

E K A T E R I N A K O Z L O V A

Movement beyond Roads and Writing beyond Fiction An Interview with Aritha van Herk

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Ekaterina Kozlova: *Canadian heroines and their way towards psychological freedom were always the focal point of your writing. Like Judith Pierce in Judith and J. L. in The Tent Peg, Arachne in No Fixed Address embarks on a journey of self-discovery through Canadian landscapes. How does she come to terms with herself?*

Aritha van Herk: Arachne is a different kind of character, because I don't think she ever stops being restless. Her disappearance at the end of the novel, which some people take as negative, and some people read as an escape, is actually a kind of recognition that in the landscapes of Canada she is a restless moving force and she will always embody the places that she passes through. Although she drives all over Western Canada, she keeps going home to Calgary, but she also can't stop leaving. And that persistence of movement, which is itself a kind of Odyssean myth (even though I know, in the end he goes home, but who knows whether he stays there), becomes a kind of Odyssey of discovery for the parts of Canada that very few people know about.

As for the course of her final movement north, where she is travelling, some people say, 'Oh, it's because she killed this man.' But that's all coincidence along the way. The episode in the mine, as well as the very strange women's meeting in the Banff Springs Hotel are just continuations. Not one element prompts her into that movement North, except movement itself. Movement is the way that she feels herself. All of those moments, like where she "almost dies" from eating fugu, are merely an impetus to go farther. So, she commits her crimes and what happens to her [can be interpreted] in mythological terms. Gods are always dying and coming back to life, people are always dying and coming back to life. It's a kind of refusal of stasis, and that's what really keeps her moving, until she moves beyond the roads of Canada to a place where they vanish in the landscape. And of course, the North has no roads. When you go far enough north, there are no more roads at all, which is why I am so interested in that spatial notion. It is not an uncharted landscape, it's not a landscape that we don't know, it's not the landscape that has no movement, but the landscape beyond the mechanics of a car and beyond roads. We don't see where

she ends up, she just disappears off the edge of the horizon. I love that idea. You can tell, I have a terrific desire to disappear.

EK: *In your radio talk about the 1976 novel *Bear* by Marian Engel, you mention that it is one of the greatest books of the Canadian literature that fascinated you at the start of your university career (1:00-1:15, 6:40-7:40). In *No Fixed Address*, a bear appears together with Arachne's Doppelgänger. Is it a tribute to Marian Engel's *Bear* or just a symbol of nature, the incarnation of Arachne's wild spirit as one of the women "who keep their skin as substitute for fur" (van Herk 1987: 101)?*

AvH: I wanted a cameo, you know the way directors always visit their own movies? So, there is a point, at which I wanted to visit my own novel. And the woman whom Arachne picks up (she thinks she is with a dog, but it's a bear) is an image of the writer writing Arachne, Arachne meeting herself. She is her Doppelgänger indeed. And the Doppelgänger is an important figure in Canadian literature. For example, if you look at the primary influence of Robert Kroetsch, in *The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof* he meets his double in the Frankfurt train station. That's one of the models that I used there.

Indeed, I wanted my novel to be visited by the spirit of Marian Engel's bear because that novel is a parody of the nature writing that Canadian literature is relegated to, often by outsiders. Europeans especially. They want Canadians to write about nature, they want us to see a bear, they want us to write about nature! And that has become the albatross of continent. So, when Arachne picks up the woman, who is hitchhiking with the bear, she is speaking of all of the writing that insists that Canadian literature has to be about the wilderness and it has to have a bear. The bear snores, the bear is hopeless. It's a wonderful image, because it is both my homage to Marian [Marian Engel died in 1985, *No Fixed Address* was originally published in 1986] and it's a critique of the way that Canadian literature is settled by its own incredible landscape. I am very skeptical of how European critics romanticize Canada's wilderness. You could hear a trace of that yesterday when I was speaking [Aritha van Herk gave a keynote speech on July 07, 2017 at the conference "Canada Across Borders: Comparative Perspectives" organized in Konstanz by the Young Scholars' Forum of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries]. We have a very different relationship to landscape than people think. And no, we don't have bears everywhere, sadly. So that's what I was playing with there, as well as visiting my own novel.

