

## Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere* The Wild and Adventurous North?

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, Aritha van Herk situates her work as a response to the fiction of male writers of Western Canada which is characterized by the search for historic figures, great themes and wide horizons. Referring to Rudy Wiebe's *A Voice in the Land*, Aritha van Herk writes:

"Take War and Peace," suggests Rudy Wiebe. He would, having once insisted that the reason women will never be GREAT writers is because they do not set themselves great subjects. "Like what?" you asked him then, furious, offended. "Like war and peace," he said in his Yahweh voice. "Women write only out of their viscera." The word viscera in his mouth scornful and repellent, plump with blood and bread. Since then you've learned the viscera of men larger and more dangerous, hidden as they are in an inflated sense of themselves centring the subject of greatness. War and peace exactly what you wish to leave behind in lower Canada. But you take Anna Karenin. (*Places* 80)

Van Herk aims to leave behind the "great subjects" of religion, history and myth common to the literature of the "big sky country" and to explore what Wiebe would perhaps consider "viscera." Van Herk is interested in the psychological and sexual frontiers that J.L. has to overcome in *The Tent Peg* (1981), the adventures of Arachne, an eternal *picara*, in *No Fixed Address* (1986) and the reinterpretation of *Anna Karenina* against the backdrop of an Arctic space in *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990). *Places Far From Ellesmere* is an attempt to reinterpret or, in van Herk's words, to "unread" the narrative options and fictional worlds of male-authored heroines; it is also an attempt to defy generic conventions and classifications. More specifically, van Herk's

text aims to subvert the generic constraints of a northern<sup>1</sup> which has been predominantly construed as a narrative topos ideally suitable for adventure, challenge, escape, survival or death.

The North has provided a narrative space for the realization of manhood, male fantasy and a test of masculinity. According to Lisa Bloom, the North in men's writing represents "the ideal mythic site where men can show themselves as heroes capable of supernatural deeds" (6). Shelagh Grant gives a detailed account of European and Canadian texts about the North. According to her, the fur traders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries romanticized and mythologized the North as a place for "perilous adventure and boisterous camaraderie" (20); many explorers in the nineteenth century "accentuated the mystery and the grandeur of nature" (21) under the influence of European Romanticism and its fascination with sublime landscape. The disappearance of the Franklin expedition further enhanced the mystery of the North. American transcendentalism, as Grant argues, perpetuated the myth of the North as a desolate and mystical frontier. Canadian nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appropriated the rhetoric of valorizing the mysterious North and construed the North as a place of important and strong northern races. As Grant states, "this was indeed a north of the mind, representing challenge, adventure, enchantment, escape, and solitude" (23).

Narratives about the North inevitably parallel American westerns. Both West and North originally reflected European dreams about uncivilized wilderness, adventurous frontier, mysterious virgin land that had to be explored and conquered. However, the West has been tamed, explored and inhabited and "can no longer support the wild fantasies and utopian dreams it had sustained for so long" (Senkpiel 135). Westerns of adventure and escape from civilization have been replaced by expressions of regret about the lost Edenic dream or by parodies, as in George Bowering's *Caprice*. Northerns, however, tend to maintain their adventurous nature as the Far North is still considered largely mysterious, wild and menacing. According to Senkpiel, there is a correlation between the disappearance of the Wild West and the rise of the Far North: "The North is to the twentieth century what the West was to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a place with more future than past, more unexplored reaches than carefully mapped topography" (136).

There is another crucial difference between westerns and northerns. Westerns are often an expression of an "inevitable paradox of colonization"

(Kolodny 7); they embody the tension between the wish to maintain the Edenic dream found in the newly discovered continent on the one hand and the economic necessity to cultivate land on the other. Northerners, however, do not so easily support the imagery of paradise. Though the North can sometimes represent “a last chance to escape the errors and terrors of the ‘civilized’—that is, industrialized, polluted, and overpopulated—south” (Senkpiel 138), it does not lend itself easily to the pastoral imagery characteristic of westerns (see Blodgett). Northerners, then, have been consistently perceived as a genre of adventure, danger and test of masculinity in relentless wilderness.

