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Table of Contents

Author(s)	Title	Page
Amina El Halawani	Inventing Geographies: The Global South and Brian Friel's "Ballybeg"	8
Samar Sayed Mohamed	The Representation of Trauma in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)	17
Doaa Ibrahim	Cultural Castration and Contra-modernity in "The Lamp of Umm Hashim" by Yehya Haqqi	29
Saudat Salah Abdulbaqi, Sanusi Shehu Janyau, Bashir Amada Ajijola and Sule Musa-Ohiare	Literary, Cultural and Moral Contexts of Arewa24 Television Programmes on Selected Registered Youth Organisations in Nigeria	42
Diaa Elnaggar	Wer hat den ersten emblematischen Stein zum Rollen gebracht? Eine quellengeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Entstehung der literarischen Emblematik	58
Zaki Mohamed zaki abdelrasol	汉语借代、比喻修辞格与阿语相关的辞巧学借代、比喻的对比研究 A comparative study between metonymy and metaphor in Chinese and Arabic	70
Samah Elsaied Ahmed	توظيف العصف الذهنى وتدريبات الارتجال لتطوير الأداء التمثيلى للطفل	83

Inventing Geographies: The Global South and Brian Friel's "Ballybeg"

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Abstract: In answer to the question "Vous êtes Anglais, Monsieur Beckett?" during an interview with a French journalist, the Irish playwright responded, "Au contraire" (Heaney 405). Where does Beckett's "Au contraire" place him or his country of birth then? This paper aims to extend the notion of the Global South to locations beyond its strictly geographic contours; locations which seem to share a "mode" of being elsewhere, of being "otherwise", even if they lie in the northern part of the map. By focusing on the Irish playwright Brian Friel's invented town "Ballybeg" [Little Town] as a setting for many of his plays this paper explores notions of space and place, and their importance in decolonial context. This paper, thus, focuses on Ballybeg as an invented space as well as a premise for engaging in discussions of mapping geographies, and the narratives of place evident in many of his works, most visibly in *Translations*.[1]

Keywords: Brian Friel; place; space; decoloniality; mapping.

In his attempt to introduce what the concept of the Global South stands for, Russell West-Pavlov rightly points out that "'Global South' is a shifty, shifting term that one is well advised to treat with caution, while remaining open to the potential meaning-making it may nevertheless have the power to release" (7). While this statement refers to the elusive nature of the term since it started to gain currency, it also emphasizes its potential as a heuristic device. One useful definition of the term is provided by Walter Mignolo who identifies it "not only [as] an area to be studied but a place (or places) from which to speak" ("Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse" 123), and as such he proposes to look at the "Global South" not as a geographical category but as a "metaphor" loaded with meaning ("Global South and World Dis/Order" 184). Performing a similar gesture, Fernando Resende urges us to think of "the Global South as a concept […] beyond physical geographical locations" ("The Global South" n.p.). Within this perspective it is rather to be treated as "a theoretical and methodological framework that brings together fundamental political and aesthetic concerns within contemporary thought" (Resende, Robalinho & Amaral 18, my translation). It is from this standpoint, thus, that this article stretches the Global South beyond its common geographical contours to an invented location that lies in the northern part of the map, Brian Friel's "Ballybeg" (Little Town in Gaelic).

Highlighting the importance of the "[places] from which to speak" (Mignolo, "Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse" 123), this paper focuses on the Irish playwright Brian Friel's invented town as a setting for many of his plays, with special attention to *Translations.* In this exploration, Ballybeg brings to the forefront, notions of space and place, and their importance in decolonial context, while confusing attempts for mapping its location. Friel places his imagined "Ballybeg" in County Donegal, a contested space in

[1] This is a reworked version of an earlier paper that has appeared in Portuguese translation under the title: "Os Espaços Inventados de Brian Friel e a Topografia Cultural do Ser" (translated by Luiza Magalhães) in *Modos de Ser Sul: territorialidades, afetos e poderes* (Resende, Robalinho and Amaral, eds.), e-books, 2020, pp. 105-120.

itself; on the map it falls in the north and yet it belongs to the Republic. In Friel's plays, Ballybeg, though fictional, becomes a metonym for Ireland with its historical, cultural, social and political narratives, and I would argue, for a characteristically 'southern' experience.