EK: *My first impression was that Arachne was going insane as she met her Doppelgänger. As if it were a turning point in the novel indicating that Arachne had been staring into an abyss long enough and the abyss stared back into her (Nietzsche 69).*

AvH: No, she is perfectly sane, I don't want to give her a pathology or an illness because I think she is more the embodiment of the spirit of movement of Canada than that she is becoming schizophrenic, or crazy, or losing her direction. She has

lost direction, but in a good way, because we are too directed, and we always move in a specific way. I think our attribution of cause is always suspect. Why does she pick up a hitchhiker? Because she feels like it, she is travelling, she is free. Why does she have [a hatpin in her poncho] when she is on the ferry across [the Strait of Georgia]? It's totally an accident of invention and of fiction. And Arachne is a woman who accommodates herself to the moment. She is right there in every moment. And for some reason, the moment is what gives her impetus. So, no, I don't think she is mad. She is not insane. But she is the embodiment of the spirit of restlessness, which later on, of course, I develop in *Restlessness*. She has to keep moving because she is in search of a kind of eternal travelling.

EK: *In one of the chapters in the novel, you describe some objects in an office as being indicative of people's thoughts and mood, as carrying their emotional experiences around: "Only a half-open drawer, a cardigan dangling crookedly from the back of a chair, a book of matches, a torn Kleenex. Do they make up stories, read futures in the paper crumpled in the garbage, do they see blood, tears, anger in the position of the chair, the attitude of a typewriter, the angle of a wife's picture?" (87-88) Do you think that objects have a mobile power of transmitting the meanings, which people have imbued them with?*

AvH: You picked up on my interest in materialism. Absolutely. Because the object is imbued with the spirit of the person that interacts with it. I think we are too much, right now, fixated on objects and we dispose of them, when, in fact, they have a much longer "life" than we think they do.

What you see in the little story I gave you ["Deep Cold on 11a"] is the object that I "fetishize," although that's not really the word. The object is a boot scraper used to scrape the matter off your shoes. Boot scrapers are almost nonexistent anymore, nobody has them. So, I am interested in the way that objects are imbued with the spirit of people, but also what they then convey in stories. If you walk into a room, but the person who lives there isn't there, you can actually tell a lot about that person if you pay attention and if that person has a relationship with their objects. One of the elements of contemporary culture that I lament is the way we have made objects disposable, over and over again. We don't fix our shoes, we throw them away. We don't fix our purses, we throw them away. We don't cherish our grandmother's ring because it's out of fashion. And I find that ahistoricism terrifying because it means we are relegating the past to a place where we don't learn from it anymore. Part of what Arachne is doing in travelling is inventing herself a past, because her childhood was so bereft of affect. But that doesn't mean she has no affect, or that she has not had much love. She is one of those disaffected children who are looking for meaning in everything that she encounters.

But Arachne's is also a story of class. She is a working-class girl. She has very little education, she is a tough street kid. She learns how to defend herself, despite the fact that she is a girl, she is tougher than all the other gangs. When she slams the kid

on the head with a sack full of coins, which is a lethal weapon, she is trying to reinvent herself. So, all the deaths in the novel are her attempt to reinvent the limited circumscription of what she is able to encounter by virtue of how poor she is, she is not well-educated. I am not going to tell you what to think of the heroine but that she is a very poor kid and her driving the bus, her encounter with the classical pianist, her meeting the man with the maps and taking off with him are all markers: she betrays those elements of class that are so much missing in our depiction of characters in Canadian literature. She has to work, she has to have a job, she has to survive and her sense of physical safety or distance is always contingent. So, she does bad stuff.

