

“EXPERIENCING IT THROUGH THE SKIN:” KAREN CONNELLY’S WRITING ON TRAVEL

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- 202** The crossing of borders is part of human experience, and the stories we tell of our journeys inform how we imagine ourselves and others in the world.¹ In fact, narratives of geographical displacement have become pivotal in the production and understanding of cultural identities, mainly due to the potential encounters and revisions these narratives depict and reenact. It is exactly from this space of possibility that this paper departs, beginning with a discussion of two short excerpts from texts that negotiate moments of travel and encounter. The first is taken from Canadian writer Karen Connelly’s *One Room in a Castle: Letters from Spain, France and Greece*, in which she collects not only letters, but stories, reflections, and impressions from these three places in which she lived for various lengths of time. In the last section of her book, when writing about her experiences in Greece, Connelly records what she calls a “Greek lesson”:

EXO. MESA.

Out. In. *Eime exo. Eime mesa.* I am out, I am in.

Thelon na eime mesa. I want to be in. *Eime mesa.* I am in. The Greek expression to denote belonging, intrinsic understanding of a given place, event, or situation. *Eime mesa.* (*One Room* 342)

This seemingly straightforward account not only describes the meaning of words in a different language, but also alerts the reader to Connelly’s reflections about her travel writing. Her choice of Greek words to learn reveals the paradoxical attempt to grasp, in a foreign language, the concept of belonging or, in other words, to comprehend through difference what it means to possess an understanding of place. As a writer who embraces travel and encounters with difference as ways into self-explorations, Connelly elaborates something emblematic about the experience of displacement:

understanding *eime mesa* means understanding *eime exo*. One is imbricated in the other. In order to belong, one needs to not-belong.

This sort of duality also appears in the following excerpt from Holly Luhning's "Traveling: Poetic Notes," published in a collection of Canadian women's travel writing. In this piece, Luhning reflects on her travel poems:

When we write about landscape, travel, and place, we reveal as much about ourselves as we do about the worlds represented. [...] The exotic acts as a catalyst to thinking about the familiar.

Although we often think of home as being fixed and stable, [...] home can also function as a place to escape to, and escape from. [...] This state of movement, of travel, is necessary in order to perceive the entire picture of the narrator's relationship to home. Without distance, her comprehension of home is one-dimensional, what has always been known; only while displaced is she able to re-view the place with which she's most familiar. (41)

The above passage shows Luhning's search for an articulation of the notions of "home" and "away." These are concepts in which the relation of signification does involve an awareness of "not-being," but, as Luhning's piece seems to suggest, this relation also reflects transiency. Similarly to the considerations present in the excerpt from Connelly's work cited above, Luhning's elaborations on the idea of "home" or of belonging are constructed through movement.

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This paper begins with the kinds of questions that surface in Connelly's and Luhning's quotations, as they allow me to explore issues of dislocation and movement in connection to current debates on identity. Both Luhning and Connelly are among a group of contemporary Canadian women writers who incorporate the experience of "not being at home" into their works as a way to reinvent their selves. For them, the crossing of borders is marked by their gendered, cultural, and social bodies, which are constantly reading, and being read, by the people they encounter. If travel and exploration have been traditionally approached as "masculine" endeavours, many of these women challenge this view as they engage in physical and literary experiences of travel, further investigating the connections between the inner and outer worlds. As the titles of collections of women's travel literature, such as *Outside of Ordinary: Women's Travel Stories* (2005) or *This Place a Stranger: Canadian Women Travelling Alone* (2015), demonstrate, Canadian women have more often than not "hit the road," and the critical attention devoted to these works might help to shed some light onto what is involved in reconstructing identities at the crossroads.

