

Re-mapping historical silences: a discussion of Jan Conn's travel encounters in the Americas¹

Magali Sperling Beck

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Resumo: Este artigo apresenta uma releitura das ambiguidades advindas da intersecção entre viajar e representar através de uma discussão da obra da poetisa canadense Jan Conn. Considerando-se que Conn produz reconstruções poéticas (ao invés dos tradicionais relatos de viagem ou etnografias) de suas experiências cruzando fronteiras nas Américas, sua obra torna-se um lugar privilegiado para a releitura da dialética entre o eu e o outro. Assim, argumento que Conn não aborda a viagem como necessariamente uma celebração, mas que ela apresenta um desafio a este discurso, já que o lê através de seus momentos de instabilidade e silêncios históricos.

Palavras-Chave: literatura de viagem; poesia canadense; eu e outro.

*In this landscape everything
is stripped away. It is where the cult of peyote
and the secrets of medicine women and men begin.
The light is confrontational. There is nowhere to hide
from yourself.
“How to Think about Southern California”*

As a result of her many geographical crossings in varied landscapes, the writing of the Canadian poet Jan Conn could indeed be approached as a travelogue of impressions and “re-discoveries” of different places, peoples, and cultures. Her interest in the “secrets of medicine men and women,” or on details possibly not easily recognized by the traveller’s eyes, reveals her attempts to extrapolate the boundaries between known and unknown worlds. Yet, as the verses in the epigraph also suggest, the “light [in this landscape] is confrontational”. (CONN, 1994, p. 95). Instead of only reflecting the impositions and drives of the eager traveller, the landscape returns the traveller’s gaze, creating a space where inner and outer

boundaries are inevitably confronted and re-explored. Aware of such complexities, Conn offers in her poetry an opportunity to re-think about what is involved in writing on the crossing and the re-mapping of boundaries between different geographical and discursive spaces.²

The interconnection between travel and representation has been the focus of much of the theory and criticism produced in recent scholarship. Critics have been discussing about and even challenging the implications and complications involved in the kinds of representations produced by travellers around the world. Michael Kowalewski, for example, emphasizes the relevance of critical readings on travel, and points out that it is exactly the challenges imposed on travel writing (mainly related to a traveller's attempt to write about a culture not being part of that same culture) that has usually attracted a great number of travel writers (p. 2-3). Moreover, for Kowalewski, such acts usually "blend outward, spatial aspects of travel (social observation and evocations of alien settings and sensibilities) with the inward, temporal forms of memory and recollection" (p. 9). In this sense, the relation between self and other becomes one of the underlying narratives of the writing on travel.

However, embedded in this narrative, there is also what Caren Kaplan has recognized as the need of the other (or of distance) to the "ideology of subjectivity" (p. 212). In "Transporting the Subject: Technologies of Mobility and Location in an Era of Globalization," Kaplan argues that, despite the mobility and the reinventions enabled by travel experiences, subjects insist on "locatedness," re-defining their points of connection with a sense of origin, particularly in the globalized world (p. 209).³ Thus, the interconnections between self and other become not only problematic but open to questioning and revision since grounded on the rhetoric of re-affirmation of *roots* over *routes*.⁴ In this context, travel is located not as a mere "celebration" of the crossing of frontiers but also as ambivalent in its core. In a similar line of thought, Renata Wasserman and Sandra Almeida have recently commented upon such ambivalences in their introduction to a collection of essays on travel writing. For these critics,

[t]ravel writing brings to the fore fundamental and unresolvable contradictions: it records (but at times simply imagines) how geographic dislocation confirms and destabilizes the self, whether that is understood culturally or psychologically. It records conquest and the imposition of

the cultural self on a cultural other, but it also records exploration and the opening of the self; it glamorizes the dangers of both. (p. 9)

Through such a re-reading, the mapping and re-mapping of spaces occupied by selves and others become a continuous, almost non-stop, movement – a movement that is both “tainted” (CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 30) and open to new possibilities in creation and representation.

