As “Pequenas criaturas” de Douglas Coupland: a busca pela identidade no Canadá globalizado

Douglas Coupland’s “Little creatures”: the search for identity in a globalized Canada

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Resumo: O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a busca de identidade no conto “Little creatures” (1994), de Douglas Coupland. Serão levadas em consideração as discussões a respeito da problemática da identidade canadense, desenvolvidas por críticos como Northrop Frye e Margaret Atwood, assim como as problematizações teóricas acerca de questões identitárias a partir da perspectiva do multiculturalismo e da globalização, como as desenvolvidas por Diana Brydon e Kit Dobson. Nosso objetivo é analisar como Coupland aborda essas ideias no Canadá contemporâneo e globalizado através de sua escrita crítica e ficcional.

Palavras-chave: Literatura canadense. Identidade. Globalização. Douglas Coupland.

Abstract: This essay analyzes the search for identity in Douglas Coupland’s short story “Little creatures” (1994). Discussions about the theme of Canadian identity will be taken into account, such as the ones developed by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, as well as the theoretical inquiries regarding identitary issues from the perspective of multiculturalism and globalization, as the ones developed by Diana Brydon and Kit Dobson. Our aim is to analyze how Coupland acknowledges these ideas in the contemporary and globalized Canada through his critical and fictional writing.

Keywords: Canadian literature. Identity. Globalization. Douglas Coupland.

It was only in the 1960’s that Canada embraced the project of developing a national literature. Although this moment has been positively addressed as the “boom” of Canadian literature, Canadian writer Douglas Coupland, most known for his 1991 novel *Generation X,* introduces a

different opinion in his 2006 article for the *New York Times* entitled "What is CanLit?". Coupland criticizes the literature that emerged around 1960 and which has been considered "Canadian Literature". For him:

> CanLit is about representing a certain kind of allowed world in a specific kind of way, and most writers in Canada are O.K. with that — or are at least relieved to know the rules of the game from the outset and not have to waste time fostering illusions. (COUPLAND, 2006).

Coupland mentions that the literature from this period was supported by the government, which would pay writers to "[…] write about life in small towns and/or the immigration experience" (COUPLAND, 2006), and he comes to the conclusion that writers involved in this project should rethink some strategies in order to survive in the contemporary world. For him, CanLit needs new blood and is in need of writers that are able to write about the world outside from the limitations that were established by this governmental program. The word "survive" is ironically chosen by Coupland, once it comes from one of the most famous texts about CanLit, written by Margaret Atwood. In *Survival: a thematic guide to Canadian Literature,* Atwood affirms that every country has a unified symbol at its core, and states that "[t]he central symbol of Canada […] is undoubtedly Survival" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 25). The concept of survival might refer to the hostile land that the first explorers had to face, but it can also mean the survival from crisis or disasters, as Atwood states, and no matter how this idea is approached, it is a recurrent theme in what has been called CanLit.

Although Coupland does not consider himself part of CanLit, being only a Canadian who writes books, as he says in his text in the *New York Times*, he manages to perform a dialogue with critics that are involved in the institutionalization of this literature, such as Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood. The questions posed by these scholars to discuss the country's identity, such as "Who am I?" and "Where is here?", gain a new set of questions in Douglas Coupland's short story "Little creatures". The story is part of the book *Life after God*, published in 1994, and presents the question "What does it mean to be human?" as its main theme. The story is written *in media res* and is narrated by a man who tells his child (it is not specified whether it is a boy or a girl) about a road trip they took

together through Canada to visit the child's grandfather, referred to as an old "wino". The father recalls how amazed the kid was with the animals and keeps narrating their experience in different parts of the cold country, observing nature as they drive by. The conversations about animals make the man think about the meaning of being human in a world that shows no future worth living, bringing a new kind of search for identity into display, one that is more global than national.

