

“What Is There to Say?”

Witnessing and Anxiety in Karen Connelly’s Burmese Trilogy

Introduction: Witnessing in/to the Voice of the Other

In a 2013 blog post, author Karen Connelly reflected on the differing receptions of her novel *The Lizard Cage* and her memoir *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story*. Both books discuss the Burmese political unrest of the mid-1990s, a time when Connelly herself was living and travelling on the Thai-Burma border. She notes that readers tend to be more critical of the memoir: “*The Lizard Cage* was the better book, I agree, but it’s important to remember how different the books are too. A novel; a memoir. A fictional accounting; a record of lived experience, my own lived experience, complete with my failures and my immaturity” (“Is it” n. pag.). Connelly’s post explores in microcosmic form what this essay will address more broadly: the affordances and limitations of different genres for bearing witness to the suffering of distant others, and the anxieties that accompany any attempt to ethically represent a culture that is not one’s own.

In addition to *The Lizard Cage* (2005) and *Burmese Lessons* (2009), Connelly also published *The Border Surrounds Us* (2000), a collection of lyric travel poetry that includes a dozen poems on Burma. I refer to these books collectively as her “Burmese Trilogy.” While they are not explicitly a trilogy in terms of publishing history or marketing, they inscribe the same set of experiences across three genres in a way that rewards such an approach. Reading Connelly’s books as a trilogy complicates critical understandings of how her work in particular, and literature in general, bears witness to distant suffering. Multi-genred and intermedial, the Burmese Trilogy constitutes an argument for how different forms bear witness

and a contemplation of these forms' inherent limitations. Witnessing, as it is figured by Connelly in these and other writings, is an act of not only encountering but also representing; it is the translation of experience (the author's or another's) for a larger audience who was not there to share in that experience first-hand. Connelly is particularly concerned with the problem of communicating the political crisis of Burma to a Western readership. The Burmese Trilogy emphasizes these representational anxieties, as it invites a rereading of literature of witness in terms of mediation, circulation, and the ethics of bearing witness.

James Dawes has described the paradox of literary witness: does it intervene ethically in the status quo by revealing the reality of the lives of others, evoking an empathetic response on the part of readers, or does it cater to "voyeurists of terror or bored, purposeless people seeking an 'authentic' moment" (185)? The Burmese Trilogy takes up the ethical burden of having seen, and the impasse of witnessing without exploiting or appropriating, by oscillating between different genres and mediums of representation without fully rejecting or endorsing any of them. While each of the books can be read independently, their relation suggests an anxious back and forth between the impossibility and necessity of representing the experiences of others separated by borders of race, culture, religion, language, and lived experience. *The Border Surrounds Us* is a collection of lyric poems that attend closely to the limits of what language can and cannot say. This collection constitutes Connelly's first sustained attempt to represent her years on the Thai-Burmese border, during which she witnessed vicious beatings at an anti-government protest and the death of a small child in a refugee camp, and listened to various testimonies about torture and imprisonment. In these poems, representation is a struggle that often ends in failure. They draw extensively on the image of borders as a means of signifying both the politically restricted movement of bodies and the limitations of writing about the experiences of others. *The Lizard Cage* on the other hand, crosses these borders to enter into and represent a Burmese prison. This setting—a fictional construct based on the many stories she was told by former prisoners and those with imprisoned family members—is encountered from the perspectives of characters who occupy the prison's world: Teza, a political prisoner sentenced to solitary confinement for writing protest songs; Handsome, the sadistic prison guard who shatters Teza's jaw during a vicious beating; and Nyi Lay, an orphan boy who has been surviving in the prison by killing rats and selling them to

the starving prisoners. The novel thus takes as its subject the same world—claustrophobically confined and subject to the constant surveillance of jailers and warders—that the poems in *The Border Surrounds Us* construct as largely unrepresentable.

