5 Contested Boundaries and Uncharted Entanglements in Evelyn Conlon's *Moving About the Place*

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Evelyn Conlon, a Transcultural Writer

Evelyn Conlon went to Australia in 1972 by ship and stayed there for three years. She did a lot of travelling around the country and all sorts of jobs, experiencing what Arianna Dagnino calls a "cultural dislocation" (1). In an interview conducted with Melania Terrazas ("I Have Always"), Conlon talks about the impact of that time on her life and career:

> When I came back to Ireland I had my first child, at twenty-three […]. I went back to Maynooth College, which was also the place where priests were trained […] It seemed an impossible task but I got a crèche going there […] I had my second child in the second year and separated from my ex-husband in the third year. Pretty hectic arts degree […] such enormous turmoil in my personal life affected what I wrote about […] it gave me an opportunity to see a world that I would never have seen otherwise, to understand what hypocrisy means.
>
> (208–209)

Like other Irish transcultural writers, such as Roddy Doyle, Margaret McCarthy, Hugo Hamilton and Colum McCann, Conlon also questions the ways the limits of the local and the global affect her and her creative practice. As she explains in an interview conducted with Paige Reynolds ("The Lookout"):

> It could be said that the global is always local somewhere. The other question could be: Where am I from? I mean, *where am I really from*? Of course I'm from Ireland, as in that I was born there, but I don't spend my days thinking that I'm Irish. I don't feel Irish, except in certain situations – usually when I'm away … One of the joys of literature is that it allows us to be somewhere else, fills in the gaps in our experience, lets us know the thoughts of a woman in Iran or a man in

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> the proverbial Timbuktu, or indeed the Monaghan woman with the handbag in America.
>
> (171)

Conlon is interested in travel and in how new, foreign settings have an impact on one's perspectives ambivalently as she affirms that "travel can broaden the mind, but it can also narrow it" (E. Conlon, personal communication, July 31, 2023). Undoubtedly, she is well aware of the effect of travelling and experiencing dislocation to "embrace the opportunities and the freedom that diversity and mobility bestow" (Dagnino, 2), and her literary production bears witness of her concern with this topic.

Her first short-story collection, *My Head Is Opening* (1987), includes stories set in Italy and Australia, as well as others where mobility in and out of Ireland is a feature. In her novels *Stars in the Daytime* (1989), *A Glassful of Letters* (1998) and *Skin of Dreams* (2003) Conlon places her characters in Italy, Ireland and the United States. After her fourth novel, *Not the Same Sky* (2013), where she tells the story of 4,414 Irish girls orphaned by famine and shipped to Australia between 1848 and 1850 to satisfy the colony's demand for domestic servants, Conlon returns to the short story genre in *Moving About the Place* (2021), which also features characters living and establishing relationships in countries in which she has a long-standing interest: Australia, Japan, Italy, Indonesia, Monaco and South Africa.

This collection of eleven stories distils a transcultural turn, not only because its shifting viewpoints address "experiences associated with the fashioning of a new self as the result of travelling to far-flung places" as Teresa Caneda-Cabrera ("Women's Mobility", 54) puts it, but also because it shows how people's movement – or, more concretely, women's movement – can lead to progressive material and emotional transformations. Underlying this idea is Conlon's determination to challenge binary oppositions so that "centre" and "periphery" become recurrent sites of contestation and their interstices emerge as the object of attention.

Moving About the Place is anchored in female agency, as is Conlon's feminist stance since her involvement in the radical end of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement – with Irish Women United – in the 1970s.[1] Since then, Conlon has continually refused the place intended for her and, thankfully, for the reader. Her feminist engagement is evident in her construction of female characters "with multiple affiliations and multi-located identifications" (Caneda-Cabrera, "Women on the Move" 27). In *Moving About the Place*, she draws attention to both underacknowledged female historical figures and ordinary women whose active commitment contributes one way or another to combating inequalities and transcending boundaries. She relishes in the unexpected and a careful reading of her

work reveals that her characters dodge fixed categorisations and are "never solely one [seeker] or the other [sought] because the world does not stay fixed" (Dolan).