Ireland and Locating "Southerness"

To go back to the question of the Global South, Ireland seems like the perfect location from which to address the dichotomy inherent in thinking of the Global South from a Northern location, sharing itself many of the common features of what makes the South 'southern.' In an interview with a French journalist, Beckett gives us a beautiful riddle for defining Irishness. "Vous êtes Anglais, Monsieur Beckett?" asked him the journalist, while the Irish playwright responded, "Au contraire" (Heaney 405). Where does Beckett's "Au contraire" place him or his country of birth then? Beckett does not give a simple 'No' for an answer, or even indicate that he is Irish. On the contrary, his answer is playfully ambiguous, raising questions about what it really means to be Irish. His definition of Irishness is not provided in affirmative terms. It is expressed only in negation or rather in opposition. To be Irish is to position oneself at the outside of the metropole or the centre, at an "ex-centric" position, to borrow Homi Bhabha's terminology. It is to be located elsewhere, and to be otherwise, which inherently refers to the power relations embedded in mapping and territorial denominations; relationality and "ex-centricity" being keywords in defining the "south" (Comaroff and Comaroff 47).

Locating Ireland, Edward Said in "Yeats and Decolonization," explains the irony in Yeats's status as a poet "almost completely assimilated into the canon," while highlighting his status as a "*national* poet" in the Irish struggle for independence (*Culture and Imperialism* 220), and hence as belonging to an ex-centric position from which he expressed his anti-colonialism. Moreover, in an interview conducted in Ireland in 1999, Said comments on his interest in the Irish struggle:

> You have had many more years of imperialism than we have had [referring to Palestine], and you have produced a fabulous culture of resistance and an extraordinary spirit, which I desperately hope we can measure up to by about 10% […]. One of the things that I always do when I lecture in the Arab world is to talk about the Irish struggle along with the South African struggle. There are three places that have meant a great deal to me; one is South Africa, another is Ireland, and the third is India. These places have meant a great deal to me culturally [. . .]. ("Interview with Edward W. Said" 13)

Commending the "culture of resistance" produced by Ireland, Said makes the connection between Ireland, South Africa, India and the Arab world. As such, it becomes clear that for Said, Ireland is a place not at all remote from what we now call the Global South, or at least as a place which, owing to its long history of resistance against imperialism, has so much in common and so much that can be put in conversation with the Global South.

Building on the work of Michel de Certeau and Walter Mignolo, Resende reminds us that "the 'Global South' must be understood as an ambiguous term as any other name referring to space and geographical determinations" ("The Global South" n.p.). Resende's remark highlights the artificiality of the process of naming altogether due to the complexity of the power narratives it implicates, explaining: "It is a term that refers, altogether, to categories, locations and subjects very much marked by power, identity, narrative and space issues" (n.p.). Resende's words bring to light the many overlapping cultural, historical and territorial considerations embedded in the process of rationalizing geographies. This is why as Said points out, a cartographic impulse which lies at the heart of the poetry of W.B. Yeats, Pablo Neruda, or Mahmoud Darwish allows them to create an alternative space for that territory their peoples have been deprived of, and through that space to communicate

their cultural narrative (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 226). As such, literary cartography becomes more than a matter of putting names on a map. Land, history, ownership, and emotional rootedness are all brought into question here, and the land as such bears a lot more than just material/territorial importance. Within this context, Brian Friel's plays, particularly *Translations*, provide a complex, nuanced and relevant framework to think through the conception of space, place, and emplacement in relation to questions of hegemony and power.

Friel's Ballybeg and Space, Place, and Emplacement

In his book *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography,* Brian Graham argues that despite culture's elasticity as a concept it is best perceived as a system through which as Raymond Williams puts it, "a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Williams qtd. in Graham 2). Society occupies space, and as such forms as well as is formed by the complexity of relations within the place it inhabits.

> Place therefore forms part of the individual and social practices which people continuously use to transform the natural world into cultural realms of meaning and lived experience. As such, a cultural landscape can be visualised as a powerful medium in expressing feelings, ideas and values, while simultaneously being an arena of political discourse and action in which cultures are continuously reproduced and contested. (Graham 4)

The making of places in which people live and from which people perceive life is a continuous process. To invoke Lefebvre, space is continuously produced, and hence it is never static. On the other hand, the process by which it is being perceived is always located in space as well. As Edward Casey puts it, "There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it" ("How to Get from Space to Place" 18). Positionality thus is central to one's experience and making of a place.