While *The Border Surrounds Us* is now out of print, *The Lizard Cage* has been critically and popularly successful: it won Britain's Orange Broadband Prize for New Writers in 2007 and was long-listed for Canada Reads 2014 as one of "5 Books that will change your perspective on the world" ("Get to know" n. pag.). Connelly returned to the same setting five years later in *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story*, an autobiographical account of the experiences that led to the composition of the earlier two books—an account that, as Connelly mentioned on her blog, was not as well-received as her novel ("Is it" n. pag.). In this paper, I refer to the narrator-protagonist of *Burmese Lessons* as "Karen" to emphasize her non-identity with the author-function whose name appears on the book cover. It is important to note, however, that the coincidence of narrator and author names is central to establishing the work as autobiography (Rak 22). *Burmese Lessons* describes Karen's arrival in Burma as a representative of PEN International, her encounters with Burmese writers and political activists, and her subsequent love affair with a Burmese dissident. The memoir can be read as a *Künstlerroman* narrating Karen's journey toward composing her novel, *The Lizard Cage*. It works to authorize her ability to bear witness to the suffering of the Burmese people by describing both her affective connection to the country and the many people who pled with her to "write the book" that will "tell the world what is happening in Burma" (*Burmese Lessons* 19, 98). At the centre of the memoir is the imperative Karen feels to use her freedom as a Canadian author to tell the story of the Burmese people, an act that will justify the degree to which dozens of Burmese people endangered themselves by taking her into their confidence.

The material circulation of different media, including literature, is of primary concern within all three books. In *Burmese Lessons*, Karen notes her feelings of uselessness as a witness to political injustice because she has "no newspaper to write for" (124) that would allow her to represent her experiences to a wide readership. Print's capacity to circulate is also of central concern in *The Lizard Cage*: Teza's "cheroot ceremony," in which he secretly unrolls and reads the scraps of newsprint that line cigarette filters, highlights the dangers and pleasures of the written word in the context of political oppression (50-58). Meanwhile, the illiterate orphan Nyi Lay

amasses books he cannot read, hoarding them as objects that “are full of the world” (262). While *Burmese Lessons* depicts Burmese subjects exhorting Karen to turn her experiences into a novel, *The Lizard Cage* associates novels with the West—what Karen in *Burmese Lessons* calls “the realm of freely circulated ideas and books and newspapers and technologies” (18). Novels may serve as points of entry for Western readers to a world beyond the safety of our own, but within that world, novels become fetishized non-circulating objects. Ironically, the voice of the imprisoned Teza circulates only through written poetry. Reading across the Burmese Trilogy in this way invites questions about the relation between the politics of representation, the ethics of witnessing, and the capacity of different media to circulate images of distant suffering to a readership divorced from the experiences Connelly attempts to recount.

If the Burmese Trilogy is concerned with both the limitations of language and the importance of writing books that will find an international readership, it is because of Connelly's understanding of literary witness. Connelly's article “In the Skin of the Other: Writing *The Lizard Cage*,” published in the midst of the novel's eight-year composition, addresses the anxieties and responsibilities evoked by writing about Burma. The article argues that, for a Western public, “our incredible wealth of freedom makes it more, not less, difficult for us to imagine what it is really like for people who live and struggle in countries like Burma” (57). A failure of imagination implies a failure of responsibility in relation to the other; thus, the implication of Connelly's stance is that empathetic imagination is linked to political action.¹ She describes this shift from a subject who empathizes with the other to a subject who acts on behalf of the other as a painful self-transformation that involved both a “long education of trying to be other, and, in all those foreign places, of *being* the other” and a recognition of her own implication in the Burmese struggle, an implication that can only be answered by the politicized action of writing the stories that she has heard in order to educate a larger readership (58). While the article also attempts to justify the novel's border-crossing strategies by insisting that the novel was both requested and explicitly sanctioned by the people she met in Burma, it is the painful process of self-transformation that defines the novel's composition: “The book is coming. It is coming slowly and with great labour out of the prison of my own mind and spirit” (60). Connelly describes the writer as imprisoned, voluntarily bound into the dark places with which her writing engages.

