

Cultural Encounters in *Songdogs*

Maura Xavier GARCIA¹

- RESUMO: O objetivo deste estudo é demonstrar como as narrativas de deslocamento, no romance *Songdogs*, de Colum McCann, apresentam diversos elementos culturais em tensão. Como consequência, o narrador constitui sua identidade híbrida. Iniciamos com uma visão geral a respeito do autor, um irlandês-americano, e seu romance, prosseguindo com uma breve análise dos principais símbolos que estruturam o romance, examinando a ligação entre as narrativas de deslocamento histórico e geográfico e como os valores culturais são apreendidos neste entrecruzamento de narrativas. Finalmente, apresentamos algumas reflexões sobre como as narrativas de deslocamento, feitas pelo narrador, resultaram em uma verdadeira "viagem de descoberta" do seu próprio *self*.
- PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Deslocamento; diáspora; identidade; Colum McCann; valores culturais.

Cultural Encounters in *Songdogs*

The object of this analysis is the novel *Songdogs*, by Colum McCann, an Irish-American contemporary writer. He has already published two short-story collections: *Fishing The Sloe-Black River* (1993) and *Everything in The Country Must* (2000),

¹ Faculdades Integradas de Avaré – CEP 18700-000 – Avaré – SP. E-mail: mauraxavier@yahoo.com

three novels (*Songdogs* (1995), *This Side of Brightness* (1998), and *Dancer* (2003) and several screenplays. In his work, he articulates different kinds of narratives that show a thematic unit: love, loss, exile and displacement. The diaspora theme is recurrent in Irish literature; nowadays, it can also be observed in the diasporic voices outside Ireland. This analysis focuses on different displacement narratives that represent the Irish diaspora in the novel *Songdogs*.

The narrator's origins are described through a fragmented narrative of memories in which he reveals to the reader that he is both Irish and Mexican. He was born in Ireland and then, following his parents' routes taken in the past, he decided to migrate to the United States. Soon after his period of travelling, Conor returned to Ireland with the purpose of getting his green card, in the American Embassy in Dublin, and then he visited his father in the county of Mayo, for a week. The source of his departure from Ireland was the search for his mother. He visited the same places in which his parents had been, enriching the story with different perspectives, different characters in different times. Spatial, social and historical descriptions in the story are significant because they reveal his perceptions in relation to his origins. His narratives are full of cultural symbols and signs that, in a dialogical relation,² will help him constitute his identity.

Symbolic and mythical elements are present in the novel. According to Pnina Werbner (1997),

Organic, unconscious hybridity is a feature of the historical evolution of all languages. Applying it to culture and society more generally, we may say that despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions. There is no culture in and of itself. (p. 05)

The narrator develops all his narratives based on a well-known Irish myth called "The Salmon of Knowledge", and a

² The term dialogism is associated with two different voices, each bringing a different point of view, a different way of seeing the world. Bakhtin argues that these different points of views are what give birth to new 'potentials' and 'promote renewal and enrichment' (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 271).

main metaphorical symbol, the Navajo legend of the "Songdogs", well known in Mexico territory.

"Songdogs", also called "coyotes", give the title of the novel, in reference to the Navajo legend about the creation of the world. These "coyotes"³ did so through singing. The narrator sings metaphorically what it is to exist in the world whenever he crosses frontiers, no matter where he is. At the same time he claims his parents to be his "songdogs" considering they gave him a life which could be perceived from different cultural perspectives.

In the following passage, the readers learn about the meaning of "songdogs" and the symbol it stands for:

Years later, in America, I was told that Navajo Indians believed coyotes ushered in the Big Bang of the world with their song, stood on the rim of nothingness, before time, shoved their pointed muzzles in the air, and howled the world into existence at their feet. The Indians called them Songdogs. The universe was etched with their howls, sound merging into sound, and the beginning of all other songs. Long ago, when they told me their stories about Mexico, Mam and Dad, I believed they were true. And I suppose I still do. They were my Songdogs – my mother by the washing line, my father flailing his way against the current. (p. 72)

Besides the Navajo legend, in a somewhat similar trajectory through life, the narrator can be identified as the young warrior, Fionn, from the Irish myth "The Salmon of Knowledge". This myth is about an old poet waiting by a river to catch the salmon of knowledge. If he catches and eats this salmon he will have all access to languages, ideas, beauty, truth, depth of feeling. He has been hunting the salmon for years. One afternoon he is joined on the riverbank by a fabulous young warrior: Fionn. Fionn tells the poet that he will help him catch the salmon. The poet is delighted. Eventually, they do catch the salmon and they roast it over a spit in order for the poet to eat it. However, Fionn mistakenly burns his thumb on the roasting fish, sucks

³ The coyote symbolizes duality, the ability to present both sides of an issue and the ability for survival. (The Canis Latran Webpage).

his thumb... and—without necessarily wanting it—gets access to all knowledge. The poet is left with nothing but the story to tell. As previously mentioned, the narrator returns to his home country after having travelled throughout Mexico and the USA. He stays with his father for seven days. This is when he revises all the stereotyped symbols. So, we can conclude that if on one hand his father is representing the old poet, on the other hand, the narrator is representing the young warrior Fionn, who, without “consciously” wanting it, gets access to knowledge—in this case, the knowledge of his own self, the origin of the song of his identity.