The significance of movement and displacement for re-readings of the self is not necessarily new to literary and theoretical debates. For critics such as James Clifford, although "roots always precede routes" in the understanding and analysis of questions of cultural formation and identity, travel could be faced as "a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experience" so that "[p]ractices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (Clifford 3). Instead of focusing only on dwelling as the meaningful space for cultural practices, Clifford argues that one should pay more attention to how dif-

ference and cultural exchanges are articulated in travel and displacement. For him,

[c]ultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales. Stasis and purity are asserted—creatively and violently—*against* historical forces of movement and contamination. (7)

Travel and movement are reinserted into a critical debate about cultural productions, which is certainly meaningful, especially if one approaches identity as a process subject to change and historicization, or as a “process of becoming, rather than being” (Hall 4). What one notes in works by writers who embrace travel and displacement as ways into the self is this awareness of identities being rearticulated at the crossroads. By reinstalling a fruitful, even if complex, exchange between *roots* and *routes*, these writers explore moments of transformation as well as the possibilities involved in inhabiting spaces of dislocation. However, despite the fluidity that such crossings might evoke, the travelling subject is constantly repositioned in the encounter with the foreign.

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Although a critical reading of a broader range of writers would be extremely relevant for a discussion of these issues, this paper focuses specifically on Karen Connelly’s literary production, mainly because of the influence of her travel experiences on her writing. Moreover, the choice of focusing on Connelly’s work is propitious, as she has published five collections of poetry, three travel journals/memoirs, and one novel, and has addressed the issue of displacement in a variety of ways. Connelly was the youngest Canadian writer to win the prestigious Governor General’s Literary Award for her memoir *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal* (1992), which narrates her experience of living in Thailand as an exchange student when she was seventeen. Since then, she has travelled extensively, and has stated, “For as long as I can remember, what is foreign has been something I have craved” (“The First” 198). Although Connelly at first regarded her desire to travel as a way of escaping her dysfunctional family and her upbringing in Calgary, later in her life, she would fully embrace the project of writing about what she calls “life in the world” (“Biography”).

This paper explores how Connelly uses the possibilities present in narratives of displacement to disrupt (or complicate) the “models of identity” available to her. Understanding identity as culturally and socially constructed and as “marked by time and place,” Smith and Watson argue that “there are models of identity culturally available to life narrators at any particular historical moment” (34). It is in this line of thought that I insert my readings of Connelly’s writing, particularly as I believe that, by leaving “home,” or the “domestic” space, and by writing about her journeys, she questions what it means to belong, to be a woman traveller, a foreigner. I also think it is possible to investigate the narratives of the self portrayed in Connelly’s encounters with the other. In order to further delve into these considerations, the next section discusses the possible correlations between travel, gender, and identity as a critical approach to my reading of Connelly’s work.

TRAVEL, GENDER, AND IDENTITY

Travel, as a literary trope, has a long tradition in Western literature. As Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs remind us, "the traveller's tale is as old as fiction itself" (2). We might only think about works of literature such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Cervantes's *Quixote* to see how travel has been commonly associated with a world of possibilities, of discovery, or even the maturing of a hero. Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when ocean crossings led to European explorations of new worlds, travel also involved mapping and documentation, and the narration of the other became part of an imperial history of discovery and appropriation (Hulme and Youngs 3). In more recent times, especially after the rise of postcolonial studies, travel writing has received a renewed degree of attention. According to Mary Baine Campbell:

the interest in travel writing—across a wide political spectrum—was part of the necessary reimagining of the world first occasioned by the post-World War Two resistance movements and wars of liberation in the former European colonies, as well as by the waves of immigration that followed. (261)

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In an article in which she presents a variety of critical positions that might have contributed to a new approach to travel writing, Campbell shows that travel narratives have become extremely significant to the "study of what we know and how we know it—not to mention who 'we' are" (265). In this context, investigations about what is involved in movement, representation, and identity have become central in literary and cultural studies.

One aspect of travel writing that attracts various commentaries is the ambivalence of the genre. Apart from imperial associations, travel writing often entails a sense of displacement and a loss of certainty, which often dislodge the traveller, leaving him or her with the realization that the crossing of borders and the recording of these experiences are not as free categories as they may seem. As many scholars have already pointed out, the writing of travel involves both the complicity of this discourse to past and present imperialist practices as well as the ways in which travel narratives attempt to resist these same practices, opening the possibility of cultural revisionism. Such irreconcilable contradictions lie at the core of travel writing, and as Wasserman and Almeida suggest, they are "unresolvable" (9). Yet, besides recognizing the ambivalences of this discourse, what are the critical possibilities that might develop?