This account of the problem of bearing witness recalls the spatial metaphor deployed by Shoshana Felman in her own description of witnessing. Felman uses the metaphor of inside and outside to account for what she describes as the incommensurability of different acts of seeing; in her work, the gas chamber is the archetypal inside that “has no voice” and cannot be the origin of testimony (231). If it is “impossible to testify from the inside” (231), however, the outside is an equally untenable position: “[T]here is a radical, unbreachable and horrifying difference between the two sides of the wall” that separates these “*incomparable* and utterly *irreconcilable*” positions (236). The unbreachability of this wall demands an artist who can “literally *move* the viewers and . . . actually *reach* the addressee,” representing the “abyssal *lostness* of the inside, without being either crushed by the abyss or overwhelmed by the pathos, *without losing the outside*” (239). Felman’s argument draws upon conditions of witnessing specific to the Holocaust, but the metaphor of an inside and outside separated by an unbreachable wall that is porous to the artist alone is also fundamental to Connelly’s work. So is the emphasis on viewers and addressees, the audience toward whom the literature of witness is directed. Connelly’s article implies that the journey of the author must be followed by a comparable journey on the part of the reader. It is not enough for the text to be written, however painfully; it must also be read, and read ethically. As Lena Khor makes clear in her reading of *The Lizard Cage*, Connelly’s work is available to appropriation by “the White humanitarian reading classes . . .’ [that] consume only certain novels about the Other, ones that tell stories of the Other already familiar to them, ones that synchronize with their own view of themselves and the world” (92). While, as Khor argues, Connelly’s novel models alternate approaches to reading about others (94), the Trilogy as a whole is shot through with anxieties, mediations, supplements, and even deliberate failures that do more than model an ethical reading practice. The Trilogy instead presents reading about and witnessing to the other as at once necessary and impossible.

Failure in *The Border Surrounds Us*

The Border Surrounds Us explores the productive limitations and failures of language in the face of atrocity, using the opacity of language to resist the appropriating gaze of the reader. At several points in the collection, the poetic persona emphasizes poetry’s uselessness, insisting that, “[a] poem is not an escape path” (34). This concern with uselessness and failure is most emphatic in “The child dead”:

She waits for words to come
in any dialect.

They forced him to eat pieces
of his own ears, lips, tongue.
Then they killed him.

What is there to say?

Her mouth is a hole ringed with teeth.
Her hands, cutting into the bread,
picking up a shovel,
become more useless. (61)

The relation between the lost voice of the unnamed “him” and the useless mouth and hands of “her” operates at various levels. The image of torture is what she, the poet, cannot say “in any dialect”; but her silence also seems to emerge from his. The silenced witness, forced to eat his own tongue, leaves no voice behind that can be communicated by the poet, either through her mouth or, as writing, with her hands. The poet is incapacitated by the voicelessness of the inside (Felman 231).

Nonetheless, to gain access to the voices of the inside is the poet's implicit goal. In the poem “Prison Entrance,” for example, the poetic persona is entranced by the sounds of men behind prison walls:

Sometimes their voices, their shouts,
were so clear. So clear she wondered
about the secrets behind
the high grey walls, the worlds
she could not fathom, with freedom
wrapped around her like a cape
she could never pull off. (25)

The repetition of “so clear” invokes a fantasy of representational transparency that is contradicted by the “high grey walls” of the prison and the insurmountable wall of privilege. Despite the seeming immediacy of those clear shouts, the poetic persona is irrevocably divorced from the interiority both of the prison and of those unknown men because of the irreconcilability of inside and outside. In this collection, poetry is capable of brushing up against but not crossing borders. It can gesture to its own silences, and to the silences imposed by torture, but it cannot undo them. While the book's existence belies this consistent emphasis on representational failure, what the poems say most clearly is that representation is a burden as well as a duty; it is a call for the poet to find words that is made more imperative because finding

words that adequately encompass her experience of the border is impossible.

