

DISAPPEARANCE IN DECEPTIVE LANDSCAPES:  
BORDERLINES OF IDENTITY IN THE CANADIAN WILDERNESS  
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO SELECTED WORKS BY  
MARGARET ATWOOD, ROBERT KROETSCH, MICHAEL ONDAATJE AND  
ARITHA VAN HERK

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores why much contemporary Canadian literature features protagonists who disappear in the wilderness. This boundless region serves as a powerful metaphor for a country that feels its internal and external borders are insecure. The nation is not only divided provincially between Anglophone and Francophone communities, it also uneasily defines itself against the frontier with the United States. Through the study of four Canadian writers, I explain why these divisions have made national subjectivity difficult to delineate.

The 1970s saw the first comprehensive articulation of why the wilderness was prominent in Canadian literature. Chapter One considers the work of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, whose thematic criticism discusses the Canadian landscape in relation to a national search for self.

Chapter Two shows how the feminist writer, Aritha van Herk, overturns some of the negative impressions that previous authors have given to the wilderness. Drawing a comparison with selected works by Atwood, this chapter looks at how women disappear into the Canadian wilderness to rebuild their lives.

By way of contrast, Chapter Three investigates Kroetsch's challenging exploration of the prairie West from a masculine point of view. His work depicts how the Canadian man often discovers himself lost in a deceptive landscape that confounds traditional heroic ideals.

Chapter Four examines Ondaatje's idiosyncratic wildernesses, which at first glance appear not to be Canadian. I consider how foreign deserts, bushlands, and jungle that feature in his oeuvre revise the established trope of the wilderness in Canadian writing. In charting these vast landscapes, Ondaatje represents identity through an alien 'Other'. His perspective on the wilderness relates to his immigrant background as a Ceylonese-born Canadian subject.

To show how far the wilderness expands in recent Canadian literature, the dissertation concludes with a brief discussion about group disappearance in the work of Native writers.

For Dr. Elizabeth Jennings,  
a fine scholar and a very special grandmother.

This is for people who disappear  
for those who descend into the code

Michael Ondaatje

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract		2
List of Illustrations		6
Preface		7
Acknowledgements		8
INTRODUCTION	'Where Is Here?'	9-25
CHAPTER ONE	Mapping the Territory: Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood	26-59
CHAPTER TWO	'Boundary Busting': Canada, the Wilderness and the Disappearing Woman - Aritha van Herk and Margaret Atwood	60-109
CHAPTER THREE	'The Fiction Makes Us Real': Misleading Appearances in the Prairie Writing of Robert Kroetsch	110-164
CHAPTER FOUR	On the Edge of Disintegration: Uncertain Boundaries in Michael Ondaatje's Imaginative Wilderness	165-216
CONCLUSION	Where Do We Go From Here?	217-225
NOTES		226-307
BIBLIOGRAPHY		308-329

ILLUSTRATION

1. Front Cover, Robert Kroetsch, A Likely Story: The Writing Life, Red Deer College Press, 1995. 157

## PREFACE

I have not been able to use original editions for citations from many of my primary works because of the difficulty of obtaining such texts in this country. However, in each case I have indicated the date of first publication after the title of the work on my initial reference to it. In quoting from Canadian and American works I have standardised spelling to British usage. I have presented documentation in line with the MHRA Style Book (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1991). Since, however, the MHRA is not particularly comprehensive when it comes to providing bibliographical references, the full bibliography at the end of the dissertation is presented in line with the recommendations of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Joseph Gibaldi (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995). I have experienced difficulty in locating the page references of a handful of Canadian newspapers. These incidents occur where I have obtained press cuttings from the indirect sources of Michael Tooby and O.W. Toad. They are referenced as such in the endnotes. I have standardised the capitalisation of West and Western, using this upper case form only when referring to the West as a place, rather than west as a direction. Likewise, Western is capitalized when I am signifying the American cowboy genre but carries a lower case 'w' for the adjective.

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## INTRODUCTION: 'WHERE IS HERE'?

What are you . . ? they ask.

And [Canada] replies:

I am the wind that wants a flag.

I am the mirror of your picture  
until you make me the marvel of your life.

Yes, I am one and none, pin and pine, snow and slow,  
America's attic, an empty room,  
a something possible, a chance, a dance  
that is not danced. A cold kingdom.

- from 'Poem on Canada', Patrick Anderson, 1946

In terms of land mass, Canada is the second largest country in the world. Yet it is one of the most sparsely populated countries, renowned for its extreme northern weather and its vast unpopulated wilderness. This dissertation seeks to investigate how these physical and geographical factors shape the Canadian imagination. Each chapter discusses the specific problem of articulating a coherent sense of national identity because of, rather than despite, the possession of such a unique national environment. I have chosen for analysis selected works by Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje and Aritha van Herk because they are all writers concerned with the Canadian landscape and the wilderness, and how these types of environment influence national models of subjectivity. Each writer's work brings a contrasting perspective to my geographically orientated discussion of Canada. Commentaries concerning the relationship between the environment and Canadian identity are far from new. Writing in 1984, B.W. Powe declared that 'for over two decades the Canadian literary scene has been charged with a distinct emphasis: self definition. Not self-knowledge, but "identity"'.<sup>1</sup> Powe stresses the need to work out what the borders of that identity might be. It may be possible to outline the national character, but as yet, he suggests, it is not possible to fill in the inner details through self-knowledge. The debate about Canadian identity continues in terms of boundaries, not only in literature, but also in public and political life. Discussion focuses on the literal, as well as metaphorical, borderlines of identity.

The predicaments associated with defining national identity are not specifically Canadian. They affect all former colonies and countries settled recently, predominantly

in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century. Australia for instance, as a former penal colony and huge, sparsely populated landmass, is similarly debating adequate formulations of nationalism. But national identity is a subject which is particularly persistent and complex in Canada, a dually post-colonial nation bordering the world power of the United States. Geographical borders operate both physically and psychologically to define the Canadian national character. There is Canadian anxiety over the Free Trade Agreement signed by Brian Mulroney with the United States in 1988, increasing the economic permeability of an already culturally vulnerable southern national border, and provincial boundary disputes, as French Quebec moves towards national partitioning on cultural and linguistic grounds. This is a vitally important time to reexamine the vexed question of Canadian national identity in the light of the extremely marginal defeat of the Bloc Québécois and its separatist ambitions in the October 1995 Referendum. My dissertation is part of this broader debate. Surveys reveal that 60 per cent of Quebeckers subsequently believe that the province will achieve sovereignty within the next decade,<sup>2</sup> resulting in the end of Canada as it is now known. After the failure of the Meech Lake Accord in 1987 and the indecisive results of the 1995 Referendum, some commentators have suggested that Canada is suffering from constitutional 'burn-out', dubbing the political debate the 'neverendum'. But the country's need rather than desire to discuss the issue of national identity continues unabated, in the arts as well as politics.

