

**ARITHA VAN HERK'S *NO FIXED ADDRESS*: AN
EXPLORATION OF PRAIRIE SPACE AS FICTIONAL SPACE**

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Abstract

This paper will explore the language of feminist cartography in the novel *No Fixed Address* (1986) where Aritha van Herk uses the geographical spaces of Western Canada to figure out a new place for women in prairie fiction. Structured as a woman's romance of travel through the prairie and up into the Arctic, the novel traces Arachne Manteia's quest for freedom as she struggles to map the inner territory of her own desires. This fictional mapping begins with documentary realism, but just as Arachne finds the Geodetic Survey maps inadequate, so the novel shifts from realism into the fictional spaces of subjective vision and fantasy. Arachne's quest for the 'ultimate frontier' leads her into the Arctic, where she disappears off the map. For the writer as for her female protagonist, this is a daring gesture of female dissent from cultural and literary conventions, leaving geography behind as Arachne escapes/disappears into the spaces of fiction and myths of the Canadian North.

Face it. The west is male. Masculine. Manly. Virile. Not
that it had much choice, the prairie lying there innocent
under its buffalo beans, its own endlessness ... It posed, still
poses, indifferent, for the obsessed camera of art, of fiction
...
So where, in this indifferent landscape, are the women?
(Van Herk, 'Spies' 139)

and

Arachne looks down at the slow ground and thinks of
traveling, spidering her own map over the intricate roads of
the world.
(Van Herk, *No Fixed Address* 223)

These two quotations, one from an essay by Van Herk and one from her novel, will serve to focus this paper, which is an exploration of the language of feminist cartography in fiction. *No Fixed Address* is a woman's romance of travel through prairie space and Arctic space in her quest for freedom and self

transcendence as she struggles to map the inner territory of her own desires and longings, deviating from official road maps into the fictional spaces of imagination. As a feminised version of the Western, *No Fixed Address* is another project to mythologise the West in all its vastness, like the fiction of Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch; the difference is that this time it is a woman writer who is doing it, and using a female hero. Mapping is the main structural metaphor in this novel and I shall try to show how Van Herk's dissident employment of the language of cartography opens up new spaces for the different representation of women's experience in prairie fiction, as the language of documentary realism shifts to communicate meanings beyond topography, mapping psychological and emotional states and imagined possibilities. *No Fixed Address* as its title would suggest is a novel full of restlessness and travelling, with a heroine who is continually on the move. She does not have a location; instead, she occupies a series of changing positions, following the lines of her destiny as she drives through the geographical spaces of the West and up into the North where she vanishes.

Van Herk was born and lives in Alberta. As she asserts, she is a regional writer who belongs to 'the region of the West' and 'the region of woman', for 'Region is not only a place where you live but is a specific way of looking at the world' (Jones interview 1). Out of this double concept of regionalism comes her distinctive sense of otherness: as a woman she feels herself to be 'other' than man, as an immigrant child whose first language was Dutch she feels 'other' than anglo-Canadian, just as the West sees itself and has always seen itself as different from centres of power in the East like Ottawa and Toronto, and as Canada itself is 'other' than traditional centres of culture in Europe. Van Herk is the 'dissident exile' figure whom Julia Kristeva writes about: 'How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of exile' ('The Dissident' 298). It is with a similar sense of the positive value of otherness that Van Herk comments, 'I believe alienation and isolation to be good, powerful things. The retreat from the mainstream, that retreat which makes one more and more regional, makes a better artist' (Jones interview 2). In *No Fixed Address* Van Herk sets out to answer the question she had asked in her essay two years earlier, 'So where, in this indifferent landscape, are the women?' ('Spies' 142)

No Fixed Address is the story of a young travelling saleswoman called Arachne Manteia ('Arachne' meaning 'spider' and 'Manteia' derived from a Latin word meaning 'cutpurse, thief', and Arachne is certainly that). Employed by a Winnipeg firm with the old fashioned name 'Ladies' Comfort'

