

Long-distance *Landing*:
Emma Donoghue and her Experience
of Otherness in Canada

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Emma Donoghue's novel *Landing* draws much on the semiotics of alterity and foreignness — tenet concepts of modern theories of identification and psychoanalysis. It too assents on the idea that identification is a dynamic, open-ended process based on the operations of selfhood and otherness, and not merely mimetic sameness and selfhood. Even though we mistakenly search for sameness in relations between the other and ourselves, we constantly stumble upon one evident and unavoidable fact — otherness and strangeness are the underlying themes of our identity. As such, we are inevitably bound to conclude that sameness, unity and transparency may have as well been the greatest fallacies of all times.

In the theory, during the process of naming and thus comprehending the other outside we approximate ourselves towards the idea of the other inside ourselves. Our lives are an ongoing process of translation of otherness found not on the thresholds of our being but deep within the abyss of our selfhood. What is more, it is our obligation to try to embrace the other and recognize himself or herself within oneself.

While Deleuze and Guattari wrote extensively on the idea of becoming and not simply being as in becoming-a-child, becoming-a-woman, or becoming-an-animal in their *A Thousand Plateaus*, they said that becoming does not signify literal taking on the attributes of either woman or animal. Instead, this means releasing the particles that constitute the new self through the enunciation of a transforming subject. As such identification may be a violent process in which one sheds one's skin in favour to imprint the other's name on oneself:

The girl and the child do not become; it is becoming itself that is a child or a girl. The child does not become an adult anymore than the girl becomes a woman; the girl is becoming-

woman of each sex, just as the child is becoming-young of every age. (...) Knowing how to love does not mean remaining a man or a woman; it means extracting from one's sex the particles, the speeds and slownesses, the flows, the *n* sexes that constitute the girl of *that* sexuality. (Deleuze, Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* 306)

Similar to that, in her fiction, Emma Donoghue has focused on the idea of becoming the other in order to be oneself. In becoming the other, we acknowledge actively the existence of the audience that inevitably is there, playing a part of the receiver of our life narrative — we acknowledge the necessity to become the other. According to modern feminist scholarship as represented here by Judith Butler this audience is both the very *I* inside and the other outside since through becoming one both constructs and destabilizes the subject. As Julia Kristeva writes we are the stranger living inside ourselves who multiplies the masks until the point of becoming unrecognizable to oneself.

The above idea becomes painfully true in Donoghue's novel and her depiction of otherness both inhabiting her characters and the spaces they belong to. In her novel *Landing* there is a great amount of otherness both in Ireland, a country of spiteful children, anonymous citizens and racists. In Canada, the other too underlies the shaky connections of the apparently close-knit communities, as well as in a broader sense, is present in Canadian silent intolerance towards the minorities. Both Ireland and Canada remain communities in making, or rather, re-making having to answer to the latest challenges of Celtic tiger, and globalization, in case of Canada. Theoretically, both Ireland and Canada become scenarios desiccated through a double-edged problem of otherness that reveals itself in an inability to accommodate the spurious self and in inaptitude to welcome the awakening of the new foreigner that may appear unmanageable and unreasonable. Still, dealing with the other is a reciprocal process, where both insiders and outsiders need to agree on their mutual collaboration in bargaining an identity, this being also true on a more intimate, love plane as shown in Donoghue's *Landing*.

The idea of Deleuzian becoming has its echoes the idea of iterability and performance as thoroughly worked by Judith Butler in her *Bodies that Matter* or *Gender Trouble*. Donoghue, too, like Butler, is against

essentialism and sedimentation of identity taking a stand in favour of the theoretical positionality. Positionality, again, is to Donoghue, a double-edged sword. This she understands to be a result of unrestrained fluctuation discursively possible for the subject in question, as well as the subject's so-called audience of the performative, whose vision also remains relative and blurred. This, then, multiplies the clichéd idea that we fear most what we do not know and what do not understand. As a result, positionality is a state possible for both the *I* and the other enhanced if not restrained by an inert longing for certain discursive normativity that is inescapable for different sexualities and genders.

Donoghue's *Landing*, therefore, is not simply a meeting of two binaries, two destined halves, and nations but an encounter of a myriad of possible positions within discourse that the subjects have available — the very myriad of constructive molecular particles that Deleuze mentions in *The Thousand Plateaus*.

