

## **Unfixed/unfixing *geografictione* in Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990)**

*Anne-Sophie Letessier, Université Jean-Monnet Saint Etienne*

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While Aritha van Herk's writings "do not conform to tidy labels," the Canadian author choosing to "tak[e] up liminal positions that explode totalizing categories" (Goldman, "Go North" 32), a trademark of her work has been her interest in cartography. With *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990),<sup>1</sup> her "genre-bending prose" (Neuman 221) goes a step further than the parodic "picaresque rootlessness" (Thieme 47) of her previous novels, *The Tent Peg* (1981) and *No Fixed Address* (1986) which already give pride of place to map-making and the fascination it exerts on their irreverent female protagonists.

*Places Far From Ellesmere* is structured into four "explorations on site": Edberg where van Herk grew up, Edmonton where she studied, Calgary where she now resides and the island of Ellesmere where the narrator embarks on a feminist revisionist reading of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Perhaps unsurprisingly since she defines genre as "the coffin that contains form" (*In Visible* 17), van Herk refuses the label autobiography and, throughout the text, the narrator uses the second person singular to address her self, a pronoun which functions "almost [as] an audiential address" showing "the multiplicity of possibilities for the reader and the writer, who are the same and different" (van Herk, "Shifting Form" 87). Likewise, if the self-conscious use of the term "exploration" in the subtitle cannot but call to mind the expeditions and cartographers who mapped what was to become Canada – J.B.

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<sup>1</sup> Further references to appear in parentheses in the text, prefaced by the abbreviation *Places*.

Tyrell (*Places* 14) and David Thompson (*Places* 66) to name but a few of those whom van Herk includes in her book –, the text is less driven by the forward impetus of discovery than by the “mutual implication of geography and fiction” (Helmes 69) indexed in van Herk’s coinage: *geografictione*. The term refers at once to a style of writing and to place, the reversibility of the components – “A fiction of geography/geography of fiction” (*Places* 40) – underscoring the impossibility of dissociating the latter from its inscription in a discursive process (Ashcroft 155).

The cover illustration by Scott Barham<sup>2</sup> proposes to the reader a visual interpretation of a *geografictione* which “establishes cartography as a first framework for reading” (Heim 139) and disrupts the very model it proposes. The collage is indeed composed of several layers of maps, different scales and different viewpoints coexisting on the same page. A black and white map where toponyms are hardly legible serves as the background to a brightly coloured insert. Within its frame, a female-shaped island faces south towards a landmass which is cleft into two by a river. East of this divide, the artist has inscribed the figures 1, 2, 3, the latter superimposed on a grid map of Calgary. Fragments of maps of the Arctic Ocean and of the northern half of the globe have been pasted in the top and bottom left-hand corners. The collage’s playful non-referentiality is a reminder that cartography does not reproduce an existing form: it functions as a modelization whose graphic language creates a space in which to locate new representations – what Christian Jacob calls “the impossible mimesis” (quoted in Besse 157). The way the collage subverts the symbolic contract of cartography as an ordering of topography providing orientation and positional information further elucidates van Herk’s own reading of *Places Far From Ellesmere* as “a book masquerading as a map, or more accurately, a map masquerading as a book” (“Map” 129). A paradoxical map if there is, since it “refuse[s] the epistemic classification of cartography” (van Herk, “Map” 130), yet uses the cartographic model to examine the notion of place as “transportable” (van Herk, “Shifting Form” 90). Reversing the traditional relation that posits place as the object of exploration, van Herk indeed proposes to see it as the agent of its own exploring, therefore “unfixed, unmappable” (“Map” 130).

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the cover map, see Omhové (97-100), Grace (88) and van Herk’s own interpretation (“Map” 134).