T.D. MacLulich identifies westerns as a predominantly American genre and northerners as a major Canadian one (127). However, he argues, these terms “do not divide fiction into air-tight compartments. Rather, they are labels that identify tendencies—sets of related motifs and attitudes—they may exist separately or may be combined in any particular novel” (118). Moreover, according to MacLulich, genres like the northern, western, eastern and southern are deeply embedded in socio-historical contexts. Thus, “these forms of fiction are the products of historical circumstances. They cannot be defined in purely aesthetic or formal terms” (118). An American western, according to MacLulich, is a “novel of civilization evaded” (123); it frequently asks the question “How can man escape restrictions imposed by society?” (122). Canadian northerners, however, “have chosen to dwell on the process of settlement, in which European or ‘civilized’ values are imposed on the native landscape” (122). Whereas Leslie Fiedler defines a northern as a “direct confrontation between man and environment” (16), MacLulich perceives it as “the meeting place between a sensitive individual and a puritanical society that inhibits the emotional and intellectual development of its members” (127). Thus, according to MacLulich, novels like *As for Me and My House*, *Fifth Business*, and *St. Urbain’s Horseman* are examples of Canadian northerners, as they focus on the social inhibitions imposed on the intellectual, artistic or emotional development of an individual. Though MacLulich’s insistence on the historical embeddedness of the genre is well taken, his definition of a northern is too broad, since the clash between social and individual values has been the core of many literary texts that do not qualify as northerners. A northern in my view must be preoccupied with the North as frontier, challenge and inspiration. However, a northern reflects only the North of the mind; it is, in other words, both a European

construct and a product of Southern Canadian imagination.

Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere* admits women to Arctic space and aims to rewrite the northern from a feminist perspective. The narrator of the novel travels to Arctic Canada in order to contemplate fiction reading and writing, to think about certain fictional conventions which are often an entrapment to women writers and fiction characters. She sets out to free herself and the heroine of *Anna Karenina* (the book that she takes with her) from the constraints male fiction imposes on women. *Places Far From Ellesmere* subverts and dismantles the tradition established by male writers who envisioned the North as an ideal topos for the masculine fantasy. Van Herk's novel explores, challenges and subverts the limitations of genre, plot and syntax imposed by the conventional male narratives about the North; however, I will argue that it also replicates the mystery and romanticism of these texts because van Herk valorizes the North as an ideal space for women: space which is blank, empty and free from southern civilization and the gender assumptions it imposes.

Is van Herk's novel, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, a feminist northern? In her article "A Gentle Circumcision," van Herk describes the writing of western Canada as a "masculine kingdom of adventure" dominated by the romanticism of the landscape:

Try being female and living in the kingdom of the male virgin; try being female and writing in the kingdom of the male virgin. Women must come to a place in this kingdom themselves but until now it has been dominated by a romantic fiction that is disintegrating like a paper cowboy put into water. The kingdom boasts adventure and chivalry; it proudly displays all the characteristics of romanticism: innovation, spontaneity, sensuous nuance, limitless aspiration. This is big sky country; both the fiction and its criticism have relied on endless landscape as a metaphor. But it is also a kingdom which practices a kind of perverse courtly love: don't touch the lady. She'll sully your purity. (259)

Thus, van Herk characterizes writing about the west and north as masculine. In another article entitled "Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape," she delineates the strategies a woman writer can use to deconstruct masculine or conventional forms of writing about the west and the north. According to van Herk, women writers should dismantle the traditional representations of women as "mothers/saints/whores/muses" (18) and independently enter "the kingdom of the male virgin" (259). She considers women writers and the characters they create as "spies" in a masculine landscape who are there to infiltrate and change it:

You may feel that my spies, both writer and character, are violent, unredemptive. Only remember that they are spies, spies in an indifferent landscape up till now defined by other eyes. The male west has to be earth-quaked a little, those black steel lines and the looming giant toppled. Not destroyed, oh no, infiltrated. ("Women Writers" 24)