Jan Conn's writing reflects these same concerns. As the landscapes represented in her poetry are not only mere descriptions of scenery or of a background which surrounds the speaker/poet, Conn's portrayal of her experiences of different landscapes serves as a path to read not only her own role as a writer of the other, but also her questionings and representations of a discourse of exploration in travel. In her poetry, places such as Guatemala, Venezuela, or Brazil appear as travel locations or destinations, but they become more than that, since they are also spaces of re-discovery for the travelling and gendered self. Travelling and writing poetry since the 1970's, and constructing what Beatriz Badikian has called a poet's “own personal maps” (p. 73), Conn can indeed be considered a “travel writer of sorts” (BADIKIAN, 1998, p. 73). Yet, it is through her poetical writing (in opposition to more traditional travel accounts or ethnographies) that she is able to critically reflect on the encounters between self and other in the constant exchange of experiences in the travelled space.

Thus, I read Conn's practice as embedded in this very context: not necessarily as a celebration of the destabilization of borders, but as a possibility for further reflection on what is involved in travel and representation. As many of her travel poems suggest, the sense of failure in controlling travel experiences and the awareness of the limitations of one's knowledge in a new geographical and cultural context “initiate,” in Kowalewski's words, “a humbling but not paralyzing self-examination” (p. 10). Such internal movement allows Conn to re-read her subjectivity, or her personal re-discoveries, as part of a tradition of travel and exploration. Yet, instead of reconstructing a discourse of impersonality based on the image of the self-assured and objective explorer, Conn actually challenges this discourse by creating new ways of reading its silences, or its moments of instability. It is through an investigation of her subjective, unsettled, and gendered self that these new readings become possible.

Since the publication of her first book, *Red Shoes in the Rain*, Conn has been interested in negotiating the experience of displacement involved in travelling to different and unexpected cultures.⁵ However, it is with the publication of her second book, *The Fabulous Disguise of Ourselves*, that such negotiations become more evident. The first half of the poems in this collection reflects Conn's experiences in Central America, mainly Guatemala, where, according to the commentary on the book's back cover "several of the poems were written." The evident contrasts between the places visited or travelled to and the ones left home immediately overcome the poetical imagination, and many of the poems actually dwell on an exploration of the different, and even inhospitable, landscape. Since the first poem on Guatemala, "Casa Shaw," images of cockroaches, rotting wood, mould, or of a manager who "eat[s] mangoes and watermelon / with a carved silver spoon" (p. 13) invade Conn's verses and create a sense of isolation and difference that actually contrasts with the speaker's incessant attempts to "write" this place back home. "Lake Atitlán," for example, opens with the speaker's inability to describe the foreign environment: "I try to describe this place to you / in letters, but I can't get it down" (p. 17), and the mind of the traveller literally goes back and forth between the travelled space and the space left.

However, despite the alleged inability, the other does get written, as well as the position the self occupies in the travelling space. Such position is permeated by the reconstruction not only of the travelled space but also of memories of family and childhood. It seems particularly significant, then, that Conn opens this collection with the poem "While I Was Looking at the Background You Walked out of the Picture." In it, Conn presents some of her first attempts at negotiating the meaning of travel through personal memories, recovering as well different subject positions defined against the axis of who is allowed to travel or to stay at home. Conn introduces an imaginary of foreign landscapes connected to the image of the father, who later on re-appears in her poetics as what could be read as an emblematic figure for the male traveller.

