

**DISAPPEARING DOUBLES AND DECEPTIVE LANDSCAPES IN  
THE WRITINGS OF ROBERT KROETSCH**

**Rosalind Jennings**  
**York University, U.K.**

*Abstract*

This paper investigates the trope of disappearance, especially of the self as 'Other', in Canadian literature, focusing on Robert Kroetsch's critical essays and poems. I contrast the motif of a vanishing double in Kroetsch's 'The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof' from *Advice to My Friends* (1985) and 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart' from his latest autobiographical work, *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* (1995). The Canadian search for identity is reformulated as a subjective project involving the loss of self. Kroetsch's experimentation with the postmodern autobiography in *A Likely Story* is set in the context of writing the self and writing the landscape in the Canadian prairies. This quest for a masculine self is contrasted to American macho-Western frontier cowboy models. The paper elucidates possible reasons why Canadians might choose to make themselves invisible in a willed absence that has much to do with enabling transformation, using Kroetsch's own self-representation, as well as other Canadian historical and literary figures, as examples.

In his essay 'No Name is My Name' Robert Kroetsch suggests that Canadians, far from trying to define themselves into existence, seek instead 'a willed namelessness'.<sup>7</sup> This process becomes not only a linguistic but a subjective move towards absence. Kroetsch writes:

If we look to the invisible characters in American writing, the invisible man, or the voice that says 'nobody knows my name', those are the voices of people who feel they are being made nameless by others. The Canadian narrator makes him- or herself invisible.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1989, 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. Kroetsch is, in part, implicitly referring to an American work by Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947). In this highly politicized work it is those in the dominant white society who have made the black American 'invisible'.

This paper explores the possible reasons why Canadians, and the Canadian spokesperson or narrator in particular, might choose to make themselves invisible, in a willed absence that has much to do with enabling transformation and a deconstructive need to unname before naming anew. I seek to elucidate why the American and Canadian experiences are so widely diverging, making particular reference to the regional Western prairie context of Kroetsch's Albertan writing. Landscape and setting are all important to Kroetsch's exploration of Canadian subjectivity as he reworks the American mythological western quest for self, suggesting that in Canada 'to go west is to find "I" and to lose it in the finding'.<sup>9</sup> I demonstrate how Canadian writers' perception of their own particular prairie topography means that loss of self is virtually inevitable in this landscape. As a consequence, I investigate why the Canadian quest should differ so widely in its intent from that of the American search, involving, as it does in Kroetsch's work, actively losing rather than finding the self.

Kroetsch's own narration of self provides a good example of these motifs. In his latest publication, a collection of essays and poems entitled *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* (1995), he states - in typically Kroetschian oxymoronic style - that his aim is to 'attempt ... to write an autobiography in which I do not appear'.<sup>10</sup> This wish to subvert the traditions of subjective self-creation is announced on the front cover of the work and is repeated throughout the collection. The cover photograph, which depicts a boy who is presumably Kroetsch, fades gradually from the feet upwards, hinting at ultimate disappearance. So, the most distinguishing personal corporeal features, the head and face, are those that are most indistinct. Moreover, the whole image is written over by a text, which in its handwritten form suggests a personal signature which is also denied or absent. The superimposed text is fragmentary and indecipherable, thus acting to obscure rather than define the

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*. Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1995, 153. In this, his own autobiographical quest for self, Kroetsch initially sets out on his quest north into Canada's Arctic tundra. His journey, and *A Likely Story*, begins with 'Why I Went Up North and What I Found When He Got There' (pp.13-40). The Arctic is another important wilderness site for disappearance in Canadian literature. Nevertheless, as a very different landscape it does not operate symbolically in the same way as the prairie west. Thus, despite the significance of the North as a quest site for Kroetsch and other contemporary Canadian authors, I shall restrict my analysis to 'the West' within the limits of this article.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

image of Kroetsch. Both language and image fail to clearly signify the self. Indeed, the word 'not' significantly covers the boy's smiling face in an apparent assertion of self-negation within a positive context.

