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The instability of gender: the body at *unrest* in Aritha van Herk's (geogra)fiction(e)

M. A. Thesis

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1. Spanish summary

Este trabajo fin de máster se ha centrado en analizar los sujetos inquietos que protagonizan la obra de la escritora canadiense Aritha van Herk. Dicha inquietud responde a una primera recurrencia de viajes o continuo movimiento por parte de sus protagonistas. No obstante, mi tesis fundamental abordará cómo esta agitación en términos espaciales nos desvela también una agitación subyacente en términos corporales, motivada en particular por restricciones de género contra las que sus personajes han de enfrentarse en su vida diaria. Como consecuencia, mi investigación consta de un análisis de la conexión entre cuerpo y espacio, concentrándome en su mutua influencia; enfatizaré, sin embargo, la importancia concedida al cuerpo en todos los textos, que recogen el papel fundamental del mismo en desestabilizar y/o subvertir los mismos significados y normas de género que se le asignan. Se examinará principalmente, por tanto, la representación atípica o innovadora de esta agencia corporal, aunque se hace igualmente imprescindible reconocer la importancia de la perspectiva espacial que la autora incluye, puesto que su trabajo por esta vía alimenta de manera notable el énfasis en lo corpóreo. Sus 'exploraciones' geográficas y simbólicas buscarán (re)inscribir el deseo y conocimiento a través del cuerpo, contrastando no sólo con su contexto cultural e histórico más cercano (especialmente las crónicas y mapas de exploradores y la literatura del oeste canadiense) sino también con tradiciones literarias, históricas y filosóficas más alejadas pero igualmente cimentadas bajo las mismas premisas de abstracción de lo corpóreo y de la subjetividad.

2. English summary

This research focuses on the analysis of restless subjects, out of the fact that all of van Herk's characters feature incessant travel or movement. My contention is that this spatial restlessness is connected to body matters, particularly gender-related constrictions that they are suffering. As a result, my study comprises an analysis of the interconnection between space and body, concentrating on their mutual influence but specially emphasising how the body is put at the centre as the primary destabiliser of gender meanings and the very norms it is assigned. We will mainly explore, therefore, the portrayal of such unusual bodily agency, although it is equally important to acknowledge, also, van Herk's thorough work on space, as this seeks to (re)inscribe corporal desire and knowledge in a way that directly confronts Canadian literary tradition (especially exploration and western narratives) and wider cultural and epistemic contexts.

Approval signature

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Signed: Isabel Carrera Suárez Signed: Eva Pelayo Sañudo

To my mother, Alicia:
Thank you and I love you

To Aritha:
My heart had broken and you noticed me

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Introduction to the Author and her (Geogra)Fiction(e)

Aritha van Herk was born in 1954 to Dutch parents who had migrated to Canada after World War II out of the desire of the time to get more religious freedom (from strict Calvinism) and better economic and educational opportunities for their offspring (van Herk 1992a, 42-43). She grew up in the family farm near the village of Edberg, in the Albertan Prairies, and later moved to a small flat in Edmonton to attend college (1992c, 33), where she came into contact with established Canadian writers she had read as a child, Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe. At the age of 24, she wrote her first novel, *Judith* (1978), gaining international acclaim and being the first writer in the country to win the Seal Books Award. Since then, she has published extensively, plenty of short-stories, essays, four novels and other in-between genres such as her geografictione *Places far From Ellesmere* (1990) and two collections of ficto-criticism (imaginative or creative critical responses), *In Visible Ink* (1991) and *A Frozen Tongue* (1992) (Verduyn 2001, 7). She combines her work as a writer and critic with her current position as professor at the University of Calgary, where she teaches Creative Writing and Canadian Literature.

Most of her work is deeply rooted, drawing from personal biographical facts such as the numerous jobs she has held - farmer, tractor driver, secretary, researcher, editor and bush cook (van Herk 1978, about the author) - and from Canadian history, notably the "famous explorers and travellers who were involved in mapping Canada and the North" (Lutz 1999, 55). She also deals with wider cultural references and sources, however, renowned as she is for her particular engagement with and rewriting of canonical and mythical texts. An acknowledged feminist too, this local and universal interest is usually approached in the same critical manner when it comes to the place of women in such traditions, striving to give a new, fairer turn while also to open room for different insights both as a woman and as a writer.

This research has selected her four novels and geografictione, whose brief summary is worth advancing before the analysis is properly carried out.

Fistly, *Judith* (1978) presents us with the homonymous heroine who is living on a farm on her own, breeding pigs and trying to come to terms with her past, both her childhood in her family's farm and part of her adult life as a secretary in the city. Flashbacks to that past of difficult familiar and love relationships combine with scenes from her new life, where she discovers true friendship (through her neighbour Mina)

and a freer sexuality but also the hardships of solitude and work, in an attempt to balance her life and make the right choices.

Secondly, *The Tent Peg* (1981) presents another character whose only desire is to flee the troubles of a sick heart. J.L./Jael, student of sociology at the university, where she is not a minute safe of either oblivious or overreacting boys, decides to depart on a camp expedition into the Yukon Territories, searching for solitude and silence. Unable to be accepted otherwise, she disguises herslef as a boy to join the company and work as a bush cook. Nonetheless, she herself soon discovers the truth to the chief and leader MacKenzie, for whom she feels an instant sympathy. Her initial and constant support in her struggle with the general opposition of the camp crew, they will become true friends and confidants, helping each other to overcome their respective pasts.

Thirdly, in *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (from here *Address*) (1986), Arachne, stuck in the fixed trajectory that her job as a bus driver compels her follow, yearns to tread over the whole world and beyond; she is only looking for the map/opportunity to do so. Consequently, when she meets Thomas, a mapmaker for the Geodetic Survey Company, and envisions the possibilities his maps open for her, immediately quits her job and goes to live with him in Calgary. There, she enjoys her new insights by travelling all the prairie towns with the help of Thomas' maps, who also encounters for her the perfect excuse to drive around endlessly by working as an underwear saleswoman. Later on, a new layer of discovery and options again appears when he takes her in an air balloon trip and she views the world from a different perspective. Nonetheless, eager as she is to transcend all boundaries and never conform, in the end all known maps prove insufficient, especially as regards what she mourns most, a map for longing. Hence, she has no choice but to leave and search for her own cartographies, driving north and disappearing from mapped territory.

Fourthly, *Places far From Ellesmere. A Geografictione: Explorations on Site* (from here *Places*) (1990) is experimental writing which combines autobiography (or rather 'geobiography', as it mixes place and personal histories), fiction and literary criticism. Thus, while remembering most of her life's gender-related prohibitions, the protagonist (presumably van Herk herself) sets on a journey to the North Island of Ellesmere, where she also takes the doomed character of Tolstoy's novel, Anna Karenina, hoping to be able to read (and write) a new life (or fiction) for her too.

Finally, *Restlessness* (1998) somehow summarises all of those fleeing characters, here the goal and desire of escape being the ultimate one, death. Dorcas is an incessant

traveller due to her profession as an international courier, but, as the novel later discovers, out of a profound unconformity and sadness too. She cannot stand the idea of stopping, of having a fixed map/life, which she primarily conceives in terms of gender codes, as the rest of our female characters: "most women . . . get what they settle for, which makes their lives dreadful, imprisoned by panty-hose and casseroles and daycare and Valium. I refuse to settle for what I've been dealt. It's not enough." (80). Additionally, she is terribly marked by lovers who turned out to be assassins, infected as some other of her male characters with the "deafness follicle" (46), "not want[ing] to hear [her] crying . . . not want[ing] to know why [she] wanted to die" (30). Paradoxically, it is when she chooses the assassin Atman to end with her *restlessness*, that she finds one true lover (apart from her "dear one"), as all she hoped for was that someone might notice her "*body recalcitrant in its longing*, bone-lonely for a hand" (30 [emphasis mine]), and never "imagin[e] the rest of [her] life in a disentanglement of utilitarian limbs, the word *love* to be avoided at all costs" (30 [emphasis original]).

Methodology and Main Theoretical Framework

My thesis intends to work around the idea of a core concept present throughout the work of Aritha van Herk (born 1954), namely, that of "restlessness", coinciding precisely with the title of one of her novels (*Restlessness,* 1998). Although already relating the corporal and spatial dimension, my title expresses a re-elaboration of this key motif (from *restlessness* to *unrest*) with a view to focus not only on a spatial condition of being on the move or unsettled, but also, or specially, on a physical/bodily state of uneasiness or discomfort, which may be accounted for as mostly related to an oppressive, rigid system of gender norms. Accordingly, the main objective will be to concentrate on the latter aspect not only to understand how the author deals with issues of gender-role constraints, as applied to the body, but especially to show how this very body becomes at the same time an overpowering/subversive motor (both literal and discursive) for destabilising them. In this way, referring to the former, to the spatial dimension, becomes inevitable given that one of the essential ways in which bodily agency becomes a profound destabiliser is through its incomparable impulse to movement, which will (try to) break old (spatial and other) gender norms; space and/or mobility, therefore, are fundamental elements in/through which strict binary restrictions are transcended or sought. Hence, movement/*unrest* is to be understood not only as a simple desire or love for travelling, but as prompted by underlying conditions related to gender norms, as a more profound urgency and need of the female subject in van Herk's fiction. All this will be carefully explored in the central chapter, showing, in short, how the body thus becomes an ambiguous entity, responsible for gender restrictions while also their primary transgressor, as my title implies.

Additionally, the analysis of body and space will be intrinsically related inasmuch as, regarding the matter that concerns us, gender issues, both may be considered to influence/have influenced one another or be mutually dependant: on the one hand, spatial configurations and associations influencing the way humans experience space according to their alleged gender[1] and, on the other hand, individuals' relations and

[1] Numerous feminist studies [e.g. Kathleen M. Kirby, "Re: mapping subjectivity: Cartographic vision and the limits of politics" (in *BodySpace: destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality*: 45-56), 1996; Linda McDowell, "Postcript: Reflections on the Dilemmas of Feminist Research" (in *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographie*s: 224-249), 1999] have analysed how women live or experience space very differently, in the sense of being more aware of it and of their presence on it, at night for instance. Van Herk also

attitudes (re)producing, contributing to maintain or, inversely, changing, such spatial configurations. In this bidirectional dynamics (where it may not be clear which aspect comes first or influences the other) I will rather follow Michel Foucault's thought that "nothing is fundamental" (2001/1999, 136), simply signalling the "interconnection" (141), and consider van Herk's work in this respect as greatly representative as it articulates a constant interplay and clear awareness of both dimensions, without prioritizing either. The reason why, in this thesis, I have given emphasis to the bodily dimension is precisely that most of the critical attention devoted to her work has tended to concentrate only on the way space has influenced the female characters, particularly how its transgression has allowed for a major liberation on their part. My initial approach to the author last year also quickly perceived this interpretation, but we cannot deny that van Herk's work shows us something more (powerful), having to do with the protagonists themselves and their recurrent *restlessness (*or *unrest*); nor can we overlook, either, the situation that the author presents us at one point, the fact that there may be the case, as well, in which a change of scenery may not suffice: promising as the different settings certainly are, we will see J.L. in the Yukon or Judith in her new life on the farm, for instance, still having to struggle and rely on their own (corporal) agency to overcome obstacles.

I intend to explore, therefore, this bodily dimension without disregarding, nevertheless, space and its undeniable potential for gender equality. With the intention of keeping in mind this interdependency, I have structured my study and analysed each chapter under a general twofold prism, which apart from the above mentioned mutual influence, signals other relevant interplays for our discussion on gender issues, those between content and form and between material and discursive domains . To give an idea of such a pattern, we may propose *Places far from Ellesmere* (1990) as an overall perfect example of this dual/twofold dynamics in both style, with plenty of binaries reunited and sentences' sense reverted, and content, interchanging people's and place's biographies and their mutual un/reading and writing. It is important to clarify the

addresses this concern through J.L.'s reflection in *The Tent Peg*: "I can hardly believe the difference it makes when he's not around. I didn't realize how much I watched him, how I never dared to turn my back, how I was always anticipating the moment when he'd try to corner me alone. I can relax for a week. . . . Men never know what's like, they never experience the constant awareness that one is vulnerable, open to attack; . . . It happens to all of us sooner or later. After all, they have the perfect excuse. We get the blame for it, we were in the wrong place at the wrong time, were dressed the wrong way, we called attention to ourselves." (1981, 183).

specificity/nature of this duality, not being exclusionary or incompatible as is usually the case, but quite the contrary, as signaling confluence and complexity; a clarification needed not only as a tribute to the author's style but as regards the implications for gender, which as much as her texts are concerned, mirror the instability of clear-cut categories that is generally conveyed as main theme. There is a certain reconciliation in her work of traditionally antagonistic conceptions; a kind of return to ambivalence, following Umberto Galimberti's theoretical insights, rather than the philosophical 'either-or' quandary that has prevailed in Western thought (1983, 40). A reconciliation that is also proof, in short, of the instability of gender.

Thus, my study will begin by referring to that important *interconnection* between body and space which van Herk develops in her work, comprised under her explicit equation in one of the chapters ("exploration sites") of her geografictione, "Woman as Island" (1990, 77), and in the cover illustration of the book[2]. More than anything, she overtly underlines the gender distinction that is at the basis of most spatial conceptions, just as much as the body, as demonstrated by Linda McDowell's affirmation that "space and place are gendered and sexed, and gender relations and sexuality are 'spaced' " (1999, 65). As a consequence, both space and body may be considered as texts that are written on, read or given meaning from outside, rendered intelligible. Mapping of space, cartography (a crucial subject in her work), could be equated to people's different labels according to their body/appearance, gender being one of the crucial means of intelligibility. We cannot forget, either, the way in which place is equally gendered if we take into account colonial discourses of feminization of the land, in this case of the Western (and Northern) space, as shown by a great volume of literature in the Canadian tradition where explorers view it as a place of adventure, conquest and desire. Paradoxically, the same harmful association or instrumentalisation can be appreciated in various nationalist discourses through history, of which Canada is not an exception. Hence, it emerges a major interest in revisiting common topics of both the Canadian (literary) tradition[3] and a wider cultural context with a view to contesting patriarchal

[2] A picture of the cover of the book is provided in Annex. 1.

[3]Canadian literary tradition may be said to have derived or originated in a great extent from travel or exploration narratives; besides, in the nationalist period, the role literature played was fundamental. For a more detailed description, see the PhD dissertation by Pedro M. Carmona *En primera persona: nación, género sexual y modos autobiográficos en 8 ficciones canadienses*, 2004. In addition, *The Tent Peg*, which deals precisely with exploration issues, has been considered to be narrated following the frequent structure of those early writings: "[t]he first-person point of view makes for a seemingly unmediated personal response of characters to the situation . . . This practice of drawing the reader into the events is again reminiscent of important forms of text in Canadian literary history, such as early travel accounts or biographies" (Čimžar-Egger 2010, 49-50).

representations and offering more liberating characterizations for women. This interest is highly expressed in van Herk's concern for myth and canon rewriting, from classical texts such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *Odyssey* to the biblical stories of Judith, Dorcas or Jael; and within such rewriting, we may remark a major feminist contestation to the received trope by proposing "alternative relationships between women and place- relationships based, not upon the capture and mastery of the landscape, but upon the impulse toward deterritorialization" (Goldman 1993: 23).

Van Herk's awareness of the implications of the equation of body and place may explain her thorough work on space: women's liberation will also imply a liberation of space as this is a crucial (re)producer of gender relations and meanings. Space will become central for a free and open identity, as is proved by numerous instances in the texts where body issues and problems concerning gender boundaries are going to seek relief through an exploration and eventual transgression of spatial boundaries. In this respect, the second chapter, 'unexplored spaces for unconventional paces', will analyse the potential of space for women's liberation as is shown by giving all heroines unusual or alternative spaces, most notably Anna Karenina, who is freed from her male-controlled and prejudice-led context to occupy a different, non-oppressive setting of gender norms. Van Herk engages in a mapping and exploration task that will take us to an expansion of the borders of the possible for women: most of her protagonists are intent on pursuing geographies and paths of their own, usually pioneers in their respective roads and choices (of profession, for instance); but more often than not, the unexplored that van Herk opens for us will be such in a representational or discursive sense, where we will see an inscription of subjectivity and (corporal) desire that directly confronts the inherited cartographic/scientific/philosophical model and its subsequent effect of disregard for the body and women.

Chapter 3 will concentrate on how geographies are in turn 'incarnated' in van Herk's fiction: "I want to dare to inscribe my body on the page" (1991d, 131), she declares; "incarnated" not necessarily in terms of sexual difference but in the sense of the body being fully inscribed, taken into consideration and posited as receiver of meanings but also as active, indispensable, enabling destabiliser. Then, as I have anticipated, I will argue that the tendency in van Herk's (revisiting) works is to destabilise the conventional gender binary oppositions of the masculine and the feminine. In order to show this, I will use Judith Butler's (2002/1999) conceptual

category of "performativity" to signal the instability of gender inasmuch as it must be continually reproduced. Thus, for example, there are overt statements of the 'role-play' or 'game' aspect of certain social/gender relations such as being mother for Lanie (van Herk, 1998a, 44, 65) or a middle-class respectable wife for Arachne (59) in *Address*. Additionally, I will also refer to the idea of 'passing' as a profound destabiliser, the clear epitome being *The Tent Peg*, with the character of J.L. who by no means is suspected not to be a man. The 'disguise', the most typical way of passing, is even taken a "step further – to invisibility" (Verduyn 2001, 21) by many of the characters (Arachne, Dorcas or Anna Karenina), which stands for a literal refusal of definition, as well as for an act of absolute self-dominion and agency, the author has recognised, given that women are "so visible by virtue of our bodies" (22). In contrast, visibility is pursued in those cases where normative gender does not include it with a view to destabilise the model again; insightful subversions will make visible the taken for granted or unveil the unspoken, such as the double standards or the sexual mark of the norm. Lastly, the final destabiliser and perhaps clearest example of 'incarnated geographies' is desire, deeply connected to the body as it is mainly inscribed in relation to sexuality and to escape from the gender restrictions at work. *Places*, for instance, illustrates the far-reaching implications of stripping writing from admitting desire: characters are condemned, as Tolstoy's Anna, which van Herk qualifies as "his punitory witholding of erotic and emotional ease", and women writers, extrapolating from this gender distinction[4], are prejudiced against, "exiled for their visceras, eviscerated for their exiles" (1990, 83).

