EARTH-QUAKING THE KINGDOM OF THE MALE VIRGIN

A Deleuzian Analysis of Aritha van Herk's
"No Fixed Address" and
"Places Far From Ellesmere"

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CRITICAL OPINION concerning Aritha van Herk's fictions have generally tended to be mixed. One reviewer of her most recent text, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, had the courage to ask, "What is this work?" (Beer 36). Another critic, somewhat less given to speculation, perhaps, simply concluded that the work is a "genreless book that makes a powerful argument for genre" (Thomas 70). In what follows, I hope to show that van Herk's most recent fictions, *No Fixed Address* (1986) and *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990), are best understood in the context of their attempt to address and transform the traditional narrative structures of western Canadian regional fiction.

Van Herk is unabashedly critical of the one-sided nature of storytelling in the west. As she says, "[t]he fact is, men write epic fiction: about life, about war, about what matters, including who [sic] they have screwed and whom they have killed. Sometimes, as an alternative, they write sensitive writerly novels about the male act of writing fiction" ("Double" 276). By far the greatest obstacle that women writers must negotiate when they try to get a word in edge-wise is the legacy of masculine representations of Woman.[1] Van Herk points out that, in any list of western writers, Grove, Mitchell, Ross, Wiebe, and Kroetsch are invariably cited; Margaret Laurence remains the exception (see "Women" 15). As far as van Herk is concerned, the western literary tradition is a thoroughly male terrain: "the art that has defined it [the west] is masculine and it appears to have defined its art as a masculine one" ("Women" 15). Worse, within traditional western fictions, women are "fixed as mothers/saints/whores, muses all" (18). Van Herk insists that the prairie is "in bondage to an image" (17); the term "bondage" may

seem a trifle dramatic, but, when one reads the manifestos and fictions written by western male writers, the word seems appropriate enough.[2]

In *The Canadian West in Fiction*, Edward McCourt traces the development of literature in the western regions as it was depicted by its earliest chroniclers — fur traders, explorers, missionaries, mounties and, later, travellers, journalists and romantic novelists. As his study reveals, for the most part, the West has been seen and described from a masculine perspective. The feminist critic, Annette Kolodny, in her book, *The Lay of the Land*, underscores the impact of this masculine perspective. She points out that, during the pioneer period of American history, the settlers promoted the myth of the land as woman. In many instances, mapping the new land was likened to the possession of "virgin continent." Although Kolodny's study is limited to the settlement of the United States, her findings are applicable to the physical and literary appropriation of the Canadian landscape as well.[3]

Perhaps Rudy Wiebe, in his essay "Passages by Land," best illustrates the masculine perspective which van Herk strives to undermine in her own fictions. In this essay, Wiebe offers one of the most clearly articulated examples of the masculine impulse toward mastery of the supposedly feminine landscape:

> [T]o touch this land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space. . . . *You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design* and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build giant artifact. No song can do that; it must be giant fiction.
>
> (Wiebe 259; my emphasis)

Van Herk whole-heartedly rejects the desire to "fix" the prairie by imposing this type of grid, fashioned from a male perspective; and she likewise rejects the representations of women as Woman proffered by male western writers. By contrast, she remarks that the male west "has to be earth-quaked a little, those black steel lines and the looming giant toppled. Not destroyed, oh no, but infiltrated" ("Women" 24). In keeping with this philosophy, her increasingly experimental fictions explore alternative relationships between women and place — relationships based, not upon the capture and mastery of the landscape, but upon the impulse toward deterritorialization. I would suggest that this gesture toward deterritorialization, read by some critics as genrelessness, resembles an ideologically subversive stance which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as "nomadology."

In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari outline a cartographic model of the lines of power and desire. In contrast to Foucault's view of the dynamics of power, Deleuze and Guattari's model offers the possibility for social and individual transformation; their model also shares many features of feminist strategies whose aim is to subvert what is called phallocentric thought. Adapted, rather than adopted, the work of Deleuze and Guattari offers an innovative set of

methods and procedures that can serve to displace the "pervasiveness of the struc-
ture of binary logic that has dominated Western philosophy since the time of Plato"
(Grosz 7). The Deleuzian model is of particular interest to feminists because, in
accordance with feminist theory, it displays an interest in viewing "difference"
outside the structure of binary pairs in which what is different "can be understood
only as a variation or negation of identity" (Grosz 8). The subject, according to
Deleuze and Guattari, is not an 'entity' or thing, or a "relation between mind
(interior) and body (exterior); instead, it must be understood as a series of flows,
energies, movements . . . linked together in ways other than those which con-
geal it into an identity" (Grosz 12). In this fashion, the Deleuzian model, like
feminist models, destabilizes traditional modes of conceiving identity as unified
and masculine.