EK: *In your recent talk on the CBC Radio about your latest book "Stampede and the Westness of the West" you also relate to people's disconnect from place and its history saying that "people think the landscape, the land, the agriculture, the Indigenous ways are a relic." But you state that they are not, that "they are in our DNA and it's to our stupidity if we ignore that" (5:00-5:15). It feels like Arachne is charged with the energy and collective memory of the landscapes where she finds herself. On the one hand, her ability to connect to a place seems to be triggered by the mobility of her imagination driven by the miserable conditions in which she grew up. On the other hand, it could be the mobile power of landscape itself that affected Arachne's open mind and transformed her along the way. How would you explain this connectivity Arachne feels with the land?*

AvH: She is connected to the landscape that she passes through because the landscape doesn't judge, doesn't try to tell her what to do, doesn't give her moral imperatives, and gives her an incredible freedom. There is nothing like a road trip through the prairies. That landscape looks endless. At some stage, you don't know whether you are going north, east, south, or west, because the prairie is like a continuous sea. And the way that that landscape embraces those people who pass through it, is phenomenal, a transcendent and spiritual experience. So, the fact that there is no judgement, she doesn't have to fight for her survival (all she has to do is to sell underwear at stores) makes her aware of this as a place she voyages through, again in Odyssean sense, but a place that accepts her. She can get out of the car, have a picnic in the graveyard. It is a completely open place.

The prairie is also inscribed, of course, by the settlers that have lived there, which gives you a sense of its mythology. Let me use a quotidian example. In Calgary, all of the roads through the city are old Indigenous trails. We don't call our freeways "freeways," we call them trails. Every day I drive up Shaganappi Trail. Shaganappi means pony. All Calgaryans speed. And everybody says, 'Ah, it's because they are rude.' No, it's because the Indigenous people, where I live now, loved fast horses. The faster the horse, the greater they loved it. Their horses were their wealth. So, contemporary Calgaryans driving their cars up a trail, are actually performing an embodiment of what those Indigenous people loved, which was riding fast horses

through the same landscape. Although we don't even know it (well, I know it), we are doing the same thing because the spirit of that place is in the air.

When I go out in a Chinook wind, or I go out on North Hill, or when I am out in the mountains, I take on the history in the place, not a built history, not buildings, but magical spirit that comes through. That's as far as I go in the spirituality realm, but I really believe it. I know that the house where I live contains the spirit of the past, people camped there, people looked at that space, they loved it as much as I do. My job as a writer and as a person living is to honor that spirit and to recognize it.

EK: *Your words reminded me of two locations in the novel that have history and magical spirit in them. The first one is Chief Crowfoot's grave where Arachne and Joseph meet each other for the first time. They see each other for the last time on the site of a mysterious effigy laid out in stones by the Indians on a hill a long time ago, which is the boulder monument known as Wild Man Butte located close to the US-Canadian border to the south from Minton (Bryan 143). Why did you choose these Indian historical monuments as settings for the two turning-point scenes in the story?*

AvH: The Old Man is an embodiment of history and helplessness. There are two people in our culture who are most at the whims of other people's desires, and that is, of course, children and old people. The old man has been put in an old folks' home against his will by a daughter who doesn't care what happens to him. He is actually perfectly fine. Arachne picks him up as an example of an incarcerated person. They go to these two sites, which are both spiritual Indigenous sites, which signals her acknowledgement that he, even though he isn't Indigenous, possesses a kind of connection to older wisdom, which she is actually looking for. I am very tired of the commonly known tourist destinations like Niagara Falls because the places in Western Canada that are sacred, or that are overwhelmingly beautiful, or that are spiritually transcendent, are not commonly known. Arachne is looking for spiritual transcendence, and her visit with the old man or her taking the old man to those places is her way of providing him with the spirit guide to the next world, because he is very close to death. She just takes care of him and he is happy to get out of "jail."

