

**PANTIES AND ROADS: WOMAN, FICTION AND
CARTOGRAPHY IN ARITHA VAN HERK'S
*NO FIXED ADDRESS***

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse the novel *No Fixed Address* by the Canadian writer Aritha van Herk from the particular perspectives opened by postcolonial and feminist literary theories. I will focus on the intersections between these two theoretical discourses in fiction. My attempt is to show how van Herk dismantles social and literary conventions in an alternative narrative that rewrites the relations among woman, fiction and space.

You discover in your search that the fashionable woman's shape has always been in a state of constant change. We have come to be what we are after years of changes in cut and color, drapery and form adapted and re-adapted in variations on camouflage. At any given moment, the garments covering it have determined the contours of the body; but the final appearance of the outer costume was inevitably controlled by a supporting apparatus beneath. 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.¹

Such is the beginning of Aritha van Herk's novel *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey*. The biographer, interested in the history of women's underwear –and immediately identified as a woman by the 'we,' which not only marks her gender but also involves us women in the research, and thus in the reading of the book– follows the life of Arachne Manteia in her dangerous challenge to patterns and structures of every kind. Indeed, the novel represents a simultaneous challenge of certain images of femininity, of the colonial concept of maps, and of the way we write and read fiction itself. The text does so in a manner that Shari Benstock detects, in women's writing, as a

relation-making process “of the mind to writing ... of political to narrative system” that signals “not only a problematizing of social and literary conventions ... but also the need to reconceptualize form itself.”²

In this paper, I would like to identify the stratagems by which van Herk successfully exploits the metaphor of female body as earth to ensue the double colonisation that women living in peripheral territories (Canada, in this case) might be subjected to. At the same time, I wish to describe how feminist and postcolonial issues interweave, through the intertexts of women’s underwear and maps respectively, in a novel that defies not only social and literary conventions, but also the concept of form itself.

Diana Brydon uses the term post-colonial to refer to those “cultures [which] have been formed through the transplantation and transformation of languages and cultures from elsewhere.”³ Brydon distinguishes at least between slave and settler colonies in the British colonial enterprise. In both cases, the natives are subjected and/or marginalised, but in the second instance (a settler colony such as Canada), the transported culture becomes internalised by both the settlers and the dominated indigenous inhabitants. As opposed to former slave colonies, such as India or the African countries, with a strong native culture to turn to, here, Brydon argues, “it was much more difficult to eradicate an internalised Englishness that militated against developing a indigenous identity.”⁴

Although acknowledging many differences among diverse colonial circumstances, Brydon opts for considering Canada as a postcolonial space, because of its “ambiguous ‘interphase’ position between the two states of mind and between the competing pulls of the disintegrating British empire and the advancing American empire.”⁵ The literary production of these territories, then, would show a need to declare its difference: to reject its position as “merely the engulfable margins of the imperial center.”⁶

In this context, *No Fixed Address* can be considered a post-colonial text in its coming from an area caught between the legacy of old and the threat of new colonial circumstances. Moreover, this novel alone provides a theoretical stance from which to speculate on the use and abuse of tradition from a position of resistance.⁷ Thus, van Herk includes all possible modes of discourse in a text that is constantly resisting its own framing—in a way perhaps truthful to those who have seen English Canadian writing as a literature of resistance and contradiction.⁸

Indeed, van Herk’s refusal to conform to old patterns and versions, leads her to revise, rewrite, and often parody classical myths (*Arachne/Ariadne*), generic conventions (the picaresque or the western), and traditional images of women (women’s travelling journal). In her essay on the sense of place in Canadian literature, Eleanor Cooks puts forward a Canadian awareness of what she calls “hyphenated conditions” as well as an attention to “how things get put together.”⁹ Here, I would rather suggest that van Herk, like her protagonist, while displaying an extreme awareness of categories, refuses to put things together, and opts, instead, for a radical exercise of displacement. Attained through a fictionalised narrator/biographer, the story becomes a self-consciously subjective crosscultural representation of woman, time and space that seriously dismantles realist conventions of plot and structure.