Read in relation to the texts of Aritha van Herk, the work of Deleuze and
Guattari, with its emphasis on the deterritorialization of identity, politicizes our
understanding of van Herk's attempt to explode genre and plot, and her portrayal
of women who flee to or create unmapped territory in an attempt to escape the
grid which fixes the image of Woman. In their work, Deleuze and Guattari align
attempts to subvert traditional representations of identity with revolutionary politi-
cal struggles. Viewed in this light, the domain of fiction ceases to remain an
aesthetically neutral realm which exerts virtually no influence on the lives of
individuals. As far as Deleuze and Guattari are concerned, fictions are implicated
in political struggles and can be used by minority groups to subvert the State
apparatus. Thus, when van Herk argues that, if women hope to write fiction, they
must reject their traditional identity as "muse" and get out of "this male structure"
("Women" 18), she can be said to be aligning herself with what Deleuze and
Guattari describe — oddly, if effectively — as a "nomadic war machine."

Van Herk shares with Deleuze and Guattari, as we shall see, an interest in using
a cartographic model to discuss attempts to reformulate female subjectivity beyond
the discursive positions sanctioned by the State. In discussions of western regional
literature, van Herk tends to utilize spatial metaphors, and positions herself as a
woman writer in a "kingdom of the male virgin." As she says, "I come from the
west, the kingdom of the male virgin. I live and write in the kingdom of the male
virgin. To be a female and not-virgin, making stories in the kingdom of the male
virgin, is dangerous. You think this kingdom is imaginary? Try being a writer there.
Try being a woman there" ("Gentle" 257). In interviews, van Herk continues to
describe her identity as a woman in spatial terms, arguing that she belongs to "the
region of woman" — a region defined by its characteristic sense of "otherness" (1).
Elaborating on the nature of this "region," van Herk states:

> [T]here's a very obvious difference between the region of women — that of the home
> and family, the traditional territory that women have, and now the regions they are
> reaching for outside, attempting to establish themselves in a different way — and

the quintessentially male regions of fiction which have been the great theatres of the world. Men always write about war and peace and action and heroes.

("Interview" 2-3).

In her writing, van Herk emphasizes that both women writers and their characters need to escape; they must both become "spies in an indifferent landscape up until now defined by other eyes" ("Women" 24).

In many ways, her notion of escape is in keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming imperceptible and transforming oneself into a nomadic war machine. In her writings, van Herk portrays women as guerilla fighters, scouting out hostile territory; at one point, she boasts that women "have an apron full of alternatives, all of them disguises, surprise weapons. We are beginning to dot this landscape but we can't be seen" ("Women" 19). Before looking more closely at particular correspondences between van Herk's fictions and the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, a brief review of some of the latter's major concepts might be helpful.

I̶n *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari begin by identifying the structure of binary logic with the State; they also characterize the State according to its essential function, namely, "capture," which involves the stratification of space and the control of a variety of "flows," including the flows of individual energies and movements, population, commerce, commodities, and money or capital (385). Working along what they call "molar lines," the State sets up its field of interiority and parcels out closed spaces to people, "assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares" (380). On one level, then, the State's impulse to capture and control space is evident in a city's geographical grid; on another level, this impulse is evident in the images individuals use to organize and describe space. Rudy Wiebe's image of the grid conforms to this type of impulse toward control.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, working in opposition to the State and its mode of binary thinking are a multiplicity of decentred, "molecular" entities, which are organized, not in the hierarchical or "arborescent" manner of the State, but according to a "rhizomatic" structure (6-7). They use the organic metaphor of a meandering root structure to describe assemblages based on multiple connections which "bring together very diverse domains, levels, dimensions, functions, effects, aims and objects" (Grosz 13). According to Deleuze and Guattari, rhizomatic structures have the capacity to function as "nomadic war machines."

Understandably, many feminists have balked at the idea of appropriating the term "war machine"; for one thing, what could be more male-identified than the military and war? Likewise, the term "machine" makes feminists uncomfortable because the infrastructure associated with machinic functioning and technocracies

remains predicated on the exclusion of women (Grosz 5-6). However, in working with the concepts of the State and the nomadic war machine it is important to remember that both of these terms refer to a constellation of characteristics, rather than to concrete, physical entities; this explains why they are used by Deleuze and Guattari to designate anything from organizations to modes of thinking. Used in this way, the terms are no longer reserved to describe male bastions. There is no denying that the use of the term "war machine" to describe feminist projects remains problematic; however, it is important to re-evaluate arguments that assume that only supposedly "feminine" terms and strategies are acceptable, while other, presumably "masculine," strategies must be eschewed. If nothing else, Deleuze and Guattari's application of the term to describe the efforts of a variety of groups — including the feminists — destabilizes any easy opposition between "masculine" and "feminine" techniques for subversion.

Deleuze and Guattari's writings constantly preclude the possibility of constructing simple dichotomies. For instance, they propose that the distinction between the State and the war machine ultimately can never be fixed because the border between the two is permeable; they argue that, throughout history, the State has constantly appropriated the revolutionary potential of the war machine. While their concept of the nomadic war machine is based on the characteristics of traditional nomadic tribes, the authors' goal lies in utilizing the idea of a war machine to describe the activities of isolated groups or "packs" "which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of State power" (360). They suggest that "each time there is an operation against the State — insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution as act — it can be said that a war machine has revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared ..." (386).

