(In) hospitable Narratives: Language Depropriation and Writing in Oona Frawley’s *Flight*

*Récits in-hospitaliers : désappropriation du langage et écriture dans Flight de Oona Frawley*

Léa Sinoimeri
Introduction

1 Set in Ireland in 2004, against the backdrop of the anti-immigrant sentiment that preceded the Citizenship Referendum, *Flight* (2014), by Oona Frawley weaves the story of Sandrine—a young Zimbabwean woman who flies her country in search of a better future for herself and her family—into that of Tom and Claire, an old couple of returning Irish immigrants for whom she works as a carer. As Sandrine’s life in a new country and a new language overlaps Tom and Clare’s loss of memory and slow decay, her pregnancy progresses along with Elizabeth’s—Tom and Claire’s daughter—difficult journey towards motherhood.

2 The novel focuses on the indoors and inner life of the characters, but beyond the familial narrative, we are given glimpses into the national scene outdoors where an “angry” (Frawley, 2014: 173) and inhospitable Ireland verges into a political and economic crisis. In the downturn after the economic prosperity of the Celtic Tiger and in the aftermath of the national commemorations and remembrance discourses that had characterised the 1990s, Frawley materialises this national time of crisis as a time of language dispossession and forgetfulness (2013). As the country prepares to abolish the territorial rights (*ius soli*) that the Good Friday Agreement had enshrined in the constitution in 1998, and adopt a model of citizenship based on blood rights (*ius sanguinis*), the characters of the novel all face, albeit differently, an extreme experience of dispossession of language and memory. They experience different forms of
estrangement from their mother-tongues, their memories of the past, their homelands and their ideas of motherhood and family. The novel thus draws plural connections between Tom, Clare and Elizabeth, the “foreigners within” and Sandrine, with whom they share a paradoxical condition of being “aliens” to themselves, guests to their own language and to their own stories. Narrated in an indirect stream of consciousness, *Flight* invests the narrative voice with an inner ambiguity that constantly estranges and displaces its authority, mirroring the characters’ alienation in the reading experience. Paralleling her non-fictional work on cultural memory in Ireland (2011-2014), Frawley engages thus directly in her novel with representations of migration and hospitality in contemporary Ireland by considering the nature and complex workings of language, memory and identification.

To tackle these issues, I turn to the work of Jacques Derrida and notably to his excavations of monolinguism and hospitality in his 1996 autobiographically informed book translated in 1998 as *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Drawing on his personal experience of citizenship and linguistic dispossession as a French-speaking Algerian Jew during the Vichy government, Derrida deconstructs the idea of the mother tongue as a site of personal and national identity. His critique of philosophical, linguistic and cultural nationalisms is thus foregrounded in a critique of hospitality which deconstructs and reverses received conceptions of the host and the guest, through a critique of language. Derrida’s work on linguistic dispossession is particularly resonant in the Irish context. Ireland’s colonial past and the disjointed relationship to language that it produced continues to have important ramifications in the imaginings of Irish identity, nationalism and literature. “Host” and “hostage” to the English language, Irish literature in English has unceasingly returned to exploring this inner state of migration and otherness in the midst of one’s own language, selfhood and nation. The question of the “grafted language”, as John Montague has called it (1972: 3), and its repercussions on the makings and un-makings of Irish identity have been a *topos* in Irish literature from the modernist poetics of exile in Joyce and Beckett, to the postcolonial turn with the Field Day and Brian Friel’s *Translations*, to Seamus Heaney’s poetics of displacement.

Not surprisingly, Irish studies have often turned to Derrida’s philosophy to investigate its potential relevance in modernist and contemporary Ireland. In an essay on Derrida, Yeats and Heaney, Eugene O’Brien builds parallels between Derrida’s notions of *différance* and Yeats’s and Heaney’s poetics of strangeness and alienation in connection to place and language to argue for complex, plural and inclusive forms of Irishness emerging from their writing (O’Brien, 2003). More recently, Áine Mahon (2017) and Lisa Foran (2019) have read Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other* as an account which usefully challenges sentimental models of nationalism which have long appealed to the Irish case. Ranging from literature and philosophy, to sociolinguistics and pedagogy, these studies argue that Ireland’s complex and disjointed relationship to language, its dual condition as both a host and a guest of language, provides a basis and hope for conceiving of new, hospitable forms of identity in Ireland.