The narrator establishes a process of identification through the recognition of symbols, ideals and cultural elements of his Irish and Mexican origins. Similar to what Stuart Hall states in “Who needs identity?”:

(...) identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (HALL, 1997, p.04).

What we observe in this novel is not an essentialist concept of identity, there is no unity or a finished identity, but one that is constructed across the articulations of narratives, constantly in the process of change and transformation, thus the singing of an anti-essentialist song, as we can see in this excerpt: “In a train station, ..., I pondered my dual heritage, the Irish in me, the Mexican....A child voice inside me asking: ‘Who the hell are you anyway?’” (p. 42)

It is important to notice that the flow of geographical and historical displacement narratives establishes a background context for the ideological constitution of the subject through the descriptions of past historical events and its major personalities. Confronting opposite ideological discourses, such as Fascism or Nazism and Anarchy, the narrator reconfigures past ideologies, as we can confirm in the excerpt by Smith, when he says that:

Symbols, too – emblems, hymns, festivals, habitats, customs, linguistic codes, sacred places and the like – were powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture and fate of the ethnic community. So were shared memories of key events and epochs in the history of the community: memories of liberation, migration, the golden age (or ages), of victories and defeats, of heroes and saints and sages. (SMITH, 1998, p. 191)

The historical flow begins with the birth description of the narrator's father in 1918, when World War I was over, in the county of Mayo—county Mayo is one of the places with the largest emigration number in Ireland. Then, this historical flow moves to 1934, 1936, 1939, depicting events as the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, World War II and its atrocities. The narrator's father goes to Spain during the Big Depression in the thirties; he worked in the Spanish Civil War as a photographer. Following the horrors of war, his father moved to another country with the hope of a better life. So, he goes to Chihuahuan Desert, Mexico, where he meets his future wife, the narrator's mother. It is implied, in the narrative, a process of "free migration", understood by Hall (1997, p. 04) as: "a global phenomenon of the so-called post-colonial world", once his father was not forced or obliged to move from one place to another. Moving from Mexico to the United States, the narrator's father witnessed the beginnings of the relevant social and civil movements that took place in the Sixties in the USA, such as war protests, marches, nudist camps, psychedelic buses among other events. The most outstanding personalities and facts of this historical period are constructed by the narrator inferring social antagonisms and giving him the support from different subject positions so that he can constitute himself as an ideological subject. At the same time those personalities represent attachment to particular places and events, that is, some are connected to nationalist discourses and others belong to universalistic identifications – creating tension between local and global representations negotiated by the narrator along his narratives in a dialogical process.

Within this displacement cycle, exemplified by the narrator's father displacement, there is great cultural diversity, which is a consequence of the historical constitution of

populations, coming from the reunion of many elements added to native people, even before the European colonization, as we confirm with the metaphorical symbol of "songdogs", and also coming from the differences between regions—urban, rural life and social groups.

The geographical and historical narratives are described mainly through black and white photographs. We understand that the author's choice of descriptive narratives through black and white photographs shows the narrator's perception of the environment detached from personal emotions, considering Kossoy's (1989) ideas that colours are related to our emotions and clarity and obscurity are related to the perception of our environment. The narrator is observing the environment from a different point of view, or better, from a different "point in space". His choices of both the characters and their social representations, fixed in the photographs, favour the maintenance of a tense atmosphere along the novel, as in the following example:

He carried it [the camera] along dark roads built eighty years before, by famished men from the poorhouses. They were narrow roads, bits of sea blown spray landing on them, winding drunkenly away from the cliffs towards the mountains. And drunken men walked along them, sometimes rows of men, like weeds in motion through the decade of the Great Depression. (p. 09)

Some of the characters described by the narrator include Germans, Spaniards, Moroccans, Algerian, Asians, Italians, Jews and mestizos, all sharing a common space. The narrator draws attention to ethnicity, mainly minority groups, their displacement and their social representations in order to find his own voice in this dialectic vision of communities, what in the words of Bhabha is "the outside of the inside: the part in the whole." (BHABHA, 1997, p. 58)

Commercial products are also part of the narrator's perception of the environment and their importance rely on the observation made by the anthropologist Marcel Maquet (1962), who says that objects give evidence to many other approaches about human activities, that they help us to tell the story of part of our History and that each community has

its own material history although we have an increasing homogeneity in cultural signs due to the speed of globalisation. On the other hand, Stuart Hall (1997, p. 78) states that the cultural flows between nations and the global consumerism create possibilities of “shared identities” as consumers to the same goods, customers to the same services, among people who are very distant from each other in space and time.