In contrast to the State, which works to create stratified space, the nomadic war machine seeks to maximize deterritorialized or smooth space. For this reason, the shifting sands of the desert, whether sand or ice, are home to the nomad because, in the desert, there is no attempt made to enclose the landscape which is constantly changing. Even though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, "it does not fulfill the function of the sedentary road" which encloses space (380). Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that one's mode of perception changes in the desert because "there is no line separating earth and sky; there is no intermediate distance, no perspective or contour; visibility is limited. ... It is a tactile space, or rather 'haptic,' a sonorous much more than a visual space" (382). Whereas the line of power associated with the State is "molar," the line corresponding to the nomadic war machine is the "molecular" path of escape or the "line of flight": "This is ... a line without segments which is more like the collapse of all segmentarity. It is the line along which structures ... break down or become transformed into something else. It is the line of absolute deterritorialization" (Patton 65). It is this line of flight or transformation which subverts traditional

binary oppositions — destabilizing, for instance, the distinction between the categories of man and woman, human and animal, as well as mind and body.

In their work, Deleuze and Guattari align the war machine and its line of flight with processes which they refer to as "becomings." These are processes which systematically break down binary oppositions constructed by State-thought. As Elizabeth Grosz notes there is an order to these "becomings":

> There is . . . a kind of direction in the quantum leap required by becomings, an order in which becoming-woman is, for all subjects, a first trajectory or direction: becoming-woman desediments the masculinity of identity: becoming-animal, the anthropocentrism of philosophical thought, and becoming-imperceptible replaces, problematizes the notion of thing, entity. Indiscernibility, imperceptibility and impersonality remain the end-points of becoming. . . .   (23)

In my use of the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, I recognize, in conjunction with other feminist critics, that there are serious problems for feminists associated with their assertion that both men and women must engage in "becoming-woman."[4] Most obviously, Deleuze and Guattari's model of "becoming" seems to appropriate women's experience once again, idealistically portraying it as a supposedly neuter, universal step which both men and women must strive to attain and then move beyond. However, even if their work replicates patriarchal structures to a certain extent, aspects of their theories can be usefully salvaged. As Elizabeth Grosz insists, it is important not to dismiss their work out of hand, but to determine whether their work can serve as a "powerful tool or weapon in feminist challenges to phallocentric thought" even though their writings may be deemed patriarchal or phallocentric (6). Furthermore, any efforts to remain untainted by phallocentric thought, well-intentioned though they might be, remain highly problematic because, as Grosz underscores, "*no* text — not even 'feminist' texts — can in a sense be immune to this charge [of phallocentrism], insofar as the very categories, concepts and methodologies available today are those spawned by this history . . ." (6).[5] In the debate between keeping feminism "pure," or utilizing "tainted" phallologocentric theories, I align myself with Grosz and other feminists who believe that we must employ all the theoretical tools at hand, just as we must shape them to our use.

L EAVING THIS CONTROVERSY ASIDE, I want to look at the correspondences between the work of Deleuze and Guattari and van Herk's feminist, militaristic strategy for infiltrating and destabilizing the masculine terrain. Van Herk's insistence that women need to distance themselves from their traditional "fixed" representations as Woman — "mothers/saints/whores, muses all" ("Women" 18) — which surfaces in all of her writing, but most emphatically in *No Fixed Address* and *Places Far From Ellesmere*, corresponds to Deleuze and

Guattari's emphasis on resisting State control and "becoming-minoritarian," a transformation that rends individuals from their "major identity," and aims toward rendering individuals imperceptible (Deleuze and Guattari 291).

As we shall see, *No Fixed Address* investigates the process of "becoming-minoritarian" and represents this transformation using cartographic imagery. In this way, the text draws relationships among mapped and unmapped territory and female identity. However, this text examines what happens when women do not ultimately align themselves with the State; as the title suggests, the novel does not conclude by positioning the protagonist within the "fixed" bounds erected by the State. In this case, the term "address" refers, on the one hand, to both physical location and the linguistic notion of address; the latter entails an understanding or, as in this case, a lack of understanding, concerning the ideological "location" of speakers in a given discursive situation. In this way, the title playfully signals the disturbance created in the linguistic terrain when women choose to become invisible within the terms designated by traditional representations of Woman.

No Fixed Address is composed of four sections, each bearing the same title "Notebook on a missing person." The novel's picaresque heroine, Arachne Manteia, becomes this "missing person" when she escapes into male territory as a travelling underwear salesperson. Throughout the novel, Arachne drives a 1959 Mercedes through a myriad of prairie towns, plying her trade. As one critic argues, underwear in *No Fixed Address* functions as "a metaphor for the repression of women . . ." (Leckie 279). Although Arachne sells undergarments, which recall State control, and the time when it was *"taken for granted that woman's body should be prisoner, taped and measured and controlled"* (10), she herself never wears the stuff. Far from playing by society's rules, Arachne is an "amoral, selfish, dishonest" woman (103). By far van Herk's boldest heroine, Arachne finds it easy to reject State-thought and become a nomadic warrior because she was never trained to be a Woman in the first place. Ironically, she must rely on her boyfriend, Thomas, to teach her how to don a feminine disguise in order to navigate in the "'real world,' . . . the respectable world, in which she is an imposter" (103). Patterned on the character of the traditional male rogue, Arachne is a sexually casual, itinerant trickster, who, like the class of spiders she is named for, treats men like flies (see van Herk's interview, "Kiss" 86). As Arachne explains to her friend, Thena, men are "'just bodies, you could put a paper bag over their heads'" (33). Unlike the prairie fictions in which the little woman waits at home, in *No Fixed Address* the situation is reversed, and Arachne's faithful lover, Thomas, a cartographer for the Geodetic Survey Company, chastely waits for her. Furthermore, with the aid of the maps that Thomas and other map-makers like him draw, Arachne fulfills her insatiable longong to spider "her own map over the intricate roads of the world" (223). Arachne's appropriation of Thomas's maps illustrate the extent to which van Herk has subverted the State's practice of controlling