In "From Conclusions to A Literary History of Canada", Northrop Frye studies how literature in Canada was consolidated, and realizes that English Canadians have been struggling not so much with their well known problem of identity "[…] as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity" (FRYE, 2004, p. 18). Frye emphasizes that Canadians are more perplexed by the question "Where is here?" than by the question "Who am I?". For him, there is a tradition being followed by most of the writers in the country, and these writers have been living in a world that is "[…] post-Canadian, as it is post-American, post-British, and post everything except the world itself" (FRYE, 2004, p. 18). Thus, Frye comes to the conclusion that even in a world post everything, there is a theme that is hard to ignore:

> Yet I keep coming back to the feeling that there does seem to be such a thing as an imagining native continuum, and that writers are conditioned in their attitudes by their predecessors, or by the cultural climate of their predecessors, whether there is conscious influence or not. (FRYE, 2004, p. 19).

Margaret Atwood acknowledges Frye's discussion about Canadian identity. She also mentions the existence of a tradition, and observes that the answers to the questions "Who am I?" and "Where is here?" are partly similar. Atwood states that "Where is here?" "[…] is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the 'here', is already well-defined, so well-defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 23). For her, the obstacles to survival represented in Canadian literature have changed from external, which were located in an alien environment, to internal, or according to Atwood, "[…] obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 26). Coupland's short story "Little creatures" explores the obstacles to internal

survival. While Atwood still refers to the singularity of being human in Canada, Coupland mentions the issue of being Canadian, but above all, he ironically discusses what it means to be a human being in the world. In "Little creatures", the narrator's contact with the Canadian environment presents gloomy conclusions about the future possibilities for human beings in a capitalist and globalized world. Coupland's short story shows that it is more productive to think about Canadian identity today from a transcultural and transnational perspective.

In "It is time for a new set of questions" (2000), Diana Brydon points out that it is time to challenge simplified notions of identity and nationalism, and she invites readers to acknowledge the destabilizing potential of Frye's question in a multicultural Canada: "Frye's question had the virtue of suggesting a reciprocity between individual and place, implying that identity is not given but negotiated, interactive, and open to change" (BRYDON, 2000, p. 16). Instead of asking "Where is here?", Brydon invites Canadians to ask themselves "What are we doing here?":

> To ask what we are doing here is to look backward to a history that reminds First Nations people that they were always here and that their location involves certain responsibilities. It reminds others (those addressed by Northrop Frye's question "Where is here?") that their ancestors or they themselves came here as explorers, settlers, refugees, immigrants, or travellers, each positioning carrying its own burden of accountability. (BRYDON, 2000, p. 14).

Her most recent publication with Marta Dvořák, entitled *CROSSTALK: Canadian and global imaginaries in dialogue* (2012), raises questions that go beyond multiculturalism to encompass Canadian imagery in a globalized world. In 2009, Kit Dobson's *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian literature and globalization* had already recognized Canadian culture as part of a capitalist system. Dobson's approach goes beyond the national at the same time that it recognizes the national dimension of Canadian culture:

> The disruption of the older, more centred nationalism that Atwood advocates in her thematic model – her confident identification of a national 'we' is key to the emergence of Canadian literature in the context of transnational studies.

> Transnational Canadas may begin by asking questions that derive from Atwood's analysis, but it moves towards tracing how the patterns that she identifies have shifted, leaving behind the texts of the centennial period and working towards the contemporary moment, one in which 'we' become more complex. (DOBSON, 2009, p. xiii).

The discussions about identity have already proved that, in a capitalist world, where human relations are mediated by the economical power, people are supposed to consume identities that are modified according to commercial interests; therefore, it is utopian to think about a unified identity. As Stuart Hall points out in *The question of cultural identity* (1996):

> The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the system of meaning and cultural representation multiplies, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily. (HALL, 1996, p. 598).

In "Little creatures", Coupland approaches the question "Who am I?" from a global perspective, which ignores the borders and searches for an answer that would not be limited to a specific nation. Nevertheless, Coupland still addresses Atwood's ideas when he recurs to the theme of survival in his text, even though this recurring theme in his literary work is not bounded to an exclusive national issue. In "Little creatures", the idea of survival is not connected with the land as the enemy, nor is it the survival of the Canadian or foreigner in the alien space, but it is the survival of human beings who face similar problems in many parts of the world, such as the conflicts generated by living a life that is doomed to fail. This failure is not because of racial, religious or other related issues, but because of the fact that failing is the predicament of living in the age of globalization.