Emphasizing the unendurability of witnessing, the untranslatability of the other's experience, and the incommensurability of inside and outside, *The Border Surrounds Us* is an exploration of representational failure. Failure refers here not to the success of the poems, but to a productive aesthetics that resists literature's production of homogeneous and knowable images of the other. Smaro Kamboureli argues for the need to recognize, in Judith Butler's words, that "the recognition . . . of the Other is always also the failure to know that Other" (qtd. in Kamboureli 130). This failure to know extends into a network of other failures: "to assimilate the Other into cultural and political discourses that appropriate its differences," for example, or "to see the Other as a fully knowable entity" (130). Failure, for Kamboureli, "is a kind of negative capability that both reveals the alterity of the Other and exposes the fallacy that dominant culture is transparent, dominant in and of itself, a community . . . that fully knows itself" (130). The equation between knowability and representational violence is a key formulation of postcolonial and feminist theory (Meffan and Worthington 133). From this perspective, the productive failures and silences of Connelly's poems not only respect the alterity of the Burmese people and culture, but also undermine the very possibility of representational transparency, introducing a deliberate space between text and reality that emphasizes the alterity of both Burma and the poems themselves.²

Read in isolation, *The Border Surrounds Us* introduces a productive difficulty into the act of representation, what Doris Sommer has referred to as a "slap of refusal" that "detain[s] [readers] at the boundary between contact and conquest" (201-02). The poems reject the possibility of imaginatively "becoming other," which Sara Ahmed critiques as a Western fantasy that reinstates rather than challenges entrenched cultural and racial hierarchies (125). In describing the problematic of becoming other, Ahmed draws on the metaphor of the prison: "Passing for the stranger turns the stranger's flesh into a prison—it reduces the stranger to flesh that can only be inhabited as a temporary loss of freedom. The stranger becomes known as the prison of flesh through the fantasy . . . that *one can pass through the stranger's body*" (132). While in "Prison Entrance" the prison wall prevents the poet from inhabiting the flesh of the stranger, in *The Lizard Cage* this dynamic is reversed: the author enters into the perspective of imprisoned Burmese subjects, and the stranger's body becomes not only knowable but arguably inhabitable for author and reader.

Mediating the Voice in *The Lizard Cage*

Connelly has suggested that she considers poetry a more intimate and private genre for various reasons, including its more modest circulation. Prose, in comparison, “involve[s] too much exposure” (“Implicated” 206). Shameem Black agrees that the novel has a higher degree of circulation and accessibility (9), but she takes issue with the equation of accessibility and hegemony, arguing against the perspective that representations of others necessarily constitute “new forms of representational violence” (3) by examining narrative’s capacity to “present the *process* of imagining social difference” (4). *The Lizard Cage* constitutes an argument for and against its own representational ethics, exploiting the novel’s capacity to enter the interior worlds of Burmese characters while undermining fiction’s ability to bear witness by both valorizing poetry as the genre most closely linked to the body and supplementing the narrative with photographs.

The prison world of *The Lizard Cage* is obsessed with writing; the circulation of pen and paper is the narrative focus of the novel. Throughout, writing is touted as a material manifestation of the silenced voices and destroyed bodies of those within the prison; it is the messenger that, in Felman’s metaphor, can traverse the border between the inside and the outside (239). At the same time, however, the novel’s emphasis on the materiality of writing makes it impossible to imagine the written word as a point of direct access to the lost voices or bodies of the prisoners. As a mediation of the voice and the hand, the written word instead emphasizes the inaccessibility of those imprisoned through its ability to cross the borders that they cannot.

