

‘ANNIHILATE BUT SPACE AND TIME, AND MAKE TWO LOVERS HAPPY’: NATIONAL HOMELANDS AND LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN EMMA DONOGHUE’S *LANDING*¹

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Feminist geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling argue that home ‘places can be a suburb, neighbourhood, nation, or indeed the world’ (23). Responding to such shifting definitions of home, this article examines award-winning, Irish-born, Canadian author Emma Donoghue’s novel *Landing* (2007) and its subversive conceptual re-definition of the ‘National homeland’. Centring on the romance between Irish flight attendant, Síle, and Canadian museum worker, Jude, who meet on a flight between Canada and England, the novel follows the blossoming of their relationship and the problems of time and space that the women have to negotiate as part of their long-distance relationship. I suggest that in *Landing*, Donoghue exposes traditionally received notions of Nation, or ‘homeland’ as predicated on an imagined ideal, and instead posits an alternative meaning of these terms that privileges conceptions of community as defined by relationships. After all, community’s substantiation through individual relationships incorporates lesbianism in its definition. Subsequently, this instigates a move beyond the binary predications (inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside, citizen/immigrant) of Nation. *Landing* thus supports Linda McDowell’s assertion that community is ‘a fluid network of social relations that may be but are not necessarily tied to a territory’ (100). In short, Donoghue’s novel reveals how lesbian relationships can function to facilitate notions of belonging across national borders, *whilst* critiquing—and destabilising—the notion of a single national homeland. Sequentially, then, through lesbian relationships and migration, the novel interrogates the queer possibilities of time and space.

One resolution offered to this problem of the nation-state and identity politics has emerged via the theory of diaspora. In the process of re-defining national homelands, Donoghue engages with the politics of queer diaspora to reveal its limitations on, and for, lesbian migrants. If diaspora ‘involves feeling ‘at home’ in the area of settlement while retaining significant identification outside it’ (Walter 206), then it remains complicit with national spaces and traditional connotations of belonging. By recognising home as a physical *and* imagined space, diaspora can subvert the idea of an authentic or definitive ‘homeland’.

However, this also means it fails to shed the pre-existent binary associations inherent in the concept of nation and homelands. Developing diaspora theory, Anne Marie Fortier argues that “queer diaspora” rests on claims about the condition of exile and estrangement experienced by queer subjects, which locates them outside of the confines of “home”: the heterosexual family, the nation, the homeland’ (408). Whilst Fortier’s concept provides a useful framework for understanding the politics raised by queer diaspora; Donoghue’s novel only reflects a queer diaspora in order to challenge its prevalence and legitimacy, as *Landing* offers a theoretical intervention that depicts queer diaspora to be equally problematic in relation to lesbian belonging as the notion of national homeland which it seeks to revise.

Further, if as Ed Maddon (2012) suggests queer Irish sexuality constitutes a queer diasporic project, then Donoghue’s critique writes back to a specifically queer *Irish* diaspora. Like Kathryn Conrad’s argument that homosexuality has traditionally been positioned outside the discourse of what constitutes ‘Irishness’ (124), Tina O’Toole (2013) suggests historical motions like the 1937 Irish Constitution have always reinforced Ireland’s heteronormative constitution and nation-building project (131). In analysing Donoghue’s novel in tandem with Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), O’Toole suggests *Landing*—as a lesbian romance novel—challenges ideas about LGBT and Irish migration as part of its attempt to reshape the homeland. Despite this assertion, O’Toole’s analysis remains indebted to the framework of queer diaspora and thus fails to recognise Donoghue’s own sceptical representation of the notion.²

This paper traces how these concepts and arguments are mapped out in the novel by first examining the tension between ‘roots’ and ‘routes’—as two means of existence that antithetically suggest grounding and mobility respectively—in relation to belonging, before secondly considering the motif of travel and how, with this, Donoghue disrupts the concept of borders. Although borders are spaces to be crossed—an image suggestive of a single line—they are inherently restrictive in that they are sites that demand identity and national allegiance to be affirmed. By realising that ‘the notion of borders refers to two heterogeneous boundaries and not to a single “line”’ (Kaplan 5), I argue that Donoghue calls into question their supposed authority. Finally, I turn to the depiction of Jude and Sile’s lesbian relationship to highlight how it creates a sense of home and belonging for the women across time and space outside of the nation-state.

