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DIALOGUE BETWEEN HUMAN AND PLACE: BIOREGIONAL READING OF MARINA CARR'S *BY THE BOG OF CATS...*

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"*Environmental narratives are produced as the space around us bears down on our skin, into our senses and on to our minds. Our stories are our engagements with our natural worlds.*"

Lisa FitzGerald (2017)[**]

INTRODUCTION

Irish theatre scholarship has recently been influenced by ecological thinking and examined the role of space and spatial dynamics in identity construction on the stage focusing on the process of place-making, creating a life place, and the connection between geographical metaphors and literary and cultural studies in general.[1] As Christopher Morash and Shaun Richards point out in *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* there is recently a "self-consciously spatial turn in Irish Studies which explores the global and local repercussions of place-attachment" (2013: 5). This spatial turn in Irish Studies has led theatre scholars to re-examine the works of Irish playwrights from the revivalists like Yeats and Synge to

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** Lisa Fitzgerald, Re-Place: Irish Theatre and Environments (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).

1 See Anne F. O'Reilly, *Sacred Play: Soul Journeys in Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004); Lionel Pilkington, Theatre and Ireland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Helen Heusner Lojek, *The Spaces of Irish Drama: Stage and Place in Contemporary Plays (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Christopher Morash and Shaun Richards, Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Lisa Fitzgerald, Re-Place: *Irish Theatre and Environments* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).

the recent works shifting the emphasis from the traditional nationalist or postcolonial perspectives to the ecological significance of the space and place in those works. However, Marina Carr's play *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998) has not received the deserved attention from environmentalist critics, although it was performed in 1998, during the years known as the Celtic Tiger years of Ireland in which the bogs, traditionally one of the most important economic resources for the rural communities in Ireland, were extremely drained and sacrificed to urbanization and industrialization.

In *By the Bog of Cats…*, contemporary Irish playwright Marina Carr foregrounds the Irish bogland in the Midlands region which is home to the two largest bogs in Ireland: Monagan Bog and Boora Bog – and part of the Bog of Allen. Although Ireland is "o*ne of the boggiest countries on earth*"[2] the boglands as a bioregion were "*systematically eradicated by draining throughout the colonial rule, but, ironically, most significantly in the twentieth century after Irish independence during intensive modernization efforts*" (Gladwin, 2011: 393). As a playwright who was born and grew up in Offaly in the Midlands region, Marina Carr's depiction of the bogland as a bioregion is important because bioregional literary criticism requires that the bioregional works should be written by the indigenous writers of the related land (May, 2005: 94).

By the Bog of Cats… delves into the complexities of human relationships, identity, and the interplay between individuals and their environment. By applying the lens of bioregionalism, a holistic ecological philosophy that emphasizes the intimate connection between people and their surrounding ecosystems, we can unravel the profound implications of the play within the context of place, nature, and the human condition. Therefore, this essay proposes that Carr's *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998) is an example of a bioregional drama that intends to explore the cultural, historical, spiritual, and environmental significance of the boglands in Ireland with an emphasis on the physical, emotional, and spiritual interconnectedness of human and place, and human and nonhuman entities pointing to the permeability of both. As bioregional literary criticism is also an ecological criticism, this essay, further, suggests that Carr's play invites the audience to embrace an ecological consciousness that recognizes the interdependence between humans and the natural world.

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2 Feehan, John. (2001). "Waterworld", *World of Hibernia*, 7/2:40. (8.7.2023) https://www.search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=5172800&site=ehost-live.

Bioregionalism and Bioregional Literary Theory

Bioregionalism, born as part of the environmental movement during the 1970s, intends to take attention to the significance of the place not as a merely geographical location but as a home with its history, myths, and biodiversity where we have tender physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual integration and interaction with all life forms like human and nonhuman entities. It aims to raise "*in all people the sense of being indigenous to a place (…) and centers around the identification of, and with a bioregion*" (Booth, 1999: 97). What is a bioregion, then? Robert L. Thayer Jr. defines a bioregion as a "*life-place – a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities*". (Thayer, 2003: 3). As Jim Dodge puts it, bioregionalism means "life territory, place of life" and a bioregion "*includes all interacting life forms, from the tiniest fleck of algae to human beings, as well as their biological processes*" (Dodge, 1981: 5). David Robertson summarizes the key components of bioregionalism as "*a holistic integration of the individual person with that bioregion; and the interconnectedness of the physical world, human psychology, and spirituality*". (in Barnhill, 2012: 1017)) . Here, to be able to grasp the bioregional spirituality in the context of the Irish boglands we should look through the history of boglands in Ireland as a bioregion.