Arachne drives around rural Alberta in her vintage black Mercedes selling women's underwear, though she never compromises by wearing any herself. She spins through the western Canadian landscape, starting out from Vancouver where she was born, travelling with her lover to Calgary from where she sallies forth on her sales trips to the scattered prairie towns. Later, she is arrested on a charge of kidnapping an eighty year old man from a nursing home, and when released on bail she drives back west as far as Vancouver Island, on an endless quest which freaks out at the end into fantasy up in the Yukon. Arachne disappears somewhere up in the Mackenzie Mountains beyond Macmillan Pass, still driving up the endless road, though it is nothing more than a track by now (if indeed it exists at all!), leaving behind her a trail of brightly coloured panties and endless speculation as she becomes a 'missing person' and one of the legends of the West.

This is a very lively witty feminist novel, presenting a version of the Western where open spaces have been traditionally available only to men; women stay at home on the farm, in the settlement. There is a clear masculine/feminine pattern in the genre of the Western which Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch has described:

The basic grammatical pair in the story-line [the energy line] of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be in a house is to be fixed: a centring unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move.

(Kroetsch, 'Erotics of Space' 49)

As Van Herk tartly comments after quoting this passage, 'The construct is a marvellous one, the perfect excuse for everything' ('Spies' 143). Needless to say, in her revisionist novel she reverses the gendered patterning of the plot; it is not the male hero who rides off into the sunset but Arachne who lights out for the territory to fulfil her destiny alone, and where finally she loses herself in the landscape. Challenging not only gender limits but genre limits, Van Herk extends her story Up North. As she asks in her next 'geografictione' *Places Far from Ellesmere*, 'If there are westerns, why can there not be northerners?' (*Ellesmere* 85). Van Herk lists male writers who have mythologised the prairie: F.P. Grove, Sinclair Ross, Rudy Wiebe, and of course Kroetsch. She could have added a list of male writers who have been busy mythologising the North: Robert Service and Earle Birney in their

poetry, Kroetsch in 'Why I Went Up North and What I Found When He Got There' (1989), John Moss in *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* (1993), and Wiebe in *Playing Dead: A Contemplation concerning the Arctic* (1989) and *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994). It might be argued that Arachne's quest is ultimately an impossibly romantic one as she searches for freedom and self transcendence through immersion in the sublime (an aesthetic category and not a geographical one). However, Van Herk's reappropriation of male myths makes it plain that not only are traditional male odyssey narratives deeply romantic, but also that her novel is a romantic myth told from a feminist point of view:

I like turning reality on its head to show women who are actually in control of their lives and who are acting upon their fictional lives rather than being acted upon themselves.

(Jones interview 7)

To return to the dominant metaphor of mapping in this novel, it is worth quoting Van Herk's comments on the significance of maps in her Canadian context:

It is no wonder that we turn to maps as oracles, that we make cartographers heroes. And it is no wonder that the concept of mapping is so inherent in the way we see ourselves - as nation, as people, as literature. Because we are such a new country, we have almost perfect records of our own charting and because of our youth, we continue to participate in that mapping; it remains both an ongoing process and a metaphor for our particularity.

(*Mapping as Metaphor* 54)

In that essay she reminds us that human beings make maps 'to serve as mediators of reality; as such, the map is a symbol, a metaphor'. In considering this topic it is perhaps worth making a few obvious points about map language and the relation between mapping, writing and reading. Map language is a graphic language of location designed to illustrate things in relationship to one another, a useful definition of maps being that they are 'graphic representations which facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes or events in the human world' (Tyacke 573).

To trace the link between maps and cartographic images in literary texts is to focus on spatial metaphors and the subjective element within any form of representation. As Graham Huggan defines the project of 'literary geography':

The map [in fictional texts] operates as a vehicle for the reorganization of space which permits the writer to invent and explore 'new territories', or to reassess more familiar places and his/her own relation to them. The map, in this sense, is an enabling construct; yet it may also be a disabling one: maps, after all, are by their nature reductive, introverted, even simplistic or distorted.