Comparisons with American individualism are further highlighted by the fact that Kroetsch is dressed as a ranch-hand-cum-cowboy, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a gun, an archetypal image of the North American West, one might assume. But this declaration of western masculine identity is undermined since the photograph clearly represents an adolescent who has not yet reached manhood, and the hand holding the gun is faded to the point of absence, so that Kroetsch's connection with the gun - an archetypal symbol of masculine phallic power - is tenuous. In this collection of writings, Kroetsch describes his 'inability to deal with violence';<sup>11</sup> the gun

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 34.

is not to be fired. In this context, it is useful to turn to an essay by Rosemary Sullivan which discusses 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space' (1979),<sup>12</sup> a seminal essay by Kroetsch, one which informs much of his own writing and is relevant to my discussion here. Sullivan suggests:

As a border man, Kroetsch ... [is] demythologizing the myth [of the West] that threatens to define him - the American cowboy myth. With a typical Canadian irony, he turned the romantic, energetic myth into a myth of impotence.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, Kroetsch may be preventing a false and externally imposed form of self-definition but although such ironic inversion is humorous, it belies the serious consequences for a creative writer of establishing a myth of unproductive impotence. So how is a Canadian prairie man, such as Kroetsch, to discover any form of gendered identity? Certainly, he regards the existing Western Canadian male 'macho posture ... hooked on the notion of a quest' as comically grotesque,<sup>14</sup> and sees a need to break such 'self-inflicted definition[s] of maleness'.<sup>15</sup>

So, why continue to quest at all when it is apparently self-negating? As a leading Canadian theorist, Kroetsch adopts a postmodern scepticism about the ability ever to achieve a coherent and static subjectivity. He states that 'It is not possible to write an autobiography',<sup>16</sup> since there is no 'true' self to discover. Yet at the same time he admits: 'By the time I learnt that lesson it

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<sup>12</sup> See Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 73-83, first published in Dick Harrison, ed., *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Sullivan, 'Summing Up' in Harrison, ed., *Crossing Frontiers*, 144-57 (quotation from p.154).

<sup>14</sup> Alan Twigg, 'Male', an interview with Robert Kroetsch, in *For Openers: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1981, 107-16 (quotation from pp.109-10).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 117.

was too late for me to avoid the necessity'.<sup>17</sup> Instead, it is avoidance of the 'true self' that paradoxically becomes part of Kroetsch's autobiographical technique. In an unpublished letter, Kroetsch reveals that 'the photo on the cover ... is not a photo of me. In fact I took the picture - [which is of] ... our hired man'.<sup>18</sup> Kroetsch is the invisible observer *behind* the camera. Stressing that not even the handwriting on the cover is his own, he goes on to add: 'in the case of the handwriting as with that of the photo, I seem to have disappeared in the course of the making of the book'.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, most readers would be unaware of this extra dimension to the evanescent photographic image. Kroetsch plays a trickster role, able to change his appearance and his identity as it suits him, misleading his unsuspecting readers in the process. And he does so sufficiently well that not only does fact become fiction in this text, but conversely, fiction (in the form of a bogus other as self) takes on the appearance of fact (Kroetsch himself).

Kroetsch's own emphasis is not just on personal disappearance and invisibility in a gendered postmodern context but also on a subjective setting which itself displays a tabula rasa absence, open, physically and metaphorically, to numerous writings. Loss of self is only the first stage in the recreation and rewriting of self. In his poem, 'Seed Catalogue', Kroetsch describes the prairie as a 'palimpsest',<sup>20</sup> an image which is made visual on the cover of *A Likely Story*. The boy stands on a flat prairie grassland which stretches to the horizon and the text runs across it.<sup>21</sup> Kroetsch has stressed in an interview that 'the western landscape is one without boundaries quite often'.<sup>22</sup> This liberating effect on writing is physically represented as the text

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kroetsch, letter (12 March 1996), Victoria, BC, from Robert Kroetsch to Rosalind Jennings.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Robert Kroetsch, 'Seed Catalogue' in *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989, 32-51 (quotation from p.49).

<sup>21</sup> In his letter of 12 March 1996 Kroetsch locates the setting of the photograph, stating that it 'was taken on my family's farm near the village of Heisler in Alberta. That is parklands country'.

