

MARÍA DEL MAR GONZÁLEZ CHACÓN

## THE CONCEPT OF THE EDGE IN THE PLAYS OF MARINA CARR

**A b s t r a c t.** Women in the plays of Marina Carr have always been on the edge of something. The Mai suffers from the loss of selfhood and tries to escape the limitations imposed by her family, Portia fights for her right to be a mother who does not love her children, Hester cannot live outside the geographical limits of the bog that is killing her and Catherine will struggle to live in a dream.

The edge in Marina Carr's theatre is a space that can be defined as a space of the mind, a space of resistance that her characters fight to inhabit. Edges constitute marginalized sites where women find a space of their own. In her latest plays the concept of the edge has been transferred to modern life and mythological rural landscapes have receded. Spaces of urban tension and conflict create edges that are now more visible on the stage through the dramatic space, and transformations occur in the form of provocative dialogues and behaviors that hint at a reinvented edge where women continue to search for their own spaces.

**Keywords:** Marina Carr; Irish Theatre; space; identity; edge; margin; border; resistance; change.

### 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF EDGES FOR IDENTITY

For me, this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 206). To belong is to live in accordance with dominant values and mores. Not to belong may mean having been outcast, but it may also indicate defiance and deliberate destabilization of those dominant values. (Lojek 2)

Marina Carr (1964–) was born in Tullamore, County Offaly, in the Republic of Ireland, and she is acknowledged as one of the most important Irish playwrights. Her first plays include *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996), and

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*By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), all of them set in the Midlands. But she has moved away from rural landscapes, and one of her latest plays, *Marble* (2009), is set in modern urban Ireland. Despite the shift from rural to urban landscapes Carr's women share a struggle to find a true space for identity linked to the necessity of crossing or staying on an edge which will mark their existence. This analysis of Carr's plays will utilize space theories to demonstrate the relevance of margins or edges as places of resistance and liberation, rather than only as places of marginalization and loss of identity. In particular, it embraces bell hooks' concept of the edge as a site of openness and liberation; it refers to Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey on some occasions and relies on recent studies of space in contemporary Irish theatre such as Helen Lojek's *The Spaces of Irish Drama Stage and Place in Contemporary Plays* (2011). Edges and margins are synonyms that represent spaces where Carr's women (choose to) live; boundaries are physical borders or frontiers that mark where the edges end and other spaces begin, and limits or limitations are understood as constraints.

Overlapping with ideas ranging from Lefebvre's concept of social space (1974), which established the autonomy of spaces and their relevance in society, to geographer Massey's inclusion of gender issues, which raised problems such as the inability of the community to provide a frame for female identity (163), hooks has outlined the concept of the edge as a place of liberation in works such as *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000, 1984). It was in the preface to the first edition of this feminist study that hooks started to refer to margins in positive terms in so far as, although their permanence is mainly forced by dominant orders, they also foster "a particular way of seeing reality" (*Feminist Theory* xvi) that allows to develop the capacity to see from the inside out and from the outside in and, thus, to achieve a sense of wholeness hooks defines as a "strengthened ... sense of self" (xvi). Moreover, in her seminal article "Choosing the Margin as a Place of Radical Openness" (2000) she also engages the question of belonging and edges. For hooks the alienated need to find places where there is a space for revision and "where transformation is possible" ("Choosing the Margin" 203). This process of finding a voice is painful since it involves resistance and a struggle to emerge within the dominant community. Hooks conceives the edge as for those who do not conform, who "live, who 'make it', passionately ... invent spaces of radical openness" (206) and argues that one wants to stay in these sites to increase one's skill to resist and ability to create new worlds.