(*Territorial Disputes* 58)

Maps do not resemble landscapes any more than words resemble the objects and events to which they refer, for they are both culturally constructed sign systems, as some contemporary geographers are now arguing (Barnes and Duncan). In *No Fixed Address* the map functions as location marker, though it also functions as a point of departure and as a narrative device that to a considerable extent liberates the heroine. Arachne falls in love with maps and with Thomas Telford, the young cartographer who makes new maps and collects old ones, and she begins by following Thomas's maps on her sales trips until a crucial point when she decides that she wants a different kind of map which only she can make for herself. His maps are too restrictive, for Arachne is obsessed with space and movement, desiring a map of endless promise and a way of escape, a map that would record her restless craving for new knowledge and experience:

Men map the territory of place, history, and event [while] the female fiction writers of Canada map a different territory, not as obvious but just as important. They map the country of the interior, the world maze of the human being.

('Mapping as Metaphor' 63)

Arachne's desire seems to exceed even this, for what she wants is a map of 'elsewhere' which is by definition unmapped for, as Van Herk reminds us, 'There is no map for longing' (*No Fixed Address* 171). Having already deviated from Thomas's maps into places not marked, like vanished ghost towns or landscape features no longer regarded as culturally significant, Arachne finally disappears up in the Arctic, driving off the map into 'four-

dimensional nothingness' which may be death, though it could also be the imaginative territory of fiction. Arachne's project has much in common with the concept of 'paradoxical space' discussed by the feminist geographer Gillian Rose, who describes it as a mobile site of resistance, which is 'multidimensional, shifting and contingent' (Rose 140-60). Of course such space is not territorial in any geographical sense but metaphorical or discursive space, which is used as a rhetorical strategy for representing feminine difference and feminist resistance. Van Herk develops her version of a feminist politics of location, as Arachne ceaselessly strives to position herself 'elsewhere' beyond any limits already mapped by traditional authority.

It is worth tracing the stages of Van Herk's fictional mapping here. The novel begins with documentary realism as Arachne 'bumps off the road' outside the prairie town of Cluny where she has been selling underwear, to visit the graveyard (marked on the road map) where Chief Crowfoot is buried. Gradually the narrative of her early life unfolds, all within the realistic mode: her deprived childhood in Vancouver where she learned the maps of all the back alleys around her house as the leader of a gang of male teenage thugs called the Black Widows; and then her first job as a bus driver in Vancouver where she had to follow predictable bus routes without any possibility of deviation - until her last week, when she veered off her late-night route to take home a young cartographer who had left his Geodetic Survey map tube on the bus. The following week she drives with Thomas to Calgary in her 1959 black Mercedes. This 'goddamn antique Mercedes' is the one talisman in Arachne's life, bequeathed to her by Gabriel Greenberg, one of her mother's teacup reading male clients, and it is this car and Thomas's maps which give Arachne the means to find her own direction in life. The presence of these two male mentors codes in an important realisation about women's social position and dissident women's fiction. Frequently it works as counter-discourse, recognising established structures and symbols of masculine authority and power, which is the 'power of the male/universal' space in which it [women's writing] cannot avoid to some extent, operating' (Hutcheon 110), just as it is fired by the urge to escape from these patterns, to go beyond them. This is precisely the pattern which is figured in Arachne and Thomas's love relationship which is really a romance based on maps. She falls in love with his beautiful maps because they open up other frames of reference which enable her to transcend her own past, and he is fascinated by a woman who would touch these maps 'with reverence and desire' as he does himself. Together they peruse old explorers' maps, maps of roads and maps of

mountains and rivers, and Thomas also teaches Arachne about the constellations; for her, they represent patterns of hope and images of escape.

Van Herk is an author 'whose imagination depends on facts' ('Spies' 66) and the novel is rooted in the realistic referential world, so that it is possible to trace Arachne's sales trips on a map of Alberta:

Arachne's summer continues, a litany of small towns. They are all the same, with individual scars or decorations. It is a choking summer. The brick-faced farmers clogging in the post offices are full of doom and pessimism. Drought, they mutter, and hail. Nightly, thunderstorms rattle the darkness but only a few unsympathetic pellets strike the ground. Arachne's orders are low. When she asks about business, the store owners shake their heads. Even though the names of the towns are airy and genteel - Countess, Rosemary, Duchess, Millicent, Patricia, Princess - the people wear a coarse, gritty look.