<sup>22</sup> Russell M. Brown, 'An interview with Robert Kroetsch', *The University of Windsor Review* 7 (2) (1972), 1-18 (quotation from p.2).

spills beyond the margins of the cover page. Yet the prairie is a paradoxical space where self-definition without boundaries can become equally problematic.

The whole concept of environmental and subjective boundaries becomes confused in an open space in which the self is surprisingly easily lost and journeys confounded. Kroetsch stresses that 'the prairies ... are labyrinthine. They have been mapped like grids, all those roads, but you can get lost in them so easily'.<sup>23</sup> Defining lines are not what they seem. Elsewhere, Kroetsch describes a personal experience of getting lost on the prairies despite being on a completely straight road.<sup>24</sup> The Canadian West may be renowned for its lack of natural boundaries, but free movement does not imply easily obtainable goals or destinations. The one dominant natural boundary, that between land and sky - the horizon - embodies many of the characteristics of the apparent defining lines of the prairies. It is a shifting, illusory, unobtainable point of delineation. The horizon is, Kroetsch points out, 'place and space at once, somewhere and nowhere, always present and never to be reached'.<sup>25</sup> In such a landscape any quest which is undertaken seems doomed to failure, a trope parodically supported by Kroetsch's fiction, especially his 'Out West' triptych. These three thematically linked novels subvert the motif of male (sexual) self-discovery through journeying, since the male protagonists never reach their intended goals as a result of their travels.

The American heroic cowboy quest into an idealised West is clearly not possible in this Canadian landscape, an environment perceived by many prairie writers to be dehumanising and deceptive. Further, there is the obvious irony of attempting to quest west when one is already in the West, as Kroetsch says, the act of 'realising that we are already where we propose to go'.<sup>26</sup> But such failed quests and lost selves do not reduce the motif entirely to one of Canadian self-mockery. In conversation with Kroetsch, Shirley Neuman

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<sup>23</sup> Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982, 80.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Kroetsch, 'Writing from Prairie Roots', *Alberta School Library Review* 8 (1) (Fall 1971), 7-14 (quotation from p.8). This is not an uncommon prairie experience. Rudy Wiebe describes getting 'lost in broad daylight' on a prairie in 'Passage By Land', *Canadian Literature* 48 (Spring 1971), 25-27 (quotation from p.26).

<sup>25</sup> Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

suggests that within his aesthetic 'the only possible heroic act becomes the telling of the story',<sup>27</sup> a statement with which Kroetsch acquiesces. It is this very act of narration that, for Kroetsch, liberates the Canadian west into a zone which is ultimately self-affirming and not denying, self-creative and not destructive.

In a famous and much-cited statement Kroetsch paradoxically inverts the conventional search for self within a Canadian context, suggesting that 'in a sense we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real'.<sup>28</sup> Self-invention or reinvention is enabled in the prairies precisely because any existing self can easily be lost or made absent and invisible in this landscape. Kroetsch's proposal to make the self 'real' through fiction is not merely theoretical but historically based on a number of famous Canadians, including the author Frederick Philip Grove and the Indian naturalist Grey Owl (Archibald Belaney). These two immigrants recreated themselves on their arrival in Canada, hoping that through careful self-creation their former selves would become invisible to the world at large. As figurative personalities Grove and Grey Owl clearly preoccupy Kroetsch since he refers to them on numerous occasions in his essays, novels and poems. He goes as far as to suggest that Grove might be paradigmatic of the Canadian artist, uninventing and unwriting his life before imagining himself anew. As Grove's true identity is increasingly questioned, Kroetsch believes that, 'he comes more and more to represent our predicament'.<sup>29</sup> Here, Kroetsch is suggesting that the quintessential Canadian quest for identity in its contemporary form is a search for the diffusion rather than conclusion of self.