For this present work, one pivotal aspect of travel writing is the rereading of the genre from the perspective of women writers. According to Susan Bassnett, since the 1970s, feminist scholars have consistently revised so-called "male-authored histories," and in doing so they have brought more attention to women's travel writing (226). One possibility of looking at the interrelation between travel and gender is related to how women use the experience of movement and dislocation to reinvent themselves and their identities, challenging the confines of "home." For Bassnett,

“[t]ravel for some women, it seems, may have offered a means of redefining themselves, assuming a different persona and becoming someone who did not exist at home” (234). Travelling, then, might lead to transformation and reimagining, which, for writers such as Connelly, are necessary aspects not only of border crossing in itself, but also of writing.

Indeed, the intricacies between dislocation, reinvention, and the narratives of the self are aspects that surface in Connelly’s writing. In *One Room in a Castle*, transformation is foregrounded by her reflections on her encounters with other languages, which, both physically and metaphorically, change her. For example, before departing from Canada for an extended stay in Europe, Connelly reflects on how other languages change her name and, by extension, her identity:

In foreign languages, my name never sounds the way it does in English. Often, I am not even called by my name: I am given a local name that has a similar meaning or sound to Karen. Kanika. Kalen. Carmen. Katrin. Katerina. My middle name, Marie. Maria.

206 With the metamorphosis of the name, the self is transformed through language. In a different country, when I hear myself called by a new name, I leave the old one somewhere behind me. This is an alteration as subtle and powerful as one shaft of light falling in a dark stable. (*One Room* 27-28)

By connecting the notion of change to the different ways in which her name (a word usually associated with identity, origins, and roots) is transformed when pronounced in foreign languages, Connelly explores the possibility of reinvention. Such reflections become even more poignant when, a few lines earlier, Connelly somehow “defines” what her “name” means: “I will always try to escape my name (my drunken Catholic father, my red-neck upbringing, the girl howling in the basement)” (*One Room* 27). In this particular excerpt, Connelly reflects on the necessity of moving, of escaping, or of letting herself being transformed, even if she is still not sure about what this transformation will entail. Later, she asks: “How long it will be before someone says my name? And when they do, what will it sound like?” (*One Room* 92).

Another important aspect related to this “craving” for movement is the tension between a welcoming self-transformation and the alertness that such a change also comes from the ways in which the travelling body is read in the encounter with the other. On the one hand, Connelly’s work does address the possibility of revision commonly present in travel narratives. On the other, this revision is possible when her body becomes visibly foreign, demarcating a space of “not-belonging.” This position complicates what scholars such as Susan Bassnett have identified as the romantic overtone that permeates some critical approaches to women’s travel writing (234). By portraying the reinvention of identities in border crossing as being permeated by tension, Connelly goes beyond a mere celebration of the road, while, at the same time, accepting the unsettling experiences that these movements bring.

"THE NECESSITY OF BEING FOREIGN:" KAREN CONNELLY'S WRITING ON DISPLACEMENT

Karen Connelly's work is indeed inextricably connected to the experience of travel or of "being other." As she states in her afterword to the second edition of *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal* (published in 2010), her first experience of living abroad completely changed her, leaving her with what she called "another language, a modus operandi for being a young writer in the world, and enough lived experience for [her] first book of prose" (*Touch the Dragon* 180). Since then, Connelly has been fully engaged in crossing borders, and in encountering and living difference. Many of her works speak to these interests, and her poem "The Dancer" is one example. Although Connelly published it many years after her first travel experience in Thailand, it is significant to quote it here, as the poem suggestively addresses both the speaker's incessant desire for breaking patterns of stillness as well as the sense of destabilization and multiplicity involved in "changing" or "becoming new":

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Desire ruptures
the dumb sleep
of the world.

For this reason
we do not rest
in our cages
but bite the metal bars
and gnaw our wrist bones,
follow the prophet on our knuckles
and slide our fingers
too slowly
through the flame.

Desire, rising:
this is why we claw our way
through each other's bodies,
through the innocent earth.

