

# "The best tradition of womanhood": Negotiating and Reading Identities in Emma Donoghue's *Landing*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article reads Emma Donoghue's 2007 novel *Landing* as an intersectional romance. The novel's conflict emerges not only from the distance between the two lovers, the Irish flight attendant Síle and the Canadian curator Jude, but from several intersecting differences: gender identity, class, race, age, sexual orientation, and nationality. Specifically, this article lays out how Síle's nationality and sexuality are compromised through invisibility, and unpacks how her race and gender contribute to this invisibility. While Jude is recognizably queer and Canadian, as a femme of colour Síle's identity requires more explanation and affirmation. Through *Landing*, Emma Donoghue examines how Síle can find happiness without compromising her identity as an Irish racialized femme.

**RESUMEN**

Este artículo analiza la novela de Emma Donoghue *Landing* (2007) como romance interseccional. El conflicto argumental tiene su origen no solo en la distancia entre las dos amantes, la azafata irlandesa Síle y la gestora cultural canadiense Jude, sino en varias diferencias que se solapan: la identidad de género, clase, raza, edad, orientación sexual y nacionalidad. En concreto, este artículo analiza cómo la nacionalidad y la sexualidad de Síle son puestas en peligro por su invisibilidad, y explica cómo su raza y su género contribuyen a la misma. Mientras que Jude aparenta ser queer y canadiense, como mujer de color la identidad de Síle exige más explicación y afirmación. A través de la novela, Donoghue articula cómo Síle puede encontrar la felicidad sin poner en peligro su identidad como mujer irlandesa racializada.



Emma Donoghue's *Landing* (2007) follows the romance of Jude, a young archivist living in the small fictional town of Ireland, Ontario, and Síle, an Irish flight attendant based in Dublin. The women meet on a flight to England, and their relationship emerges over the course of emails, letters, and intermittent visits. It is not just physical distance that sets them apart, but a series of obstacles and differences: Jude is white, and Síle is brown, the offspring of an Irish father and Keralan mother; Jude has a limited income, while Síle owns her own home and has capital at her disposal; Síle is a lesbian in her late-thirties, while Jude is much younger and reluctant to label her sexuality; Síle has a long-term partner, Kathleen, and Jude has an intermittent relationship with Rizla, a man to whom she is still legally married. But the romance hinges primarily on the distance, compounded by time zones, borders, and plane fare. Ultimately, Síle weighs the decision of whether to commit to Jude by immigrating to Canada. Síle's friend Jael quips, "Women are still such suckers for self-sacrifice" (Donoghue, *Landing* 287). And yet, Jael's gendering of Síle's decision complicates the queer nature of Síle and Jude's relationship. In a romance between two women, how is it that Síle is called upon to "self-sacrifice"? Though scholar Emma Young argues that the novel's "lesbian relationship[p] and migration" allows it to "interrogat[e] the queer possibilities of time and space" (108), the terms *lesbian* and *queer* fail to fully contextualize Síle's difficult choice.

*Landing* is not just a queer romance; it is an intersectional romance. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* to account for how "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (1243). Crenshaw has been clear that intersectionality applies to more than just race and gender, and that many factors, "such as class or sexuality" intersect to "shap[e] the experiences of women of colour" (1244-1245). In *Landing*, Síle's experience is shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, regional background (urban versus rural), and age. These issues intersect to create tension in the central relationship between Síle and Jude. This article focuses on four of these intersectional issues (though they are by no means discrete): race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality. I unpack how Síle's queerness and Irishness are in tension with her gender and race. This pressure is applied externally: others fail to identify her as an Irish lesbian because she appears Indian/South Asian and heteronormatively feminine. In response, Síle bolsters her nationality and her queerness by participating in two legitimizing but restrictive identity structures: globalization and the butch-femme dynamic. She is a "global citizen," the quintessential figure of a contemporary, prosperous Ireland (Donoghue, *Landing* 128), and she is traditionally feminine, always bearing feminine accessories and make-up. At first, her relationship with Jude af-

firms these central aspects of her identity: she must be even more mobile to be with Jude, and she frames Jude as the butch that balances her own femme identity. But as the novel approaches Síle's migration to Canada, her reliance on transnationalism and binary notions of queerness undercut her other affiliations and needs.