In Lojek's recent analysis, geographical locations and theatrical spaces combine in contemporary Irish theatre to promote communication of plays'

themes. The concerns shared by late twentieth century Irish plays include “belonging and not belonging, home and homeland, and an acute awareness of exile in the form of an outsider status that is not necessarily geographic” (Lojek 1). This new type of exile, “staying in a place and surviving” (3), is present in Carr’s plays and, more specifically, in her female protagonists. The four women who perform the main roles in *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats* ... and *Marble* are exiles who have never left Ireland, but who live on the edge and perform acts of resistance. Through a version of Lojek’s distinction among dramatic space or the space of the stage itself, the offstage space and the geographic spaces represented in dialogues, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the spaces evoked in these four plays as edge spaces, physical and/or psychological. Interior realities gain power over exterior materialistic existences and personal expectations struggle to survive. These ideas are most useful when considering Carr’s plays as a contribution to the process of defining identity in Ireland in terms of limits or edges.

After the different processes of invention and reinvention of identity that Ireland has gone through, often through struggle with external forces, Carr now suggests that once one has no external enemies to fight, the only opponent left is oneself. However, Carr’s characters do not cede ground without a good fight, and when they do, when they cross the border, they do not turn back. Carr penetrates the boundaries of spaces and takes her characters to fringe territories where they struggle to find a place. The peripheries where they choose to live also constitute edges and entering there involves dissolution into new realms of existence: insulated from the outside. Carr’s theatre has always been a site for remaking female characters who do not conform to the rules of their society, who cannot live within the physical and psychological borders that have been imposed upon them.

Spaces in Ireland have been much debated. From discussions of colonialism and postcolonialism, to Declan Kiberd’s concept of invention and reinvention or Seamus Heaney’s discussion of the sense of place, senses—modes of existence—and places—physical or mind states—have struggled to coexist. Carr articulates new spatial challenges by using in some of her plays traditional sets such as the home but presenting them as spaces of potential danger rather than safety for women. Homes become prisons in her works, and they constitute spaces that limit women’s life outside their margins. The Irish Constitution laid the foundation for this relegation of Irish womanhood to domestic spaces:

Article 41.2.1: In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

Article 41.2.2: The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Foley and Lalor 122–23)

These provisions limited women's sphere of influence to their homes and distanced them from public sites of power. However, Carr's theatre is reluctant to accept the validity of "the patriarchal and mutually reinforcing ideologies of the Catholic Church and the Irish Constitution, which have incarcerated and ossified woman in representational binds over the period of the last century" (Sihra, "Nature Noble or Ignoble" 134–35). The gendered spaces that will be explored here will demonstrate that the home is no longer the place for women in the terms defined above. Each Carr's woman has a different sense of home that does not accord with previous definitions influenced by Irish history.

In each of Carr's plays from the 1990s discussed here, *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats...*, there is a female character who is both a creator and the inhabitant of an edge. The Mai, Portia, and Hester show defiant attitudes towards socially accepted lifestyles and the stereotype of the Irish woman—and the Irish family—as a metaphor for the unity of the nation. In 2009's *Marble* Carr locates women, Catherine in this case, on the verge of earthly existence to pose the possibility of a peripheral life.

## 2. THE MAI AND THE HOUSE

The Mai: The ground is gone from under me ... I'm on the downward slope. (Carr, *Plays 1* 162)

At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. (hooks, "Choosing the Margin" 205)

*The Mai* is the first play in which Carr chooses the landscape of the Midlands to create a character in itself, "a territory that accommodates a kind of Irish heart of darkness" where "[t]he geography ... works on many levels, paralleling

emotional states in the [other] characters, opening Ireland out into a metonym for the world as the vulnerable home” (Leeney 510). The concept of the edge can be identified in this play with interior physical spaces—a house, a window—but also with exterior landscapes such as Owl Lake, or exotic worlds evoked by women in the play. Ultimately, edges are articulated through women’s defiance of sacred vows such as motherhood. In all cases edges constitute places where women fight to find their identity through liberation. The play treats of a couple, The Mai and Robert, who have been married for seventeen years and have had four children. During all this time, The Mai’s efforts have been directed towards the building of a house for her family, while Robert’s towards his own independence outside that same home. The Mai has worked as a teacher but she has also accepted cleaning jobs in order to have money to pay for the house that now constitutes her prison, only to wait there for a husband who left her to pursue his dreams. Robert has been away for five years and when he returns The Mai expects to have a perfect marriage. However, this reencounter will mark the end of The Mai’s dream, as it will be explained below.