In our becoming
we are broken,
as the first cell splits
into life. The shedding snake
knows it, and the sapling
cracked by spring ice,
and the river rushing away
from its pure source
and the dancer
planing down the bones
of his feet. (*The Border* 9-10)

As the poem suggests, movement entails both confrontation and fragmentation. The first comes from breaking up with a sense of imprisonment and from the necessity or the desire of “waking up” from a “dumb sleep;” it might also be present in the “clawing” of our ways in encounters with other bodies, or even with the body of the earth. The second, fragmentation, is connected to the unavoidable feeling that becoming new might mean becoming split:

We are taken apart even
as we crouch down
among the stones
unable to fit
the many fragments
together, unable to find
the lost key to ourselves.

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The lucky among us learn
to break the rusted locks.
The locksmith demands,
 Why can't you just be still
 with these locks on your hands,
 your mouth?
They are fine mechanisms,
they allow you to speak
and to eat and
to clap like a seal.

Why can't you be still? (*The Border* 10)

To become new, one needs movement to break “rusted locks.” Stillness, in this poem, implies a continuous imprisonment, preventing the speaker, the subject, from putting together at least a few of the pieces of his or her own fragmented self. However, as the locksmith asks, if able to speak, eat, or clap hands, “[w]hy can't you be still?” (*The Border* 10). As if aware of the implications involved in this question, the speaker does not answer it, but her/his attention goes back to the dancer's body, which keeps on dancing, until “time reach[es] the end / of its long iron fence” (*The Border* 11).

“The Dreamer” is one of the poems from the collection *The Border Surrounds Us* (2000), published when Connelly had already experienced the political tension on the border between Burma (now Myanmar) and Thailand during the late 1990s. At the time, Burma was facing an oppressive dictatorship that led many people to escape the country and live in refugee camps. While living there, Connelly interviewed political prisoners, had contact with many refugees, and worked in the camps. This was a very powerful experience for her, and the images of confinement and oppression that inform the poem are directly connected to the violence she witnessed in a repressive political environment. To break patterns of stillness in this contested political scenery would mean, for many people along the Burmese border, to be materially changed, whether due to imprisonment, segregation, or life in refugee camps. Yet, the

echoing question in the poem returns to the speaker (and to the reader as well): "why can't you be still?" As if addressing not only the insurgence of those who would rebel against oppressive political regimes, but also the writer's own incessant restlessness, this question resonates with Connelly's body of work, or with what she has called "the necessity of being foreign."²

Indeed, in much of her work, Connelly attempts to articulate what is behind this necessity for movement, this inability to "stand still." Although I focus here primarily on Connelly's *Touch the Dragon*, mainly because it marks her discovery of the "self in the world," displacement emerges as a connecting thread throughout her *oeuvre*. Moreover, as the image of the inability to "stay still" suggests, Connelly's work makes a strong connection between the experience of travel and the traveller's body itself, which "claws its ways" in her journeys, not allowing the traveller to forget the materiality of her experience: "The body is the first country, the first and the last country. When I write well about the foreign (and even when I write about it not so well, less consciously, more purplely), it always involves a groping toward this basic but profoundly complex fact" ("The First" 199). By reading the body as a place of arrivals and departures, Connelly elaborates on the idea that to experience displacement means confronting the ways in which the body is culturally constructed³ and experienced: "I say 'profoundly complex' because not everyone thinks about the body in the same way" ("The First" 199). In her writing, Connelly explores such complexities, learning about how her travelling body is read in cross-cultural encounters.

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In *Touch the Dragon*, Connelly writes about her first experiences of inhabiting a foreign body, in the sense that immediately after her arrival in Thailand, she is confronted with the fact that her body is "different," and that, from this moment on, she will be known as a *falang* ("foreigner" in Thai). In fact, *falang* is not only the first word Connelly⁴ learns when she arrives in Thailand (*Touch the Dragon* 4), but it also defines much of her experience in this new country. It is how she is recognized by her host families and by the people in Denchai (the city in which she lived for a year), and it becomes the narrative pattern through which the travelling-self explores the contradictions and the difficulties of a possible new identity, that of "being Thai in a foreigner's body" (*Touch the Dragon* 33). Thus, even if *Touch the Dragon* is structured as a journal, it is also constructed as a narrative of learning, one that, years later, Connelly would define as "cracking open [her] head and heart, pouring the big world in" (*Touch the Dragon* 180).⁵