(No Fixed Address 32)

Writing within the mode of prairie realism, Van Herk lists the names of small towns scattered east of Calgary, and all the conventional signs by which a reader recognises a dusty prairie town, even if we have never seen one. Such a passage is the marker of topographical regional identity.

As it progresses, the novel attempts to chart locations which are not only spatial but also cultural, gendered, imaginary, as it focusses on the hidden topography of myth and subjective vision. In the next passage, the conventional litany of small towns (north-east of Calgary this time) quickly slips away from realism when they are seen through Arachne's eyes. From her perspective these towns look like hallucinations; they have no independent existence, but they are there because she needs them to be there. It is a transitional kind of passage, where prairie town names cling tenuously to realism as they slide over into a subjectivised fictional dimension:

Rumsey, Rowley, Craigmile, Delia, Michichi, Munson, Morrin Bridge, Ghost Pine Creek, towns like their names, isolated, hopeful, doomed. Each trip, they are eroded, less proud, the settings for impossible regional fictions, their reality doubtful and confined. They are there because Arachne is selling underwear, no other reason. Their names

scatter her map tentatively; their streets edge toward oblivion, their post offices lie. Arachne sometimes has the spooky feeling that they are sets. If she could dart around the corner of a false-fronted general store quickly enough, she would discover the vacancy behind and the face would be free to fall. It is an illusion that she shoves away; these places are her livelihood, they give her a reason to travel, a story to inhabit.

(No Fixed Address 112)

Arachne has always loved to drive, but she learns travel through Thomas's maps. He is the cartographer who draws the maps, but it is she who drives on the roads:

From Calgary roads spider over the prairie. Arachne pores over Thomas's maps, the lines enticing her to quest beyond the city's radius. She gets into the car and sets the bonnet toward the sun. She is learning travel, the pace and progression of journey, the multifarious seduction of movement. She returns to Thomas vibrating at a pitch that he can take into his hands and drink. He is the author of those maps ... He only draws them; she traces them for him, leaving the pen-line of her passing.

(No Fixed Address 163-4)

Thomas's map-making may assert his 'masculinist claims to know which are experienced as a claim to space and territory' (Rose 147), but Arachne is learning to resist Thomas's authority as she becomes a subject moving through landscape. Already she is falling under the spell of travelling; the signal is that very non-geographical word 'spidering'. Partly it is a reflexive code based on her own name, but partly it codes in her subjective response to landscape. As Graham Huggan pertinently remarks, 'Van Herk distinguishes in the novel between the symbolic value of the map, which designates a fixed, inherently limited view of the world, and that of the spider, which expresses a more mobile view' (*Territorial Disputes* 65). Actually the roads around Calgary are fairly straight, but for Arachne they are a magic web. At this stage she is still following the map, enchanted by motion and distance, and even if she deviates from the straight and narrow in her brief affairs with the road jockeys on her sales trips, she always comes home again to Thomas who is the centre of her

world.

Arachne's mother and her best friend Thena believe that Thomas has saved Arachne. Certainly their relationship has given Arachne's life a new stability and structure, but Thomas's most precious gift comes via his profession: he teaches Arachne to think spatially. His maps give her a new way of seeing and a wider perception of her movements within landscape, comparable with the revolution in the popular concept of space brought about in the sixteenth century by Tudor cartographers (Harley 26). For her birthday, Thomas gives Arachne a special present: a trip in a balloon up over Calgary, where for the first time she sees an aerial map of the prairies:

The balloon floats up, beyond the earth's curve into a morning of distant mountain teeth and blue fields. And then drifts above that map of road and land and slough and fence. In the south the towers of the city catch rising light, gold and spinning. They are suspended there, at the centre of currents, swaying under the shimmer of a silken web that stretches its filament arms to cradle their cocoon. Beneath them the prairie unfolds in wedges of yellow and black, with small monopoly houses perched on their periphery, roads spidering together into the clusters of towns ... 'I wanted to find you a map,' says Thomas, 'but I thought this aerial would be better.'