The fact that Friel's Ballybeg is an invented space altogether allows it some freedom from such strict positioning that Casey mentions, which permits it to engage more seriously in some of Ireland's biggest problems. This paper, thus, focuses on Ballybeg as an invented space as well as a premise for engaging in discussions of mapping geographies, and the narratives of place evident in many of his works, most visibly in *Translations*. In this play, Friel stages the process of the remapping and renaming of Irish locales which took place during the British Ordnance Survey in the 19th century, highlighting how remapping changes the cultural topography of a nation, while his very Ballybeg itself, being fictional, becomes a place somewhere, everywhere and nowhere.

Ballybeg is a curious invention. It first appears as the setting of Friel's first play *Philadelphia here I come!,* in which the main protagonist is a young Irishman who is preparing to leave for the United States. Gar O'Donnell, however, finds it unbearable to stay home any longer, but also unbearable to leave. In presenting him as a divided character, Friel presents us with two actors on stage, one in the role of Gar's private self while the other in the role of Gar's public self, so the dilemma becomes translated into a clear theatrical split of character, allegiances, aspirations, conflicting emotions, etc. Gar O'Donnell, the play's young protagonist, is torn to pieces between wanting to leave and knowing that he will want to come back.

In the first episode of the play, Private Gar questions his Public self, concerning his journey.

> PRIVATE: You are fully conscious of all the consequences of your decision?

PUBLIC: Yessir.
PRIVATE: Of leaving the country of your birth, the land of the curlew and the snipe, the Aran sweater and the Irish Sweepstakes?
PUBLIC: (*With fitting hesitation)* I-I-I-I have considered all these, Sir. (32)

Hesitation emerges here in the form of questioning one's awareness of the consequences of one's decision, while again in the next episode we find Gar justifying his departure, not just to others but primarily to himself:

PUBLIC: D'you know something? If I had to spend another week in Ballybeg, I'd go off my bloody head! This place would drive anybody crazy! Look around you, for God's sake! Look at Master Boyle! Look at my father! Look at the boys! Asylum cases, the whole bloody lot of them!
PRIVATE: (*pained)* Shhhhhhh!
PUBLIC: Listen, if someone were to come along to me tonight and say, 'Ballybeg's yours –lock, stock, and barrel,' it wouldn't make that much difference to me. If you're not happy and content in a place—then –then –then you're not happy and content in a place! It's as simple as that, I've stuck around this hole far too long. I'm telling you: it's a bloody quagmire, a backwater, a dead-end! And everyone in it goes crazy sooner or later! Everybody!
PRIVATE: Shhhhhhhh . . . (78-79)

In this rant in response to the reminder that he will be missed by his father, Private Gar appears "*pained"* at what Public Gar is saying while he attempts to stop him. Private Gar's reaction to Public Gar's words proves his attachment to Ballybeg despite Public Gar's declarations: "I hate the place, and every stone, and every rock, and every piece of heather around it! Hate it! Hate it" (79). Public Gar rejects everything that belongs to Ballybeg calling it all "yap" (79) and instead is in search of a place to start anew: "Impermanence—anonymity—that's what I'm looking for; a vast restless place that doesn't give a damn about the past" (79). The main question becomes, however, can Gar find a place of neutrality to accommodate such "anonymity" as he calls it? This metaphor of 'no-place' maybe promising for Gar, but it only shows that his real challenge is not to escape geography but history. The conception of place as such becomes as much temporal as it is spatial.

According to Resende, "the body" itself can be seen as "part of a narrative territoriality" ("Geographies of the South" 77). If we think of Gar and his public/private character(s) as a representation of a 'cultural' entity that holds within it the spatial forces of its interior self and the outside world, Ballybeg as such becomes a spatial representation of Ireland which carries a whole of Ireland within it (especially that of Catholic Ireland North and South) with all its divisions. Hence, as a cultural entity, Gar and his Ballybeg are both emplaced in space; there can never be such thing as a 'no-place' not when we already have embodied characters walking around the stage. Ballybeg, though invented, must still be perceived in Edward Casey's terms as a "non-simple" location (*Getting Back into Place* 65-67), a location that is not only defined by its geography but the culture of its people, their history, and their narratives of the everyday. This, as John Lowell Lewis suggests, implicates "multiple aspects of emplacement (dimensions, directions, horizons) as well as histories, memories, feelings, social constraints, imagination, and the like" (94). In both Casey's and Lewis's views, no embodiment can ever take place without emplacement. "An embodied being must be in some place; it cannot exist in 'no place'" (Lewis 94). Such is the case with Friel's characters, and Gar is no exception. He, thus, embodies the tension between his very own emplacement and his wish to escape it.