Van Herk's reflection, in that regard, is attuned to the contemporary reassessment of the notion of place in the humanities, notably in cultural geography and post-colonial studies (Thieme 1-3). Although *Places Far From Ellesmere* is informed by the contrary dynamics of the centripetal forces of "emplacement" as "entextment," and the centrifugal drive of dis-location striving to eschew "the boundaries of page or place, their constraints" (*Places* 119), it does not do away with place. The narrator's assertion about Edberg – "This is place, inescapable" (*Places* 23) – bespeaks more than a sense of claustrophobia related to childhood experience; it evinces the primacy and inevitability of place, the persistence of its inscription on the writing/reading self. The excess of positional information which cartography may provide – "Canada, the West, prairie, Alberta, the south, Calgary: a house northwest, room" (*Places* 57) – demonstrates that to ponder this persistence, one should see place as something other than a circumscribed point on a map, or a static landmark. Underlying the narrator's efforts to locate a home which would accommodate her restlessness is the idea that place can no longer be envisaged solely as "a pause in movement" (Tuan 6). Van Herk's critical and poetic investigation of the "mobility" of the concept (Massey, *Space* 1) unsettles the limits of its definition as "a site of authenticity, singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity" (Massey 1994, 5) to write unfixed and unfixing *geografictione*.

### **"Written into place": origins and destinations**

1, 2, 3: the figures which feature prominently on the cover map appear to record the sequence of explorations, the overall structure of the book seemingly resting on a trajectory in time and space with each section corresponding to a stage in the narrator's life. Yet, in keeping with its blatant refusal of cartographic ordering, the figures thwart the reader's expectation for orientation.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the text's "self-conscious avoidance of plot" (Goldman, "Earth-Quaking" 31) means that origins and destinations can longer be taken as the two polarities between which the narrative unfolds: defining "'originary moments of departure" and locating "a definitive moment of perfect arrival" (Thieme 3 and 11) prove to be equally problematic. Faced with the difficulty of finding a circumscribed point of origin whose stability and solidity would

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<sup>3</sup> As Claire Omhové underlines, "the position of these figures belies the location of the corresponding towns in an atlas." (99)

allow her to “launch” herself and her explorations (*Places* 33), the narrator turns to the fixity and permanence of the burial ground, and looks for possible sites for her future grave in all four locations:

Engravement then. The home of the spirit? To dare to stay here to die, to dare to stay after death, to implant yourself firmly and say ‘Here I stay, let those who look for a record come here.’ (*Places* 61)

The pun on “engravement” – the inscription and the burying of the body – conjoined with the insistence on the deictic calls to mind Pogue-Harrison’s reflection on the deictic gesture of the grave marker (“here lies”) which “appropriates the ground of indication,” making it the foundational gesture of emplacement (397) and the paradigmatic example of “writ[ing] into place” (*Places* 39). In the narrative, the phrase always coalesces discursive process (writing into being) and textual assignation (writing into position) for van Herk’s use of the term engravement hinges on an analogy between the burial plot, the plotting of place and the plotting of fiction (Goldman, “Earth-Quaking” 31).

The reader is ushered into the meditation on Edberg as a first possible site of engravement by a series of clauses which reads as a diffident attempt to define it:

Home: what you visit and abandon: too much forgotten/too much remembered. An asylum for your origins, your launchings and departures, the derivations of your dream geographies. [...] Always and unrelentingly (home) even after it is too late to be or to revert to (home), even after it pre/occupies the past tense. (*Places* 13)

What prevails in the succession of parallel phrases is the awareness that writing about Edberg cannot bring it to an end, the parentheses which disrupt the syntax indexing the need to engage with this impossibility. If memory is *preoccupied* by the past, the slash which cleaves the word in the passage re-inscribes both the temporal and the spatial. Exploring Edberg is not an anamnesis nor is the town a repository of memory waiting to be “happily retrieved” (*Places* 38). As the narrator forcefully asserts, it is “without a time limit,” its exploration made up of “uneasy souvenirs” since it “insists on a reference, influence, empreinte” (*Places* 15). The irruption of foreign words upsets the assumptions of stability, fixity and durability frequently associated with the idea of imprint. Edberg as *empreinte* is evidence simultaneously of the contact of loss and the loss of contact (Didi-Huberman 18) in which the past, far from being foreclosed, ceaselessly works and transforms the substratum it imprinted (Didi-Huberman 14). Van Herk’s “mnemonic reading” of her childhood place (“Map” 130-131) registers “a site effacing itself, a town dis/appearing” (*Places*

29), the second phrase contradicting the clichés underlying the first. Although the narrator gathers evidence of the dereliction and dissolution of a small town and agricultural community forgotten by the march of modernity (*Places* 29, 34), loss is not experienced as a continuous progress towards erasure and absence: the double movement textually marked by the slash points to a simultaneity which makes Edberg anachronistic.