It now appears that Grove was born Felix Paul Greve, but chose as a young man to leave Germany, escaping serious debt, the taint of a year in prison for fraud and in all probability a wife, by literally disappearing into the Canadian Mid-West of Manitoba, having faked his own suicide. In Kroetsch's words, 'he departed Europe; in mid-Atlantic he uninvented himself, unwrote his history, arrived in Canada a new self, Frederick Philip Grove'.<sup>30</sup> Grove's

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<sup>27</sup> Neuman and Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice*, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Kroetsch, 'A conversation with Margaret Laurence', in Robert Kroetsch, ed., *Creation*. Toronto: New Press, 1970, 53-63 (quotation from p.63).

<sup>29</sup> Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 62. See Douglas O. Spettigue, 'The Grove enigma resolved', *Queen's Quarterly* 79 (1) (April 1972), 1-2, and Spettigue, *F.P.G.: The European Years*. Canada: Oberon Press, 1973 for a

written life is recorded in his semi-fictional 'autobiography' *In Search of Myself* (1946). Despite winning the Governor General's Award for *non-fiction* in 1947, *In Search of Myself* is, in hindsight, a highly ironic title since Grove's life story includes a section on his early European life which is entirely imaginary. He literally loses himself in his writing.

This 'autobiography' by Grove certainly has an important bearing on that of Kroetsch. As a writer, Kroetsch seems to fear the possibility of not being allowed to change his own story,<sup>31</sup> and signals his wish to narrate his own autobiography in the form of a tall-tale by entitling it *A Likely Story*. He authenticates the 'real' Kroetsch through fiction. In the context of Canadian autobiography, *A Likely Story* can be seen as part of a larger tradition of subjective disappearance through fictionalization. Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982) and Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* (1993) both play with the conventional boundaries between fact and fiction, and both are narrated by a person whose true self eludes their readers in the process. In Ondaatje's account of his family and his early boyhood in Ceylon, the one missing character in this exaggerated tall tale is Michael himself. This semi-fictional account may 'make real' for the reader the Ondaatje family and colonial Ceylon during its heyday, but it is far from realising any details about the author. Present only as a narrative voice, Ondaatje disappears into the polyphonic maze of the text, in a personal disappearing act that recalls that of Kroetsch in *A Likely Story*. Similarly, *The Stone Diaries* is an imaginative work whose centrally bound collection of family photographs, as Susannah Clapp points out, 'suggest that this work of fiction is a work of fact - it is biographies, not novels, which contain photographs'.<sup>32</sup> Yet the one missing picture in this family album is the narrator on whose life story this pseudo-autobiographical work is centred. The sense in which Daisy Goodwill is a disappearing figure is based not on any personal attempt to distort the facts of her life, evading her readers through guile, as Kroetsch and Ondaatje do. Rather, she naively has so little sense of herself that her own life seems to elude her. Narrating chronologically her complete life story, Daisy technically narrates her own death, defying the conventions of autobiography and effectively writing herself out of her own story in the process. In this novel,

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detailed discussion of Grove's 'true' life.

<sup>31</sup> See Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> Susannah Clapp, "'Flowers and Fruit' - A review of Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*", *Times Literary Supplement* 4717 (August 27, 1993), 22.

Shields may well be making a wry comment on the self-effacing nature of many women in society. But how does this compare with the Canadian/Albertan male model of subjectivity in Kroetsch's work?

Reality and fiction are no longer two safely distinct terms in the ficto-(auto)biographies by Ondaatje and Shields. 'The writing life' also increasingly becomes an imaginatively inscribed rather than lived event for Kroetsch, as his collection of essays in *A Likely Story* progresses. I will end this paper by discussing the most fictional of these pieces, 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart', in which Kroetsch encounters his poetic double, who then characteristically vanishes. In an otherwise highly critical review of *A Likely Story*, Sam Solecki suggests that this is 'a strong piece of writing that shows Kroetsch at his best'.<sup>33</sup> Fictionalizing one's life may have certain creative and conceptual advantages.

