

A Revisionist Reading of the American West in Days Without End by Sebastian Barry

Uma leitura revisionista do oeste americano em Days Without End de Sebastian Barry

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Abstract: *This article aims at discussing the literary representation of an Irish immigrant in the American West in the nineteenth century, emphasizing the transnational, hybrid, and overlapping dimensions of cultures in that region, and investigating identity issues that are addressed in the novel, which deconstructs the traditional perspectives of masculinity, individualism, and romanticization of the expansion of the American Frontier in the period. Thomas McNulty, protagonist of the novel Days Without End (2016), by the contemporary Irish writer Sebastian Barry, leaves the city of Sligo in Ireland to escape the Great Famine that victimized his family, and arrives in the United States in 1850, a period of expansionist violence and development of the American West as a space of conquest and opportunity for some and tragedy for others. Like hundreds of thousands of Irish people in the nineteenth century, Thomas served in the U.S. Army and became involved in the fighting against Native Americans and also in the American Civil War. Being a victim himself of starvation and of British colonization in his native country, his involvement in the American wars also makes him an aggressor, although we can draw connections between the plight of Irish immigrants in the region and the Native Americans.*

Keywords: *Irish Fiction; Irish in the USA; Days Without End.*

Resumo: *Este artigo tem por objetivo discutir a representação literária de um imigrante irlandês no Velho Oeste americano no século XIX, enfatizando a dimensão transnacional, híbrida e de sobreposição de culturas naquela região, e investigando questões identitárias que são tratadas no romance, que desconstrói as perspectivas tradicionais de masculinidade, individualismo e romantização*

da expansão das fronteiras estadunidenses no período. Thomas McNulty, protagonista do romance Days Without End (2016), do autor contemporâneo irlandês Sebastian Barry, deixa a cidade de Sligo na Irlanda para escapar da Grande Fome que vitimou a sua família, e chega aos Estados Unidos em 1850, um período de violência expansionista e desenvolvimento do oeste americano como espaço de conquista e oportunidade para alguns, e tragédia para outros. Como centenas de milhares de irlandeses no século XIX, Thomas serviu no exército dos EUA e se envolveu na luta contra os nativos americanos e na Guerra Civil americana. Sendo ele próprio uma vítima da fome e da colonização britânica em seu país natal, o seu envolvimento nas guerras americanas torna-o também agressor, ainda que possamos estabelecer conexões entre a situação dos imigrantes irlandeses na região e os indígenas nativos.

Palavras-chave: *Ficção irlandesa; Irlandeses nos EUA; Days Without End.*

Introduction

After the independence of the thirteen colonies of the United States in the 18th century (1776), the process of territorial expansion of the nation towards the West began. First, the plains of the central region were occupied, and in the course of the 19th century, the West Coast, bordered by the Pacific Ocean, was reached. The ideology behind this process of conquering the West was that of clearing the region in order to explore it, bringing what was considered progress and civilisation. The encounter between the white settlers and the native indigenous peoples in the US generated conflicts, which were resolved through armed violence. This colonising expansion made the frontier between the conquered territories and those that were still outside the jurisdiction of the government moveable, and, eventually, the Frontier was considered officially extinct in 1890. At that time, the American National Census stated that the western region of the country had so many pockets of colonised areas that it could no longer be said that a frontier line existed. The advance of the frontier line that had characterised changes in population distribution over the previous hundred years was complete.

The physical frontier line was extinguished, but the myth of the Frontier remained. This is a foundation myth in the history of the United States, which was consolidated as a result of the conceptions of writers, politicians and historians, such as, for example, the Frontier Thesis proposed by historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In his essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), Turner explains that American progress was based on

the expansion of frontiers moving westwards. According to him, back in those days the history of the United States had largely been the history of the colonisation of the West.

The American West represented “wilderness”, a free area, a wild space that had not yet been colonised. For centuries the frontier line advanced westwards, until the process of territorial expansion was considered complete. Turner claimed that the frontier defined the history of the country and its development when it sought out lands with the potential to be colonised, urbanised, or in other words, conquered and modernised by the white Americans by exploiting the lands to the point of exhaustion in order to meet economic needs.