The reflection on the town dis/appearance serves as a counterpoint to the long list of “remainders,” what remains (the traces of the past in the present) and serves as a reminder (a presence which points to the future of remembering).<sup>4</sup> When the narrator enumerates the “disappearing locations of appearances” – the cart trail, the creamery, the barbershop, the Chinese café (*Places* 29-32) –, more is at stake than bemoaning regrets measuring what is left in the light of what has gone. The whole section pieces together personal anecdotes, historical references to explorers and settlers, and considerations on religious differences among Edberg’s population. These snippets, however, never quite aggregate into a coherent whole. In a similar fashion, when the narrator adopts a bird’s eye view to offer a description of the town, the text flaunts its disregard for topographic charting through the insistent use of disjunctive slashes: “the school/houses/Erickson’s store/a blank-face building? shed?/the hotel/another dusty storefront with a tabby sleeping in its window/the Co-op store/across the street Nick Radomsky’s hardware and the garage” (*Places* 22). This resistance to ordering space and time in such a way as to allow summation is premised on the notion that memory cannot take hold of place, that the memory of Edberg cannot take place: the town does not fulfill the role of the Aristotelian *periechon* whose containing boundaries and stabilizing persistence hold the remembered (Casey 186). Writing cannot be envisaged as a compensatory gesture “command[ing] [Edberg] into everlasting place” (*Places* 37) either, the text a “receptacle [...] gathering evidence of its existence” (Omhovère 103): the recurring image of the cupped hands trying and failing “to enclose this soft jumble of houses and streets” (*Places* 34) brings to the fore this impossibility. What the first exploration does instead is to bear witness to the unresolved paradox of the narrator’s desire “[t]o unhinge, and to carve with words” (*Places* 39).

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<sup>4</sup> “The action indicated by the reminder is typically one step removed from the immediate present in which I apprehend the reminder itself. I am being reminded of a possible action which I may undertake very soon or eventually, though not precisely when and as I am perceiving the reminder.” (Casey 93)

Because Edberg refuses to let itself be written into a monument of the past, the narrator briefly sees it as “an Ellesmere” (*Places* 36), an elsewhere which is synonymous at once with escape and with “the eternal temptation of the lie that return is possible” (van Herk, “Map” 131). When, in the final section, she *does* escape to the Arctic island, the reflection veers away from the question of memory to probe the “male/lineated” territories of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and of Arctic maps (*Places* 88), the forceful emplotment of women and place into unitary definition whose static circumscribing strives to stifle their “determin[ation] to enact their own vitality” (*Places* 125).

As she hikes on Ellesmere, reading Tolstoy by Arctic white nights, the narrator muses on the congruences between *Anna Karenina* and Ellesmere: “The nineteenth-century island: the nineteenth century novel” (*Places* 97). In 1873, Tolstoy started to write his book, “publish[ing]/punish[ing] [his character] by instalment” until 1877 (*Places* 97). Meanwhile, the Arctic island was being “extensive[ly]” explored by two expeditions in 1875 and 1876 (*Places* 97). Beyond the sole coincidence of dates, van Herk elaborates on the summarily summed-up equation “terror of women = terror of the north” (*Places* 123)<sup>5</sup> to bring under scrutiny “the transition from boundless space to bounding pen” (Omhovère 115) characteristic of European representations of the Arctic, be they travel narratives or maps. Tolstoy’s ambition to explore the heart of female passion, whetted by his prurient fascination with “the body of an undressed and dissected young woman who threw herself under a train from heartbreak” (*Places* 97), participates in the same drive to chart unknown territories which sent European adventurers across the Atlantic and into the Arctic ocean in search of “the un/found North West Passage” (*Places* 84). The narrator debunks these figures of knowledge-seekers by presenting them as instances of “rampaging male egos” (*Places* 80) whose singular lack of imagination (*Places* 81) is on par with their desire to define and capture in language through the imposition of “[p]rescripted choices” (*Places* 81). While *Anna Karenina*, as van Herk reads it, is “a fictional mirror of a