Van Herk displays a good deal of awareness about the narrative traps awaiting a woman writer who aspires to write in what she calls the "kingdom of the male virgin." She also delineates strategies for defying this kind of masculine writing. How, then, does van Herk "earthquake", "infiltrate" or subvert the masculine northern in *Places Far From Ellesmere*? In a Deleuzian reading<sup>2</sup> of van Herk's text, Marlene Goldman argues that it aims "to subvert traditional forms of storytelling and continues to emphasize the limitations of traditional representations of Woman" (38). Karin Beeler discusses *Places Far From Ellesmere* as an attempt to "reinterpret characters depicted by male authors" and as a challenge to "the authority of male writers in the literary canon" (277). According to Beeler, *Places Far From Ellesmere* is a feminist alternative to masculine, that is, more traditional forms of expression. Matthew Manera interprets van Herk's text in terms of Wolfgang Iser's receptionist theory.<sup>3</sup> According to Manera, the novel removes "the restriction of text as product only" and collapses "the walls between writer, text and reader" (89). The reference point in van Herk's work is "no longer the reader's horizon of expectations and the appearance of the text; it is the asymmetric dualism, the simultaneous difference of fiction and reality: it is the power of reading" (94).

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, van Herk not only creates new representations of women but, as I will further argue, offers alternative ways of literary representation and identification. Her text interests me, first and foremost, as a feminist challenge to the masculine northern preoccupied with adventure, exploration and romanticism, as in Sir John Franklin's accounts, and as a response to Rudy Wiebe's obsession with great themes and worthy subjects. However, though *Places Far From Ellesmere* successfully subverts the masculine northern, it paradoxically also replicates the traditional portrayal of the North as a blank space ready to be used for one's own purpose and narrative.

*Places Far From Ellesmere* challenges the masculine northern by its defiance of generic conventions. It refuses generic classifications of fiction, non-fiction and literary criticism. The narrator of *Places Far From Ellesmere* is called Aritha van Herk; thus, the conflation of author and narrator blurs the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction. The lack of plot, characters and other conventional elements of a novel raises doubts whether *Places Far From*

*Ellesmere* is, in fact, a novel. The narrator's intense focus on Anna Karenina and the fictional world of women heroines created by men and shaped by literary conventions brings *Places Far From Ellesmere* close to literary criticism. The text also obscures the boundaries between prose and poetry as its lyrical intensity evokes associations with prose poems.

*Places Far From Ellesmere* incorporates a semi-fictive autobiography which gives an account of the narrator's life through the description of places where she lived. The insertion of autobiography into a northern narrative is a subversive move in itself because accounts of the north tend to be caught in the demands of objectivity and science, as in Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* or Beattie's *Frozen In Time*. On the one hand, masculine northerners tend to romanticize and mystify the North in order to enhance the heroism and courage of the narrating subject; on the other hand, however, some of these narratives self-consciously aspire to render the text into an objective and scientific account. Therefore, elements of autobiography or exploration of the self in *Places Far From Ellesmere* subvert the demands for objectivity in the masculine narratives.

The approach to autobiography in *Places Far From Ellesmere* is also unusual. The book is narrated through the descriptions of places; thus, the focus is not only on the individual but also on the landscape. If male northerners tend to maintain a distance between landscape and the narrating subject in order to emphasize that the male subject is in control of the menacing landscape, van Herk's text offers a different relationship between a human subject and a landscape. The narrator is interested in "How to unearth the place in the person?" (37), therefore suggesting a mutual relationship between people and landscape: the human mind shapes narrative representations of the landscape but the landscape also influences the human perception.

The narrative moves from the third- and second- persons points of view and therefore implies the conflation of the narrator and the reader. The use of the second-person narrative modifies the conventions of autobiography and destabilizes the relationship of narrator and reader; it also reveals a complex reading process which, for the reader, becomes a simultaneous exploration of fictional characters and the self. This means that by "un/reading" Anna (the heroine of *Anna Karenina*, which the narrator reads in the high Arctic), the fictional van Herk "un/reads" herself and therefore enables the reader to "un/read" herself as well. Van Herk further elaborates on the complexities of such a reading in her article "In Visible Ink":

Reader, this amulet of the first and most final of all crypto-frictions is that one can be disappeared and re-written in a language beyond its own. Herein resides the ultimate illusion of the text: you are not reading me but writing, not me but yourself; you are not reading writing but being read, a live text in a languaging world. (10)

Thus, the second-person narrative enables van Herk to experiment on various levels; it questions the possibilities of reference in a post-modern text and also produces reading as an active and self-exploratory process.