Building on these previous studies, I argue that Derrida’s concepts reveal important insights into Frawley’s novel and its representations of migration and hospitality as being inseparable from the question of language. Contrary to the bilingual and plurilingual aesthetics of many contemporary Irish writers who take up the modernist explorations of the creative potency of Hiberno-English (Kelleher, 2020), the question
of language(s) becomes, in Frawley’s novel, the question of language per se, intended as a constitutive alterity that inhabits the subject. Frawley returns to the modernist topos of the “inner émigré” by reworking the narrative structure of the novel as she adopts a twin perspective on past and present migrations in Ireland which constantly translates and reverses guest to host, and host to guest.

6 To show this, I first draw the main lines of the argument of Jacques Derrida in Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin, by highlighting the link between language depropriation (Yildiz, 2012) and the ethics and politics of hospitality and the way in which they resonate in the Irish context of Frawley’s novel. The second section of the paper analyses the way in which Frawley reworks the myth of the (lost) mother tongue, motherhood and homeland by challenging those “family romances” and remembering and reconfiguring the characters’ relations to Ireland and Irishness as an outward interiority. Finally, the last section explores the importance of remembering and writing as a form of retranslation and displacement that resists all forms of appropriative identifications.

7 “I only have one language. It is not mine.” (1998: 1) This paradoxical statement opens Derrida’s deconstruction of language as property and dwelling in Monolingualism of the Other. The question of hospitality that Derrida will explore a year later in De l’hospitalité (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 1997) is already present in the text with its “colonial structure” and it is intertwined with the question of language and identity. There stands at the core of the book an autobiographical and historically specific act of dispossession: the withdrawal of French citizenship from the community of French-speaking Algerian Jews during the Vichy regime. Derrida recounts how this temporary loss of citizenship disclosed a constitutive alterity not simply between himself and his citizenship, but also between his identity and his language. Shaking his legitimate sense of linguistic grounding, the loss of citizenship unsettled for Derrida the status of the “I” engendering in him a “trouble of identity” (1998: 14). Once ripped, the linguistic bond revealed its artificial and constrictive nature and the French language was shown as being at once the mother tongue and the imposed language of the other and of elsewhere:

For the pupils of the French school in Algeria, whether they were of Algerian origin, “French Nationals,” “French citizens of Algeria”, or born in that environment of the Jewish people of Algeria who were at once or successively the one and the other (“indigenous Jews”, as one used to say under the Occupation without occupation, indigenous Jews and nevertheless French during a certain period)—for all these groups, French was a language supposed to be maternal, but one whose source, norms, rules, and law were situated elsewhere. (1998: 41)

8 Parting ways with a long tradition that conceives of the mother tongue as a site of identity and natural belonging, Derrida extends his deconstruction beyond the specific example of the community of the Algerian Jews to a reflection on the impossibility of language appropriation in general. Like the colonised, the master, the hospes, the coloniser is, according to Derrida, submitted to language and to its artificial nature of law, education and imposition from the outside: “The master is nothing and he does not have exclusive possession of anything.” (1998: 23) Linking a critique of the pure ipseité to a critique of hospitality, Derrida makes of language depropriation the very condition of a politics and an ethics capable of fighting against all forms of philosophical, linguistic or cultural nationalisms. Far from neutralising the specificity of the condition of colonial expropriation and linguistic oppression, this “prudent and differentiated
universalisation” (Derrida, 1998: 23) is, according to Derrida, the only possible way to unmask and defy those hegemonic forces that try to appropriate and impose languages—and through them, cultures and national identities—as their own.

Derrida’s fraught questions about the relationships between birth, language, culture, nationality, and citizenship resonate in the Irish context of the Citizenship Referendum and in the proprietary thinking beyond the forms of hospitality/hostility that it triggered. Analysing pro-immigrant discourses in the news media in Ireland in the early 2000s, Breda Gray investigates the ways in which these commentaries collapsed the differences between Irish immigration and multiple immigrations in Ireland in order to produce empathy at the expense of intersubjectivity:

The predicaments of contemporary immigrants are constituted as mirroring those of Irish emigrants so that readers are invited to identify with the circumstances, hopes, and aspirations of immigrants as like those of Irish emigrants. The abstraction and generalization of both Irish emigration and new immigration, and the invitation to welcome new immigrants as reminders of “our own” emigrants in the past, locate the encounter with the immigrant other firmly within what is assumed to be “our” national homeland, and hospitality is extended primarily within the terms of “our” national narrative of emigration. (2004: 218)