Like the labyrinthine Canadian quest which reaches no destination, death in Kroetsch's fiction becomes rather disappearance, not a Western stereotypical heroic end but a circle to a new beginning. This process is a type of recreative rebirth or resurrection. In 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart' this trope is signalled by the fact that Rita disappears on June 26, Robert Kroetsch's birthday. Unlike the enigmatic conclusion to Kroetsch's novel, *Gone Indian* (1973), in which the central character apparently and mysteriously disappears into Albertan Canada, 'a peculiar land [where] ... illusion is rife',<sup>34</sup> possibly faking suicide to enter a new life, Kroetsch does not leave us in any doubt about the nature and motivation behind Rita's vanishing act. He spells it out clearly, stating that her disappearance does not 'hint of a longing for death' but 'had everything to do with entrance into the world'.<sup>35</sup>

Things, however, are not so deceptively simple in this text. In the context of the image of a vanishing poet, Rita's surname - Kleinhart - is clearly meant to recall A.M. Klein's poem, 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape' (1948), which debates the possible causes for a poet's disappearance. Through this suggested link, Kroetsch stresses the trope of the disappearing Canadian artist as an historically recurring phenomenon. He shows the development of the motif since Klein's day, now that Canadian writers are no longer struggling to

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<sup>33</sup> Sam Solecki, 'Fire Hidden Under the Smoke in Kroetsch's Poems, Essays - A review of Robert Kroetsch's *A Likely Story*', *The Globe and Mail*, January 5, 1996.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Kroetsch, *Gone Indian*. Nanaimo, BC: Theytus Books, 1973, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 191.

be heard, as artistic recognition and profiles have been raised since the nationalist movement of the seventies. Klein's poet is not so much everyman as no-man, made invisible by others who ignore him. In complete contrast, Kroetsch has his poet willing her own absence, her own invisibility, to escape 'the bonded ghost she had become to her ... readers'.<sup>36</sup> She wishes 'to erase herself' from the restrictive context of a by now well-established 'literary scene'.<sup>37</sup>

The interest in this piece is not so much on the process of disappearance itself but on the nature of the double who chooses to be absent. Rita Kleinhart does more than share Robert Kroetsch's initials, birthday and original ranch home on the Battle River. In this piece she is described as travelling to Germany to give a lecture at the University of Trier, a journey Kroetsch actually undertook in January 1983 and which he describes in an earlier poem, 'The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof', from *Advice to My Friends* (1985). There is a doppelgänger figure in this poem also but it is that of a man who in voice and appearance mirrors Kroetsch himself. Writing a decade later Kroetsch radically reworks the poem to create a far more complex double or alter ego and thus a more ambiguous and problematic version of self. In an interview, Kroetsch makes an illuminating statement about his concept of self-creation through poetry which holds equally true for the creative essay form of *A Likely Story*:

We're too busy lying to ever be autobiographical, I think. You write the poem with your life by not creating a safe boundary between poetry and life. It would be nice if there sometimes were a clear boundary, but in fact the two keep spilling back and forth; exchanging.<sup>38</sup>

Such an indefinite exchange is evident in 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart'. Rita is apparently Kroetsch's female anima and lover/muse but the relationship between narrator and his double or other is rapidly confused. The dialogue makes the association between the 'real' and the 'fictional' undecidable, so one

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>38</sup> Kristjana Gunnars, 'Meditation on a snowy morning: a conversation with Robert Kroetsch', *Prairie Fire: A Special Tribute to Robert Kroetsch* 8 (4) (1987-88), 54-67 (quotation from p.67).

is prompted to ask which 'RK' is really doing the disappearing act here. At one point the Kroetsch persona describes himself as Rita's 'invisible muse'<sup>39</sup> and later goes on to ask - 'Why do I imagine phone calls in which she tells me I have disappeared?'<sup>40</sup> The concept of the Other is not simply embraced but inverted with the possibility that the Self is Other, the Other is Self. Who is creating whom?

Kroetsch writes himself into being as a fictional construct. But in this narrative he is also created through the imagination of Rita who reads him in turn. Indeed, I believe that Kroetsch is using the name Rita as a pun. He is attempting to get lost in a liminal subjective space in which he is neither the *reader* nor the *writer* of his own life, but *Rita*, a figure in between. Blurring pronouns, he wishes to disappear into a linguistic lacuna between 'I' and 'you'. However, loss of self becomes problematic in this text because of Kroetsch's decision to resolve the difficulty of his own disappearance through the agency of a female persona. How far is Kroetsch guilty of using woman as a convenient figure for his own transposition? Is he implying that the female 'RK' possesses a fluid subjectivity that the male one cannot experience? To understand these sexual political issues it is important to examine the description of Rita's disappearance in more detail.