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"flows." Here the cartographer, although male, is portrayed as loving and domesti-cated, and Arachne's enjoyment of the maps he produces indicates that maps, which are very often created by the State, can be used for radically different pur-poses than the ones they were originally intended to serve: as a nomadic war machine, Arachne uses Thomas's maps to locate the boundaries of civilized society and to escape its borders.

Arachne's wanderings can be aligned with van Herk's desire to expand "the borders of the region we inhabit as women." Not only does Arachne stray physically, but she also strays psychologically from the traditional image of Woman. For instance, Arachne is portrayed as a woman "without a scrap of motherly feeling..." (38). In accordance with the findings of Nancy Chodorow, Arachne maintains that motherhood "is something socialized, something incubated in a girl child with dolls and sibling babies" (38). And that "something" is the one thing she did not get from her mother, Lanie. One month after she was born, Arachne's mother left her alone and went off to work as a waitress, leaving Arachne to grow "without a mother hovering over her progress" (85). When Lanie wanted to go off to a Bingo or a shoe-sale, she would lock Arachne in the backyard as if she were a dog. At three years of age, Arachne learned how to climb the fence and would spend her time wandering alone through the neighbourhood. As Arachne explains, her forays helped to shape her "solitary and observant life" (42). Rather than receive a traditional education in the reproduction of mothering, Arachne is educated to become a nomadic war machine.

Her penchant for violence surfaces quite early. As a child, her dolls were "clothes-pins divided into two armies who alternately attacked and decimated each other" (38-39). At fifteen years of age, she founded and became the sole female member of a street gang, which she named the Black Widows (191). As Deleuze and Guattari point out, war machines are "dark assemblages" which include war societies, secret societies, and crime societies (242); they also insist that "gangs of street children" fall under the category of a war machine (358). In van Herk's novel, Arachne's gang is described as a "clutch of swaggering city rats..." (192). Deleuze and Guattari use the image of a swarm of rats to describe the type of structure which subverts the molar organization of the State, arguing that "the proliferation of rats, the pack, brings a becoming-molecular that undermines the great molar powers of family, career, and conjugality..." (233). Thus, Arachne's early association with her gang or pack primed her for an adult existence as a war machine.

As an adult, Arachne destabilizes State-thought in a variety of ways. Most obviously, her trade as a travelling salesperson allows her to indulge in a lifestyle that is antithetical to the type of fixed existence which women are encouraged by the State to adopt. Furthermore, as the narrator explains, "Arachne travels to travel. Her only paradox is arriving somewhere, her only solution is to leave for

somewhere else" (164). It is useful to compare the narrator's description of Arachne's "lust for driving" (172) with Deleuze and Guattari's description of the nomad's attitude toward travel:

> The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points. . . . But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. (380)

In van Herk's novel, Arachne, like the nomad described above, enjoys the process of travelling, the intermezzo, rather than the accomplishment of arrival. By contrast, as Ian MacLaren points out, in *No Fixed Address*, the italicized voice of the narrator (who is desperately trying to plot Arachne's movements) represents the realist reader who is bent on establishing a map of Arachne's journey (xxxv). The narrator, neurotically obsessed with creating a realistic map of Arachne's movements, can be aligned with State-thought, whose vital concern is to "vanquish nomadism" and to "control migrations" (Deleuze and Guattari 385). In the end, Arachne disappears altogether from the grid she has created. Like a spider, she creates her web only to abandon it, waiting for her prey to become helplessly tangled in the threads.[6]

Whereas the plots of van Herk's two previous novels portray heroines returning to the fold (in *Judith*, the protagonist claims an address [188], and in *The Tent Peg*, the heroine, J.L., stakes a claim [210]), *No Fixed Address* refuses to reduce Arachne's desire to travel to the confines of a realistic plot: the spider-like Arachne is never caught in her own web. Instead, she fearlessly crosses into unmapped territory. Moving beyond the conventional roles of daughter, wife, and mother, she remains sexually appetitive and adventurous — so much so, that she flaunts social convention that relegates the elderly to an asexual limbo, and has a passionate affair with Joseph, a coppersmith who is almost ninety. One of the more intriguing boundaries that Arachne crosses is the division between life and death itself. Toward the end of the novel, Arachne dies; as the narrator explains, "one of her lives [was] certainly over" (301). But the story does not end with her death because the text does not bow to the dictates of traditional plot structures, which, as Daphne Marlatt points out, always award marriage or death (or insanity) to the heroine (Marlatt 105). Instead, the inconclusive conclusion of *No Fixed Address* portrays Arachne, still very much alive, fleeing the law — a metaphor for the "laws" of fiction, perhaps — driving north toward the arctic. As the narrator explains, the arctic *"is the ultimate frontier, a place where the civilized melt* [sic] *away and the*

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meaning of mutiny is unknown, where manners never existed and family back-grounds are erased. It is exactly the kind of place for Arachne" (316).