I would like to focus precisely on those representations of woman and space, for there is in the book a recurrent double metaphor of female body and territory as colonised space. According to Graham Huggan, the attraction of post-colonial writers to physical and psychological maps indicates a need to re-interpret traditional

perceptions of space (as enclosed, hierarchised territory), a need which leads these writers to an exploration of “new territories,” mostly occupied by women, region and ethnicity.¹⁰ These spaces, Huggan argues, “do not so much forge new definitions as denote the semantic slippage between prescribed definitions of place.”¹¹ Revision of the mechanisms at work in the production of maps, then, provides the “new” writers with a post-colonial discourse that unveils the “relativity of modes of spatial (and, by extension, cultural) perception.”¹²

Thus, in a very post-colonial mode, there is, in van Herk’s novel, an attempt of both woman and land to free themselves from the marks of possession, in such a way as to create “ways of escape out of the dominant discourse that threatens to enclose us all.”¹³ As I have mentioned, the most obvious intertext in the novel is the history of women’s underwear, in which women have suffered multiple tortures of the body, since “[i]t was for a long time taken for granted that woman’s body should be prisoner, taped and measured and controlled.” (10) Significantly, an underwear saleswoman, “Arachne wears nothing at all.” (12) The second informing metaphor is the roads through which men have arranged, structured, and confined the space around them as something logical and fixed. Arachne’s concept of space is, however, much more changing, her maps as well as the names of the towns in it deceiving the eye, “their reality doubtful and confined.” (112)

In a modern female version of the western, *No Fixed Address* follows the life of Arachne Manteia as she travels the Canadian prairie selling women’s underwear on board of her black Mercedes, always getting, sexually and professionally, the most of it. Of dubious working-class origins –fitting the picaresque genre the novel parodies,– Arachne has previously worked as a city bus driver, and only conceives her life in terms of motion, “the illusion that she is going somewhere, getting away.” She fails to recognise her own past and thinks of it as unreal, her own memories as distorted as the “objects receding in the rearview mirror.” Driving, her living/loving activity, is a constant movement forward apparently deprived of the purpose of leaving and/or arriving. It is the motion in itself, the process as endless, that fascinates Arachne, and represents “the only sensible way to deal with the world.” (68)

Her radical rejection of fixed structures obviously leads Arachne to resist to conform to any patterns of femininity, always associated with immobility, stasis. Much to the contrary, she takes on traditionally male jobs, swears and spits out of her car window, has a stocky and muscular body, and “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 impositions of childhood and mothers.” (40) In that sense, despite her complicity as a seller of female underwear –a token in the novel for women’s historical enslavement–, she renders her own occupation doubtful by wearing nothing herself, “adamantly determined not to be her own best advertisement”; and when asked for advice, she always recommends the comfortable, inexpensive, and cool white cotton, perhaps because of a certain “religious awareness that white cotton must be healthier if it’s unprovocative.” (12)

Sexually liberated, Arachne is always ready to enjoy the bodies of the “quick and comfortable and undemanding” men she meets on the road; she even looks for them, and when they do it, she always comes. “They’re just bodies,” she explains to her only friend Thena, ““you could put a paper bag over their heads’.” (33) Still, she is not totally unscrupulous, and distinguishes between boring and enjoyable men: she knows the world is full of the former, for whom sex is a brutal conquest of the

female body; she only loves the men who make love “without in some minuscule but thwarted way subduing her,” and for whom “[p]leasure ... is exactly that, not something won or held back.” (27)

Thomas, the cartographer, her “Apocryphal lover,” is one of these undemanding men with whom Arachne enjoys an altogether satisfactory relationship. Moreover, the reversal of roles that occurs between the two makes this relationship an exception: he draws the roads, she reads and experiences them; he works at home, she has a travelling job; he does the house cleaning, she “litters the living room with her samples, her order forms, her road life.” (62) As Linda Hutcheon suggests, “[h]is is the product; hers the process.” Thomas’s perception of territory as creative spaces enables multiple connections between mapping and writing, between travelling and reading. “Like the writer,” Hutcheon notes, “the cartographer makes possible the renewal of process: reading is the analogue of travelling.”¹⁴