In contrast to the exploration of poetic failure in *The Border Surrounds Us*, *The Lizard Cage* incorporates poetry as perhaps the most mobile form of communication. In the midst of photographs, novels, songs, and political protest letters, the poem proves the only form capable of escaping the prison walls. Judith Butler has linked the mobility of prison poetry to the genre’s ability “to leave a mark, a trace, of a living being” (59) via its connection to breath: “The body breathes, breathes itself into words, and finds some provisional survival there. But once the breath is made into words, the body is given over to another, in the form of an appeal” (61). In *The Lizard Cage*, the body that is given over to the reader is that of Teza, nicknamed “the Songbird,” a young man seven years into a twenty-year sentence of solitary confinement for writing political protest songs. Teza’s voice, with its capacity to incite political resistance, is dangerous; by extension, so is the body that bears the voice and the words that make up the songs. In

addition to being kept apart from all other prisoners, then, Teza is denied writing materials.

The plot of the novel centres upon Teza gaining access to this dangerous contraband and eventually composing a long poem that is smuggled out of the prison. The novel painstakingly charts the paths of the pen and paper, both originally part of a set-up by the vicious prison guard Handsome who intends to extend Teza's sentence. When Teza anticipates the coming raid, he eats his letter of political protest in a scene that encapsulates the failure of language to circulate within the prison: "Coughing now, trying to cough quietly, fearing he will start choking and not be able to swallow, he pushes the rest of the wet paper into his mouth" (142). The passage of the wadded paper down his throat is easier than its passage out of the cell, blocked by networks of circulation that are only used to trick and trap him.

The pen finds a different fate, retrieved from outside his cell's window by the orphan boy Nyi Lay, who eventually smuggles it back to Teza, now lodged in the prison hospital after Handsome has shattered his jaw. Teza composes a poem of witness and protest in a stained accounting ledger that Nyi Lay smuggles out of the prison and eventually delivers to Teza's brother Aung Min, a guerrilla soldier in the North. When Aung Min first opens the book, he finds "[t]he handwriting . . . as familiar as the voice Aung Min often listened to on a dusty cassette player" (10). Like this audio recording, the poem is only ever a mediation of the voice and a trace of the body, a testament to the very distance of the man who has been left to die behind the prison walls. The words of the poem echo this perception, suggesting how the poem has come to embody Teza's distanced presence:

As for me I have forsaken
every weapon but the voice
singing its last song
And the hand Dear Brother
my own hand
writing it down. (362)

The language of voice and hand echoes Connelly's earlier poem, "The child dead," but reverses its claims. Where the voice was once silenced and the hands useless, they have become the final weapons, inscribed into a text that will remain after the body has been destroyed.

The Lizard Cage evokes a world heavy with materiality, in which information travels with great difficulty, marked by the bodies and environments it encounters. Although the novel seems to value the written

word as the primary vehicle of witness, this faith in writing was undermined by the inclusion of thirty-eight photographs in the 2005 Random House of Canada hardcover edition, of which thirty-two were taken by Connelly during her travels. The photographs supplement the text, linking fictional representations with small black-and-white images that seem to function as tokens of reality. This supplementarity suggests a crisis of faith in the novel as a vehicle for what she has seen and what she feels she must do. Speaking of the photographs in an interview, Connelly described them as a form of evidence for both herself and the implied reader. They were “really important,” she explained, because they were able to remind her and demonstrate to the reader “that this was a reality, not just a text”; acknowledging that photographs are their own fictions, she nonetheless maintained that “they were a piece of this reality that became necessary to me” (“Implicated” 217). This reinforcement of the veracity of the novel’s fictionalized events gestures toward a different representational anxiety from that of *The Border Surrounds Us*. The use of characters and the absence of an authorial avatar seem to threaten the novel with its own fictional status, and the photographs work to reconnect the events narrated in *The Lizard Cage* with the body of the author, whose physical presence in Burma establishes the authenticity and authority of the novel.

As Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri point out, however, the incorporation of photography into fiction “almost automatically challenges accepted distinctions between fiction and nonfiction,” substantiating the novel by associating it with the documentary function of the photograph while destabilizing the authority of the photograph such that it becomes fiction itself (8). The images in *The Lizard Cage* are rife with this ambiguity; they evoke characters and scenes from the novel without ever being identical to them, thus both insisting on the novel’s basis in reality and emphasizing its incommensurability with the real. Alongside other authorizing paratexts such as Connelly’s article “In the Skin of the Other” and *Burmese Lessons* itself, the photographs suggest an authorial anxiety about using a novel to represent lived experience. If *The Lizard Cage* seems to privilege poetry as the medium most capable of remediating the prisoner’s voice, and photography as the medium most capable of rooting a text in the lived realities of those being represented, then why write a novel at all?