This article lays out how Síle's nationality and sexual orientation are compromised through misreadings, and how her race and gender contribute to these misreadings. While Jude is recognizably queer and Canadian, Síle's identity requires more explanation and affirmation. Tina O'Toole reads *Landing* as critiquing Ireland through the queer/Irish diaspora, and Moira Casey argues that Síle embraces a (precarious) contemporary globalized Ireland. I will build on these arguments to analyze how Síle's investment in the butch-femme dynamic and her negotiations of globalization account for her femme invisibility and interrogated nationality. My theoretical framework draws on Aihwa Ong's work on citizenship, Sara Ahmed's work on queer mobility, and conceptualizations of femme identity. Scholarship on sexuality and literature in Ireland (Donoghue, Howes, Kilfeather) and Canada (Dickinson) situate *Landing* within discourses of queer nationality, and analyze how Donoghue is writing within a queer Irish tradition. Ultimately, the novel's ending offers a compromise that may seem like an overly simplistic happy medium, but also acknowledges the identity privilege that Jude holds, and how the two women can build a new life together that is comfortable for Síle. Through *Landing*, Emma Donoghue examines how Síle can find happiness without compromising her identity as an Irish femme of color.

### Identity Misreadings

Several times in *Landing*, preconceptions about sexuality and race are challenged when characters (mis)read each other. Casey notes that at their first encounter, Jude and Síle are "reading each other in terms of economic class, nationality, and sexual orientation" (69). In the novel, when Síle realizes that Jude's casually mentioned ex is a man, her "face heated up. Haircuts could be so misleading...So much for her ability to read people" (23). But Síle *is* a good reader; Jude is queer. The haircut works as a potential indicator of her queer identity, and it is read as such by Síle. Though after Jude admits that her haircut may be "a statement," she clarifies, "But I've had that since I was four" (Donoghue, *Landing* 72). This comment undercuts the efficacy of *reading* someone's identity through their body and presentation, as the hair is a facet of Jude's individuality, not just a function of her sexual orientation.

The practice of reading identity is even more tenuous when it comes to Síle, who is repeatedly misread. In her essay "Cé Leis Tú? Queering Irish Migrant Literature," O'Toole

notes: “The hybrid identity of the globetrotting Síle is the cause of several misidentifications in the text” (137). Síle is not readily identified as Irish and lesbian. Close readings of some instances of misidentification in the text demonstrate how these misreadings function through preconceptions of what an Irish/lesbian looks like, and how Síle copes with them.

Jude first sees Síle as “a South Asian woman in a green tailored suit of startling brightness” (Donoghue, *Landing* 10). The green suit marks both the airline and Síle’s national affiliation, but Jude is still surprised when she reads the name tag: “Síle O’Shaughnessy, Purser. That didn’t seem like an Indian name” (12). Despite the Irish name on display, Jude still makes the mistake of calling Síle a Brit, and Síle has to articulate that she is, in fact, Irish (16). The national markers of the suit, the name, and the accent do not successfully communicate Síle’s Irishness because her race is hyper-visible. This scene is echoed in the bar in Ireland, Ontario. She is introduced as “Síle O’Shaughnessy of Dublin, Ireland,” and Síle emphasizes this introduction, “her accent strengthening as she leaned over the bar” (131). Nevertheless, Dave the bartender “examine[s] the visitor more closely” before articulating his surprise: “I thought Rizla here must be pulling my leg, because you don’t look Irish” (131). Once again, Síle must confirm her nationality in multiple ways so that it is not eclipsed by her race. Síle receives this judgment in good humor, but also pushes back against Dave’s preconceptions: “And the funny thing is, Dave, I’ve been told I don’t look like a lesbian, either” (131). Síle’s witty response signals that she is used to being misread on these two fronts, and accustomed to being called upon to declare or explain her national and sexual status.

Though Síle seems good humored and comfortable identifying herself in both of these exchanges, it is clear that the categorization of Síle as South Asian or Indian fails to account for her lived experience. Her mother’s homeland in Southwest India is distanced by her mother’s death. Síle’s experience is Irish: she is Irish in name, passport, and cultural and geographic history. Síle tells Jude that she has visited her family in Kerala, “but I still feel like an outsider there. If our Amma had lived to raise me and Orla I suppose we’d be cultural hybrids, but as it is we’re just brown Irish” (120). And yet she stands out in the bar for “being the only South Asian face in the village” (131). She carries her race on the surface, and her Irishness must be exposed, articulated, and confirmed.