The poem opens with a potential bridging of two different locations through the affirmation: "I've sent you a tiger" (p. 11). Imaginary or not, the tiger's "fur burns intense orange" and its ears, since "filled with white hair," still "[listen] to dreams / of the rain forest: fat frogs creaking, a prey of insects crackling" (p. 11). Through the tiger's image, the experience of the landscape from which it was sent

also travels with it, creating the potential connection of two different spatial zones. Such action could be interpreted as a re-reading of earlier scenes in the speaker's life, presented in the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, when the addressed 'you' of the poem is also defined:

You leave me behind, always,
coming home months later, from India,
Africa, Colombia – with another
smell on your skin, a suitcase
of saris and ivory elephants for your wife,

and smaller gifts for us, the daughters, growing
like Hallowe'en pumpkins, awkward teeth
stuck in our grins. (p. 11).

In these images, the sense of separation between the traveller (father) and what or who is left behind (wife and daughters) is tentatively alleviated by the gifts and mementos of another world. Such world is not physically travelled but imaginatively journeyed by at least one of the daughters, even if only through the father's smells. Still, the feeling of something missing, or of an absence that is not easily fulfilled by the mementos brought home, permeates these stanzas and in the last verses of the poem, the speaker tells: "I decide to become an archaeologist, / to go where you've been / while the scent is still fresh" (p. 11). At this particular moment, there is an inversion of roles. Instead of a continuous waiting, a position that, according to Mary Morris, has been the traditional position of women who, confined to their domestic roles, had "to await the coming of the stranger to town" instead of journeying or looking for it (p. 25), the speaker acknowledges her own need to follow the dream of travel, and becomes a traveller herself, sending, through the tiger, new messages home.

It is not by chance that Conn brings to the fore images of her father when talking about the travelling quest in many of her poems from different collections. As a mining engineer, Conn's father travelled to many places around the world in search of areas of exploration and mining development.⁶ By looking at his position as an explorer, Conn recognizes that her own experience is connected to

the recovery of a personal past in which travelling and the exploration of distant lands and different surroundings defined the father's domain (his space in Conn's personal mappings). Yet, despite the evident pull the images of the restless quest, represented by the father, exert on the daughter's imaginary about travel and exploration, this appeal is also counterbalanced by the continuous reading of the mother's position in her surroundings. As the speaker of "First Signs of Transformation" acknowledges:

Under the bedclothes
I read novel after novel,
whose heroes in dug-out canoes
explored the Orinoco, the Amazon. (CONN, 1990: 23)

Even in this attempt to escape the enclosure of the physical domestic space, such verses are also complicated by the fact that, while she, as the daughter, was indeed "discover[ing] El Dorado," her mother "minded five children, / played bridge & sang in the Sunday choir" (CONN, 1990: 23). By connecting such images, Conn further explores the many layers that demarcate spatial boundaries. If, as Eric Leed notices, "[t]ravel is a gendering activity" and [t]here is no free and mobile male without the unfree and sessile female" (p. 221), Conn attempts to resist a reading of herself as enclosed in the domestic space. Yet, at the same time she rejects such space, she recovers it, since the stories surrounding her mother's journeys also inform Conn's personal mappings.⁷

Conn's writing can be approached, then, as bridging some of the gaps left in a traditional history of exploration and in the writing of difference and new territories. She re-inscribes the links between her travelling and gendered subjectivity and the travelled landscapes of her poetical encounters. Conn's inner (or private) worlds can, in fact, be read as a public re-discovery of the legacies of a historical discourse of travel and exploration usually populated by male characters, such as the heroes of the novels she used to read as a child. Her travel experiences are marked by such legacies, but she also challenges them as she attempts to read their silences. In this context, her poetical journeys become not only acts of covering geographical distances and reading spaces but also a re-reading of how these spaces were constructed throughout historical discourses. Also, more than looking at the

position of the travelling explorer as privileged and self-assuring, Conn reflects on the many intricacies (or moments of instability) that permeate the crossing of borders between known and unknown spaces.