One example of a recent large-scale, high-profile and federally subsidised examination of national identity in the arts will serve to introduce the problems of comprehensively articulating such an identity in relation to Canada's vast landmass and diverse population. In the first half of 1996, the Art Gallery of Ontario (A.G.O.) staged an ambitious but highly controversial exhibition - 'The OH! Canada Project'<sup>3</sup> - to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Group of Seven (1920-1931).<sup>4</sup> This exhibition was conceived to examine whether the ideas of nature and the nation which inspired this influential Canadian school of painters still speak to Canadians today. The formation of the Group of Seven marked the first attempt to formulate a collective sense of Canadian national identity, doing so through portrayals of the uninhabited Canadian wilderness, especially the landscapes of Algoma and Algonquin.<sup>5</sup> Yet the A.G.O. tacitly acknowledged the dated limitations of the Group's national vision as a

subjective one, based on an alliance of all white, male, anglophone Canadians, located in Toronto and painting mainly Ontario scenes. 'The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation' exhibition of their work formed only a small part of the larger Project, which included interactive areas for technological and artistic participation by the general public.<sup>6</sup> Also included was a contemporary response to the tenets of the Group of Seven by six local urban communities which were represented by black, immigrant, Latino, Chinese, Native and Caucasian groups.

The A.G.O. seemed to have fallen into the pitfalls it hoped to avoid. The gallery sought to broaden the forum of debate, asking the question 'What makes a nation? People? Stories? Land?'. But at the same time it chose to portray that nation primarily in racial and not gendered, sexual or regional terms. Thus the exhibition emphasised Canada's famed multiculturalism while overlooking other forms of diversity. A victim of its own location in the heart of Toronto - the cultural centre of Ontario - the A.G.O. used the opening words of the national anthem to appeal to a patriotic sense of collective identity and to suggest a national perspective.<sup>7</sup> Yet the exhibition remained highly regional in its local subject matter and community input, gesturing at the margins while remaining central and institutional. The event was split between tradition and technology, formal art and pop culture, a wilderness theme and an urban setting, a seemingly boundless nation and the metropolitan limits of Toronto. This is perhaps an apt demonstration of Canadian identity conventionally represented as uncertain and divided.

My dissertation focuses on the ways in which location and environment in Canada have affected individual rather than group perceptions of self and country. The chapters that follow do not aim to construct - like the A.G.O. - all-embracing models of Canadianness. The image of one unified land and one Canadian people is erroneous. I dissent from the view that Canadian literature has collectively striven for a uniform articulation of what it means to be Canadian. This is an important point to stress because there remains, even in post-colonial studies, a narrow outlook which Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin misleadingly attribute to the nation and its written production in the late-1980s. They claim: 'Canadian literature, perceived internally as a mosaic, remains generally monolithic in its assertion of Canadian difference from the canonical British or the more recently threatening neo-colonialism of American culture'.<sup>8</sup> Aware of the

limitations of their perspective, I have adopted a plurality of approaches in examining national identity from the individual and subjective positions of four very different Canadian authors. Each of the writers discussed develops her or his ideas away from prevailing traditional representations of Canadian identity, breaking new bounds in their personal portrayals of the landscape and the way that land influences the psychology of those who inhabit it. They seek not simply to define Canadian identity by external opposition with America but also to suggest internal regional, gendered and ethnic distinctions.

While acknowledging that the terrain charted by such authors is limited, I would contend that the combined works of Atwood, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and van Herk represent a diverse range of racial, sexual and provincial identities within Canada. Although these authors are based in only two regions - Toronto (Ontario) and prairie Alberta - it is the case that mapping their geographical and cultural influences demands a revisionary approach to received models of Canadian identity and literary tradition. Ondaatje, for example, was born under distinct colonial circumstances in Ceylon, while Atwood was brought up in the Quebec bush where native myths and traditions were part of the environment. Periods spent living in England further complicate the national consciousness of these two writers. Equally, although Kroetsch and Van Herk share a prairie Albertan birth and upbringing, there are marked contrasts between their work. Their different genders have resulted in divergent experiences in a traditional agrarian society where labour was strictly gender-defined. Masculinity and femininity have a complex relation to Canadian identity because of the different way the sexes relate to the physical landmass of Canada. Ethnic origins also play a part in the contrasting responses of these two writers: Van Herk's parents were Dutch, Kroetsch's grandparents German.

I do not wish to establish a deterministic model of influence by suggesting that the immediate home environment alone controls the perspective of these writers, affecting their choice of setting and style. They are not bound by their physical environment but range imaginatively through the landscapes of the mind, frequently drawing on personal experience but also, and especially in the case of Ondaatje, feeling free to roam across the border between fact and fantasy into unvisited regions. In their work, landscapes are not fixed geographical backdrops that serve simply to ground setting.

Instead, they are deceptive environments often possessing a character of their own. The range of the creative journeys made possible in their writings is further extended because the Canadian landscape is not a wilderness but a series of wildernesses. The Yukon, the Northwest Territories, the Arctic and the mountains of British Columbia are the wildernesses that stretch across the narratives I examine. Comparably boundless are the Ontario and Quebec bush and the mid-West prairies. Notably, Ondaatje extends the boundaries still further beyond the sovereignty of Canada to examine contrasting, but perhaps related, wildernesses, in his inventive portrayals of the Australian Outback, the scrub of New Mexico, the Ceylonese jungle and the African desert. By comparing the way these four writers represent these landscapes, I intend to show why the wilderness is a shifting signifier in a Canadian context: an appropriate geographical analogy for the unfixed, changing and evasive nature of national identity itself.

The origins and structure of this investigation reveal my own personal reasons for developing a fascination with Canadian identity. In a dissertation focusing on disappearance, invisibility and hidden identities, it seems appropriate for me to articulate the responses of arguably less well-known authors in this debate. My selection includes writers who to all intents and purposes have been invisible outside Canada, at least until recently.<sup>9</sup> For this reason Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Robertson Davies, as high-profile Canadian authors, are conspicuously absent from my dissertation. I have, however, retained two world-renowned Canadian writers, Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye, for a specific purpose. They jointly form a natural starting point for my discussion, not only because they were some of the first commentators on issues of nationalism based on literary cultural production, but also because they are the origin of my own thinking on Canadian literature. My master's dissertation dealt with issues of doubling, fissility, individuality and subsumption of identity in the work of Margaret Atwood.<sup>10</sup> As an identical twin myself, these topics had a distinctly personal relevance. The wider debate about Canada's attempts to discover its own identity in the face of a dominant and proximate other - the United States, a nation with whom Canada is inextricably linked - invited more than an objective, academic interest from me as a researcher. It became appropriate in my master's work to link the personal and the political in an investigation of the shifting

geographical borders of national identity and the corporeal boundaries of femininity in Atwood's novels. This association between the borderline position of Canada and women is one which Atwood has herself suggested in her nationalist survey, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972).<sup>11</sup>