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<sup>5</sup> It is now commonplace in criticism on van Herk to underscore her engagement with the discursive formation of the north, the dominant narrative of “courageous men battling dangerous, hostile, female *terra incognita*” (Grace 16). Significantly, the Ellesmere section has garnered the most critical attention (sometimes to the detriment of the rest of the narrative). The extent to which it reinforces what it seeks to deconstruct has been a moot question among critics, some arguing that van Herk failed to do away with her dependency upon the male “Idea of the North” (Grace) or to satisfactorily engage with Euro-centric definition of the Arctic (see Grace, Helms, Crane). Omhovère proposes a more nuanced approach with her enlightening analysis of van Herk’s subtle inversion of the gendering of space.

male reading of women” (*Places* 82), the Arctic map is a projection of male explorers’ narcissistic fantasy of writing themselves onto a landscape suitably empty (emptied) of women: “Name, name, leave names on everything, on every physical abutment, leave behind one’s father’s name, the names of other men, the names of absent and abstracted/ideal women” (*Places* 88). The narrator’s derisive tone when reflecting on the naming frenzy which gripped Arctic explorers does not obfuscate the fearful symmetry of the male ideology of silenced femininity which condemns Anna Karenina and Ellesmere to absence, the former killed by the murderous plot of her creator, the latter emplotted as a *tabula rasa* (*Places* 77).

Reading past these inscriptions, the narrator offers Ellesmere as “a remedy” to the plight of Anna Karenina (*Places* 77), its “grammar of stone and tree, water and sky” (*Places* 84) opening possible reading routes to upset unitary definitions. Only then can Ellesmere “float into a geografictione” (*Places* 87), the fluidity of the liquid element suggestive of the movement of the “puzzle-ice” during the brief Arctic summer (*Places* 121), an alternative to engravement.

#### **“Home is a movement”: un/reading place**

If Anna Karenina steps out of the book into the landscape to walk and converse with the narrator (*Places* 103, 104, 106), ultimately, she cannot escape the plot Tolstoy devised for her. Meanwhile, the narrator refuses to choose a grave, a plot or a home. In response to the vexing question: “Where does home mean?” (*Places* 68), she proposes that “home is a movement” (*Places* 69), an aphorism which gives the lie to the notion of home as a resting place (Massey, *Space* 123), and sharpens the correlation she identifies in the Canadian Prairie between “historic restlessness” and its “companion,” settlement (*Places* 68).<sup>6</sup> The impossibility of turning home into a fixed entity, even when she forsakes the “temptations of exile” (*Places* 58) and decides to stay in Calgary (*Places* 62), gestures towards the increasingly problematic nature of the concept in “the contemporary world, where routes versions of cultural becoming are supplanting roots notions of identity” (Thieme 27). More important perhaps than the notion that “identity has many imagined ‘homes’” (Hall quoted in Thieme 27), is the way the narrator’s restlessness disrupts “sedentarist notions of

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<sup>6</sup> The passage points the reader back to the narrator’s opening remark on the “restless settlers” of the past, drifting through the prairie (*Places* 19).

place" (Thieme 37). In that regard, one may argue that van Herk is not so much interested in the transactions through which undifferentiated space is invested with meaning and value (Tuan 6), as she is in the mobile heterogeneity of place identities which are "always in transit" (Thieme 6). The narrator is acutely aware that the four sites of exploration have already been "entext[ed]" (*Places* 53) and mapped by others. Edberg is "[i]nvented: textual" (*Places* 40), Edmonton "a reading, [...] an open book" (*Places* 47), while Calgary is "empenned" (*Places* 66) and Ellesmere a "paginated presence" (*Places* 77): all four are "places with acts of readings as their histories, and all of them [the narrator's] homes" (*Places* 36). Starting from the premise that place is "an act of text" (*Places* 47), van Herk ceaselessly works on the dialectical interplay between writing and reading, the reading writer always a writing reader who writes place as she reads it.