The narrator's disillusion when he faces the world comes partly from his divorce from his child's mother. The story indicates they had recently broken up, since the man is still in touch with lawyers as he explains: "[…] for the previous month, I had been living out of a suitcase and sleeping on a futon in a friend's den" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 3). Nevertheless, in the middle of this excruciating moment in his life, he decides to take the

child to visit his grandfather by car, in a trip that will exhaust him, since, as he says, he "[…] shouldn't even have been driving such a long way, really" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 3). Both characters leave the urban center, Vancouver, crossing the West of Canada and driving all the way to Prince George, but the reader only has access to the narrator's descriptions of moments when they were on the road and at hotels.

Right at the beginning of the trip, the child starts paying attention to the animals along the way for the first time in his/her life, as the narrator says, which makes the travel more pleasant for both of them. First, they drive by a farm with its horses, sheep and cows. The excitement of the kid when they see a bald eagle grows in such a way that the child does not even notice that the Flintstone Bedrock City amusement park was closed, as the father observes. The questions that the child asks about those animals make the trip less difficult for the parent as they create an atmosphere of intimacy between the two characters. Such questions, however, work as a pretext so that the father and the child address another issue: human beings. The discussions about humanity acknowledge Atwood's concept of internal survival, as they mention human beings as part of the Canadian landscape. The first question the child asks, "Where do people come from?" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 5), destabilizes the father, forcing him just to answer "from back east" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 6). This incomplete answer evinces the narrator's efforts to ignore the new question brought into discussion. He thinks about where people did come from and realizes how little attention people, including himself, give to this matter:

> You did get me thinking. I mean, five thousand years ago people emerge out of nowhere – sproing! – with brains and everything and begin wrecking the planet. You'd think we'd give the issue more thought than we do. (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 5).

After barely reflecting about this subject, what he manages to tell the child is only the direction from which people came. His reaction is to ignore history, not only to spare the child from a complicated explanation, but also because he cannot think about history, as we can see in other aspects of the narrative, such as the history of his family: which encompasses his father with a drinking problem or even his ex-wife. The issue with the wife, which is the apparent reason for his instability, is only indicated as a

probable betrayal. It is possible to realize such cause for the divorce when he explains her preference for cats: "I like dogs because they always stay in love with the same person. Your mother likes cats because they know what they want" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 14).

The will to run away from his past is also shown when the car enters a territory surrounded by mountains, leaving civilization behind. At this moment, the narrator affirms that he "[…] was relieved at how quickly the landscape became wild" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 7). He feels the nature of the country, but rather superficially, once there is no temptation of going deep into the wilderness and both characters just observe nature from the car. The landscape reminds the father of the discussion about where people came from, and he says: "The road was so long and so steep, and the mountains so large, that I began to think of how the new world must have frightened and enchanted the pioneers" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 8). However, instead of developing the issue of the pioneers or the land, he just returns to the issues regarding the animals. In this sense, the contact with nature and the environment works as a strategy to escape not only from his emotional problems, but also from questions that would inevitably expose the fragility of humanity and relationships in contemporary society. Moreover, the extract above evinces the narrator's difficulty to acknowledge Canada and Canadian landscape from a historical perspective.

At this point, the father starts to think about the difference between humans and animals and about what it means to be human. This comparison with animals shows again the lack of historicity in the short story. In "A drinking problem just like Grandpa's", Mikkel Jensen analyses how "Little creatures" marks Coupland's departure from idealizing rural locations. According to him:

> The reader may also infer from the fact that the father doesn't recognize humans' fundamental difference (history) from animals, is because he doesn't think in these temporal, diachronic dimensions suggesting that he doesn't reflect on the past (other than the bitter experience of his wife being disloyal to him), which then draws attention to the fact that he expresses his feelings about the divorce without really dwelling upon the events that led up to and caused the break. (JENSEN, 2012, p. 185).

Jensen's recognition that the father does not think in a temporal and diachronic way is also perceived as something recurrent in contemporary literature. In *Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1997), Fredric Jameson suggests that one cannot avoid the fragment when experiencing time in the capitalist society. Since historical temporality cannot be organized in relation to a past and a future in a coherent way, it becomes impossible to avoid fragmentation. Jameson affirms that:

> If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory. (JAMESON, 1997, p. 25).