With its emphasis on the north as anonymous territory, *No Fixed Address* develops a link between the unmapped northern landscape and the cognitive space where women can plot radical alternatives to traditional representations of female identity. More precisely, Arachne's transformations correspond to the Deleuzian model of "becoming," whose end-point, as Elizabeth Grosz indicates, consists in becoming indiscernible, imperceptible, and impersonal (23). As Stephen Scobie remarks, in *No Fixed Address*, the most radical subversion of traditional representations consists in the refusal of representation itself. This occurs when Arachne becomes a "missing person": "She has certainly moved beyond the confines of an individual personality, whether defined in the loose terms of the picaresque tradition or in the stricter terms of the fiction of realism. She has become a different person, a missing person" (Scobie 40). Here the plotting of identity and the plotting of landscape fuse because, when Arachne drives to Long Beach in B.C., she drives over the edge, "the brink, the selvage of the world" (291). As Scobie notes, the word "selvage" is formed from the combination of the words "self" and "edge," so that her journey literally takes her to the self's edge and beyond (39).

In the end, the realist reader/narrator, desperate to capture Arachne, is left miserably following her trail of abandoned panties, those emblems of the repression of the female body, which are strewn along a road that never ends. Ironically, one reviewer, obviously sympathetic with the text's realist narrator, vents his frustration at the turn of events, which begins when Arachne abandons Thomas and the normalcy which he represents. According to the reviewer, after that, "We're not sure what is real and what is not, so it hardly matters. Arachne is no longer a reverse role-model, but has become merely words on a page" (McGoogan 34). Despite his frustration, McGoogan has hit on a key point. Arachne does not remain a reverse role-model; instead, she moves beyond the frame of binary thinking, leaves the grid behind altogether, and becomes unrecognizable as a real Woman (or Man, for that matter). Her escape reveals that the traditional image of Woman or Man and its mirror reflection were never more than simply "words on a page" or their equivalent in the first place.

IN *Places Far From Ellesmere*, not only is the traditional representation of Woman subverted, but the structure of realistic fiction continues to be destabilized as the narrator journeys from place to place and muses about the landscape, its history, its inhabitants, and, strangely enough, its graveyards. This text focuses most directly on the relationships between the mapping of place and the plotting of fiction, and the repercussion both types of plotting have had on

fictional representations of female identity. At every instance, the narrator is, in fact, searching out possible sites for a "future grave" (140). In her review of the text, Hilda Kirkwood describes van Herk as a "contemporary mystic, quasi-religious, with a death-fixation" (29). However, van Herk does not have a "death-fixation," so much as a desire to explore the nature of "engravement," which, as the pun indicates, concerns the process of engraving plots (see *Places* 23, 61). In the text, the word "grave" pivots on this double meaning: a grave for people as well as a fixed *plot* for stories. As the narrator intimates, physical engravement, i.e., burial in the landscape, has affinities with the engravement or emplotting of fictions: "to dare to stay after death, to implant yourself firmly and say, 'Here I stay, let those who would look for a record come here'" (61). Writing, which is committed to paper, like a body committed to the earth, becomes both a record for others as well as an ambiguous icon: "Enclosured, focussed, [sic] a possible fortress . . ." (62). Although the narrator tests out the possibility of locating a plot in three different places, like Goldilocks in the fairy tale, she is not permitted to make a final selection (140-41). Ultimately, she recognizes that she is destined "to become ashes. Ashes alone" because it is not safe for women to choose a fixed plot (141). Her insistence on remaining fragmentary and her awareness of the dangers associated with locating oneself in the literary landscape recall Marlatt's point that traditional plots end only in death, marriage, or insanity (a form of death) for the heroine. The narrator of *Places Far From Ellesmere* warns that women must resist the temptation to find a final "home"/grave/plot because there "are murderers at large" (141).

In the text, the impulse to resist the temptation to rely on a traditional plot affects the structure of the work. As I noted earlier, the text has generated tremendous confusion among reviewers. What remains clear, however, is that the self-conscious avoidance of plot, and the undermining of traditional forms of representation and gender roles leads to the undermining of genre categories. It is a mistake, perhaps, to try to squeeze this genreless work into a "fixed" classificatory system that it is so clearly attempting to resist.

Van Herk herself has dubbed the work a "geografictione," in an attempt to describe the text's fusion of the processes of map-making and fiction-making. In accordance with its reliance on cartography, each of the novel's four sections maps a specific "exploration site." These sites include the author's hometown of Edberg; the city of Edmonton, where she attended university; Calgary, where she currently resides; and, finally, Ellesmere Island, the arctic desert where she journeyed with her partner, Robert Sharp, an exploration geologist. It is on this floating polar desert that the narrator enacts a re-reading of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*, a reading which frees Anna from Tolstoy's murderous plot (82).[7] In accordance with the Deleuzian model discussed above, the narrator journeys from one stratified site to

another, where the individual is captured and enclosed, before she finally escapes to the smooth space of the desert.