Irish Boglands As A Bioregion

Historically boglands have always been at the center of social, cultural, and economic life in Ireland. An environmentalist scientist Derek Gladwin states that boglands are often considered a particular feature of the Irish landscape although 92% of them were sacrificed today to the global economy (Gladwin, 2011: 395). Bruce Osborne sees the boglands as the world's most important carbon stores and recognizes them for their biodiversity (2021: i). John Feehan describes the bogs as magical places emphasizing the flora and fauna in their natural environment:

> During the winter season, the sight of numerous geese, ducks, and waders congregating on the flooded grasslands around the bog creates a delightful and exhilarating spectacle for observers. Unlike some other rare and untamed regions, there are no sizable herds of mammals here; instead, the bog is home to a diverse array of small creatures. These tiny inhabitants, such as beetles, moths, flies, dragonflies, and butterflies, each

> have their own captivating stories to share, and much of the enchantment lies concealed within the extraordinary lives of these tiny animals. (Feehan, 2001:40)

Moreover, bogs are also known for their preservative qualities; they are known as a place to store butter and eggs (Gladwin, 2011:393), and even dead human bodies and artifacts from the past because of a substance called sphagnum (McLean, 2008: 301). What is magical in the boglands is the ability of the bog plants to survive without oxygen. Just as bog plants do not decay properly when they die, neither do objects hidden or lost in bogs by people down the ages. They are just embalmed in the upward-growing peat. (Feehan, 2001: 40). However, the bogs are also dangerous places. This is made explicit in one of the wall displays at Moesgård Museum in Danmark (Treacherous and Alluring Bogs), which describes the bog as a threshold between the human and supernatural worlds:

> The bog is a strange and dangerous place, neither land nor water – a desolate landscape with neither roads, nor paths, nor fixed points, just a bottomless deep waiting to engulf the trespasser. Take one wrong step while jumping from tuft to tuft and you will perish. The bog is alluring and seductive and inhabited by strange creatures. The dreamlike mist across the black deep has fuelled myths and ballads about ladies of the bog (…). (McLean, 2008: 305-306)

This concept might have nourished the contemporary perception of the boglands as mythic and supernatural landscapes (McLean, 2008: 305-306). For example, in Irish folklore, a paranormal spirit called the 'pooka' is believed to live within and around bogs and other watery landscapes. While accounts vary, the pooka is a shape-shifting creature often associated with the trickster tradition. Flickering pale lights often sighted across the bogs at night – created by spontaneous combustion of peat gasses – were identified in folklore as a malevolent spirit called a 'Water Sheerie' or 'Bog Spirit', and "*Their purpose was to cajole weary travelers toward a watery death*" (Gladwin 390).

Bioregionalist Reading of Carr's *By the Bog of Cats…*

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats…* deals with the idea of place-based identity in the personality of the protagonist, Hester Swane, a marginal