In *Touch the Dragon*, Connelly narrates her immersion in Thai culture, living according to different habits, patterns of behaviour, new sets of rules, and new models of identity. For example, she learns that "spicy food will do strange things to [her] stomach" (9), that the parts of the body have different values for Buddhists (11, 63), that she has to make an effort "to be nice, and open, and friendly" (15), that "[e]verything is the wrong size [there]. [Her] bones are too big, [her] mind is too small" (21), and that she will often encounter "scenes without explanations" (36). Thus, her journal becomes a recording of what she calls in its preface "her true edu-

cation,” as it involves accepting difference and “experiencing it through the skin” (Connelly, *Grace* 7). It is by describing how she has been physically touched by another language (by its sounds, by the way its concepts affect her modes of knowing), and how aware she is of her body in connection with the land, with its people, and its surroundings (whether riding the crowded *songtow*⁶ when going to school, washing her laundry with her bare hands, or listening to the stories people insist on telling her), that Connelly, as the narrator, positions herself as learning new ways of apprehending (and of being in) the world.

Nevertheless, the position occupied by this “learning self” is also full of contradictions, as the narrator seems aware of her own limitations in fully accepting difference, and at the same time recognizing how she has changed because of it. There are moments in the book in which Connelly discusses feeling estranged from people’s attitudes, or the fact that she does not understand or agree with certain aspects of what she observes in the country. She also describes times of internal struggle, in which she is torn between feeling completely connected with people and place while disconnected from a more politically and socially engaged side of herself, or of feeling even challenged by certain cultural practices:

Sometimes I could almost say I hate Thailand, yet I know that’s not true. The strain is in two different directions. If I hate it sometimes, I love it more. The solution is not in being like a Thai, but being a Thai completely, which is impossible. I will never wash sheets by hand without gritting my teeth. I will never wear a uniform without secretly laughing at it.

If I could have it, I would take the clear existence. [...] But I could only believe so much. I am already myself, used to my own skin. (*Touch the Dragon* 65)

Belonging is embedded in tension and surrounded by the space of “not-being,” since Connelly is neither a tourist anymore, nor a Thai, but someone in between, who carries the marks of her own upbringing, but who has already been changed by her encounter with the other. In this space of contradictions, the narrator feels she has become “an interesting deformity” (*Touch the Dragon* 102): “I am not Asian and never will be. Even if I forget it sometimes, no one else does. I am the wrong colour. But I am not what I was before I came here, either. Something in me has changed, or grown” (*Touch the Dragon* 102). Although the narrator welcomes transformation through learning, the word “deformity” brings with it a feeling of displacement, or of nonconformity to her status as a *falang*.

It is also through the experience of being other that Connelly rediscovers her gendered body, especially because she is constantly repositioned as a young woman travelling alone, and supposedly in need of “protection.” As she comes to realize upon her arrival in Denchai, the freedom she experiences as a woman traveller is not a given for many other women there. It is, in fact, discouraged through cautionary tales about the “dangers” of the road, or through a discourse of protection that tries to prevent the narrating self from getting into situations that would not be considered appropriate for women. In some instances, Connelly tells of her discomfort in feel-

ing "overprotected" or never alone, almost like a child, since she is always under the supervision of her host families or an extended web of relations who constantly tell her what she can or cannot do, where she can or cannot go. Such "lessons" are gradually explored in her writing, and the narrator uses her everyday experiences as points of entry to further considerations on gender issues:

Many Thai women who feel trapped know what is wrong; they even have the ability to free themselves. But most of them do not have the raw courage and necessary selfishness to break with convention. In Thailand, history is not a subject. It is a force that holds you still. (*Touch the Dragon* 146)

The image of stillness is once again in opposition to the experience of the body on the road, the body of Connelly as a *falang*, who interrupts stillness by "constantly stirring things up" (146). Yet, she does not address the political implications of movement in this context, or, in other words, her own privilege of being, as a Thai friend tells her, "so lucky" since she "can do whatever [she] want[s]" (*Touch the Dragon* 116). Interrupting stillness paradoxically means, to the narrator, entitling herself to do so from a privileged position, from where she does not have anything at stake since she is a white traveller with a temporary resident status in Thailand. Interestingly, Connelly does not try to "speak for" the women she encounters, but she listens to them, all the while noting the contradictions of a location and of a culture her travelling self has already learned to respect and care for.