In his essay, Turner defended the idea that in contact with the wilderness, the pioneers had to face the conditions of primitive life, abandoning the habits and customs of European civilisation and relying on themselves because they were far from government control, although they sought help from the Union government to solve problems beyond their reach. The permanent contact with simple life in the wilderness marked the American character and strengthened the central government to reinforce national ties. The frontier experience was therefore fundamental to the Americanisation process. And this experience occurred successively over three centuries, as the frontier line advanced westwards. Because of these conditions, Turner associated the frontier experience with individualism, democracy and nationalism.

Another important influence in understanding the “Frontier myth” was the perspective of the writer and politician Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), who would go on to become President of the United States from 1901 to 1909. In his view, the experience that transformed him into a progressive politician with democratic conceptions was the time he spent on his ranch in Dakota, in the centre-west of the country. In the four volumes he wrote about the West, *Winning the West* (1889-1896), Roosevelt valorised the mythological figures that portrayed the superiority of the Americans in the conquest and formation of the United States of America, such as the lone hunter and the cowboy.

As mentioned, Turner and Roosevelt, among others, associated living conditions on the frontier with democracy and individualism, and the pioneer, farmer or cowboy as symbols of American nationality – white, masculine and solitary men, representatives of a race superior to the “savages” (indigenous peoples) who inhabited the uncolonised lands. The construction of a modern, industrialised country justified the death of the “inferior races” that inhabited that space. The West was then idealised as the land of freedom, and also served as the basis for

the capitalist ideology embodied in the doctrine of “Manifest Destiny” or, in other words, the belief in the divine mission of the Americans, as the people chosen by God to bring civilisation and progress to the peoples of the continent.

Although the term “Manifest Destiny” was coined in 1845 by American journalist John O’Sullivan to defend the westward expansion and annexation of Texas by the United States in the war against Mexico, this idea of the country’s providential destiny has its roots in earlier centuries. It dates back to the era of British colonisation of the New World, since the arrival of the pioneering English colonists in the 17th century, with the Puritans who arrived on ships like the *Mayflower* (1620) and the *Arabella Ship* (1630).

It should be emphasised that Puritanism provided elements for the identity of the colonies: a new man could emerge in the promised land, bringing his values to the New World and leaving behind the corruption of the European Old World. According to Cherry (1998), the settlers saw their settlements as a civilisation project operated by God for the redemption of humanity (25).

Narratives about the Frontier have been present since the 16th and 17th centuries, describing conflicts between Europeans and natives, crossed the 18th and 19th centuries, and were disseminated worldwide in the 20th century through literature and cinema, mainly focusing on the period from 1860 to 1890 in the West. The setting encompasses the Mississippi coastline from the period leading up to the American Civil War until the mid-1890s. The American Wild West, as represented in traditional westerns, is part of a worldwide historical memory, which through adventures of independence and courage, confronting nature and fighting the natives, understood as “savages” propagates the ideology of Anglo-Saxon superiority in North America.

Post-modern and post-colonial studies have brought fictional narratives, not only of the conquest of the West, but also of life in the West, from different perspectives, with room for questioning the founding myths of the United States, analyses of the transformations and adaptations of American culture and the multicultural and globalised relations that were established on the Frontier.

In this regard, professor emeritus of American Studies at the University of Nebraska, Dr Neil Campbell (2008), applies the concept of rhizome to reflect upon the American West. According to him,

to rethink the West rhizomatically, beyond its function of unifying the national territory ... is to see it as unfinished, multiple and open; and to recognise that underneath the official histories there are others, ... with other kinds of encounter and invention', which trace divergent and tangled lines of composition that constantly interconnect and divide. (9)