Similarly, through Thomas’s presence, body and maps become connected: he neither interferes with Arachne’s life nor invades her body to possess it. Their acts of love are –as the maps he loves and she carries along in her selling trips– explorative, tentative, pleasurable experiences. Aritha van Herk has herself pointed out the infinite possibilities that a metaphorical relationship between body and road can offer in the textual construction. In an article on feminist erotics and/in the text, she writes:

We insure vehicles and we have careful regulations for their operation; surely, the container of the skin is another travelling body caught in a tangled and confused series of intersections and clover leaves, freeways and four-way stops for which there is no decipherable map.¹⁵

Instances of an implicit parallel between the sexual and the cartographical acts are many in the book since Arachne meets Thomas. She feels attracted as much to him as to his particular perception of maps, which, she discovers, is also hers:

He never imagined a woman would be interested, would touch these maps with reverence and desire, caressing the paper between thumb and forefinger. She covets them the way he does, images that trace out hope, mapping an act of faith, a way of saying, I have been here, someone will follow, so I must leave a guide. (118)

In a study of the significance of maps in two postcolonial writers, Graham Huggan has observed how the concept of map is not necessarily a negative one. “The optical data codified in a map,” he argues, “construct a model, not a copy, of the phenomenal world which facilitates our orientation in it.”¹⁶ Through a comparative study of western and non-western modes of spatial representation, Huggan asserts that for some non-western cultures, the making and reading of maps is a collective activity based on experience and passed down orally “in a successive recreation of the cultural history of the people.”¹⁷

Maps in *No Fixed Address*, are then positive metaphors of (re)creation: roads, like writing, like reading, provide Arachne with “a story to inhabit.” (112) Yet the maps Arachne uses, like their author, are seen as exceptions: They are not prescriptive

but descriptive; she does not want to possess the territory she travels, only to experience it, “the pace and progression of journey, the multifarious seduction of movement.” (163-4) As Hutcheon writes: “Her relation to the land she travels is not that of the male tradition of mastering and controlling nature, perhaps most obviously because the male tradition had usually seen the land as gendered female.”¹⁸

A very different version of men (and maps) is given, for instance, in the episode of the poet: a man convinced that “[w]omen are muses,” and whose life is an attempt “to understand them, praise them, capture them, worship them, overwhelm them, love them.” (201) Arachne, who distrusts men poets because “they are always looking for women to put into their poems,” finds this man nonetheless peculiar in his ridiculous self-confidence. Through this character, the cartographical connection is reversed so that women are objectified by a man’s mind in the way territory has been by cartographers: To confine her/it, to possess her/it, to subdue her/it. Driven by ambition, the poet, Arachne is sure,

would be an uneven lover, erratic, would jump from point to point on a woman’s body, like one of those join-the-dots pictures, hasty and irregular, urgency motivated by his subsiding reputation, the fact that he has not been included in the latest anthology. (205)

On the contrary, when Thomas enters Arachne’s life, the sexual and the textual seem provisionally connected: As he provides Arachne with some emotional stability, the text also shows an increasing tendency to linearity. Despite her road jockeys –only at times a source of guilt for Arachne– their nonetheless entirely satisfactory relationship is accompanied by a somehow *logic* narrative line: events are believable and are told in a more or less linear chronological way; besides, in spite of the fact that Arachne’s travelling roads become increasingly intricate, she is always willing to come back home, to Thomas, her connecting thread. Provisionally, then, Thomas is acknowledged as Arachne’s center, her only hook to reality. Yet she is too happy to feel comfortable in that reality, in which Arachne thinks of herself as a transvestite, her disguise discovered “she will lose Thomas, her only solid connection with what she calls ‘the real world,’ certainly the respectable world, in which she is an imposter.” (103)

