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Book Review: Shaping Women's Identity in Northern Ireland

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To cite this version:

Karen Hagan. Book Review: Shaping Women's Identity in Northern Ireland. European Journal of Women's Studies, 2006, 13 (1), pp.70-73. 10.1177/135050680601300109 . hal-00571262

HAL Id: hal-00571262
https://hal.science/hal-00571262v1

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

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Ana Mañeru manifests her profound debt to a series of feminine mediations that make up a long genealogical chain of women who have created world. It is they who have permitted her to illuminate and come close to Emily 'without enclosing her in categories or establishing comparisons' that might distract attention from the American poetess's own words.

The main achievement of this book is exactly that which the author has set out to achieve: to help us not to miss the 'greatness amongst the multitude of conventional, banal and distorted interpretations' of the life and work of Emily Dickinson. In this sense, Ana Mañeru Méndez has clearly chosen to distance herself from academic approaches that insist upon a 'thematic' ordering of her work, or psychological interpretations of it that only repeat the same (dis)organization of the world. Neither does she stop to argue with – or share – the version of a violently repressed soul that is manifested in the chinks in her poetry, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have managed to canonize in North American feminist studies. Tiptoeing past useless sterile polemics, she prefers to introduce us to *her* poetess and her words. Without any fuss, in her own particular sweet and clear style, with that writing of hers that is so beautiful, Ana Mañeru offers us a panorama of those interpretations of Dickinson's life, sometimes condescending, almost always erroneous, that Adrienne Rich was to denounce. Meanwhile, she introduces us into Dickinson's home, her family, the room where she wrote and in which, in the words of Dickinson herself, 'freedom is', in the books that she read and loved, in her sense of irony and her peculiar religious feeling, far from the 19th-century puritanism to which she has frequently been linked. At the same time, she introduces us to the poetess's relationship with her work, the family quarrels over her legacy and the successive editions of her poetry and correspondence, her reflective mind, her incredibly personal sense of what is correct, her experience as a measure of the real, the adventure of her unique style and her entirely free usage of the resources of language and poetry.

The style of Ana Mañeru becomes one of the essential elements of this book. Its beauty, its sweetness and clarity, its firm and paused rhythm, speak to us from other worlds of meaning; they are echoes of a voice that we recognize as her own. Because the author does not project her voice and disguise herself as a critic or biographer, but rather reads the words of Emily Dickinson from herself. In this sense, and above all, this book is an emotive testimony, manifested in its careful selection and its fine translation, of a woman poet who is concerned, not to rescue texts from oblivion, but to recover a voice that has been distorted by a tradition of male reading.

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(Translated by Caroline Wilson)

SHAPING WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Alice McIntyre
Women in Belfast: How Violence Shapes Identity
Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004, ix + 207 pp., ISBN 0–275–97925–3

Alice McIntyre became interested in exploring the issues of 'race, ethnicity and discrimination' (p. 4) in Boston with African American youths within the

education system. She later learned of multiple interpretations of feminism and discovered participatory action research (PAR). All of these elements are brought together coherently in this book; the skills and knowledge have been transferred to the setting of 'Monument Road' in Belfast, where she carried out PAR with a unique group of nine women. McIntyre met the first two women in the USA, following a talk they gave on 'the violence in the North of Ireland' (p. 5). They then recruited the others from their friends and neighbours, based on whom they believed would enjoy the project. McIntyre lived with two of the participants when she was in Belfast and has clearly developed very close relationships with the group. The women range between 24 and 40 years of age and differ in their domestic arrangements, personalities and education/employment. Although they all describe themselves as nationalist or republican, there is some variability in the meanings they attach to these ideologies.

> . . . [PAR] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 1)

McIntyre has adhered to the original principles of feminist PAR, being committed to the local participants and their issues. She has attempted to draw on the women's own desire to reflect on their experiences to achieve some clarity and collective action that may be of benefit to them. Much is made of the autonomy of the women in the process and their ownership of the research. The ultimate aim is not only to achieve a deeper understanding but also to 'effect a transformative change' (p. 19).

As well as issues of power and knowledge construction, the book covers a range of topics relevant to the women in Belfast. Although there is a focus on how violence has impacted on their identities, they also discuss gender, class, ideology, geographical location and other relevant areas. The section on 'women researching their own lives' (p. 17) provides the framework for the approach and focuses. McIntyre uses grounded theory method to explore the social constructions in the women's early discussions. These then form the themes addressed in the project and the book.

Chapter 2, 'Past and Present Violence in Women's Lives', presents a most disturbing picture of the experience of violence in a community and is a stark reminder of what this community has actually had to endure. Indeed, research in the past has identified the deleterious impact of violence on the opportunities available to women in terms of education and public life and on their health, both physical and psychological. The most startling aspect of this chapter is McIntyre's analysis of the continuity between the past and present. Not only is there no qualitative change between the past violence and that of the present, there is a sense that, in terms of the level of violence, change is minimal.