The formulation of Canadian nationalism in the visual arts originated in the 1920s with the paintings of the Group of Seven, while such an explicit group articulation occurred in literature only in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This delay may partly be attributed to the mode and scale of creative production, since to have any wider impact a work of literature needs to be reproduced in considerable numbers and so requires the coincident establishment of a national publishing industry. During this period, faculty teachers in Canadian universities developed a school of criticism which identified recurring themes in the emerging national literature. Just as the Group of Seven concentrated on uninhabited, wilderness landscapes as a symbol of Canadian national identity, so too almost all of these thematic concepts were associated with the Canadian geographical environment. Initially a response to Northrop Frye's suggestion in 1965 of a Canadian national 'garrison mentality',<sup>12</sup> the developing trend in Canadian thematic criticism focused on a series of linked images of exile, alienation, isolation, survival and inner division or paranoid schizophrenia. Critics revealed, for example, how European representations of pastoral landscapes were firmly rejected in a Canadian agrarian context. Frye influentially argued that the fearful and self-protective pioneer response to the unknown 'other' landscape of the Canadian wilderness still exhibited itself in the Canadian psyche. My own research originates in these psychological and thematic models, as the opening chapter on the related nationalist commentaries of Atwood and Frye reveals. But these representations are included to establish a point of departure for more recent articulations of national identity over the last two decades, not as a means of reaffirming dated models and ideas.

To be sure, the thematic criticism of authors like D.G. Jones (Butterfly on Rock, 1970), Frye (The Bush Garden, 1971), Atwood (Survival, 1972) and John Moss (Patterns of Isolation, 1974)<sup>13</sup> - dubbed by Russell Brown 'the Thematic Four'<sup>14</sup> - is now widely regarded as outmoded.<sup>15</sup> One example serves to illustrate why. With typical nationalist fervour but sweeping humanist rhetoric, Jones declared in 1970 that 'we [as Canadians] have arrived at a point where we recognize, not only that the land is

ours, but that we are the land's'.<sup>16</sup> While acknowledging the limitations and weaknesses of such generalised surveys and commentaries on Canadian literature, it is important to recognise that such an approach was of its time and certainly has relevance for present-day critics. My own interest in the linked topics of disappearance, the wilderness and its borders might well be regarded as thematic. In some senses, it is. But I would claim that my argument does not use a thematic basis in the same way as these earlier works. This dissertation is not an 'attempt to define a national identity or psychosis',<sup>17</sup> nor is it a survey of the nation's literature which undertakes to group authors or works in 'patterns' - although the dissertation endeavours to refer broadly to Canadian literature while concentrating on close, detailed textual readings of selected works. My aim, above all else, is to be exploratory rather than formulaic, not to provide a completed 'map of the territory'<sup>18</sup> - one which Atwood suggests is needed - but to establish a number of points of reference, like a series of trig. points to facilitate the discovery of further cartographical details which will map as yet unnoticed contours in the Canadian psyche. One such important point of reference is disappearance: a recurring motif in Canadian literature. Despite the insights it reveals into the national character, it has yet to be studied in any depth across a comparative range of Canadian authors and contexts.

By investigating this prevalent Canadian theme of disappearance, I am not suggesting that it is to be found only in Canadian works. After all, the trend in postmodern writing around the world has made uncertain and fragmented subjective representations increasingly common. As a consequence, many postmodern protagonists reveal traits of disappearance.<sup>19</sup> Instead, what I am suggesting is that there is a whole host of cultural connotations, assumptions and historically based responses to such disappearances that are peculiar to Canadian culture and the Canadian imagination. To clarify this point, let me draw a contrasting national example. In Argentina, disappearance has a particular and sinister political connotation. It would be impossible for an Argentinian author to write about a character's disappearance without recalling in the mind of a native reader Argentina's los desaparecidos. Canadian figures do not disappear unnaturally in this way. Instead, they have a tendency to disappear into the landscape, often of their own will, becoming part of or one with the land in a process of identification which clearly has national

implications. Canada's environment provides a vast wilderness in which loss or disappearance of self is a distinct possibility, as well as a recurring historical and contemporary reality. The epigraph to this thesis, taken from Michael Ondaatje's poem 'White Dwarfs' (1973), suggests that the act of disappearance is connected with a potentially symbolic descent. However, the possibility of establishing this motif as part of a larger archetype of descent and return is not supported in a Canadian context, since descent into the code of language or landscape (sometimes into the ground itself) is often not accompanied by return in Canadian literature. To establish this narrative motif more in the pattern of the mythical experiences of Eurydice than Orpheus is not to suggest that disappearance always has negative death-laden symbolism for Canadians. Far from it. Frequently, disappearance in Canadian literature offers the possibility of a positive national myth to counter the negative ones of exile, division and bare survival.

Evaluating the dominant Canadian tradition of thematic criticism, Russell Brown points out the potential for the positive development of this dated approach in the context of national articulation: 'Is there a cultural code we learn as Canadian readers?' asks Brown. 'If so what are the messages that are being sent between author and reader?'.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to suggest that 'perhaps the Canadian writer of today signals his reader of their common ground by introducing not so much lexical markers of nationality (such as "eh?" at the end of sentences) as cultural markers: one such might be the deliberate utilization of imagery meant to be recognized as referring to the garrison'.<sup>21</sup> I am proposing that disappearance is just such an image: a symbolic act which would signal something different for Canadian subjects than, say, U.S. citizens. For example, as a 'cultural marker' disappearance might well recall to the mind of a Canadian reader historical individuals like Tom Thomson, a painter closely linked to the Group of Seven, who became a mythic figure after his disappearance in Algonquin Park in 1917. The suggestion was that the land had claimed this landscape artist for its own. Such cultural myths are further strengthened by the widespread influence of certain works of literature embodying the theme. Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) centres on the search for someone who has equally disappeared into the wilderness, and it is a narrative which would be familiar to many well-read Canadians. These associations would help give context, form and structure to a work of



disappearance in a symbolic national framework. As Brown emphasises, 'a recognition of "theme" in terms such as these would be very different from the way we are used to dealing with the concept'.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, I wish to develop this traditional Canadian modus operandi in new ways.

Having indicated how I intend to approach the national territory, let me explain exactly where that region of research lies. Mapping the disappearing self or doubled other is a vast project in the Canadian literature, originating in numerous and various images of splitting and internal divisions, exile and marginalisation associated with an insecure national identity, which might be viewed as a type of pervasive inferiority complex. I have limited the territory in a number of ways. First, I concentrate on the inter-linked work of Atwood and Frye whose particular discussion of Canadian national identity focuses specifically on issues of mapping and geography. Jointly they have been central in developing a theory about Canadian psychological responses to the wilderness producing not only an influential model in Canadian literature but also what has become the prevailing one. Chapter One begins by establishing the grounds of Canada's national insecurity and divided identity - suggested by both Atwood and Frye - through a historical survey of pioneering attitudes and experiences, contrasting the divergence between Canadian and American national identities. Despite similar patterns of settler colonisation and a shared continental location, the traditional national characteristics of these two adjacent nations are markedly different. Why should this be? Is Canada's insecure, conservative and guarded national character really a direct response to America's assertive, aggressive, confident nationalism, or a more complex result of historical and geographical factors? And do these traditional models still hold?