As in the previous novel, the northern landscape once again offers a refuge for women from the over-determined, masculine representations of Woman. When the narrator travels to Ellesmere, she brings Tolstoy's novel with her as "a lesson, to solve a problem in how to think about love; to solve a problem in the (grave) differences between men's writing and women's writing . . ." (82); once again, the word "grave," can be understood to mean "plot." As Linda Hutcheon suggests, the word also conveys the sense of "graveness" or seriousness typically associated with masculine, epic fiction. Rather than rewrite the masculine fictions of the prairie, as she begins to do in *No Fixed Adddress,* in *Places Far From Ellesmere,* van Herk advocates abandoning them altogether: "Go north. . . . If there are westerns, why can there not be northerns? Northerns of the heart. . . . Anna has been punished too long. Take her with you to Ellesmere" (85).

In the first section, the narrator engages in a meditation of the nature of Edberg as home and as a possible site for engravement. Although she finally understands that she cannot capture the town in a fictional engravement (37-39) the narrator does provide some salient details regarding her hometown — details which emphasize its fortress-like nature. In her account of Edberg, she describes its "six square blocks" and the town's grid-like structure, stressing the emphasis placed on the control of flows (37). In her reading of Edberg's history and her early life in the town, she primarily remembers the set of prohibitions that were geared to restrict her movements (24-29). In contrast to the town's repressive character, the image of the platform at the train station, which stood "on the lip of the world," functions as a figure for desire and escape (16). It is on the platform that the narrator first imagines seeing Tolstoy's Anna Karenin (16). Later on, she remarks that Anna "will get off to pace the platform . . . and to remember that illegitimacy lurks everywhere, she has only to read the story differently, her own story waiting to be un/read by the light of these places . . ." (36). However, this image of Anna getting *off* the train highlights the crucial fact that a creating re-reading of the story, what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "line of flight," can only occur when one diverges from the linear narrative trajectories associated with State-thought, symbolized by the train-tracks.

In the novel, the image of train-tracks corresponds to Rudy Wiebe's image of the fiction writer's grid, those "great black steel lines of fiction." Within the section on Ellesmere Island, the narrator clarifies this association between the train-tracks and State-thought when she explains that Anna was railroaded into committing suicide by Tolstoy. She goes on to align Tolstoy with the mysterious peasant who appears in Anna's dreams and magically arrives on the scene when Anna commits suicide in the novel. Tolstoy and his alter ego, the little peasant "working at the rails," are held responsible for grinding Anna "beneath the freight cars of the

train" (119).⁸ In essence, the train-tracks symbolize the rigid, prearranged structure of the masculine narrative trajectory.

In the second section, the narrator attempts to escape the prohibitions associated with Edberg by travelling to Edmonton. Although she travels to this city to get away from prohibitions, as it turns out, Edmonton — this "once-fort, Hudson's Bay Company stronghold" — like Edberg, is structured according to a grid (52). Associated as it is with the State and State-thought, Edmonton cannot possibly satisfy the narrator's desires for escape. The text offers a clue that this is the case when the narrator asks, "what's to be expected of a fort(ress) set up to trade/skin Indians?" (43), and then likens herself to an Indian: "you now the Indian coming with your skin, your fresh eyes up from the Battle River country . . ." (44). As in the previous section, the fortress is once again opposed to the smooth space of the desert. For the narrator, the city remains a "stagnation point" within the world at large. Her memories of it are of "the darkness of winter and of buildings, of *enclosured cold*" (53; my emphasis). In this section, the image of Anna Karenin reappears once again, signalling the narrator's desire to escape what is clearly another of the State's fortresses (48).

In the third section, the image of the fortress surfaces yet again. The narrator wryly comments on her new home, Calgary, saying, "Found yourself a Jericho, have you?" (57). Jericho was, of course, the biblical walled-city, which Joshua and the *nomadic* army of Israel destroyed. Each of Calgary's four quadrants is discussed in a separate section of the text. Portrayed as a labyrinth, Calgary fulfills the primary goal of the State, which is to effect capture. The shopping malls are described as labyrinthine "bubbles of light and air that claim closure, insist on wholeness and order" where you "wandering, lost, cannot find the door you came in or any door at all . . ." (72). At one point, the narrator likens herself to a minotaur trapped within a maze: "Who can find you here, a clumsy bawling beast in the centre of a web of thread, a cat's cradle of encapturement?" (73).