In “Manaus,” for instance, one of the first poems on Brazil she publishes in *South of the Tudo Bem Café*, Conn describes the experience of visiting this Amazonian city. In the portrayal of the local zoo, one notes that the animals cause a certain unexpected impression on the speaker/viewer:

Boa constrictors wind around vertical
wooden shafts, draped over each other
like shoelaces. The only animal that moves
is a jaguar, whose caged pacing troubles me
for days. (p. 50)

As an object of observation, the exotic jaguar is literally framed for the observer's examinations of it. Yet, as the speaker also recognizes, the animal is restless; its own nature cannot be contained in the zoo's cage, and it directly affects the speaker, troubling her. By recognizing this “troubled feeling” in relation to the jaguar's caged pace, Conn points toward the ambivalent position she occupies in a system of representation that, in a way or another, attempts to “contain” the other's difference inside an ordering frame. This tension between the framing observer's look and what cannot necessarily be contained in the frame of representation permeates much of Conn's writing on travel. Although many of her poems, particularly in *South of the Tudo Bem Café*, could be seen as what George Elliott Clarke has defined, in his review of the book, as “mere postcards” (p. 55), these same poems also defy an unproblematic “framing” of the other's difference in a contained narrative of “re-discovery.” As the caged pace of the jaguar reminds us, even if “contained,” the observed other is still restless, and in the most unexpected moments, it brings the observer's gaze back to the self.

In another poem on Brazil, “Amazonian Rain,” published in *What Dante Did with Loss*, Conn challenges the travelling quest, and re-inserts the recognition that the position the traveller occupies is never in isolation, but is directly informed by the travelled destination as well. In it, the poet re-maps the rainforest's space in relation to its definitions as a “golden mine,” which come not only from its eco-

nomical exploration, but also from its attractiveness to travellers and explorers.⁸ By structuring the poem around the observations, feeling and sensations of the approaching traveller, who carefully notes every detail of her movement toward the vastness of the forest, Conn destabilizes the experience of the “Amazonian dream,” as it is embedded in a series of painful recognitions regarding the state of the forest. In the poem, “the Amazonian Basin, the frontier” (p. 77) is portrayed as “thousands of hectares of exquisite / flora and fauna— / except a lot of it has already been ‘disappeared’...” (p. 77). The traveller-speaker recognizes the silences of space and its transformation through “fires and bulldozers and wealthy ranchers / and their hired gunman” (p. 77). In an interjection, the speaker reacts and is appalled: “But there was a whole / interconnected world here, intricate and complex...” (p. 77). At this moment, when reflecting on the past interconnections of every living organism in the forest, the speaker realizes that the same rain that used to fall over them now falls again, coming towards herself, but exposing a new set of relations,

as the first drops
 let loose on the dead boa constrictor by the roadside
 and the noisy parrots
 clustered like feather dusters in the fruit trees
 and the lone Brazil-nut tree
 rising like a tidal wave
 above the grove of rubber trees
 and our upturned faces
 opening like flowers [. . .] (p. 77-78)

The rain, which releases the speaker from the tormenting sun and the covering red dust, also releases a new image of the forest: with a boa probably killed by a car on the side of the road, with birds looking for the rarer fruit trees, and with the lone Brazil nut tree still resisting the invasion of the more economically profitable rubber trees. Yet, it is at this moment the traveller recognizes herself as part of this picture – her presence is also transforming it; the roads are not built for the native wild animals of the forest. In this recognition, the speaker addresses the falling rain:

Wash away the red dust,
the heat, the useless grandiose
Amazonian dreams. For which, like gold fever,
there is no cure. (p. 78)

These final verses carry with them Conn's re-mapping of the Amazonian search. In her re-reading of the invasion of the forest, she does not necessarily exclude her own participation or interference. The definition of these dreams as "useless," since probably still embedded in the idealized reading of the space as "El Dorado," redefines the encounter; and in this context, the image of the "gold fever" seems particularly appropriate in its relation to exploration, domestication and even expropriation of the land.