The Kroetsch persona in 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart' fleetingly glimpses Rita after her initial disappearance and this sighting is highly significant, as is the place of her departure into silence. Geography is all important within the context of my discussion of the western quest for self, as Rita vanishes *not* on the Canadian prairies but in the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt. I would argue that this is not, on Kroetsch's part, simply a gesture of imaginative return to Germany which is the country of his maternal family origins. Nor is it in this context an extension of the death-birth cycle. Instead, I suggest that Rita's site of disappearance is directly related to Kroetsch's poem, 'The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof', in which he encounters his double while making one of several journeys, all of which are westward. Having travelled from West Berlin to Frankfurt he is aided by his *doppelgänger* in his search for a train to Trier located on Germany's western border with Luxembourg. Kroetsch's double, Rita, in *A Likely Story* makes this trip, but it is the return journey from Trier to Frankfurt; she is travelling east. And she continues to

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<sup>39</sup> Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 182.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

travel east after she has `disappeared into art'<sup>41</sup> from whence she comes, transparently signalled by her vanishing in the Museum of Modern Art. When Kroetsch next glimpses her she is on a subway train in Singapore, a city that is not only located to the east, but, for some, epitomizes the East.<sup>42</sup> I believe that Kroetsch is trying to suggest that, *as a woman*, Rita has been able to escape or at least invert the pre-established North American masculine quest narrative. She not only travels east rather than west. She also rejects the notion of doing so overland - the train she has caught is underground.

Kroetsch may well be trying to signal the need to search for the self in radically new and imaginative ways. But by implying that the female persona is mutable and thus capable of escaping the monolithic, phallic, signifying `I' in a way that as a male he cannot, carries the potential danger of slipping into very antiquated gendered binary oppositions. Is Kroetsch's representation of Rita, in fact, a patriarchal one? As long ago as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir in *Le deuxième sexe (The Second Sex)* argued against the construction of `woman' as man's Other, seeing such a representation as a denial of the right of women to their own subjectivity. Beauvoir's influence on Western feminist thought, especially through the publication of *The Second Sex*, cannot be underestimated, and it would be surprising if the theoretically astute Kroetsch was not familiar with the tenets of her argument, even if he chooses not to fully engage with them in `The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart'. Kroetsch's link between femininity and the East similarly opens the piece up to a possible charge of exoticism. Certainly, Rita seems far more erotic and desirable because she is now unobtainable through her absence, existing only as a fantasy and not as a reality. Absent and silent, she is further reduced to an image, a reflected object rather than a subject. Kroetsch's male persona describes how, `Seeing her as I did, through a moving window, I was

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>42</sup> I qualify this statement about Singapore `epitomizing the East' because such an equation involves a very compromised representation - interweaving the exoticism of the feminized Orient (such as the Singapore Airlines advertisements), the authoritarian paternalism of the state (highlighted abroad by publicity about harsh punishment for public order and drugs offences, censorship and the state-run marriage bureau), in sharp contrast to the city's renown for its *westernized* high-tech economy. I am also aware that in western Canada Singapore's geographical positioning as part of the `East' is problematized by the fact that one would actually travel west, across the Pacific, to get there. Rita, however, would naturally have travelled east from Europe (Germany) to Singapore.

reminded of her photographs of back doors - photos in which, by accident, she more than once captured herself as a reflection in glass'.<sup>43</sup> While Rita's self-effacement is suggested as a utopian gesture of freedom by Kroetsch, an act which involves not passive but active disappearance, this action still leads to her ultimate non-existence within the framework of the text. The man is present, the woman absent. Equally, Rita may free herself from the male/female binary of her heterosexual relationship in the narrative, yet textually she remains Kroetsch's double, his 'other half'.