Such questions, as discussed in Chapter One, indicate why it is essential to understand the historical background and psychological conditions behind the motif of Canadian disappearance. Those emigrating from Europe across the Atlantic effectively disappeared from their families and communities, 'passing over to the other side',<sup>23</sup> frequently never to return. Absent but not dead, families still mourned the finality of their departure as the wakes held for leaving immigrants in rural parts of Ireland and Scotland demonstrate. Yet this experience would potentially be common to all immigrants leaving for the Americas, or indeed Australia. My study focuses on the

moment of arrival in Canada to suggest why the sense of dislocation should be more profound for Canadian immigrants than American pioneers. I discuss the pioneer accounts of an historical frontierswoman, Susanna Moodie, a figure who clearly demonstrates in her journals her shock at arrival in an alien wilderness. She is not an arbitrary example but a woman who embodies for Atwood the 'national illness' or 'state of mind', paranoid schizophrenia,<sup>24</sup> a psychological trait which Atwood develops in several of her own fictional characters. The chapter concludes with a detailed reading of Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972), a highly complex and in some places conflicted narrative of physical and mental division, breakdown and disappearance, as well as the author's clearest articulation of her Canadian nationalist stance. Through this novel, I investigate the central issue of how one draws the perceptual borders of one's world: a subject which has deep implications both for individual and national identity in Canada.

My second chapter turns to the lesser-known work of Aritha van Herk, a mid-Western feminist writer and critic whose novels are regionally and gender specific. Van Herk's fiction, written predominantly after the thematic movement of the 1970s, represents a natural progression in my argument since she overtly challenges the national representations of Frye and Atwood. Her work reflects the growing assurance of Canadian national identity which has developed along with the country's political and cultural international standing during the 1980s. Atwood's daunting female confrontation with a hostile or frighteningly indifferent natural environment, where survival is the main aim, is transformed by van Herk into a deeply positive wilderness experience where freedom and possibilities abound for women in this territorially ambiguous region. Likewise the trope of disappearance is developed into a less divisive and more enabling hiding of self from view, a move beyond patriarchal boundaries as well as a comforting retreat inside the protective natural borders of the concealing wilderness.

Van Herk is at the forefront of the Canadian feminist engagement 'in a vigorous border-traffic', which Barbara Godard describes as being 'between the world defined for [women] and the world defined by them which they hope to bring into being'.<sup>25</sup> Godard goes on to suggest that 'their project is to be cartographers of new realms'.<sup>26</sup> Linking the joint nationalist and feminist projects of writers such as van Herk, Godard proposes that 'like cultural nationalists, [Canadian feminists] reject the map made for

them by denying that their difference is peripheral or marginal. Placing the point of the compass where they are, they redraw the circle'.<sup>27</sup> This is a perceptual readjustment which is clearly articulated by van Herk and the other female authors whose works of female wilderness liberation I use as a point of comparison, providing a Canadian feminist context for this chapter. In van Herk's writing the wilderness is a pioneering space in which the historical, social, sexual and class limits imposed on women can be liberatingly redrawn to claim what Elaine Showalter has described, in the context of more general feminist criticism, as a female 'wild zone'.<sup>28</sup> While setting up an alternative positive model of national, female identity which contrasts with the 1970s work of Atwood, I do not wish to use her writing merely as a negative foil. To give balance to my commentary on women's writing in the Canadian bush, I conclude this chapter by investigating the urban wildernesses portrayed by Atwood, focusing on one of her most recent works, The Robber Bride (1993). In this Toronto-based novel, a new and stridently aggressive and assertive type of female Canadian identity is represented in the ambiguous context of a largely absent and frequently disappearing central character.

Having looked at Canadian feminist responses to the wilderness, Chapter Three examines a notable male engagement with this national landscape. Here I turn to the work of another prairie author, Robert Kroetsch, born within a few miles of van Herk in the Battle River Valley of Alberta. Van Herk's novel No Fixed Address (1986) directly parodies Kroetsch's theorising of a gender-delineated 'erotics of space',<sup>29</sup> which she claims is sexist. However, despite her intellectual disagreements with Kroetsch, van Herk nonetheless acknowledges 'a strange kind of recognition of a shared metaphysical space'.<sup>30</sup> The wilderness in Canadian literature is frequently as clearly a symbolic and imaginary concept, as an actual physical environment. By remaining with the same prairie landscape as van Herk's, this chapter on Kroetsch does not represent so much a duplication of setting as an opportunity for a direct comparison of approach. Kroetsch's work is interesting when juxtaposed with that of van Herk because it embodies an open declaration of what it means to be male in the Canadian West, articulated in terms of the discovery of masculine sexuality through pioneering frontier quests in the wilderness. Kroetsch has described himself as 'a frontiersman',<sup>31</sup> alluding

not only to his prairie origins but his pioneering stance as a postmodern author attempting to write across boundaries, including those of the nation.

This dual position raises a key question about the interaction of local and country-wide agendas. How might experimental investigations of the regional relate to larger national projects concerning identity? Of the four authors I have selected, Kroetsch is the writer most explicitly representing his local environment and tackling the tradition of its representation. Despite his strong Canadian regionalist position, Kroetsch lived and worked in America for many years, an experience which influenced his writing, ironically both clarifying and redefining his sense of personal and national identity. In an interview, Kroetsch admits that 'in my coming to the United States I discovered how hopelessly Canadian I am'.<sup>32</sup> In his 'Out West' trilogy of novels (1966-73) - or triptych as he would term it - Kroetsch adopts an irreverent, bawdy and parodic style to undermine the American mythic image of the wild-West hero through the comic characterization of anti-heroic protagonists, Johnny Backstrom, Hazard Lepage and Jeremy Sadness. Yet the establishment of a Canadian mythic framework for successful male questing proves problematic both because of the deceptive nature of the prairie landscape and the lack of existing regional narratives.

This chapter investigates why the Canadian expectation should be of failed encounters with the environment while the American model involves successfully taming the frontier into submission. Through a critical, poetic and fictional inquiry into historical figures such as Frederick Philip Grove and Grey Owl, Kroetsch reveals the way in which the prairies threaten a possible loss of self. Nevertheless, he suggests how that disappearance - here in the act of immigration - might provide the enabling opportunity to reformulate one's (masculine) identity free from outdated or alien models. The work of Kroetsch hints at the instability of personal and national identities when 'translated' across national borders. What happens when those borders are profoundly brought into question by the transference of citizenship during emigration? This question is of paramount importance to the debate about Canadian identity in a nation whose immigrant population is so large.