The Mai is “caught in the same in-between space ... poised on the threshold between an inner security never experienced and an outer freedom never fully within reach” (Roche 41). Neither interior nor exterior spaces seem to accommodate her anxieties. Robert’s return makes her realize that her home does not fulfil her expectations any more as it has now become “dark, formless, strangely inviting” (Carr, *Plays I* 158), a realization which differs from traditional perceptions of the home as a safe place and comes close to the image of an edge as a liminal space which emerges in desperate situations. The house she loved is “the kind of house you build when you’ve nowhere left to go” (158). Moreover, the place that was meant to be a refuge has made a Penelope of her and she spends long hours by the window waiting for Robert, “her eyes closed tightly, her lips forming two words noiselessly. Come home – come home...” (111). The window as the boundary between the inside and the outside of the house marks the existence of The Mai. The window is a double-sided mirror of her reality as it not only reflects the connection between the interior and the exterior, but it can also be seen as “a transitional object” (Lefebvre 209) that “has two senses, two orientations: from inside to outside, and from outside to inside” (209). It can also be considered an edge in so far as it represents the space through which The Mai looks out to Owl Lake and symbolically resists and enters a new place where she, autonomously, “decides she is dreaming” (Carr, *Plays I* 107); it allows her to enter the realm of

another existence outside the borders of her home. Exterior and interior places throughout the play test The Mai's ability to inhabit either of them.

Landscapes are powerful in Carr's plays. The setting of Owl Lake is steeped in legend: it acts as a *dindseancha*-like character that provides the play with a mythological meaning that captures the essence of the site. Millie, The Mai's daughter, explains its relevance. She recalls how her family has been moving "like sleepwalkers along the precipice and all around gods and mortals" (Carr, *Plays I* 148) dodging the influence of the lake which always had a "damaged air ... that hung about us like a wayward halo" (129). The abyss image of Owl Lake evokes a watery edge which gains importance when we learn it is the place The Mai has chosen to drown herself. The legend attached to Owl Lake foreshadows the impending catastrophe and, at the same time, parallels the story of Robert and The Mai. It acquires tragic dimensions and exerts its influence on the lives of the characters to the extent that there are women in the play who feel they need to escape the halo of the place. This is the case with Beck, The Mai's sister, who "is flittin' from one country to the next" (120). However, when she leaves the Midlands and tries to become a free individual, she feels the pain, the risk of entering an unknown space where she does not fit or find any sort of social recognition, a place where "you're nothing and you have nothing" (132).

Another strategy adopted by nonconforming women consists in building parallel stories without frontiers. This is the case of Grandma Fraochlán, described as lost in her memories, whose exotic tales of origin—she usually calls up the extraordinary presences of her life in the form of the Sultan of Spain or the palaces of Morocco—hint at the intention to escape in order to transform. Her ghosts are "as numerous ... as colourful" (Carr, *Plays I* 120), e.g., she holds conversations on stage with the Sultan of Spain and after that she sends him back "to the exotic ghost section of her ancient and fantastical memory" (121). The importance of Grandma Fraochlán as the provider of a connection between other women in the play and exotic worlds, myths and legends, has been noted by Antony Roche, who sees her as the link between women and "a sense of their own identity as something they carry with them rather than something that is dependent on a particular place" (Roche 38). Inner worlds gain importance over external materialistic realities and the yearning for the unattainable is always present in these women. Moreover, unmotherly feelings are shared by generations of women in this family and can be read as a way of overcoming tight and suffocating familial bonds. Carr's Irish women, paradoxically, are far from being caring and nurturing mothers: Grandma Fraochlán