Van Herk subtitles her novel “a geografictione” which implies the conflation of map-making and fiction writing. The fusion of cartography and fiction further dismantles the conventions of the masculine northern and deconstructs the hierarchy of an objective science (cartography) and subjective fiction. Cartography can be construed as a realm of imaginary geography: maps can represent a geography of mind as well as a geography of place. “Mapping,” according to Derek Gregory, “is necessarily situated, embodied, partial like all other practices of representation. Mapping is no longer accurate and objective, but representing perspective from someone’s point of view” (7). Van Herk’s “geografictione” perceives mapping as a practice of representation; it aims to reveal objectivity as an illusion useful to maintain hierarchies.

The cover of the novel shows a map on which Ellesmere Island is shaped as a woman. The cover exposes and mimics the troping of the unexplored land as feminine, unpredictable and menacing. Feminist critics (Kolodny, Rose, McClintock, to name just a few) have theorized the coding of Nature or landscapes in Western culture as feminine. Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of The Land* argues that the feminization of landscape in American literature oscillates between the tropes of welcoming mother and menacing virgin. The description of landscape as friendly and maternal characterized early American literature. The newly found continent was often described as Eden. However, Kolodny further argues that in order to live in a paradise, one has to cultivate the land which inevitably means destruction of the Edenic garden. Thus, the pastoral maternal image of landscape was abandoned in favour of that of a threatening virginal land that had to be tamed. However, late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literature experienced “a movement back into the realm of the Mother, in order to begin again” (153) and, at least symbolically, regain the paradise lost.

Anne McClintock argues that land as a female “is a traumatic trope, occurring invariably in the aftermath of the male boundary confusion” and

that “feminizing the land is a compensatory gesture, disavowing male loss of boundary by reinscribing a ritual excess of boundary” (24). In other words, caught between known and unknown, faced with the dangerously unfamiliar, male explorers code landscape as feminine. This coding allows them to deal with the fear of the unknown and secures their ego boundaries by reinscribing an excess of gender hierarchy.

Gillian Rose relates the troping of the landscape as feminine to Lacan’s mirror stage, and ideas of power and gaze. Using Laura Mulvey’s theories, Rose describes the gaze as a tension between “narcissism—identification with the image—and voyeurism—a distancing from the image” (103). This tension emanates from the mirror stage, “for the seen unity of the subject is in fact a fantasy” (103). Landscape then is troped as a comforting mother or a castrating dangerous femininity. The first instance suggests narcissistic identification with the image (that is, the landscape), whereas the latter implies voyeuristic distance, mastery and control. According to Rose, “Landscape can then be not the welcoming topography of nurturing mother but terrifying maternal swamps . . .” (106; also see Miller). In Rose’s account, voyeurism implies a threat to identity and fear of losing a unified subjectivity. Rose’s argument echoes McClintock’s reasoning that coding landscape as a threatening feminine force stems from the fear of boundary loss which results in the need for distance from and control over the object.

Thus, the island shaped as a woman on the cover of *Places Far From Ellesmere* mimics the hackneyed tendency to feminize landscape. It aims to expose the fear of the unknown in its commonplace camouflage as an unruly female which has to be domesticated. Moreover, the cover reminds us that while the explorations to map the Canadian North were driven by scientific, economic and political motives, they also drew on the mythologies of place, culture and gender of the day. Thus, the “map” on the cover of *Places Far From Ellesmere* and the fusion of map and fiction making in the text itself prove to be a powerful rhetorical strategy: they undermine the hierarchies and clear distinctions between what has been traditionally perceived as precise and objective science and what has been labelled subjective fiction.<sup>4</sup>

Van Herk’s “geografictione” challenges the conventions of gender representation and plot possibilities of the masculine northern. The narrator is obviously obsessed with visiting graveyards—possibly alluding to the burial of history of the places she describes. However, her obsession with the graveyards may also mock the absence of women in masculine northerners.