woman of forty, a tinker's daughter,[3] who was abandoned by her mother Josie Swane when she was seven. Hester lives close to nature, to the bogland whereas other members of the bogland community look for material values such as money, property, and superficial respectability that comes along with those, and feel threatened by this choice of Hester's. The play is also an appropriation of Euripides's *Medea* into the contemporary rural Irish context taking at the center the predicament of Hester who is forced by both Carthage Kilbride, her young common-law husband, her partner of fourteen years, and the bogland community to leave the Bog of Cats and her seven-year-old daughter Josie. (Hester, who has been longing for her mother since the age of seven, names her daughter after her mother). Carthage and the bogland community think that a woman who lives on a caravan by the bog refusing to live in a house and wanders around the bog every night and day cannot be a good mother for a seven-year-old daughter. However, Hester severely rejects this, saying "*I'm goin' nowhere. This here is my house and my garden and my stretch of the bog and no wan's runnin' me out of here*" (Carr, 2000: 268). In another scene, Hester again protests: "*Ah, how can I lave the Bog of Cats, everythin' I'm connected to is here. I'd rather die*" (Carr, 273). Hester's following words unravel her deep connection with the bog: "*I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end me days*" (Carr, 2000: 289). In the meantime, Carthage is about to marry Caroline, the daughter of a rich farmer Xavier Cassidy, to merge his farm and assets with Caroline's father. Carthage lets Hester stay on the bog if she accepts not to live on her caravan by the Bog of Cats but in the house that Carthage has built for her. But Hester is intimately connected to the bog and sees and defines herself in terms of the bogland, reflecting the bioregional concept of having a history, finding meaning and belonging within a specific place. Hester again protests: "*I've as much right to this place as any of yees, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees*" (Carr, 289).

Hester Swane's rejection to go into exile just because her husband and the bogland community want her and her deep connection not with Carthage but with the bog is a strong landscape-based identity definition (Kader, 2005: 168-169). As Hester's close friend, the Catwoman says, Hester was put into the nest of the Black Wing, a black swan by her mother Big Josie Swane when she was born, and then left by her in a caravan in the

[3] As Mary Burke states Tinkers are "travelers" and "members of a historically nomadic minority community defined by anthropologists as an ethnic group that has existed on the margins of Irish society for perhaps centuries" (Burke, 2009:2)

Bog of Cats when she was seven and since then Hester has been living on the Bog of Cats and waiting for her mother to return to the Bog of Cats: "*I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I'll watch her return*" (Carr, 297)). This is another reason why Hester is intimately connected to the bogland. She keeps waiting for her mother's return from the bog.

Although the rest of the play follows the same tragic revenge structure as Euripides's Medea and ends with Hester's murder of her daughter and suicide, Carr highlights the bog not as a backdrop, not as a geographical location only but as a bioregion, a "*life place*"[4] and a separate character in its own right that sometimes shapes the characters' experiences and identities and is sometimes enmeshed with and embodied in their body and soul as the bioregionalist literary criticism assumes.

In the discourse of bioregionalism, another most important key term is *dwelling*. For Kirkpatrick Sale, to dwell means "*to live mindfully and deeply in place to be fully engaged in the sensory richness of our immediate environment. Different bioregions look, smell, taste, sound, and feel different*" (quoted in Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster, 2012: 5). As Kirkpatrick Sale puts it elsewhere:

> The crucial (…) task is to understand the place, the immediate specific place where we live. The kinds of soils and rocks under our feet; the source of the waters we drink; the meaning of the different kinds of wind, the common insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees; the particular cycles of the seasons; the times to plant and harvest and forage – these are the things that are necessary to know…And the cultures of the people, of the populations native to the land and of those who have grown up with it, the human social economic arrangements shaped by and adapted to the geomorphic ones, in both urban and rural settings—these are the things that must be appreciated. these are the things that must be appreciated. (2000: 42)

As Hester Swane's Midlands accent exhibits she is a dweller in the bogland and lives mindfully and deeply in the bogland: "*I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best*

[4] In *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Robert L. Thayer defines a *bioregion* as follows: "A bioregion is literally and etymologically a "life-place" – a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities". (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster, 3)

bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue. I could lead yees around the Bog of Cats in me sleep" (Carr, 314). Peter Burg and Raymond Dasmann suggest a more common word living-in place than the term dwelling. They explain it as "*following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site*" (1990: 35). This particular site where Hester Swane was born, grew up, had intimate connections, and wants to live and die is the Bog of Cats.

When the play opens, we see Hester scraping a black swan's (Black Wing) dead body off the ice to bury her while a Ghost Fancier who comes to take Hester's life but ironically enough is confused with the time, watches her.