Making Roots *and* Routes

The conceptual opposition of roots and routes is theorised by Paul Gilroy in his influential essay ‘It’s a Family Affair: Black Culture and the Trope of Kinship’ (1993), where he calls for a rethinking of ‘the dialectical tension between cultural roots and cultural routes, between the space constituted through and between places and the space marked out by flows’ (193). Whilst ‘routes’ destabilises the essentialist belief in identity as rooted in a national space or ‘homeland’ by prioritising mobility, conversely, ‘roots’—with its association of being rooted in the ground—implies stasis. Donoghue depicts the conflict between these two terms in *Landing* as she reveals the restrictive qualities of both elements of the binary. As such, the novel reveals how being ‘grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached’ (Ahmed et al., 1). Further to the spatial implications of this route/roots binary, there resides a temporal resonance as the idea of a rooted ‘native country’ is imbued with permanence and belonging whilst the ‘host’ country—visited *en route*—is perceived as a temporal residence. By dismantling the original binary, Donoghue systematically problematises notions of time and space. Returning to sexuality, however, the reworking of this binary serves to unravel queer diasporic discourse.

Following Fortier’s definition quoted earlier, which proposed that identifying as queer—and moving away from an original home location—positions individuals outside of traditional notions of home, nation and homeland, the roots and routes binary becomes implicitly sexualised. As roots (and therefore belonging) conflate with heterosexuality and allow an individual to identify with a homeland, homosexuality becomes ‘othered’ and forces individuals to always be *en route*. Consequentially, so-called dissident sexuality is spatially and socially suppressed. Far from propagating assimilation—a problematic idea in its own right—Donoghue invokes this contradictory and troublesome ideology to rework the paradigms of sexual citizenship and national homeland. As ‘citizenship is inevitably a heterosexualised concept, such that rights claims based on citizenship status mobilized by lesbians and gay men must be moulded to fit this pre-existing heterosexual frame’ (Bell and Binnie 27), Donoghue’s avoidance of assimilation maintains her sceptical approach to broader heteronormative frameworks of belonging.

The novel embodies this critique of roots and routes through Jude and Síle’s chosen careers and personal beliefs. Prior to her transatlantic flight Jude has never left her home town of Ireland, Ontario in Canada.

She works in the local—and specifically regional—museum and her commitment to the perseveration of the past reinforces her geographical roots in this place. Conversely, Síle, as a flight attendant (like her deceased mother), is constantly moving between countries. Their employment is therefore central to the women’s tendencies towards home spaces. In the beginning, Síle confesses that she is ‘always nipping out of the country on my days off’ (23), thus displaying continual movement, whereas Jude, following Síle’s tale of Oisíne coming home, warmly recognises ‘the magical pull of the native soil’ (21). Although Jude initially mocks Síle and her mobility, by the novel’s conclusion, her position has been revised, as too has Síle’s. Drinking coffee in the airport, as Jude is upset by the in-flight death of the passenger beside her, Jude refers to Síle as a ‘Rechabite’ the ‘tribe of Israel who wouldn’t settle down’ (23), issuing a sense of mockery and derision at her travelling lifestyle. Yet, during an email exchange once they are both in their respective ‘homelands’, Jude re-reads the passage and writes to Síle:

P.S. I just looked up that bit about the Rechabites. It’s Jeremiah 35: 7:

‘Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents: that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers’.

The funny thing is, I’d remembered the Rechabites’ tent-dwelling as a bad habit, or maybe a punishment. But rereading the passage, I think they’re actually being advised to stay mobile. (57)

Returning to the bible, itself a symbol of heteropatriarchal domination, Jude re-reads the passage to discover an alternative understanding of the Rechabites. Despite the original scepticism towards Síle’s continual mobility, Jude begins to recognise that this does not necessarily equate with a lack of home space and therefore non-belonging. As quoted above, she perceived the ‘tent-dwelling as a bad habit or maybe a punishment’ (57) when in actuality it could equally have been for safety and comfort. Thus, Donoghue suggests that despite queer diaspora’s premise, mobility is not necessarily a punishment for non-normalcy or failure to assimilate into a heterocentric space. Importantly, Donoghue draws on queer theory’s desire to demolish the categories that facilitate the normative and non-normative binary to illuminate the multiplicity inherent in a single sentiment.