It is true that the title *Landing* is a direct reference to the founding event of the plot — the jet travel during which the characters meet in most awkward circumstances, where the flight attendant named Sile helps Canadian passenger Jude get over a sudden death of a fellow yet anonymous voyager from the seat next by. However, *Landing* is also a metaphor for a identificational struggle between the two subjects that the characters represent as in the everyday use of the word 'landing' that stands for acquiring, getting after struggling, catching, or simple capturing. Both of the subjects end up trying and struggling to colonize each other in a game of mutual self-discovery.

Notwithstanding the psychoanalytical theory, postcolonial and colonial are also two important terms in the analysis of the novel. Moreover, they both seem to underlie Canadian history and context, though they may not be the easiest ones to dissect. As a result, we may argue that in *Landing* Donoghue gives the reader a partial answer to both simple and 'not-so-simple' question that was posed in the year two thousand during a conference at Manitoba responding to a progressively alarming reality of deeply unsettled Canadian literature. The question that the conference addressed was as follows: "Is Canada Postcolonial?"

All in all, to be able to find an answer to the above inquiry further attention needs to be given to a myriad of other topics. One should ponder

the problem of marginality and alterity and see whether the theories associated with marginality apply in Canada. Following the above, the complex reality of Canadian readiness to deal with the issues such as power distribution, change, resistance and historical revisionism should be addressed, as well.

Bearing the complex nature of the aforementioned inquiries, no two contributors to the conference in Manitoba agreed on what postcolonial and Canada meant for the vast literary oeuvre it has homed and produced. However, the participants did agree on mapping out overtly important key concepts to Canadian literature and culture and these being: displacement, hybridity, collaboration, memory, ambivalence and syncretism. Of central issue was how Canada engages with American and British imperialism and neo-imperialism, and above all how it manages to differentiate between the multicultural policy and practice. Certainly, the themes Donoghue chose to deal with in *Landing* were very much synchronized with the Canadian postcolonial context, and of those let me elaborate on just few.

First, one should analyze the problem of public and private 'memory'. In *Landing* public memory is linked to Canadian Jude's job in a local museum and the general popularity of all that is traditional and totally unique, yet at odds with Canadian native communities raising a question of the boundary, if artificial, of what is native and what is foreign. Private memory is intertwined with the issue of unexpected losing of memory and consequently identity as in the theme of Jude's mother who suddenly develops an irreversible brain illness and is destined to forget all of her past, all of her discursive self threaded over a long life of counterbalancing difficulties and odds. Again, private memory refers to Sile's recollections of her long dead mother, whose memories and mementos she revisits while preparing for moving on to live in Canada. It then must be said that memory in Donoghue is inevitably connected to the maternal, the original, the founding but reveals itself delicate and complex as we generally tend to remember what and how we choose to remember.

Second, one should ponder the concept of displacement — being a stranger to the community in general that Donoghue portrays in Sile's Asian origins at odds with the apparently modern multicultural Ireland. Furthermore, *Landing* raises the issue of being a stranger to the local community because of sexual orientation that does not attest to the idea of

normative sexuality. However it, too, highlights the fallacy of normativism of queer communities in portraying the characters as strangers to the gay community for having a too strong straight pattern of behaviour, as well as a record of straight relationships and even a straight marriage as in the case of Jude. This obviously tackles the problem of what it means to be queer through an attempt to deconstruct gender formation and to disassociate it from sole sexual performatives, putting an emphasis on other ways of being and becoming that do not fit the +/- phallic category.

Third, one should see into the concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and syncretism. In hybridity, Donoghue sees a key issue for a better understanding of interraciality, between-genderness, and furthermore both Canadian and Irish national identities. Ambivalence, she understands as simultaneous desire and necessity to embrace and abject the other. Syncretism is tackled as a means of being true to oneself and an attempt at reconciliation or union of different and opposing principles, practices, or parties in philosophy, religion, and national identity.