This focus on short-term desire(s) and drive(s), together with the protagonists' many instances of evading any kind of life destiny or other general long-term purposes, gives us a further clue of gender instability and pursuit of unfixity. Chapter 4, 'Evading plot', summarises this thematic approach while also connects to an important aspect of van Herk's work: its perfect mirror in style and form to what is narrated, which is all the more intentional as demonstrated by her statement "Art! Life! You need to learn how to evade plot" (1991a, 22). There will ensue, consequently, the study of gender and genre

[4]Gender distinction that is profoundly revised, mocked and thus destabilised in her making visible or unveiling that there is no such a thing like "women writ[ing] only out of their viscera" as opposed to men's "great subjects […] 'Like war and peace,' [sic]" (van Herk 1990, 80). Apart from stating that they are/were men who establish(ed) the canon of what is/was great and not, she seems to ask what may be more visceral than wars, for instance: "The word viscera in his mouth scornful and repellent, plump with blood and bread. Since then you've learned the viscera of men larger and more dangerous, hidden as they are in an inflated sense of themselves centring the subjects of greatness" (ibidem).

correlations, in which rewriting emerges as an important strategy regarding both content and form. Having already detailed in the previous sections the treatment of gender, attention here will be devoted to the issue of genre, for which van Herk is most notably known. Some of the advocates of her habit of blurring genres will see it precisely as a support for the content she presents us, or as a consequence of it (Goldman 1993, 31). What is clear once more is the *interconnection*, as Marlene Goldman has interpreted, in "van Herk's attempt to explode genre and plot, and her portrayal of women who flee to or create unmapped territory in an attempt to escape the grid which fixes the image of Woman"; accordingly, we will also discuss a consideration that will be further explored in the next and final chapter, namely, that "the domain of fiction ceases to remain an aesthetically neutral realm which exerts virtually no influence on the lives of individuals" (1993, 23).

Finally, I would like to include in my dissertation the concept of space also as having a mental dimension that highly contributes to shape reality. In other words, how the imaginative or the symbolic (in this case van Herk's fiction) not only reflects reality but, importantly, also contributes to modify it, as I have stated above. Here, I will mainly take Alicia Menendez' summary explanation of how until the 1980s the approach to space was based on a merely material analysis of gender inequality while ignoring that, in fact, space not only refers to a material reality, geography, but also incorporates and generates meaning(s), thus forgetting that "para intervenir en el espacio no basta con alterar su morfología, sino también subvertir significados asociados" (2010, 56). For this reason, van Herk's work constitutes a greatly significant contribution for acknowledging this symbolic dimension and subsequently configuring new "geograph[ies] of the mind" (Kumar and Sultana 2010: 3) in order to contribute to open new material spaces. As the author herself has stated: "women can write kitchen-sink realism about the limitations of their lives forever. But 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" (íbidem). In particular, I will pay attention to the ways in which she resists unitary, essentialist identities: not only with the content of her works, which illustrates Deleuzian deterritorialization (both physical and symbolic, for abandoning given places and identitarian positions) or re-writes mythological and canonical female figures, but also through form, with postmodern techniques of fragmentation and multiple voices/narratives. Her heroines

seem to champion indefinition/instability *par excellence*; her own writing being ultimately a compromise to this inasmuch as the invisibility/disappearance many of her characters reach is a sign that text/ discourse cannot contain them. Nothing is complete, not even van Herk's texts, as firmly exemplified by the reverberation throughout her work of Barthes' theories of dialogism (here translated as myth and canon rewriting) or the death of the author (often illustrated by equalling autobiographical narrative with disappearance or death).

Chapter 1. "Woman as Island"[5]

As Simone de Beauvoir has traced in her chapter devoted to "History", the identification of woman with the land dates back to primitive societies, where women were all the more respected and idolised as a consequence of the fear of the mystery or magic it was believed made them participate of the same forces of nature itself (1956/1953, 93-4). With the advent of instruments and the relative domination by humans over natural phenomena, however, such fear was gradually lost and with it, a first or partial rule over women was established too:

> The devaluation of woman represents a necessary stage in the history of humanity, for it is not upon her positive value but upon man's weakness that her prestige is founded. In woman are incarnated the disturbing mysteries of nature, and man escapes her hold when he frees himself from nature. It is the advance from stone to bronze that enables him through his labour to gain mastery of the soil and to master himself. (100)

This identification has recently been widely signalled by the ecofeminist critique too, which has denounced the severe implications where women share a similar lot/luck of destruction and exploitation to that suffered by land or nature, as may be illustrated by Francis Bacon's (in)famous rape metaphor that inaugurates modern science: his consideration of "hounding" nature and forcing her to reveal her secrets, if necessary (Fox Keller 1985). Hence, we see the broader extension or consequences of such a phantasy of domination/possession and supremacy, although the seed was already there for centuries, especially since Plato's determining binary classifications equalling man and mind/reason as opposed to or excluding woman and its equivalent body/matter (Kirby 1996, 14-5; Grosz 1994, 4). Such masculine perspectives on nature, or space broadly speaking, will have, as we shall see, far-reaching implications as regards the generalised instrumentalisation or appropriation of women's body by the colonial and nationalist discourses alike, operating in the Canadian context under study too[6].

On the one hand, we may cite Hélène Cixous' insights about how woman and land are equated in a reciprocal way, the former being imagined as a dark or virgin continent and the other in turn being usually feminised: "what they [men] have said so

[5] (van Herk 1990, 77)

[6] Canada has the peculiar status of being both a settler and settled colony: settler (or coloniser) if considered as part of the British colonial enterprise that sought its citizens to spread over the 'new' territories; settled (or colonised) in terms of the native population that was actually already occupying that space, and in terms of the (former) colonisers themselves after a time had passed and started to regard themselves as so distant and different from the imperial centre, as a nation with independent aspirations which searched for self-definition as any other postcolonial peoples. For a deeper understanding or data see *The Empire Writes Back*. (Ashcroft et al. 1989).

far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to col-onize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a 'dark continent' to penetrate and to 'pacify.' " (1976, 877). Thus, the conception of (untaken/unclaimed) land as dark or virgin continent is a classic that fills the imagination of colonial writings, those feminine appeals functioning as a justification for the staking or as an invitation to do so. With the resort to virginity, for instance, explorers or settlers may well be tempted to adventure into 'the unknown' when this is portrayed in a half-warlike, half-amorous/chivalrous rhetoric as a promising space of desire, conquest or mysterious charms. Thus, colonial literature usually features active metaphors of invasion and penetration over the territory, which is in turn feminised and depicted as passive. The case of Canada and its early or settler literature is not an exception:

> during the pioneer period of American history, the settlers promoted the myth of the land as woman. In many instances, mapping the new land was likened to the possession of "virgin continent." Although Kolodny's study[7] is limited to the settlement of the United States, her findings are applicable to the physical and literary appropriation of the Canadian landscape as well. (Goldman 1993, 22)

Asta Mott also agrees that not only pioneer chronicles but now established/canonical literature that imagined western settlement or advancement in Canada featured this " 'masculine kingdom of adventure' dominated by the romanticism of landscape" (1998, 102). Van Herk, on her part, has put it plainly in her essay "Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape": "Face it. The west is male. Masculine. Many. Virile" (1992d, 139), going on to cite the writers who have mythologised prairie space as female, awaiting for the writer (or explorer) to plough it (F. P. Grove), to be "la[id] great black steel lines of fiction" (Rudy Wiebe) or to be the "unapproachable, mysterious" muse that centres man's universe or provides him with a point of reference through her fixity/stasis after he has made his adventurous quest (Robert Kroetsch) (141-142). In conclusion, "Symbolic rape everywhere (142)", whereas the role of women ends by being the "perfect excuse for everything. The lady for whom the quest is made" (143).

In addition, Canadian fiction not only about the West but also the North, has been considered to be tainted with this colonial trope. Mott, for instance, has traced the

[7] Annette Kolodny. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphors as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, 1975.

sources that indicate how since early exploration by eighteenth-century fur traders onwards, "The North has provided a narrative space for the realization of manhood, male fantasy and a test of masculinity" (1998, 100). Coral A. Howells argues that van Herk should have added to the list of writers who have "mythologised the praire", the names of those who have "mythologised the North" too (1996, 8). An important debate arises on this point, however, when Mott and other critics[8] have wondered about the extent to which van Herk herself, in trying to counteract those master narratives of mythic adventure and romance of the West, has still fallen into the same postulations, mythologizing and using the Northern space for her feminist purposes. Thus, van Herk is reported to have considered the North as a "more seminal space . . . as this wonderful kind of space that does not already have a discourse attributed to it and that discourse you can alter or usurp or enter. So it is not so limited as the West" (qtd. in Kumar and Sultana 2010, 1). Nonetheless, she is equally conscious of the colonising implications often involved (Clayton 2001, 165), a reason why her writing often significantly differs or distances itself, as we shall see, in the relationship to landscape that is portrayed (Mott 1998, 104) and by the fact that her restless characters are not searching to settle (Kroetsch 2001, 69) or any broader fixity/possession.

On the other hand, nationalism is not that different as far as the same dynamics of instrumentalisation of women's body or image is concerned. Two main mechanisms operating in narrations about the nation are "its personification as a symbol or image" (Hobsbawn 1983, 7 [personal translation]), usually the female figure, or its victimization by resorting to women as well as children who are rendered as weak and in danger in order to encourage masculine fight in their defence (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1997, 196). With a view to differentiate itself from its old colonial centre (England), or from the neocolonial neighbour (the United States), Canada has also appropriated women to symbolise land or the nation as victims of foreign domination: "the colony is portrayed in feminine terms and the oppressor in masculine" (Gibert-Maceda 1993, 76). The renowned writer and feminist Margaret Atwood was the first to perceive and denounce this "identification of Canada with a victim", making a mobilizing call to abandon self-compassion, since, in her view, "being a victim is not equivalent to being innocent" (Gibert-Maceda 1993, 77 [personal translations]).

[8] Marlene Goldman, "Go North Young Woman: Representations of the Arctic in the Writings of Aritha van Herk" (*Aritha van Herk: Essays on Her Works.* 31-44), 2001; Raj Kumar and Asra Sultana, "Mapping the North as a Female Space in Aritha Van Herk's Geografictione *Places Far From Ellesmere*" (*Irwle* 6.1: 1-19), 2010.

According to Mª Teresa Gibert-Maceda, Atwood succeeded in doing so given that her publication of *Survival* (1972) started the departure from this tradition of victimization after many texts where (women) writers expressed such an attitude, bringing awareness to many (Gibert-Maceda 1993, 78). In this context we could situate van Herk's work, which in some critics' opinion, would follow this line of awareness and subsequent rejection of victimization. Considering Atwood's classification of four kinds of victims[9], Gibert-Maceda, for instance, has viewed Judith, the female heroine of the eponymous novel, as an example of the victim that recognises herself as such to then rebel and reject that position, and J.L., protagonist of *The Tent Peg*, as an exvictim due to her final celebration of herself (80). Carol L. Beran has also seen van Herk's work under such optics, arguing that she presents powerful images of women by making a combination of traditional female and masculine traits (combination also noted by Gibert-Maceda):

> Since *Survival*'s publication in 1972, perhaps in reaction to Atwood's theory and no doubt in reaction to the feminist movement in general, an enhanced awareness of victimization and power has been reflected by many Canadian women writers of fiction who have presented complex images of women as powerful […] Aritha Van Herk's novels *Judith* (1978) and *The Tent Peg* (1981) present women who achieve power by adopting traditional symbols of men's power and then combining these with traditional symbols of women's power to create new images of power for women. (1990: n.p.)

As we see, there is a major feminist contestation, of which van Herk is a cited example, to such a description of woman/Canada as victim deriving from nationalist discourse. Similarly, we can appreciate another contestation in her work to the colonial discourse that identifies woman and/as land in an imaginary of possession and passivity; contrary to this traditional masculine perspective, she proposes or "explore[s] alternative relationships between women and place — relationships based, not upon the capture and mastery of the landscape, but upon the impulse toward deterritorialization" (Goldman 1993, 22). Thus, her female characters do actually present, claim rather, another attitude to space, as demonstrated in *Restlessness* by Dorcas' complaint that "the first travellers were conquerors, not interested in looking but in having" (1998b, 16),

[9] Atwood classifies victims according to four basic positions. The first one consists of denying that one is a victim. The second one is acknowledging that you are a victim and accepting it with resignation. The third one, to be aware that you are a victim and reject that role, rebelling against the situation. Finally, the fourth position is the one of the "no-victims" or creative "exvictims"; those who, after understanding their situation are able to transform that rebellion into creation. They do not limit themselves to a destructive attitude, but create something positive out of the victimization they have suffered and, in this way, they achieve their liberation: they stop being victims (Gibert-Maceda 1993, 77 [personal translation]).

attitude she still perceives in modern-day tourists and tries to depart from by refusing to photograph, for instance. The importance she gives to place, cities in her case, to the point of seeing and treating them as her lovers, recalls the colonial and nationalist personification of place to serve their respective purposes, but the great difference lays in the evident will of rejecting that long-standing phantasy of possession/domination and passivity affecting both space and women. The distance is significant considering that the emphasis on boundaries by cartography, that is, the formalization of space, has been seen as "indicat[ing] the primacy in European mapping of *ownership*" (Kirby 1996, 46 [emphasis original]).

Another insightful instance is presented by a novel featuring exploration issues precisely. *The Tent Peg,* dealing with the vicissitudes of a company going to an Uranium mine in the Yukon Territories, yet presents a clear contrast between the two main characters in their relation to space, one pointing, "finger on map" (1981, 3), the other simply looking at the surroundings. In his very first intervention, Mackenzie, the company's chief, voices the classic colonial mentality of unexplored or unmapped space as nothingness or unclaimed (*terra nullius*): "I'm sitting in my hotel room, as close to of the window as possible so I can get some light to fall across these maps. Nothing but tundra and lakes, lakes and tundra […] not a dot of anyone anywhere. And I like it that way" (6); and the underlying idea of making it profitable: " 'Uranium', says Mackenzie absently, finger on the map spread across his bare knees" (5). In contrast, J.L., the only woman in the group, departs from traditional conceptions by making a description of nature not as passive but as responsive to human intervention, as demonstrated by the first sentence in the book, where it is also valued/stressed through personification: "the plane thuds. As if the ground flings the reverberation of our passing *back at us* from the cracked and wrinkled face of the tundra, expressionless white but for a few blacklines of water" (3 [emphasis mine]). Additionally, in her first impressions of landscape as black and white at the same time, or featuring sameness while also ever-changing, she also distances herself by going beyond or blurring the binary logic: "beneath the plane, the land wheels in an unending hesitation of sameness. And yet, it is ever-changing, White snow and black water a striated spectrum. I am mesmerized, frozen here looking down" (íbidem).

Overall, we can consider the reflection or contribution of van Herk's fiction under these two major contestations that are the rejection of victimization/passivity and colonial possession, but in more general terms, she may be said to make a major

contribution by her awareness of the *interconnection* between woman and place. As such, those contestations are usually intertwined with feminist concerns as we may gather from one of Mackenzie's comments about J.L., which equals his obsession with "put[ting] his finger" on nature/space with his desire to 'discover/decipher' also J.L. (whom he thinks still a man): "I can't quite put my finger on his silence" (10); or, from the equally illustrative example of ecofeminist critique, the episode where the Yukon and J.L. are equated in their oppression and consequent defensive answer: a crumbling of mountains (the historical Frank Slide) is explained in terms of a defence or response to company's presence (Lutz 1999, 55), and a bear's appearance (and attack to Jerome) as a consequence of gradual but pervasive aggression against J.L. by some of her camp mates:

> I knew her. She [Deborah[10]] came to me in the she-bear. She came to me and she reared herself up big and beautiful and wild and strong and she said, 'Wait. Don't let them drive you away.' I clench my fists. 'I'm tired, I'm so tired.' 'Just stay,' she says. 'But one wants to murder me and one wants to fuck me and one wants to take pictures of me, and what are the others going to want?' (1981, 104)

In short, we see deterritorialization in a literal, spatial sense is usually connected to women's identity in an attempt to extend the ending of that common imaginary of possession and control, which both reflects and implies discursive deterritoralization too; her thorough and complex work on space and cartography comes from a realisation that women do not only occupy a material space but also a symbolic or discursive "region", as she says[11], of what is possible, hence the intended connection: "her portrayal of women who flee to or create unmapped territory in an attempt to escape the grid which fixes the image of Woman" (Goldman 1993, 23).

Therefore, her interest in maps and cartography can be seen as a reflection on Canadian literary tradition specifically, on its origins in travel narratives of early explorers[12] and its later periods of prairie literature and nationalist manifestations, with the above mentioned gender implications, but not solely, as there is a gender distinction at the basis of all knowledge in general and maps of the world (cartographic and

[10] Deborah is J.L.'s best friend in town, whom she writes letters while on camp and invokes in thought in a number of occasions as a way to relieve her distress, reason why J.L. now senses the bear to be her.

[11] "In interviews, van Herk continues to describe her identity as a woman in spatial terms, arguing that she belongs to 'the region of woman' — a region defined by its characteristic sense of 'otherness'." (Goldman 1993, 23).