So, they visit those two places. Crowfoot's grave right above the crossing where Treaty Seven was signed. One of the most beautiful spots in Alberta. The Wild Man Effigy, which overlooks the American border, is also one of those places where even an unspiritual person might have a spiritual visitation because of its ancient prominence. I think we, as human beings, are beginning to assimilate the spirit of all that has gone before us. The disconnect between the early peoples of Canada, the Indigenous people who are their progeny, and the settlers that have come to Canada (everyone wants to categorize them), is the biggest mistake colonialism made and is the biggest mistake we made in relation to the landscape. The only way we will manage to form a kind of unity with the landscape that we are a part of, not living on, but a part of, is if we embrace the spirit that it gives us.

So those two places are very important for the spirit of the West which is a different imaginative country: The farthest east Arachne goes is Winnipeg. She never goes into the eastern east. She goes west and then she goes north. The West was the first frontier, the North is the last frontier. She doesn't go to the center of Canada. That whole world of Western Canada, which is so different and so special, is what is so inspiring. Like those mountains I look at every day, they are in my imaginative psyche, impregnable as they are. Can you imagine the first European who saw them? He had no idea what he's looking at! It's a fascinating place. And those two western places in the novel are not mountain views but are prairie views, both important in that sense.

EK: *Besides being related to the First Nations, the places are also associated with death: on the cemetery, Arachne and Joseph find the chief's skull, while on the Wild Man Butte the boundary between the real and the imagined shifts, and it is not clear whether they are alive or dead. Why is death such an important motif?*

Well, first of all Joseph is on the edge of death, we know that. Both the grave and the effigy are markers. Crowfoot's grave is a white monument although the Indigenous people have taken it on. But he was a very important leader and an amazing character in many, many ways.

The grave of Crowfoot is less about the burial of his body, but more about the spot, which overlooks the beautiful, beautiful Bow River, the Crossing of the Bow River, the place where the Indigenous people signed Treaty Seven, where they thought their future was assured, his spirit was really at home there despite his own kind of interesting mobility. He was a man who moved, who travelled, who knew all of Canada. He was a peaceful man, he didn't want to go to war, he didn't join the Riel Rebellion. But he was also very pragmatic. His people were starving, and he was interested in their survival. That was the trade he made.

Those places are both related to death, but in a very positive way. The grave is a marker, but the skull that the characters find could be anyone because there is a grave next to Crowfoot's. In fact, I visited this place and it was a fascinating moment of translation. I was working on the novel, and I encountered two American tourists. The place isn't very well-known, but it's gotten better now. They said, 'Look at that!' All those graves used to have saddles and blankets. Because they would leave on top of the grave the things that were needed in the next life. I didn't talk to them very much, but I saw a skull. It's an old graveyard. When they left, I just covered it up gently, because it's a part of that landscape and that's where it belongs. But that notion of death as kind of a positive eternity very much inhabits those two places. This effigy is the same, it's a human remain. We call what's left "human remains." And effigy is a human remain, it's just made of stone. Both the skull and the effigy are alive and speak to the living if the living want to hear.

EK: *Arachne travels in both rural and urban Canadian spaces, and those spaces seem to move along with her. For example, when going through Countess, Rosemary, Duchess, Millicent, Patricia, and Princess, Arachne notices how the same landscape she passed by before has changed: “the roads have holes, signs are changed, her maps are out of date, towns she remembers from three months ago have vanished, new ones have sprung up in unexpected places, large and ugly.” And immediately she changes herself too: “Arachne begins to spit out the window, to squat and pee without bothering to look for a decent clump of bushes” (32). Moreover, she will disappear herself at the end of the novel, not unlike Redland – the town she tries to find and cannot.*

Arachne is merging with landscape. Landscape is animated as the objects of nature are personified: graves shiver, Arachne finds herself “at the very lip of the valley,” rows of dirt breathe quietly, Joseph follows “the body of the landscape” with this gaze (17-19). At the same time, Arachne’s experience is rendered with the help of landscape-driven metaphors: she wants to “shout her name into the river’s echo,” her inclination for cynicism would “swamp” her (18, 27). In which ways are Arachne, her bodily experience, and landscapes interrelated?