Again, from a psychoanalytical point of view, much of the narrative of *Landing* makes a direct reference to the founding themes of our identity, such as abjection, motherhood, dialogism, strangeness and otherness. As a result, as much as selfhood is understood as interpersonal, the novel is intertextual. Donoghue is prompt not to spare us even a direct reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in one of characters' conversations on originality and proximity. "The way he kept going behind the screen, and taking painfully long to come back out in the mask of His mother" (Donoghue, *Landing* 161) Marcus comments about the Danish performer. "Could it have been a reference to Hamlet" (Donoghue, *Landing* 161) he quickly adds. Following this theoretical thread, it may be said that our entire search for the other has been originated in the semiotic relationship to the mother, towards whom we are in oscillating movement of abjection and approximation throughout our lives. As modern as the lives of Jude and Sile may appear, they run narrowly close to the narratives constructed by and about their mothers. In fact, these are the constructed narratives that Jude and Sile have misguidingly left in the process of entering the Symbolic. Apparently freed from the mothers' discourses Jude and Sile re-live and re-encounter the maternal present in a set of clichéd stories, joint misconceptions and imaginary tales of the other, as well as their budding relationship of care

and responsibility for one another. In the end, it is virtually impossible to take the mask of the mother off who delves deep within the unconscious of Kristevan archaic mother and Deleuzian becoming-little girl again.

The idea of otherness brings in the issues of proximity and distance, the latter being more painful though more humane and sustainable, the former causing the subject virtual pain of having to embrace and welcome the other. In *Landing* Sile's friend Marcus, who now lives four-hour drive away from Dublin, in a cottage village exchanged for the chaos of the big city, but also a close distance to his present partner, criticizes Sile vehemently for having to cover huge distances to get with her partner Jude. "Canadians drive that for a picnic" (Donoghue, *Landing* 162) Sile responds to the accusation, when another of Sile's friends, Jael, answers in — "Anyone beyond arm's reach in the wee dark hours is too far away." (Donoghue, *Landing* 163) And yet Donoghue makes us aware of what negative impact the strains of proximity and distance disseminate on Jael's life. For Jael is very much bashful of her former relationship-ridden university life with many lovers, and yet she is the only character that settles quickly with a husband and a daughter, whom in the end of the book she abandons engaging yet in another of her life's love affairs.

All characters in *Landing* struggle with the idea of otherness from the beginning to the final resolution of the plot; all are as if woken from a fantasy of having had successfully dealt with this problem long time ago and having taken the course of their lives in their hands. To that Donoghue poses a question of why and how the idea of love and otherness enters the adult life with such force — "Blame the zeitgeist" says Marcus — "the new technologies let us get ourselves into tangles: they make this arrangements just possible without making them liveable" (Donoghue, *Landing* 163). As a result Donoghue asks: are we still able to live with one another?

Can we still live with one another if even such simple actions as talking — here talking on the phone — are problematic, even when the language itself is common for both of the speakers. During the course of the narrative of *Landing* Jude visits Sile in Ireland and is made painfully aware of how her discourse does not fit the discourse of the strangers, even though the words they use are the same and clearly expressed in the same *parole*. As a consequence, friends cannot agree on such simple matters as foreignness, murder, bilingualism and the idea of beauty, yet simple as they

are, these concepts are the founding concepts of any national identity, any discursive, cultural or political hegemony.

In *Landing*, on the national level, Canada and Ireland seem to have nothing in common — “oh, I know, says Sile, we’re a filthy nation” (Donoghue, *Landing* 169) of slums and “they can set fire to your car” (169) while one is away. In return Canada is described not as idyllic and innocent, though it does give away this idea at first glance. After a closer analysis Canada is “backward” (Donoghue, *Landing* 204) and embarrassingly retarded — “grow where you planted” (Donoghue, *Landing* 203) says one of the slogans on the way to Jude’s village where we can further see another message engraved on a dilapidated barn: “marriage — 1 man + 1 woman” (Donoghue, *Landing* 202). In the end, “Immigrants from all over the world are banging at the door to come settle in western Ontario” (Donoghue, *Landing* 206), but they are not welcome — explains bitterly Jude’s former husband.

In close-knit communities people’s narratives are constructed against the narratives of the other so that Donoghue makes us see how abjectable, constraining and burdensome this may be to a visiting stranger. On the other hand, these narratives, too, invade the personal space of a local dweller making him or her struggle to constantly redraw the boundaries and delineate the contours of a desiccating subjectivity.