proudly declares that she was the kind of woman who put her lover before her children. She openly shows predilection for one of her daughters, Ellen, who “got all the brains and all the beauty of my lot” (Carr, *Plays I* 116), and she acknowledges that “in me darkest hour I often wished that God had taken one of the others and left me Ellen” (117). She herself was also a Penelope who spent long hours at the window waiting for her husband, and this suffering caused her daughters to have to drag her from the cliffs several times when she tried to reunite with her dead husband. The Mai, for her part, explains to Robert her demanding duties as a mother, which caused her to renounce her true talents: “I collected the children from their schools, I did twelve loads of laundry, I prepared eight meals, I dropped the children back to school, and I read Plato and Aristotle on education” (155). She does not care about her daughter Millie, a defenceless witness of their rows with Robert. Older generations do not provide stability and nurture for the younger ones: consequently, Millie will end up repeating The Mai’s situation, living on an edge, “teeter[ing] along the fringe of the world” (184).

For actress Olwen Fouéré, “The Mai associates her sense of being with the bricks and mortar of this house that she has built” (Fouéré 169). The house is the edge in the play: it constitutes the precipice where The Mai stands but also provides her with the strength to fight Robert and unfold her true identity; it is the place that enables her to identify the new ways and frontiers mentioned by hooks.

### 3. PORTIA AND THE RIVER

Portia: There’s a wolf tooth growin’ in me heart and it’s turnin’ me from everyone and everythin’ I am. I wishin’ if the wind or somethin’ would carry me from this place without me havin’ to do anythin’ meself. (Carr, *Plays I* 240)

*Portia Coughlan* is set in the Belmont Valley. Portia lives there with her husband, Raphael, her children and, as in *The Mai*, four generations of women. Portia also shares her life with the ghost of her dead brother, Gabriel, who drowned himself in the river when he was fifteen, and with her lover Damus. “The stage must incorporate three spaces: the living room of Portia Coughlan’s house; the bank of the Belmont River; the bar of the High Chaparral” (Carr, *Plays I* 191). The landscapes of the play have been defined by Fintan O’Toole as “boggy and unstable, bounded by lakes and rivers” (10). There are

even moments when two different sets coexist on stage, e.g., at the beginning of Scene 6, Act 1: While Raphael waits in the kitchen for Portia, she appears by the river with her lover. This juxtaposition of spaces creates the effect of Portia as another woman who does not conform to her role as a wife, refuses enclosures and tries to win her right to have a parallel existence since she does not want to find herself “stuck here for all the eternity” (200). The Belmont River, its banks, is where Portia finds a refuge, a lawless place where she commits adultery, meets her dead twin brother, and reveals her true feelings. She defiantly reckons “I’ll lie here when I’m a ghost and smoke ghost cigarettes and watch ye earthlin’s goin’ about yeer pointless days” (203). She, both literally and metaphorically, cannot avoid walking towards the edge. She is aware of her difference, proudly accepts it, and thus her marginality is a position of resistance. As happened with *The Mai*, and will happen with *Hester*, Portia deliberately chooses being an outcast, and here the edges can be seen as “a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (hooks, “Choosing the Margin” 207).

Both her home and her husband make Portia feel awfully tangled up, in a space where life coexists with death:

These days I look at Raphael sittin’ opposite me in the armchair. He’s always tired, his bad leg up on a stool, addin’ up the books from the factory, lost in himself, and I think the pair of us might as well be dead for all the joy we knock out of one another. The kids is asleep, the house creakin’ like a coffin, all them wooden doors and floors. Sometimes I can’t breathe anymore. (Carr, *Plays I* 207)

This initial desperation sets the tone for Portia’s tragedy. Her anger and sense of entrapment grow till she crosses the line between reason and madness. Portia’s moments of highest rage coincide with arguments with her husband, especially those concerning her duties as a mother since she feels that motherhood is a social construct imposed on women to deceive them: “ya thought ya could woo me into motherhood. Well, it hasn’t worked out has it?” (Carr, *Plays I* 221). Portia echoes *Medea* when she talks about weapons to hurt her children: “I see knives and accidents and terrible mutilations. Their toys is weapons for me to hurt them with, givin’ them a bath is a place where I could drown them” (233). Despite her efforts to be accepted by the community she lives in, Portia is unable to be a caring mother or a loving wife, and her dark animal side wins the battle: “There’s a wolf tooth growin’ in me heart and it’s turnin’ me from everyone and everythin’ I am” (240).