In a similar transformation, Síle, who claims that stasis ‘gives me the creeps’ (216), revises her initial reaction against putting down roots. As the plane takes off ‘Síle didn’t feel any bliss. Only a heavy craving not to move anymore, not to go anywhere anymore’ (245). Having spent her life travelling the world and believing that movement provides her with freedom, Síle longs for a stable place to remain. However, the novel avoids simply dismissing movement in favour of stasis, and as with Jude, it instead re–negotiates the issue to move away from binaristic thinking. With Síle’s belief that ‘where you lived was just one tiny spot on the globe’ (166), implying that roots are not fundamental but a sense of belonging in *any* space is achievable, Donoghue blurs the connection between roots, home and belonging. Notably, the naming of places in the novel—Dublin, Ireland and Ireland, Ontario—illuminates Síle’s assertion. Whilst Ireland is one tiny spot on the globe (to paraphrase Síle) it becomes one of many ‘Irelands’. Consequentially, it diminishes the uniqueness and geographical specificity of ‘being Irish’, and thus questions the discourses of nationality and Nation.

Jude and Síle’s recognition that home is not defined by the place in which one is rooted, and that continual movement, or ‘routes’, is not always a liberating path for an individual, echoes the idea that ‘to travel is also to dwell, to be grounded in a particular landscape. Equally, to dwell is not necessarily to arrive or “settle”’ (Proctor 15). Donoghue challenges the prescriptive understanding of ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ as binary opposites in order to liberate an individual’s identity. The novel concludes with Jude asking Síle if she could ‘imagine living in Toronto?’ (320). As a space, Toronto symbolises a compromise of ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ as it blends Jude’s Canadian roots with a compromising move away from her tiny hometown of Ireland, Ontario. Likewise, for Síle, it sees her become slightly grounded in a single place whilst at the same time depicting her *en route* as she moves from Dublin, Ireland. Crucially, however, both women are shown to be moving away from their own ‘Irelands’.

Breaking Borders: Travel and Queer Migration

In *Landing* the destabilisation of borders is crucial to how Jude and Síle locate and access a home space in which they can be together. Because borders ‘offer new frames of analysis that resist and transcend national boundaries through their creative articulations of practices’ (Lavie and Swedenberg 15), they contribute to the ways in which lesbian identity can be located in the transnational context. When viewed as creatively

defined, borders are open to transgression as they destabilise the concept of Nation. Donoghue uses the motif of travel, and specifically flight, to question the solid, static dominance of (national) borders. Consequentially, a queer impetus materialises as the luminal yet socially constructed quality of time and space is celebrated through air travel. Opening with Jude's first journey on an airplane—an event that implies her initial embrace of a movement away from the 'homeland'—the novel acknowledges that borders are spatial markers that can be crossed. On the plane, Jude 'prayed for the night to be over and herself safe at London Heathrow, where—according to the screen over her head—it was 4:29 on January first. Back home it was still last year' (7). As the quotation shows, in transcending the superficial limits of spatial borders there is the simultaneous realisation that time, like (air)space, is also a construct. Jude's mid-flight realisation that time and space are discursive constructs is further emphasised by Síle's continual movement across these delineations.

Jude and Síle's relationship also relies upon this ability to transgress spatial boundaries through travel. Yet this transgression also resonates with queer critiques of identity politics; their lesbian relationship threatens to disrupt the heteropatriarchal nation-state. As Jon Binnie highlights, there are physical 'barriers to stop the transmission of a global gay culture; there are specific limits to the mobility of sexual dissidents' (87–88). Borders are obliquely political in defining a national space and controlling the individuals who can pass into it. Further, this activity can be reified as a particularly queer one. Following Conrad's suggestion that 'sexuality does not confine itself within the border. Any identity category potentially troubles the national Nation' (125), queer migration narratives illuminate the fluidity of *all* identity categories: from national to sexual. Commencing mid-flight, unrestricted by national spaces, Jude and Síle's desire is not controlled by social norms. As the women sit in the transient space of the airport café after the flight they develop a flirtatious rapport. Situated emotionally and physically *in* transit, the pair are at liberty to express their lesbian identities. Furthermore, just as Síle confesses 'I like androgynous names, they disconcert people' (18), spatially the airport disrupts the heteropatriarchal normalcy of society by being a site of becoming as it is neither here nor there.