In my fourth and final chapter, I discuss both the prose and poetry of the Ceylonese-born immigrant Michael Ondaatje. As in Kroetsch's work, the wilderness in Ondaatje's writing becomes an area where old distinctions are collapsed in a

postmodern experiment with genre and language, as well as the politics of identity. Like Kroetsch too, Ondaatje reinterprets the motif of the Canadian wilderness, combining images of the American frontier West in his long poem The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems (1970) to produce a hybrid image both of Billy and the historical pioneering North American experience. However, Ondaatje has acknowledged that his portrayal of Billy as an outsider, exiled in the wilderness, is informed by his personal experiences as an immigrant to Canada. Through In the Skin of a Lion (1987), he directly addresses the issue of alienation associated with immigration, bringing to light the history of the immigrant workers who helped construct metropolitan Toronto, after official records had made their contribution and presence invisible. Formerly discussed in mythic, gendered and regional contexts, disappearance in the work of Ondaatje takes on increasingly historical and political overtones.

In his latest work, The English Patient (1992), Ondaatje portrays another physical wilderness, the North African desert, but also suggests that European national identity was in crisis in the political wilderness of the post-war years immediately after the Second World War. The mis-named English patient has attempted to eradicate all trace of his national and nominal identity in the desert wilderness and is now burned beyond recognition. Despite the global conflict caused by Hitler's extreme nationalistic ambitions for his Aryan super-race, Ondaatje hints that the eradication of national and racial distinctions may not be the utopian solution it at first might appear. The English Patient raises several profound questions about identity. What form of identity would be left if national differentiations were to disappear? And how can a person retain their individual identity without differences of nationality, race, class and gender becoming divisive? Likewise, how far should immigrants attempt to assimilate into their newly adopted nation? As Ondaatje discovers, these are difficult and controversial questions which ultimately can be accentuated but not fully answered.

In Ondaatje's writing, Canada's position as a continuing culture of arrival raises far-ranging post-colonial issues not just for immigrant fiction but also for native literature. The discourse of nationality, race and post-coloniality is complex in Canada, with different configurations of coloniser and colonised in this settler/ invader society. While Canadian pioneers were under British and French rule they in turn colonised the

indigenous population. Bearing this tension in mind, my dissertation concludes with reference to the emerging arguments concerning Native land rights and the political representation of the Six Nations, a national dimension which refuses to recognise the 49th Parallel. Native peoples are increasingly vociferous in their refusal to be assimilated and ignored in the discussions about Canadian nationalism. They perceive the landscape in very different terms from non-Natives, viewing the wilderness not as being 'out there', but all around them, traditionally part of their very being, 'an integral element of [Native] mindset',<sup>33</sup> society and beliefs. Indeed, Norman Newton goes as far as to suggest that Canadians 'have invented the idea of "wilderness"' to avoid the realities of an earlier Native mythic tradition, provocatively claiming that in fact 'the "wilderness" never existed'.<sup>34</sup> In this way, my conclusion deliberately seeks to problematise Canadian perspectives on the wilderness. Likewise it suggests the contentious and inconclusive nature of any discussions on the subject of national identity in Canada.

Trends in Canadian critical commentary have tended to focus on single aspects of national articulation not several combined, as demonstrated by the A.G.O. exhibition. I have no wish to essentialise the work of van Herk, Kroetsch and Ondaatje as representing female, male and immigrant fiction respectively. Their writing serves as examples not paradigms, and those examples are many-faceted. Van Herk discusses femininity and class. Kroetsch addresses issues of regionality, masculinity and immigrant metamorphosis. Ondaatje has been studied as an immigrant writer concerned with various forms of cultural subordination. Such mono-focused critical approaches have a tendency to clarify crucial features of the writing of these authors but also operate to suppress less easily acknowledged aspects of their work. The concentration on the immigrant aspect of Ondaatje's oeuvre has enabled critics to ignore the masculine investments in his work. Why should this be? I have identified a specific Canadian problem of articulating identity in the context of the environment, both in national and gendered terms. But are there established links between these two topics? Parker, Russo, Sommer and Yaeger assert that nationalism and sexuality are 'two of the most powerful global discourses shaping contemporary notions of identity',<sup>35</sup> converging in a frequently eroticized nationalism, couched in terms of a 'love of country'.<sup>36</sup> In a pioneering study, Nationalism and Sexuality (1985), the

historian George L. Mosse demonstrated how the construction of middle-class morality and bourgeois sexual norms could facilitate the rise of fascist nation-states, focusing especially on the historical development of Germany from the late eighteenth century until the rise of Hitler in the 1930s and 40s. Conversely, sexual minorities have legitimated their rights through a discourse of civil liberties.

Dennis Denisoff stands out as one of the few critics to have primarily focused on the issue of sexuality in Ondaatje's writing, looking at the articulation of 'homosocial desire' in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.<sup>37</sup> However, Denisoff does not attempt to link his argument about sexuality with a questioning of nationalism and the way in which a parodic post-colonial mimicry of the all-American Billy the Kid in Ondaatje's work possibly leaves masculine identification as a kind of feminized negation of American masculine imperialism.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, Ondaatje may be suggesting a different type of masculinity altogether, one which is negotiating its desire for adventure, authority and conquest of land in a style that seeks to be critical of the available dominative models. Critics are only just beginning to question masculinity within the post-colonial literary sphere.

I have portrayed Ondaatje's writing as deeply ambiguous both in its mode of characterisation and authorial perspective, and this is equally true of his sexual representations. His work is recognised to be sensual and erotic, but while acknowledging the sexual, it does not focus on issues of femininity and masculinity per se. Denisoff emphasises that Ondaatje depicts 'the notion of a sexual subjectivity based on emotions and desires rather than on actual activities or the sex of other individuals participating in the acts'.<sup>39</sup> Desire and sensuality ambiguously blur the boundaries of gender in his work. After my emphasis on sexuality in previous chapters, I have not dealt with gender and eroticism in Michael Ondaatje's canon. This decision is part of my larger attempt to keep as broad-ranging as possible the discussion on which the dissertation as a whole is based. This topic is sufficiently equivocal in the context of Ondaatje's writing to require a complete chapter to unravel the constituent threads of the argument, and I have no desire for the focus of this work to be on sexuality alone. One example will serve to indicate the sexual complexities and ambiguities which remain effectively unexplored territory in the writing of Ondaatje, an area that would benefit from more detailed mapping in future.

Ondaatje's The English Patient opens with a description of the eponymous character lying naked in bed being washed by a woman. In this erotic scene, in which intercourse is nonetheless improbable because of the protagonist's severe burns, the masculinity of the patient is emphasised by the description of his 'penis sleeping like a sea horse' against his body.<sup>40</sup> Why a sea horse? Does the image simply suggest shape, size and impotence (or potential) in its slumbering stasis? Or was Ondaatje aware that the sea horse is noted in the animal kingdom for its reproductive behaviour because it is the male, not the female, which carries the fertilized eggs? The English patient's ambiguous sexuality is further hinted at, I believe, by the implicit characterisation parallel with T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).<sup>41</sup> Graham Dawson describes the 'aura of ambivalent, even transgressive, sexuality' that surrounded Lawrence,<sup>42</sup> both as a man and a film legend. He is one who embodied 'the phantasy of a perfect man who is also womanly' in his flowing robes and petite, clean-shaven boyishness.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, these intertextual references which might give clues to the English patient's sexual representation are not only inconclusive and hidden, but are themselves a matter of speculation. So even if sexuality is an aspect of identity that remains disguised in Ondaatje's work, that is not to say it should be suppressed in favour of more post-colonially orientated interpretations.