It is the narrator's concern with the "hermeneutics of place" (Thieme 29) which prompts the "un/reading" underpinning the four explorations. Understood in the light of the epigraph from Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, van Herk's coinage signals an investigation into "discursive formation" as a "space of multiple dissensions."<sup>7</sup> Un/reading becomes "a means of interrogating" which pays equal attention to content and process ("Unreading" 87). The question: "What justifies place?" (*Places* 20), which runs through the entire book, thus calls for more than re-reading or "de/coding" (*Places* 38). Significantly, it elicits differing responses. When the narrator exclaims, about Edmonton: "what's to be expected of a fort(ress) set up to trade/skin Indians" (*Places* 43), the cleft textually marked by the slash makes room for a revisionist reading of the city's foundation story and points to a correlation between the fur (skin) trading activities held at the fortified fort and the brutality to which First Nations peoples were submitted. On Ellesmere, the narrator rectifies the record about the Arctic Island: "explored, not discovered," for the roaming bands of hunters from forty-two hundred years ago already had a name for it (*Places* 98). That name, however, remains unsaid, a silence to which the text draws attention: "if one

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<sup>7</sup> Two quotations, one from Levi Strauss about memory as a desert, the other from Camus about the need for deserts and islands, frame the excerpt from Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*. The authorial synthesis, at the bottom of the page and between brackets, repeats and displaces words from each of the three quotes, thereby offering a comment on what Levi Strauss's and Camus's texts may be read as glossing over: the gendering of space – "The world admits deserts and islands but no women" (*Places* 9). While van Herk does not elaborate on the archaeological method Foucault's approach to space relies on, this authorial intervention is in itself a critical act of un/reading.

only had the eyes to read it" (*Places* 97).<sup>8</sup> Brief as these two references to colonial rewritings and overwritings may be, they underscore the "discursive interference of colonialism" by calling attention to "the conflicting accretions which become the dense text that constitutes place" (Ashcroft *et al.* 197 and 190). The narrator's exploration of Calgary complements and complicates such un/reading. Under the heading "Denizen," she notes the archaeological finds which testify to First Nations peoples' originary claims: "Spearpoints found in the plowed fields east of the city (12 000 years old). Teepee rings, medicine wheels, effigies: Blackfoot, Sarcee, Stoney" (*Places* 66).<sup>9</sup> The list is immediately followed by another made up of the names of explorers and surveyors (*Places* 66). The juxtaposition may read as an implicit contrast between the nomadism of peoples whose sense of place is not dependent on settledness and static enclosure, and the mapping of the West by agents of European imperialism which transformed place into a "topographical system" predicated on the introduction of boundaries (Ashcroft 146). One is not pitted against the other, however. In a place "[b]egun by the oldest occupation, the nomadic herding of grazing animals" (*Places* 68), all are "transient denizens" (*Places* 66): "Arriving and leaving, citizens of their own rules: Ex-mounties, Ex-speculators, Ex-Metis buffalo hunters, Ex-Arrivals" (*Places* 66-67). By bringing together these examples of spatial mobility, the text does not shy away from the political implications of past and present spatial practices in post-colonial Canada, but resists "the easy resolution of seeing European discovery and invasion as a defining moment, or idealizing pre-Columbian America as a site of authenticity" (Thieme 7).

Un/reading, therefore, cannot be limited to the sole excavating and discovering of what has been ignored or dismissed by dominant discourse. In what may be construed as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Foucauldian metaphor, the narrator remarks: "It's been said before: archaeologies are (in)formed by those who (in)vent them" (*Places* 58). My contention is that van Herk's un/reading does not hinge as much on "palimpsestic layering" (Crane 52) – as tempting as the metaphor is, especially in relation to Foucault – as on a process of fragmentation "dismantling [the] text past all its previous readings and writings" (van Herk, *In Visible Ink* 4). Such

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<sup>8</sup> Van Herk's essay about her experience on Ellesmere explains this silence of the text: the Inuktitut words which her guide Pijamini taught her are his, "not [hers], and if [she] was able to hear them and to mimic them, it was only through his agency. [She] will not raid them" (*In Visible Ink* 10).

