkins is illustrative for the fragmented history of solidarity staged between a black and green Atlantic throughout this collection of essays. More specifically, starting from the figure of Terence MacSwiney and the symbolic investment of the city of Cork, of which he was mayor when he went on the 73-day hunger-strike, Jenkins’s account shifts to narratives of solidarity running from Jamaica-born Claude MacKay and Marcus Gavey and spiraling back to Frederic Douglass and Olaudah Equiano. In this imaginative reconstruction, the city of Cork is an intersection point for both black and green Atlantics, not only as an important port of Irish emigration, but also an “imagined port of call on the Black Atlantic for activists and intellectuals” (175).

A similarly complex relationship is explored in Cedric J. Robinson’s analysis of Irish racial performance in O’Neill’s plays, where blackness is represented rather through a form of blackface through which O’Neill, “by masquerading himself as a brutal, egomaniacal Black ruler [in The Emperor Jones], had given the lie to Black self-governance” (62), and which can be read contrapuntally with Jonathan Tadashi Naito’s analysis of the rich transposition of affinities between black and green Atlantics in Samuel Beckett’s work, in particular the black Godot performance in New York and the emphasis of Irish elements in the Pike Theatre production, in which he shows how green can be black: “to see Godot as green means seeing it also as black” (88). Also exploring the complexities of the series of masquerades that are involved in playing an identity, Mark Quigley looks at greenface in popular culture (House of Pain) as enacting “the miscegenated status of Irishness as a means of policing the effects of an uncomfortable closeness with a “savage” racial Other” (65).

The global note of the collection is also contained in the utopian notes that emerge in the final essays of the present volume, a utopian note that is, one might argue, a corollary of the global dimension envisaged in the endeavor of a black-green Atlantic fraught by nodes of free-flowing communication or of problematic pauses. The editors conclude
their introduction with the vision of the black and green Atlantic suggesting “a world forged not in domination and mutual antagonism, but in solidarity” (xx), echoing David Lloyd’s words that ethical questions are to be posed anew “if we are ever to redeem the fates of those who were colonized and dispossessed, enslaved and exploited, all across the Black and Green Atlantic” (19). The two closing articles of the collection also look to the present and future. Anne W. Gulik’s investigation of C.L.R. James’s writings in the context of the international –and internationalist– human rights law shows how the latter discourse is “more situated, and less totalizing,” to suggest how it is possible to conceive “of postcolonial justice in a way that embraces the spectres of slavery and revolution and their consequences for the messy multiplicity of political community in the present” (226). Denis O’Hearn engages in a comparison of utopias, starting from an analysis of mortifications to which Irish political prisoners were subjected to proceed to a comparison of their protest in the H-block in the 1970’s with radical utopias or guerilla movements, including the Zapatistas, emphasizing the level of representations which, argues the author, even in the case of “unsustainable “utopias, are significant for their attempt at “alternative life” (242). It is the merit of this volume that the hypostases of resistance, re-appropriation and translation brought forth here ultimately also give substance to the literal meaning of utopia, a no-place, in which dispossession can become a world-building attribute.

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