These experiences of misidentification, minor though they are, exist in relation to heavier judgments. Síle recalls “that feeling of being the only ethnics in town...You couldn’t so much as pick your nose in case the neighbours jumped to the conclusion that *all you people pick your nose*” (124). From a young age, there is pressure to perform her race

respectably, and to act as a representative of a culture with which she has limited contact. Later in the novel, she is misidentified as a new immigrant and “handed a flyer headed ‘Ireland of the Welcomes,’” an organization she knows through her sister, Orla (247). Síle is “[d]arkly amused that she’d been targeted” –Donoghue’s subtle pun on the word “darkly” interrogates how Síle’s dark skin stands out and invites the flyer (247). Once again, Síle’s response is one of humor: she is “amused” and makes a note to inform her sister about the organization’s spelling error, not its racist distribution practices.

Síle strategically embraces her hybridity: if she cannot fit into a stereotypical white Irish nation, she can enjoy the privileges of globalization. She is ironically aware that she is “an avatar of contemporary Irish society” (O’Toole 34). She tells her girlfriend Kathleen that a passenger:

wanted to feature me in a piece on Ireland since the Celtic Tiger...Can’t you just imagine? “Veteran crew member Síle O’Shaughnessy, chic at thirty-nine, tosses back the hip-length tresses she owes to her deceased mother’s Keralan heritage”... Kathleen took it up. “People are just people, under the skin,” laughs Indo-Hibernian Síle as she wheels her smart green carry-on across Dublin Airport’s busy departures level.”

“*Bustling* departures level.”

“*Thronged* and bustling.”

“Her *soignée* blond life-mate, Kathleen Neville...is a senior administrator in one of the vibrant Celtic capital’s top hospitals” (Donoghue, *Landing* 34)

This exchange playfully interrogates how Síle can work as a symbol that confirms Ireland’s progress. She is played up as exotically feminine — “hip-length tresses” — but her success and comfort speak to Ireland’s tolerance of both race and sexuality (34). The imaginary article has her thriving in the airport, where Irish development and prosperity are described in increasingly emphatic terms: busy, *bustling*, *thronged*. Kathleen’s success is also situated in a Dublin that is simultaneously Celtic and vibrant, with the term *vibrant* carrying the double meaning of racial diversity and prosperous gentrification. Casey reads Síle as “a type of transnational subject who has reaped many of the rewards of neoliberal feminism” (70). Though this exchange with Kathleen is humorous and speculative, it rings true to neoliberal multicultural discourse, and the ways it has shaped Síle’s success.

But this success, partially a result —as Casey notes— of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland’s economic boom (71), does not secure Síle’s Irishness. Her jokes with Kathleen soon slide into a darker discourse about racist and xenophobic attitudes: her friend Brigid being told,

aggressively and with a racial slur, to “Go home” (Donoghue, *Landing* 35). Síle brushes it off: “She and I had a laugh about it. You have to laugh” (35). Humor is clearly a way of coping with her and Brigid’s racialized exclusion. In dialogue with Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler plays on the expression “the state that binds” to think about national belonging: “If the state is what ‘binds,’ it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes” (4-5). This is useful in thinking through Síle’s relationship to contemporary Ireland: she is the expression of progress, but she is also the expression of difference, and so is ultimately alienated from “a certain version of the nation” (5). She is the *global* in a globalized Ireland, the *multi* in the multicultural, the transitory in the transnational—she is dislocated from the nation itself. Though she was born and raised in Ireland, she is received both inside and outside the nation as a new arrival. When her Irishness is interrogated, so is her own strong history of belonging.

Síle copes with this interrogation of her Irish identity by constructing a loose relationship with the nation. Síle exhibits what Aihwa Ong calls “flexible citizenship”, which refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes. (6)

She presents herself as mobile and cosmopolitan, and Jude quickly defines her in terms of nomadism: “you’re a Rechabite...They were the one tribe of Israel who wouldn’t settle down” (Donoghue, *Landing* 23). Síle embraces this nomadic identity: “*I happen to be based in Dublin but it could be anywhere really (well, anywhere with a population more than a million!), life being a moveable feast, to use the old Catholic phrase*” (62, emphasis in original). It is worth noting here that she understands herself to be nomadic, but a metropolitan nomad. When she describes herself as “flying free like a kite,” it is clear that her string would be anchored in a large city, a place where she can shop, eat well, attend events, and drink the high-quality Italian coffee she loves (65). Her flexible citizenship hinges on access to capital and goods; though her race may bring her national belonging into question, at least she has the capital to disengage from the nation. Sinead Moynihan argues: “What distinguishes Síle and her friends from the people who frequent her sister’s drop-in center is their class positioning, whereas most migrants are obliged to become mobile because of economic *necessity*, Síle and her friends are mobile because of economic *privilege*” (204). This economic privilege is apparent in the way her job allows her