Following attempts to navigate a long-distance relationship, Síle seeks citizenship in Canada. However, she soon discovers how complicated the procedures for residency are, a point that results in her proclaiming that borders 'are a bugger...I think they should all be done away with' (229). Although on the one hand Donoghue reveals the

ability of individual's to cross borders, she also reinforces how borders also serve to enforce the practices of the nation–state.³ Here, borders are restrictive as they prevent individuals from being together, and Donoghue illuminates how the nation–state does not recognise or indeed accommodate lesbian relationships. In unsettling heterosexist ideologies and, quite literally, refusing the reproduction of it, lesbian relationships challenge the sustainability of the nation–state. In turn, according to heteronormative ideology, these sexualised bodies need to be controlled—or even contained—within geographical spaces.

Outlining this heteropatriarchal grounding of the nation–state, Anne McClintock proposes that a ‘woman’s *political* relation to the nation [is] thus submerged as a *social* relation to a man through marriage. For women, citizenship in the nation has historically been mediated by the marriage relation within the family’ (358). Given the formation of nation and belonging, as defined through men, the lesbian couple becomes marginalised and unable to access other nations based on their sexual relationship. In *Landing*, Síle discovers the difficult procedures involved in immigration, and bemoans how ‘the laws were progressive, all right’ but they still do not apply to Jude and Síle’s situation (278). Legally the women have to become common–law partners or, to borrow the official terminology Donoghue deploys in the text, have ‘cohabited in a conjugal relationship for a period of at least one year’ (278). The oxymoronic tension in this phrase is that the women could not have ‘cohabited’ in this relationship for that period *because* of their national citizenship statuses. Thus, these rigid national laws restrict Síle’s freedom to inhabit a country other than her native ‘homeland’ and subsequently reflect the traditional belief that an individual is tied to, or rooted in, *their* nation. Through this dialogue the novel articulates the dual problem of sexual citizenship and the nation in which the latter informs the formation of sexuality whilst rigorously patrolling it.

Síle’s eventual move to Canada at the end of the novel recognises the ineffectuality of borders and migration laws in preventing people of different nationalities from being together. This successful movement across borders subverts the dominant idea of a national space as a homeland whilst challenging the synonymous relationship between nation and nationality. If “‘Home’ is produced through a constant process of adjustment, transformation, negotiation, redefinition—a never–ending, ongoing work to reproduce the appearance of stability and fixity that is part of the imagined community’ (Geldof 101), then the subversion of borders functions as part of home’s conceptual transformation. If the home is a site of continual (re)negotiation, then national space—defined as a static locale—is rendered false. This is

apparent in relation to Jude's friend Rizla, who proclaims that the town was all 'Mowhawk hunting grounds...till we sold it to the Crown' (132). Speaking to Síle, Rizla acknowledges how Canada has been subject to imperial control and is a cultural melting pot—a place constituted by an array of national identities. Subsequently, inhabitants of the nation have diverse heritage. According to Rizla, the 'authentic' heritage of the town can be traced to tribal roots. However, the majority of people that now inhabit the space—and refer to it as their national homeland—do not share this heritage. Thus, the permeability of borders and repeating shifts in state control has resulted in a distortion of 'rooted' belonging. Rizla's identity is one example of this diverse heritage as his 'Mom wasn't a Status Indian once she married a Dutchman. She had to leave the rez' (132). Furthermore, Jude, who has grown up in the town and perceives it as her 'homeland', has family origins in the United Kingdom through her mother. Likewise, Síle embodies hybrid ethnicity with her origins as an Indian–Irish. Through the revelation that individuals' homelands are not defined by their genealogical heritage, Donoghue questions what it is that ties people to a nation–state. Rizla and Jude's heritage destabilises definitions of 'Canadian' as they both have family roots in other parts of the world.

The novel's original book cover (see Figure 1) also extends the destabilisation of borders and locates the concept, in this instance, outside of the main body of narrative. In the photograph two hands meet in mid–air to form the shape of a heart. Implicitly, the hands are those of Jude and Síle and the image therefore symbolises the existence of their relationship outside of the confines of time and space. Suggestively, the couples encounter in transit on the plane is 'at the heart' of the novel but it also implies that the women transcend time and space with their relationship to defy border and meet mid–way, not just mid–air. The paratextual breaking of (literary) borders is reinforced by the epigraphs to each of the chapters. By including quotations from the bible through to passenger in–flight safety instructions, Donoghue conjures a pastiche of textual material. From classical literature through to everyday documents the epigraphs function to blur literary lines, or borders. Further, the content of these epigraphs maintain Donoghue's refusal to proffer simple, one–sided answers to the question of home spaces within the confines of the roots/routes binary. From John Donne's 'To live in one land, is captivity./ To run all countries, a wild roguery' (33) through to St. Jean–Baptiste–Marie Vianney's 'On earth we are like travellers staying at a hotel' (15), these epigraphs do not favour one mode of belonging over another. In short, Donoghue compliments the narrative's

destabilisation of borders with a paratextual blurring of literary lines and spaces.