Her ongoing questioning and challenging have translated into her creative work as a satirical rhetoric of inquiry, and are the foundation of her extremely observant, succinct and witty narrative voice. Her style transgresses boundaries in order to render visible the dynamics of cultural entanglement, and her frequent use of open endings alludes to alternative scenarios that conjure up unforeseen futures. Similarly, her use of rhetorical strategies of the satirical apparatus, namely, irony and wit, stands out as a strategy to contest ideologically marked categorisations and offer alternatives.[2] Besides satire, Conlon's conceptual creativity is deployed through experimental writing, illuminating various transcultural insights into the ethics and activism of the eclectic women who inhabit her stories, and the social justice they seek. As she has argued, "fiction gives you a different lookout point. It's a lookout point from where to feel what's happening in the world" (Reynolds, "The Lookout" 181). Accordingly, her female characters often embody strong assertive activism, whether loud or silent, because their practice of addressing particular social and political issues is a way of challenging those in power. As a result, Conlon's characters are complex and diverse individuals who have much to offer and bring about meaningful change in their societies. Social justice, women's lives and history are recurrent elements in Conlon's production and her work frequently encourages critical thinking about the complex experiences, life narratives and transformations witnessed in Ireland's modern history. As she comments in an interview, her work facilitates new truths because her witty female characters are allowed to think in crooked lines and to be perceived differently from the norm (Terrazas, "Gender Issues" 143). Her protagonists always have a purpose, which confirms Conlon as a strongly engaged writer whose stories are also narrative accounts of dissent and calls for change.

Considering transculturality a method that addresses culture as a dynamic category and debunks ideological dichotomies (Pelillo-Hestermeyer), Conlon's transcultural lens is a natural methodological companion to the restless feminist and activist that she is, always yearning for mobility, always reaching beyond her place and beyond the accepted canon. *Moving About the Place* points out the rise of a global mode of thinking and presents culture as "constantly changing, moving, adapting … through contact and exchange beyond real or perceived borders" (Abu-Er-Rub et al., xxiii). Following these criteria, the collection questions a hermetic view of culture identified with the geographical limits of a nation, Ireland, calls for epistemological openness and challenges well-established

knowledge, in such a way that its transcultural traits not only affect the individual but also history.

The aim of this discussion is to show Conlon's ability to express a newly emergent transcultural sensibility in four selected stories included in *Moving About the Place*, particularly constructed on the understanding that "entanglement, exchange, porosity and hybridisation have always been an instrumental part of the ongoing definition and development of cultures" (Abu-Er-Rub et al., xxvi). These four stories involve Irish women who behave unconventionally, move abroad or return to the island, always bringing some kind of change with them. Conlon's art thus calls into question social and geographical borders and overturns ideological and physical limitations. The stories, deeply filtered through her personal experiences, offer re-readings and reappropriations of Irish history and culture from a transcultural lens, examine spatial and time limitations on people, detect uncharted connectivities, and present new and broader understandings of transcultural social practices.

Moving About the Place: On Contested Boundaries and Uncharted Entanglements

"Imagine Them", "Dear You", "The Lie of the Land" and "Disturbing Words" are stories that present networks of power and identity formation created by people, material objects, media and ideas on the move. They revolve around imperialism, colonial encounters, border-crossing and contestation, and cultural transformations by means of exchange and negotiation. In these four stories, "place" is "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6). Conlon challenges asymmetries and promotes new modes of perception and new practices so that transculturation happens in those particular places of contact.

"Imagine Them" is the story of Mary Lee, the Irish woman at the forefront of securing the vote for women in South Australia in 1894, while "Dear You" fictionalises the life of Violet Gibson, the Irish woman who almost succeeded in assassinating Mussolini in 1926. These two stories inspired by real historical figures pay tribute to all the suffragists and feminist activists with a focus on their letters (a constant trope in Conlon's fiction), and other personal objects and documents such as birth and marriage certificates, photographs, etc., through a transcultural lens.[3] Conlon's interest in reclaiming a broader knowledge of Irish history and its global connectivities is anchored to her focus on women's agency for transformation.