In the end, according to Donoghue, globalization pushes people away instead of approximating them towards common goals based on the workings of dialogical existence. Proximity and simple being-together too often does destroy people’s delicate sense of personal integrity. For who is the foreigner, if not, simply, the other self — the other *I* — that we carry within us? As Kristeva writes in her *Strangers to Ourselves*,

Foreigner: a choked up rage deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency, opaque, unfathomable spur. The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither a romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us. (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 1)

And while Deleuze and Guattari elaborate in the *Anti-Oedipus* on the multiplicity of selfhood “From the connections of bodies or from experience, human mind forms ideas” (Colebrook 82), new simulations, conflicts and its consciousness Donoghue simultaneously agrees on human interdependence writing that “A place is nothing on its own it was only people that carved it into memory.” (Donoghue, *Landing* 318)

It may be said that Donoghue’s *Landing* follows the modern psychoanalytical scholarship of transcendental understanding of the self. Moreover, it agrees with the idea that the completeness of multiple and intersectional identity lies in its incompleteness — the body in becoming. Hence, identity in *Landing* is an issue of public and private relationships. It is best understood as *oneself-as-an-other* in a given place and at a given time where Heideggerian *within-time-ness* and *within-place-ness* come as handy tools in situating the discursive practices of a subject. As Kristeva is prompt to add, “The other is my proper unconscious” (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 183).

In *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington writes: “For people seeking identity (...) enemies are essential” (Huntington 20) and the word ‘enemies’ may be synonymous with the foreigner that lives both inside and on the margins of our spurious self. According to Kristeva “we know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others.” (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 170)

By recognizing [the stranger] within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 1)

In 1972 in his article “National Identity and the Canadian Novel” Frank Birbalsingh wrote that “National identity is an important literary theme especially among colonial or neo-colonial peoples who have not evolved an organic sense of community or cultural homogeneity” (Moss 1) and who have been struggling for a post-independence national identity. Asking postcolonial questions can be valid as long as one does not impose one and

unique understanding of Postcolonialism. Designating a country's literature as postcolonial situates it between binary oppositions of imperial and anti-imperial, personal and impersonal, private and public. And it is precisely about these binary oppositions that Canada is so ambiguous and should remain wary.

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ABSTRACT

Emma Donoghue has been on the literary scene since 1993 when she published her first novel *Stir – Fry*, a coming of age novel and, at the same time, a crude and unwelcome quest towards discovering one's identity. An author of five more novels, other pieces of fiction, as well as a PhD in English from Cambridge University, comes back with her much biographical novel *Landing* published in 2007.

Landing is one in a line of Emma Donoghue's novels that renders the reader every possible *cliché* about strangeness and otherness ferociously authentic. In her *Landing* Emma Donoghue captures what can be called a clash of identities in the un-reality of timelessness — here erratic travel in the *jet lagged* era — where an apparent homelessness and strangeness are irrevocably written into both national and personal histories. Since the stories of attracting opposites have been exhausted in literature, Donoghue manages to make her story absorbing by taking the ambiguous nature of selfhood into the stereotyped context of Canadian and Irish histories and well beyond into the pots of personal narrative of youth, adulthood, ethnicity and gender.

In the paper, we will have an opportunity to look at the (de)construction of personal and foreign narratives, histories of selfhood and otherness within hostile environments of public and private Canada and Ireland.

KEYWORDS

Donoghue; Ireland; Canada; Foreignness; Selfhood; Identities.

RESUMO

Emma Donoghue tem estado presente no mundo literário desde 1993; o ano em que publicou o seu primeiro romance *Stir-Fry*, considerado *Bildungsroman* fruto de angústias da autora resultantes da difícil descoberta de identidade. Donoghue é autora de mais cinco romances, outras obras literárias, como também um doutoramento pela Universidade de Cambridge sobre os conceitos de amizade entre homens e mulheres na literatura do século XVIII.

O *Landing* publicado em 2007 continua na linha de escrita bibliográfica demarcando-se como um livro não somente *queer* mas também dividindo-se entre questões da tradição e a novidade, o presente e o passado, o nacional — irlandês e o estrangeiro — canadiano. *Landing* tenciona provar a impermeabilidade e solidez das divisões binárias previamente enumeradas e muitas vezes sendo elas consideradas *clichés* agora transpostas para os mundos irlandês e canadiano. Emma Donoghue consegue capturar o constante atrito entre varias identidades e histórias pessoais num tempo ambíguo e metaforicamente visto como a sensação de *jet-lag* vivida pelas duas personagens principais do romance.

A presente intervenção serve de ponto de partida para uma discussão sobre a (de)construção de narrativas pessoais e estrangeiras, como também histórias de alteridade e *selfhood* vividas em mundos *hostis* do Canadá e Irlanda.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Donoghue, Irlanda, Canadá, estrangeiro, alteridade, *selfhood*, identidades.