Molly Ferguson has argued that recent Irish fiction has mirrored this trend of national media discourse, by representing contemporary migration in Ireland inside the framework of a “transactional migration narrative” (2020: 397). She reads Flight as a novel which complicates and questions this narrative, by invoking the figure of the pregnant migrant as “a vulnerable body out of place” (2020: 395) that challenges ideas about motherhood and sexuality. While building on Ferguson’s idea that Flight unsettles this received narrative of migration, my interest lies in the formal and thematic devices of estrangement through which the novel deconstructs the idea of a homogeneous “we” of Irish citizenry and identity, by revealing its “strangely familiar” structure that unsettles false narratives of identification and appropriation. Always inhabited by an inner otherness, the “we” of “our” national narrative is shown in Flight as simultaneously dominant and vulnerable, colonised and coloniser, both, immigrant and emigrant, host and guest of language.

Against a logic of identity that extends hospitality primarily within the terms of a linguistically and culturally homogeneous narrative of migration, Flight builds a prismatic structure that weaves subtle connections between Sandrine’s migrant experience and those of Clare, Tom and Elizabeth through a reversal of perspective, differentiation and distancing. Frawley accurately reconstructs the specific historical contexts and different reasons that had driven Tom, Clare and Elizabeth to migration, opposing them to Sandrine’s experience. By narrating Tom and Clare’s migrant experience to the States and then to Vietnam, where Tom had worked in the spice business for many years before returning to Ireland, the novel insists on remembering Irish involvement in European neo-colonialism and thus clearly refuses a migration narrative that collapses differences between Irish emigrants and contemporary immigrants in Ireland. Frawley’s juxtaposing Elizabeth’s story to that of Sandrine equally emphasises the differences that drive the two women apart: a white, privileged cosmopolitan, who owns an Irish and an American passport, Elizabeth lives an utterly different experience from Sandrine, whose life as a black, pregnant woman in Ireland in 2004 is policed and constrained by national and international laws.
On the other hand, Tom, Clare and Elizabeth share with Sandrine a paradoxical condition of being “aliens” to themselves, guests to their own names, languages, homelands and memories. Chronicling the inexorable progression of Tom and Clare’s dementia that makes them oblivious to their older selves and throws them on the edge of language, the novel excavates the intimate otherness that inhabits the selves of its characters, preventing them from being the owners and masters of their own narratives. Drawing on Derrida’s analysis of language in *Monolingualism of the Other*, Frawley’s emphasis on forgetfulness and language dispossession in the context of the Citizenship Referendum can thus be read as a critique of the idea of the self as a master and host of language and memory.

Borrowing from Benveniste’s (Benveniste & Lallot, 2020) analysis of the etymological chain of the word “hospitality”, Derrida discloses the semantic closeness of the idea of “identity” to that of “master” (*hospes*) and deconstructs those bonds and ties that define the “I” as an owner of language, culture and identity. The temporary loss of French citizenship ruptures Derrida’s connection to his only language, French, thus driving apart the self from its linguistic power and ownership. Like Derrida’s disjointed self, Frawley’s characters are all affected by a “trouble of identity” (1998: 14) that unsettles their *ipseité* and disrupts their status of *hospes*. Frawley focuses, in particular, on the figures of Elizabeth and Clare, by investigating their different relations to language, motherhood and homeland. Read together, they offer a composite portrait that reworks and complicates the “family romances” of the (lost) mother tongue, motherhood and homeland, by remembering and reconfiguring their relation to Ireland and Irishness as an outward interiority.

In her difficult journey, away from the idea of a “natural” and heteronormative conception of motherhood and family, Elizabeth is the character that better embodies in the novel the “inalienable alienation” (Derrida, 1998: 25) that informs the structure of language and belonging, according to Derrida. Born in Ireland to Irish parents, but raised and educated in America, her narrative of migration as a teenager in Vietnam and later, as an adult back to Ireland, complicates a shared memory of familiar and national belonging. Elizabeth, the daughter, is from the outset “other” from her mother and father. She is the one with the English name who speaks a different language from her parents. She is: “Elizabeth. The only one, the girl. This was how she was introduced by her mother, who rarely exchanged the definite article for the possessive ‘my’ that would have softened the child towards her” (70). From the outset, the mother-daughter relationship is founded on an act of naming which bans all forms of belonging. For Elizabeth, being a daughter is, from the very beginning, a profound experience of otherness.