Portia's personality is made more complex through the ghostly presence of other marginal characters such as Gabriel, an unnatural child and an outcast from hell for his father, who blames him of shaming the family. The moments when he manifests himself constitute spaces that contain life outside earthly existence. Inevitable bonds exist between him and Portia since for twins, she explains, "everything's swapped and mixed up and you're either two people or you're no one" (Carr, *Plays I* 241). The link between them cannot be broken and life-and-death borders cannot be maintained. Incest is also hinted at, contributing to the blurring of the limits established by blood ties. Portia and Gabriel came into the world together, and she continually hears "his footfall crossin' the worlds" (251). Her ordinary existence, her marriage, constituted her attempt to stay in a world where she would be accepted by the community, a battle she cannot win.

Carr portrays a dysfunctional family with a different Irishness. The worlds of the dead and the living coexist, exposing the banality of the latter. Issues of memory and the land that she explores include a rewriting of the boundaries or borders that include the definition of the characters in terms of the mythic, the uncanny and the mystic, and Carr addresses these from an ironic position about a notion of Irishness that has long prevailed. The mythic world evoked in the play(s) suggests that it is one where the borders of morality have been crossed and nothing extraordinary happens. Portia's mother rejects the spiritual and encourages Portia to behave as a "normal woman" (Carr, *Plays I* 211), and herself tries to survive in the framework of an orthodox family. However, Portia's alienation also constitutes her fantasy. She detaches herself from the kind of personal responsibilities that would put her in touch with earthly existence—being a mother, a wife, even a lover—but would enslave her. Carr's women are forced into such attitudes by their search for identity and agency, which makes them feel their relationships have been broken and they need to rebuild their identity; secondly, Carr's women are attracted by the languages of the other worlds, the languages of the edges. The playwright always reminds us of the existence of other worlds and of their connections with our own: we can always see or at least feel the other side, the darkness, but one has to be or become extraordinary to escape tangible reality. Portia's drowning herself in the Belmont shows, on one hand, that she "has never entered the world at all, but she remains trapped" (O'Toole 10); but it can also be read as Portia's act of resistance and protest as well as her attempt to achieve wholeness: the river is where Gabriel died and it will be there where

they will come together and where Portia's personality can be transformed into a whole again.

#### 4. HESTER AND THE BOG

Hester: I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end my days.... it holds me to it in ways it has never held yeas. And as for me tinker blood, I', proud of it. It gives me an edge over all of yeas round here. (Carr, *Plays 1* 289)

Hester Swane, the female protagonist of *By the Bog of Cats...*, has been with Carthage for fourteen years; they share a daughter, Josie, and a history of ambition. Carthage is now looking for respectability in the community and cannot include Hester in his plans anymore as he wants to marry young Caroline Cassidy, the daughter of a wealthy landowner. Hester has always lived by the bog where, ironically, she is considered by her neighbours as an outsider, a dislocated woman who does not fit. In spite of this, she is unable to leave the place: she longs for a mother who abandoned her as a child and she resists attacks and is determined not to run away "just because certain people wants me out of their way"(Carr, *Plays 1* 269). She has been defined as a "traveller who does not travel" (Lojek 70), and who is thus removed from the community of travellers but also from the community of the locals. Her personality escapes social conventions: she prefers living in a caravan rather than in a house, is independent, can see ghosts, foresees the future and talks to the swans. She is a single mother and has no money in her bank account, to the astonishment of those around her who show off about their balances. Despite all these qualities, or precisely because of them, she is the main character of the play, who triumphs over the rest of the characters as the only one who has the courage to live passionately and stands out as a brave woman. She has the heroism of staying and fighting rather than leaving the place that causes her so much suffering. It is precisely such refusal to abandon that creates "spaces where individuals may be most alive" (Lojek 13), edges that can be identified as places of struggle for women's identity. After regaining her pride, Hester will fight for her right to stay in the Bog of Cats.