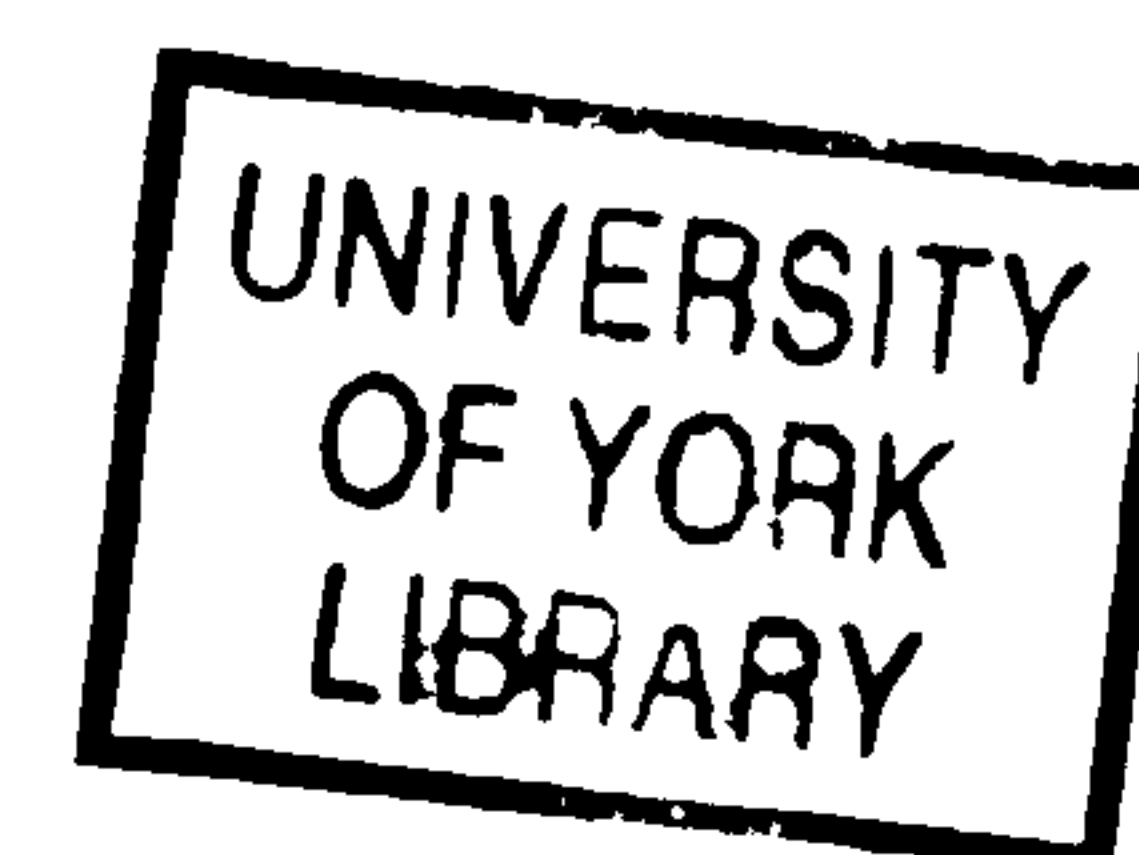
Just as I realise I have discussed femininity and masculinity in relation to the gendering of the landscape and the nation with only passing reference to homosexuality, so too there are other omissions which I must note, although I feel less need to defend them. There is no study of French Canadian literature in my dissertation. Such studies exist - Jack Warwick's The Long Journey: Literary Themes of French Canada (1968) is one work in the tradition of Canadian thematic criticism and 'the geography of the imagination'.<sup>44</sup> I acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural studies, especially in Canadian feminism, a move towards an 'active bilingual dialogue' which Neuman and Kamboureli advocate in their broad-ranging feminist collection A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing (1986).<sup>45</sup> However, I am not myself bilingual and a study of French Canadian literature would, in any case, represent an over-extension of the national territory I am covering, examining not only another canon of texts or selected authors but also potentially another nation. A



dissertation which was a comparative study of Anglo- and Francophone writing would produce a different set of arguments about the Canadian wilderness.

Just as Quebec is missing from a linguistic and textual perspective (although not as far as representation is concerned - it is the setting for Surfacing) so too is the literature of the Maritimes. The reason for this is straightforward. The Maritimes of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and coastal British Columbia are defined by their relationship to the seaboard and the ocean. This dissertation concentrates on the exploration of one particular type of natural environment - the wilderness - which while embracing many regions, shares the universal characteristic of a boundless space. It is hard to conceptualise a sea coast as a wilderness for the very reason that it embodies the boundary between land and ocean. Equally, while being lost at sea is a common occurrence, loss of self when situated on a coastline, often providing panoramic views, is physically a lot less probable.

The wilderness may be boundless but my analysis of it is not, for which I make no apologies. The discussion of national and sexual identities in relation to the landscape has the potential for being as large as the Canadian territory itself. I have attempted to avoid tokenism and generalisations, concentrating on depth of focus over breadth of study. I stake my claim to an authoritative knowledge of only a narrow field of authors, laying markers for others to follow and advance further, in the hope that readers who are not familiar with Canadian literature may be inspired to go and discover the territory for themselves.



## CHAPTER ONE

### MAPPING THE TERRITORY: FRYE AND ATWOOD

#### I

Robert Kroetsch has suggested that he and other Canadian authors 'write books, not in search of our identity, but against the notion of identity'.<sup>1</sup> Kroetsch is not proposing a Canadian rejection of all formulations of identity. Instead, he advances the paradox that 'the Canadian identity states itself in, by, its acts of concealment'.<sup>2</sup> This statement raises many questions which are central to the present chapter. Is this act of concealment associated with a national inferiority complex, a wish to hide from larger world view, or is it a positive strategy of maintaining control over modes of representation by a conscious decision at hidden presence? Can identity really be articulated by concealment and by implication the invisibility and silence necessary to allow one not to be seen or noticed? Kroetsch's reference to 'the Canadian identity' implicitly suggests that while its manifestation is complex, there is at base only a single national identity to be discovered. Is this really the case? Reconceptualising his theory of the Canadian strategy of concealment elsewhere, Kroetsch suggests that 'Canadian literature is the autobiography of a culture that insists it will not tell its story'. 'It is', he adds, 'the autobiography of a culture that locates itself against the security of all direct arrivals at self-knowledge by elaborate stratagems of border, of periphery, of the distanced centre'.<sup>3</sup> The positioning of national and subjective boundaries certainly plays an important part in the articulation of identity.

With these points in mind, my discussion begins with an examination of the ways in which Canadians have identified the borders of themselves and their world, setting up the parameters of the complex debate about the paradoxes of Canadian identity, before turning to look at the psychological states that might effect a wish for concealment. I consider the validity of Kroetsch's statements by looking at one of Atwood's earliest novels, *Surfacing* (1972), which not only investigates problematic points of national identity but does so in the context of the search by a nameless protagonist for her missing father, in a setting characterised by its many border divisions.