Connelly’s answer to that question emerges in her descriptions of the novel writing process. She situates novels as uniquely able to cross representational borders, satisfying her desire not to “write a book with a white person at the centre” (“Implicated” 218). Set within the walls of the prison, *The Lizard*

Cage allows the implied reader to enter into an encounter with characters defined by distance, difference, and a radical experience of unfreedom. In order to describe the impact of this representational decision, as well as her own experience of writing it, Connelly repeatedly returns to the language of restriction, submission, and imprisonment, describing her writing process as “enter[ing] the darkest places in the human world and . . . stay[ing] there for long periods of time” (“In the Skin” 59). It is the novel, she implies, that makes this “terrible, necessary act” possible (59). In this sense, *The Lizard Cage* aligns with Dorothy J. Hale’s recent work on “the ethical value of novels” (“Fiction” 189). The literary ethicists that Hale discusses—including J. Hillis Miller, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak—locate the ethical value of the novel in the readerly act of decision-making, specifically making the decision to freely submit oneself to the alterity of the novel (189). In their defence of the novel as the primary ethical genre, these ethicists focus on its capacity to confront readers with the limitations of their own supposedly all-encompassing vision: “The reader experiences the free play of his or her imagination as produced through a power struggle with a social other [the character]. The struggle to bind turns back on the reader, enabling the reader to experience the self as unfree, as in a constitutive relation with the other, who, in turn, binds him or her” (“Aesthetics” 902). Hale’s analysis of reading as “voluntary self-restriction” (“Fiction” 195), when extended to *The Lizard Cage*, suggests that the ethical value of the novel lies in its formal and thematic interiority, produced by setting almost the entire novel within the walls of a prison that the implied reader must freely enter, choosing to share the prisoners’ experiences of constraint.

These claims for the ethical value of the novel are not only at odds with the aesthetics of failure explored in *The Border Surrounds Us*, but are also internally complicated by the incorporation of supplements like photographs and externally complicated by the publication, five years later, of *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story*. The memoir problematizes the status of the novel as the most ethical way to represent the suffering of others by engaging in its own deliberations on the ethics of various media and forms including novels, poetry, photographs, documentaries, newspapers, and oral testimony. While the photographs were cut from the paperback edition of *The Lizard Cage*, the memoir has stepped into their place as a sign of the novel’s relation to a perceived reality. Much as the poems in *The Lizard Cage* gain their value because they serve as stand-ins for the voice and hand of Teza, the novel gains its ethical and political force through its understood status as the

mediation of a material reality. What becomes apparent when the memoir is added into the Burmese Trilogy, however, is that the novel's capacity to represent the Burmese struggle is far from straightforward.

Authority and Anxiety in *Burmese Lessons: A Love Story*

Burmese Lessons is filled with the traces of alternate forms of representation that are by turns validated and critiqued, including writing itself. The result is a memoir characterized by self-conscious generic fluidity, shifting between political commentary, testimony, and love story. This fluidity is the source of the memoir's effectiveness as a self-reflexive engagement with the problems of representing the other, but it may also account for the book's critical unpopularity. In *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Julie Rak connects the recent surge in mainstream memoirs to the desire to "learn about [political] events through personal stories" (161), demonstrating how the political capital of these memoirs lies in "the link . . . between personal authority and political authority in the intimate public sphere" (162). A comparison of reviews of *The Lizard Cage* and *Burmese Lessons* suggests that reviewers, at least in this case, associate interiority and intimacy with the novel rather than the memoir. Reviews emphasize the capacity of fiction to "show[] us the kind of suffering that newspapers can't communicate and non-fiction rarely reaches" (Taylor n. pag.), praising *The Lizard Cage* for "show[ing] us what autobiography usually veils: the human spirit not at its most defiant and brave, but as it really is and can only be" (Adams n. pag.). Fiction's capacity to generate a reality that exceeds non-fiction is emphasized by critiques of the novel for crossing the line into documentary or journalism. Craig Taylor takes issue with the photographs which, he argues, take away "[t]he pleasure of creation in the reader's mind" (n. pag.), while reviewer Tash Aw finds fault with the "heavy-handedness" of the novel's more didactic passages: "[T]he weight of information she provides obscures rather than heightens the sense of a country in crisis" (n. pag.).