Paradoxically, it is Thomas, this entirely lovable man whom Arachne adores, who, at the same time, prevents her movement. There is no wonder why Thena and Lanie, Arachne’s mother, credit Thomas “with saving Arachne, with preventing her from becoming an escapee.” They both agree that this man “has given her some structure. She has a schedule of sorts. She has a telephone. She is inclined to return home.” (62) Since Thomas’s house becomes the returning point from her journeys, motion is obviously limited, confined by the notions of leaving, of arrival. And Arachne seems only too aware of this difference as well as of *her* difference, and of the impossibility of becoming part of the imposed unidimensional perception she calls *reality*:

Arachne remembers that desire. She had it too but she learned very quickly its impossibility, that she was not the same, would never be the same. There was nothing she could do about her difference, nothing but to exploit it, call attention to the fact that she was crossing every boundary. It was a way of declaring herself, of drawing a line. She knew where she stood. Outside. (143)

And she does step outside: the “kidnapping” of the old man Josef breaks definitely narrative linearity at the same time that Arachne herself breaks her Calgary-centered travelling routine. Since Arachne distrusts the patterns of reality, for a long time, she has also been aware of the limits of cartography. Even Thomas’s maps are defective: old towns disappear, new ones appear as if out of the nothingness, “the roads have holes, signs are changed, her maps are out of date.” (32) There seems to exist no correspondence between the names of the towns and what they really *are*. Only intuitively, perhaps, does Arachne realise this lack of referentiality between signified and signifier. She nonetheless thinks in terms of simulacrum, at times feeling that the towns are “sets,” that they have a mere strategic existence –for Arachne to sell her underwear: “If she could dart around the corner of a false-fronted general store quickly enough, she would discover the vacancy behind and the face would be free to fall.” (112)

Coinciding with her heroine’s realisation of barriers and with her choice to cross them, van Herk too seems to arrive at the limits of realist fiction, or at the confines of the image of woman in such a fiction. She decidedly opts for the creation of an alternative space, in which, “narrative itineraries may take different paths.”¹⁹ Both Aritha van Herk and Arachne Manteia seem determined to take that alternative route, to free themselves from any kind of structure whatsoever, to declare their difference, to exploit it. Arachne does physically, by escaping the cartographical circle and “spidering *her own* map over the intricate roads of the world” (223) (my italics). Listening to the story of the displaced Bosnian-Serb Josef, after she runs away with him, the maps become intersected with an altogether different reality, the lines unclear, their reality confused: “Her dreams are the maps of convoluted journeys.” (228) Or, as Huggan observes in the Australian Aboriginal Dreaming-tracks, “to map the country is to dream it.”²⁰

Revealingly, at this point, Arachne’s movements begin to take the form of dreams, of an endless spinning: circles and curves seem to replace the straight line said to characterise the prairie landscape. In turn, Arachne reclaims the land as hers, back to the typical female gendered earth. But, in a scene charged with significance, she dances around the stone called the “Wild Woman,” in a gesture that both acknowledges the archaic feminine power and challenges the stasis to which women have been reduced. Her incessant spinning around the female-shaped stone points indeed to a very different image of woman:

Arachne looks at the sky, at the circle of world below them, and begins to dance.... It is a long way east she has circled and circled, finally come to this nipple of land on the breast of the world, immensely high and windswept.... And there they find the Wild Woman, her stone outline spread to infinite sky, to a prairie grassland’s suggestion of paradise, a woman open-armed on the highest hill in that world. They trace her outline: arms, amulet, hair, teeth, skirt, breasts, feet. Arachne stands between her legs. Her face speaks, the welcome gesture of arms, the amulet’s adornment, the breasts soft curves, immensely eloquent. Arachne’s small shadow falls within the woman’s shape, the stone-shaped woman. She stretches out inside the woman, lies within the stones on her back beneath that wheeling sky, arms outflung like the woman’s, her head cushioned on a circle of breast. (232-3)