Not only is Calgary a maze, it is also a fortress of sterility; as the narrator explains, "sex is too playful for Jericho . . ." (73).⁹ In the midst of the discussion of the city's maze-like structure and its virginal, Christian idealism, the narrator introduces the concept of nomadology. She remarks that Calgary was begun by the "oldest occupation, the nomadic herding of grazing animals," and that the transient nature of the city is due to the nomadic legacy of the ranchers (68, 69). Now, when she poses the question, "Where is Home?" she recognizes that, from certain vantage points, home may not exist, and she sees that there is "no evidence of city" from certain points "outside" the metropolis — points of view which belong to the "nomad wandering the prairie" (71). Ultimately, the narrator decides that Calgary, a fortress built out of "dragon's teeth that have grown themselves into monoliths . . ." (71) is, in conjunction with Edberg and Edmonton, a place "to run away from . . ." (72). She winds up her tour of this exploration site with a plea

in support of nomad-thought, and she urges individuals to escape Calgary's laby-
rinth of stone and to return to deterritorialized space. In the end, she commands
the city to shout, just as Joshua and his troops shouted in an effort to raze the
walls of Jericho.

In the text's final section, entitled "Ellesmere, woman as island," the walls have
shattered, the male west has been successfully "earth-quaked," and the exploration
site shifts to the deterritorialized, nomadic polar desert of an arctic island. In this
desert landscape, the female body ceases to be the site for the projection of mascu-
line fantasies; the chimera of Woman gives way to a non-hierarchized body. As
the narrator explains: "You are only a body, here in this Arctic desert, this fecund
island. Lungs, fingers, a stomach, legs and feet. This fragile wold far tougher than
you are, a floating polar desert for all characters to emulate" (77-78). In their
work, Deleuze and Guattari invoke the concept of the "Body Without Organs" to
describe a body which is free from the restrictions imposed on it by State-thought.
As Elizabeth Grosz suggests:

> Their notion of the Body Without Organs (BWO) constitutes Deleuze and Guat-
> tari's attempt to both denaturalize the human body and to place it in direct relations
> with the flows or particles of other bodies or entities. . . . Rather than, as psycho-
> analysis does, regarding [sic] the body as the developmental union or aggregate of
> partial objects, organs, drives, bits, each with their own significance . . . which are,
> through oedipalization, brought into line with the body's organic unity, Deleuze
> and Guattari instead invoke Antonin Artaude's conception of the Body Without
> Organs (BWO). This is the body disinvested of all fantasies, images, projections,
> a body without a psychical interior, without internal cohesion or latent significance.
> Deleuze and Guattari speak of it as a surface of intensities before it is stratified,
> organized, hierarchized. . . . [I]t is a limit or a tendency to which all bodies aspire.
> ("Thousand" 14).

IN ACCORDANCE WITH THIS DELEUZIAN MODEL of the Body
Without Organs, the narrator portrays the interaction between body and environ-
ment on Ellesmere as one of free-flowing "pleasure" and "seduction" (109). The
syntax used to describe the simple action of drawing water from a river reflects
the extent to which the narrator's body is in direct relations with the flows or
particles of other entities: "buckets and water and stones and the muscles of
shoulder and arm" (109). The conjunction of the human and nonhuman elements
in this passage conforms to the rhizomatic structure of nomad-thought. As Brian
Massumi explains: "Nomad-thought replaces the closed equation of representa-
tion, $x = x = $ not y ($I = I = $ not you) with an open equation: $\ldots + x + z + a. \ldots$
Rather than analyzing the world into discrete components, reducing their manyness
to the One of identity, and ordering them by rank, it sums up a set of disparate
circumstances in a shattering blow" (xiii). With the aid of nomad-thought, the
narrator is able to experience her body beyond the confines of its designation as

"the Sex." Moreover, in conjunction with the destabilization of these binary opposi-
tions, she is also able to deconstruct the static enclosure which characterizes the
plot of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*.

The narrator explains that she could only take one book with her on her trip to
Ellesmere. Although her friend, Rudy Wiebe, suggested that she take *War and
Peace*, she does not want to read masculine epic fiction. She chooses *Anna Karenin*
because, as she says, she is looking for "an image of a woman," even one scripted
by a man (81). In an attempt to rescue Tolstoy's Anna, the narrator takes her to
Ellesmere and unreads her (85). As in *No Fixed Address*, the north once again
becomes the home of the nomad — the deterritorialized space which lies outside
the enclosed spaces of the State's fortresses. In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, the
narrator underscores this, saying: "The northerns belong to no nation, no con-
figuration of (wo)man" (125). Even the puzzle-ice which covers the ocean pro-
vides a clue to the type of fluid unreadings made possible in this arctic space. The
narrator's/reader's unreading of *Anna Karenin* is likened to a thaw in the static
mass of ice (93), and, at one point, the ice forms a picture of Anna herself (111-12).
Ultimately, the image of the puzzle-ice transforming from molar masses to fluid
molecular shards functions as a figure for the exploratory strategy of a feminist
reading of Tolstoy's text: "The words are stirred, mixed, like pieces of a jigsaw,
broken up into their separate shapes and the whole picture lost . . ." (113). As the
narrator explains, "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).