Burmese Lessons, on the other hand, is praised primarily for its ability to point back to the novel. Marian Botsford Fraser frames the memoir as an answer to the question she had after reading *The Lizard Cage*: "[H]ow on earth [was] Connelly . . . able to write such a visceral, subtle, complex book, how could she know specifics about life in prison in Myanmar?" (n. pag.). Paul Gessell reads the memoir as "a non-fiction prequel to *The Lizard Cage*" and argues that, "[i]f nothing else, *Burmese Lessons* will entice you to read or

reread Connelly's novel" (n. pag.). And Lesley Downer's primary concern is the memoir's failure to entice with the same vivid accounts that characterize the "harrowing novel," complaining that Connelly is too "preoccupied with her emotional journey" to provide the specifics of "her meetings with dissidents in the jungle and her interviews with guerrilla fighters" (n. pag.). What readers really want, Downer implies, are intimate details of life in Burma.

This sampling of contemporary reviews from Canada, the US, and the UK suggests how closely Hale's description of the novel's function aligns with some readers' understanding of the genre ("Aesthetics" 902). The novel's ability to enter the prison, and bring readers along, is pivotal to its political and ethical value; critiques of the novel focus on any features that detract from this quality of intense interiority, while praise for the memoir is rooted in its insight into the origins of the novel's verisimilitude. The memoir, then, functions as a prequel that authorizes the novel by rooting it in the author's lived experiences. Supplementary like the photographs, the memoir implies an anxiety that the novel will not be read as fully real. This reinscription of the author's experiences indicates a further anxiety: that the author has engaged in an act of representational violence by eliding herself from the novel. *Burmese Lessons* personalizes the first two books, placing them within an autobiographical register that establishes the entire Trilogy's authority while simultaneously undermining it.

In *Burmese Lessons*, Karen is once more an outsider in relation to the culture of Burma, a "foreigner" as she repeatedly calls herself, but also one of the white Western "experts" that include journalists and NGO workers. She includes herself in her critique of the appropriative practices of experts: "The Westerner knows. We are entitled to knowledge, among other things. That is what makes us experts. Everything becomes territory to us, everything becomes ours" (54). This passage explicitly links the white expert gaze, knowledge production about the foreign other, and colonialism as a means of both evoking and problematizing Connelly's authority. A key example of this problematization occurs on a visit to the Maw Ker refugee camp, where Karen witnesses a small child's death by malaria. Afterward, Karen's guide Tennyson asks why she didn't take photographs: "[W]e need pictures of this," he insists. "This is the truth, this is how our children die" (292). Though Karen promises to "write it down instead," she notes "the promise of the written word makes little impression on him. In the propaganda fields of the world, the image is all-powerful" (292). Later, Tennyson forgives her for failing in her duty as a witness, not because he believes that her writing will do any good, but

because he is not certain anything will: "It doesn't matter," he tells her. "About the photographs. We have too many photographs already" (294).

