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Book Review: Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women (Gender, Racism, Ethnicity)

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Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place and Irish Women (Gender, Racism, Ethnicity).
Bronwen Walter. London: Routledge. 2000. 320 pp., \$36.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Helen Thompson¹⁰

Over the last twenty years Irish women's studies has grown into a veritable industry as researchers and writers have filled in the gaps of women's invisibility in literary, historical and cultural studies of Ireland. With the globalization of Irish identity in the 1990s migration studies have become even more important, yet again, as Bronwen Walter's book indicates, women have been invisible both in contemporary migration statistics and subsequent studies of migration patterns. Her book claims to fill the gaps in the historical record and critical analyses of Irish mobility. It is an important contribution to academic research into Irish women, migration studies and cultural geography, and will appeal primarily to academic audiences.

The central concerns of her book focus on reading Irish women's relationships to both their native and adopted homelands--Britain and Ireland--and how they have been simultaneously assimilated and racialized within British culture. Her book moves from the theoretical positing of diaspora to studies of migration patterns to the United States and Britain since the nineteenth century, along with the concomitant implications of race and gender within these patterns. She then focuses on case studies of ten Irish women living in Bolton, England and their lived experience in the diaspora. Walter's book is an important contribution to migration studies, and particularly to Irish women's studies, because it discovers a different pattern of movement for men and women and then fills in the gaps of the historical record to examine women's material existence, again different from that of men, in a Northern English city. Her argument for a redefinition of "diaspora" creates a space for examining migration patterns and settlement as a more complex series of what she appropriately calls "entanglements, rather than a linear process of exile, adjustment and assimilation. One of the significant strengths of this book is the conjoining of theoretical discussions of diaspora with the material lives of migrants from historical record and from contemporary Britain. Yet, as I will later explain, it is also one of the book's central weaknesses.

In the first chapter Walter outlines the theoretical framework of the "diaspora space," a concept she borrows from Avtar Brah because it does not rely on the binary oppositions of old and new homes with the inherent implication of simple assimilation. Indeed, Walter claims that this more fluid concept of diaspora is particularly useful for studying gendered migration patterns because women's experience of migration does not mirror that of men. Similarly, the term allows for more interchange between indigenous and migrant populations as "both 'diasporic' peoples and 'indigenous' peoples equally inhabit diaspora space, which therefore becomes a description of the center rather than the margins" (10) and allows us to realize that this space is one of continuous negotiation. As a part of this theoretical chapter, Walter also examines representations of women both within Ireland and in relation to migration. For example, she points out that the concepts of home, land, and domesticity were feminized to make women immobile and dependent; whereas, representations of mobility and enterprise were masculinized. Walter argues that

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it is precisely these kinds of representations, and the culture and economy they underscored, that caused women to leave Ireland, and in their leaving reshaped the gendered dynamics of Irishness. This chapter highlights the difficulties of studying women's migration given an academic discourse that omits the potential for reading patterns of movement that differ from the standardized male migration patterns and simultaneously demonstrates the actual difficulties of movement women faced given the confines of feminine representation. Walter's book explodes these dual confinements and opens up a space for a more complex understanding of relationships of home and belonging.

Another strength of Walter's book is her comparative analysis of migration patterns to Britain and the United States since the nineteenth century. In her second chapter, Walter explores women's experience of emigration to the United States "in order to emphasize women's distinctive material and representational roles in the processes of travel, and to draw attention to the significance of 'dwelling'" (33). It charts women's migration patterns since the nineteenth century, explaining that the reasons for migration had mainly to do with employment opportunities, particularly as domestic or textile mill workers. She examines the lives of these women both at work and at home, arguing that public records focused more on the activities of men, keeping women on the periphery. Interestingly she draws parallels between the African American experience of enforced transplantation via the institution of slavery and that of the Irish Famine. In this connection she cites the periodic resurfacing of what she calls "diasporic myths and memories" (45) which rupture the assimilation process because they recall the originating moment of displacement. As her specific example she cites the 1997 Irish Famine Memorial on Cambridge Common in Boston. This memorial symbolizes the degree of assimilation achieved by the Irish yet their distinctness from other ethnic groups. One of her conclusions is that Irish women in America are much more visible because of their whiteness and their hyphenated identities. No such hyphenated identity exists for Irish migrants to Britain, unlike the current Black British identity, making assimilation more difficult.

Walter claims that "being Irish in the United States has not been and is not the same as being Irish in Britain" (61). The nature of whiteness in both countries also differs. In a compelling argument she claims that in America, Irish women became integral in the construction of whiteness in the United States by acting as the contrasting differential with Black women. White work became defined as that which had no history of black workers, like textile millwork where Irish women were heavily featured. Similarly, Irish women were preferred as domestics and were accepted as white in contrast to black women seeking the same work. Just as in the American case study, Walter argues that the majority of Irish women migrated to Britain for economic reasons. With limited data, Walter manages to piece together a history of women's work from the nineteenth century, again through the main routes of domestic work and textile mills.

In the following three chapters, Walter completes a similar study of Irish migration patterns but in Great Britain. She focuses on stereotypes, constructions of whiteness and blackness, how language functions to racialize the Irish even as they are constructed as white, and relationships to the concept of 'home.' What she calls the 'black/white binary' occurred in post-1945 Britain, much later than in the United States yet the racial dynamics are more complex because they lack the relative ease of the

hyphenated identity. With the influx of migrants from South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean in the postwar era, Irish migrants were believed to assimilate more easily because in contrast to the new migrant populations, they appeared to be white. However, this assimilation is undercut by the racial slurs the Irish experience--but the British fail to acknowledge--because the Irish have been constructed as white. This is a shift from the nineteenth-century simian representations of Irish men and an argument that demonstrates the precariousness of Irish identities in Britain, particularly those of women because they are not as visible as men.

In chapter seven, Walter offers us analyses of case studies focusing on ten Irish women who migrated to Bolton. Her specific interest in these women centers on their relationships to native and adopted homes, particularly in relation to family in Ireland and in Britain. The interviews she conducts and her subsequent analysis reveal that these women have complex and diverse relationships to Ireland and Bolton. While several women live comfortably with two homes, not relinquishing their birthplaces, others do not. Walter has chosen women from different backgrounds in Ireland--those from rural and urban environments, from the Republic and the North, Catholic and Protestant, and from different generations.

Walter's analysis of these interviews is perhaps one of the most disappointing parts of the book. Her analysis reads more like summary and it seems a lost opportunity for placing these women within the theoretical and historical framework the rest of the book so deftly manages. For example, she argues that "Irishness is not recognized beyond the migrant generation" because the indicators of Irishness, particularly the accent, disappear with second and third generations. However, the interviews reveal that some children of migrants preserve their Irish identity and while it is even less visible than the racial indicators of skin color and accent, that it will be revealed in other ways, through political or religious affiliation or even through parents and family. Walter also moves too quickly through her analysis of the women's responses to questions about racial identity and racism. Many of the women did not admit to or fully articulate their experiences of racism. In these silences, like the gaps in the historical record, much can be read. While Walter does address these concerns there is much still left unsaid.

The wide expanse that Walter covers--diasporic theories, statistical study, historical tracing, case studies--are both the book's strength and its weakness. The project is hugely ambitious and it is necessary work, but the organization of the book makes for less than fluid reading. The shifts from one kind of research to another are not always explained and connections are not always made between the theoretical work, the historical analyses and the case studies. While Walter does attempt to clearly indicate the trajectories of her argument as she moves through this wide expanse, the project is unwieldy and difficult to navigate. Despite these shortcomings, the book is an important contribution to feminist studies in migration and settlement.