When she undertakes her unreading of Tolstoy's novel, the narrator discovers
that Anna is punished as a result of her eroticism. More precisely, at the heart of
Anna's desire for Vronsky and her love of books lies her fundamental desire to
read her own life, an impulse which is not permissible in a society where female
desire represents "an unleashed demon that should be controlled and organized,
scripted and domesticated" (107). In a close-reading of the passage where Tolstoy
arranges for Anna to commit suicide by throwing herself under the wheels of the
train, van Herk highlights the fact that it is primarily Anna's ability to read which
is negated by her death: "*And the candle by which she had been reading the book
filled with trouble and deceit, sorrow and evil, flared up with a brighter light,
illuminating for her everything that before had been enshrouded in darkness,
flickered, grew dim and went out forever*" (Tolstoy 802, qtd. in van Herk 120-21).
However, in the high arctic of Ellesmere Island, the darkness into which Tolstoy
casts Anna, and the trains which he arranges to murder her are banished: "The
trains that shunt Anna back and forth between Moscow and Petersburg . . . could
not conceive of how to traverse Ellesmere. No amount of hammering could shape
this floating woman/island into a metal bar. Within this endless light, she resists
all earlier reading" (121). Ultimately, the "site exploration" of Ellesmere island
offers a fierce condemnation of the imposition of the "great black steel lines" of

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masculine fiction. Writing, in the service of the State, is revealed to be akin to rape. The narrator's use of the inclusive pronoun "you" further emphasizes that all women have suffered from the rigid frame imposed by the representation of women as Woman: "Anna murdered, *you murdered*, your body abandoned under its burden of blood and bone, the terrible violation of an iron writing" (142; my emphasis).

To summarize, in the texts discussed in this study, attempts are made to subvert traditional forms of storytelling which have characterized western regional fiction. Rather than conform to a "fixed" grid, which positions women as Woman, van Herk's most recent texts forge alternative narratives, which, to borrow the words of Deleuze and Guattari, resist "capture" in favour of "deterritorialization." As I suggested earlier, *No Fixed Address* challenges established representations of Woman through its portrayal of Arachne, an amoral underwear salesperson, who indulges in the pleasures of a nomadic existence. Not only does the text problematize conventional gender roles, it also subverts established plot structures by refusing closure: Arachne does not die, she simply becomes "imperceptible," disappearing into the uncharted, arctic landscape. Similarly, van Herk's latest "geografictione," *Places Far From Ellesmere*, continues to emphasize the limitations of traditional representations of Woman as well as established plot structures — the products of "engravement." Here the distinction drawn by Deleuze and Guattari between "State-thought" and the "nomadic war machine" surfaces in terms of an opposition between the grid-like structure of the western towns and cities (depicted as fortresses) and the unmapped, nomadic territory of Ellesmere Island. As in *No Fixed Address*, the shifting arctic desert is portrayed as a site where radical re-reading of traditional plot structures are made possible.

In the light of van Herk's boldness in taking on the traditions of western regional literature, and her successful destabilization of established plots and their representations of female identity, criticisms which dismiss her work out of hand seem far too harsh; worse, they reveal a misunderstanding of her project, which is not so much to change the map as it is to change the process of mapping altogether. What emerges are texts which instigate shifts from capture and cartography to deterritorialization and nomadology.

NOTES

[1] In using the term "Woman," I refer not to actual historical individuals (i.e., women), but to what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the product of various "social technologies of gender," which assign individuals to a particular category that did not exist out there in "nature" (4).

[2] The following serve as examples of the prairie's "bondage": first, Frederick Philip Grove's assertion that order "must arise out of chaos; the wilderness must be tamed" (Grove 227); second, the prevalent image which Laurence Ricou isolates in western fiction, namely, the binary opposition between the vertical man and the horizontal world; and, finally, the feminized landscape portrayed in Henry Kreisel's story, "The

Broken Globe" (58). The imagery used in each case is, according to van Herk, undeniably masculine: "a black line breaking up space. There is no entrance here, only imposition, juxtaposition, the hammer blow of an extrusive shape" ("Women" 18).

[3] For a parodic depiction of the metaphoric feminization of the Canadian landscape, see Susan Swan's novel, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, p. 180-83.

[4] For a discussion of the reservations which feminists have articulated in response to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, see Elizabeth Grosz's study, "A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics," 2-5. This paper was delivered at a Deleuze conference at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, on May 16, 1992, and I believe that she intends to include it as a chapter in a forthcoming book.

[5] I was disturbed by a talk at the Canadian Women's Studies Association, May 30 to June 1, 1992, which focused on the evils of post-structuralist theory. In a session, entitled, "Postmodernisms: Feminist Critical Responses," Somer Brodribb spoke of the dangers associated with "touching the phallus," and the tendency of phallocentric, poststructuralist theory to undermine and obfuscate the clarity of truly feminist strategies.

[6] My thanks to M. Harry at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, for pointing out the nefarious behaviour of spiders, which Arachne emulates.

[7] In selecting Tolstoy's classic, van Herk may well be responding directly to Rudy Wiebe's assertion that the prairie deserves a literary representation based on the fictions of the "Russian steppes."

[8] Van Herk refers to the Penguin translation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*, 802.

[9] Robert Kroetsch first described Calgary as a city of male virgins in an article which mocked the "failure of sexuality" in the newly-created city. He concluded that Calgary is "ultimately Christian in its sexual posture: women are the source only of man's fall" ("Kingdom" 1).

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