Ballybeg continued to reappear as setting in Friel's plays and by the time he writes *Translations,* Ballybeg has already become not mere space but a place his audiences know

the dimensions of; they are already familiar with its topography, with its problems and its peoples. In *Translations*, Friel sets out to chart the active role that cartography plays in the lives of Ballybeg's inhabitants, not just in its colonial past but through exploring the ramifications of such past in the shaping of the present. This is a play that is literally about mapping. The play takes the British Ordnance Survey, a project of mapping Ireland and anglicizing Gaelic names of villages and places, as its subject matter.[1] But it is also as important to note that *Translations* was performed in 1980, a time when Northern Ireland was going through the Troubles, and hence when defining identity meant emplacement within the conflict with the British, the conflict between the North and South, the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, between Republicans and Unionists, as well as a position on discussions about drawing borders or erasing them.

As Casey tells us: "places not only *are*, they *happen*. (And it is because they happen that they lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or as story)" ("How to Get from Space to Place" 27). In *Translations,* we have a very engaging discussion of the notions of naming, territory, language, identity and ownership, how these overlap, and how places have stories of their own; in other words a discussion of how places 'happen'.

In the preface to his *Origin and History of the Irish Names of Places,* published in 1869, P.W. Joyce compares the case of Irish place names to other European countries which often had mixed nomenclature, writing, "our place names are purely Keltic, with the exception of about a thirteenth part, which are English, mostly of recent introduction" (vi). Joyce sums up the history of place naming in Ireland by means of referring it back to a national history of the island and its people:

> This great name system, begun thousands of years ago by the first wave of population that reached our island, was continued unceasingly from age to age, till it embraced the minutest features of the country in its intricate net-work; and such as it sprang forth from the minds of our ancestors, it exists almost unchanged to this day. (vi-vii)

Such description moves the discussion beyond the maps of the island and towards a narrative of its people and their culture, a self-proclaimed history of the people. To Joyce, "The face of the country is a book" (79). This "book", however, is still emplaced and positioned, performing a cartographic activity that is embedded in a certain narrative. This relationship between place and its narrative history is at the heart of *Translations*, though in this case it is portrayed as a lot more complex than what Joyce describes.

While the play focuses on a group of Irish individuals who can only speak Gaelic, with the exception of a few English characters, all the acting takes place in English, which complicates the relationship between the two languages. Even though it is implied that the characters are speaking to one another in their native language, through the use of this theatrical conceit, English is presented as already supplanting Gaelic on stage. Within this framework, the Ordnance Survey seems to replace more than just the names of places in the play; Owen himself, the young Irishman who helps the English communicate with the people of Ballybeg, is mistakenly called by the English "Roland" throughout, problematizing the notion of identity even further. Despite his declaration "It's only a name" (408), the many failed attempts at finding an equivalent for the naming of a small

[1] According to Parsons, the Ordnance Survey despite its centrality in the Irish imaginary is not the first cartographic project to take place but just the latest in what he calls "a long line of […] conflicted cartographic projects" (4).

beach at the mouth of the river at the beginning of Act Two, highlights the complexity and the danger inherent in the process of naming and renaming (409-410). It brings to light the threat of effacing a whole cultural history of place.

In describing his role in the project, Owen refers to himself as “a part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter [whose] job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (404), which is not as light a task as he makes it seem to be. In drawing the maps and translating names of places, language is also being supplanted, and the theatrical image of the Gaelic characters speaking English on stage is already a powerful one, pointing directly to the future result of the project at stake. The descriptors in the above statement are a source of alarm: Gaelic is already qualified by Owen as archaic and unnecessary. He seems to not understand how the people of Ballybeg cannot just embrace what he calls “the King’s good English” (404).

Captain Lancey, the English cartographer, tries to describe what a map is, but his attempt is far from complete: “A map is a representation on paper – a picture – you understand picture? – a paper picture—showing, representing this country – yes? – showing your country in miniature—a scaled drawing on paper of – of – of’” (405-6). The abrupt notes on which Lancey’s speech ends is telling. He never manages to finish what this scaled drawing is supposed to encompass literally and more importantly what the repercussions of that would be. Owen immediately steps in to interrupt him, and gives euphemistic translations of whatever description he gives of the project.