to visit Jude more often, but also in small acts of consumerism. When Síle is unable to bring luggage on a visit, she arrives looking “very presentable” because she made sure to buy some “duty-free makeup” (Donoghue, *Landing* 201). Ong notes that “[n]ew strategies of flexible accumulation have promoted a flexible attitude toward citizenship” (17). This flexible attitude also enables Síle to cope with her marginalization within a primarily white nation that does not always recognize and accept her. She spends only part of her time in Dublin, and she understands herself as *unsettled* in empowering, economically liberating, and exciting ways.

Her relationship to her home nation mirrors, in some ways, her relationship to Kathleen. She does not fully live in Ireland, nor does she fully live with Kathleen. But cohabitation is not the only issue: Síle and Kathleen do not have sex, and their lack of intimacy parallels her apparent lack of intimacy with Ireland. Though she recognizes that their lack of sex sounds “like a disaster,” she emphasizes that it does not bother her: “Oddly enough, she rarely thought about it. Her life was crammed with work and play, friends and films, weekends in Brighton or Bilbao” (Donoghue, *Landing* 75). She is too busy to be bothered by their lack of intimacy, and too busy to be bothered by the racism that doubts her nationality. She is regularly away from both Kathleen and Ireland, and this distance allows tensions—sexual, racial—to go unresolved. Her growing connection to Jude makes this lack of intimacy a more pressing issue, as it means that she is away mentally as well as physically: “She’d made the mistake of thinking that dinners out and traffic jams were her real life, and this connection with Jude was just a transitory preoccupation. But now she saw that she’d been living onscreen, sentences swallowed and sung back and swallowed all over again” (100). Her Canadian connection reveals that the looseness of Síle and Kathleen’s relationship is not a benefit, but “a strange disassociation” (100). Ultimately, her relationship to Jude also forces her to re-negotiate her “strange disassociation” with Ireland as well (Donoghue, *Landing* 100).

### Femme (In)visibility

Returning to the scene at the bar, Donoghue highlights Síle’s race but also her gender performance: “Síle crossed her legs seductively, despite the borrowed snow boots, and smiled up at him. In her bright skirt and beaded Rajasthani jacket, she stood out against the comfortable casuals the locals were wearing, quite apart from being the only South Asian face in the village” (131). Síle’s race is not the only thing that makes her stand out—her femme style is different and notable. In “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto,” Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh write that the “fem(me)...makes a scene, an entrance, an

appearance—she steals the show (she *is* the show) of difference” (165). Síle is described in feminine terms and through feminine accessories, starting from the first time Jude meets her: “Her snaky black braid was long enough to sit on...She wore expensive perfume; a gold choker swayed away from her throat” (12). On her visits to Jude, there is more evidence of her interest and investment in fashion and make up: “She put on a brown suede skirt, a silk sweater, and an angora shrug—a word Jude had never learned till today, and couldn’t imagine using in conversation. From the Aladdin’s cave of her suitcase she took out a quantity of gold jewelry; on anyone else, it might have looked too much” (123). During the trip without luggage, even after she acquires duty-free makeup, the disruption in her femme routine is a challenge: “Later, Síle had to remove her makeup with moisturizer and toilet paper. It was quite fun, all this improvising, though she couldn’t imagine getting through the whole week without shopping” (209). Síle is committed to certain feminine practices, which bolster my reading of her as a femme.

And yet, the term femme is not used once during the whole novel. In contrast, the term butch is used three times, always to describe Jude. The first time is in Jude’s recollection: “She used to have a sort of quiet about her that some found enviable, others irksome; ‘the butch gravitas thing,’ a girlfriend had called it” (47). Síle uses the word twice more. Jude expresses her emotional stress by saying “I felt like hammering a nail through my hand,” and Síle cringes at this description: “Ouch! Even your metaphors are butch” (108). Later, when Jude is “still carrying the bag instead of wheeling it,” Síle observes: “this was butch bordering on ridiculous” (113). There are subtle ways that Jude’s appearance is described in masculine or butch terms: her short hair, her loose clothing, and her engagement in physical labor. But she does not explicitly identify herself as butch. It is worth nothing that this reading of Jude’s gender comes mostly from Síle—perhaps as a femme, Síle is invested in using the term butch and so building a recognizably queer partnership.