<sup>9</sup> Such artefacts resolve the question of home for the Sarcee woman the narrator encounters at the Co-op store: "she knows home better than you do, she knows where it is" (*Places* 68).

process is given cogent expression in her metaphoric displacements of the phrase “long division” which serves as the title of the Edmonton section. Once “dislodged from its scientific context,” Claire Omhovère points out, it “comes to designate the riving process through which the narrator elaborates her georafictione” (105). It bears on the cleft opened by the North Saskatchewan, the river which “cut[s] the town in half: north/south” and whose axis holds for the narrator the promise of evasion, of “divid[ing] [herself] from the country” and its reductive plots<sup>10</sup> (*Places* 43). Out of the four explorations, the Edmonton section is the one which relies the most on fragments from a variety of texts which the narrator assembles as she negotiates reading paths through the “maze of [her] books” (*Places* 52). Featured in the text or quoted in free indirect discourse, these fragments are loosened from their status as archival evidence<sup>11</sup> to allow for multiple points of entry and passages leading to shifting reconfigurations. The narrator’s remark on her “abstemious[ness],” having “yet to see the inside of a hotel” (*Places* 49), introduces an advertisement for the Edmonton hotel in colonial times, at the same time as it harks back to Edberg and women’s exclusion from beer parlours (*Places* 14) and “the beer parlour tradition of oral narrative” which has fed the work of Prairie writers like Robert Kroetsch (Neuman 223). The content of the ad itself resonates with the society article included on the following page. Whether it be the promise that “[p]emmican and dried buffalo meat has long been a stranger at the table” (*Places* 49) or the reporter’s insistence on the toilettes of a ball’s attendees as proof of civility, both texts evince a desire to outgrow the pioneer past which results in awkward mimicry, as awkward as the narrator’s own efforts to “match” the “flowered blouses vaunt[ing] cashmere cardigans” of the “rich city girls” (*Places* 51). In between these two fragments, a jocular article about the popularity of “coffin varnish” (*Places* 50) follows the fluvial axis of division, and points to the South and to the North. While the bootlegged liquor travels to Wyoming – without “having had its significance or usefulness impaired” (*Places* 50) –, the colonial temperance movement gathers strength, intent on “press[ing] for total prohibition. On all passions.” (*Places* 50) The pause in the formulation of the sentence signals a change of scope which can then encompass

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<sup>10</sup> “Drink and get laid and get away and quit school.  
Quit school and get away and get laid and get drunk.

Reverse all orders: this is as far as you can get away from home” (*Places* 23).

<sup>11</sup> Van Herk’s text collapses temporal distance by including the events recorded in the archive documents on the same time plane as the narrator’s experience as a student in Edmonton.

Tolstoy, that other “son [...] of temperance” whose novel *Anna Karenina* the Edmonton student has yet to read (*Places* 50; see also 81).

As the narrator tries to divide herself from Edberg by “entext[ing] [herself] a city of pages” (*Places* 53), entextment proves to come with its own perils – after all, the neologism relies on the same affixation as engravement and emplotment, the prefix *en-* in each case suggestive of confinement. In the course of the second and third explorations, the motif of the maze becomes more prominent and blends with the image of the fortress. In Calgary, the narrator finds “a Jericho” (*Places* 57), an “enclosure” (*Places* 66) divided into quadrants but replete with the “crossword puzzle of street” (*Places* 72), interlocking bridges and malls, “labyrinths” (*Places* 72) in which she wanders until she becomes “enmesh[ed] in the very textual threads which should have led her out,” at once Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur (Omhovère 107): “Who can find you here, a clumsy bawling beast in the centre of a web of thread, a cat’s cradle of encapturement?” (*Places* 73). If un/reading and entextment might be construed as reversible polarities – one “exploratory,” the other “introverted and possessive” (*Places* 113) –, place does not merely wait for the reader’s probing; it is the agent of its own dis-location when “it moves, un/reads itself again, a sly alteration leaving [the narrator] puzzled” (*Places* 37), a movement which van Herk’s poetics reciprocates.