Tellingly, it is during her first experience of migration to Vietnam that she first becomes aware of the non-natural property of language and national identity. Alternating the chapters set in Ireland, in the present, to those set in Vietnam, in the past, Frawley repeatedly reverses the perspective by showing Tom, Clare and Elizabeth from their position of hosts into that of hotel-guests and neo-colonisers in a country ravaged by war, poverty and decades of French colonization. Away from her American home, Elizabeth first becomes aware of her accent and of the power relations mediated by language (82). “What did it mean to be Irish anyway?”, she asks herself, as she recognises her inner alienation to a national community: “she didn’t feel part of the ‘we’ she used, saying this was like speaking a language she didn’t know” (70). Like
language, being Irish is revealed to Elizabeth as a constructed, non-natural process that cannot be owned or appropriated. An inner outsider, peering through the window of her hotel room which becomes her home during the Vietnam years, Elizabeth observes the attempts of the expat community “to recall Europe in the courtyard gardens” (85) and build an artificial, lost Eden in the secluded garden of the hotel which excludes and erases the otherness and reality of the hosting country.

Similarly, her idea of Ireland is that of an uncanny, unfamiliar homeland: “Ireland in her mind stayed black and white and grainy and sometimes even out of focus.” (136) It is a form of outer memory mediated and constructed by the happy stories her parents had shaped for her, like those postcards, photographs, and posters representing places and times she had not lived, nor remembered, but which composed her own picture of the homeland. In her memorial journey, Elizabeth acknowledges the false, unauthentic nature of these “acutely happy” images of Ireland, erasing “the paucity of happiness” in the Ireland of the 1960s that had set in motion her parents’ dreams and desires of migration (92). As she negotiates between her Americanness and her Irishness, she acknowledges the spectral structure of all belonging. Ireland is unveiled to her as “the imaginary geography of her parents’ delusions” and her own attachment to America as “a love for a ghost self” (93). Back and forth from her plural homelands, in and out of her American English and her Irish English, Elizabeth experiences the implausibility of the myth of language as origin and dwelling.

At the end of the novel, in a conversation with Sandrine, she is able to put into words her unutterable grief of not being able to have children and the last pages of the novel evoke Elizabeth’s return to Vietnam to adopt a child who will become her Irish daughter Anh. Before finding her own way to motherhood, Elizabeth also reconciles with Clare’s way of being a mother, by retrieving “different memories” of her, away from the stereotypes of the comforting, domestic and affective mother. Significantly, Elizabeth remembers Clare as a mother in absence, “standing in the background, removed, but there” (133), and this makes her able to understand Clare as a woman who, like many others, had been forced into motherhood but had not naturally chosen to be a mother: “She had taken on the shape of motherhood without wanting to fill it.” (132)

Thus recollected, Clare’s reluctant motherhood contradicts the narrative of migrant Irish women as connected to the national community through kin relationships and obligation (Gray, 2000: 169). Away from the representations of Irish migrant women as passive and fragmented, bound to an unhappy life abroad, Clare’s text of memories insists on the empowering force of emigration and on her desires and projections into a different life. The desire to escape from “the quiet depression of the Irish 1960s, full of tightening belts and babies and boredom” (64) first manifests itself for Clare as a desire to escape language and step into another “role”. Carrying conversations with herself in French, or reading American novels, Clare “shape(s) herself” (41) against the oppressive economic and social ascriptions of her homeland, well before sitting on the plane that will carry her away from Ireland into her new life in the States. Conversely, her pregnancy interrupts her dream of independence and drags her temporarily back to Ireland. If, unlike Elizabeth, Clare remains unaware of her alienation and her quest for otherness becomes, during the years, a quest for exoticism embodied in her passion for oriental rugs and carpets, she shares with her daughter a sense of unhomeliness and estrangement from both, motherhood and motherland.
In the memorial text of Elizabeth and Clare, being Irish and belonging in Ireland is reconfigured as an inherently alienating experience, constantly inhabited by alterity and otherness. Foreigners to themselves, Elizabeth and Clare mourn, albeit differently, a “grief originaire”, (Derrida, 1998: 60) as Derrida defines the paradoxical form of alienation that bans the subject from owning her own language and origin. Derrida’s ethical injunction to transcend proprietary thinking vis-à-vis language proves thus particularly enlightening in the context of the novel. According to Derrida, understanding the non-existence of a natural property of language means recognising the inner otherness of the je/I, its “strangely familiar and properly improper (uncanny, unheimlich) structure” (1998: 29) and thus debunk false narratives of identifications and appropriations. Indeed, it is Tom, Clare and Elizabeth’s condition of “inner émigrés” that gradually allows Sandrine to find in them temporary companions to her own alienation in Ireland: “She had hurried back to the house afterwards, aware that it was indeed her refuge, for Clare and Tom and Elizabeth were all, in a way, foreigners too.” (125) Juxtaposing Clare’s and Elizabeth’s different experiences of motherhood to that of Sandrine, Flight reverses and deconstructs the pairings of natural and adoptive motherhood, native and hosting homelands. If it imagines temporary figures of hospitality and solidarity between Sandrine and the other characters of the novel, it does so under the sign of estrangement and differentiation. Foreigners to their own languages, homelands, and motherhoods, Clare and Elizabeth become foreigners to their own memories and share with Sandrine a common struggle to remember and narrate their disparate stories of dispossession.