Tennyson's claim invokes debates over the political efficacy of the image while placing an ethical demand upon literature—both the memoir and the novel that Karen is implicitly promising to write—to do something that photographs cannot. Karen's ongoing resistance toward taking pictures of violence or suffering recalls critiques of photography as a potentially objectifying and racializing medium. Susan Sontag links the proliferation of images of "grievously injured" racialized bodies in contemporary journalistic practices and "the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized, human beings," in which "the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (72). The relation between viewing and being viewed reinstates power dynamics in which the white gaze is fixed upon and fixes non-white bodies. Karen's discomfort with the role of the white photographer suggests her awareness of this representational history, and her reluctance to spectacularize the suffering of racialized bodies. Readers of the Trilogy know, however, that Connelly did take photographs of Burmese subjects, photographs that she included in her novel as a means of establishing its veracity and, implicitly, her authority as a witness. When Karen retroactively refuses the efficacy of photography, then, she also calls into question Connelly's earlier representational choices, much as the novel's willingness to enter the prison calls into question the poems' insistence on the impossibility of such a move.

Karen's representational authority is also destabilized through the memoir's emphasis on the ethics of oral testimony. As Karen becomes more involved with the Burmese diaspora in Thailand, she begins to privilege interviews over writing: "The most useful thing I do around here is interview people about their experiences in Burma and on the border. Even that is beginning to feel more useful than actually writing a book. . . . To tell his or her own history is one way for a human being to reclaim legitimacy" (*Burmese Lessons* 237). The memoir's emphasis on oral testimony attempts to undermine the privilege of the white expert by giving the story over to the voice of the other. Karen's description of conversation as more useful than writing also conveys her anxiety about producing any representation of Burma at all, an anxiety that is closely linked to her consciousness of herself as a privileged white subject.

Karen's ambivalence about how to best serve the people of Burma and their cause is a recurring trope in the memoir. Sometimes she rejects widely

circulating media because she is concerned about their appropriative or colonizing tendencies; at other times she implies that her act of witnessing would be more meaningful if she herself were a journalist. “Does it matter that I saw what I saw?” she wonders after witnessing a protest: “I have no newspaper to write for, no report to make to anyone who cares” (*Burmese Lessons* 124). Newspapers and reports regain their representational validity despite their complicity with hegemonic knowledge production because of their capacity to circulate. Karen may value her interviews with Burmese subjects, but unless she mediates these encounters so that they can circulate beyond the protests and refugee camps, she cannot meaningfully impact the political oppression against which her interlocutors are objecting and in defiance of which they are risking their safety by speaking with her. These same interlocutors are clearly aware that the possibility for political change is tied to circulation. One friend asks her to “[p]lease write a good book so that it will become a bestseller and bring much attention to my little disaster country” (*Burmese Lessons* 221). Despite Karen’s anxieties about her own representational authority, it is seemingly her ability, as a white Western expert, to write a “bestseller” that makes her most useful to the Burmese people.

This ethical conundrum is at the heart of the Burmese Trilogy as a whole. While each text can be read as a reflection on its own genre’s efficacy in representing what Connelly witnessed on the Thai-Burma border, the three books together refuse to either valorize or reject any particular genre, form, or medium of witnessing. The writing of *The Lizard Cage* may seem to undermine the aesthetics of failure explored in *The Border Surrounds Us*, but *Burmese Lessons* returns to the ethics of border-crossing by interrogating the narrator-protagonist’s right to write her book; ultimately, it presents the composition of *The Lizard Cage* as the only appropriate response to the debt Karen owes all those who shared their stories. As a whole, the Trilogy gestures toward its basis in lived experience while introducing a gap between representation and reality, attempting to establish its status as literature of witness without objectifying or fetishizing the other. The Trilogy thus models an ethical ambivalence that recognizes both the responsibility to bear witness by producing books that will circulate widely and the impossibility of doing so without exploiting the suffering of others or potentially catering to a voyeuristic readership. It rejects the possibility of ethical purity in literature of witness, residing instead in the messy space of failure, anxiety, and perpetual rewriting.

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NOTES

- 1 Suzanne Keen describes “the contemporary truism that novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world” (xv) as “attractive and consoling” (vii), if not convincing.
- 2 For more on the aesthetics and politics of textual alterity see Black; Drichel; and Goldman.

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