In poems such as "Amazonian Rain," the grandiosity of travelling epiphanies about self and other is challenged, defied. In its place, one finds a tension between the traveller-observer's perspective and the material existence of the travelled space. Similarly to the stories about Conn's family and her past, which become points of departure for a re-reading of gender in the discourse of travel and exploration, Conn's travelled landscapes also enable the poet to uncover the hidden stories embedded in centuries of colonial domestication of the land. As she writes in "Three Poems for the Rio Xingú," published in *Botero's Beautiful Horses*:

At times what the eye can see
the heart misses completely – so the emerald breast
of a hill across the cobalt slash of the Xingú,

shorn of its primary forest,
is filled with the plaintive cries of grasses
and the palms shine on
in the glaze and dazzle of noon,

the moon-white cattle wade
up to their thickened waists
in the resinous light. (p. 87)

Even if recognizing that contemporary travel narratives are still embedded in the narratives of the past, Conn continuously excavates some of their hidden meanings, their silences. In her reading of the Brazilian landscape, Conn recovers the stories of transformation of this land, now filled with grasses for the grazing of cattle instead of its native vegetations. Through these underlying tones and the juxtaposition of different images, she resists enclosing the land in a new containing narrative, opening it up to its historical resonances.

These tensions between traveller and travelled space are even more explicit in Conn's *Jaguar Rain: the Margaret Mee Poems*, in which she re-counts the journeys of this British botanical painter in the Amazon region. Born in England in 1909, Margaret Mee moved to Brazil in 1952, living in this country for more than twenty years. She was a painter and a passionate admirer of Brazilian nature, and she became the resident botanical artist at the São Paulo Botanical Institute in 1960.⁹ Mee undertook fifteen journeys to the Amazon region (between 1956 and 1988), exploring many of the Amazonian rivers, and painting mainly the local flora and its wild flowers. In her biographical notes at the end of *Jaguar Rain*, Conn writes: "[Mee] was the first botanical artist to begin to put exuberant background details into her formal botanical paintings. These serve as a reminder that whole ecosystems give rise to such diversity, species richness, and the critical need to preserve this extraordinary heritage" (p. 107). By recognizing the importance of this particular feature of Mee's artistic work, Conn also points toward a direction to the reading of her own poetical constructions, be it in *Jaguar Rain* or elsewhere: in the process of re-mapping 'an-other' world, the attention to its interrelations and to the connecting threads that envelop both observer and observed (or even inner and outer worlds) is fundamental.

Mee's Amazonian travels, being the result of her interest as a botanical artist and explorer, are in direct dialogue with previous exploratory narratives of the region, such as Alexander Von Humboldt's and Richard Spruce's (in fact, these are some of the names both Mee and Conn raise in their writings). Conn re-inserts Mee's journeys as part of an archive of exploration and discovery, something which is even reinforced in the first section of her book, called "Antecedents." In it, the archaeological acts of collecting and classifying are recovered, framing not only a reading of the Amazonian region, but of the very act of exploration. Yet, Conn's presentations of these "antecedents" are quite unique. Instead of repeating the de-

contextualized discourse of museum displays, Conn imaginatively re-constructs the experience of encounter. "Near the Solimões River, 1880," for example, opens with a question:

What would *you* do, she asked, if you came upon a man
wearing eight black-necked red cotingas around his waist?
Their heads and tails scarlet. Everything else glossy, buffed
black. A bar tips the tail like a blackout over the eyes
of torture victims in police photographs? (p. 17)

This conversational tone and the sense of estrangement characterizing the direct question are actually defied in the second stanza of the poem, when the speaker responds to it by re-connecting with the experience of encounter itself: "As he walks toward me, a strange arrhythmic sound: snail / shell and animal bone on his chest rubbing together. The / feathers brush against me first, then other things. Bird feet, claws clenched". (p. 17). In these verses, the hypothetical encounter is concretized in the speaker's reconstruction of it, and the poem's effect becomes even more significant when, in reading Conn's notes, one realizes the poem is a re-presentation of an indigenous body ornament, now located at the "Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna". (p. 97). In this re-reading, the observed object is not seen in isolation, but it is relocated in relation to its observer. The object becomes more than a mere artefact or a display, but it is actually re-enveloped by its historical resonances. Recovering the stories of Mee's journeys, Conn once more attempts to read the silences or the voids left by the discourse of travel in its framing of the other.