AvH: You said it all, you are a fantastic reader. Exactly. The fact is that the built environment is ephemeral, the towns are there and then they are gone, new towns have sprung up. Arachne is recognizing that the landscape doesn’t stay the same. But yes, she changes with what she encounters, of course. She is such a metaphor for landscape, I am almost embarrassed, it’s a little obvious. She is a part of that undulation and she embraces it in her physical aspects: her behaviors, her resistances, the risks that she takes, because she is a risky character, a picara in every sense of the word. And all picaras do is to get into trouble and then, how do they get out of trouble? They just run away. That’s the old story, that’s what the picara does. They get into trouble and then they run away, whether it’s Tom Jones [*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, a novel by Henry Fielding], or Don Quixote. And she is a female embodiment of that trope.

EK: *The analogy could probably be extended to include the space of the book itself as Arachne disappears from the pages of the book into the intangible, non-existing space of the Canadian North. In *A Frozen Tongue* you wrote that you, too, as a writer “want to disappear, drive off the edge of all the maps of tongue and literature into the fall of language, the white space of the open page” (291). What does disappearance mean to you as a writer and to Arachne as a picara?*

AvH: One of the reasons that I write is to vanish into language because the actual world where we live, the physical material world, much as I love it, it’s not so much problematic, but we all at some stage would love to disappear. I think the ultimate power of any woman is to disappear. This is an antithetical idea to people who think that disappearance means disempowerment, but I read it as an empowering act for a woman who wants to be in control of her visibility. And for a writer that is im-

portant because I love the moment when I can disappear into the book I am writing, or when I can disappear into the book I am reading, or when in my life I can disappear and be a whole other person. So, that is what Arachne is playing with, the empowerment of her own journey. But I don't see disappearance as empty, I just see it as a field of possibility that we don't know about.

EK: *Places and landscapes are synonymous to boundedness and thus stand in opposition to mobility. They are essential for its understanding, but need to be left behind in pursuit of absolute mobility. This is why Arachne's journey through the Canadian West and North inevitably leads her to where the road comes to an end, where the blank space signifies the end of the novel too: "Her life has become movement without end, the grind of notion wearing itself into her, wearing all else out" (304). How do you understand this paradox of movement without end in no space, which is, in fact, immobility as mobility is not to be perceived without space?*

AvH: That's the question! That's why I wrote the novel that has no conclusion. It is a kind of endless stasis. Movement can be an endless stasis. Earlier in the novel, Arachne says, 'I am running away from home, I am running away from home.' She is the figure who is constantly running away, but at the same time is running toward. That notion of not the destination or arrival, but the idea of engaging with movement in order to run toward or that the movement itself is enough of a destination. That's a restless notion and one that I've grappled with a lot in terms of the mobility question because it seems to me that mobility suggests that you are always going somewhere, when in fact, sometimes it's the challenge, the comfort, the excitement of movement that is its own destination. Did I answer your question?

EK: *Absolutely. Arachne's mobility is in fact beyond movement as such, so that she disappears into the metaphysical realm of the Canadian North and Canadian Myth where there are no boundaries and where she is forever free. What is so special about this space where Arachne's life turns into movement without end?*

AvH: If we think about it cartographically, there is uncharted space in Canada, which is what I was playing with. But there is also uncharted space in our imaginations, there is uncharted space in our lives. We have no idea when or where we are going to die. So that notion of space as definable and confinable place or destination is one that I am playing with. I don't have any answers, but I do think she is playing with it as well.

EK: *I think it totally makes sense in terms of trying to achieve the absolute mobility and leaving territorial space behind because if we can locate a place, it is static, but if it is metaphysical, then ultimate movement becomes possible.*

AvH: That's right!