At the core of Derrida’s analysis in Monolingualism of the Other lies a double interdict, of both language and memory which casts light on the centrality that narrative and writing assume in Flight:

In what language does one write memoirs when there has been no authorized mother tongue? How does one utter a worthwhile “I recall” when it is necessary to invent both one’s language and one’s “I,” to invent them at the same time, beyond this surging wave of amnesia that the double interdict has unleashed? (1998: 31)

Reworking Derrida’s conception of language in the context of contemporary migrations, Guillaume Le Blanc also interprets linguistic expropriation as a trouble of memory and narrative. In Dedans, dehors (2010) he describes the condition of the immigrant as an impossible progression on the linguistic scene, being neither in nor out of language, having two languages, but owning none of them.9 The traumatic experience of migration is explained as an un-focusing of the subject form her centre which renders her unable to put together a narrative of her past and future life:

L’immigré se découvre comme un sujet indisponible en son centre, en sujet tissé d’absence, impuissant à revenir vers l’ancien soi. Flotter dans son moi sans être en mesure de lui donner une trame narrative continue est l’un des premiers effets de l’immigration : le « soi » de l’immigré et le « soi » de l’émigré ne coïncident pas. (Le Blanc, 2010: 87)

Oona Frawley’s novel captures this “floating of the self” by giving voice to Sandrine’s private anguish of losing the meaning of words and sinking into forgetfulness. The disjunction between the life left behind in Zimbabwe and the new life in Ireland is revealed early in the novel, in Sandrine’s letters to her husband George:

Sandrine is learning about the limitations of narrative. She writes to her son of the things she sees and does, and to her husband she writes other things. Nothing things. How today she is beginning to think of the verb “to be” differently—because here in Ireland, it does not seem possible for her to just be, and for her own voice to
be heard—and remembering how as a child she pestered her father for a definition of the word “the”. *Dear George, I remembered today asking my father to define “the”.* (117)

Sandrine discovers that the story of the future life that she had imagined for herself and her family back in Zimbabwe is, in the reality of Ireland, suspended and fragmented and impossible to be told. As she begins to write her letters to George, her sentences break down and language becomes incommensurate to her feelings and thoughts. The article “the”, this word “that point(s) to something assumed familiar, known, understood” (117), is here devoid of its cohesive properties that bind a text together and assure narrative progression, because her other life, in the past, has all of a sudden become untranslatable, impossible to be put into narrative. Like Clare and Tom, who stand detached form the real world, as if “peering at it from above the surface of a vast pool” (128) and start losing the meaning of words, Sandrine “lives in memory and at a distance from the realm of the real” (118).

Still, this utter estrangement from self and time conveys a paradoxical form of recreation and projection into the future:

She spoke of her husband, her son, her images of home as past, as some other time unconnected to this one, severed from it. And disturbing as it was in some way to speak of what and who she loved with such distance, it was precisely that distance that granted to Sandrine hope, a future sense of happiness beyond visas and class attendance and silent pregnancies. (53)

In another passage, Sandrine is similarly described as remembering the past through dispossession and distancing:

And Sandrine continues to talk to herself while watching Clare, listening to her own voice confirm to none but her own ears that she has a past that is not only another life but still connected to her in the present, the exercise becoming as necessary for her as it is for Clare. (57)

The past comes to Sandrine as a foreign, reified language, as the narrative voice insists on comparing Sandrine’s experience of recollecting her past as an adult, in Ireland, to her experience as a child, back in Zimbabwe, when she used to read aloud to herself books in French, or Shakespeare’s sonnets, “just to hear the strange foreign words” (57). “Lost in the rhythm of her own voice” (57), Sandrine’s words become, in these conversations, delinked from their conventional meaning and are re-contextualised in the fabric of the narrative of her past life in Zimbabwe. Tellingly, Sandrine “pilfers the vocabulary of books” (58) and is described as using uncommon words, words of uncertain meaning, Shakespearean words. The text of her past and future life is imagined as emerging out of this chaotic, plural, literary language, at once familiar and foreign.