In botany, the rhizome defines the system of horizontal stems that grow in a differentiated, horizontal manner, without a defined orientation, like grass, for example, which spreads out over the land on which it is planted. This form of plant organisation presupposes multiplicity; there is no centre, hierarchies, order or depth. In the humanities, philosophers Gilles Deleuze (2000) and Felix Guattari developed the concept of the rhizome to think about philosophy, and to this end created an epistemological model that is characterised by “the abstract line, the line of escape or deterritorialisation” (14) and which is suitable for studying the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the contemporary world. Transporting this understanding to the region of the American frontier as a rhizome, non-linear, and its multiplicity of unofficial histories, which are aligned with the fictional writing of contemporary Irish author Sebastian Barry, we intend to point out some identity issues present in the representation of the American West in his novel *Days Without End* (2016). This study examines the way in which the author deconstructs the traditional perspectives of masculinity, individualism and nationalism resulting from the frontier experience, and emphasizes the transnational, hybrid and overlapping dimension of cultures in the West, questioning the ideologies of “Manifest Destiny” and the “American Dream” in American culture. The literary and cultural representation present in Barry’s novel works not only to deconstruct traditional narratives, but also to reconstruct narratives erased from the traditional literary and cinematic historiography of fiction recognised as “westerns”, which tell the story of the American Wild West.

The representation of the West in *Days Without End*

The protagonist of the aforementioned novel, then Irishman Thomas McNulty, is a fictionalised version of one of Barry’s relatives. The author was inspired by a comment made by his grandfather, who told him about a distant relative who had fought in the wars against the Indians in the United States in the 19th century. Nothing else was known about his life story, and Barry constructed one for him through his writing, as part of a very personal project, already described in several interviews, that is to give visibility to those who have been erased

from Irish history, both at home and abroad, using examples from his own family. In 2017, in an interview with Terry Gross on the *Fresh Air* programme, the author explains:

... you wonder then about the sadness and the sorrow - historical sorrow of an Irish person, himself essentially a native person, an aboriginal person, by a great trauma having to go to America, joining an Army that was engaged in the destruction, erasure and removal of a people, the Native American people, not unlike himself. That was one of the things. So, my task was to follow, and in this instance, follow a person like that to America. (Gross, 2017)

In the novel, Thomas McNulty leaves Ireland after losing his family in the Great Famine (1845-1849), a tragedy that victimised more than a million and a half people in the country and led a similar number to emigrate. After a brief stay in Canada, he arrived in Missouri in 1850 at the age of 15, where he met a teenager, John Cole, born in New England, who, like him, was struggling to survive, having left his homeland after his father's land was exhausted. The two boys became lifelong friends and then lovers, even marrying after the American Civil War. McNulty, now 70, recounts their adventures in the Old West; the jobs they did, the wars they fought, the towns they lived in.

During their first two years in Daggsville, a mining town in Missouri, the “dancing years”, as McNulty calls this period, they worked in a cabaret. The two boys, still young and immature, danced in women's clothes to entertain the miners of the Old West in Mr. Titus Noone's saloon, a place frequented only by men, since there were no women in the town.

Those performances brought a bit of illusion and imagination to those rough men, who dressed up and perfumed themselves to dance with Joanna and Thomasina, the boys' stage names, who, as McNulty makes clear, represented the girls from the miners' memories. The narrator describes the miners as “gentlemen of the frontier” when they were at the cabaret with the dancers. Men who “like rough food, rough whiskey, rough nights ... There were never such raping men as miners ... They all came into Noone's saloon and there was a change, a mighty change. Because we were pretty girls and we were the darlings of their souls” (Barry, 2016 10).

As demonstrated in the example, Barry's novel distances itself not only from the conventional westerns and their stereotypes of masculinity in the Old West, by describing the respect, kindness and affection of the miners in dealing with the dancers, but also from

narratives that focus on European immigrants in the nineteenth century, who were fleeing poverty for the New World, the land of opportunity. There, they could quickly be enriched by exploring the American West. The immigrant Thomas McNulty, on the contrary, is a poor, homosexual Irishman with no financial ambitions, who, together with his partner John Cole, accepts any kind of work just to survive. Whether dancing for miners in Daggsville in women's costumes for 50 cents each, joining the US army exterminating Indians in wars against natives, or fighting in the American Civil War. Survival was the only objective for these boys, even though their wages were very low: "The only pay worse than the worst pay in America was army pay. ... But you were glad to get work because if you didn't work for the few dollars in America you hungered, I had learned that lesson. Well, I was sick of hungering" (2).