One of the more powerful interruptions in the journal might be the listening to the stories of those women who "are everywhere: I live with them, they teach me at Nareerat, they sell me pineapples, they chat with me in the backs of *songtows*" (*Touch the Dragon* 146). Because she listens to them, the pattern of silence Connelly identifies in the community she lives in is, even if tentatively, broken. Moreover, even if Connelly does not write much about her life in Canada before Thailand, by connecting to other Thai women whose lives become influential to her, she confronts the ways in which her own upbringing has affected her or marked her body. In fact, many of the poems in her first collection of poetry, *The Small Words In My Body*, speak to what Connelly has called "the various disasters and addictions of [her] family" (*Grace* 3), and as she continues, "the first world allotted to us for understanding—and the one that never leaves us—is that of the family" (*Grace* 3). In this context, by bringing to the fore the contrasting image of her body in relation to the bodies of women with whom she lives in Thailand, Connelly is able to resituate her own personal history, recognizing the ways in which different cultures might lead women to become silent or unquestioning. As critic Kristi Siegel reminds us, the "rhetoric of peril" has been constantly present in Western narratives of women travellers as well, from cautionary fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" to mainstream Hollywood movies (57, 65). However, a woman travelling alone can somehow disturb this rhetoric, and although Connelly might not have been completely aware of these issues when she initiated her world journeys, her encounters with different cultures

and different ways of experiencing her gendered body led her to further reflect on her position as a travelling woman.⁷

In *Touch the Dragon*, one of the last images of Connelly's experience in Thailand also involves the journeying of women, and in this particular case, a trip Connelly took together with Meh Dang, one of her "dear friends and surrogate mother" (*Touch the Dragon* 176). In fact, from Connelly's descriptions of Meh Dang, she would be some kind of Thai role model for her. Compared to other Thai women, Meh Dang was more questioning and not silent about what she observed around her. Together, Karen and Meh Dang travel first by bus to Chiang Rai, and then by car, driving up the sinuous roads to the top of the Maysalong mountain, a place in the north of Thailand known for being a refuge to Chinese migrants. The reasons why Meh Dang takes Connelly there are not made clear, but she is originally from this region and would visit the mountains when she was young. The trip could mean to her a return to her origins, which, in a way, mirrors Connelly's approaching return to Canada. After a
212 long car trip towards the top of the mountain, both women spend time in the village, interacting with others and watching the "hill-tribe people" perform a local dance for the sake of the visitors:

They swing from one dance into another, telling the same secrets again and again, but giving nothing away. They keep their faces closed. Bronze words, their words, the low singing of the flute, the language of their footsteps on the ground—these blend into one step steady pulse of a life hidden from us, the spectators. (*Touch the Dragon* 156)

In her encounter with this new community inside Thailand, Connelly feels once more dislocated, not actually part of the place surrounding her, and aware of her distance from the people she meets: "The smell of rain and pine reminds me of Canada, but I have no way to connect the reality of that place with this one. Being here takes me a world away from Thailand; North America is even farther" (*Touch the Dragon* 156). It is significant that this encounter with yet "another Thailand" is initiated by Meh Dang. For Meh Dang, bringing Connelly to this remote village might have meant the possibility of dislodging what the young Western woman travelling alone thought she knew about the country. Although Connelly cannot speak for Meh Dang, she describes what they experience together after leaving the village: "We slide down, Meh Dang and I, both of us quiet. Our heads are light with the mist, riddled with bamboo. We come away and meet the smoother earth, the one we know" (157). Knowledge about the other is once more challenged, leaving the narrator to question her own position as a traveller, an observer:

My life here has been so easy that the idea of living on Maysalong stuns me.
 [...]