The subheading 'Remembering the Past to Survive the Present' (p. 49) does aim to give a little insight into the ways past experiences shape present views and beliefs. This could have been developed in more depth in terms of how salient these past aspects of violence are in comparison to the present and why. The constructed meanings associated with violence are touched on but not explored in depth; I still do not feel I quite understand, in the round, what violence and aggression mean to the women of Monument Road. There are hints at the dual values expressed towards violence when on the one hand it emanates from the community and the women support it and on the other hand it is targeted against the community and is condemned.

Chapter 3, 'Geographies of Place and Identity: A Visual Story of Monument Road', exemplifies the use of photovoice to 'enable people to "reflect on photographs that mirror the everyday social and political realities that influence their lives" (Wang et al., 1998, p. 80)' (p. 75). The technique is creative and allows reflection (albeit highly selective) on significant aspects of life for the women on Monument Road, including places and structures. It is personal yet raises many broader issues and considerations for the research process. There is an interesting dichotomy between what the women are and what they want to have represented in the public record of the book – as illustrated when some, who do not speak Irish, want the captions for their photographs to be written in Irish.

Chapters 4 ('Baby Makers and Sweet Colleens') and 5 ('Women and/in Politics') focus more clearly on the feminist issues and theories that McIntyre also hoped to raise through the PAR project. While there is quite a bit of repetition of points and material and it is a little difficult to follow the logic of the structure, there are some extremely interesting and well-discussed subsections. In one subsection, 'Shaping the Identity of a New Generation', McIntyre outlines some of the views of the children of the community and the dilemmas facing the women about what should be passed on and how. Again, however, I was frustrated by the lack of depth about the construction and transmission of meanings, e.g. how protesting on the road is constructed as 'protecting' their children.

The fifth chapter, 'Women and/in Politics', reports the range of ways the women in Monument Road are active politically within the community and in the wider arena while their role is somewhat muted in the public sphere. McIntyre draws on the work of McWilliams (1995) and Millar et al. (1996) (pp. 148–9) to suggest reasons for this, including lack of opportunities as well as a lack of interest in representing issues that are important to women on the part of those in the political structures. 'The Contested Nature of Women's Roles: Doin' Politics and Doin' the Home' (p. 160) also highlights the conflict for women who want to become more politically active. In previous work, both the wider society and local communities have been found to send out conflicting and changing messages about the acceptability of women having prominent social roles (Sullivan, 1999). McIntyre, like Aretxaga (1997), goes some way to recognizing women political activists in their own right, unlike some previous feminist researchers who erased women from the realm of political activism.

The final chapter of the book reflects on the process and the outcomes for both the researcher and the women. The feminist PAR project did achieve more than most methods could, as McIntyre claims. It was a wonderfully creative process that brought the subjects of the study along as full participants with a great level of control over the outcome. There was a sense that the women benefited from taking time out to express themselves in this way and had opportunities to explore some of their very deeply held hopes, fears and experiences. McIntyre suggests that violence is a pervasive (although differentiated) element in the lives of the women of Monument Road, however, she also provides a rounded picture:

> Portraying Irish women as long-suffering victims of the war dismisses their considerable success as educators, community workers, humorists and the primary actors in everyday life. (p. 144)

I was brought up in Belfast and have lived here for 40 years. Perhaps as a result, I am struck by the limitations and problems of this participant observation. The activist stance of the researcher is problematic and does highlight some ethical dilemmas as well as value issues. The conflict in Belfast is not quite as clear-cut as presented and there is a naivety inherent in McIntyre's/the PAR stance; more

awareness should be shown of the contested nature of claims, such as whether internment ended just before the Good Friday Agreement (p. 130). The tone of the book is value-laden and biased, from the use of language to the information provided. McIntyre has adopted the ideology of the participants but without full transparency and without full acknowledgement of the context. For example, while it is essential to accept the meanings attached to terms and actions that are part of the narratives of the women of Monument Road, the researcher, herself, uses the terms 'war' and the 'North of Ireland' and refers to children throwing missiles as part of 'the various forms of resistance' without acknowledging their political inferences. One omission in this discussion of how violence affects identity is that there is virtually no recognition or discussion of the intra-community violence.

McIntyre has claimed to be committed to 'researcher reflexivity, which included problematizing the power dynamics in participant–researcher relationships' (p. 20). Although there is acknowledgement of this and some awareness, for example, of being the outsider, I don't think McIntyre has reflected sufficiently on the complex nature of the researcher–researched relationship. These women are exceptionally astute and politically sophisticated and have political agendas as well as personal ones. McIntyre came to this community through links made with fundraisers in her home country of the USA, which is one of the main sources of income for the republican and nationalist cause. I would have expected greater reflection on the political discourses and power relationships inherent in her relationships with her participants and in their lives. Without such reflection, the promise that the book will throw light on this crucially important issue for the 21st century is not fulfilled.

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