The narrator mentions some typical products from Ireland such as Guinness beer, or from Mexico such as Tequila, or from the USA such as Coca-Cola—also probably the most consumed product worldwide. Likewise, most of the other products mentioned by the narrator share global identities. The recognition between the typical and the global products leads to his own hybrid identity constitution. The typical products work as key differentiators distinguishing his stereotypical common features, whether Mexican or Irish or American. As shown in the following passages:

They are Irish immigrants. Their clothes and expressions tell you that. Flat hats and grey trousers held up with suspenders... (p. 136)

Mexico existed on the washing line for her, hung out to dry, the woollen ponchos full of life beside the ordinary clothes of our days, my father vests, his trousers, his underwear, the banality of them held with wooden pegs. (p. 24)

He [the narrator’s father] said that ‘sunnyside up’ is an American notion and that I’ve developed a bit of an accent to go along with my cooking. (p. 27)

Among the religious symbols and signs highlighted by the narrator are rosary beads and images of saints, distinguishing, for example, the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe by the Mexican and the Good Virgin by the Irish.

The narrator goes on moving towards a multi-cultural identity. Along the novel, through the link to his ancestral places and his own mobility, he highlights elements of nature in their particular attachments to each place and in their common denominators of landscapes. The natural environment can also

mean a common ground overlapping the idea of frontiers. Human beings are unique in experiencing nature not only as a setting for survival. We attribute meaning to the elements of nature around us and there are many rituals and cultural activities linked to them.

The integration with nature and space can raise a feeling of being accepted by local peoples in some way and mobility gives a notion of the availability of what is there on a map. However, many ethnic groups are not allowed to settle in those places, which is an unreal piece of paper for many ethnic groups. As we can observe in *Songdogs*, some of the cultural and social values linked to nature were acquired by the narrator revealing a contradictory sense of integration versus isolation, as exemplified below:

Curious how different the sense of space is here. In Wyoming I can take off and go walking for miles on end without seeing a soul, only a few cattle scrubbing away on the lands, every now and then a horse breaking the hills. Land like that seeps its way into you, you grow to love it, it begins to thump in your blood. (p. 94)

The integration with space also reveals a sense of ownership:

The wind had peculiarities that she made her own. When she was eleven years old she had given the wind different colours....I decided that I would make my trip to my mother's country, find her, make her exist for me again. (p. 42 - 43);

and the awakening of a sense of continuity and survival:

my mother grew to adore the chickens in the same way that my grandmother adored rabbits. (p. 53)

As we could observe, the narrator described the natural environment slightly creating a tense atmosphere constituted of feelings of integration versus isolation as well as the awakening of a possibility of survival, existing again in another place.

We can infer that the author suggests that in travelling the individual acquires a new perception of the world through his integration with other habits, as a matter of survival, and it results as experience that becomes part of one's self. In *Songdogs*, places and people are seen from another

perspective of space: the imaginary one. Thus, by establishing the dialogue among the Irish, Mexican and American cultural elements within his imaginary geographical and historical displacement, the narrator made a real "voyage of discovery", the discovery of his own self. In the following excerpt we can appreciate the revelation of the narrator's self as a consequence of his displacement:

It had become a habit of mine, looking at the album. I would rise from my chair, step out the door, look at the Wyoming sky, the thump of creation, and then take another step forward on to the edge of the porch, and I would walk my way slowly into old photographs. (p. 135)

In Wyoming, after many geographical displacements, thus, with a new perception of the world, the narrator reveals the constant process of the creation of his own self, just like the creation of the world by the songs of the "songdogs".

GARCIA, M. X. Confrontos culturais em *Songdogs*. *Revista de Letras*, São Paulo, v. 45, n. 2, p. 111 - 121, 2005.

ABSTRACT: *In this study we intend to show how the narratives of displacement, in the novel Songdogs, by Colum McCann, bring about distinct cultural elements in tension. As a consequence the narrator constitutes his hybrid identity. We start with an overview of the author and the novel, proceeding with a look at the main symbols that structure the novel, examining the link between the historical and geographical narratives of displacement and the way cultural values are apprehended in their crossings, and finally reporting some ideas on how the narrator's narratives of displacement resulted in a real "voyage of discovery" of his own self.*

- **KEYWORDS:** *Colum McCann; cultural values; diaspora ; displacement; identity.*

References

BAKHTIN, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. C. Emerson, M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

BHABHA, H. Culture is In-Between. In: HALL, S.; DU GAY, P. (Eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 53 - 60.

HALL, S. *A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade*. Trad. Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, Guacira L. Louro. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A, 1997.

_____. (Ed.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. New York: Sage Publications, 1997.

_____. Who needs 'Identity'? In: HALL, S.; DU GAY, P. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 01 - 17.

KOSSOY, B. *Fotografia e história*. São Paulo: Ática, 1989.

McCANN, C. *Songdogs*. New York: Picador, 1996.

MAGET, M. *Guide D'Etude Directe Des Comportements Culturels*. Paris: Centre Nacional de La Recherche Scientifique, 1962.

SMITH, A. D. *Nationalism and Modernism. A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. London, New York: Routledge, 1998.

WERBNER, P. Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity". In: WERBNER, P.; MODOOD, T. *Debating Cultural Hybridity. Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of AntiRacism*. London: Zed Books, 1997. p. 01 - 26.