EK: *What really fascinated me about the novel is the elaborate description of the country with its evocative landscapes, which are both real and uncanny. The novel is written in the mode of prairie realism, so that I even felt like tracing Arachne's travels and sales trips on a real map pinpointing the names of small towns you so meticulously listed. Space is not only the context for Arachne's movement, it is also a product of movement. Thus, the prairies of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the rain forest of Vancouver Island and the bluest blue of the Canadian North shape Arachne's personality, and are created by the power of her imagination at the same time. Is it correct to say that there is no boundary between realism and magic in the novel?*

AvH: Absolutely. Because when you begin to see not a literal landscape or a literal journey, but a metaphysical or an evocative, magic realist landscape, then there is no boundary. You have crossed the boundary of all maps, the map which seeks to identify a line, the map which closes, the map which finishes the shape of a story, or the shape of a journey, or the shape of the imagination. So, what I am trying to work with there is the permeable boundary and how it can be crossed. And in fact, the only country that I really think matters is the country of words.

EK: *Talking about your first book "Judith," you mentioned that "transformation moves us to understand that it is possible to transcend established reality by considering not the obvious aspects of the world around us, but the unexplored, the unexplainable. Then fiction becomes magician and transforms itself" (1978: v). Arachne explores the open space of both West and North in a romantic way, heading for the sublime in search of self-transcendence, so that the boundaries of the genre are extended: "If there are west-erns, why can there not be northerns?" as you put it Places Far from Ellesmere (85). It seems that No Fixed Address pushes all possible boundaries: boundaries set by literary genres, by maps, by gender, by society, and even those dictated by common sense. And as if it were not enough, the novel attempts to cross the border between reality and fiction on a purely narratological level. At the end of the novel, Arachne as an internal focaliser disappears and the heterodiegetic narrator turns into a homodiegetic one, i.e. becomes a character in the story. Here, a shifting of the boundary between two worlds occurs: in which one tells and of which one tells. Or maybe of three worlds, as "you" narrator might as well be the reader himself/herself and then, the narrative transcends another boundary and makes the reader to a character in the story. What purpose does introducing this metadiegetic level, or metalepsis, serve?*

AvH: Well, you've analyzed it very well. I don't have to say much. When I say that she vanishes into a journey that we can't identify of course, I neglect to mention the teller of the story, the person who follows her looking for her, looking for her story, and who is as important as the vanishment. There is a witness to the fact that she has gone there, even though we don't know quite where she is gone. So, your analysis is perfect, it's the metadiegetic follower, the reader, and then the reader of the reader, not the accusatory you, but the inviting you. So, they are all connected in

this crazy tale of what follows. The reader is always in that interesting position of what follows.

EK: *Are you trying to engage the reader into the story, make him or her to a character?*

AvH: Of course, I want to implicate the reader, because the reader is implicated in every text by virtue of reading it. But I am also, you are right, trying to pull the reader into the process of the journey, not just be a passive witness to it, but a part of the process of the journey. You know, you noticed that I used the second person in *Places far from Ellesmere* too. Having to go up north in order to look at the places where I've lived, I had to separate the autobiographical from the witnessing, but also pull the reader into my biographical text. So, there are all these interesting intersections and separations. Well, it's what literature can do, it enables that kind of exploration. Instead of just sitting here and describing the architecture, I can take the reader by the hand and say, 'Let's walk through these hallways.' Because I am not just an interpreter as a writer, I am not just a narrator of a story, or a teller of a story, or a writer of a story. The reader is the accompaniment to that. And because I always figure myself as a reader, as well as a writer, this is important to me. There is a very strong sense of the two being comingled.

EK: *I find it amazing how by means of engaging the reader into the story, you develop their imagination, make them to co-creators of the story, teach them how to be story-tellers themselves.*

AvH: Of course, and also to be a part of the journey. Travel literature is fascinating to me, and *Restlessness* is an antitravel book. We are always reading about people who go to the Taj Mahal and then tell us how exquisite it is, which turns the place into a consumerist moment. What I was really seeking to do was to escape that and to say, you can't just consume Arachne's story. You have to be a part of it.

EK: *Thank you very much for this elucidating talk and for answering my questions in so much detail!*

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Map

A Map of Arachne's Journeys, by Ekaterina Kozlova.

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