> *Dawn. On the Bog of Cats. A bleak white landscape of ice and snow (…). HESTER SWANE trails the corpse of a black swan after her, leaving a trail of blood in the snow. The GHOST FANCIER stands there watching her.*

> HESTER: This is auld Black Wing. I've known her the longest time. We used play together when I was a young wan. Wance I had to lave the Bog of Cats and when I returned years later this swan here came swoopin' over the bog to welcome me home, right up to me and kissed me hand. Found her frozen in a bog hole last night, had to rip her from the ice, left half her underbelly. (Carr, 265-266)

Marina Carr, here, describes the bog as a living creature containing within itself many symbiotic life forms. As the scene suggests, the Black Swan's underbelly stuck to the ice will merge into the bog when spring comes and the ice melts and will continue its existence by dissolving and merging with other organisms in the bog and taking a different form as bogs, due to their nature and the bio-chemicals they contain, have a renewing, dynamic structure that supports many life forms and also supported by them. In this way, as the scene suggests space and the animal body become permeable by intertwining with each other.

While the opening scene reveals the place and nonhuman interconnectedness, Scene Three reveals the human-nonhuman connection in these words of Hester:

> CATWOMAN: She came to my door last night and tapped on it as she often did, only last night she wouldn't come in. I

> bent down and she puts her wing on me cheek and I knew this was farewell. Then I heard her tired auld wingbeat, shaky and off kilter and then the thud of her fallin' out of the sky onto the ice. She must've died on the wing or soon after. (*Kisses the black swan*) Goodbye, auld thing, and safe journey (…). (Carr, 272)

Later on, it is revealed by Hester's friend, the Catwoman, that Hester's life span is attached to the black swan's, and the black swan's death will bring Hester her own death. The Catwoman tells Hester of her mother's prediction on the day she was born: "*That child says Josie Swane, 'will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less*" (Carr, 275). This opening scene establishes the bioregional concept of interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman connecting Hester's life span to the Black Swan's. Hester's interesting birth story is important in the context of bioregionalism because as Theresa J. May puts it, "*a story is a product of connection that maintains a field of contact not only among people but also between people and place (…). Stories create a matrix of belonging, a living tissue between past and present and between human and non-human communities*" (94).

Apart from the Black Wing, Hester's only friend in the bogland, The Catwoman, is a half-human, half-animal character in her late fifties. She keeps many cats, lives in a turf house on the bog, eats mice, drinks water from a bowl like a cat, and wears a coat of cat fur with a cat's eyes and paws on it. She is a character who blurs the line between animal and human. Although she is blind she is a healer and she has a deeper seeing, "*the capacity to inhabit both the spirit and the human world*" (O'Reilly, 2004: 155). Like Hester, she transgresses the borders not only between the animals and humans but also between life and the afterlife as she can see and talk with the ghosts. Therefore, both Hester and the Catwoman are othered and stigmatized as witches by the rich and influential people of the bogland because of their close connections and identification with nature and the nonhuman world as well as their lower social status.

Although most critics have seen the existence of a Ghost Fancier and other ghosts in the play as a gothic element, this embraces the bioregionalist spirituality that is defined "*as one sort of emotional/mental relationship between the earth and humans*" (Booth, 1999: 98). Jim Dodge explains bioregional spirituality focusing on the interconnection between human and nonhuman nature and states that "*We're all one creation, and there*

is a connection – even a necessary unity – between the natural world and the human mind" (Dodge, 1981, 10). Environmental poet Gary Snyder, explains bioregional spirituality as awareness about the sacredness of a piece of land. "*This is an attitude that draws on awareness of the mystery of life and death; of taking life to live; of giving life back – not only to your own children but to the life of the whole land*" (Snyder, 1977: 59-60). Here the bogland, as a liminal place, a threshold between the water and the earth is also a threshold between life and the afterlife, "*between possibilities of being*" (May, 2005: 95) with the embeddedness of the place, the human, and non-human entities, like ghosts, and their stories.