[12] Pedro Carmona had signalled literature in Canada to be significantly derived or have originated with its early explorers and, in his doctoral research, he also mentioned as two out of three Canadian icons, the map and, especially, inhospitable nature- the third being the national anthem (2004: 56).

cognitive); that is, they are mostly mediated by masculine vision, "male/lineated" in van Herk's words (1990, 88). Linda M. Alcoff, tracing the limits that have been attributed to reason and scientific knowledge, points out, for instance, philosophic realisation by figures such as Heidegger and Kant that there is no such a thing as a world in itself that could be studied but only a lived or mediated world (1996, 13). It was discovered that "Man organizes and shapes his world, conferring on it meaning and intelligibility, and thus man is a constitutive condition of all knowledge" (íbidem). They acknowledged, therefore, an inevitable in-corpo-ration of the subject's view or position to the object of its approach. Nonetheless, this acknowledgement was later proved to be limited itself, when feminism saw beyond and revealed that the "Kantian 'man' who conditions all knowledge is, indeed, a man" (17); that is, knowledge about the world was not only mediated by human vision but was also "marked by sexual difference" (14), for which reason knowledge was once again limited or inaccurate, having omitted the other half's vision. Feminist theory thus questioned the validity of the very world as we knew it by informing about the "sexually specific body, as a mediating element of knowledge", and unveiling that there are "gendered practices passing as universal" (14). In this way, van Herk's recurrent myth and canon rewriting are evidence of a special interest in revisiting wider cultural, literary and epistemological contexts/perspectives, and so expanding the limited borders of the possible for women that these perspectives may entail as a consequence of the fact that man's gaze permeates or informs accepted knowledge and worldviews.

Summing up, there is usually a gender distinction underlying the conception of space since, as we have seen, the world's meaning is shaped by the masculine gaze, (which partly explains/causes the colonial and nationalist attitudes before mentioned, but goes/spreads further). Thus, polarised gender binaries have been extended to knowledge as well: reason is male and the body is female, retaking the old philosophical dualism from Plato, male minds and female bodies (Alcoff 1996, 14). Besides, space's formal conceptualization through cartography makes it more liable to be gender-polarised for being standardized in this retaking or revival of dualistic logic that the Enlightenment period meant (Kirby 1996, 45). This will be thoroughly explained in chapter 2, around an illustrative and repeated sentence by one of van Herk's heroines, Arachne, from *Address* (1986), which summarises the implications (the disregard for body and for women) of the not so new mentality of what is validated as mappable or as

knowledge in more general terms: "There is no map for longing" (van Herk 1998a, 138).

At the moment, we are going to concentrate on how her work approaches the important remark about the gender distinction underlying spatial configurations (just as much bodies); how, in McDowell's words, "space and place are gendered" (1999, 65), and therefore, they will influence (the same as gender will influence a body to certain roles, behaviour, etc.) the way in which humans live. Thus, we have the basic public-private distinction still affecting or operative at different levels (ranging from access to work, distribution of care, to allowances in the collective imaginary such as being/walking alone, especially at night) according to the context. An important concern, even today, that van Herk also addresses is the 'culture of fear' instilled (whether consciously or not) in women from childhood to occupy certain places (usually gendered in the masculine as connected to the public sphere or mobility):

> to ride a car with anyone other than an adult older than thirty […] *Or drive yourself* […] But cars were sites for potential danger: where you were killed, or where you got knocked up, or where you got drunk: trasnsportable sites of sin and transgression with doors that could lock, engines, heaters and back seats. (1990, 25-6 [emphasis mine]).

Connecting with what we have been saying, for instance, about 'unexplored' territories being feminised or the prairies coded with masculine presence/mobility almost exclusively, this gendering of space implies a male enterprise of conquest that excludes women such as J.L. from participating, or forces Arachne primarily to travel according to the official maps made by cartographer Thomas, her lover, which she senses deficient for her purposes or wishes. Regarding the nationalist conception of space we discussed in conjunction with victimization, it is that basic public-private distinction precisely that conceives women as victims to be saved, as we have seen in the above quotation. Such distinction is important especially to understand nationalism given that, as Nira Yuval-Davis argues, the fact that the formation of nations and political matters have been attributed to the public sphere (deriving from classic theories of social contract that divided society in public and private areas, assigned to men and women respectively), women have been consequently denied any participation or recognition in the nation's project (1996, 164-5).

From here, altering spatial tendencies and meanings may be well considered as decisive to liberate women from gender-related restrictions[13], a task which van Herk effectively engages in by following the pattern of deterritorialization, as will be further developed in the next chapter. This will materialise in allowing characters (male and female) 'unconventional paces' by giving them new spaces/spatial conceptions, which will liberate them, for instance, from the pervasive logic of possession and fixity (both spatial and existential). In *The Tent Peg*, for example, Mackenzie, good-hearted but obsessed with possession and control, is haunted by his ex-wife's life on her own, which he cannot understand before J.L. makes him change his conceptions and realise the impossibility of trying to fix life and people. The same is done with another of the few likeable male characters in the novel, Thompson, also confused by that mentality: "Katie, me wanting the mountains and the rocks but afraid that I'll lose her, I'll have to trade her for my work, should I marry her, should I try to take her with me, should I expect to lose her?" (1981, 150); until J.L. comforts him that he does not need to worry about something he could not get no matter how hard he tried:

> 'When you go home in the fall, do you try to take the bush with you?' . . . Because you can't, right? Well, you can't take her up here with you either.' 'But if I could only be sure of her. I've asked her and asked her and she won't be married.' 'Would that make you feel better?' 'Yes, it would. At least I would know she belonged to me' She says nothing for a long, long moment. Behind her, I can see the jagged and tumbled shapes of the rocks from the slide. Finally she sighs. 'Thomson, I know you won't believe me, but you could marry her a hundred times and she would never belong to you.' . . . Things change. Be happy with her when you have her, be happy with the mountains when you are here' (150-1)

For the same reasons, deterritorialization is specially projected on female characters due to their more common tendency to occupy a fixed/static place; as she understands women's liberation going hand in hand with liberation of space and its associations, she will provide heroines with new/unexplored/free-from-male-prejudice places so that they may develop differently. Apart from this influence of spatial

[13] Apart from the examples provided in the texts under study, it is important to remember how spatial conceptions are more than pure rhetoric or an ideal, and do have a great influence in daily life. The case of Irish nationalism is outstanding for its severe consequences on women: a vital destiny as mothers and, contradictorily, sexual repression, resulting from the nation being constructed as 'Mother Ireland' and catholic, with the Virgin Mary as icon. For perceiving the considerable effects of other distinctive Irish traits on women, I do recommend the film by Peter Mullan, *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), with an already illustrative first scene where traditional folklore is literally silencing the cries of a woman being raped. I do owe and thank for this knowledge to Dr. Luz Mar González Arias, who presented us a clear panorama of the extent of nationalist aspirations for women's life as part of a module she taught me last year in the GEMMA MA.

configurations on individuals, however, van Herk additionally shows the way in which they also produce space and its meanings (just as much as the body, again, in relation to its alleged gender[14]). Completing McDowell's affirmation, "gender relations and sexuality are 'spaced' " (1999, 65); that is to say, gender is spaced but, contemporarily/simultaneously, individuals' actions, attitudes, sexuality and relations influence that spatial configuration as they contribute to reproduce or, conversely, change the particular spatial association/meaning already existing. Arachne's attitude and behaviour, for instance, will greatly contribute to take sex to the public sphere.

This latter line/vector of influence, perhaps less perceived or recognised, is put at the centre and underlined in most of van Herk's texts when certain spatial meanings are challenged through characters' constant movement or *restlessness*/*unrest*, responsible at the same time for disrupting the usually taken for granted gender stability. They often abandon given or pre-established paths that will result in opening new roles, choices and meanings: J. L, vividly aware of the power of movement (detachment) and action, will say: "I did it deliberately. I wanted this job, I wanted to head for nowhere and look at everything in my narrow world from a detached distance. I wanted it so much that for weeks I schemed, I lay awake concocting ways to get here" (1981, 18); and later, after mentioning a number of gender-related oppressions/sufferings, she resorts to/dreams of displacement and envisions it as a solution "from the precast world" (1981, 52). As a result, she opens up the possibility for a woman to be a bush cook, which was not allowed, as demonstrated by her having to dress up as a man to enter the camp company and go on expedition. Women's perfect ability for such a position is therefore proved, and she succeeds, despite the many difficulties she has to face due to her mates' opposition.

Aside from this gender instability caused by an individual's action (bodily *unrest*/uneasiness, more precisely, being directly related to gender constrictions), some spatial conceptions are also revised and changed. Judith, on her part, leaves the 'secure' city life, which once more imposes on her various duties as regards her partner and her office work, moving from a marriage-like relationship and the classic feminine career as clerk to a life on her own as farmer and pig breeder. Another significantly *restless* character, Arachne, who by literally abandoning given, official roads (the ones drawn in Thomas' map), will open new spaces' associations and gender possibilities at a variety

[14] Through performativity, for instance. This will be developed in chapter three.

of levels, from travelling indefinitely and freely in the manner of the traditional male adventurer[15] or picaro, to bringing sex to the public arena or old age sexuality (through her relationship with 90-year-old Joseph) to visibility. Finally, Dorcas, whose *restlessness* is already prefigured/emphasised by the title of the novel that tells us her story, changes spatial conceptions such as place being absolutely passive and interpreted, when in fact space is a reader and speaker of us humans too, e. g. of her being foreign (1981, 91) or inappropriate as "middle-aged [for] urban sites [that] prefer young woman, thin-boned and louder, with an elbow's cigarette flick" (10).

To recapitulate the importance of van Herk's recognition of and engagement with the equation place-woman: firstly, unveiling the gender distinction that is at the basis as a consequence of the extrapolation of gender differences and of the fact that accepted views of world/space have human tinges (mostly male); secondly, working on space and its representations/associations for its potential to configure new material spaces of freedom and realities of the possible for women; and thirdly, acknowledging and effectively portraying human/bodily action as a profound force in changing space and its attributed meanings. Although we may have doubts about what criticism has considered in relation to her texts, as in Marlene Goldman's "Go North Young Woman" with respect to *Places far from Ellesmere*, which seems to point out to the character's own agency (by the use of the imperative form) while also signalling the potential of that northern space in particular, it is crucial to mention that this distinction does not seem intended at all in the context of her work.[16] Following Foucault's thoughts/questioning around the primary influence or prevalence of the factors space, power and knowledge, his final resolution of considering the *interconnection* as the only relevant factor after all, and "not the primacy of this over that which never has meaning" (2007/1993, 169), may well be applied to van Herk's work too[17]. Adding to the examples we have already provided, we may take *Places* (1990) as the epitome of this interdependent/twofold dynamics; the "exploration site" that overtly establishes the basic equation this chapter deals with, "ELLESMERE, woman as island" (77), portrays

[15] as in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) with which it has been compared (Herk 1986, back cover).

[16] I have already explained the reasons of my focus on bodily/individual influence on space to be consequence of a perception that a greater study has been done about the influence the other way round. In any case, aware of this obvious interdependency and, especially, of the writer's portrayal as such, I am equally providing (in chapter 2) analysis on space's effects and potential.

[17] Feminist scholars and urbanists have widely analysed this interdependency too, interested in the gender implications of geography, expressed in this case in relation to cities particularly and in other terms: as a dependent variable when the city's configuration affects individuals, and as independent when these are instead active participants in the construction of city's spaces and their associations (Sánchez de Madriaga et al. 2004, 27).

new spaces as tremendously potential for allowing Anna new "alternatives"/"chance[s]", while also recognising the character's ultimate need to (re)act from the very first sentence to the final assertion that "This is what you long for", but "Anna must have too":

> Anna Karenina should have escaped to Ellesmere . . . . This is a remedy you want to propose to her, Ellesmere, as if it were a nectar she could swallow or inhale. A consummate escape from Vrosnky and Karenin, Ellesmere, that most northerly of extreme Arctic islands, probably un/named when Tolstoy invented her, probably unheard of, like Anna herself. A lost heroine. Lost in Russia, lost in love, lost in the nineteenth century […] Anna. Her paginated presence makes you want to rescue her, offer her alternatives. Read her again, give her a second chance, another life, another fiction. You are at Ellesmere. You have escaped to Ellesmere.. . . This is what you long for. Anna must have too' (77)

The whole geografictione is also notable for realising this twofold pattern at a variety of levels, worth mentioning for the further implications concerning gender issues: as regards content, we find that explicitly mentioned interdependent influence of space-body, further highlighted by constantly interchanging people's and place's biographies and their mutual (un)readings/writings[18], moving from autobiography to 'geobiography':

> Edberg dreams of other islands . . . . Invent Edberg as home, invent a home for it . . . Come back. Everywhere is here. Your frozen dreams . . . your itchy palms from longing to be touched, your un/read stories . . . . This is your self-geography, the way you were discovered/uncovered in Edberg's reading of your fiction . . . In the basement of the person rests the village of Edberg, refusing to be dislodged, a continuous grounding. (32-7)

In form, by reverting a great deal of sentences' sense, e. g. "Drink and get laid and get away and quit school. Quit school and get away and get laid and get drunk. Reverse all orders" (23), "Is this a place from which to launch a world, a river, or even a short story? Can it launch itself?" (33); and by fusing words/meanings, e. g. 'dis/location' (32), "Un/reading: de/coding" (38), "Edberg: . . . A fiction of geography/geography of fiction (40). Importantly, this fusion corresponds to

[18] Take a look also to *Restlessness* for a constant interchanging of people's and place's biographies and their mutual readings, e. g.: "REFUSING TO TRAVEL with a camera enables me to believe that I am travelling not only by suitcase and guidebook, but erratically, willing to take on the imprimatur of whatever chooses to single me out and mark me. I thought I could become a version of a notebook, blank pages" (1998b, 100).

traditionally opposed conceptions or binaries (e. g. geography versus fiction[19]) which become now reconciled, thus departing from the traditional exclusionary logic of western tradition. Interpreting it under Umberto Galimberti's consideration as a return to ambivalence where, he explains, one thing was one but also the other (in contrast to the antagonistic either/or logic) (1983, 11), the implications for gender meanings are huge, as this formal combination may be said to mirror content, wherein stability of what is usually taken as a clear-cut division was disrupted by the intertwining of the traditionally feminine and masculine, for instance.[20] In conclusion, we may view this formal and conceptual attention as van Herk's intention of blurring the long-standing dichotomy, when not directly calling for a broader void of meaning altogether (on both space and body) concerning gender differences:

> Her island, tabula rasa, awayness so thoroughly truant you have cut all connexion to all places far from Ellesmere. . .Ellesmere is absence, a hesitation where you can pretend there are no telephones in the world, no newspapers, no banks, no books. You are only a body, here in this Arctic desert, this fecund island. Lungs, fingers, a stomach, legs and feet. (77)

[19] 'a geografictione . . . deconstructs the hierarchy of an objective science (cartography) and subjective fiction' (Mott, qtd in Kumar and Sultana 2010, 4)

[20] See chapter 4, 'Evading plot', for a more detailed and precise analysis of gender and genre correlations.

Chapter 2. Unexplored Spaces for Unconventional Paces

This chaper will analyse that first vector of influence of space over bodies or individuals, which is approached in van Herk's fiction by portraying most heroines leading more liberating/satisfactory lives thanks to the potential of places unusual or with less rigid systems of gender norms. As a consequence, her work constitutes a mapping or exploration of such promising places at a variety of levels, material and discursive, that may allow for new possibilities and identities.

At a first level, we have a picture of the unexplored in a purely physical sense, that is, signalling the way in which new, actual spaces, places with different (or lacking) gender-based codes operating, may affect or result in new functions, roles or options for the female subject. Thus, van Herk's mapping and exploration task has to do with taking her characters to unusual settings or having them follow unconventional paths in order to expand those borders of the possible for women. Thus, we find Judith or J.L., who pursuing geographies of their own choice, become pioneers in professions such as pig farmer or explorer, respectively. Similarly, Anna Karenina in *Places*, who is freed from her patriarchal space of 19th century Russian society, and given another chance in a new place where she may develop differently. Finally, Arachne, perhaps the more eccentric character in this sense, for her consciously breaking all the established norms, could summarise the above mentioned task:

> Unlike the prairie fictions in which the little woman waits at home, in *No Fixed Address* the situation is reversed, and Arachne's faithful lover, a cartographer for the Geodetic Survey Company, chastely waits for her […] Arachne's wanderings can be aligned with van Herk's desire to expand "the borders of the region we inhabit as women" [She] fearlessly crosses into unmapped territory. Moving beyond the conventional roles of daughter, wife, and mother, she remains sexually appetitive and adventurous — so much so, that she flaunts social convention that relegates the elderly to an asexual limbo, and has a passionate affair with Joseph, a coppersmith who is almost ninety (Goldman 2012, 27-29)

At a second level, there is an exploration in terms of representation that can be distinguished to operate in two ways. On the one hand, as a combination with the physical exploration, that is, believing uncharted or unmapped territory in the traditional/cartographic sense to be the most appropriate for lacking the associations that necessarily derive from giving space certain meanings, as those offered by the colonial/settler mentality: "so much of my own restless exploration has taken me to the

north, which is not at all a settler world and never will be. It is a nomadic world, and will continue to be one, in every sense of the word" (Clayton 2000, 165); or by more general human interpretation": "The North appeals to her imagination because it baffles construction of meaning as it exceeds language by offering its own non-human imaginary of puzzle-ice and 'glacial blueness' " (Howells 1996, 16). It will be the North then, for constituting a stated frontier in both the daily life and Canadian imagination (Carrera 1994, 123)[21], that will gather all the potential in van Herk's work to conceptualise new gender meanings:

> With its emphasis on the north as anonymous territory, *No Fixed Address* develops a link between the unmapped northern landscape and the cognitive space where women can plot radical alternatives to traditional representations of female identity. More precisely, Arachne's transformations correspond to the Deleuzian model of 'becoming,' whose end-point, as Elizabeth Grosz indicates, consists in becoming indiscernible, imperceptible, and impersonal (23). As Stephen Scobie remarks, in *No Fixed Address,* the most radical subversion of traditional representations consists in the refusal of representation itself. This occurs when Arachne becomes a 'missing person'. (Goldman 2012, 30)

One of van Herk's most notable footprints, the intertwining of the material and representational/cognitive dimensions, is recognised and especially developed in her geografictione, the new genre of her text *Places*, which

> focuses most directly on the relationships between the mapping of place and the plotting of fiction, and the repercussion both types of plotting have had on fictional representations of female identity. Van Herk herself has dubbed the work a "geografictione," in an attempt to describe the text's fusion of the processes of map-making and fiction-making. (íbidem)

On the other hand, we find van Herk's exploration to be in purely discursive terms; there is an exploration of exploration itself, a meta-exploration or reflection on what constitutes the object of exploration as such. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on boundaries, standardization, measurement and ownership, in accordance with the Enlightened (male) individual (Kirby 1996, 45-47). The new scientific method prioritising reason, with its revival of traditional philosophic values, was thus based on a polarised (gender-related) vision that, praising objectivity while completely

[21] In chapter 1 we saw some critics' view that the North had been mythologised by Canadian fiction too, in a similar way to the West. From van Herk's perspective, though, the extent to which the North has been conceptualised or given meaning is clearly different, which partly derives from her puzzlement that many of her fellow citizens do not seem to care much or know about that region of their country (van Herk, 1991c, 3).

disregarding the subject approaching their study and the very body that made it possible, caused the "cartographer [to] remove[] himself from actual landscape" (48) and the early explorer "to forget the body, to use orienting principle as that allow him to erase his physicality" (52). As Umberto Galimberti explains, the relationship between the individual as a corporal being and the world, between body and space, has been one of detachment: "l'interazione esistente tra corpo e mondo è ignota al pensiero oggettivo" (1983, 122)[22], and, additionally, the body has been reduced to the category of a(nother) mere object of the world. In accordance with phenomenological and existentialist thought, Galimberti re-members the body's inestimable value: firsly, Merleau-Ponty's idea that the "soggeto di questa esperienza non è l'inteletto puro, ma quell'inteletto 'incorporato' " (118)[23], and that "invece di partire dalla coscienza, che reduce il corpo a oggetto tra gli oggetti, si parte dal corpo come da quel veicolo che introduce al mondo, perché al mondo è originariamente dischiuso"[24]; secondly, the Sartrean transcendental view of the body, which far from being an(other) event in the world, gives it part of its meaning. The world/space has human meanings as these are transforming or continuously recreating it:

> Come il cuore nell'organismo, così il corpo tiene in vita lo spettacolo del mondo, lo anima, lo alimenta; ma quetso lo può fare perché non si dà come evento del mondo, ma come sua ri-creazione, come continua ricostruzione […] senza ridursi a cosa nel mondo, il corpo può intervenire a trasformare le cose che dimorano nel loro in sé, in utensili per sé. Con questo intervento il corpo modifica il modno a propria immagine e il mondo incomincia ad accogliere sensi 'umani. (132)[25]

We may deduce the main effects of reason and the scientific method, therefore. The body is perceived as an obstacle to knowledge and, considering the gender differentiation that is at the basis (the long-standing dichotomy mind/body being associated to the pair man/woman), so are the women. In fact, as Linda M. Alcoff argues, reason was conceived as bodiless "to justify women's exclusion from the domains of academy, of science . . . because women were well known to be much more

[22] Interaction between body and world has been unknown to objective thought [personal translation].