Arachne looks down at the slow ground and thinks of traveling, spidering her own map over the intricate roads of the world.

(No Fixed Address 222-3)

This lyrical passage is one of Arachne's moments of revelation, for suddenly she gains a vast new perspective on the grandeur of landscape and a vision of tracing her own map beyond anything she can see. It is an image of her desire to map her adventuring, to exceed the territorial logic signified by Thomas's maps, and it is the closest image in the novel to a map of female longing. Arachne is what we might call a 'nomadic subject' (following Rosa Braidotti's analysis of a feminist politics of location), a figure ever on the move, resisting any social and gender positions prescribed for her. According to Braidotti, 'Nomadism is not a fluidity without borders but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries. It is the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing' (Braidotti 36).

Such transgressive desire is marked in the novel not only by Arachne's attachment to the Mercedes and her compulsive urge to go on driving ('the nomadic trajectory is controlled speed,' Braidotti 24), but by the form in which the story is told. After Arachne's aerial excursion the narrative shifts gear, moving away from realism into the surreal and the fantastic. She kidnaps her old friend Josef, a Bosnian Serb immigrant, an outsider and rebel like herself, from the old people's home where his daughter has recently placed him (an action for which she is later arrested) and together they drive out on to the prairies to visit the prehistoric figure of the Wild Woman, a gigantic Native goddess figure outlined in stone on the highest hill in the region. Of course the prairie is not a blank space though it may be vast and empty; it is marked by historical events and has already been lived in by aboriginal people, as Crowfoot's grave and the Wild Woman sculpture indicate. The Wild Woman represents the mythic image of woman inscribed in landscape, a feminised landscape described in terms of a female body with its 'curves', 'declivities' and 'folds', and there 'on the breast of the world' Arachne lies down within the Wild Woman's embrace as if inside her womb. This is the rebirth of Arachne within landscape, and the stage where she intuits that she is going to give up all social ties, including Thomas and old Josef, in order to pursue her journey alone, which she does:

She finally rises and stares beyond the outline of rock to the horizon that wheels four dimensions around her. What secret burial she makes before she walks down the steep ridge to the car and the waiting old man is buried there.

(No Fixed Address 233)

In the Mercedes Arachne takes off west along the Trans-Canada Highway, passing through Vancouver, across the Strait of Georgia over to Vancouver Island, and driving all the way up the coast to Tofino:

This is the edge, not the end but edge, the border, the brink, the selvage of the world.

(No Fixed Address 291)

Real place names are marked so that we can follow her route, but the journey becomes progressively surreal because it is all part of Arachne's inner psychic journey as she attempts to lose herself in landscape. As Van Herk writes, 'A scape is a scene of land or sea or sky but the archaic meaning of scape is to

escape, an escape, or means of escape. Landscape beckons escape; escapade' ('Spies' 140). Arachne is offered a chance to lose herself in the blackness under the earth when she goes down into an abandoned coal mine near Fernie; she is offered the chance of drowning in the Pacific at Long Beach near Tofino when she has a strange erotic encounter with the ghost of a dead airman who drowned there in 1945, but refusing these temptations Arachne returns instead to the mainland and heads north for the Yukon. This choice where the 'western' becomes the 'northern' is symptomatic of Van Herk's fascination with the North, which she has explored in *The Tent Peg* (1982), *Places Far from Ellesmere* (1990), *In Visible Ink* (1991), and *A Frozen Tongue* (1992). The North appeals to her imagination because it baffles constructions of meaning as it exceeds language by offering its own non-human imagery of puzzle-ice and 'glacial blueness'. In the novel the maps change too, when seen from a different perspective, this time the view from an immense distance. As one travels farther North signposts become irrelevant, or at least their conventional meanings are emptied out, as the narrator searching for Arachne discovers at Watson Lake. (The italics indicate a shift in the narrative viewpoint here, for the story is no longer being focalised through Arachne's point of view but through that of the narrator, for whom Arachne has become a 'missing person'):

You start at the end of town with all the lost signs, all the places in the world gathered together. Vienna, 16km. Washington, 101 miles. Pretoria. Passetto-Fernandes. Argentina-Rosario. People steal signs and bring them to Watson Lake, reminding them of the world outside, the world so far beyond their borders.