I will not forget the beggars or the barefoot children, though I don't know exactly why remembering them matters. Why do I pay such attention to details I cannot alter? Why do I see these things so clearly? Am I here only to witness, amazed one breath and appalled the next? (*Touch the Dragon* 158)

Such questions point towards the ethical implications of reinventing identities at the crossroads, as they involve a grappling with difference, with what one cannot know. As Connelly seems to perceive, her idea of belonging, or of having a "Thai home," is disrupted by the experience of otherness on the road. Although her questions are not necessarily answered in this narrative of Thailand, the remoteness and the inaccessibility of the "hill-people" remind the travelling self of something Connelly, as a writer, will try to articulate much later in her career. In her afterword to *Touch the Dragon*, she states: "An old culture is fragile, but it is powerful, too. We must believe in and respect that power if we want otherness to survive and thrive" (186). This embracing of displacement and otherness permeates Connelly's journal, but not without conflict for the travelling self.

Connelly's awareness of her role as a listener as well as an observer of, and even a participant in, different cultural practices becomes much more evident and more politically charged in her later work, particularly in the narrative *Burmese Lessons* (published in 2009), a travel account of her experience of living both in Burma (now Myanmar) and on the Burmese-Thai border, during the late 1990s. As she notes in an interview with Smaro Kamboureli and Hannah McGregor, although she recognizes that *Burmese Lessons* is still connected to an exploration of the self in the world, her writing on Burma represents to her a new and more engaged attempt at negotiating the position she occupies in experiences of displacement, particularly when they involve witnessing what happens in a place she describes as being "in a state of trauma" ("Implicated" 216). In this context, *Burmese Lessons* becomes not only an opportunity for Connelly to engage in recuperating Burmese history, but also, to tell "the story of [her] own education on the Thai-Burma border and in Burma" ("Implicated" 216).

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Indeed, the image of learning or of educating herself is again brought to the fore in this later piece. Yet, one issue that stands out is the tension between wanting to understand, to reach out to the other's difference, and, at the same time realizing that the traveller will always be an outsider, only partially knowing what she observes. As a Burmese friend who serves as a guide in Burma tells her: "You know when you go back to your guest house and write things down? [...] Things that you see, the talks we have, about what happens here? [...] For you it is notes on paper. For me it's my life" (*Burmese Lessons* 74). Thus, in the book, her desire to know is contrasted to the materiality of the lives lived, and it is in questioning her role as an observer that she better understands the responsibilities involved in witnessing such traumatic political situations. As she comes to realize after being invited by a group of monks to watch, from a distance, government soldiers violently attacking a protestor on the street: "If I say, 'Yes,' I am willing to be a witness. Implicit in the act is some kind of responsibility" (*Burmese Lessons* 129). The measuring of her own responsibility towards what she learns in Burma seems to be one of the lessons that also guide her narrative. One of the ways she finds to engage with what she experiences around her is by listening to the stories people have to tell:

The most useful thing I do around here is interview people about their experience in Burma and on the border. [...]

The people I interview want to talk, even if they don't want to talk about everything. [...]

They are here illegally, set apart from the dominant culture, existing in a long, difficult limbo. To tell his or her own history is one way for a human being to reclaim legitimacy.

(*Burmese Lessons* 237)

By recognizing the importance of storytelling in the Burmese context, Connelly is transformed from an external witness to an integrated or, rather, implicated listener. Rather than replicating or objectifying the pain suffered by others, she somehow embodies, through the stories she hears, the utter displacement experienced by Burmese refugees and political dissidents. If *Burmese Lessons* is indeed an apprenticeship, as its author suggests, it is one connected to the openness and vulnerability of the body on the road, which is transformed by the experience of other bodies.

214 It is exactly this tension that Connelly explores in many of her works. By interrupting stillness and occupying a space of not-belonging, she reimagines herself as multiple and fragmented, as “nurs[ing] a curious, long-term fracture” between “cultures, languages, countries” (*Grace* 13). Yet, more than a “deformity,” a word she initially uses to describe herself in *Touch the Dragon*, fragmentation and multiplicity become, for Connelly, “new way[s] to understand our world and to approach the work of being engaged human beings” (*Grace* 13).