Physical borderline situations are consciously utilized by authors and critics alike, as frontier zones which offer the opportunity for redefinition at the margin. I wish to look at contemporary articulations of Canadian identity in relation to geographical boundaries, concentrating on the margin or border because it is the site of transition where the very concept of stable definitions is challenged. Linda Hutcheon claims that, despite Canada's 'perceived position in international terms' on 'the periphery or the margin' of world culture,<sup>4</sup> over-shadowed by America to the south, the periphery is also 'the frontier, the place of possibility'.<sup>5</sup> From her postmodern 'ex-centric' perspective as a Canadian academic and theorist, Hutcheon clearly believes that the frontier in Canadian literature is an exciting region of potential where new ways of articulating national identity might be discovered. In a more general post-colonial context, Homi K. Bhabha discusses the process of 'reading between the . . . borderlines of the nation-space'.<sup>6</sup> This process involves an acknowledgement of the 'cultural liminality within the nation'<sup>7</sup> as a crucial 'cutting edge' from which 'to derive the narrative of the nation and its people'.<sup>8</sup> Yet he is aware of the problematic 'double-writing' - which he terms 'dissemi-nation' - that this split discourse involves.<sup>9</sup> In his view, the internalisation of the border may involve diasporic rather than cohesive forces to produce a 'narrative . . . of splitting, ambivalence and vacillation'.<sup>10</sup> In the specific context of Canada, the shifting boundaries of national definition produce a problematic sense of a precariously undelineated or conflictingly divided identity.

In Canadian writing the border is frequently a zone of uncertainty and insecurity. Discussing questions of unstable national identity, Marshall McLuhan famously described Canada as a 'borderline case'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Northrop Frye, probably Canada's best-known critic, reiterates Hutcheon's idea of Canada as a peripheral, ex-centric country operating at the margins in less than reassuring terms. He suggests that 'identity in Canada has always had something about it of a centrifugal movement . . . of elastic about to snap. . . . This expanding movement has to be counter-balanced by a sense of having constantly to stay together by making tremendous voluntary efforts at intercommunication'.<sup>12</sup> Because of the highly specific geographical, historical and cultural circumstances surrounding Canada's formation as a nation, the contemporary

postmodern concern for borders is taken, in Canada, from the level of literary and cultural concern to a national preoccupation or even an obsession.

Now politically at a post-colonial stage in its development, Canada's quest is not, as in the case of many other former empire nations, a search for a new identity after throwing off colonial ties, but an ever-present attempt to discover any coherent identity that might define or delineate the national consciousness. As a result, discourses of nationalism are truly in crisis in Canada. Atwood proposes that the 'Canadian habit of mind' is a synthetic one involving an 'ever-failing but ever-renewed attempt to pull all the pieces together, to discover the whole of which one can only trust one is a part'.<sup>13</sup> As Atwood suggests, it is not only a question of where the borders of definition are, but if they truly exist at all. Canadians feel their southern border with the United States to be culturally, if not militarily, indefensible, a boundary which they do not securely hold.<sup>14</sup> The presence of other geographical borders is also less than reassuring because many of them, like the boundary of Quebec, between French and English-speaking Canada, are internalized borders, dividing not uniting the nation. These two features of Canadian boundaries, their instability and their potentially divisive internalization, are aspects that need to be investigated in much greater depth. That is why I will discuss how Canada has never achieved the moment of self-definition which the United States achieved, despite these countries' shared continental location and apparently similar pioneering, immigrant settler histories.

Canadians are well aware of their own lack of coherent national self-definition, and this forms the basis of many ironic formulations of national identity. As the well-known Canadian adage goes, the attempt is to be 'as Canadian as possible under the circumstances'. But what are the circumstances, and why is it so hard to be Canadian? Frye has asserted that 'there is no such thing as a hundred per cent Canadian'.<sup>15</sup> This statement has a demographic precedence since even in the most recent census, which includes data on individuals' places of origin, 'Canadian' is still not accepted as an 'ethnic' classification, even for families who have lived in Canada for generations.<sup>16</sup> Historically, Canada is a nation of immigrants: the nation was founded by European pioneer settlers and throughout the twentieth century African, Asian and Caribbean peoples have also emigrated to Canada in considerable numbers, enhancing Canada's status as a multi-cultural nation. However, Frye's remark indicates that all Canadian

people, even those whose ancestors date back to the earliest settlers, will essentially remain foreigners in their own land. They can never fully own the country in which they live. This Canadian disassociation between nationals and nation may partly account for the fact that, despite the assimilation of many races in 'the melting pot' which is the neighbouring United States, no such homogenized national identification has occurred in Canada, where the ethnic mix is described as a multicultural 'mosaic': an apt image of Canada's tenuous fragmented identity.

Atwood, a former student of Frye,<sup>17</sup> supports and develops this concept of Canada as a country of foreigners in the afterword to her poetry collection about an English pioneer woman, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970):

We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders.<sup>18</sup>

Atwood indicates that Canadians' insecure sense of belonging is connected to a divided response to the vast physical space which is Canada; 'lost' in the boundless expanses of the wilderness there is a strong sense of dislocation resulting from a confusion between concepts of 'home' and 'exile'. Canadians are paradoxically exiled in their home country, a land which is both foreign / unknown and ultimately unknowable in its vastness. Uncertainties about identity are linked with difficulties in locating the self. There is a need for personal orientation. Atwood believes that 'by discovering your place you discover yourself',<sup>19</sup> suggesting that where you are affects who you are. She refers to Frye's famous national treatise, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (1971), in which he clearly links these issues concerning the discovery of place and self:

It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by the famous problem of identity, . . . as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question "Who am I?" than by some such riddle as "Where is here?"<sup>20</sup>

If Canada is composed of foreigners, as Frye and Atwood would suggest, then the nation is peopled by individuals whose sense of belonging, whose very location is permanently divided - where everyone inside the border is, psychologically if not

physically, forever elsewhere. The Canadian crisis of identity is invoked by Atwood's reference to 'exiles and invaders', people who no longer belong to where they came from and are not wholly welcome where they have arrived, existing uncertainly between the two. Canadians are simultaneously both insiders and outsiders; their location in relation to the border is unclear. No wonder Michael Ondaatje describes Canadians' psychic sense of a divided, marginal identity in terms of a lack of settled location - 'there is the preoccupying image of figures permanently travelling, portaging their past, still uncertain of where to settle in this country . . . We are all still arriving'.<sup>21</sup>

## II

Canada is a country whose national history is not only a temporal one but also very much a spatial one. Frye asserts that 'Canada, with four million square miles and only four centuries of documented history, has naturally been a country more preoccupied with space than time, with environment rather than tradition.'<sup>22</sup> Certainly, the importance of Canada's physical land-mass in discussions of national identity should not be under-estimated. With the geographical features of Canada in mind, I wish to discuss Frye's conundrum of 'Where is here?', of exactly where Canadians have arrived or are arriving, and the split borderline existence of the Canadian people in terms of the wilderness which, in many senses, is the vast physical space of Canada.