The caravan where Hester used to live and where she still sleeps frequently (as she does not feel her house is a home) is symbolically placed "on the side [edge] of the bog" she loves (Carr, *Plays 1* 269). Irish bogs have traditionally shaped Irish landscapes and are still nowadays perceived as a "magical space

... an in-between landscape that ... perches precariously on the border between rationality and mystery, order and chaos, life and death" (Lojek 86–87). Bogs retain the quality of liminal spaces/borders where these dichotomies coexist, and Hester embraces this place as her home. Moreover, the power of the landscapes that surround her acquires a prelapsarian quality (Leeney)—Hester wishes the age of ice would return and "do away with us all like dinosaurs" (Carr, *Plays I* 267)—and echoes the image of the classical Ovidian symbiosis with nature—Hester knows "every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile ... where the best rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue" (314). Mysterious off-stage worlds are present in the form of living ghosts, such as the spirit of Joseph Swane, Hester's brother, who walks across the stage asking to come back to life, and the character of the Ghost Fancier who comes from another world and wants to take Hester with her. References to witchery add to this dimension: Hester is called "the Jezebel witch" (280), and when she burns down Carthage's house she is warned, "A hundred year ago we'd strap ya to a stake and roast ya till your guts exploded" (331). Finally, the presence of swans and dreams evoke mythic and spiritual experiences. It is in this marginal space that the mysterious emotional realities of Hester and the bog coexist. Carr associates the bog, a place considered to encapsulate Irishness, with Hester, a character who has deep roots—as has the bog—in Ireland but who is unwanted anyway. When Hester first comes on stage she is accompanied by a swan, the old Black Wing. But what could be a mythic and idyllic image of Irishness is disrupted by the trail of blood left by the corpse of the bird in the snow. The emotional realities of Hester and the bog coexist and both are "always shiftin' and changin' and coddin' the eye" (267). Carr is again posing questions of the different types of Irishness and their validity.

Edges are also articulated through references to the dark, wild side of people, which are apocalyptically announced by Hester when she warns the community that "There's two Hester Swanes, one that is decent and very fond of ya despite your callow treatment of me. And the other Hester, well, she could slide a knife down your face, carve ya up and not bat an eyelid" (Carr, *Plays I* 285). The animalization of other characters adds to the picture: the Catwoman has cat's eyes and paws as do those who celebrate Carthage and Caroline's wedding who are compared to gargoyles. Hester herself can feel something wild growing inside: "there's something about me ye'es never understood and makes ye'es afraid and ye'es are right for other things goes through my veins besides blood that I've fought so hard to keep wraps on" (325). When she ultimately kills her daughter, Hester "begins to wail, a terrible animal wail" (339). The

play's fatal ending, which includes Hester's own suicide seems coherent with her determination not to conform. Hester's death symbolizes the triumph of nonconformity over ostracism, the triumph of a rebellion that seemed doomed to defeat by the rest of the community. Hester kills Josie so she does not have to cross the line and live outside the bog and inside the community that abandoned her. Living on the edge in *By the Bog of Cats...* is a differentiation that alienates Hester but also makes her feel proud of the distinction between herself and the rest of the community that despises her on this basis. It is when Hester feels the threat of being evicted from that space that she claims her personal territory and finds the strength to fight and be what she really is. Hester's independence, exoticism and spiritual connection with other worlds make of her not a victim but the only one "who has truly lived this drama" (Lojek 71). She ends up sharing with the bog the wilderness and also rootedness which allow her to stay in a marginal position where her irrational identity can exist. Olwen Fouéré, who played Hester in the world premiere of the play at the Abbey Theatre in 1998, describes Hester as full of primal energies and referred to her as a heroine at all times rather than a victim of society. She defines Hester as being like "a furnace inside, but ... exultant as well" (Fouéré 163) and describes the bog as "a place of great anguish and exultation" (171). Hester and the bog share that position on the edge where Irish identity is, once again, questioned.