The presence of the term butch and the absence of the term femme parallels the issue of visibility/invisibility for queer women. Elizabeth Galewski argues: “the butch has often come to be seen as the queer women’s community’s most effective political actor. Considered visible, public, and distinctive, the butch has come to signify queer” (284). In contrast, queer women who present as femme are less visible, blending in as they do to heteronormative assumptions of femininity. Amber Jamilla Musser explains femme invisibility and how it is contested through butch-femme relationships:

While sexual identity is visible only relationally, normative assumptions link gender performance to sexuality. This produces confusion when it comes to the femme, whose performance of femininity is assumed to connect her to het-

erosexuality...While the visibility of identity is a complicated negotiation for all, what marks the femme’s struggle is the attempt to make her queerness visible while adhering to conventional gender norms. (56-7)

Just as her skin color renders her Irishness less visible, Síle’s femme-ness renders her sexuality less visible; recall her comment to bartender Dave that she’s “been told I don’t look like a lesbian, either” (131). Jude never has to come out, and she suggests that her butch haircut may have done some of this work for her (72). In contrast, Síle has to come out regularly, including to strange men in bars. The language of the novel makes butch explicit, but leaves femme unspoken, only silently visible when Síle’s feminine appearance and sexuality are fully articulated.

Síle’s invisibility as a femme is compounded by a history of lesbian invisibility in Ireland and Irish literature, as noted by Donoghue in her article “Lesbian Encounters.” Donoghue describes how male homosexuality is recognized through legislation, but lesbianism is not: “the Irish state is not inclined to make us visible even by mentioning us in its laws” (1090). This is a form of oppression still being worked through: “As we come out of our various closets and make ourselves visible in Irish culture, many of us face worse things than invisibility...but invisibility is perhaps the most debilitating. As Irish women who love women, we have been like faces looking into a mirror and seeing nothing” (1090). Her description of the mirror has resonances in *Landing*; after Síle does her best to read Jude’s sexuality, and in turn be read as queer, she walks through the airport: “She glanced in every mirrored surface she passed” (Donoghue, *Landing* 27). Within the public space of the airport, where Síle’s sexuality may be invisible to a (hetero)normative gaze, she recognizes herself, again and again. On a personal level, she can combat her invisibility. But on a public and social level, she still needs to account for other’s heteronormative assumptions.

Mirrors make an appearance in “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto” as a part of femme identity and (self)recognition: “Mirrors are not pools in which [the femme] drowns; they are the instrument or metaphor of her essential irony” (165). Though Síle can, and must, recognize herself in a world that cannot fully see her, there is an irony in how she over- or misreads Jude as butch. Musser expands on how femmes become visible when paired with a butch lesbian:

Generally, femmes are made visible as queer women when they are seen as part of a couple. Historically, femmes have been most recognized when paired with butches, whose overt masculinity marks the relationship as legibly sexual, partly because the butch-femme dynamic is assumed to recall heterosexual

norms of attraction. By making explicit the sexual economy that she is part of, the butch's presence makes the femme recognizable as something other than heterosexual. (56)

When she is coupled with Jude, Síle's sexuality is confirmed. She does not need to out herself; her status in the butch-femme dynamic accomplishes this for her. This visibility is apparent through scenes of discrimination. There are no scenes in which Síle experiences discrimination alone, but when she walks around Dublin with Jude, they are subject to hostile commentary. When they kiss on the street, "drunken lads started making mwah-mwah sounds...Now one of the guys was pretending to puke" (186). Later, children jeer them at: "Are yiz lezzies?" (191). Jude is uncomfortable but notes of Síle: "You don't seem to let it bug you" (191). Certainly, Síle could be subject to harassment on her own—there are hints that she faces it at work, where coworkers are more aware of her personal life—but it is only explicit when she is paired with Jude (Donoghue, *Landing* 86). For Síle, to be seen, even by a hostile eye, is to be acknowledged.