[23] The subject of experience is not pure intellect but this intellect as incorporated or in a body [personal translation].

[24] Instead of starting from consciousness, which reduces the body to an object among objects, we should start from the body as the vehicle that introduces us to the world as hereto it is originally opened [personal translation].

[25] As the heart in the body, so the body has in life the spectacle of the world, activates and supplies it; and this is possible only because it is not an event of the world, but its re-creation, as its continuous reconstruction . . . without being reduced to object in the world, the body may intervene to transform the things-in-itself in tools for-itself . With this intervention, the body modifies the world to its own image and the world starts to acquire 'human' meanings [personal translation].

subject to bodily distractions" (1996, 16). She goes on to expose the extension of this old conceptualization, still operative in the academy today, desperately searching to transcend emotion, or affecting the very notion of equality, as was the case of Simone de Beauvoir's opinion on this point that entailed surpassing or eliminating the body and its "distractions" (íbidem). In this light, we may deduce Arachne's important sentence "There is no map for longing" (van Herk 1998a, 138), as reflecting the effects of science and reason: a disregard for the body (both masculine and feminine) and women altogether by extension (Grosz 1994, 4). The link is obvious given that the influence of this new mentality was specially noted in cartography precisely, which at the same time contributed to reinforce or install that emergent approach; as Kathleen M. Kirby has explained, "Cartography . . . is both an expression of the new form of subjectivity and a technology allowing for causing the new subjectivity to coalesce . . . The cultural and subjective location of mapping are elided" (1996, 45-7). We shall see van Herk's fiction as a complete departure from this tradition and providing instead a rich and successful "Re: mapping of subjectivity" (45). In this sense, her writing implies a profound revision of the cartographic and scientific method, of the Enlightenment/Cartesian disembodied and detached male explorer, and an inscription instead of the so far unexplored/unrepresented: female subjectivity and the body. In keeping with the early 1980s feminist realisation that there was a "necessity of a new relation between reason, theory and bodily, subjective experience" (Alcoff 1996, 17), we may well frame her works as adding to the "new epistemological viewpoint based on the idea of knowledge as embodied, engendered and embedded in the material context by place and space" (Duncan 1996, 1).

The clearest hint of this "Re:mapping [of] subjectivity" is *Address*, by signalling the contrast in approaching space: while Thomas is simply intent on drawing maps, detached in the traditional manner of the cartographer he is, Arachne is shown to be living[26], even experiencing/feeling them, in some cases with sensual connotations, which further emphasises the inscription of desire and corporal moves:

> 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 (1998a, 132)

[26] "He is the cartographer who draws the maps, but it is she who drives on the roads" (Howells 1996, 13).

It is no wonder, then, that the final outcome will be her abandoning Thomas'maps, which comprise or summarise all other maps where she mourns there is no desire/ "longing". This repetitive assertion echoes another significant realisation, this time in *Places*, regarding desire's and women's place, where we may perceive a clear disregard for anything that is connected to them:

> 'Take War and Peace,' suggests Rudy Wiebe. He would, having once insisted that the reason women will never be GREAT writers is because they do not set themselves great subjects … 'Women write only out of their viscera.' The word *viscera* in his mouth scornful and repellent, … On Ellesmere you want to forget the world's war and peace and read about love. Even love as doomed as you know Anna's to be. So you take Tolstoy's eight hundred and fifty pages as a lesson, to solve a problema in how to think about love; to solve a problema in the (grave) differences between men's writing and women's writing; to solve a problem in sexual judgment. To investigate viscera and mirrors; passions and polemics. Even though you know you'll be stuck with Tolstoy, that the order and the rules are male, that he writes Anna no choices… You know at least a hundred Annas, stranded in fictional love affairs written by men who do not know that Ellesmere exists. Come to that, women are all Annas, caught or not, Annas sweating their way from one day to the next. They know the war within their orbits, between children and husbands and lovers, need and desire and the desperate necessities of symmetry, how they will be always and forever culpable, exiled for their visceras, eviscerated for their exiles . . . his punitory withholding of erotic and emotional ease. (van Herk 1990, 80-3)

We may perceive in these two examples a possible voiceover for the author's intentions in all her texts, a (meta)fictionalisation of abandoning patriarchal inheritances/roads/maps/ "prescripted choices" (81) which are simbolised by this Anna who is all of us, and starting delineating their own as Arachne proposes to do. Thus, in the same way maps in *Address* are "used for radically different purposes than the ones they were originally intended to serve [. . . with] Arachne us[ing] Thomas's maps to locate the boundaries of civilized society and to escape its borders" (Goldman 1993, 28), the protagonist/Herk[27] in *Places* also seems to follow a similar strategy, more at a discursive level perhaps, parting from already given maps, the canonical novel *Anna Karenina*, and escape them by leaving behind traditional representations. Not

[27] "*Places* narrates a journey that loosely corresponds to the geography and history of van Herk's life from childhood to adulthood. The chapters are 'memory-maps' of significant places in van Herk's life: her home town of Edberg; her university town, Edmonton; her residence at the time of writing, Calgary; and Ellesmere, the northern landscape of many visits" (O' Flynn 2009, 66).

accidentally, the above dissertation about love and desire, or *viscera* as these are referred to, comes after a validation by Rudy Wiebe, one of the canonical writers in Canadian literature, about what constitutes great subjects in literature; validation that is demonstrated to be androcentric by the fact that it is men precisely who are "centring the subject of greatness" (80-1), for which reason women are inevitably trapped: having being stripped from their legitimacy to desire, as shown by Tolstoy's "punitory witholding of erotic and emotional ease [on Anna]" (83), women are already condemned in a kind of vicious circle where they are "exiled for their visceras, eviscerated for their exiles" (83). Additionally, the effects of this writing *about* women extrapolate to writing *by* women, who is weighed on those very terms mostly, motivation enough for a break from tradition or 'the canon'. Van Herk then departs from wider western inheritances comprised by Tolstoy as well as from nearer, more direct influences of her time, place and life, as represented by Wiebe, part of the "Western Canadian literary tradition [which she also saw] as predominantly male and burdened with patriarchal notions of women's places and roles in society as well as literature'' (Clayton 2000, 164).[28]

We may well interpret in this light, therefore, her many other outstanding examples pursuing that *re:mapping of subjectivity* at both levels of geography and discourse that is her trademark. *Restlessness*' Dorcas, whose desire and subjectivity is highly inscribed by presenting a character that carefully plans her "c*hosen* oblivion" (1998b, 14 [emphasis mine]) and makes love to cities: "I wait for a city to seduce me, . . . Cairo took to me immediately, without a word, simply pushing me up against a wall and holding me, rough and attentive to my pleasure" (19). She is the distinct representative of the variety of desire and subjectivity, shown through that atypicality together with her unique self-assertion:

> I am NOT a character in a cheap thriller where a detective will break down the door with a bold shoulder, where my body will assume an exotic and silent place at the center of a mystery eventually solved by a slick loner with a penchant for cigarettes and superlative powers of deduction. Elementary, my dear sidekick. No. I am engaged in an act of hunger, a ravenous plan of escape that I have been working toward for more than a decade. (8)

[28] I appreciate Dr. Isabel Carrera Suárez for her insightful comment on van Herk's relationship with Rudy Wiebe, whom she regarded as a father/mentor figure but whose ideas she did not share, which made me see his being mentioned in *Places* in this light of breaking away from the canon and realise its extent.

Her assertiveness is all the more intended since, in the author's own words, "making desire invisible is one of the terrible legacies that we have to live with. For women to say 'This is what I want' is still difficult even today. We're so used to apologizing: 'I'm really sorry but tonight I'd like hamburger.'", which highly contrasts with "Dorcas declaring her desire for death: 'I want you to kill me' " (Verduyn 2001, 25).

J.L., in *The Tent Peg*, clearly recognising or seeing through those "prescripted choices"/vicious circles, promptly rejects them through the celebration of her body by the dance she is about to perform, while also deconstructs the anchored myths of women as patient listeners or sirens' wish to attract men when the major desire in her case is, on the contrary, to be alone:

> I am finished with confession and repentance…I will not play Joan of Arc and be encircled for what I have been forced to hear, for what I could not escape. Instead, I'll play siren, put on the gypsy skirt that has been collecting in the bottom of my knapsack these three months, gather it in my hand and jump atop that sagging table to give them one last word, one final invocation to send them on their way. (1981, 218)

Then, as regards sexual desire, which is largely reflected on and discussed by the protagonist, it is dealt with in a very different manner from what may be expected. Thus, we find her tale of admiration about "a very strange and beautiful story about a woman who loved a bear" (147), or her perfect awareness of her right to take the initiative, which is especially emphasised by changing the conventional associations; where she would be taken as a victim in a too common scene of a man trying to enter her tent at night, she is surprisingly portrayed as *deciding* not to let herself go:

> Even if I do look like a boy I could see them calculating how long it will take before they dare to rasp the zipper on my tent, before they can make some excuse to stumble over my guy ropes. But this summer is mine. I'll keep my hat on my head. I'll keep my hands away from belt buckles, I'll listen but I won't hear. It would be a shame to spoil the silence. (58-9)

Places gives us another unexpected association in this line, which simply seeks to point out at where women's desires and possibility of decision may lay, especially with that 'culture of fear' that partly seeks to prevent any possible real danger and partly to prevent certain behaviours by women. Van Herk seems to hint at the fact that the latter reason prevails by showing the ridicule of this totalising argument:

> But dances were not dangerous for dancing: they were dangerous because they were in the Elks Hall and because people went to them in cars with back seats and in the middle of the dances went outside for a drink, and bag, you were knocked up. You were not allowed to go to dances because it was a sure thing that you would be instantly knocked up. Who would do the knocking and whether you would permit yourself to be a knockee was irrelevant. Going to dances had only one outcome. Can you refuse to dance? Can you fall in love dancing? can you dance your way out of love?… all of your fiction etched to a never readable page. *Saved* from your own story (1990, 26 [emphasis mine])

A crucial figure in all this dissuasive discourse is the car, which gives us an important hint about those interests behind the "[dis]allowances" (24): What you were not allowed . . . to ride in a car with anyone other than an adult older than thirty. . . . Or drive yourself." (25). Considering the enormous potential of cars for women's physical mobility and broader possibilities, consequently, to drive themselves or decide, the car has a strong presence in popular thought as a key element of danger with a view to prevent or counteract another kind of menace, the abandoning of the private sphere and stillness that it would entail for the patriarchal system. This explains van Herk's inclusion of the car at the level of another protagonist in *Address*, where it is posited as an obvious means of escape, survival and freedom for Arachne.

Finally we find notorious and recurrent inscription of sexual encounters, which serve two main purposes. On the one hand, to promptly dissociate sexuality from gender duties, as is expressed through Arachne's reasoning and lifestyle:

> What is it about making love to a stranger? When the circumstances are clean and you don't have to ask about consequences, is it love? is it real? There is something square and direct about fucking for its own sake, no other considerations: wifely or husbandly duty, buying, selling, payoff, gratitude. The thought of having to sleep with a man under a marriage certificate, having eaten and clothed with his money, conceiving his children to justify existence as his sweet and lovely parasite, makes Arachne cold. She can think of no faster way to achieve frigidity. To her the true exchange of hearts within the bonds of holy matrimony speaks death to the life of the body. This shock of pleasure that she gets from this strange man's stubby penis and gentle hands is pure. She can dig her fingers into his muscled back and feel herself unfaithful as always, faithful to inly her body, her reliable, well-tuned body. (1998a, 179-80)

Similarly, in *The Tent Peg*, giving full prominence to the body and its pleasure is also a priority, while rejecting the common imaginary of giving oneself completely in a relationship:

> I know, I admit, I confess, I have been loved only too well, and I have felt little gilt for my own lack of desire, my passive body acquiescing to touch but moving only for myself, not another. Oh I have loved in return, but never quite to the furthest reaches of possibility. There is always a remnant of desire left (1981, 142);

and in *Judith*, the protagonist's marriage-like relationship is described as boring, disappointing and a burden, as is literally referred to by the sexual encounters precisely where she feels all his back's weight on her, which contrasts with the body's awakening and liberation she will later experience in the pleasure of her solitude in the farm, a desire that is fuelled in contact with a man, his neighbour, but also by contact with the very air: "It was the slacking of that sensuality she had ached with, running in the pasture at night, whipping through the tight-high grass to dispel her body's restlessness" (1978, 91).

On the other hand, bodily and erotic inscription serves also to de-exorcise women's sexuality, which is perceived as a menace in a number of occasions[29]. This is much evoked in *Judith*, whose equating of the figure of Circe to the protagonist Judith explains her lovers' immense fear of castration: " 'Sorry I took off this morning.' . . . 'You...you scared me.' . . . 'Listen,' he said, and his voice was low and urgent. 'Listen, the way you went at those pigs this morning, how do I know what you'd do to me?' " (174). This classic fear of psychoanalytic theories of development of sexuality and subjectivity is then purposely retaken by directly alluding to one of its most powerful sources in the collective background, the archetypical myth of Odysseus and Circe,[30] which shows male "resentment and fear of being "taken" by the woman, of being lost in her, absorbed, or alone" (Cixous 175, 5): "The god Hermes warns Odysseus that he must bed Circe if he wishes to free his men, but warns him, 'when she has you stripped she may rob you of your courage and your manhood' " (Beran 1990, n. p.).

Another significant example of this anxiety about women's sexuality is narrated in *The Tent Peg:* when J.L. tells her campmates the story about the woman having a sexual relationship with a bear, this is taken with opposition and disgust, reaction that greatly differs to the hearing of the very same story of an Australian farmer having a

[29] Mind also the anxiety implied by the critical reception of *Judith* (and *The Tent Peg*) in Canada, where the popular press qualified the author on the basis of a sole episode as a "castrating bitch or . . . with a focus which is too narrow" (van den Hoven 1981-2 , 64).

[30] The connection is explicitly made in the novel by making Judith castrate her pigs, which recalls of the mythical Circe turning Odysseus' men into swine, when not directly referring to Judith by the name of the classic figure.

relationship with a sheep, which is openly laughed at and viewed as nothing particularly unusual or outrageous. Next, the anxiety is expressed by Thompson, one of her few friends and of the more open-minded in the camp:

> ‘It was a marvellous story. But you’ve got to realise they are a little afraid, you see through them so easily. ‘Afraid?’ she says. ‘Sure. Women are these hidden, inexplicable people. Here you are cooking unimaginable things, handling everything so calmly, keeping so cool. And then you tell a story like that!’ ‘Thompson, are you afraid of me’ I laugh. ‘Only sometimes. Hey, one last drink?’ (149)

Hélène Cixous, criticising precisely psychoanalytic theories for their portrayal of women as castrators to be punished for and for making of the question “what do women want” a pure rhetoric to be avoided (1981), has urged women to “speak of [their] pleasure” while contemporarily “ ‘de-phallocentralize’ the body, relieve man of his phallus, return him to an erogenous field and a libido that isn’t stupidly organized round the monument, but appears shifting, diffuse, taking on all the others of oneself” (51). In this sense, van Herk’s characters may be said not only to be able to talk about their desires and sexuality, but also to prove they still may want many things outside men or despite them, thus contesting the inflated Freudian assumption: “Without me, what could she want?” (íbidem): J.L. perfectly explains to Mackenzie what cannot enter his framework, that women’s desires and decisions do not necessarily stem from them, that his wife did not leave him for any precise reason connected to him or his behaviour, but that “She left for herself . . . It was herself she was after” (1981, 195) . As regards Cixous’ other wish and call to “ ‘de-phallocentralize’ the body”, on both men and women,[31] this is portrayed by presenting another typology of excitements the body experiences beyond heteronormative or phallo-centred sex, such as Arachne with old Josef, the woman with the bear or J.L. with Mackenzie “without direct genital contact” (Lutz 1999, 60); and by the portrayal of other erogenous zones, most notably hands, e. g. “she [Arachne] takes the hand and holds it between both of hers, the hand of a man [Josef] who has been alive a long time. Here is a small scar and there, on the back, a few dark age spots” (1998, 21); “The feel of his [Mackenzie’s] rough hands on my skin [J.L.’s], turning my body between his palms so gently as to wake me from the longest sleep, a song of praise unlike any other” (1981, 207).