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to a volume dedicated to critical discussions of Canadian responses to the foreign, Smaro Kamboureli addresses the ethical and the political implications of writing about the foreign, particularly when it involves bearing witness to violent acts. Based on Spivak's argumentation about the importance of “aesthetic education” as a way to imagine and resonate with the other while being aware of the risks involved in representation, Kamboureli argues for the urgency of critically approaching literary works that explore the relation between selves and others in cross-cultural encounters. For the scholar, even if the concept of the foreign “signifies in multiple ways” (94), “[t]he concern with the foreign [...] is as much about the foreign itself as it is about ourselves, referencing the continuous transactions that constitute our relationships with others and the spaces we inhabit” (95). In a way, Kamboureli's suggestion echoes the passage quoted from Holly Luhning at the beginning of this essay. Luhning, as a travel poet, reflects on “a concept of home as movement” (42) since it is “re-viewed” in displacement. In Connelly's work, such exchanges and transactions are also taken into consideration; in her writing, self and other, belonging and not-belonging, are constantly in dialogue and informing the rereading of identities at crossroads.

Almost twenty years after her first experience in Thailand, and looking back at

the transformational moment it meant to her, Connelly describes such exchanges as getting "into the skin of another culture" (*Touch the Dragon* 181), which becomes a new form of education for her. For Connelly, the kind of exchange enabled by this embodiment of otherness becomes significant because, more than revealing her privilege as a Western traveller, it also reflects the kind of responsibility involved in inhabiting displacement:

Perhaps living abroad, or travelling, is neither right nor privilege but a responsibility, an important human act. To slow down, to listen more carefully, to watch the surface until we glimpse what is underneath, to learn from people who know well what we do not know: these are choices, steps toward dismantling the barriers that separate not only nations and strangers, but neighbours, too. (*Touch the Dragon* 187)

Although still embedded in a somewhat romanticizing rhetoric of the road, Connelly's focus on responsibility also points towards the fact that travelling and writing about it might involve creating new ways of addressing the risks and the possibilities involved in what Kamboureli called "the continuous transactions" of our encounters with others, whether abroad or at home.

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Moreover, by recognizing the transiency of belonging, Connelly's writing also points towards the vulnerability of bodies on the road. Writing displacement, for Connelly, involves returning to her own body as a woman traveller who is also read and repositioned in her travel exchanges. As Vici Johnstone writes in her introduction to an anthology of Canadian women travel writing, "[w]e are not just benign observers and neither we are invisible" (8). It is, then, by allowing her body to be seen, changed and marked in her travel experiences that Connelly seems to challenge her privileged position. One of the last images present in *One Room in a Castle* speaks to such transformations. In it, Connelly, as the narrator, reflects on the physical changes she perceives in herself after an extended stay in Greece:

What has happened to my fingers? [...]

My hands are newly scarred. No white nails. Callouses hard as gems on my palms. Feet made of goat leather. Changed hands and feet, and all the flesh in between, changed. (*One Room* 431)

Once again, "experiencing it through the skin" seems to be the position chosen by writers such as Connelly to embody difference as a way into the self, writing about the reimagining of identities in displacement.

NOTES

1. This paper presents part of my research as a visiting scholar at Trent University in 2015-16. Thanks to CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, Brasil) for the scholarship that enabled me to pursue this project in Canada.
2. This is, in fact, the title of the afterword to the second edition of *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal*.

3. For further discussions on embodiment and on a view of the body as being culturally constructed, see Smith and Watson, especially pages 37-42.
4. Although I use Connelly's last name here, I am fully aware of the difference between Connelly as writer and Connelly as narrator of her autobiographical journey in *Touch the Dragon*. This is why, throughout my analysis of her narrative, I refer to Connelly as a narrator, in an attempt to differentiate the writer from Connelly's travelling self. For further discussion of the interrelations between writers and autobiographical subjects, see Smith and Watson, especially Chapters 1 and 2.
5. Suzanne Bailey has already suggested that Connelly's journal could be read as a formative narrative: "Although the narrative involves only one year of Connelly's life, it can be seen as a *Bildungsroman*" (64).
6. A means of transportation similar to a bus.
7. See, for example, her discussion of gender and travel in Connelly, Kamboureli, and McGregor.

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