In her turn, van Herk also manages to escape the restrictions of realism as well as, in Nancy Miller’s terms, “the inscriptions of its political structures,” by turning the last

section of her novel into a dark piece of fiction.²¹ Gothic, fantastic, or at times just absurd, this last section, like the Arachne who fills its pages, seems to lack any sense of direction. It is the sudden dismantling of oppositions between outside and inside, between realist and fantastic fiction, between omniscient and fictionalised self-conscious narrator, that totally exposes the textual construction and unveils the text as a postmodern artifact. As Donald Pease argues, this kind of narrative –which he calls “postnational”– undermines the concepts of both national narrative and national identity, since they stress contradiction and fragmentation and, in so doing, break the tendency towards an enforced integrity, from which they are necessarily excluded.²²

In their coordinated challenge of authority, complicity between van Herk and Arachne reaches unexpected dimensions: they both trick the biographer, whose research represents van Herk’s first motif for the story and perhaps Arachne’s only reason to exist. As any of us, readers, unable to come to terms with the obscure disappearance of the protagonist, the biographer interrogates Thena: “You are persistent, you want to know how the whole business ended, what happened to Arachne.” (237) Her obsession with “finding out the real story,” with “detect[ing] the truth,” is frustrated by Thena who “persists in denying all knowledge of what happened.” (238-9) The truth would in fact be ungraspable, since “literature,” Gayatri Spivack suggests, “displays that the truth of a human situation *is* the itinerary of not being able to find it.”²³

Meanwhile, Arachne drives in full circles trying to escape the reality (and the fiction) that treads after her to enclose her. In this, perhaps, her ultimate journey, she experiences all kinds of adventures: she finds herself in a surreal women’s meeting in the sauna of a hotel; she tricks one of the women into giving her a great amount of money for the car Arachne is not willing to sell, and then is tricked herself by another ‘picaro’ like her. She kills a man and even dies back in Vancouver, “one of her lives,” she thinks “certainly over.” (301) Significantly, her conviction that she is dead, seems to be motivated by a vacuum-like state of mind: on the ferry crossing the Strait of Georgia, she wakes up to find out she has lost memory and language altogether.

Inevitably, of all possible endings, this is a problematic one. To read through the increasingly anti-teleological piece is to arrive nowhere, only to watch Arachne “stealing herself to enter the blank, the dislocated world of the North,” driving herself towards nothingness. “What happens when the road comes to an end?” She wonders. “What she finds at the end will have to be enough, will have to be enough,” she reassures herself. “Perhaps she could find a place to settle in, colonize,” she ironically thinks. (302) But that part is left without an answer, for Arachne simply disappears without leaving a trace behind. Crossing all possible boundaries, she goes beyond marked territory, where there are no maps.

This ending could be considered an ultimate undermining of the concept of arrival –a romantization of process. Indeed, at this stage, the activities of reading, writing, driving or even mapping become connected through Arachne’s endless process of motion: “She drives relentlessly, driving into and out of herself, a fierce evasion that can bring her nowhere but is itself enough.” (270) But I would suggest that the novel’s ending allows for a kind of arrival that is, in itself, indefinable. When Arachne reaches the point marked precisely with the initials of her lover, she immediately recognises the limits of cartographical exploration. She has alerted us to the possibilities, to the notion of “no end but edge, the border, the brink, the selvage of the world”. (291) Strategies of displacement are at work here not only within the constructions of fiction, but also within physical and psychological territories, within the structures of

gender and language itself. In a deconstructive exercise, van Herks destabilises the readers' expectations by taking her heroine to unconceivable limits.²⁴ Beyond that point, Arachne knows, there is an immense unmapped territory for her to experience in what seems to me Arachne's ultimate liberation: "She watches the roadless world below her, knowing she has arrived." (310)