Not only is Barry's protagonist devoid of financial ambitions, but also the opportunities for immigrants at that time were scarce, especially for the Irish, who suffered prejudice. McNulty soon realises what historian Noel Ignatiev (1995) says, that the white skin made the Irish eligible for the privileged white class, but not immediately admitted to it; they had to earn it" (59). The fact that the immigrants "deserve the privilege" meant adopting the values of American culture, such as oppression and violence against non-white peoples.

The character expresses this condition when, at the age of 40, he considers that his old identity as a soldier no longer existed, and thinks about his humble origins in Ireland, and how he became an American, facing obstacles and difficulties in the process (p.244). Being part of the US army made him commit atrocities, take part in the genocide against the Native Americans and, as a reward, be considered an American. But this identity doesn't sit comfortably with him. He says: "Am I American? I don't know. Me and Winona take our place with the other mudsills in the fifth-class section" (235).

The Irish migrated to different parts of the United States, but in the novel, Barry portrays the role of the Irish in the exploration and expansion of the country's Western Frontier. Barry's fiction challenges the idealisation of the American national character by examining the Frontier from a transnational perspective. The protagonist Thomas McNulty is Irish, and the American John Cole has among his ancestors an Indian great-grandmother whom he never met because the people to whom she belonged, the Native Americans, were forced to leave the East of the country and live in Indian reservations. (p. 3). When they join the army as mercenaries, Cole and McNulty, temporary soldiers, follow the route from Oregon to California, and on their way west they meet not only Americans, but people of

other nationalities, such as Scandinavians and also squalid Native Americans, “some of them travelling to get their government annuities” (15). McNulty goes on to observe: “Now a hundred thousand Irish roam this land and Chinese fleeing from their cruel emperors and Dutch and Germans and boys born east” (215).

To deconstruct idealisations of identity, Barry uses irony, among other narrative strategies. In an interview with Richard Lea from *Guardian Books* (2017), Barry says that the novel is ironic in that it shows the involvement of the Irish in wars against the natives, and comments on the role of McNulty, “who dispossesses people who are like his own people” (Lea). Barry’s fiction interrogates, questions and does not keep away from human ambiguities and/or affiliations that are established between people and causes at specific historical moments, for the convenience of the occasion. In his novels, the author seeks to deconstruct binarisms such as right and wrong or good and evil; he seeks to give visibility to those people erased from the official narratives of history and also to show human contradictions in the face of the historical forces to which people are subjected.

In *Days Without End*, for example, Barry describes the Irish participation in massacres against Native Americans in a cruel and violent way, but he also shows the psychological impact that this form of violence had on them, represented in the novel by the character-narrator Thomas McNulty. He declares that he was surprised at his own reactions: “I was astonished not to be fired on, astonished at the speed and the horror of the task, and the exhilaration of it; my heart now not racing but burning in my chest like a huge coal” (31) and continues: “I was affrighted and strangely affronted, but mostly at myself, because I knew that I had taken strange pleasure from the attack” (32). It is relevant to highlight that the attack cowardly victimised only indigenous women and children.

The narrator comments on the fact that becoming killers changed them: “We didn’t know where we were. We didn’t for those moments know our names. We were different then, we were other people. We were killers, like no other killers that had ever been” (32). At the end of this chapter, inspired by the historic episode of the Sand Creek Massacre, on 29 November 1864, when 675 soldiers destroyed a Cheyenne encampment in Colorado Territory, McNulty says: “There didn’t seem to be anything alive, including ourselves. We were dislocated, we were not there; now we were ghosts” (33).