In the mid 1970s an influential work extended and developed much of Beauvoir's thought on Woman as Other. In her challenging feminist work *Spéculum de l'autre femme (Speculum of the Other Woman)* (1974), the psychoanalyst and philosopher, Luce Irigaray, confronts some of these reductive representations of women. In this work she discusses the ways in which patriarchal discourse situates woman outside representation, 'in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines',<sup>44</sup> a negative or mirror-image of man. Irigaray takes particular issue with the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud. In Freudian theory female sexuality is perceived in terms of absence or negation of the male norm (the lack of a penis or any *visible* equivalent). Freud suggests femininity is inscrutable, exotically mysterious and unknown, a dark continent. Since there is 'nothing to be seen' (*rien à voir*) it is not just 'woman' but her female sexuality which is invisible or absent - hence the title of another of Irigaray's works, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un (This Sex Which is Not One)* (1977).

Kroetsch's device of a disappearing or absent female other as a method of investigating his own gendered subjectivity appears increasingly socio-politically suspect in such a context. Irigaray not only mocks Freud's theory of penis envy in women by advancing the idea that this hypothesis is a projection of his own *male* fear of castration. She more radically suggests the possibility of confounding the male, Freudian, model of self and Other, by proposing that 'woman' embodies both states, being 'two but not divisible into one(s), ... dazzlingly multifaceted',<sup>45</sup> embracing opposite states at one and the

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<sup>43</sup> Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 190.

<sup>44</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, trans. Gillian C. Gill, p.20. A speculum is a concave mirror used by gynaecologists to view the inside of a woman's body, to examine the 'cavities' of her sexual self.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

same time. Irigaray affirms femininity as exceeding or denying a masculine imperial economy since it is uncontainable. Kroetsch himself is left searching for his self as other, not on a far flung quest, but in the restricted location of his western boyhood home. Rita accuses him of being 'a prisoner of space',<sup>46</sup> but he acknowledges that he is more likely a prisoner of language. He remains partially bound by universal binary concepts embodied in psychoanalytical and patriarchal linguistic thought, trapped in a structuralist attempt to construct a meaningful personal subjective identity through reference to an absent other.

As this paper shows, Kroetsch *has* escaped the Canadian macho prairie definitions of maleness and American western cowboy models, thus beginning the process of reversing the gendered iconography of the West as he does so. However, his project to subvert gender stereotypes is more cogently theorised and articulated in his representation of men than women. A new order is hinted at in his work, but not, as yet, totally successfully conceptualised. Some would disagree. Arnold Davidson, analysing fictions of the Canadian West in his study, *Coyote Country* (1994), refers to Kroetsch's novel *Badlands* (1975) as an example of a 'feminist revision' of the West, in a section focusing on the feminist writings of Aritha van Herk and the lesbian Western of Anne Cameron's *The Journey* (1986).<sup>47</sup> In *Badlands*, as in 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhardt', Kroetsch deploys a female Western quester, Anna Dawe, as an apparently liberated foil to a failed male quester, her archaeologist father William Dawe. Kroetsch's strength comes in his ability to humorously mock the shortcomings of men, himself included, even as he acknowledges his inability to completely escape such failings. In true Canadian prairie fashion his own quest in *A Likely Story* is not a total success. Kroetsch recognises that 'by borrowing fragments of other lives I borrow an autobiography of my own', enabling him simply to 'disappear, only to discover that I have once again made a turn in the labyrinth' - of language, of genre, of subjective representation? Kroetsch does not say.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the

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<sup>46</sup> Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 214.

<sup>47</sup> Arnold E. Davidson, *Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994. 'Feminist Revisions' is the title of this section (pp.97-135). Kroetsch's *Badlands* is referred to on page 99. Davidson devotes a whole section to this work earlier in *Coyote Country*, see 'The Archaeology of *Badlands*', pp.74-93.

<sup>48</sup> Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 117-18.

labyrinthine maze of the intricate 'Poetics of Rita Kleinhart' is an artistic success in terms of its thought-provoking, enigmatic narrative. As a storyteller, at least, Kroetsch *can* make a heroic journey, one into the imagination.