[31] “unblock a sexuality that's just as much feminine as masculine” (Cixous 1981, 51)

Summing up, van Herk's (geogra)fiction signals the way in which new places or new conceptions associated to space may affect or result in new functions, roles or possibilities for the female subject. Following deterritorialization, all characters have been presented with new spaces that were the condition for the liberation to a considerable extent from given gender constrictions; constrictions from which they were already escaping or trying to, reason why those very new places and new possibilities discovered are simultaneously the result of character's own agency. Remembering this important interdependency van Herk detects, "esta relación es recíproca puesto que la transformación de las estructuras socio espaciales a lo largo del tiempo no solo es una condición de la acción de las mujeres, sino que también es en parte un resultado de dicha acción" (Sánchez de Madriaga et al. 2004, 27-8)[32]. As regards space's influence, this chapter has opened "unexplored" domains for women, both material (the north, exploration camps, wanderings across Canada by car or a pig farm of one's own ruling, among others) and at the level of discourse (the body, sex, desire). Next chapter will deal with body's influence, which being constrained to certain gender norms, will strive for liberation and so is put at the centre of van Herk's fiction in the reach of those new places that allow them to develop differently

[32] This relationship is reciprocal as transformation of socio spatial structures through time is not only a condition for women's action but also is partly the very result of their action [personal translation].

Chapter 3. The Body at *Unrest*: Travel and Gender Norms

One of the distinctive features of van Herk's (geogra)fiction(e) is its *restless* subjects, ranging from Dorcas, the international traveller whose "home is her homesickness" ( ) (or is "sick of home", as Kroetsch has put it[33]), to Arachne, whose amorous journey has no fixed address, including J.L., who departs from her "precast world" (1981, 52), and her first heroine, Judith, who after having seemingly found her place, still refuses to give a fixed address in the Delivery Office (1978, 179-80). The most obvious feature of this *restlessness* is incessant travel, a spatial condition of being on the move or unsettled which they specially favour. Nonetheless, beyond a particular liking, travel and *restlessness* have also to do with leaving behind precast worlds, using J.L.'s statement, notably linked or due to gender restrictions. Thus, in my analysis and title I have encompassed this double sense by renaming the key motif of *restlessness* as *unrest*, which signals both the spatial condition of physical movement and the bodily dimension through which characters are in a state of tension, uneasiness or discomfort, mostly due to gender-related circumstances. Recognising that *restlessness/unrest* exceeds a mere fondness for travelling is fundamental given that, in fact, it will be the body's *unrest*/discomfort with gender norms that will primarily motivate movement or explain that predilection for travel that is associated with escape. At the same time, the proposed term *unrest* gathers another twofold dynamics: the way the body is disturbed together with its capacity for rebellion, its being in turmoil and, therefore, a potentially liberating force. In this way, the body is posited as more than a mere receiver of (gender) meanings, as it has been traditionally conceptualized:

> Natura e cultura non sono gli estremi di un itinerario che l'umanità non ha mai percorso, ma semplicemente due nomi che qui impieghiamo per designare l'ambivalenza con cui il corpo si esprimeva nelle società arcaiche e l'equivalenza a cui oggi è stato ridotto nelle nostre società dai codici che le governano e dal corredo delle loro iscrizione. Sommerso dai segni con cui la scienza, l'economia, la religione, la psicoanalisi, la sociologia di volta in volta l'hanno connotato, il corpo è stato vissuto, in conformità alla lógica e alla struttura dei vari saperi, come *organismo* da sanare, come *forza-lavoro* da impiegare, come *carne* da redimere, come *incoscio* da liberare, come *supporto di segni* da trasmettere[34]. (Galimberti 1983, 11 [emphasis original])

[33] (2001, 69)

[34] Nature and culture are not the extremes of an itinerary never followed, but just two terms that we use to designate the ambivalence with which the body expressed itself in archaic societies and the equivalence to which it

Importantly, then, the body is recognised in van Herk's work as a powerful destabiliser of those same meanings at work. We will concentrate, therefore, on its ambiguous, ambivalent in Galimberti's terms, character; on how bodies are at *unrest* for being constrained by received meanings but also their indispensable influence, their active role in both signalling the instability of gender and escaping or subverting its restrictive conceptualizations.

We will begin by exploring that condition of *unrest* as referring to the way in which van Herk's characters, especially women, are suffering from various limitations related to their allotted gender. One clear hint is the allusion to and repetition of a predestined life that is directly related to the historical legacy of gender norms, which either shadows the life of characters or continues effectively operating. J.L. reminds this on a number of occasions, the fact that women are influenced by being automatically assigned certain gender roles when, theoretically, or to a great extent, these have already been overcome:

> There is something comforting in the familiar work, in my hands' movement from memory, an orchestration we women grow up with. Why does it seem that we're never taught how to do this, we simply know, we know the smoothest, most efficient way of making food and giving food and clearing up the remains of food, nourishers always. And perhaps why, when we are angry, we have a tendency to break, yes, dishes. Deborah once said that our lives are like the outer edge of china plates, sometimes smooth and sometimes scalloped, sometimes chipped, but always with an edge, always circular, ever-returning. And me up to my elbows in soapy water scrubbing congealed food off melmac plates, rinsing them, stacking them in the remembered ceremony. (1981, 53)

She also considers the way in which her sexual and personal relationships are affected by traditional intercourse:

> all the men who have made love to me, who have laboured over me in some predestined effort to arouse beyond all others. . . . . They practice that so well, lying on top and pouring lies into my ear as a cover for the stroke stroke stroke of their cocks. And if once I rouse myself to stare up into a face, actually look at them, I am only horrified, repulsed

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has been reduced today in ours by codes and by the corset of inscriptions that govern it. Submerged by signs with which science, economics, religion, psychoanalysis and sociology from time to time have connoted it, the body has been lived, in accordance with the logic and structure of these various disciplines, as *organism* to be healed, as *work-force* to use, as *flesh* to redeem, as *unconscious* to release, as *a support for signs* to transmit [personal translation].

> by the blankness, the distance evident there. They are not feeling me, thinking of me. (142, 153)

Judith depicts many resemblances, this time indicating the reverberating effects in the present of such legacy of tradition, given that "the remembered ceremony" of house chores that J.L. alludes to materialises in this novel. Judith's childhood is framed by the traditional domestic sphere assigned to women, which is passed on from mother to daughter. Moreover, the description of the scene not only points out its monotony but most certainly recalls that connection with dishes observed by Deborah, a reinforcing of predestination and fatal lot by its implied eternity through a circular and ever-returning form: " 'Don't forget the salt, Judy.' Moving in circumference, around her mother's world: the stove, the sewing machine, the washer. Every request simple and familiar, repeated at pace intervals, an unvarying rhythm" (1978, 53); and in adolescence, her position and expected attitude with boyfriends is also affected by traditional gender roles, with her passivity assumed and men having the option to touch her and never the other way round: "He would run his hand down the length of her back, smoothing her buttocks, caressing the backs of her knees. 'Always lying on your stomach. Like a baby,' he said, even as she moved impatiently, restless, under his touch, angry with his assumption of her body." (7).

Interestingly enough, both novels also share striking similitudes in expressing these gender constrictions as having a considerable or direct impact on the body of the protagonists. J.L., remembering her past relations, says:

> And after they leave I run myself a tub full of water as hot as I can stand and lie there as long as possible sloughing them off, dissolving the sweat, the spit they've chafed into my skin. It's their smell that lingers. Although I soap and soak I can sometimes smell them three days later, abandoned with me the thick and clotted scent of their whispered intercourse. (1981, 153)

Judith's flashbacks to her past life also tell us of the damage inflicted to herself when she could not suit her father's demands of working like the boy he occasionally assumed/desired he had (1978, 67) or of her feelings of imprisonment under her boyfriend's caresses:

> she had been so long without a face, had always hidden it behind the frame of her hair. He would wrap it around his hand and tug at it, separating the tendrils with his fingers and twisting it until she shook her head with annoyance. And he laughed, holding her like that, captive. (5)

In both characters, Judith and J.L., we can appreciate this bodily *unrest* or discomfort prompting similar attempts to soothe, protect their body by "lying in the tub after the door had closed behind him, sloughing her chafed skin in hot soapy water, passing her hands over her body to reassure it, still whole" (1978, 37) or to liberate it by cutting her hair (5). In short, it prompts that other form of *unrest* we will discuss later which is incessant movement, as is very well implied by that situation where Judith feels captive and "move[s] impatiently, restless, under his touch, angry with his assumption of her body" (7).

Judith additionally shows other specific gender-related pressures on the body that are related to the external appearance women are expected or desired to have:

> You're getting fat and out of shape, can't do anything anymore. Except screw. And she climbed furiously again, her body fluttering with weakness. On the eight floor she went into the washroom, combed her hair and mopped the beads of sweat from her forehead with a paper towel. Eight flights four times a day should be equal to two miles. Five times a week, ten miles. Her body slumped at the idea and she pulled herself erect, turned sideways to look at its profile in the mirror. She clenched her teeth, looking at her midriff, the slight bulge appearing at her waist. (112)

The extract is quite self-explanatory of the repercussions and presumed author's attitude to this constraint in particular, but the argument is highly emphasised and denounced in statements such as "the acts of barbarity she had committed on herself for him: plucking her sleek eyebrows, rolling her straight hair into curls, thrusting golden posts through the holes in her ears" (166) or "the change he had orchestrated in her, the loss of her unstudied awkwardness resulting from his sandpaper polishing, his careful honing of her salient features into his special mould" (166). Finally, *Address* also discusses this imposition to be more feminine, connected to "woman's shape", by referring to the string of time-changing and motivated/deliberate requirements (1998a, 2):

> This combination of garment and underpinnings reduced or expanded the natural female shape in an often remarkable manner, the goal, it is important to remember, to aid physical attractiveness, a standard inevitably decided by men. For centuries women have suffered the discomfort of corsets, padding, petticoats, girdles, bustles, garters and bust pads. . . . And who will be responsible for what those tortures have created? The existence of smelling salts, hysteria, frigidity and shrewishness can all be attributed to uncomfortable underwear. It was for a long time taken for granted that woman's body

> should be prisoner, taped and measured and controlled. Some fashions literally demanded that women walk within the wooden and metal hoops of cages. (íbidem)

Van Herk also approaches the implications of the gender legacy in relation to men, the way expectations and assumptions may also condition them to (de)part for adventure and from home[35], with a far more restricted protagonism in caring and fathering, as is MacKenzie's case:

> I should be in management, shirt and tie, shave my beard off, jog at lunch to keep the pot away. But Janice always took the kids to the coast for the summer and even now, I can't seem to break the habit. Everyone expects ol' Mackenzie to head for the bush in the middle of May; if I said I wanted a change, they'd be upset. (1981, 6)

J.L. herself, with all the difficulties she has to face in this respect, also notices gender constraints pressing on them equally, such as their having being stripped from their emotional side that is instead usually attributed only to women in that differentiated traditional vision of the masculine and feminine:

> Ah Deborah, it's started. They're coming to me one by one, pouring their pestilence into my ears, trying to rid themselves of the poison. I can't blame them, the goddess knows they need to tell somebody, but oh, the weight of those words. They suck at me like quicksand but I have to listen. I know that if I repulse them, they may never speak again, they'll have lost their only opportunity to become men. Poor children. I thought we women carried heavy bundles. Theirs are much heavier simply because they cannot admit that they are carrying any. And they come to a woman to lay them down, put them at my feet and expect me to sort the fagots, shape the bundle neat and tidy, so that they can carry on with their predestined world. (165)

This awareness is all the more important since it spotlights the need of finishing with the clear-cut, polarised vision of men and women altogether. That is, the extract perfectly reveals the reason why J.L. was initially desperate for silence and later also hiding away from the men in camp; these either go to her for solace such as Mackenzie, or for sexual relations that recall her previous urban "whispered intercourses" such as Franklin's chasing her to hear his poems. Therefore, there is a recognition that the central issue concerning gender differences is not simply liberating women from being

[35] Literature has left us plenty of examples where men are directly assumed to leave the home/part for adventure not only as almost an absolute necessary for their personal development but also as a way to "run away from women" (Kumar and Sultana 2010, 13) such as the popular American tale Rip Van Winkle showed. This is particularly true for narratives of the West, which in the case of Canadian Prairie Literature assumed the dichotomy "horse-house" vinculated to "man-woman" and where "the desire for freedom that [is] imagine[d] is a solely male quest", reason why some authors might presumably desire to portray men freed from their freedom, from the need to escape Woman and time (Snyder 1993, n.p.).

the expected patient listeners but also liberating men from having to hold/hide their feelings so that they do not burden themselves or women such as J.L. with this repression. Another related restriction also caused by the gender legacy and that *The Tent Peg* clearly ascribes as affecting both men and women and their relations is that of mutual distrust and (un)deserved responsibilities, anticipated in the previous quote and returned to later in the novel by J.L.:

> Men. A paradox, a quandary, whole centuries of snakes and ladders. I wouldn't trade. And yet they've got it all, they've managed so sublimely to capture the better half of the world and put us to work for them. Nerve, they're born with it, they carry with them blind, unhesitating presumption. After all, it has been given'. . . . . Oh, I know all about exceptions. This camp is full of them. Nice, well-meaning men. They wouldn't deliberately hurt anyone. Yet they've been marinated in it, they've soaked up centuries of divine right. . . . If only the real exceptions were easier to discover. Like Mackenzie. He's the only one struggling here . . . fighting toward a knowledge that he doesn't understand . . . Even knowing it will be painful, even knowing it might destroy what his life has been up until now. I respect him. I could love a man like that, maybe relax enough to let him love me. That's the hardest of all. Trusting them. (1981, 165, 184)

Regarding the condition of *unrest* as the agency of body to escape the very roles and norms it has been assigned, this is directly connected with the blurring of gender differences or the displaying of gender instability. The most obvious interpretation in this light comes as a result of portraying a great deal of situations under what Judith Butler has theorized as performativity; that is, the fact that gender identities are not substantial, something one inevitably is or is not, but a naturalized effect of the particular set of repeated actions that are meaningful to what each society or historical time considers to be the norm for the so-thought distinct binary of the masculine and feminine: "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (2002/1999, xv).

This gender *becoming* is consistently represented in most of van Herk's novels. In *Judith*, alongside those self-inflicted acts of barbarity and the change her boyfriend wanted to effect in her, fitting her into a given mould or platonic ideal, we find a repeated reference to Judith's "other self" (1978, 6, 173), which refers to her split/instable identity and former city life with its 'specific' gender rituals: "Going down the hill to the barn she felt herself walking the way city women walk, as if stepping over

cracked eggs. She had to remind herself that there was no one to watch her, no one" (8). Another significant portrayal of performativity in this novel is constituted by Judith's bored and predestined relationships with her former boyfriends (Norman and her workmate in the office), ritualized in the manner of a marriage: "They might have been married. Their habits so predictable and customary. There was no longer even any need for conversation (123)", with the traditional parents' consent and pressure included: "'You should be careful, Judy. You'll get a bad reputation if you don't treat Norman nicer'" (141), and the expected sexual passivity but complacency at the same time: "on the road just out of sight of the house he stopped the car. 'How about a kiss?' She bent toward him dutifully, feeling like a wife" (137).

Although usually reported in the flashbacks referring to her childhood and city life, these rituals and gender relations still reverberate in her new life, conscious as she is now of the way she had certainly been acting for others, implying the internalisation of this learning and far-reaching claims, e. g: "She studies her nails, how quickly taken again that self-conscious motion of modesty that women assume under scrutiny" (105). This time, nonetheless, there are substantial "subversive bodily acts", as Butler would put it (2002/1999, 101). In the farm, when she dresses to receive her neighbour Jim, she conversely manages to lead the (expected) performance and when rituals reverberate, such as how to wear clothes, she changes the expected action, moving away attention from garments to her own body, its touch (how it feels the cloth), form (musculature) and needs (hunger and pleasure):

> she stood looking, looking for that other Judith. The clothes hung untouched in the back of her closet, still permeated with the vague aura of dancing and long, sequestered evenings. . . . She stripped them off the hangers and slipped *her body into them*, . . . The material felt like touch against her skin, the tips of a man's fingers running over her. The now-unfamiliar skirt flowed behind her through the house and she was suddenly unsure of how to carry herself, where to put her hands . . . She took one step and then another, perfectly straight and composed as she had never been when she wore them for others, for him in the city. . . she found herself suddenly certain and assured, swishing about the kitchen in the trailing skirt. Muscles, she thought, I have muscles. She moved slowly and with reverence, more self-aware than ever. And she thought that she would broil herself a steak, thick and bloody, and have a drink from the half-empty bottle of whiskey she had brought from the city. (172-3 [emphasis mine]).