## 5. CATHERINE AND THE MARBLE DREAM

Catherine: I know it's not living on the edge but there isn't room on the edge for everyone. Countries have to be run, children fed, taxes paid. (Carr, *Marble* 55)

The new millennium has marked Carr's recognition as "Ireland's leading woman playwright" (Friel and Sternlicht xv). The importance of her theatre has been well-asserted within Ireland, where she is "the only Irish woman to have her plays produced on Ireland's main stages in recent years" (Sihra, *Women in Irish Drama* 19). Her work has been compared with that of the most relevant male Irish writers of her time: "Undoubtedly, Carr has emerged as one of the most gifted new voices in the Irish theatrical arena and stands side-by-side with prominent fellow Irish playwrights Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness and Tom Murphy" (Novillo-Corvalán 1). At the turn of the millennium, her plays also started to be performed abroad; when in 2001 she was awarded the E. M. Forster

Award for Literary Achievement, the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre company performed *Portia Coughlan. By the Bog of Cats...* premiered in Chicago in May of the same year. Asked how she coped with familial duties and her new position as a well-known writer Carr sees little difference between herself and other women writers who preceded her:

Eliot—she married late; no children. Brontë: no children. Austen: no children. Plath couldn't cope with her children, neither could Sexton. What is the equation that is going on here? Sometimes I think we women writers are no further advanced than Elizabeth Gaskell grappling with writing and home life, and Virginia Woolf talking about that room of her own. The truth is that family life with children is mayhem. It is hard to carve out a creative space for yourself. (Carr in Gardner 1)

Carr's preoccupations with herself as a woman writer and a mother attest to the difficulty in modern Ireland of finding a space for women's creativity. In *Marble* (2009) rural landscapes have been replaced by claustrophobic urban spaces although the margins, edges and feelings of disillusionment but also acts of resistance persist for women in contemporary Irish life. Carr captures postmodern urban distress and the isolating effect of crowds. Characters wear suits, carry briefcases, drink takeaway coffees and have meetings. They live in a city made of concrete and steel where it is difficult to survive, where Carr wants to catch "the near absence of people, the dream shadows" (Carr, *Marble* 8). Women in *Marble* have entered urban life and threaten men's spaces and patriarchal systems. Here, social and power relations are more equal, and women are more powerful in so far as the control over them is not as tight in this new context as it was in rural environments. Notwithstanding, some restrictions on women continue even in modern urban life and the play confirms the women's need to exist in a parallel realm as "[t]he modern city generally restricts women's activities to daylight hours in "safe" places in the company of men" (Lojek 77). It is precisely the boundary between daytime and night-time that is broken in this play. Cities are places of shared anguish. According to hooks, when one enters the space of collective despair, "one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin" 207) and, therefore, freedom is lost. The characters in *Marble* are part of a collective globalised society where individual dreams become the edge or space of radical openness. It all starts with Art's confession to Ben about a dream about Catherine, Ben's wife:

There was a beautiful room—panelled hallway and come to this door and the light and the smell and the sound from it is intoxicating. I walk into the room holding my

breath, afraid I will sully this beautiful space, that it's not for me, but someone more deserving. And the marble glistens all around her as she lies there on the bed. (Carr, *Marble* 13)