It seems that one of the ways Conn finds to resist the "caging" or the "containment" of representation is by attempting to focus on movement and openness, or on the many elements surrounding the experience being represented. This resistance occurs from the very first poems on Mee's expeditions. In "For the Giant Anteater," on Mee's travels in the state of Pará, Conn re-creates a sequence of images that enables the reader to experience the connections between traveller and travelled space. Some of the verses of the poem, which can be approached as imagistic units by themselves, read:

Heat slaps our faces, a wet sheet, under the massive mango trees
 I trade my gouache for the giant anteater, its long viscous tongue
 Pre-dawn, down a hundred wooden steps into thick mist, hidden river
 [.]
 When scarlet ibis float across the molten greens, suns also rise
 We cross rapids: eyes wide open, swinging long bamboo, poling by heart
 [.]
 Mangrove roots, black mud, little crabs—boiled on board in a blackened pot
 Ticks desert the band of skinny pigs: on us grow fat as red balloons. (p. 28)

In poems such as this, Conn does not over-narrate Mee's own journey, but recreates moments of perception avoiding their confinement in a 'grand narrative' of re-discovery. Through each verse, Conn presents the reader with Mee's experiences of the Brazilian scenery: her experiences of observation, travel, and of the encounter between inner and outer worlds. By reconfiguring Mee's positioning in the forest around her (on her re-connections with heat, mist, the sunrise, or even in her leave-taking read against the parasites that leave the bodies of pigs), Conn does create a space for the surfacing of a myriad of layers in the exchanges between traveller and travelled space. Such layers, separate but dependent (as Mee's sketches of the plants and their symbiotic environment), challenge the confinement of the other as they allow both the poet's and the botanist's experiences of these images to be discovered. Thus, traveller and travelled space become intricately connected.

Yet, even in this movement towards openness and experience, there is also tension and ambivalence; such ambivalence, as Conn seems to realize, can be hardly reconciled in narratives on travel and exploration. In "Why," for instance, Conn reconstructs Mee's sense of frustration in failing to be the first European to reach the summit of the highest Amazonian mountain, called Pico da Neblina. By looking at Mee's narrative as still embedded in the ambivalent space of re-discovery, Conn is able to reflect on the many external and internal quests involved in the exploration of the other's "interiority." In the poem, the speaker asks, why

weep when the path to the summit is washed out?
 Bromeliads relish the rain.
 Why cry when food runs low?

Giant earthworms make a great stir-fry.
 [.]
 Better to cry over the abandoned malocas,
 their families buried beneath our feet.
 Better to weep on the way back down, knee-deep in mud.
 Send the hunters into the woods

for a votive termite nest to toss on the flames.
 Taste the amber smoke, the bitter smoke. (p. 47)

In the representation of Mee's cry after her unsuccessful journey to the summit of Pico da Neblina, Conn brings to the fore the realization that what is best for the traveller may not be best for the travelled space. In Conn's juxtapositions of the hardships of the exploring journey to the indigenous houses abandoned and their families buried along the traveller's paths due to their contact with "outsider's illnesses" (such as measles or tuberculosis), discovery is once more questioned and challenged. In this context, the maps drawn by observer-explorers such as Mee or Conn are embedded in a constant tension between self and other, observer and observed. Their explored paths and rivers are, as Conn recognizes through Mee's voice, "stained with the ink from my pen" (p. 73). Their connections are never necessarily free of conflict.