Lancey’s failure to pinpoint exactly what a map is a drawing of, or the concrete signified to which it refers, highlights the difficulty of defining place in purely spatial terms. Reading from the government charter Lancey says: “‘Ireland is privileged. No such survey is being undertaken in England. So this survey cannot but be received as proof of the disposition of this government to advance the interests of Ireland’” (407). The translation that Owen provides, however, is ironically different: “This survey demonstrates the government’s interest in Ireland” (407). The Survey is described to fulfill two contested purposes, the first is to benevolently “advance the interests of Ireland” while the second is to demonstrate “the government’s [own] interest in Ireland” (407). According to an earlier remark by Lancey, the map is primarily ordered “so that the military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every corner of this part of the Empire” (406). And though Owen tries to mellow down facts by translating that into “The job is being done by soldiers because they are skilled in this work” (406), his later remark about British interest in Ireland undermines his efforts.

This paradox can be best understood in light of Walter Mignolo’s political and historical approach to cartography. Looking at the development of world maps and the exercise of cartography at the time of the Renaissance, Mignolo suggests that his endeavor “opens up new ways of understanding in which cognitive patterns become embedded in social actions and representations become performances of colonization” (*The Darker Side of the Renaissance* 313). The Ordnance Survey in *Translations,* hence, becomes a literal staged “[performance] of colonization.”

It is important to note as Parsons points out, however, that Friel’s depiction of the Survey, much like his Ballybeg is fictional, and often inaccurate (19). However, the paradox inherent in the historical role of the Survey in Irish culture is not much different from what Friel portrays here. To put it in Owen’s words, “[w]e are trying to dominate and at the same time describe that tiny area of soggy, rocky, ground where that little stream enters the sea” (410). Hence, the process is two-fold, it involves both domination and description, with the latter allowing the Survey to play an important role in the consolidation of an image of the Irish landscape which even Irish Revival writers, like W.B. Yeats, were inspired by.

However, the act of "domination" still looms large in the process of mapping. "Something is being eroded" (420), as the English Yolland puts it, especially that he disappears at the end of the play and the whole of Ballybeg is threatened with eviction in literal terms. That "[s]omething" is a disorientation of the place, in other words, by changing the names of places they are reduced back to spaces that have no relation to the people who live in them, and whereby they must as Hugh says learn those names and inhabit them: "We must learn those new names [. . .]. We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (444). In this process of creating a "new home" is a recognition that places are always 'happening' as discussed earlier (Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place"), and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of continuation if they are simply stagnant in a historical past that has left them already. Accordingly, language too, Hugh tells us, must accommodate for this fluidity, to avoid becoming a civilization that is "imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact" (419).

Ballybeg as Southern Geography

Within this context, Ballybeg under threat can be viewed as a southern geography "produced within a complex of entangled temporalities and disjunctive histories" (Resende "Geographies of the South" 78). However, in response to such "never-ending asymmetrical conflict" Ballybeg as a geography of the south provides what Mignolo describes as "macronarratives from the perspective of coloniality" (*Local Histories/Global Designs* 22). For Mignolo, "[m]acronarratives from the perspective of coloniality are not the counterpart of world or universal history, but a radical departure from such global projects. They are neither (or at least not only) revisionist narratives nor narratives that intend to tell a different truth but, rather, narratives geared towards the search for a different logic" (*Local Histories/Global Designs* 22). The first step towards these narratives is the realization that all narratives are in part invented.

Ballybeg, hence, allows Friel to open discussion on and criticize the systematic colonial destruction, erosion, and devaluation of the local culture that takes place during the process of colonization while at the same time examining the complications that follow in relation to notions like cultural purity which haunt decolonizing nations as they look into their own heritage, which often comes with a tendency to idealize it and risk, as Friel puts it in the mouth of Hugh, to "fossilize" (445). Ballybeg, thus, allows Friel to liberate from having to identify with one national discourse or the other, but to express a more forward-looking point of departure for the south to re-invent itself, to move on from a naïve nativist discourse, and into a more constructive realm that can perceive identity not as fixed but as a more fluid notion continuously, like the place it inhabits, in a process of flux.

This very fluidity is central to the negotiation of identity as much as it is central to the definition of place, which brings us back to reflections on the Global South, a place hard to pin down, much like Ballybeg. Defined by resistance and contested territorialities, continuously in need of reinvention and recreation in an attempt to make a claim on history, and most importantly marked by an awareness of its being in a perpetual state of becoming, Ballybeg becomes an imaginary place Friel and his characters inhabit. Akin to Mignolo's definition of the Global South as "a place […] from which to speak" ("Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse" 123), Friel's Ballybeg presents a position from which to address the world, a practice of being 'South'.

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