The anecdote acquires greater dramatic scope when Ben shares the dream with his wife, Catherine, who feels that “the life not lived is what kills” (Carr, *Marble* 17). From that moment onwards, the dream world becomes the space where Catherine and Art meet, leaving their waking existence aside to enter the world of the night, the irregular, opaque and irrational, but also marble and bright, and being awake is no longer important for them as social rules, codes and contracts become senseless in so far as they do not take into account the essential aspirations of the human being. Catherine becomes a nocturnal character who, metaphorically, wakes up in dreams where her hidden fantasies and passions find a space. However, her behavior is seen by others, referred to as the innocents, as deviant. She is nonetheless happy in her new state and fully aware of her transformation: “I've crossed some line or other without realizing it. And it's fantastic, Ben, something is happening to me” (40). Catherine's courage contrasts with Ben's hesitation when it comes to crossing the border in search of the spectacular, the marble room, the change. He is afraid of breaking the unwritten laws of loyalty as he considers that “they're all that's between us and chaos” (45). Elusive territories are presented as dangerous, and it is the assumption in this play that one who dares cross the border in the contemporary world might end up in a mental hospital “weeping for having crossed the line” (55). Wilderness out there is opposed to safety within the boundaries of the society and its unrecorded rules. Motherhood continues to be an impossible task for women, especially for Catherine who alerts her husband of her inability to take care of the children: “I'm not good for them anymore. You must keep them safe now” (58). Again, the time before the Fall is evoked in the present moment in order to symbolize human incapacity to feel and experience outside the boundaries of the expectations built up by the society of this era: “This is the age of ice, an era when men's and women's hearts were frozen. That's how they'll describe us in the future” (42).

Catherine's final decision to leave in search of her marble dream, the wilderness, opens the possibility of the existence of the dreamed life even though she knows the price will be “high-ferocious” (Carr, *Marble* 61), as it always is when one goes over an edge.

## CONCLUSION

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance-as location of radical openness and possibility.... We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. (hooks, "Choosing the Margin" 209)

Carr's female characters are always on the edge of something, opening up new boundaries. The Irish identity at the core of these plays continues to be negotiated in terms of the margins or edges that constrain or, mostly, liberate it, as the characters of *The Mai*, Portia, Hester and Catherine suggest. The four of them may represent the "female rage of the nation" (Fouéré 169), the resistance to staying in imposed spaces, either geographical or social, and the right to speak from a marginalized position adopting liberating attitudes to gain female identity and autonomy. The different ways of seeing reality revealed here allow dissenting voices to address the question of belonging and finding edgy places of radical openness in Ireland. The four women characters battle tenaciously to stay outside their communities, to occupy a marginal position where they find a space of liberation and adopt differing discourses since speaking from the margins implies a different language. Refusing speeches about the other that erase identities, hooks advocates the marginalized: "We are the margin" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin" 209) and their right to speak from that position "from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing" (209). It is from this position that Carr's women speak, wounded by the edge, but also encouraged by it.

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## POJĘCIE KRAWĘDZI W SZTUKACH MARINY CARR

### Streszczenie

Kobiety w sztukach Mariny Carr zawsze są na krawędzi. Mai cierpi z powodu braku indywidualności i próbuje odrzucić ograniczenia narzucone przez rodzinę, Portia walczy o prawo do bycia matką która nie kocha swoich dzieci, Hester nie potrafi żyć poza trzęsawiskiem, które ją zabija, a Catherine próbuje żyć we śnie. Krawędź w sztukach Mariny Carr można zdefiniować jako przestrzeń umysłu, przestrzeń oporu w której bohaterki próbują zamieszkać. Krawędź oznacza margines na którym kobiety odnajdują własną przestrzeń. W późniejszych sztukach Mariny Carr mitologiczne, wiejskie krajobrazy ustępują miejsca współczesności. Przestrzenie miejskich napięć i konfliktów tworzą krawędzie, które są bardziej widoczne w przestrzeni dramatu, a transformacje dokonują się poprzez prowokacyjne dialogi i zachowania, wskazujące na nowe pojęcie krawędzi na której kobiety nadal poszukują swojego miejsca.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Marina Carr; irlandzki dramat; przestrzeń; tożsamość; krawędź; margines; granica; opór; zmiana.