In her encounters with Mee's journeys up and down Amazonian rivers, Conn is able to further reflect on her own position as what Badikian has called a "travel writer of sorts" (p. 73). In the re-mapping of Mee's travels, Conn challenges the silences of representation, since the travelled space is not necessarily fixed but actually permeated by historical echoes and by the traveller's subjective experience of it. In looking at the connections between traveller and travelled space (observer and observed), Conn also destabilizes the travelling subject, as this subject is constantly changing and being changed by the travelled space. Like Mee's portrayal of Amazonian flowers and their "background" details, which would emphasize the symbiosis or the relations of different elements in the same ecosystem, Conn focuses on how spaces are constructed in relation to one another, and not in isolation.

In her last book, *Botero's Beautiful Horses*, Conn investigates more intensely another characteristic of the travel poet according to Badikian: the act of "travelling

through words to create new worlds” (p. 73). The poems in this collection not only take the reader to travels through Mexico, Brazil, or Bolivia, but also through journeys of the imagination in their ekphratic (*sic*) re-readings of the worlds of artists such as Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington. In the last two sections of the book, where Conn focuses on a reconstruction of Varo’s imaginative power, once more we see the two worlds of observer (maybe Conn herself) and observed (Varo and her paintings) intermingling, creating new ways of experiencing and perceiving Mexico or, more importantly, of experiencing journeying itself. By focusing on the life of an artist also known for her avid interest in the multiplicity of the self, Conn possibly finds a way to write about her own inner worlds without being explicitly autobiographical. As she writes in “Iconographical,” the encounter with the artist’s imagination reveals a woman who

[...] muses on pentagrams, a chance encounter,
 complex mathematical formulae that appear
 across the sky after a storm in lieu of a rainbow.
 No single self but multitudes, all squeezed into
 the same body. (p. 119)

In verses such as these, one cannot affirm with certainty which selves are being painted in the poem, if Conn’s, Varo’s, or their personae’s. Yet, Conn’s writing continuously invites us to reflect on the possibilities that come from the exchange between selves and others.

In this context, Conn’s travel encounters allow her to explore the connections of inner and outer worlds and how such interrelations inevitably affect and mould both her subjectivity and her own writing. Even if Conn recognizes that the “confrontational light” of landscapes constantly return to the traveller his or her own gaze, her poetics of travel also reveals that it is exactly through this constant tension that the poet negotiates old and new meanings about self and other in the crossing of geographical locations. Some of these negotiations, in her work, involve a recovery of the silences embedded in the travelling discourse, be them related to questions of gender or to questions of colonization and transformation of the travelled space. Moreover, her insistence in focusing on the personal maps constructed by the traveller reflects her awareness of the ambivalences of representational

practices as both a door and a frame for new perspectives on the world; yet, she also seems to embrace such ambivalences as the challenge of poetry. In “Golden,” she writes: “My gondola tilts. When I regain my footing / I’m inside a glass globe filled with white flakes. / The galaxy is shaking” (p. 98). As the verses suggest, the boundaries of perspective are also shaken in poetical representations, and it may be up to the reader to decide who, in fact, is being observed in this landscape.

Abstract: This article presents a re-reading of the ambiguities involved in travel and representation through a discussion about the work of the Canadian poet Jan Conn. Considering Conn produces poetical reconstructions (in opposition to more traditional travel accounts or ethnographies) of her experiences crossing borders in the Americas, her writing becomes a privileged space for the reassessment of the dialectics between self and other in travel. Thus, I argue that, through her poetry, Conn does not necessarily present travel as celebration since she actually challenges the discourse of travel by reading its moments of instability and its historical silences.

Keywords: travel writing; canadian poetry; self and other.