Love's Landing and Home Making

Building on the destabilisation of borders and revision of roots and routes, the novel explores how Jude and Sile's sense of belonging is defined by their relationship rather than national allegiances. In this respect the novel privileges Brian Cliff's assertion that 'community's innate heterogeneity makes it an alternative rubric better suited to many

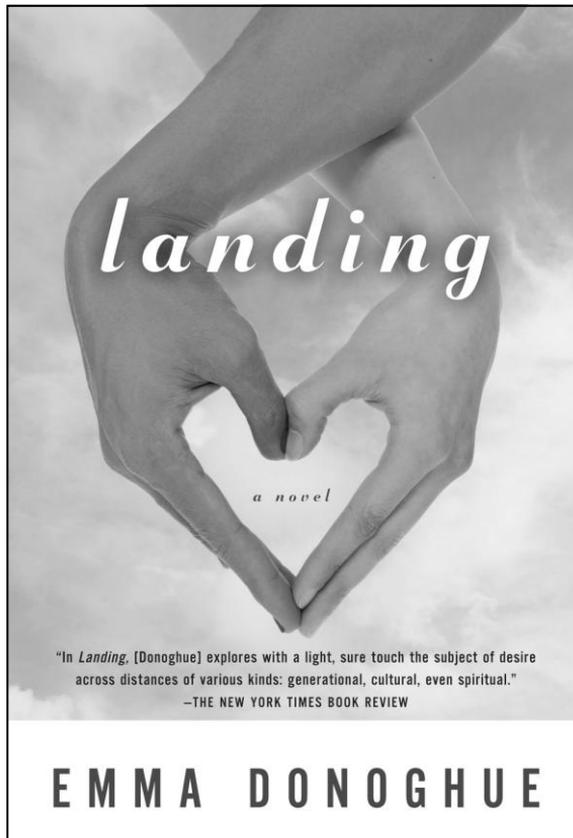


Figure 1: Cover image from *Landing* by Emma Donoghue. Copyright © 2007 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

of the discussions often lumped together under the heading of the nation' (118). By embracing community, defined as relational rather than categorical, the restrictive qualities of national space are subverted. As community is a more fluid concept that results in an intersection of multiple and diverse relationships, it offers an alternative means of classifying an individual's sense of belonging. In his paper, Cliff approaches this issue of community from a distinctly Irish perspective to suggest that contemporary Irish literature's 'most dynamic representations of community are centrally concerned with its defining paradoxes, particularly with the exclusions and crossings highlighted by the very idea of borders' (118). For Cliff, then, the notion of community and the concept of borders are explicably interwoven. Any perpetuation of community serves to dismantle borders and vice versa. Lesbian relationships, therefore, can deconstruct borders *and* propagate a sense of belonging which is fundamental to community's existence. It is in this way, I suggest, that Donoghue foregrounds an alternative version of homeland's spatiality.

This notion of relationships as making home and in turn constituting homeland, is apparent when Jude and Síle are apart as Jude is 'haunted by the feeling that real life was happening five thousand kilometres away' (238). Síle's absence causes Jude to feel lost in her national home space as life becomes associated with a person not a place. The belief that home is defined by people—and can also become a person—is reinforced when Síle tells Jude that where 'I'd really like to live, actually, is a little-known hideaway known as J. Turner' (258). As home and individuals merge the construction of home spaces (in all their senses) as founded on relationships develops. Donoghue demonstrates how home space, whether a dwelling or country, is shaped by the relationships with others within that space. As David Sopher argues, it is '[o]ne's experience of the landscape of home and one's response to it—how much it is cherished, or whether indeed it is—can hardly be separated from the nature of the human relationships there' (137). When Síle informs her friends that she will be leaving Dublin to live in Canada they are shocked. Their reactions are connected to the way in which their relations to Síle contribute to their *own* formations and sense of home space. This is visible in Marcus's hostile exaltation that 'besides, you're Irish through and through. Whatever that means! It's your setting, your frame. You're a Dub.... This dirty old town is your, what's the German word, your *heimat*' (282). One of Síle's closet friends, Marcus argues that she cannot move to Canada because she will be leaving her national homeland, presented here as her setting. Importantly, as he espouses the rhetoric of national belonging Marcus confesses to not truly knowing

what Irish nationality—or being ‘Irish through and through’ (282)—means. Thus, the tangibility of national belonging is furthered here as even proponents of the idea are unable to define it.