### **“Between habitations”: dis-locating language**

On Ellesmere, the narrator finds an “awayness so thoroughly truant [she] ha[s] cut all connexion to all places” (*Places* 77), a place where she is “free to un/read [her]self, home, [...] the rest of Canada, all possible texts” (*Places* 91). Reading these assertions, the critic might be tempted to interpret the movement of the book as leading towards absolute deterritorialisation abolishing “capture and cartography” (Goldman, “Earth-Quaking” 36), the striated space of the city-grid giving way to the smooth space of the Arctic desert (Goldman, “Earth-Quaking” 32), which would finally allow the narrator to do away with the restrictions and circumscription of emplacement and entextment. But van Herk’s geografictione comes with “necessary cordons and fences” (*Places* 140). To write dis-location – “the self written between habitations” (*Places* 118) –, she works within the constraints of page and textual enclosure against the boundedness and singularity traditionally associated with place (Massey, *Space* 169).

The adjective “far” in the title of the book offers a first clue. It bespeaks a “relational focus” (Helmes 69) which precludes definition through counter position – the cities of Edberg, Edmonton and Calgary v. the northern wilderness of Ellesmere<sup>12</sup> – and hints instead at “connections with the beyond, with other places” (Massey, “Conceptualisation” 64). The narrator ceaselessly measuring the temporal, geographical and imaginary distances between the different sites, each place reflects on and inflects the others: with their unfixed and heterogeneous identities, all are unique, none are singular. This porosity is translated by “wandering tropes”<sup>13</sup> which create open and unstable networks undermining the textual enclosure of the four sections, the frame which their respective titles might seem to impose by announcing the symbolic associations attached to each place. The motifs of the train and the grave weave in and out of the text, the same way the figure of Anna Karenina drifts through the book. At times only present through seemingly incident references – to the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Calgary (*Places* 59), or to the necessity to arrange for a cemetery in colonial Edmonton (*Places* 52), for example – they assert themselves when their semantic variations serve as a vector to articulate the narrator’s relationship with place. Thus, her repressive upbringing makes Edberg a “training for departure” (*Places* 18), the platform of the train station the promise of an elsewhere, the possibility of launching oneself into unmapped territories – provided one could frame the image so as to leave out the reminders of Edberg’s nudging presence:

The platform stood on the lip of the world, and if you could manage to ignore the cream cans and tractor parts, the wooden baggage cart, you could imagine (an Anna in black velvet stepping down to take a breath of fresh air on her way to one of the family estates: it is the Edberg platform that nudged and gestured, peering and curious) the platform a promenade, it was that even and level and inspiring. (*Places* 16)

The parenthesis cleaves the sentence open to allow for Anna Karenina’s glamorous apparition, along with a metonymic displacement which lets in Edberg’s “principles of scrutiny” (*Places* 14), the silent crowd whose gaze no departure can seem to escape. Because van Herk continuously works on slippage, permeability and disruption, her semantic variations frustrate sequential logic. The parallelism of the railway tracks

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<sup>12</sup> In that regard, my reading of van Herk’s text differs significantly from Crane’s analysis of the discursive construction of wilderness.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the phrase from Claire Omhové’s analysis of geographical tropes in Ann Michael’s *Fugitive Pieces* (83).

gives form to the symmetry of childhood training – “[a]llowances: forbiddenness” (*Places* 27) –, making it the first instance of “engravement” (*Places* 23) from whose iron lines<sup>14</sup> the narrator tries to save Tolstoy’s character when the “unrailwayed joining” of an Arctic island (*Places* 49) prompts the un/reading of the implacable symmetry to which male fiction condemns women – “forever culpable, exiled for their visceras, eviscerated for their exiles” (*Places* 83). Conversely, the meditation on Calgary, “this growing graveyard” (*Places* 57), gives the lie to the etymological meaning of “[c]emetery. Koimeterion” (*resting place*) by picturing the city as “a silent freight train carrying away long rows of boxcars neatly stacked with coffins” (*Places* 59). This image of ordered mobility is immediately contradicted by the depiction of rabbits’ and gophers’ “unrestricted” movements among graves which “elbow[...] each other awake, saying ‘move over’” (*Places* 59-60).