(No Fixed Address 314)

This heap of abandoned signposts does not indicate measurement or direction with any accuracy. Instead, it is reduced to a confusion of signs signifying nothing but distance and 'elsewhere'.

We lose Arachne at Watson Lake, for she has already driven further on into the North, and after following a false lead along the Alaska Highway as far as Whitehorse, the searcher pursues the only other possible route, along the Canol Road beyond Ross River into the Mackenzie Mountains 'that separate the Yukon and the Northwest Territories', and on as far as Macmillan Pass. In this remote area the roads are nothing but tracks, and 'there is no sign to tell you when you reach Mac Pass' (317). Indeed the official road map of

the Yukon does not indicate that the road continues beyond the Pass, though it is here that the searcher meets her last witness, the helicopter pilot who says he saw Arachne heading off up the 'endless and abandoned road'. This is the point when Arachne disappears into 'the ultimate frontier' and 'the infinite anguish of uncivilized territory' (317). However, Dr Colin Coates (to whom I am indebted for this precise geographical information) insists that the area is a frontier only for the people from 'outside' (including Van Herk from Calgary) and that he would doubt that the native people of the area had any reason to consider the end of roads passable by cars to be the end of 'civilisation'. In that mountainous landscape Arachne's trail is still visible however, marked by her own signature:

You thank him for the coffee, you step out into the wind and walk to your rented truck. When you settle into your seat and fasten your seat belt, you understand that there can be no going back.

A few miles up the road a flash of color makes you slam on your brakes. You slide out and step into the ditch, bend to retrieve it. The panties are gray with dust but their scarlet invitation has not faded. Ladies' Comfort. Another few miles and you find a peach pair, then a turquoise, then sunshine yellow. Each time you stop, shake the dust from their silky surface and toss them on the seat beside you. There is no end to the panties; there will be no end to this road.

(No Fixed Address 319)

This is not a precise mapping but a surreal scenario marked out by a gaily irreverent trail of coloured panties, Arachne's sales samples, inviting further exploration and speculation, for her position remains unfixed, mobile, elusive. It is an ending to be compared with that of the film *Thelma and Louise* (also about rebellious women), a race off into fantasy, out of sight and off the map altogether. Arachne has evaded all attempts to restrain her or to define her in conventional terms and we are left with the question, 'So where, in this indifferent landscape, is the woman?' Arachne has tricked us just as Van Herk has also tricked us, into following her disruptive alternative mapping in a narrative which figures female dissent from traditional patterns of social and literary authority. Arachne leaves the 'slow ground' behind her as she escapes into fictional spaces and the territory of myths about the Canadian North. As

Van Herk explained in an interview about her writing shortly after the publication of *No Fixed Address*:

Realism can become its own prison, its own enclosure. Fiction's mandate is to explore the possibilities of the imagination, the possibilities of the world beyond its closure. I see my characters as representing possibility rather than probability. If I were to write probability all the time I'd be a bloody mathematician, I wouldn't be a fictioneer.

(Jones interview 7)

As Van Herk's novel moves from specific geographical locations into the paradoxical space traced by Arachne's journeys, so she emphasises the excess within feminine identity which always resists the restraint of final definition, just as women's bodies have survived the physical restraint of 'corsets, padding, petticoats, girdles, bustles, garters and bust pads' (*No Fixed Address* 9). Resisting the 'impositions of cartography, in my fiction at least' ('Mapping as Metaphor' 55) she also destabilises genre conventions, opening up the fiction of prairie realism into the spaces of fantasy and myth for the representation of her elusive female subject. Spatial images and cartographic metaphors become devices here for 'escape, escapade' as the real and the imaginary are both accommodated within the spaces of this feminist text.

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