The narrator thinks about human behavior, or what would make human beings "human", and comes to the conclusion that there is nothing really important to differentiate humans from animals, and says that the only things that humans do which "[…] have no other animal equivalent were smoking, body-building, and writing" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 12). When he thinks about what characterizes animal behavior, he comes to no conclusion at all. The avoidance of experiencing time diachronically is observed again when they pass by a canyon and a region where they see no houses or noises, and the narrator says to the child "Hold your breath […] we're entering the beginning of time" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 17). Such a statement suggests they are going to live the experience of primitive Canada, but instead, the narrator just changes the subject to mention how uncomfortable he feels for being lonely.

As the narrator avoids the past, and consequently sees no future, he creates an atmosphere in which it becomes impossible to figure out what he wants. He tries more than once to enter the wild Canada with the hope that he will come out with something different, with an experience that will change him and his child, although nothing happens and he cannot find any answer that would explain his main concern about what it is that characterizes people as human beings in the world.

The narrator just keeps on living, and his lack of confidence in the world is reaffirmed in the end of the story. After he tries to enter physically

and narratively the wild nature and does not succeed, he is asked by his child to tell a story (since his/her Dr. Seuss' book had been forgotten along the way). The first one he manages to tell is about a dog that wore goggles, whose name was Doggles. When the child asks what Doggles did, the father answers that "[…] he was supposed to have had a starring role in *The Cat in the Hat* series of books except… […] he had a drinking problem" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 20). The child does not feel happy after this story; then, the narrator tells him about two other animals. The first one is a squirrel that was supposed to have an exhibition of nut painting at the Vancouver Art Gallery, but Mrs. Squirrelly had babies and he had to find a job at a factory. Finally, the father presents the story about a kitten that was going to be a movie star, except she had too many bills on her MasterCard and had to start working in a bank to pay her debts. At the end of her story, the narrator says that she may have lost her ambition, or just had become too old "[…] and she found it was easier to just talk about doing it instead of actually doing it and…" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 23). The narrator stops his talk when he suddenly realizes that he should not have been telling the child those stories about those creatures, which were supposed to be part of a fairy tale, "[…] but who got lost along the way" (COUPLAND, 2005, p. 24).

For the narrator, the creatures are human beings, but, in a sense, they are also the animals from the fairy tale or the animals they saw along the way, as he does not seem to differentiate them. The narrator's stories about animals are allegories that explain how being human in a globalized and capitalist world is inevitably related to failure and paralysis, and that is why his search for the answer to the question "What does it mean to be human?" cannot be solved. The father's narrative presents an atmosphere of innocence represented by the doubts of the child and the illustrations in each page of the story which, as Jensen states, "[…] seem to reflect the child's understanding of what the father is telling him/her" (JENSEN, 2012, p. 184), once the drawings are very simple and almost childlike. Nevertheless, this innocence is put at risk by the father's disbelief in the world.

The theme explored by Coupland in his short story "Little creatures" is still survival, which is a subject that Northrop Frye considered recurrent in Canadian narratives, and later Margaret Atwood would explore in more details to consider it the central symbol of the country. However, Coupland's concept of survival is not related to the idea of space, nor does

he encompass the issue of being a Canadian. His protagonist decides to travel by car, even though he says he should not have done that, and tries to connect with nature, but he does not achieve any experience with that. Besides, he realizes he risked destroying his child's naivety by telling him/her stories about those creatures who "got lost along the way" (how should the child survive if not even the animals in a fairy tale seem able to survive?), as well as by creating more questions to fundamental issues about identity.

The narrator's search for identity involves the situation that Kit Dobson recognizes in contemporary literature in Canada: the "we" mentioned by Margaret Atwood becomes more complex. In Douglas Coupland's "Little creatures", it is possible to see this change, once the narrator's questions involve all human beings, not only Canadians or Americans. However, this complex "we" he is trying to figure out is beyond his comprehension of the world, since he is not able to think about life as a succession of moments involving a past, a present and a future. Coupland's short story still acknowledges the main theme of CanLit: survival. Nevertheless, in this contemporary world that shows no optimistic future, he manages to acknowledge this theme in a global level with a question that could be asked by people anywhere: How can humanity survive in a capitalist and globalized world, devoid of any future perspective or certainty?

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