Butler's definition unveils the instability of gender identities inasmuch as they are not once and forever given or reached, but must be continually repeated and

reproduced, "something that one becomes—but can never be" (2002/1999, 143). She parts from Beauvoir's turning-point theory of becoming one's gender, but considers it insufficient on the basis that it is still deterministic and gives the body/subject no option whatsoever: "On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. . . . not biology, but culture becomes destiny" (12). Thus, she suggests instead how the very performativity that produces gender or helps to reproduce it, can be equally subversive and change gender meanings just as much as it reinforces them. In short, how *bodies matter*, as she titled her work developing this theory (1993):

> That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (2)

Van Herk herself seems to support this vision of ultimate agency despite all conditionings when she asserts that "Judith is a product of her past, her socialization, her place, and to some extent, her own passivity. She is captive in a common contemporary situation. She is also angry, angry enough to try to change that situation (1992c: 277)". In fact, her novels very often present such combination, this gender weight/legacy, almost destiny, but ultimately undermined by the subject's own action and performativity. Thus, in addition to the previous rebellion, in the performance of domestic gender roles Judith disrupts them by refusing prescribed identification and liberating her body from that oppressing atmosphere (her face passing from facing a mirror to the air):

> More familiar than any image of herself, her mother's motion of passing her hand over her face, erasing something there . . . 'Can I go outside now?' Her mother turned from the mirror on the wall, fingers pursing her lips, hand moving from brow to chin, wearily molding it back, back into place. She touched her hair nervously then sighed. 'Sweep the floor first, Judy.' And after she swept the floor she ran outside and held her face into the wind, knowing it would never be like her mother's, she would never try to smooth it like that, so desperate and exposed. (1978, 35-6)

And regarding her sexual relationships and expected behaviour/performance of passivity accorded to her gender, at one point conventionalisms are unsettled, determinedly rejected and shown instead not to hold any substantial consistency:

> And then, skirt bunched around her waist, guided his fingers inside her, desperate for something more than her own, willing to allow him even this small victory. 'Judy, am I hurting you?' Refusing to answer him, she forced his clumsy too-careful fingers into her, pushed herself over them, aching for slow clean strokes instead of his feeble bungling, his awkwardness so irritating that finally she drew away from him, blind with anger. He was wide-eyed, anxious. 'Did it break?' She had a savage desire to pound at him with her fists, to claw his face. What, you clumsy fool? What are you talking about? You must be crazy. I've played with myself so long I can't remember. Do you think I've kept myself for you to botch with your stupid fingers? But said nothing, would not even look at him. In scornful silence she smothed the wrinkles of her dress, ignoring the anxiety in his eyes, his fearful waiting (198)

The Tent Peg and *Restlessness* are also noticeable for recognising the ability of the characters' own actions to undermine gender restrictions they are suffering from. When J.L. laments her sexual intercourse with men who fail to consider her as a person, she is reported not simply lamenting this situation but rather forcefully plotting against it by "want[ing] to shock them out of their complacence, erase their blindness and assumption, hammer them into the ground" (1981, 153). Awareness of necessary action is not limited to conveying J.L.'s initial retreat from her precast world into the Yukon: "I wanted this; I schemed to get here" (51), but is conceived indeed as the centre of her own life/story:

> I find myself raging, I find myself waiting angrily for that promised period of peace. I'm beginning to think that unless we take some action ourselves, it may never come. It's time we laid our hands on the worksman's mallet and put the tent pegs to the sleeping temples, if ever we are going to get any rest. (166)

As for Dorcas, we see her early in the novel rejecting a destiny clearly conceived in terms of gender: "most women . . . get what they settle for, which makes their lives dreadful, imprisoned by panty-hose and casseroles and daycare and Valium. I refuse to settle for what I've been dealt. It's not enough" (1998, 8), and subsequently putting the necessary means to escape it:

> 'I've been using distance to meddle with the plot of my life, to alter my course, to escape, . . . I want to destroy the day-to-day abrasions of life's obvious plot. I can no longer swallow guidebook advice. . . . We cancel our disgust, contain our pain, or we

> die. And so I've been trying to erase my sensitiveness through insistent movement, leaving I'm Away, Do not Disturb, hanging on my doorknob,[36] . . . I'm using travel to erase everything else, to escape the unbearable, to believe myself invisible' (90).

Finally, *Address* constitutes a great contribution at showing the instability of gender identities, with Arachne voicing in a number of occasions the gender performance and socialization she has had to experience in familial and other personal relationships. Thus, family is recognised as an institution whose foundations lie primarily in learned and endorsed/repeated gender roles:

> Arachne acknowledges Lanie, but she doesn't endorse her. She isn't convinced that she has a mother; Lanie's connection to her feels tenous and unproven. But once or twice a year Arachne will submit to biology. She is without a scrap of motherly feeling herself, . . . Motherhood rouses no idealized sentiment in her. That is something socialized, something incubated in a girl child with dolls and sibling babies. . . . Lanie never played. Once she discovered there was no romance in being Arachne's mother, she simply backed away (1998a, 28).

This mother-daughter performance, therefore, is rejected on both sides and further destabilised by denaturalising it: "Lanie comes out in a clump of people from the tourist section and begins to scan heads for Arachne. Their eyes meet and before they show recognition, each reads the other. What would we think if we were not supposed to be mother and daughter?" (29). At the same time, the body's action is highlighted as an important destabiliser and not mere passive receiver of gender instruction, following Butler's argument that performativity/bodily reiteration may act for reinforcing as well as for rematerialising gender identities:

> Arachne waits for the security doors to open and Lanie to trot through, clutching her oversize bag in both hands. Lanie's small obsessions have had their influence on Arachne; she refuses to carry a purse, she refuses to wear a nightgown, she refuses to thin her rather shaggy eyebrows. She refuses and refuses all the impositions of childhood and mothers. She is still refusing now, even though she has learned to smile at the same time. (1986, 29)

Performativity of gender is also explicitly recognised in Arachne's relationship with Thomas by his mentioning that she does not need to worry about the classic social gatherings where parents meet the fiancé(e) as "it's only a game. People are just

[36] I thank my supervisor Dr. Carrera for revealing me the meaning of the epigraph to the novel that is connected to this hanging sign on the door. The author has used the Spanish translation, "no molesten" because of the double meaning that the verb "molest" has in English: the one properly referring to the "no disturb" sign, and the one which relates to gender oppressions we are discussing, "assault sexually".

wearing costumes . . . [She] can pick it up in a week . . . [being] a respectable woman, or at least the appearance of one" (110-11). Consequently, at the same time performances are acknowledged, these are showed to serve also the purpose of altering expected behaviour, as when Thomas, at one point of the "ritual of social foreplay" that he is expected to follow when courting a girl, loses control of himself and "jumps" on Arachne (77). As for Arachne, she is constantly portrayed as trying to resist the accepted gender codes of sentimental relationships:

> Arachne is not unkind to Thomas. She is only consistently unfaithful. She is also unwilling to indulge in the polite rituals that are expected when a woman is connected to a man. She refuses to accompany him to topographical survey parties and she will not provide him with even a minimum of domestic service. He is the one who hangs clean shirts in her closet . . . while Arachne tracks in air and dust, litters the living room with her samples, her order forms, her road life. (47)

The way in which this novel has altered traditional gender roles and identities is such that extensive criticism has commented on it, particularly as regards its plausibility[37] or the dangers of "simply inverting the stereotypes" by portraying women who "take their sex 'neat', like men, or as men are presumed to do, who are often promiscuous without guilt" (Clayton 2000, 167) or who approach their relations in the same detached/inconsiderate way: "They're just bodies, you could put a paper bag over their heads" (1998a, 24). These concerns express that common debate in feminism which sought to discern what reaching equality meant, with two basic positions of argumentation: the one going in the line of van Herk's answer in this particular case about Arachne being "the reversal of the male picaro" (Clayton 2000, 167), namely, that she "did not want to impose on her behavioural restrictions that male picaros have never enjoyed" (íbidem) (feminism of equality)[38]; and the one who is suspicious of such equality as it would sometimes imply endorsing androcentrism, viewing *whatever* 'masculine' trait/right as desirable or fair enough (feminism of difference). The discussion is still complicated by other interpretations from more recent thinking, with readings from postmodern and deconstructivist crtitical perspectives that, considering the novel as a whole, have claimed that "Arachne does not remain a reverse role-model; instead, she moves beyond the frame of binary thinking, leaves the grid behind

[37] Carrera seeing Thomas as "too good to be true" () or Kroetsch as a parody (Sellery 2012, 32).

[38] I would add here the same consideration affecting writing by women, which extrapolates from this situation and which we also discuss along this thesis: "[t]he fact is, men write epic fiction: about life, about war, about what matters, including who [sic] they have screwed and whom they have killed" (qtd. in Goldman 1993, 21).

altogether, and becomes unrecognizable as a real Woman (or Man, for that matter)" (Goldman 1993, 30). It is not possible indeed to classify van Herk within a precise position, all of them plausible in this particular novel as well as in others, as may be appreciated when we discuss other examples of gender instability.

Van Herk's work portrays also instability of gender as *passing*, with J.L. being taken for a man by simply cross-dressing as a man and trying to act/perform as such, passing totally unsuspected: 'She surprised me, threw me off balance. Not that she's a woman but that I didn't recognize it' (1981, 25). Although by this device van Herk primarily signals the huge androcentrism of systematic assumption of a world in the masculine[39], the instability of gender identities is effectively revealed. In keeping with the first two lines of the previous argument, disguise/passing is presented as very objectionable but still a means to enjoy certain privileges or avoid disturbances:

> But am I really that indistinct? I've never been taken by a man before, although I sometimes wish I were one: It seems so much simpler for them; everything is clearcut, laid out from the moment they're born. They do not have the questions and doubts that get laid on our backs, the bundle of faggots we carry and carry. I've tried to throw it off, fling it on the ground and abandon it, but although I sometimes lose a stick or two, the weight is still there, old myths and old lovers, old duties, my mother's warning voice, my infallible conscience. I do look somehow like a boy. It's a disguise rather than a denial. It's useful to be small and thin and flat. It saves me from myself, hides my openness to hurt. Men are more likely to be first attracted to my head and what I say. (32)

Address also discusses this issue, first representing a voice of disapproval of having to dress like men for work but then voicing through another character the wish to be one:

> 'Women drivers will not drive wearing makeup.' 'They want us to look like men,' complains a woman who is hired and trained with Arachne. 'They've got to hire us, but they'd just as soon if the passengers couldn't tell us from men.' Arachne wishes that she

[39] "I knew that if I put down my name, J. L., and left the sex, F for female, box unchecked, they would assume I was a man. Only one gender has initials, the rest of us are misses and mistresses with neither the dignity of anonymity nor the prestige of assumption . . . I thought that my initials would get me past first scrutiny, but I didn't even count on their unassailable arrogance, that even if I left the sex box empty, no "F" or "M" to delineate, it didn't matter. Women don't steal male conventions. They must have noticed, but assumed it was masculine carelessness on my part. Initials stand for a man" (1981, 18).

> looked like a man. Indeed, Arachne wishes that she were a man. Driving seems so much easier for them, reaching, turning the wheel[40] (1998a, 51)

The third line of discussion is also brought by the recurrent invisibility characters reach, which therefore signal their refusal to be con/defined altogether. It may be considered as the last step of disguise, being both a protector and an instrument as, according to the author, "women are so visible by virtue of our bodies", always exposed to be seen (Verduyn 2001, 22), for which reason she describes how her characters "orchestrate [their] own disappearance" as an *act* of agency (íbidem [emphasis mine]). This is the literal invisibility Arachne gets when she disappears off the map, becoming a missing person for everyone, included her beloved Thomas whom she also abandons. The epitome of this agency, nonetheless, is Dorcas, who decides to "be erased" (1981, 13), to "engage[] in an act of hunger, a ravenous plan of escape" (8), out of a restlessness that is recognised to be connected to gender restrictions, particularly to visual overexposal:

> I DON'T HAVE to tell him [Atman, the assassin she has chosen for killing her] I want refuge from the personal. I am afraid of my interior despairs and ecstasies doled out for inspection by the curious, the presumptive stare of those who practise varieties of distance but grab for the juice of intimacy with greedy fingers. I'm tired of eyes watching my face, I'm exhausted by outsiders trying to imagine my dreams, dictating my desires. This is a world that wants us to display every intimacy. My dear one never clutches at me, never mines my heart for his own sustenance. He never uses the world *should*. Should Ought. Need. (65-6 [emphasis original])

The extract underlines another detested burden that many female characters feel: constant or small talk by many men who mine their hearts with their problems or assumptions while, funnily enough, they themselves do not show great interest in listening to women, concentrating rather on their apperance. Such is the case of Deborah in *The Tent Peg*:

> For years I've watched men lunge after her, unable to control their hands, reaching for a strand of her hair, watching for the slightest movement of her wide mouth. And they're always surprised, oh she surprises them, a woman with a profane body that is underneath as cold as steel; surprised to find, when they reach for that softness, a trap, a brain as

[40] We may well add as reasons the other disturbances of being a female bus driver that are just previously mentioned, e.g. "Itinerant men eye her, remark, 'Hey, what's a girl doing driving a bus? . . . Hey, you're pretty cute for a bus driver. Are you busy tonight, would you like to get off at my stop?' " or "her replacement . . . who immediately begins to adjust the mirrors, muttering, 'Damn women.' " (50-1).

> uncompromising as her body seems inviting. . . .I have seen her weep, . . . curse herself, curse the lovely prison of her limbs. . . . why would anyone not want to be beautiful? . . . The first time I saw her was singing. . . . . They paraded her first for her beauty and then for her voice, they worshiped her, proposed to her, presented her. And ignored her. I saw it instantly, the circle of admirers with eyes fixed on her face**,** *men with no ears*' (33, 104-5 [emphasis mine])

As for J.L., what she yearned for was silence since men, even if paradoxically they do not listen to, demand endless attention, with their "whispered intercourse" that resembles many of Dorcas' relations with her assassin lovers, affected also by the "deafness follicle" (1998b, 46) and lacking any other meaningful (bodily) language/understanding:

> THIS KILLER ISN'T a gasbag. I'll give him that. When I want silence, he senses it, stays quiet. My other assassins were talkers, muttering under breath, grinding their teeth, stating the obvious-. . . And they were clumsy, . . . quick to suggest unspecified intercourse. 'Let's do it here,' until I started answering automatically, 'Do what?' Except for my dear one, a quiet man who speaks with his eyes, his hands gentle, without grasping, never wanting to possess . . . His hand on my neck was light, tender with reassurance, as if to offer me angelic cognitions. My dear one. (58)

A final means van Herk uses to show the instability of gender is bringing to visibility a number of situations: firstly, assumptions (a key word that is repeatedly used by characters to condemn men's attitudes) that do not hold true or not solely for a given gender, such as that "women cannot bear isolation" (1981, 23) or their clichéd rivalry (notice men's fights in *The Tent Peg* and strong bonds between female characters: Judith and Mina, J.L. and Deborah, Arachne and Thena); secondly, by unveiling the typical double standards through J.L.'s story about the woman who loved a bear[41] and its counterpart with the male protagonist who loved a goat; thirdly, by marking the norm, the presumed ungendered, disembodied individual. That is, by showing that men's body is also sexed, in contrast to the usual reference to women as the sexed and/or specific body while men are conceived instead as the unmarked gender/sex. This is done through the episode where Judith's father is reported not to allow her to castrate or watch him castrate pigs, as this would uncover the 'secret' that the male body is also sexed: "Perhaps he did not want her to witness a male emasculating a male, the castration of his own species, and so saved himself from her discovery of his common humanity, saved himself from her discovery of his own sexuality" (1978, 167). *Places*

[41] A reference to Marian Engels' novel *Bear* (1976).

also contributes to mark or make visible male norm by revealing theirs is a game where men themselves establish the rules, "hidden as they are in an inflated sense of themselves centring the subject of greatness" (1990, 80-1); rules that they are additionally shown not always follow in a strict sense, as the great subjects they are boastful of such as wars can be considered as visceral too, indeed "larger and more dangerous" (80).

These last two examples relate to the important epistemological shift brought about by feminist critique, unveiling that the history of knowledge which passed as universal was indeed profoundly mediated. Rosi Braidotti has remembered this crisis of the so-far unquestioned universal subject, who had simply disguised his singularity with the mask of logocentrism (2000, 130), and traced the work of two important figures in signalling the 'unmarked' norm and the long-standing implications around which our research circles[42]: Irigaray, whose "critique of modernity . . . attacks the complicity between rationality and masculinity. The subject of discourse is always sexed, 'it' can never be pure, universal, or gender-free" (íbidem), and Simone de Beauvoir, who "observed fifty years ago that the price men pay for representing the universal is a kind of loss of embodiment; the price women pay, on the other hand, is a loss of subjectivity and the confinement to the body" (152). One important destabiliser or subversion in this respect is the act of restoring the emotional side to men by making visible their psychological complexities. Stereotypical as men's portrayal may seem at first in *The Tent Peg* (1981), with misogynist Jerome and moralist Catholic Milton, we may sense an intention not to generalise on their gender or portray a homogenous bunch, giving them voice to express their inner struggles, fears and desires:

> They are a miscellaneous lot, and odd assortment, not what I would have expected. I thought of geologists as solid, bearded men who smoked pipes and resemble done another. But as they turn to face him, I can see that they are hardly similar at all . . . They're finally coming clear to me. At first they were just a mass, a clot of men, all of them watching me, pulling at me, indistinguisable. But now they're separating into themselves, distinct male people. (52, 129)

This restoration is especially significant for the gender restrictions we are discussing given that as Doreen Massey argues "what is at issue here is not so much overt discrimination or sexism as deeply internalized dualisms which structure personal identities and daily lives" (1996, 117). *The Tent Peg* is highly illustrative of such "overt

[42] See specifically chapter 2.

discrimination" on J.L. by the majority of her camp mates, but we equally saw how even the most likeable characters (MacKenzie and Thompson) had "deeply internalized" attitudes that still meant an oppressive hold for women, such as the common logic of possession or the "deafness-follicle" approach to women. Thus, van Herk expresses an intention of breaking up with the dualisms through the character of MacKenzie in particular, whose development represents the most optimistic surpassing of those, celebrating his new awareness of existential unfixity and understanding through/thanks to bodily or effective communication:

> It is the sound of my own assumption that hammers in my temple. . . . believing that another life [his ex-wife's] could be at my disposal, that I had any right to try and make it so. . . . And then it clears, the curtain of rain still falls cool on my face. I'm standing high on a mountain beside a small woman who is holding one of my hands in both of hers. . . . The irises of her eyes could widen indefinitely to enclose me. If I could become a figure inside those bottomless pupils I would be saved, redeemed. . . . 'I'll never make any assumptions like that again' . . . . Let me never again take for granted the wonder of a skin like hers, . . . the way she turned her body this way and that for me so that I could get a sense of it again, a woman, the way a woman feels. . . . And then she holds me, we hold each other in a great groaning circle of a kiss that wheels and tumbles and transfixes us, that leaves empty and replete and completely overtaken. . . . . Ah Sisera, I would trade with you. I would give all I had to die at her hand, . . . to lie asleep and innocent as she lays one hand on the mallet and the other on the tent peg and gently, oh so gently that I might never wake, nails me to the earth, pierces my ear, my temple, with her loving wrath and bestows on me respite, peace. . . . And as I touch her, lay my arm across her shoulder, I know the peg still lodges in my skull. I will never forget. (1981, 195-6, 206, 220)

Finally, women's subjectivity is also widely restored, as well as the inscription of their desires (sexual and other) and value of their bodies, to which they are not simply confined but constitute instead an important destabiliser of *any* fixed identity and destiny, even the chosen ones:

> Instantly it returned, the irrepressible movement inside of her to leave everything, leave the pigs and go back, Judith running to meet him, to release herself, feeling the surprising strength of his hands and arms, the quick and sudden energy of her own body in their movement altogether. It was the slacking of that sensuality she had ached with, running in the pasture at night, whipping through the thigh-high grass to dispel her body's restlessness. Sometimes she couldn't even think of his name. Not that it mattered; it was the act, the pleasure, that was important. (van Herk 1978, 91).