Furthermore, the narrator of *Places Far From Ellesmere* plays with narrative options that she thinks are available to her and, perhaps, to women characters on the whole, in a northern narrative. The narrator constructs this play with narrative options as a strategy of escape from the conventional plot:

How to get drunk: behind the school, behind the hall, in the back seats of cars, at the ball diamond, behind the curling rink, behind the elevators, down by the Battle River bridge.

Drink and get laid and get away and quit school.

Quit school and get laid and get drunk.

Reverse all orders: this is as far as you can get from home. This is place, inescapable. This is as far as you can get. The train leaves and does not return.

(*Places* 23)

*Places Far From Ellesmere* defies different aspects of the masculine northern. It mocks and subverts its gender representations as well as genre, plot and grammatical constraints. The “geografictione” challenges the masculine northern generically, as it blends fiction-making with map-making and inserts elements of autobiography into the text. It also obscures boundaries between fiction, non-fiction and literary criticism. *Places Far From Ellesmere* attempts to reinstate a kind of gender balance in a northern and admit women into the Arctic space. It therefore subverts a controlled and objective masculine northern.

However, is everything in this text revolutionary and subversive? In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, van Herk clearly idealizes the North as utopian space for women which is free from and unmarked by gender assumptions and conventions. Ellesmere becomes a blank space, an absence of civilization and its social and cultural restrictions: “Ellesmere is absence, a hesitation where you can pretend there are no telephones in the world, no newspapers, no banks, no books. You are only a body, here in this Arctic desert, this fecund land” (77). Ellesmere is juxtaposed to Edberg, the place where the narrator grew up. Edberg is described as an unromantic and unadventurous place. The narrator says, “What a place to grow up; no crime, no drugs, no raging hormones” (23). Whereas Edberg is associated with a sense of boredom and imprisonment, Ellesmere (a synecdoche for the Far North) is viewed as a place to escape to; it is considered by the narrator to be “a metaphor for escapation” (39). Ellesmere is not only an escape for the fictional van Herk, but also for Anna Karenina, the heroine of *Anna Karenina*. Anna is a “victim” of Tolstoy, nineteenth-century social norms and literary

conventions. Anna has never been given a chance of a fair reading; however, here in Ellesmere she can finally be freed and “unread”:

Created by a man, written by a man, read by men, revised by men; now, here on Ellesmere, you dare to set her free from the darkness of pages, her horrid shadow. Anna written as victim, trapped by convention's implacable refusals, a woman who gives up everything for love, destroys herself and everyone around her. (*Places* 122)

Anna Karenina becomes a symbol for all literary heroines who are entrapped in conventional plots, readings and interpretations which offer their heroines only the options of marriage, love affairs, children and often death. Ellesmere becomes a place to which all stranded heroines can escape:

You know at least a hundred Annas, stranded in fictional love affairs written by men who do not know that Ellesmere exists. Come to that, women are all Annas, caught or not, Annas sweating their way from one day to the next. They know the wars within their orbits, between children and husbands and lovers, need and desire and the desperate necessities of symmetry, how they will be always and for ever culpable, exiled for their visceras, eviscerated for their exiles. (*Places* 82-83)

Thus, Ellesmere is a space where all Annas, fictional or real, can escape from gender impositions. In Ellesmere, women are free to explore their personal fictions. Ellesmere offers a possibility “of a new story; Anna can invent herself in an undocumented landscape, an undetermined fiction” (125), since “reading is a new act here, not introverted and possessive but exploratory, the text a new body of self, the self a new reading of place” (113). Ellesmere becomes a place where literary heroines can participate in a different fiction, and their readers can explore and liberate themselves from the gender constraints of the society they left behind in the south. Moreover, van Herk is conscious of having fictionalized herself :

You know you are a character in a larger novel, a novel of geography and passion, reading yourself as you are being read by a comprehensive reader. How would this reading read your places, you self written between habitations, the braille of fingers on each locational inflection? (*Places* 118)

Ellesmere becomes a shelter for Tolstoy's Anna and all entrapped literary heroines as well as for the fictional and real van Herk. Because of an effective erasure of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, writer and reader, Ellesmere becomes a space of freedom for readers as well. Ellesmere, then, is described in terms of mystery, escape and, to a certain degree, adventure. Ellesmere is viewed in terms of blankness: it is described as an