When Jude and Síle separate Jude wishes that ‘the town hadn’t become imprinted with memories of her. The stool she’d sat on in the Dive (third from the wall) still bore her silky stockinged ghost’ (266). It is not only the emotional and physical relationship that connects the couple but the spatial geography of the town. Here, objects become tainted by association with the departed Síle as she reverberates with a ghost-like presence in Jude’s life. This representation of places and objects suggests that even broader geographical spaces (than a literal house) substantiate ‘a staging of personal memory’ (135) and thus contribute to an individual’s homemaking. Sequentially, this also illuminates the dialectic nature of home spaces in forming and being formed by relationships. As Jude realises, a ‘place was nothing on its own; it hit her now; it was only people who carved it into meaning’ (318). A home space is carved out through the relationships of individuals it cannot be defined by territories, borders, maps and flags that have traditionally formed, validated and legitimised the construction of nation-states. By privileging community over nation, Donoghue demonstrates how lesbian desire can find a ‘homeland’ free from the oppression of the heteropatriarchal ideals of the Nation.

With *Landing* Donoghue rewrites the traditional notions of the national homeland and succeeds in revealing the mythic status of the concept. As the novel closes Jude realises that

She’d misunderstood the old myths. It was when Sedna tried to come home that she’d lost her fingers; it was when he touched his native soil again that Oisín felt his flesh withering away. You couldn’t stay in the womb; you had to go voyaging. (318)

Like Jude’s revised understanding of home and belonging, the novel as a whole articulates the ‘need to rethink the assumption that “home”, in migration, is simply something we “leave behind”’ (Ahmed 8), a point exemplified by Síle’s arrival at Jude’s front door in the final chapter. Donoghue shows how home can be a destination—a landing in a new country—or a journey and thus she subverts the idea that to leave one’s ‘homeland’ is to leave behind yourself, your ‘true’ identity or even your home. Instead, being at home and belonging is always in the process of becoming. The desire to ‘[a]nnihilate but space and time, [a]nd make two lovers happy’ (222), the epigraph from the chapter ‘Geography lessons’,

and which I have drawn on in this paper's title, encapsulates the impetus behind the novel: to unsettle the discourses that define the traditional national homeland in order to accommodate—and indeed prioritise—lesbian desire. Through roots and routes, air travel, borders and lesbian relationships the novel maps out the complex implications of migration, space and sexuality to proffer a revision of national homelands. In foregrounding community, the novel recognises the often complex, contradictory and contentious issue of homosexuality in relation to the questions of nation–state and spatial geography in the contemporary era to realise the queer possibilities of home (in all senses) as a locale.

NOTES

¹ This quotation comes from a chapter epigraph of the novel (222), and is originally from Alexander Pope 'Martinus Scribelerus', *Peri Bathous: or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry*.

² O'Toole's analysis focuses less on Jude and Sile's relationship but notes how Sile's mother migrates to Ireland, Marcus adopts Irish identity and subsequently moves from the urban–centre of Dublin to the country with his partner, and that Jael's performative identity, bisexuality and family life queers sexual affinity and identification (138).

³ In discussing issues of citizenship it is worth noting that Donoghue herself has experienced this transition as an Irish–Canadian author who has moved from Ireland to Canada following a long–distance relationship. The novel's dedication 'For Chris, worth any journey' alludes to the autobiographical element to the narrative. This is a point reinforced by the 'Personal Note' on Donoghue's website relating to the novel which reads: 'Landing was known, until the brink of publication, as Time-Zone Tango, a phrase to describe long-distance relationships that still gives me a kick. The novel was inspired by my own experience of commuting between Canada, England and Ireland for a few years before making the move to Canada'. The working-title of the novel reinforces the thematic preoccupation with time and space.

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