Chapter 4. Evading plot

> The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative.
>
> (Cixous 1976, 875)

We have just seen how the content of van Herk's texts are characterized by showing and pursuing gender instability and broader unfixity, mostly as a result of those recallings of gender history that threaten protagonists to a very restricted or unchosen life. As such, thematically they represent a depiction of female protagonists evading any kind of life destiny or any long-term purposes in general, focusing instead on short-term, immediate desire(s)/drive(s), summarised by Arachne's main philosophy:

> There isn't much point in playing around, waiting for an appropriate moment, because it never comes, it's never the right time. Arachne has learned to get her pleasure fast, catch what she can, has trained her body to pleasure itself. . . . . She thinks it's a waste of time to trail after men with tears and lamentations. She shrugs and takes the week for what it has been, nothing beyond a chance to touch his skin. (1998a, 53-55)

In form, however, they also stand out for their compromise in this line, with the author's "attempt to explode genre and plot" (Goldman 1993, 23) perfectly mirroring content. In this respect, detractors of her style who see it as genreless (qtd. in Goldman 1993, 31) may consider as a good reason/explanation the doubtless connection of genre and gender blurring, which van Herk herself clearly implies in her statement "Art! Life! You need to learn how to evade plot" (1991a, 22). The way in which she tries to evade plot/genre in art is, in fact, directly connected to gender given that, generally speaking, canonical writing has had important implications for both women and writing by women. If we remember Tolstoy's treatment of women such as Anna Karenina, whom he condemned beforehand with prescripted choices that he later punished, "an invented character whose inventor revenged himself on her through the failings he invented for her" (1990, 77), or Wiebe's rejection/depreciation of women's writing for what he considers to be visceral, we may see in van Herk's work precisely an attempt to revert the considerable repercussions of the stories and approach/interests of the canon. Thus, evading plot and the inscription of sexuality and movement already indicated must be understood as a contestation to this tradition that confined women (writers). In this task,

the (female) body is a key element to be recovered, emphasising its restlessness, action and unfixity, which very much reminds us of Hélène Cixous' fundamental connection between the body and writing:

> I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. . . . . Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright. (1975, 3, 14 [emphasis original])

Van Herk has indeed expressed her project as a writer of inscribing the body[43], given that it has been neglected in the discursive domain and, as a consequence, women, writers and other, have had to struggle with language and acceptable codes:

> The feminist and writing . . . I always knew my female body had no text, I always knew that words were problematic, inappropriate if not downright forbidden, innately forbidden to me as a woman. The language I grew up within, that I struggle to think and write within, is: Marian Engel: "indubitably male" (35) what I expect, yearn for, from my writing/women's writing is an articulation of a secret and uninvented language: I want to dare to inscribe my body on the page. I want my characters to speak for themselves rather than to speak some doublespeak version of acceptable feminine thought and behaviours. . . . I want to explode writing as prescription, as a code for the proper behaviours of good little girls. (1991d, 129, 131)

One fundamental way she uses to challenge is by blurring genres in her self-labelled "geografictione" *Places*, which has been perceived as directly linked to her feminist design: "the self-conscious avoidance of plot, and the undermining of traditional forms of representation and gender roles leads to the undermining of genre categories. It is a mistake, perhaps, to try to squeeze this genreless work into a "fixed" classificatory system that it is so clearly attempting to resist" (Goldman 1993, 31). The interpretation is also confirmed by the author's consideration that genre is a coffin (van Herk 1991a, 22), a metaphor that signals people's general ending/fixity in one when dead, but especially women, who usually suffer a fixed plot in traditional stories such as

[43] Citing Cixous precisely as *the* reference in this task, as well as explicitly counteracting once again Wiebe's expectations about women and literature (van Herk 1991d).

effective death (Anna Karenina) or other forms that may quite approach it (marriage, insanity) (Goldman 1993, 31). Her other challenging instrument, rewriting/rereading, derives precisely from this concern, from her refusal or disapproval to make women fit a narrative:

> I use many biblical heroines who have been interpreted by biblical scholars in ways I find unacceptable . . . I want to explode those stories . . . And the way women have been used within them [patriarchal biblical myths] to shore up the master narrative. And the same goes for something like Anna Karenina (qtd. in Clayton 2000, 167).

As such, her writing again compromises by portraying her own narrative or discourse as unable to contain characters, who become invisible or disappear. Arachne's disappearance "off the map" in *Address*, for instance, has been signalled as representing *both* the protagonist's and the writer's dissent: Arachne from cultural norms, van Herk from literary conventions (Howells 1996, 6). Similarly, *Places* signals this gender and genre correlations as it "is an attempt to reinterpret or, in van Herk's words, to 'unread' the narrative options and fictional worlds of male-authored heroines; [and] it is also an attempt to defy generic conventions and classifications" (Mott 1998, 99).

This stylistic footprint of blurring genres and avoiding conventional narrative plots or stories may be regarded as a classic example of appropriation (van Herk, qtd. in Lutz 1989, 42). That is, of how you cannot avoid using the master's language/narrative if you are going to communicate/live at all, but at the same time this language/narrative needs to be revised, modified and necessarily challenged in order to accommodate traditional left-outs, women in this case (íbidem). In this way, van Herk simply adheres to practices already recognised in feminist theory, for example by Julia Kristeva's statement that "There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law" (1980, 65), and by Judith Butler and Monique Wittig, whose analyses of language remind us of the same *man*'s viewpoint or traces we saw permeating cartography and broader knowledge:

> Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself. [But] As Drucilla Cornell, in the tradition of Adorno, reminds me: there is nothing radical about common sense. It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself. . . . If gender itself is naturalized through gramatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most

> fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given. (Butler 2002/1999, xviii-xix)

Regarding the strategy of rewriting in particular, which van Herk broadly engages in, this constitutes a basic approach in feminist politics, extending to disciplines other than literature. Digging into the past and expanding it is a practice now effectively acknowledged not as a way to 'contribute' to history, but of making it richer or more precise by critically analysing it and unveiling its androcentric core and, therefore, inaccuracy[44]. More than anything, though, it is a question of making justice or giving second chances to mythological women who have been effaced, biblical heroines who have been misinterpreted or overlooked (Clayton 2000, 106) and canonical characters who had no way out: "Lost in Russia, lost in love, lost in the nineteenth century . . . Anna. Her paginated presence makes you want to rescue her, offer her alternatives. Read her again, give her a second chance, another life, another fiction." (van Herk 1990, 77). As a result, recovery is the first step by modelling all her heroines out of "ancient archetypes of women who reject standard feminine roles in order to accomplish significant social actions" (Beran 1993, n. p.); and rewriting usually ensues as a revision of the kind of stories or meanings that have remained:

> To question meaning, history, representation, to question our desires and duties, to question one another. And to re-write, inscribe differently, to re-verse the previously static and perpetually frozen. That freedom to question encouraged me to write novels about . . . mythic women whose powerful and active stories have been dismissed or obscured, and worse, mis-read and demeaned. By offering them a textual presence beyond their earlier configuration, I wanted to re-inscribe their tremendously inspiring rebellions, at the same time pointing out that the survival of their fragmented stories gestures toward an imperative presence of women within all mythologies. (1991d, 132).

Thus, in *Judith* we find the biblical homonym and mythological Circe. With the former, she recovers the strong Jewish woman who liberated her people by beheading general Holofernes; his army had invaded the city of Bedulia, near Jerusalem, by order of king Nabucodonosor of Nínive, who wanted the surrounding kingdoms to adore him as supreme god (Dulitzky 2000, 189). Van Herk chose this particular character as model for the heroine of her first novel in order to express that same agency, this time though to save herself (1992, 279); she also altered the story by moving from representing a

[44] See page 18 for the argument about how accepted knowledge is limited or inaccurate as a consequence of its having been "marked by sexual difference", that is, dominated by male interpretation/judgement exclusively for centuries.

widow living off her rich deceased husband (Dulitzky 2000, 189), to a chosen independence and self-sustenance: "Judith doesn't inherit the family farm though. She returns and buys her own piece of land. So it's partly about resisting the passing on of land and patriarchal tradition and finding your own place, as a woman, within it" (Clayton 2000, 176). The figure of Circe, used to refer to Judith because of the castration of the pigs she breeds (also recalling Judith's decapitation), is chosen in order to represent another powerful character who succeeds in a 'male job/terrain' where a man (Jim) is inadequate (Beran 1990, n. p.). Furthermore, this choice also undermines the archetypal object of men's fear, women's sexuality, which has remained so in the collective imaginary through this classic figure, threatening men's masculinity ever since Odysseus was warned that he could be deprived of his vigour by lying with her (Homero 2004, 218).

In *The Tent Peg*, the mythical figures are once again biblical: Jael and Deborah. The first also saves the Israelites when the enemy general of the Canaan army, Sisera, seeks refuge in her tent and she takes the opportunity to kill him while he sleeps, thus ending twenty years of oppression for her people (Dulitzky 2000, 159-160). She is recovered to convey J.L.'s strength, especially after she easily succeeds, like Judith, at a traditionally masculine task (shooting) to defend herself (Beran 1990, n.p.). As for judge and prophetess Deborah, who had a central role in the biblical victory, the song devoted to celebrate her contribution in the feat (Dulitzky 2000, 161) is echoed in van Herk's novel through a poem sent to J.L. by her friend Deborah that encourages her to resist and, therefore, functions like the biblical prophecy, announcing that she will triumph as well.

Address recovers mythic Arachne, a renowned figure, Ovid tells us, not for familiar influence but solely on the basis of her art or profession as a weaver (1994, vv. 7-8); her mastery was such that she dared to rival goddess Athena, for which reason she was punished and turned into a spider. Her choice is already appropriate as representative of female determination and talent, but it serves a further accomplishment by bringing to mind the mythic weaver *par excellence*, Penelope, the very opposite of what Arachne represents. Hence, van Herk has deconstructed the myth of female waiting and male absence, one of the most rewritten and reworked, and conveyed the very opposite: a woman weaving her own destiny with her legs/mobility, as the spider

she is named after[45]: "She stretches her legs out in front of her with a tinge of satisfaction. They are hers, they belong to her, she can take them anywhere she pleases." (1998a, 44).

Restlessness presents biblical Dorcas (Acts 9: 36-42), a producer of garments for the poor who is resurrected by Peter so that she can continue dedicating her time to the charity works for which she was revered in life and considered a model to help early Christian reputation (Fletcher 2006, n.p.). The reworking of this story is to express just the opposite, a woman desiring to die, as an objection to the act committed on this biblical character, "brought back –on no request of her own- to life" (Kroetsch 2011, 72). Just as Arachne brought Penelope to mind, Dorcas recalls another opposite character to emphasise the weight of her decision-making as she is the "reversal of Sheherazade, who saves her life through a continuous story" (van Herk 1998b, front cover).

It is important to concede that even though rewriting lies at feminism's foundations, it is a practice more generally recognised and indeed common to all of us simply as readers. As literary critic Roland Barthes has illustrated in his well-known essay "Death of the author", intertextuality and dialogism are at the basis of *any* fictional work/text, which is, therefore, liable to be answered back or updated:

> We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. . . . . In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; . . . [s]he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted (1968, 4-6)

What is interesting about his theory, which coincides with Mikhail Bakhtin's, is that by positing the reading act of a particular text as an engagement with wider readings of culture, with a multiplicity of other texts, the reader functions as a rewriter

[45] When Lanie is pregnant of Arachne, she once observes in her house of Vancouver a spider that is "weaving with her hind legs" (van Herk 1998a, 64) and then the name of Arachnid is brought up as a possible one for her future daughter.

too/ultimately, since they are also dealing with and bringing to the interpretation of such given text other existing codes and meanings already read. As Julia Kristeva informs us,

> Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is this conception of the "literary word" as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning, as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addresee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. By introducing the status of the word as a minimal structural unit, Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them (1980, 64-5 [emphasis original])

These considerations are relevant to understand van Herk's rewritings as illustrative of that demystification of the author. In particular, this is openly addressed in her geografictione *Places,* where the author's particular version of the story becomes only one more, one of the many readings/interpretations/fictions possible: "she has only to read the story differently, her own story waiting to be un/read by the light of these places: all places with acts of reading as their histories" (1990, 37). At the same time, it acknowledges the reader as key for gathering and (re)elaborating meaning, and so as rewriter ultimately, as is done by the protagonist/van Herk reader, who sets out on reading Ana Karenina differently (taking the story along in her trip to the North, where presumably other gender meanings apply or at least far from the narrow world of nineteenth century Russian social gatherings), and ends up constructing/rewriting a new life for the character:

> Anna Karenina should have gone to Ellesmere. The heart can live through a desert island, a Siberia. And also Ellesmere. Where you must read her over, through the transparency of Tolstoy's blame, . . . Anna, poor Anna, dead before she begins, the end already read. You know where she is going, have pre/read that destination. But re/reading her, in Ellesmere a/new, reading her whole, you can re/write her too (1990, 83)

Chapter 5. "Fiction's mandate"

This chapter will expand on van Herk's characteristic interplay between the material and the discursive, which we have been alluding to so far in relation to space and body. Our first chapter already showed the far from rhetorical consequences that mental associations and meanings of space (territory as female) could have; the second chapter explored how the author engaged in taking her characters to effective places with different gender codes and how she equally revealed the fact that women's lives are influenced, just as much as by 'real' settings, by what validates/is accepted as cognitive and possible in the collective imaginary; and chapter 4 approached the way in which writing has not only reflected (partially) but shaped reality, producing or contributing to materialise a given fantasy, such as that where women (writers) are visceral or they lead a single or fixed life/plot. Hence, it is no surprise that this awareness accounts for her particular commitment to fiction as a tool that may effectively counteract patriarchy and help the feminist agenda: "if we limit ourselves to what is "realistic" in our world (a neat way for the patriarchal system to keep us in line-and then it's unrealistic to be a writer at all), we will always be circumscribed in both literal and imaginative ways" (van Herk 1991d, 132).

Her quotation about "the real" is revelatory once more of a basic binary distinction operating, which has also been recognised by philosopher Gillian Rose to apply to space just as much as to bodies (through performativity) in order to configure separated notions of the real/material/concrete and the non-real/symbolic/imagined (1996, 58). She declares the division to be gendered, where "the real" is an effect of "normative geographical performances" (59): "The reiteration of the distinction between the real and non-real space serves to naturalize certain masculinist visions of real space and real geography" (60). In this sense, van Herk's fiction represents a complete departure from the geographers' persistent hierarchized difference between cognitive and geographical space (58). Instead, she presents characters such as Arachne who are continually engaging in a combination of those: it is impossible to dissociate, when she travels, perceptions from the soil she treads. As Carol A. Howells has remarked,

> the novel attempts to chart locations which are not only spatial but also cultural, gendered, imaginary, as it focuses on the hidden topography of myth and subjective vision. . . . the conventional litany of small towns (north-east of Calgary . . .) quickly slips away from realism when they are seen through Arachne's eyes . . . It is a

> transitional kind of passage, where prairie towns names cling tenuously to realism as they slide over into a subjectivised fictional dimension (1996, 12)

Arachne also represents a powerful intention by fusing official roads (van Herk, qtd. in Clyton 2000, 169) and historical facts (Čimžar-Egger 2010, 10), with unofficial ones, such as the trail of clothes she leaves at the end of the novel (van Herk 1998a, 260), and the imagined encounters she has had till then, a sushi chef who offers her a variety of dishes (232-2) and a dead soldier with whom she has sex (244-5). Likewise, in *Places* van Herk rightly depicts the obvious mental dimension of physical space, as it may be in relation to the basic notion of home, which especially in a contemporary context of migration and globalization has become more of an imagined configuration[46]:

> 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. Where you invented destinations, 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 (1990, 13)

More generally though, the geografictione, as the title itself already suggests, constitutes a blending of both dimensions throughout:

> The setting of the text, a travel memoir, is spread over four places, cartographically starting from Edberg, moving through Edmonton and Calgary to Ellesmere towards North as exploration sites. Each site signifies the metaphorical meaning, beginning with yearning of the narrator leading to the long division symbolic of duality of body/mind, truth/fiction, victor/victim, illusion/reality, life/death, and self/other. Calgary-the growing graveyard symbolizing death which is actually an act of freedom--- from torture and injustice leads to Ellesmere, . . . a dream place, an inevitable presence, writing space and mythical identity (Kumar and Sultana 2010, 16)

Numerous scholars have by now disrupted the difference between the abstract and the material. Monique Witting, for instance, has stated the enormous influence/usefulness of language and the figurative to shape the body and subjectivity:

> Concepts, categories, and abstractions, she argues, can effect a physical and material violence against the bodies they claim to organize and interpret: 'There is nothing abstract about the power that sciences and theories have to act materially and actually

[46] Migration and globalization are widely recognised to have caused "the disruption of geographical space, or at least its definition and association with 'real space' " (McDowell 1996, 38). Salman Rusdhie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1981-91) constitutes one of the best examples that deals with the implications that postcolonial migration has had in subject's new conceptions and relations to home. Van Herk, in particular, also addresses European migration in her geografictione, the "dance of settlement" (1990, 22), to allude to its importance in Canada's building as a nation.