The novel also shows another side, the affinity between the Irish and the Native Americans, both peoples who suffered from colonial exploitation, which considered them

inferior. McNulty, for example, adopts Winona, an indigenous child from the Sioux tribe; an Irish soldier, Caleb Booth, marries and has a child with a Native American woman, and McNulty comments about this event: “I guess love laughs at History a little” (77). This is one of the moments, among others, in which the protagonist expresses his empathy for the Native Americans.

As well as taking part in the genocide of the Indians and the conquest of the West, around 200,000 Irishmen fought in the American Civil War (1861-1865). Most of them, around 150,000, fought for the Union army, like McNulty and Cole, and the rest defended the Confederate states. This situation can be explained because on arriving in the United States, depending on the port of arrival, whether in a Union or a Confederate state, the Irish enlisted to gain citizenship, and therefore fought to defend one side or the other of a war that was not theirs. Barry describes how the Irish fought each other: “The Irish Rebs are shouting too, shouting filthy things in Gaelic. Then we reach each other and it is all wrestling, punching and stabbing” (147). Thus, the novel shows that the land of opportunity was not what the Irish immigrants found after crossing the Atlantic in search of a better life. The fratricidal struggle proves that ethnic ties were sacrificed in favour of the fight for survival.

The novel also deconstructs the stereotype of masculinity associated with the pioneer and the western cowboy. From the beginning of the novel, as already mentioned, Barry describes Mr Noone’s cabaret, where McNulty and Cole staged as dancers in women’s costumes and make-up, and the miners, archetypes of masculinity represented in western films, are transformed when they arrive at the cabaret, turning themselves into true gentlemen, romantic and joyful anxious to dance with “girls” that were, in fact, men dressed as women. The owner of the cabaret says: “They need only the illusion, only the illusion of the gentler sex. You’re it, if you take this employment” (8). Thomas McNulty, for his part, feels happy when he dresses up as Thomasina: “Funny how as soon as we have into those dresses, everything changed. I never felt so contented in my life. All miseries and worries fled away. I was a new man now, a new girl” (10).

Throughout the novel, McNulty dresses as a woman again on other occasions, and gradually identifies more and more with the feminine gender. Regarding his relationship with Winona, he says: “I call her my daughter though I do know she isn’t. ... A daughter not a daughter but who I mother best I can. Ain’t that the task in this wilderness of furious death? I guess so. Got to be” (236). And in another passage:

We like mother and child right enough and that's how it plays. I give thanks for that. Maybe in my deepest soul I believe my own fakery. I suppose I do. I feel a woman more than I ever felt a man, though I were a fighting man most of my days. Got to be thinking them Indians in dresses shown my path. Could gird in men's britches and go to war. Just a thing that's in you and you can't gainsay. Maybe I took the fortune of my sister when all those times ago I saw her dead. (233-234)

He tries to understand his identification with the female gender, and comments that the indigenous men in dresses showed him the way forward (p.233). McNulty is referring here to the *winkte*, or two-spirit gender, which in Sioux culture refers to men who dress like women and take on feminine tasks, because the spirits of both men and women dwell in their bodies. It is a non-binary gender category linked to spirituality. McNulty goes on to say that he could wear men's trousers and go to war, but there was something about him that he couldn't deny. He thought that perhaps the soul of his sister, who starved to death, had "crept into him and made a nest" (p.234). He reflects about it saying: "I am easy as a woman, taut as a man. ... I lie down with the soul of woman and wake with the same. ... Maybe I was born a man and growing into a woman. Maybe that boy that John Cole met was but a girl already" (234).

Cross-dressing of both men and women was not an uncommon practice in the Old West, as historian Peter Boag points out in his book *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (2011): "Cross-dressers were ubiquitous, part of everyday life on the frontier and in the American West" (11). Therefore, what Barry portrays in *Days Without End*, both the stage shows at Noone's cabaret and the romantic relationship between McNulty and Cole, should not be considered as exceptions in the expansion of the West, but rather as narratives that have been erased from official history. McNulty expresses how he felt the day they left deserted Daggsville, where no one was waiting to say goodbye: "We knew we was just fragments of legend and had never really existed in that town" (13).