Though this butch-femme dynamic is legitimizing for Síle, it is also exclusionary. It involves reading Jude in a particularly masculine way, even though Jude embraces some traditionally feminine practices, including cooking and sewing. The butch-femme dynamic can function as a binary that excludes forms of gender and sexuality that do not fit. Siobhán Kilfeather describes the place of binaries in Irish literature on sexuality:

For much of the last three hundred years writing about sexuality in Ireland has also been a mode of writing about binary oppositions—native and settler, English and Irish, nationalist and loyalist, Catholic and Protestant, man and woman, landed and landless, legal and illegal, old and young. Those oppositions have not dissolved in the last thirty years, but a confidence in essential differences has been shaken and while the oppressed—including many lesbian, bi-sexual and heterosexual women—continue to find a use for a strategic essentialism, there is also new awareness both of other previously overlooked binaries—straight and gay, Traveller and settled, for example—and of the ways in which people situate themselves in a variety of sometimes conflicting loyalties. (1041)

Síle, as a marginalized figure, finds affirmation in the "strategic essentialism" of butch-femme and gay-straight (Kilfeather 1041). But this is not the only expression of queer in the novel. Síle's attachment to this essentialism is apparent in her hostility towards bisexuality. Síle's friend Jael and Jude can both be understood as bisexual characters, and Síle

is explicitly uncomfortable with this. When Síle asks Jael "why [she] went off women?", Jael is a little surprised at this question, asking "Did I?" (196). She goes on to call herself "a has-bian," contributing to Síle's assumption that she left her queer identity behind her when she married Anton (196). But when Síle asks, "So you didn't actually stop fancying them?" Jael confirms, "I didn't stop fancying anything" (196). Her feelings for women were not eclipsed by her commitment to a man (this is doubly affirmed in Jael's affair with Catriona). But even though Jael affirms her persistent queer-ness, Síle still places it in the past tense: "You were a nasty lesbian" (197). Síle struggles to understand how Jael can be both queer and committed to a man, because it is disruptive of the gay-straight binary that she finds validating.

Síle's investment in the gay-straight binary is a source of tension in her relationship with Jude. When Síle learns that Jude is still married to Rizla, she expresses her hurt by policing Jude's sexual identity: "I thought you were a dyke. So you're still bi, is that what you're telling me?" Jude contests this labeling: "Those are your words" (137). To use Kilfeather's terms, Síle is uncomfortable with how Jude's bisexuality leads to "conflicting loyalties" (1041). This is more about Síle's identity than Jude's. Berlant writes: "Identity is marketed in national capitalism as a property. It is something you can purchase, or purchase a relation to. Or it is something you already own that you can express: *my* masculinity, *my* queerness, for example (this is why bisexuality has not made it fully into the sexual star system: it is hard to *express* bisexuality)" (Berlant 17). Síle has invested heavily in lesbian identity, and to recognize that identity is just one construction among many is difficult.

And yet, while Síle embraces the freedom of her nomadic lifestyle, this same freedom is used by those around her to challenge rigid notions of sexuality. When Jude expresses discomfort with the gay-straight binary, suggesting it is a form of societal bullying, Jael picks this up with a travel metaphor: "And god help you if you fancy a trip across that border" (229). Síle's friend and coworker Marcus describes love as a form of travel: "Having your big adventure, making landfall on a mysterious island" (85). He calls the travelling lifestyle that he has left behind and that Síle still inhabits "[a]n unnatural lifestyle" (83). The term unnatural could—and has—been applied to queer lifestyles. Though Marcus uses it casually, it prods at the ways that Síle remains unsettled and resistant to heteronormative notions of success and happiness. Emma Young argues that in *Landing*, "Donoghue challenges the prescriptive understanding of 'roots' and 'routes' as binary opposites in order to liberate the individual's identity" (112). Building on this, I will conclude by looking at how Síle's personal context—specifically the story of her mother—challenges the ways she navigates these many binaries, and helps her recognize her many personal affiliations.



## Feminine Self-Sacrifice

Eventually, Síle makes the decision to settle. As her love of Jude grows, her nomadic lifestyle begins to chafe. On yet another flight, she waits

for the familiar rush in the stomach, the pure sweet liftoff as gravity was shed. But it didn't come. They were in the air and Síle didn't feel bliss. Only a craving not to move anymore, not to go anywhere anymore. She felt as if she'd suddenly forgotten how to have an orgasm. (245)

Her disillusionment with travel is articulated in intimate, sexual terms, as if she is falling out of love or lust with the "unnatural lifestyle" that has been so central to her identity (Donoghue, *Landing* 83). She desires settlement, and soon after that she decides to settle in Ireland, Ontario with Jude.