Perhaps the biographer was right and Thena was "the keeper of history." (237) Perhaps Thena gave us all a clue in affirming that "[t]he story's not over yet." (240) Perhaps, we readers, as Silvia Albertazzi notes on postmodern fiction, are "left alone to continue the journey beyond the border of the last typed word."²⁵ Perhaps the story will never be over, since writing and reading is an endless process of be-coming. "There is no end to the panties," the biographer, hopelessly tracking Arachne's motion, finally realises; "there will be no end to this road," words with which the book, nonetheless, *ends*. (319)

In her essay on feminist criticism, Barbara Godard writes about

the effort of women writers to open new dimensions of space, to allow women freedom of movement, without hesitancy, or fear, or obstacle, through geographic and political spaces, but, more fundamentally, through cultural, conceptual, and imaginary spaces.²⁶

With *No Fixed Address*, Aritha van Herk has definitely contributed to that collective effort to open up new areas of women's research and writing, while, at the same time, enriching female tradition with a different perception of the relation of woman to fiction and to space.

Notes

1. Aritha van Herk, (1987) *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey*. Toronto: Seal Books. Subsequent references appear in the text.
2. Shari Benstock, (1988) "Authorizing the Autobiographical," in Shari Benstock (Ed.) *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 19.
3. Diana Brydon, (1987) "The Myths that Write Us: Decolonising the Mind," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 10:1, Autumn, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7. Douglas Atkins sees theory as a strategy of resistance from within, and argues that "... without itself escaping critique, theory prevents particular theories from evading the question of their own framing" (11). See his "Introduction: Literary Theory, Critical Practice, and the Classroom," (1989) *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Douglas G. Atkins and Laura Morrow Eds. Amherst [Mass.]: The University of Massachusetts Press, pp. 1-23.
8. See for instance Heather Murray, "Reading for Contradiction in the Literature of Colonial Space," (1987) *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature, Reappraisals; Canadian Writers 13*. John Moss Ed. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, pp. 71-84.
9. Eleonor Cook, "'A Seeing and Unseeing in the Eye': Canadian Literature and the Sense of Place," (1988) *Daedalus*, 117:4, p. 217.

10. Graham Huggan, (1989) "Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 20:4, October, p.127.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
12. *Ibid.*, 128.
13. Brydon, p. 2.
14. Linda Hutcheon, (1988) *The Canadian Postmodern. A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, p. 130.
15. Aritha van Herk, (1990) "Laying the Body on the Line (The Feminist Makes a Pass, or Figurations in a Feminist's Erotics)," *Border Crossing*, 9:4, October, pp. 86-87.
16. Graham Huggan, (1991) "Maps, Dreams, and the Presentations of Ethnographic Narrative: Hugh Brody's 'Maps and Dreams' and Bruce Chatwin's 'The Songlines'," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 22:1, January, p. 58.
17. *Ibid.*, 62.
18. Hutcheon, p. 124.
19. See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, (1992) "De/Colonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women's Autobiographical Practices." S. Smith and J. Watson (Eds.) *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. xx.
20. Huggan, "Maps, Dreams..." p. 62.
21. Nancy K. Miller, (1986) "Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic." N. Miller (Ed.) *The Poetics of Gender*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 275. Miller elaborates a brilliant argument around the word 'arachnology,' and propose a mode of feminist criticism that pays attention to the text as a woman's web, a woman's strategy to subvert male conventions and to declare female specificity.
22. See Donald E. Pease, (1992) "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives," *Boundary 2*, 19:1, Spring, pp. 1-13.
23. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivack, (1988) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Politics*. New York: Routledge, p. 77.
24. See Danny J. Anderson, "Deconstruction: Critical Strategy/ Strategic Criticism," Atkins, pp. 137-157. He puts forward the effects of some strategies of destabilisation in deconstruction.
25. Sylvia Albertazzi, (1989) "Beautiful Travellers: Notes on Postmodern Fiction," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 11:2, Spring, p. 60.
26. Barbara Godard, (1986) "Mapmaking: A Survey of Feminist Criticism." B. Godard (Ed.) *Gynocritics/Gynocritique: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writings*. Toronto: ECW Press, pp. 2-3.