Moreover, bioregionalists recognize "*a need for ritual and ceremony as part of the celebration of the earth and her inhabitants (…) and they define spirituality as one sort of emotional/mental relationship between the earth and humans*" (Booth, 1999: 98). This burial of the Black Swan scene is a ritual for Hester and the Catwoman. Anthropologist Vine Deloria believes that "*it is possible for a cultural group to 'consecrate' a particular landscape if they are capable of seeing themselves in terms of that landscape*" (1973: 295) and its human and non-human entities. For Hester, the bogland is a sacred place and she sees herself in terms of the landscape, the bog.

Also, the philosopher Jim Cheney points to the myths and rituals of indigenous people as models of bioregional narratives that reflect and maintain sustainable relationships between humans and their natural environments; these myths and rituals, he argues, locate the people associated with them "*in the moral space of defining relations*" and incorporate natural entities into their sense of moral community (1989: 126). So bioregional discourse always includes storytelling rich in metaphor and myth. Carr's *By the Bog of Cats…* is rich in stories and rituals. As a bioregionalist playwright, Carr wants to point to the natural and cultural significance of the bogs in the Midlands bioregion offering the Irish view of the bog encompassing the views of bioregional spirituality as many bioregionalists embrace spirituality (Booth, 1999: 100) which is associated with the sacredness of the land.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, the Bog of Cats is a mysterious landscape with its stories and ghosts, and also the collective memory of the place and community as it can store everything, even dead bodies. That is why Hester keeps waiting for her lost mother who one night disappeared in the bog. The Ghost Fancier is not the only character from another world, there is also Joseph's Ghost. Joseph Swane is Hester's brother, who has been

murdered by Hester and Carthage, and thrown into the bog. Joseph's ghost comes back from the bog. "*Ghosts are an irremovable part of the landscape of the Bog of Cats*" (Kader, 2005: 182) because bioregions are "*spirit places*" or "*psyche-tuning power–presences (…). By this criterion, a bioregion is defined by the predominant psychophysical influence where you live. You have to live in its presence long enough to truly feel its force within you and that it is not merely descriptive geography*" (Dodge 7).

At the end of the play, Hester sacrifices her daughter and then commits suicide in the bog to become part of the eternal continuity that the bog provides. Hester's last words to Carthage indicate that she and their daughter Josie are physically returning to the bog but they will be spiritually present there everlastingly:

> Ya won't forget me now, Carthage, and when all of this is over or half-remembered and you think you've almost forgotten me again, take a walk along the Bog of Cats and wait for a purlin' wind through your hair or a soft breath be your ear or a rustle behind Ya. That'll be me and Josie ghostin' ya. (Carr, 340)

Hester is now a part of the bog, a part of the infinite cycle that will continue to renew. In other words, there is a shared materiality between human and non-human worlds that invalidates the distinction between human and environment/nature. Hester's and Josie's material aspect, their bodies, will merge into the dynamic and fluid network of nature. Physically, they will return to the bog or, as Bernadette Bourke puts it, "to the great nourishing womb of nature" (2003, 139), but spiritually, they will live in the bog forever. In this last scene the physical, emotional, and spiritual interconnectedness of humans and place/bioregion/nature is released in a poetic way pointing to the permeability of both. In the dramatic world of the play where there is a magical bog that hosts ghosts, supernatural black swans, and catlike women, Hester "*will become legendary, powerful, and above all a permanent fixture of the landscape of the Bog of Cats*" (Kader, 2005: 184) like Medea, and like the Irish mythological women characters such as Deirdre, Aoife, and Diarmuid.

CONCLUSION

Bioregionalism encourages the restoration and regeneration of damaged ecosystems. Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats…* resonates with the principles

of bioregionalism, showcasing the transactional relationships and dynamics between humans and the natural world foregrounding Hester Swane's connection with the bog within the context of the Irish Midlands. By exploring themes of a sense of place, intricate human-nature relationships, environmental degradation, and regeneration, the play prompts us to reflect on our ecological consciousness and our responsibilities toward the landscapes we inhabit. Through bioregionalism, Carr invites us to embrace a deep appreciation for our ecological connections, nurturing a harmonious coexistence with the natural world while honoring our identities rooted in the land.

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