But her decision to migrate becomes brutally unsettled by a discussion about the immigration of her mother, Sunita. Síle's sister Orla reveals *her* narrative of Sunita's death: that she committed suicide because her commitment to her husband and to Ireland was too much to bear. The compromise that Sunita made was a profound compromise of self, and Síle seems doomed to repeat it:

She wanted to wail aloud for Sunita Pillay, glamorous Air India stewardess, who'd swapped everything she's known for a rain-green Dublin suburb: followed her man, gone into exile, surrendered her country and family and friends in the best tradition of womanhood. Who'd done it all for love, and discovered that love wasn't enough to live on after all. (311)

The phrase "the best tradition of womanhood" recalls an advertisement that Jude recovers from the archives and sends to Síle:

Urgent!  
Thousands of nice girls are wanted in Canada. Tens of thousands of men are sighing for what they cannot get —Wives! (194-5)

The message here, though meant lightly on Jude's end, is that Síle will participate in a long female tradition of self-sacrifice for her masculine-of-center partner. And though she may jokingly identify with this female tradition, it does not ring true to her queer experiences of femme. In her viral "Femme Shark Manifesto," femme of color Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha insists that "FEMME IS NOT THE SAME THING AS BEING OUR MOMS" (n.p., capitalization in original). This declaration bites back at the elisions between

femme and idealized notions of submissive femininity. In her grief for her mother, Síle recognizes that she is participating in a heteronormative pattern with a high price. She reacts by hesitating long enough to miss her flight to Toronto, essentially putting off her move to Ireland, Ontario and instigating a renegotiation of her relationship with Jude. She cannot recreate her mother's love and her mother's tragedy.

This identification between Síle and her mother shatters the straight/gay (or queer) binary in significant ways. Sara Ahmed critiques how queerness is often idealized as "*freedom from norms*. Such a negative model of freedom idealizes movement and detachment, constructing a mobile form of subjectivity that could escape from the norms that constrain what it is that bodies can do" (151-52, emphasis in original). But this "idealisation of movement," Ahmed continues,

or transformation of movement into fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as *not free in the same way*...Indeed, the idealisation of movement depends upon a prior model of what counts as a queer life, which may exclude others, those who have attachments that are not readable as queer. (152, emphasis in original)

Just as Síle has idealized her mother's migratory love for her father, queer theories can idealize freedom in ways that undermine real, lived attachments. And this is when Síle's flexible citizenship comes into question. Aihwa Ong writes that "[f]lexible citizenship is shaped within mutually reinforcing dynamics of discipline and escape" (19). While Síle has long used mobility as a form of escape from (hetero)norms and racial norms, in the final chapters of the novel her decision to immigrate becomes increasingly shaped by immigration policies, familial attachment, and employment opportunities, which closely follows Ong's formula that "travelling subjects are never free of regulations set by state power, market operations, and kinship norms" (19-20).

## Finding Cosmopolitan Compromise

What becomes clear in the final section of the novel is that Síle's relationship to Ireland, and to Dublin specifically, is not as casual or distant as she suspected. There is an intimacy there, and she moves through the city acknowledging the physical spaces through which she knows herself: "every corner was a touchstone. Would Dublin miss her at all, she caught herself wondering?" (Donoghue, *Landing* 301). She realizes that her citizen-of-the-world identity was not so real, after all. Berlant discusses the way "[t]ransnational capital and global media produce subjects and publics that are no longer organized around



the politics of representation within the confines of a single state,” such that “the notion of a modal person who is a citizen with one pure national affiliation and loyalty to only the place she or he currently lives markedly underdescribes the experience and political struggles of persons across the globe” (13). On the surface, this rings true for Síle, who is a product of intercultural romance and a world traveler. But Berlant goes on to trouble the implications of this globalized citizen: “But this does not mean that states are not still powerful political agents, or that the ideology of nationhood has become enervated, the faint howling of an archaic dream of democratic legitimation. Indeed, it is precisely under transnational conditions that the nation becomes a more intense object of concern and struggle” (13). On a practical level, this means that citizen-of-the-world Síle still needs to contend with the bureaucratic process of immigration, so as to implicate herself legally in Canada. On an affective level, it means that when she prepares to leave Ireland, Dublin becomes a site of intense personal struggle. She suddenly recognizes herself as a Dubliner, and has to contend with the repercussions this identity will have for her future.