The other two stories under analysis here are non-historical but also involve the crossing of boundaries and mobility. "The Lie of the Land" tells the story of Dervla and Hugh, who lie out of shame to friends and family when they move to South Africa during the Irish boycott of the 1980s.[4] Instead, they say that they are moving to Australia. In "Disturbing Words",[5] a woman living in Abu Dhabi returns to her border county in the North of Ireland for her parents' funerals and becomes entangled with their response to the Border. The story presents the concepts of nations and frontiers as dynamically changing cultural and political formations subject to resistance and contestation.

In what follows, we scrutinise Conlon's retrieval and rereading of historical figures as active transcultural agents in "Imagine Them" and "Dear You". Then, a careful examination of "The Lie of the Land" and "Disturbing Words" will concentrate on Conlon's approach to borders and how they are performed, acted upon and discussed, as well as their direct effect upon people.

In "Imagine Them", Conlon uses the narrative voice of a historical figure, Mary Lee, an Irish woman born in Monaghan in 1821, who decides to emigrate to Australia with her daughter Evelyn because her son Ben, who lives there, is ill. After a year Ben dies and instead of returning, Mary stays, committed to improving Australian women's rights as an active member of the Social Purity Society committee. At the end of the story, Mary is presented as a suffragette, the co-honorary secretary of the South Australian Women's Suffrage League, who fought non-stop for the women's vote from 1888 to December 1894, when the Australian colony granted this right. Mary "needed to move and do" (59), just as much as Conlon did when she moved to Australia in the 1970s. That response to turmoil had a very positive effect on the suffragette's vision of the world and activism, and on Conlon's transcultural drive to write about Irish women, to imagine a different Ireland for them and to become involved in the Irish "sexual revolution" through Irish Women United, a radical activist group with a charter of demands.[6]

"Imagine Them" is also a very intimate exercise in experimentation with the formal and aesthetic possibilities for rendering female subjects' lives in new ways. The short story is intended to both pay tribute to the South Australian suffragettes who, like Mary Lee, came from very different backgrounds, with unique personal and social circumstances and needs, and to show the reader how they mobilised a huge petition that culminated in the Adult Suffrage Bill (1894), an important historical moment referred to in very evocative terms:

> The petition grew in length, the pages began to stack up. Not one signature looked like another. Mary wrote pamphlets as well as letters […]

> Unlike others, she could sign her own name, no fears. There had to be some advantages to being a widow she thought.
>
> (62)

"Imagine Them" brings these events into the present as Mary Lee, depicted as "a great woman" (65), epitomises many other uncharted Irish feminists whose advocacy has been described by Ailbhe Smyth as follows:

> What Irish women can and do bring to the movement globally is freshness and practicality, a politics grounded in lived experience, a tolerance stemming from the fraught circumstances of our complex history, which enables us to both embrace and be embraced by difference and diversity.
>
> (275)

Considering that "both ideas and practices migrate not only spatially, but also over time" (Abu-Er-Rub et al., xxxii), "Imagine Them" is a clever and engaging story that leads readers to confront migrant and feminist women's memories, journeys, activism and ethics, as well as their legacy today. This story also unveils hidden tensions and developments that complicate mobility and women emigrants' legacy through a transcultural lens. Mary, an Irish immigrant in England and a recent widow, decides to move to Australia to care for her ill son, a "good excuse" (58), she thinks, to tell her neighbours. Her need to find a reason to move and the neighbours' disbelief at her audacity indicate an underlying social restriction to which Conlon immediately responds with a positive impact on the faraway land: "At the other end of the world, they were waiting for her to match her history with theirs" (58). In this story, the author not only neutralises social boundaries in terms of female agency, but also shows that cultural practices are multi-sited so that their enactment, depending on the site, can entail either inaction and stagnation or agency and actual change. In other words, Conlon's transcultural shift acknowledges dynamics of enclosure as much as of connectivities in the life and testimony of Mary Lee.