Along with factual History, fiction also constructs narratives of nationhood and, in this sense, Westerns have contributed greatly to the erasure mentioned here. In addition to the idealisation of virile, rough and fearless white masculinity, we should remember the image of the lone rider conceived by Theodore Roosevelt. This figure was very popular and symbolised the individualism that shaped American society. However, in real life, survival in the hostile

environment of the frontier made it difficult for lone explorers; they depended on an alliance for protection and co-operation.

In the first chapter of the novel, McNulty says: “it seemed natural and easy to join together in the enterprise of continuing survival” (4) as he tells the two years they danced in Mr. Noone’s cabaret. The second chapter begins as follows: “All this to say, we joined up together” (15). These ties grew stronger over the years, and McNulty demonstrates his love for his partner in many passages of the novel, as for example: “John Cole was my love, all my love” (25). For the Irishman, Cole was responsible for making him feel human again, after the trauma of losing his family to famine and being forced to emigrate to North America. During his brief stay in Canada before arriving in the United States, McNulty describes the rejection he suffered:

No one wanted us. Canada was afear'd of us. We were a plague. We were only rats of people. Hunger takes away what you are. Everything we were was just nothing then. Talk, music, Sligo, stories, future, past, it was all turned to something very like the shit of animals. When I met John Cole that's who I was, a human louse, even evil people shunned me and the good had no use for me. That's where I started. Gives an idea of the victory meeting John Cole was. First time I felt like a human person again. (25)

McNulty and Cole, after fighting side-by-side during the American the Civil War, got married at the end of the conflict. In McNulty’s words:

There was a half-blind preacher in a temple called Bartran House and I don my best dress and me and John go there and we tie the knot. Rev. Hindle he says the lovely words and John Cole kiss the bride and then it's done and who to know. Maybe you could read it in their holy book, John Cole and Thomasina McNulty wed this day of our Lord Dec.7th 1866. (173)

After the wedding, they settled down, with the Indian Winona as their daughter, as a family, on the tobacco farm of their friend Lige Magan, in Paris, a small town in Tennessee. A rural community is formed, in which in addition to the unconventional family formed by McNulty, Cole and Winona, Magan is joined by two free slaves, Rosalee and her brother Tennyson, who used to work for Magan’s father and were made free by him. In this community, all the members find co-operation and affection, which also deconstructs the representation of the

pioneer or cowboy as lonely and self-men, and it also contrasts with the excess of individualism of American society. According to Campbell (2018), McNulty constructs a kind of “alternative community, or *muintir* in Gaelic, created not under the American values of individual rights, private property and moral duties, but something closer to a traditional Irish system where land and labour were communal” (p.246).

McNulty’s narrative portrays the maturity of the character, not only in relation to his own identity, but also in his reflections about the fact of bringing a Native American into his life. He realises that he stole a child, took her away from her home and her tribe, gave her a new name, Winona, and took control of her life and her story. He states: “We took her like she were our natural daughter. But she ain’t. What is she now?” (p.214). McNulty realises that by adopting the girl in that way, he has reproduced the process of colonisation, erasing the culture to which she belonged and even her indigenous name, annihilating her sense of belonging to her tribe, teaching her the English language, and making her express herself only in this language, which used to be foreign to her.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that *Days Without End* deconstructs the thesis of the Frontier and also other American foundation myths, such as the American dream and the Manifest Destiny. The idea that the Frontier shaped people’s character and American national identity does not suit Thomas McNulty, who has doubts about whether or not he is American and who understands his gender as fluid and complex. As an immigrant, he does not progress financially in the land of opportunities.

What Barry proposes, with the erasure of founding myths and the recovery of invisible stories, is that official narratives are just that, narratives, chosen from among many other possible ones. The author also emphasises that identities are not established *a priori*, but are constructed by people’s experiences, practices and imagination, by weaving together multiple notions of gender, relationships, affiliation, home and community.

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