> upon our bodies and minds, even if the discourse that produces it is abstract. It is one of the forms of domination, its very expression, as Marx said. I would say, rather, one of its exercises (Butler 2002/1999, 148)

The nomadic identities posed by Rosi Braidotti represent a contestation to the "symbolic poverty" and disregarded knowledge(s) of dominant possibilities of identification following a consciousness that there is no social relationship that is not articulated through language and, therefore, is free from imaginary constructions (1994, 22-25). In relation to space, it has equally been widely recognised how "the symbolic structures of gender differentiation" cannot be dissociated from the "material structures of inequality" (McDowell 1999, 247). This awareness has derived from the so-called "cultural turn" in feminist theory, which moved from a focus on social relationships to analyse the way gender and cultural understandings also relate to the position of women in different societies (7). The shift has meant a significant change too for the research method in geography particularly. As is detailed by Alicia Menendez, up until the 1980s the approach to space was based on a mere material analysis of gender inequality and ignored the way geography also incorporates and generates meaning(s) (2010, 52-6). The new insights, however, about the equal impact of symbols and associated meanings of space, have made many geographers

> . . . learn ways of looking and doing research that have been less common in past decades. Textual and visual analysis, for example, is now being added to the portfolio of skills taught in many graduate schools of geography, complementing, even supplanting, the social survey methods of an older social science-influenced feminist method (McDowell 1999, 247)

Hence, van Herk's delineation of "geograph[ies] of the mind" (Kumar and Sultana 2010, 3) and attention to the symbolic is to be considered not as a simple stylistic authorial singularity but part of the feminist agenda for social change. In accordance with Menendez's statement that for achieving influence over space, altering its morphology does not suffice, and that there is a need to destabilise its associated meanings too (2010, 56), van Herk's discursive mapping and exploration task we discussed in chapter two cannot be separated from an attempt to open new material spaces and possibilities for women. In this sense, she seems to adhere to the political consideration that "the domain of fiction ceases to remain an aesthetically neutral realm which exerts virtually no influence on the lives of individuals" (Goldman 1993, 23), particularly for her conscious departure from approved/expected conventions in the field

regarding gender: "women can write kitchen-sink realism about the limitations of their lives forever. But 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" (qtd. in Kumar and Sultana 2010, 3).

The way she additionally mirrors content and form in her writing can also be considered as a further recognition of the inseparability of the abstract and the material:

> Literary works, however, maintain a privileged access to this primary field of ontological abundance. The split between form and content corresponds to the artificial philosophical distinction between abstract, universal thought and concrete, material reality. Just as Wittig invokes Bakhtin to establish concepts as material realities, so she invokes literary language more generally to reestablish the unity of language as indissoluble form and content (Butler 2002/1999, 152).

In content, van Herk resists unitary/essentialist identities by means of deterritorialization and rewriting. Thus, characters abandon both physical and identitarian pre-given positions that culture and/or literature assign to them. Impulse to rewrite and bring to light other equally plausible alternatives is much related, as revealed by the cultural turn in feminism. McDowell (1999), for instance, theorises about the legitimacy of multiple meanings and interpretations that may be attributed to space and events, about "places as a sort of spatial text that may be interpreted by 'readers' " (227); argument that recalls *Places*' main point, "all places with acts of reading as their histories" (van Herk 1990, 37), where Ana Karenina subsequently follows deterritorialization from Russia to Ellesmere searching for new identitarian possibilities/readings.

In form, *The Tent Peg*, *Places* and *Restlessness* adhere to postmodern techniques of fragmentation and multiplicity of voices/narratives that result from a crisis of universality and coherence or completeness of subjectivity/identity and (hi)story. The former by directly representing (seemingly without the author's intermediation) thirteen characters[47] and their different version and experience (though at different levels of intervention) of the same summer/events. As for *Places*, by disrupting conventional linearity and order of narration, following rather the chaotic mode of memory and repeatedly intersecting quotations from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Finally, in *Restlessness*, we find Dorcas' "existence through fragmentation" (Kroetsch 2001, 69),

[47] J.L., MacKenzie, Bill, Zeke, Jerome, Thompson, Milton, Ivan, Hearne, Hudson, Cap, Roy, Franklin.

emphasised by the episode where her identity splits into herself and a double she observes through a hotel window (van Herk 1998b, 89).

The related demystification or collapse of authorial/master authority is also a constant: from the dissolution of boundaries between writer and reader in *Places* by the "use of 'you' throughout [. . . which] challenges the presumed autonomy and authority of autobiography and historiography" (O'Flynn 2009, 66), to the equation of autobiographical narrative with disappearance or death in *Address* and *Restlessness* respectively, recalling Barthes' death of author. Equally, her blurring of genres and intertextuality also stands as "a means to deconstruct the authority of the text, in that any text and any writing exists within a community of other texts and other writers" (67). The author's own reflection on the writing process of *Judith* attest to that "suspicion[n] of the claims texts and discourses make" (66), with her wilful consideration that the page cannot contain characters: "She was angry even while I was making her, rigid even while I tried to soften her, while I argued with the page that she was an unsympathetic character, how could anyone like her? She is, I assure you, not me" (van Herk 1992c, 277).

Summing up, we have posited her texts as a major contribution that, aware of that symbolic dimension, have configured new *geographies of the mind* to open new substantial spaces and opportunities for women. Both formal and conceptual characteristics of her fiction may add to this project as, following Braidotti's argument, political action by postmodern and nomadic feminism lies precisely in "expos[ing] the illusion of ontological foundations" (1994, 35); and even though gender is still an operating code in our societies (McDowell 1999, 248), focalising on the figurative is imperative given that it is equally true that "We all act in relation to our intentions and beliefs, which are always culturally shaped and historically and spatially positioned" (1999, 7).

Van Herk's work, therefore, can be said to represent a significant engagement in overturning gender relations through the power of her fiction, in keeping with the cultural turn specially developed by feminist theorists of sexual difference who, realising the intersection of material and symbolic structures (Braidotti 1994, 152-3), regard language and writing as a primary means of contestation. Cixous, for instance, considers the following way to counteract and subvert the "sexual opposition" and "repression of women" of male-monopolised writing: "woman has never *her* turn to speak-this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the*

very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 1975, 7 [emphasis original]). Thus, at the same time that van Herk suggests that there has never been such a clear-cut distinction between the abstract and the material, as is intended by her "woman as island" insights, she has appropriated and subverted this basic identification. Asta Mott has commented how her geografictione's cover of a woman-like island, Ellesmere, disrupts traditional geographical pretence of objectivity and pure reality/material focus, "remind[ing] us that while the explorations to map the Canadian North were driven by scientific, economic and political motives they also drew on the mythologies of place, culture and gender of the day" (1998, 106). She also exposes how the author's response in this respect has been using her writing for *subversive thought*, overturning "masculine or conventional forms of writing about the west and the north" by introducing women in those narratives and creating new meanings, by "enter[ing] 'the kingdom of the male virgin' . . . [and being] 'spies' in a masculine landscape who are there to infiltrate and change it" (102).

To conclude, it is worth keeping in mind the importance Aritha van Herk has conferred to the role of the writer, who bases him/herself on an arbitrary system of representation or symbols (language), just as much as geographers: "Clearly mapping, like language, is more creation than representation, and so it is not illogical to think of fiction as geography. The only way a country can be truly mapped is with its stories" (van Herk 1992b, 58). Indeed, she has proved how this last statement has made a difference in her life, her career and her definition as Canadian. She explains how, as a child, she had the feeling of living "nowhere" (1992c, 26), "did not know that Canada existed" (27), dominated as they were by American references and British cultural rituals (saluting the flag and singing its hymn), together with her particular circumstances of her family still clinging to the "old country" (Holland) (26-8). As a consequence, "she had a confused sense of place" (28) and it was fiction precisely that provided her with the map/words/language she was desperately looking for: "rudimentary maps. Simple, yes, but distinctly part of the space that I lived" (32). Thus, first a Canadian doggerel and then literature allowed her to distinctively recognise (herself in) the place she inhabited: Ruby Wiebe taught her that the Battler River was a famous Indian boundary (28); in L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, she envisioned Edward Island and, in W.O. Mitchell's *Who has Seen the Wind*, the "Saskatchewan wheatfields (32); finally, her epiphany in reading about a place (The

High Level Bridge) she could directly perceive from her own flat window, thanks to Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse man* (33). She especially eulogises Kroetsch, "Someone [who] had dared to write about a place [she] knew, about *[her]*. [She] finally had a map" (33), for providing her with the "courage" to start delineating her "own mapping" since she firmly backs his statement that "Fiction will make us real" (34).

Conclusions

As I hope to have shown in this study, Aritha van Herk has reflected in her work a concern about gender issues from multiple approaches, notably through her interest in space, with the common topics of geography, mapping and exploration. In particular, she explores the potential of space for new gender configurations and possibilities; its great influence for liberating women from restrictions and for allowing them to develop new identities, which is represented by taking characters to different places where less restrictive (or none) gender norms may apply and by configuring new *geographies of the mind* as a way to change or broaden general thinking about the possible/valid for women. The latter is one of her recurrent perspectives when reflecting on gender, the interplay of the material and discursive levels, which not only represents a reconciliation of patriarchal exclusionary conceptions such as reason/geography/the real versus emotion/fiction/symbolic, but undermines the enduring logic of clear-cut/stable categories about the world and human beings. The map of *longing* that Arachne would like to find/trace, for instance, is one of the examples through which reason and emotion, mind and body, the real and the imaginary, are more clearly reunited.

In this sense, we have found as especially distinctive of van Herk's work the other approach to gender where *body* (and its equivalents) *matters*. The overwhelming importance the author confers to the body is actually connected to, or explains, her thorough work on space as there is a certain recurrent *restlessness* on the part of her female characters that is not simply love of travelling or unmotivated movement, but is closely associated to gender-related restrictions. In van Herk's writing, this feature signals not only the spatial condition of 'being on the move/unsettled' but also points to a cause, the bodily state of 'tension, uneasiness or discomfort' resulting from oppressive gender norms they struggle against. The bodies of her protagonists are at *unrest*, therefore, ruled by meanings, possibilities or a whole life which their allotted gender automatically assigns to them. Nonetheless, as many theorists have proved, the body is not a mere recipient or passive, but has value in/by itself or, what is more, is a crucial (re)producer of meanings. We argued that, just as much as Umberto Galimberti and Judith Butler, have given back to the body the agency and power that philosophic and scientific thought had deprived it from, van Herk has portrayed the body's ability to rebel against the very same meanings or norms it is assigned, as well as its role in reconfiguring or rematerializing established/normative paths (spatial and other). Thus,

we have seen how it is the body's *unrest*/discomfort due to gender norms that primarily prompted travel or incessant movement, both searching and effectively opening new spaces and life possibilities for women.

We have shown how the inscription of the body in van Herk's texts is more than remarkable due to this active role that directly counteracts imposed restrictions, but also because it is given a prominence in representation which goes beyond the common treatment it is generally assigned in discourse, as seldom is the female body of interest except to be hipersexualised or exposed for the male gaze. This visual overexposal is directly opposed by van Herk, as gathered from her statement that one of the reasons for her characters to disappear is a reaction to women being "so visible by virtue of their bodies" (Verduyn 2001, 22). In addition, though, that disappearance or invisibility means a further rejection of the official maps, both geographical and discursive again, as these are based on assumptions that have excluded the body's mediation with space/knowledge and, by extension, women's access to the corresponding approved/valid meanings. In contrast to early feminists who sought to transcend the body to attain equal validation in the official realms, we have found that van Herk's texts stand out for (re)inscribing bodily and subjective experiences as equally valid cognitive matters too.

In this way, we may conclude that van Herk's work rather approaches more recent feminist thinking such as Donna Haraway's situated or standpoint theories (1988), which acknowledge the unavoidable particular vision with which humans approach and interpret our world. The connection to space is once more central as the author has recognised her (bodily and subjective) position in both physical and discursive spheres: "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' " (Howells 1996, 7). Hélène Cixous is also a fundamental referent inasmuch as the effort to recover women's body and desire, and their particular inscription in writing, also became one of van Herk's main concerns, as we saw in her multiple reactions to patriarchal punishment and devaluation of women under such inconsistent/ (mostly)inflicted considerations. Just as the female body usually attracts attention in only one instance (for its sexuality and for others' gaze), female desire appears, but only if within a delineated/allowed path. This is why, van Herk demonstrates, Ana Karenina

is punished, because her desire, paradoxically the single project or encouragement in life that Tolstoy/society plans for her, is not the proper kind; or why the protagonist/van Herk in *Places* was not permitted to drive (herself) or go to dances. In conclusion, the inability to choose for themselves lies at the bottom of the(ir) real problem: the latter being "*saved* from [her] own story" (1990, 26), just like Anna, as gathered from van Herk's complaint that criticism has always came up with external or psychological explanations for Anna's behaviour, never taking into account, instead, her own right to choose nor feel, her "being a sexual woman" and "experience[ing] desire" (qtd in Dargent et al. 1994, 6).

Summing up, we have seen van Herk's clear awareness of the mutual influence between body and place, and of the gender and other binary distinctions underlying both. In particular, there is a strong responsiveness to the feminisation of land and to the opposite pole, the 'disembodied' cartographic method and wider literary and epistemic approaches. Thus, her treatment of space directly confronts the cartographic model that has been/is so influent in Canada, a country where the map is an established element and metaphor for their identity as "nation, as people, as literature", a consequence of the "sheer immensity of the country", she informs us, and of its having been "mapped entirely only by 1967,[48] [their] one hundredth birthday" (1992, 54). Here we may appreciate once more van Herk's interplay between the material and the discursive; she has based her work on historical explorers and mapmakers who delineated her country (fictionalised through some of the. male protagonists of *The Tent Peg*), and has signalled the equal role of literature in shaping it, with the allusion to male writers having imposed/left their view on landscape. We have concluded our research by discussing the possibilities of this disruption of hierarchised, gendered dichotomies, of transcending such a distinction: then, van Herk's fiction mandate in going beyond the real/the present state of affairs, is more than justified and helpful, in order to open new material and discursive spaces or to further blur other binaries affecting humans' lives and options.

We have underlined Van Herk's ultimate/additional interplay, therefore, the geographer as writer and the author as mapper inasmuch as both are based "on systems of assumptions" which configure the way reality is later understood: "The conception,

[48] The territory of Nunavut was still included in the Canadian nation in 1993, a year after the publication of *A Frozen Tongue* where the author tells us about this "on-going process" of mapmaking (1992b, 54).

the point of view, even the blindness of that maker are always present. The cartographer has a ‘critical role equivalent to that of an author’ ”(1992b, 57). As such, her own fiction counteracts Canadian cartographic and literary traditions that have left frozen/stable images of passive, static and menacing images of woman and land, as has been done by the early explorer and settler chronicles/narratives and by canonical prairie writers. Nonetheless, van Herk also represents a wider challenge to worldviews and accepted knowledge that aim to be objective/disembodied/unmarked and pass as true/universal. Thus, she not only repeatedly disrupts such assumptions but searches to recover the collateral left-outs, particularly the body and women, through her emblematic tasks of mapping the “unexplored” and of rewriting conventional myths and stories which usually are neither fair to women nor precise in historical terms. In keeping with this awareness, additionally, her own fiction stylistically compromises by reflecting the unfixity and instability of categories/story/meaning(s)/maps that her *restless* characters (her bodies ta unrest) pursue, long for.

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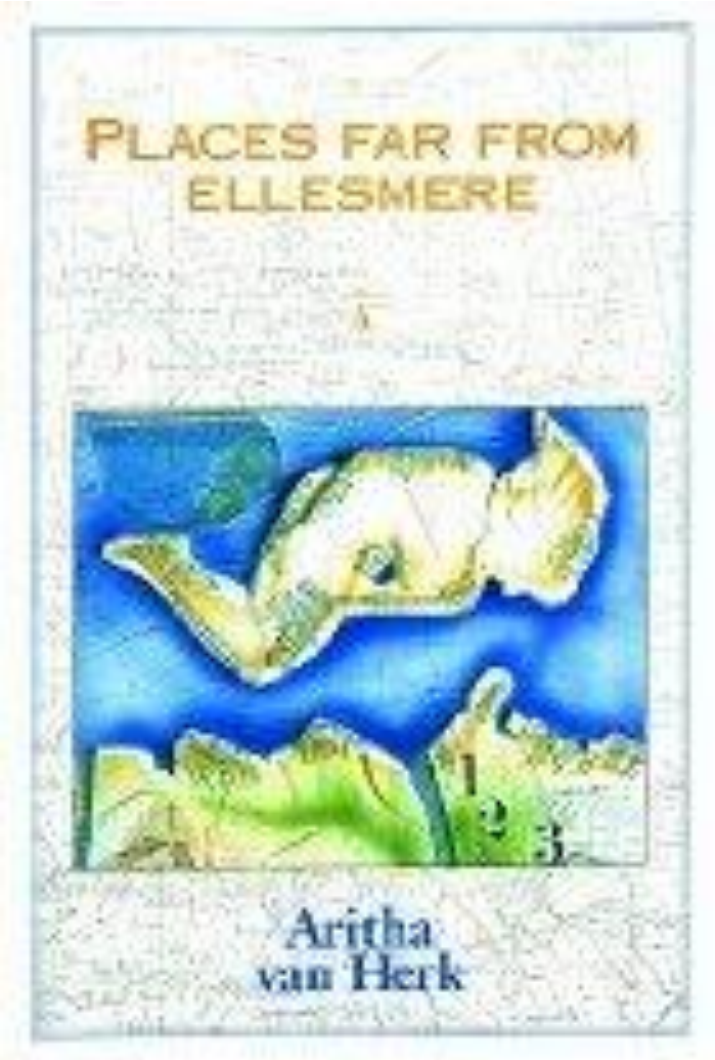
Annexes



1. Cover of Aritha van Herk's geografictione Places far from Ellesmere