Another element disclosed by the transcultural approach to this story is its appraisal of multiple mobilities and their effect upon the individual. Born Irish, Mary lived in England, and then in Australia, thus embodying multiple emigration to the point that, all in all, she "had spent almost the same number of years in Monaghan as here [Australia]" (65). In her pursuit of social justice, the protagonist was also a frequent traveller within Australia, where memories of her homeland never left her:

> Sometimes on her journeys she would see a turn in the road that looked like home, a dead ringer for the road to Ballybay, and she would shake

> her head and wonder where she was and what she was doing shouting from the back of trailers … and she would see a bleached shade and perhaps an extravagant bird, things that could only be in her new place. (61–62)

As this extract suggests, the emotional connectivities experienced by the protagonist show that places are not just physical phenomena bound to the limits of nation states, but also experienced spaces. The story thus presents a migrant whose homeland remains ingrained in her heart.

At the same time, "Imagine Them" is also a story of progressive distancing mediated by travel objects such as letters and documents. The story begins with Mary folding her documents before she leaves for Australia with her daughter Evelyn. Birth, marriage and death certificates bear witness of their owner's past and travel with her as if to confirm that "human and object histories inform each other" (Gosden and Marshall, 169). Yet, in this story certificates are treated as objects that simplify categorisations and determine social positionalities in an unpersonal and artificial way. Mary reflects: "It was hard to believe that such a short glance, such a minor intake and almost unnoticeable holding of breath, could cover all of a lifetime so far" (56). In a similar vein, letters are presented as ineffective means to transmit the magnitude of Mary's engagement: "She [Evelyn] tried once to write what Mary had become […] but it looked flat on the page, it couldn't lift into what it was, it couldn't paint the fight" (60). By this, Conlon seems to imply that lack of effective communication or transnational networks meant that "neither place knew what she did in the other" (65) to the detriment of Irish and Australian history. The story ends with Mary's daughter Evelyn posting a letter to her family to inform about her mother's death. Again, this cross-cultural object poses questions about its efficacy to properly express Mary's life and meaning, as Evelyn muses: "When the letter dropped into the box, she wondered about writing the last sentence – maybe she should have left it out" (65). In highlighting the limitations of cross-cultural objects as reliable bearers of someone's identity, Conlon suggests that human experience is too much for cross-cultural objects such as documents and letters to bear. At the same time, she also brings attention to the interstices where full transcultural transfer fails to take place, resulting in lacunae in women's history. All in all, a transcultural reading of "Imagine Them" allows a multi-scalar approach to the contradictory nature of migration, where mobility is intimately entangled with the personal, the social and the political contexts of female agency.

"Dear You" is told entirely through a letter by Violet Gibson, daughter of the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, addressed to an anonymous reader. It begins addressing this reader, "Dear You" (36), and is improbably sent

in a bottle flung into the sea in the early 1950s by George, a compassionate gardener working at the asylum in Northampton, where Violet has been forcibly lodged for thirty years, after her failed assassination attempt on Mussolini in Italy in 1926. In the missive, Violet recounts her life experiences in several countries before and after her attempt on Mussolini's life, and she considers the letter "a small part of the wreckage of my life and a small part of goods thrown overboard to lighten the mind in distress" (36). Through this letter Conlon gives voice to Violet, otherwise silenced and secluded, and so it becomes a cross-cultural object with a life of its own. As Caneda-Cabrera has detected, the letter is "a text in transit" ("Women on the Move", 33) which has undertaken a journey much as Violet in order to reach its anonymous addressee, "you". Hence, its own mobile biography contains a transcultural essence, too, becoming an "objectscape" (Troelenberg, Schankweiler and Messner, 7). Letters, like other subsidiary travel objects, have been recognised by scholarship as "carriers of knowledge, experience, and affect" (Messner, 23) and in this story, Conlon uses the letter as the only means available for Violet to express her true voice, an umbilical cord to her true story.