Being displaced by her own words, Sandrine translates and de-appropriates the text of her own memories, becoming at once the author and the product of her memorial text, the host and the guest of her narrative. The memorial process is thus re-conceived beyond the binary dichotomies of possession/dispossession, propriety/loss, through a multilingual economy of dispossession and re-translation, de-propriation and re-construction. On the other hand, she becomes both the listener/receiver and narrator of Clare’s, Tom’s, Elizabeth’s past stories. As she writes the text of her own memories, she imagines and re-creates the contrastive experience of the other characters by picturing in her mind the older, past selves of Clare, Elizabeth and Tom. Sandrine becomes a witness to Clare’s most intimate stories and Elizabeth feels that “something
of herself had already opened out to Sandrine like a palm” (193) after she utters for the first time in her life her grief of not being able to have children to Sandrine. Sandrine’s narrative voice sustains thus in the novel the making of a “fictional archive” (Frawley, 2013) of the past where memory ceases to be a model of mineness and private possession and is conceived of as an intersubjective experience.

The narrative technique of *Flight* mirrors Sandrine’s “fictional archive”. Narrated in an indirect stream of consciousness, *Flight* invests the narrative voice with an inner otherness and ambiguity. At once, a subject and an object of the memorial narrative, the third person narration of *Flight* functions as a device of estrangement. It asks the reader to “be an eavesdropper on the most private moments” (146) of its characters’ lives, while insisting on the outer, remembered and thus non-appropriative form of this intimacy. Sophie Gorman has observed that “there is no constant narrator who we feel we get to know properly. Instead, we just have glimpses, fragments of characters who are presented flaws and all—but who are not fully accessible.” (2014) Multiplying and juxtaposing perspectives and narrative voices, the narrative in *Flight* assumes a paradoxical progression that resembles Clare’s stream of thought: “She is both getting married and is married, has finished working for the fabric importer, and speaks of her parents as a child and as an adult. There is no linearity. Time is like the massive knots of wool that pool around her feet, unstraightened, without aim.” (154) Similarly, we go back and forth in time and space, as the same events are often narrated from different perspectives and narrative voices. The most telling example is the memory of Clare’s last moments narrated at the end of chapter VII from Elizabeth’s point of view and then again, in chapter VIII, through Clare’s narrative voice, but the narrative in *Flight* is constantly interrupted by this form of intra-textual repetition suggesting that memory and meaning, if any, can only be achieved under the form of collective remembrance and a mosaic composition.

However, Frawley avoids the risks of romanticising the idea of a collective remembrance, unveiling the difficulties and problematic terms of its making. In one of her early letters, Sandrine highlights the importance of collective collaboration as a condition of having and voicing a story of her own: “Her story depends on collaboration, something that she, on her own, cannot supply.” (118) Yet, while Clare forgets Sandrine’s story and Elizabeth cannot fully understand it, it is Sandrine who remembers their stories. Both, Clare’s and Elizabeth’s unuttered stories of (un)belonging and dispossession are disclosed to the reader only as the two women hand them out to Sandrine. This resounds with Sandrine’s first, symbolic task in Tom and Clare’s home which is to “tidy up and sort through the boxes that had remained unpacked since Vietnam” (28). *Flight* thus highlights the problematic burden that is placed on Sandrine’s shoulders throughout the novel as she carries out the responsibility of remembering and understanding the past. By emphasising the disparity between Sandrine’s and Clare and Elizabeth’s reconstruction of the past, *Flight* shows how past colonial power relations still infiltrate contemporary remembering processes, thus preventing the making of reciprocal, collective and mosaic archives of memory.