“undocumented” and “unaltered” desert. It is romanticized, idealized and rendered mysterious as an ideal place for women. So, is van Herk’s supposedly subversive northern so different from a masculine one? Though van Herk’s “geografictione” successfully challenges certain aspects of a masculine northern, it also replicates thinking and attitudes towards the North characteristic of its masculine predecessors. *Places Far From Ellesmere* reproduces the image of the North as a blank space, one available for an escape and a new mythology. Van Herk carelessly erases First Nations’ presence in the North. If male explorers, fur traders, explorers and some twentieth-century writers constructed the North as a topos of blankness suitable for description of adventures, escape, survival or death, then van Herk reinscribes the same attitude camouflaged under a different set of concepts. The North in van Herk’s “geografictione” is also a blank space perfectly suitable for an escape and liberation from civilization. Moreover, in “In Visible Ink” and some of her interviews, van Herk continues to reinscribe the notion of a blank romantic North as an ideal topos for women. She describes the North as a place where she finally is “free from language” and “free of words” (2). In the North or Arctic, she is finally “beyond all writing and its romance” (3), ready to “unread her very reading and her personal geography” (4). The North “effaces her own referentiality” and becomes “a transformation without continuity or chronology” (4). Thus, her article “In Visible Ink” continues to describe the North as blank and empty, free of language, free of reference, free of every invention of civilization. In her interview with Dorothy Jones, van Herk describes Canada as “a naked country, such an unwritten about country” (14):

Canada is a wonderful country to write from because it is so clear and clean of story. Every single mile in Canada has not had a story written about it. Although largely unmythologized, it is rapidly beginning to take shape in story, and that’s exciting. There is a terrific sense of freedom when you are an artist expressing the nature, landscape, sensibility of the place virtually untouched by language. (14)

This quotation replicates the construction of the North or, in this case, Canada, as a blank space, ready to be mythologized. However, it does involve some further contradictions about van Herk’s position. In this interview, the whole of Canada becomes unwritten; Canada is viewed as a country outside the shape of the story. Canada may be clean of a European story, but it is hardly a place “untouched by language” as it has been mythologized in the oral traditions of Indigenous people. I think it is only fair to conclude

from this passage that van Herk ignores both the traditional and the modern writing of Indigenous people. By appropriating the Arctic space for the subversion of literary conventions and textual constraints and the liberation from gender assumptions, van Herk is caught in an emptying practice which often accompanies colonial desire. Thus, in the end both masculine northerners and *Places Far From Ellesmere* construct the North as a blank space ready to be inscribed with southern narratives—in other words, ready to be colonized by the southern Euro-Canadian imagination. Eventually, van Herk falls back into the trap she aspires to avoid.

## NOTE

- 1 For a discussion of the term “northern”, see MacLulich and for an overview of differences between northerners and westerners, see Grace.
- 2 Goldman employs Deleuze and Guattari’s terms “deterritorialization,” “nomadology” and their cartographic model of power and desire to interpret van Herk’s alternative or “deterritorialized” identities and representations of women as opposed to fixed female identities in traditional western fictions.
- 3 Reception theory comments on the relationship between reader and writer. *Places* collapses the boundaries between the reader and writer, between the acts of reading and writing. It undermines the reader’s desire to interpret the text correctly; thus, both the reader and writer become active participants in the creation process.
- 4 The other challenge to the masculine northern derives from van Herk’s consistent avoidance of standard punctuation and occasionally of standard syntax. The lack of standard punctuation allows the semiotic energy of language to be unleashed into the text; also, it signifies a punctuation of desire rather than the punctuation of grammar. The abundance of sentence fragments in the novel may be intended to reflect the fractured subjectivity of the female narrator as opposed to a self-controlling and unified male subject in the masculine northern. Van Herk’s text is full of various syntactical puns, sentence fragments and displaced semi-colons:

What you weren’t. Allowed.

:to go uptown at noon. Either to the store, the post office, the cafe, someone’s house.

All potential trouble . . .

:to play ball after school. Base/ball diamonds were suspect, between the catcher’s mitt and the pitcher’s mound anything could flash past/get loose/be taken

(*Places* 24)

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