As is customary in Conlon's works, "Dear You" is anchored to activism and social justice. Like Mary Lee in "Imagine Them", who helps the vulnerable in Australia, Violet's biography encompasses a desire to help others, an inclination only possible after she has distanced herself from her homeland:

> In Chelsea I learned about freedom and about love … When you have learned those two things, freedom and love, you see things in a different way. The constraints that your family have tried to put on you become clear for what they are, frantic fears they will not be able to control what you think or read or how you see the world and what colours you decide to see it through. It was a lovely time there, keeping up with news of suffrage things. And art. And talk of those Pankhursts. They had nerve. I admired that and always remembered what it took.
>
> (42–43)

It is evident from these words that it is the journey that allows Violet to see things and act differently. In Chelsea, she welcomes love and freedom, and admires the bond of those feminists and their interdisciplinary thinking, ideological openness, elevated sense of otherness and discord, and lack of fear of power structures. It is in that world that she develops an initial consciousness, engages in politics and pursues her desire to make a change, even though she ultimately fails in her endeavour: "I finally set out for Rome in 1924, to watch a new tyrant [Mussolini] growing. I had read

about and followed carefully his insidious gathering of control. I went to stop him. It seemed a wise thing to do. And it was" (44).

Conlon utilises contact zones like the suffragists' campaigns and Violet's failed attempt on Mussolini to explore social border-crossing, and she does so through a special emphasis on these women's agency and the significance of the subaltern:

> I want to bring your attention to me and to the others, to let you know that … despite the door having been slammed, despite all that was dear to me having been stolen from me, despite the fact that the only way I can speak to you is through this perhaps unreliable bottle.
>
> (55)

Here, the letter in the bottle acts as "a fulcrum between material migrations and social relations" (Troelenberg, Schankweiler and Messner, 7) as it is the only means in Violet's hands to vindicate her acts and her peers'. At the same time, it is Violet's only means to denounce the different forms of violence exerted upon her:[7]

> In Mantellate jail … they said that my lack of desire to have children was a sign that I was mad.[8] And how they rushed to do their gynaecological examination. I looked at the ceiling and prayed to any god I could get to come into my head … One of the jailers got me Professor Gianelli's report. She smuggled it in to me. I have always been able to get on well with staff, yes, it was best to think of my jailers as that. Still is. The fine professor, a snake of a man … went on to say that the hymen was not intact, he said that it permitted with ease the introduction of two exploratory fingers, that's his two fingers … The hymen is not intact. Indeed. I could have told him that. And made it sound a good and joyful thing.
>
> (49–50)

This violent physical assault was an attack on Violet's integrity. The passage, which is very ironic, draws the reader's attention to her imprisonment, to other women being accomplices, to the doctors who were men and to the violent sexual practices exerted upon them, with her gynaecological examination as yet another metaphor for border crossing.[9] Hence, the letter acts as an "objectscape" that discloses and denounces all these gender-based forms of violence, otherwise shrouded in a culture of silence. In "Dear You", writer and object merge to the extent that the one cannot exist without the other. Despite its fragility and improbable reading, the letter is the prime evidence of a transcultural encounter which bears witness to Violet's transcultural life story.

"The Lie of the Land" revolves around two office workers, Hugh and Dervla, who move to South Africa during the Apartheid era. To avoid criticism, they tell friends and relatives that they are moving to Australia, but once they are gone the truth emerges and the couple stays away for years for fear of contempt and shame. In time, this situation becomes exhausting and as the story unfolds the reader senses the weight of their lie and its damaging effect upon their marriage, "like an iceberg, pulling chunks out of them" (26). At the same time, "The Lie of the Land" explores the tensions caused both by displacement and conflict, and situates that distant land as a contact zone where natural connectivities fail to occur on the surface. Hugh and Dervla must live in a protected environment, mainly inhabited by other white foreigners with whom they rarely socialise. Also, their staff are usually kept apart from their house and their interactions are strictly limited to chores. Notwithstanding, a close reading of this story reveals underlying transcultural practices that develop in cross-cultural environments. For instance, it is Rhami, their driver, not Dervla, who delivers the bad news to Hugh: " 'I am afraid that your father had died,' Rhami said, slowly, mixing his tenses as usual" (24). By stressing the separate environments reserved to each group and yet replicating forms of hybridity at the linguistic surface such as Rhami's, Conlon underscores the connectivities that emerge despite imposed borders. Furthermore, the author is skilful in picturing the thin lines separating two worlds that exist side by side, as the following lines illustrate: "It was at moments like this that Dervla hated having a maid, a cook and a cleaner. They had more English than you'd imagine, making free conversation difficult" (25). In "The Lie of the Land", Conlon's sharp eye not only unveils the subtle tensions and hierarchies that sustain difference and inequality in colonial contexts, but also detects overlapping fields of entanglement and relationality that occur in transcultural contexts despite normative ideologies of separation and opposition. Furthermore, Conlon denounces the negative effects of colonialism both upon the local populations and the colonisers. When the death of Hugh's father offers a chance to go home and start anew, he wonders whether the price paid was worth it:

> Is this what "denouement" means? Is this what all these years of wandering have come to, all that moving from one country to the other, starting a new life every few years as if the next one could be better? Is this the inevitable result – … a man … waiting to hear who was dead? (24)

But, in the end, Conlon's wit surprises the reader: Hugh does not go back to Ireland, and the story does not make clear whether Dervla eventually returns. Conlon avoids closure, keeping the journey in a potential

future: "Maybe. She would take that top and those skirts. And that jewellery box. She loved packing. It was the only time that she could see, properly, the bits and pieces that she had accumulated in all their wanderings" (35). This strategy, frequently used in her works, deploys irony and wit. For Dustin Griffin, "the satirist's instinct is not to close off an argument but to think of another example, or a qualification, or a digression. The point is to keep moving, and the satirist is supple enough to do so" (1994: 113). Hence, despite the evident deterioration of Hugh and Dervla's marriage and the downsides of life in exile, the story's ambiguous title and Conlon's ironic ending leave the reader restless and facing the potentials of liminality and uncertainty. "The Lie of the Land", as the title hints, is a satiric approach to nationalism and colonialism, and a bold portrait of the interstices that exist in-between.

Unlike the characters of "The Lie of the Land", the protagonist of "Disturbing Words" does return to her family home on the Border for the funeral of both her parents, who passed away within a day of each other. The first-person narrator is an Irish woman who has emigrated to a faraway desert country, "so foreign that you don't even know the name of it" (75), who amidst the ceremonial of their funerals discovers that her parents' lives have been hugely affected by the partition of Ireland with the border running through their property.

Since her childhood, Conlon has perceived emigration as "a perfectly ordinary choice" (Reynolds, "The Lookout" 173) and "Disturbing Words" seems to illustrate her personal experience of growing up in Monaghan, her relationship to the North and her understanding of borders. As she explains in an interview with Reynolds ("The Lookout"):

> Naturally I was conscious of the border growing up: it came up in conversation regularly. It wasn't a fixed thing in our minds, after all my parents were born pre-partition. They spoke about an Ireland before there was a border. We had one aunt and one uncle who went to Belfast rather than to America, England or Canada, and in many ways their summer holiday stories were more fascinating than the others.
>
> (174)

Accordingly, Conlon begins "Disturbing Words" with the narrator approaching her own migratory experience, an old pattern all too familiar to the Irish: "Around here they were all good at going away. The town down the road was so dead it didn't even know it" (79–80). As many others had done for centuries, she had moved first to Dublin and then further away to finally settle in Abu Dhabi. From the beginning, the reader suspects that the narrator's detachment from her birthplace entails not only physical distance but also emotional aloofness. Her adaptability

to new contexts, evident in her confession, "I say home when I'm here because it's easier" (76), insinuates a transcultural identity at the individual micro-level.

Slowly but surely, in this story Conlon reveals that the protagonist's sense of belonging and attachment to her place of birth are strongly affected by her family's identification with the border and the consequences of partition, as her mother's warning suggests: "Before I left for the faraway place my mother had said, always live away from the border" (80). But here, Conlon's borders come in many shades. For the narrator, they represent encounter, diversity and exchange. Moreover, at the end of the story, they are presented as a subject of friendly discussion and encounter: "And we went back to the desert where we had a party and discussed borders we had crossed" (83). Also, borders enable iterative change and revision, because they can be crossed, "Back and forth, back and forth" (84). This movement offers second chances and allows recollection of past experiences when "the people forced to move often take excursions to look back" (84). The infinite possibilities herein contained indicate that borders can become contact zones, or places that allow transitions. For Conlon, borders will always exist, but they are also subject to free experimentation.