Crucially, *Flight* features the experience of remembering as being simultaneously an experience of re-appropriation of language, memory and meaning and one of untranslatability and unreadability. Despite being given access to the process of its making, the reader, very much like the other characters of the novel, remains an
outsider to Sandrine’s story as the novel gives only fragments and glimpses to Sandrine’s life back in Zimbabwe. Ruth Gilligan and Liam Lanigan (2014) have read Sandrine’s elusiveness and inscrutability as a sign of resistance to the readers’ greed to “know her, to know what her skin meant”, arguing that Flight carefully withholds from the dangers of ventriloquizing Sandrine. One way through which the novel achieves this effect is by consciously reflecting on (memory) writing as a form of depropriation and estrangement.

Writing gradually occupies the focus of the narrative and it is embodied in Sandrine’s letters which assume in the text a twofold and aporetic function as both, traces of memory and sites of its opacity and failure. Sandrine’s story of migration begins with the letters that she and George decide to write to each other, only in English, for her to practice the language. Written in Sandrine’s other language, those letters bind desire, motherhood and migration to translation and linguistic otherness. Fictional, translated and remote, the “word relationship” sets in motion a new, imagined life of hope and transformation: “This, Sandrine knew, was her soon-to-be child, this bundle of letters, this English language, the awkward verbiage of it.” (183) This form of paradoxical displacement and projection is repeated in the letters that Sandrine writes during all her stay in Ireland. We are told that she keeps writing letters to George and to her son, but also, and most importantly, letters that “she had no intention of sending” (172). Unsent and written on the “nicest paper” (171), those letters can be read as gifts to herself, memoirs where Sandrine chronicles her daily experiences in Ireland and imagines a new life for herself. By opening a gap between the real and the imaginary dimension of the narrative of her life, the letters insist on writing as a mode of (impossible) re-appropriation of language. Like other letters in the novel which are often read or written on the planes that transport the characters from one corner of the world to the other, these letters epitomise a space of writing as a space of suspension and possibility. Sandrine’s unconditional desire to write can thus be read, with Derrida, as an “absolute translation” (1998: 61), a way of expropriating language through language and transforming it into a non-personal, unowned archive.

As argued earlier, Flight does try to imagine a form of literary hospitality where memory writing is conceived of as a collaborative and mosaic creation, but this utopic promise of writing as a site of hospitality is, nonetheless, disavowed at the end of the novel. Sandrine and her daughter are forced to return to Zimbabwe after the vote of the Referendum and, at the moment of her departure, Sandrine rethinks of her letters as a failed attempt to shape a new life for herself:

She wouldn’t bring them home. They didn’t belong with her. They belonged to this gestation, this spell of time that had been as much a meditation on her life, a pause in the midst of it all, as an attempt to make a life elsewhere. The prospect had failed; she had failed—and yet now, knowing he was going, she felt no shame. She was coming home with a beautiful baby who had been born in Ireland. The letters could not come too. They were too full of those fears of memory failing, a record of disintegration. (220)

Likewise, Flight occupies an interval of time between Sandrine’s arrival and her departures which stages the creative process as an ongoing interrogation on the (im)possibilities and legitimacy of memoir writing. The letters sustain in the text a desire of memory and narrative, but they also embody the failures of writing, so that Sandrine’s story is only partially and slowly revealed to the reader as “texts within the text”, other texts, which cannot be fully known, nor appropriated. Evoked, narrated
and re-transcribed in the body of the text, the letters—past and present letters, letters received and letters sent from across the world—exemplify the many types of estrangement—thematic, formal and typographic, cultural and psychological that underpin Flight. They unsettle the spatial and temporal frame of the novel as well as its graphic shape. Sandrine’s bundle of unsent letters, George’s seven letters in English that Sandrine carries with her, Elizabeth’s box of her parents’ letters, all embody in the text the literal otherness of the archive of memory. They inscribe the language of the other into the body of the text and challenge the subjective reality and authority of the process of memory writing. Like Elizabeth, who is unsettled by her parents’ letters and by those “dates, times, places that she is excluded from” (209), the reader’s desire for meaning and knowing Sandrine is constantly challenged by the inaccessibility and otherness of the archive of memory.

“Whose language?” “Whose memory?” These questions resound throughout the novel opening a space of undecidability, as the text makes of Sandrine’s struggle to write her own “memoirs” in a language of her own a mise en abyme of the novel’s own awareness of the impossibility of appropriating her narrative.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


MONTAGUE John (1972), The Rough Field, Dublin: Dolmen.