Síle’s friend Marcus frames her attachment to Dublin as a form of *heimat*: “And besides, you’re Irish through and through...It’s your setting, your frame. You’re a Dub...This dirty old town is your, what’s the German word, your *heimat*” (282). In his book *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*, Peter Blicke expands on this term. Loosely, it is a term for “homeland, home, native region” (Blicke ix), but he notes that German speakers “somewhat uneasily and without being able to define it exactly, [...] will admit to reserving a place for *Heimat* among such terms as *self, I, love, need, body, or longing*” (Blicke 4, emphasis in original). Once again, a relationship to a place is described in intimate terms of desire—so intimate, that it cannot be articulated as fully outside of the self. Simultaneously, *heimat* can be an exclusionary term, and has been used “by at least some of those responsible for xenophobia driven attacks on foreigners in many German cities” (Blicke 6). When applied to Síle, the term seems to uncover how complicated her relationship to Dublin and to Ireland is. She has a sense of belonging, but this sense is often interrogated by others, either on the superficial level on which she is seen as primarily Indian or South Asian, or on the antagonistic level when she and people like her are judged and told to go home. Her *heimat* is not as simple or as clear as that of her father, or perhaps even that of the British-born Marcus, who embraces Ireland as an adopted home, but as a privileged, if gay, white man. *Heimat* is valuable in articulating what Síle loves or needs from Dublin, and what she would not have access to in Ireland, Ontario. The novel’s final compromise —Toronto— acknowledges and accounts for what Síle loses in leaving behind her *heimat*.

As the novel draws to a close, Síle weighs two unsatisfying options: staying in Dublin and thus being without Jude, or moving to rural Ontario and thus being without a cosmopolitan community, with *community* expressing both a diverse/racialized community and the personal community of family and friends. The first option follows a tradition of unsatisfying compromise in Irish queer literature. Marjorie Howes writes that, in an Ireland where traditionally “sexuality meant married, reproductive heterosexuality...many [authors] emphasize self-censorship and the internalization of social constraints. The most common sexual tragedy...is the tragedy of the character who voluntarily renounces sexual happiness or is unable to embrace it when it is offered” (924, 929). Strong though Síle’s relationship to Dublin may be, settling in Dublin comes at the price of her sexual and romantic happiness.

The second option, committing to a rural lifestyle and finding a place within Jude’s existing life, is unsatisfying because it denies so much of Síle’s identity. I have argued that Síle is struggling with her own experiences of invisibility and hyper-visibility. Moving to a village where she is “the only South Asian face” is returning to an experience of her youth, to “that feeling of being the only ethnics in town” (Donoghue, *Landing* 131, 124). It has taken most of her lifetime for Ireland to move beyond this and reach a point where “compared to the women in chadors [Síle] hardly look[s] foreign at all” (35). Toronto offers even more comfort than Ireland: “Toronto was full of Indian and Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi faces; it was the first time in years that she’d felt so visually unremarkable, and the effect was oddly relaxing” (250). Toronto offers this newfound comfort of visual and visible diversity, as well as many economic opportunities for Síle and Jude, all the amenities of a large city that are central to Síle’s life, and an international airport that keeps her closer to her community in Dublin. It is a compromise, one that affirms Síle’s identity and needs in many ways, and allows her to preserve old communities and even participate in new ones, both ethnic and queer.

In his book *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada*, Peter Dickinson attempts to answer Northrop Frye’s looming question of Canadian culture —where is here? — through queer discourse, leaning heavily on the well-known Queer Nation chant “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” : “‘Queer,’ as an inclusive term, an expansive signifier, a transitive word with linguistic roots, as I have come to discover, in reaching ‘across’ boundaries, in standing ‘athwart’ various social communities, would seem especially suited to negotiating the distance between ‘here’ and ‘we’re’” (Dickinson 38). *Landing* is the story of two women falling in love, and then negotiating where the *we* of their relationship can happen. For Síle, this is an intersectional dilemma, as she grapples to affirm and sustain her identity as more than Jude’s lover: her identity as Irish, as a person of color, as a lesbian, as a femme, as a nomad, as a daughter, sister, friend, and as

cosmopolitan. As Dickinson suggests, *queer* works to negotiate the terms of these women's lives and their future. Their queer relationship stands athwart and across many binaries, and even stumbles on the limits of those binaries. Eventually, their mutual love gives them the tools to break those binaries together and choose a home that really *is* "split[ting] the difference" (Donoghue, *Landing* 320). The *here* that they negotiate is a cosmopolitan Canadian here, close to Jude's history and community, but affirming of Sile's identity.

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