In an all-encompassing movement, the Ellesmere section concludes on the narrator’s going through the list of possible sites for her future grave, a list which condenses the three previous sections (*Places* 140). But even the elsewhere of Ellesmere is given an elsewhere. The scope of the text is suddenly enlarged to other “sites of repose” (*Places* 141) – the coastal mountains of British Columbia, the Pacific Rim, the Australian Pacific coast –, once the narrator has pushed aside the temptation of merging with the Arctic landscape<sup>15</sup>:

But traverse on, puzzle-ice in the lake you can still see as you go higher, and the tussocks you step over eternity of continuance. The same principle: jumping from moment to moment across an abrupted space. (*Places* 122-123)

With its emphasis on on-going crossing, compounded with the descriptive notations about continuity and permanence on one hand, and sudden and unexpected changes on the other, the passage sheds light on Robert Kroetsch’s reading of van Herk’s writing as an instance of restless language whose recurring use of foreign words, multiple neologisms and metaphoric displacements “riddl[e] the grammar of what (almost) was” (Kroetsch 70). To the notion of accumulation which some critics have used to describe her use of tropes, I would therefore substitute that of dislocation since her metaphorical crossings maintain an in-betweenness, a spacing which generates destabilizing frictions and tensions. When, in the Edberg section,

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<sup>14</sup> “[H]e beats his characters into plowshares, or into railway ties, or their potential deaths” (*Places* 117; see also 121, 142).

<sup>15</sup> “You wade the Abbé River too, and again the force, the surge of electricity in the water makes you want simply to submerge yourself into a tumbled stone. You want to become Ellesmere” (*Places* 121).

she borrows the British term “coppice” from J.B. Tyrrell’s description of the Parkland “scattered trees” (*Places* 14, 20), she refrains from elaborating on the disjunction between environment and imported language, or from retaliating with a more appropriate word, which would participate in the same aspectual logic. Instead, she preserves the spacing opened in the referential process by the impropriety to produce surprisingly disjunctive connections: “initiation coppice” (*Places* 15), “the germ of origin, its coppice” (*Places* 32). In neither phrase does “coppice” refer to a definite object, a setting in which the narrator’s experience may be seen as embedded. The dissonance caused by the instability of the signifier prevents the reading of the images from falling into “preconditioned” patterns (*Places* 122): far from dispelling the slipperiness and imperfection of the assignation which notions of origins make us claim as home (van Herk, “Map” 130), the word associations leave open breaches which unsettle the fixity of mental constructs.

Van Herk’s restless language, which deliberately thwarts the efforts of “the comprehensive reader” (*Places* 118), inscribes in the text the very possibility of its own un/reading: “The words are stirred, mixed, like pieces of a jigsaw, broken into their separate shapes and the whole picture lost, left to be reconstructed by another, a different hand” (*Places* 111) – provided it accepts that such reconstruction is necessarily incomplete and provisional, and abstains from “static circumscription” (*Places* 118). Marlene Goldman points out how the image of the jigsaw, the “puzzle-ice,” which runs through the exploration of Ellesmere (*Places* 87, 93, 111, 121), functions as a “figure for the exploratory strategy of a feminist reading of Tolstoy’s text” (“Earth-Quaking” 35). I would go a step further and argue that it informs van Herk’s poetics of place and its unsettling complexities. Underlying the metaphor is the idea of mobile fragmentation, thaw creating “open patches” (*Places* 93), producing unstable reading routes, new combinations which always exceed the sum of their parts. As always in van Herk’s text, the image slides into another and that of the puzzle-ice needs to be read in relation to the attention the narrator pays to “the enduring traces” shape-changing ice “leaves on the landscape” (*Omhovère* 105). If *Places Far From Ellesmere* is indeed a map, what its overt fragmentation, disconcerting displacements and destabilising dissonances give form to is the persistence of place which imprints on the writer and the reader alike its unfixing.

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