Résumé: Dans cet article nous proposons une relecture des ambiguïtés qui se produisent au croisement du voyage et de la représentation à travers l’étude de l’oeuvre de la poétesse canadienne Jan Conn. Si l’on considère que Conn produit des reconstructions poétiques (à rebours des traditionnels récits de voyages ou relations ethnographiques) de ses expériences de franchissement des frontières dans les Amériques, son oeuvre devient un lieu privilégié pour la relecture de la dialectique entre le moi et l’autre. Ainsi nous démontrons que chez Conn le voyage n’est pas nécessairement une célébration, mais un défi à ce discours, dans la mesure où elle le lit par le biais de ses moments d’instabilité et d’épisodes historiques passés sous silence.

Mots-clés: récits de voyages; poésie canadienne; le moi et l’autre.

Notes

- ¹ This work presents part of the results from the research developed for my PhD thesis titled *Unexpected Encounters: Brazilian Journeys and Poetical Re-discoveries in the Works of Elizabeth Bishop*, P.K. Page and Jan Conn.
- ² It is important to remind the reader here that Conn occupies a very intriguing position in travel and representation as both an award-winning poet and a renowned biologist, who travels the Americas due to her scientific research as well. For a more detailed reading of Conn's literary trajectory, her travel experiences and her work as a biologist see Sperling, Magali. "Jan Conn's Encounters in Brazil: An-Other Writing." *Interfaces Brasil/Canadá* n 5, p. 97-113, 2005.
- ³ In this particular essay, Caren Kaplan focuses on how, even in the cybernetic discourse of displacement and disembodiment, the self is inevitably located. One of her main points is to discuss how the discourse of technology and communication, even if claiming the deconstruction of the binary between mobility and location, "animates the question of embodiment in historically specific ways" (p. 219). In this particular essay, Caren Kaplan focuses on how, even in the cybernetic discourse of displacement and disembodiment, the self is inevitably located. One of her main points is to discuss how the discourse of technology and communication, even if claiming the deconstruction of the binary between mobility and location, "animates the question of embodiment in historically specific ways" (p. 219).
- ⁴ The dialectic between roots and routes has been presented by James Clifford in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth-Century*.
- ⁵ One might notice, for example, the section "Japanese Journal," which is based on the poet's experiences of cycling through Japan.
- ⁶ In interviews with both Rob McLennan and Sharon Caseburg, Conn acknowledges her father's influence throughout her life. As an engineer, he was a reference for her scientific pursuits. Also, it was through the postcards he would send home from his travels that Conn started to experiment with language and new environments. In Caseburg's interview, Conn affirms: "My father sent postcards from his trips abroad with brief, vivid descriptions of his surroundings and experiences; I probably internalized these as a model for my own subsequent travel notes, many of which eventually became poems" (p. 34).
- ⁷ In her poetry, Conn also recuperates the memories and feelings surrounding her mother's suicide, which can be read as connected to the spaces the mother occupies in the family routines. In "One View from the Look-out Tower," for example, Conn approaches how the mother seemed quietly to resist a certain moulding of her life. The last stanza of the poem reads: "I stand on the silver / look-out tower, an adult woman, / and think that this is where you really died. / Florence Elliot Cole Conn. / Not in Denver, Colorado, in 1976, / locked in a garage with the car motor running, / but here, in Asbestos, you died / many times, in secret, / and none of us recognized the intricate darkness / that held you like a blacksmith / forging some hard and beautiful metal into a shape / that couldn't endure the bending" (CONN, 1990: 29).
- ⁸ An example of this discourse can be found in Renata Wasserman's recent reading of travel to the Amazon in "Exotic Science and Domestic Exoticism: by Theodore Roosevelt and J.A. Leite Moraes in Amazonia." *Ilha do Desterro* n 57, p. 59-78, 2009.

- ⁹ My notes on Margaret Mee's life were compiled from both Jan Conn's biographical note on Mee in *Jaguar Rain* (107), and from the introduction to Margaret Mee, *Margaret Mee's Amazon: Diaries of an Artist Explorer* (Woodbridge: Antique Collector's Club in association with The Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, 2004) 17-19.

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