NOTES

1. Hereafter, quotations from the novel will be indicated in the body of the text with the page number.
2. In an introductory talk of the Irish Memory Studies Network series of lectures, Oona Frawley drew a similar parallel between the post-boom years and forgetfulness: “I suppose, I’m wondering now: where does memory studies in an Irish context go from here? This is after the fall, now, after all. What happens when we are trying to deal with ghost estates, banking dash and lost Celtic Tigers? Where does memory go? Do we begin to forget, repress again? Is this another cycle of memory loss that we’re involved in?” (2013).
3. Hereafter Derrida’s book Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin (1998) will be referred to in its abridged form as Monolingualism of the Other.
4. Following Yasemin Yildiz, I employ the term “depropriation” to emphasise the difference between Derrida’s theory and the model of language appropriation. While both theories oppose assimilationist models and monolingual ideas of language, the model of language appropriation is grounded on a fundamental assumption of language as property whereas Derrida’s critique offers a radical questioning of this assumption.
6. Both Sandrine and Elizabeth carry two foreign names which, as Frawley explains: “reflect[ing] the infiltration of colonial power into their own specific cultural milieus”. Private conversation with Oona Frawley. I am grateful to Oona Frawley for having answered my question on the choice
of the first name of her protagonist and to one of the two referees of the paper who brought this issue to my attention.

7. Tracing the etymological developments of the two different elements that compose the Latin notion of hospes—potis and hostis—, Benveniste’s (2020) investigations cast light on the ways in which the confines of I—ipse—have been conceived of as inalienable from the power and properties of the master/hospes.

8. Tellingly, the English term “grief” insists on othering Derrida’s French in the original text.

9. “L’étranger qui n’est considéré que comme un étranger n’est pas en mesure de s’avancer sur la scène linguistique en tant que protagoniste. D’un côté, il évolue sur cette scène linguistique. De l’autre côté, il en est rejeté en étant renvoyé à sa propre langue. C’est que précisément il se trouve à la fois au-dedans et au-dehors. Une deuxième langue, celle du dehors, a pénétré la langue du dedans et l’a colonisée, en a fait une langue du dehors, alors même qu’elle se redéfinit, en tant que langue du pays de destination, comme langue du dedans. Les pôles du dedans et du dehors se renversent et la vie psychique de l’étranger est sens dessous dessous. De ce maelström de langues, il résulte une no-langue, la langue de personne, c’est-à-dire de ceux qui sont propulsés hors de la forteresse nationale tels des barons de Münchhausen malheureux et solitaires. Ou comment avoir deux langues dont aucune n’est la sienne.” (Le Blanc, 2010: 128–129)

10. Oona Frawley (2013) uses the term to describe Joseph O’Connor’s fictionalised biography of Molly Allgood, Ghost Life which she sees as an example of thinking and creating an archive of Irish women’s cultural memory, “Irish Memory Studies. UCD Humanities Podcast”, 44’21”.

11. I am grateful to one of the two referees of the paper for having encouraged me to develop the implications of the question of remembrance and reciprocity in the novel.

ABSTRACTS

Set in Ireland in 2004, against the backdrop of the anti-immigrant sentiment that preceded the Citizenship Referendum, Flight, by Oona Frawley weaves the story of Sandrine—a young Zimbabwean woman who flies her country in search of a better future for herself and her family—into that of Tom and Claire, an old Irish couple for whom she works as a carer. The novel engages directly with representations of migration and hospitality in contemporary Ireland by examining the complex ways in which political dimensions intersect with both linguistic and aesthetic paradigms. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin (Stanford, 1998) as well as on scholarly criticism that has scrutinised the politics and aesthetics of monolingualism, this chapter aims at exploring the ways in which Frawley’s Flight challenges the modern notion of “mother tongue” as a linguistic family romance. To a model based on the assumption that language is a form of property, intimately connected to kinship and motherhood, Flight seems to suggest new modes of writing and reading that explore language depropriation as a strategy to overcome hostile barriers and build new communities.

« maternelle ». À un modèle fondé sur une vision de la langue comme propriété, intimement liée à une communauté et à la maternité, Flight oppose de nouvelles formes d’écriture et de lecture qui permettent d’explorer la désappropriation de la langue comme une stratégie pour dépasser les barrières hostiles et construire de nouvelles communautés.

INDEX

Mots-clés: hospitalité, hostilité, migration, langue maternelle, Frawley
Keywords: hospitality, hostility, migration, native language, Frawley

AUTHOR

LÉA SINOIMERI

Université Paris Cité.
Lea.Sinoimeri@u-paris.fr