As the protagonist's and her parents' stories unfold and intertwine, the reader enjoys a complex narrative defined by movement and separation. In fact, the complexity of "Disturbing Words" lies in the multiplicity of perceptions contained therein. The narrator's positive appraisal of borders is radically different from her parents' experience. The partition of Ireland had marked their lives in opposite ways: long ago they had met right on the border filling in the roads blown up by the British army during the Troubles, but they had also been hurt by the border, whose line ran "on top of their ditch" (78). As the text reads, "His mother had mourned the loss of her friends, from both sides of the house […] So, if you were born in the six counties before now, where will they say you are from?" (78). Depersonalisation and estrangement are pointed to as the real damage behind borders.

But, scouring through their belongings, the narrator learns that her parents had taken action against the imposed partition. For one, they had planted a tree on the very border "to make sure that its roots, and now its branches, would spread across the line" (82). By means of this symbol, Conlon advocates for normal people taking simple actions that have the power to challenge imposed divisions. Also, her wit and satirical rhetoric are displayed in the protagonist's reaction to the threatened cutting down of the tree, where she perches for days, only coming down when the tree is secured. Taking the tree as a symbol, Conlon derides artificial borders and advocates for peaceful coexistence. Similarly, the protagonist learns that her parents had secretly begun to dig a basement in their barn to cross

the border from below so that "they would live in two places" (81). This unrealistic project symbolises both agency and contestation, and correlates with Conlon's transcultural approach wherein interstices, discontinuities and frictions gain relevance. In the end, all the characters in this story take control of boundaries one way or the other. Although "Disturbing Words" does not focus on border-crossing cultural encounters and transcultural exchanges, it does discuss "spatiality and processes of reconfiguration" (Abu-Er-Rub et al., xxiii), and shows the nuances of the relationships between emigration and belonging, separation and identity, as well as the various forms of accommodation, resistance and challenge displayed by individuals and societies.

Conclusions

In 2020, Reynolds called for an examination of the rapid changes that have taken place in the island of Ireland during the early decades of the twenty-first century and stated the need to keep an eye "on mobility patterns that undermine any neat suturing of physical space and cultural experience" ("Coda", 277). This investigation has attempted to show that *Moving About the Place* not only responds to this demand but also poses challenges ahead for scholars, readers and writers alike.

The stories contained in *Moving About the Place* address the complex and dynamic relations between people, especially women, and space, and offer innovative readings of the significance of nations, limits and connections. In particular, the female characters in the four short stories under discussion recall Conlon's metaphor about migratory birds used at the end of her latest novel, *Not the Same Sky* (2013).

> They go from where they breed to where they winter. They may travel over the open seas or close to the coasts … They go to where the food is, a lot like us … And there are regional variations in some birdsong. They get their accents and put them in their mouths so no matter where they are we should know from where they came.
>
> (251)

Like these birds, the women experience displacement, they are diasporic and dispersed among Irish communities elsewhere. Conlon's feminist stance confirms her commitment to social justice and pays homage to all the altruists who helped these women reach their destinations and adapt.

The transcultural lens that illuminates this analysis allows for a shift of perspective and highlights entanglements and connectivities as much as practices of contestation and resistance. Transcultural perceptiveness also reconsiders the canon and incorporates hidden and silenced voices from

the past in order to provide a more inclusive reading of history. Conlon's stories show that destinations affect people physically and emotionally. They look at the local and the global with a broad perspective and in doing so, they contest the very notion of borders.

In *Moving About the Place*, Ireland expands beyond its physical limits inasmuch as it is present in faraway countries, challenging binary oppositions and fixed categories, and "underlining entanglement and relationality while also acknowledging dynamics of enclosure, friction and dissonance" (Abu-Er-Rub et al., xxxi). Conlon's narrative is "vivid, subtle, restrained" (Dunne) with shifting viewpoints that provide multiple perspectives, open endings that hint at further changes to come and a satirical rhetoric that contests the rigidity of outdated concepts.

In "Imagine Them" and "Dear You", Conlon pays tribute to Mary Lee and Violet Gibson by telling how they lived, rebelled, marched, fought and died. The story of Mary Lee is presented in "Imagine Them" as a multi-sited migratory process where connectivities and disconnection march hand in hand. Here, Conlon shows that material cross-cultural objects are inadequate to establish networks and contain estrangement, resulting in an insufficient historical appraisal of Irish historical female figures. In "Dear You" Conlon recuperates the figure of Violet Gibson, an Irish woman with a transcultural and feminist life experience whose testimony reaches the reader by means of a letter. Here, the author resorts to this "objectscape" to record Violet's biography and deliver her call for justice with a personal touch.

But Conlon does not avoid the inner frictions that exist in contact zones. In "The Lie of the Land", she exposes inequality and segregation as characteristic of colonial contexts, while simultaneously disclosing spaces for entanglement and relationality both within and among segregated communities. In this way, she dismantles single views of domination and separation based on unreconciled binaries and shifts the focus onto the discontinuities and resistances underlying oppressive systems. Similarly, "Disturbing Words" calls into question the very notion of the border, which Conlon identifies with separation as much as connection. She masterfully intertwines the life stories of the narrator and her parents to provide a multi-sited perspective of boundary-drawing, and successfully conveys its diverse effects upon people. In challenging the rigidity of borderlands, the story unfolds practices of resistance and vindicates re-territorialisation of spaces.

As discussed earlier, Conlon is a transcultural writer whose stories provide the reader with a sharp and flexible apprehension of agency and its limits. Her plots retell forgotten stories of women, both historical and ordinary, and unsettle conventions every time; these are stories that "reimagine, engage with, and embrace the 'new' while avoiding the

regurgitation of the tried and the trusted" (Maher, 392). In *Moving About the Place*, Conlon offers multi-sited readings of Irish history and borders and, at the same time, reshapes and challenges the social reality of Ireland as a cultural entity.

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Notes

1 For more on Conlon's advocacy for women's rights and feminism, see Barros-del Río ("Power, Gender") and Terrazas ("The Rhetoric").
2 For an in-depth analysis of Conlon's satirical rhetoric throughout her work, see Terrazas ("The Rhetoric" and "Questioning Women's Lives").
3 For a deeper understanding of the "objectscape" from a transcultural perspective, see Troelenberg, Schankweiler, and Sophia Messner's work.
4 At the time, in Ireland there was strong social rejection of South Africa for its anti-apartheid policies in the form of *boycott and strike action*. For instance, Mary Manning, a shop worker in an outlet of Dunne Stores in Dublin, refused to handle the sale of grapefruit from South Africa on 19 July 1984. A few days later, other shop stewards supported Manning's refusal to handle South African produce. Conlon used to go to the shop every Saturday to give them support (personal correspondence with the author).
5 This story was first published in Sineád Gleeson's collection *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women Writers from The North of Ireland* (2016).
6 For a further study of the life-writing aspects in this short story, see Terrazas ("An Experiment").
7 This story refers to "hair-taking", a form of gender-based violence executed by crowds at demonstrations, policemen during interviews, army officers on the battlefield and male doctors in jails. To this day, this has remained a 'dark secret' in Ireland. For more on these matters, see Linda Connolly's study of gender-based violence.
8 Violet Gibson was buried in Northampton, near where Lucia Joyce, James Joyce's daughter, was later interred. The latter makes an appearance at the end of "Dear You".
9 According to Baratieri el al., Violet Gibson was "shifted to and from between Le Mantellate prison, Sant'Onofrio, and Santa Maria della Pietà lunatic

asylums, subjected to police interrogations and an extensive somatic and psychiatric examination, which included a gynecological test to determine whether she was a virgin. The decisions regarding Violet's sanity came from the top; for diplomatic reasons it was deemed to be more convenient that Violet should be returned to England on grounds of mental infirmity rather than punished for her crime in Italy" (146).

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