Coral Ann Howells indicates that the 'wilderness' is an appropriate analogy for Canada's problematic plural or decentralized identity since it is a 'shifting concept without fixed boundaries'.<sup>23</sup> Just how have concepts of the wilderness and a spatially orientated Canadian identity 'shifted' with time and are they still in a state of flux? First I shall look at the historical pioneer experience of living in the Canadian bush, since the past which Ondaatje attributes to Canadians, is both a recent personal one and a much older national one. Then I shall move on to a discussion of how, even today, an imaginative concept of the wilderness exerts a strong psychological, if not physical, hold over Canadians, in a nation still very much searching for a firm sense of location in political and cultural terms. The historical need to map one's territory in physical terms is metaphorically extended to a need for cultural cartographical placing through the development of a national literature. Atwood and Frye have been maintaining and developing a discourse on these issues of Canadian identity in relation to location,

borders and the wilderness for over twenty years now, and it is their work to which I shall largely refer, since no other commentators deal with this subject as fully or coherently. While doing so, I acknowledge that both these writers are canonical, Anglo-, white intellectuals from Toronto who provide only one historically, ethnically and regionally specific perspective on the issue of Canadian identity. However, I wish initially to establish a 'traditional' model of national identity based on Canada's pioneer settler history, before exploring some other writers' interesting departures from it. Frye's question of 'Where is here?' could be articulated from a subjective perspective as 'Where am I?', suggesting the loss of self. This problematic subject position, which involves both disorientation and negation, needs to be historically and geographically grounded.

Atwood links contemporary Canadians' sense of alienation from their natural environment, and thus from the country itself, to the experiences of one of the early Canadian settlers, Susanna Moodie (1803-84). This nineteenth-century English pioneer figure has been much written about in Canada, clearly embodying an aspect of the Canadian psyche by the fascination her life has provoked. Moodie is particularly important to my discussion here because, as I have indicated, Atwood describes her as the archetypal example of the Canadian 'national illness', paranoid schizophrenia.<sup>24</sup> Atwood is suggesting that such psychic splitting represents an intrinsic national characteristic which results from a divided response to the Canadian environment. This adoption of psychological terminology can be seen as explicit metaphoric use of the type of general definition which Tom Nairn adopts in his study of nationalism, describing it as 'the pathology of modern developmental history, [which is] as inescapable as "neurosis" in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness . . . and largely incurable'.<sup>25</sup> The use of such psychological models for examining questions of Canadian identity are widespread in national critical discussions on the subject, and they might be partly attributed to the Canadian tendency for introspection and self-analysis. Robert Kroetsch, for example, has described Canada as a Jungian society 'caught in the balance', a potentially fissile 'razor's edge' of uncertainty.<sup>26</sup> By comparison, Frye describes Canada as being 'like a

neurotic who can't deal with the world. The past in Canada . . . is like the past of a psychiatric patient, something of a problem to be resolved.'<sup>27</sup>

The wilderness and paranoid schizophrenia are mutually informing images which Atwood uses to explore the problematic issue of Canadian identity and the historical factors determining it. To demonstrate a schizophrenic response to the wilderness, one need only refer to Atwood's description of Moodie's 'inescapable doubleness of . . . vision'<sup>28</sup> as 'she praises the Canadian landscape but accuses it of destroying her'.<sup>29</sup> In Moodie's journal, Roughing It in the Bush (1852), this pioneer woman indicates her astonishingly polarized response to her new 'home' country, when she advises new immigrants that 'you will soon learn to love Canada as I now love it, who once viewed it with a hatred so intense that I longed to die, that death might effectually separate us for ever'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Moodie entitled her 1871 preface to Roughing It in the Bush as 'Canada: A Contrast'. The landscape has a 'rugged and awful beauty',<sup>31</sup> invoking both feelings of wonder and fear. Moodie describes being 'charmed with the freedom and solitude'<sup>32</sup> of the wilderness. Yet elsewhere she appears to feel trapped by 'the dense, interminable forest',<sup>33</sup> and she describes how 'that horrid word bush became synonymous with all that was hateful and revolting in my mind'.<sup>34</sup> The boundaries of her world have been profoundly disturbed as she feels both trapped and liberated in the undelineated expanses of the borderless wilderness. Moodie's writing reveals the dual psychological problems of identifying the borders of the self in a hostile wilderness which is insufficiently externalised.

Paradoxically - and it is an important paradox - Moodie feels oppressively hemmed in by the endless wilderness space surrounding her. She is daunted by the lack of territorial markers against which to define herself. Atwood describes this sensation in more extreme terms in 'Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer' (1968), a poem which she claims is an important prelude to her collection, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, which is based on Roughing It in the Bush. Confronted with the vastness of the wilderness the pioneer fears complete loss of self with no borders to help define or place him. There is insanity and chaos beyond boundaries:

He stood . . .  
with no walls, no borders



anywhere; the sky no height  
above him, totally un-  
enclosed  
and shouted:

Let me out! <sup>35</sup>

In her self-revelatory experiences in the unknown territory of the wilderness, Moodie often finds that rather than an absence of defining borders, the limits of the self can be realized, only to discover they are divisive. Borders, if internalized, can infringe on identity causing a psychic splitting. Moodie both yearns for home yet recognizes that she is already there, as Canada is now the only home she will ever know. Nevertheless, she still veers violently between loving and loathing, between pretence and genuine emotion, between an ideal image of the country and the reality:

Dear, dear England! why was I forced by a stern necessity to leave you? . . . to pine out my joyless existence in a foreign clime? . . . Ah, these are vain outbursts of feeling . . . Canada! thou art a noble, free, and rising country . . . I will and do love thee, land of my adoption, and of my children's birth; and, oh, dearer still to a mother's heart - land of their graves! <sup>36</sup>

Chillingly, Moodie hints that she never felt really at home in Canada until she had buried some of her children in it. One is left with the feeling that ironically a person can only truly belong to this new land by leaving it, at least in existential terms. Atwood describes the decision to live in Canada as 'choosing a violent duality'.<sup>37</sup> Moodie represents this choice since her journals reveal how she psychologically embodies the paradoxical Canadian response to the wilderness. The wilderness experience was, for many pioneers, one of a split psychic response, divided not simply by loyalties and longing for the old 'mother' country, while trying to make a home in the new, but an internal discrepancy between thought and emotion, between feelings of liberation and trepidation.

Atwood attributes her preoccupation with the figure of Susanna Moodie, who 'began to haunt' her,<sup>38</sup> to this internal division, 'to the hints, the gaps between what was said and what hovered, just unsaid, between the lines, and the conflict between what Mrs. Moodie felt she ought to think and feel and what she actually did think and feel'.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Atwood describes this pioneer woman as 'divided down the middle',<sup>40</sup> living not

only on the border of the wilderness but also on the border between articulation and silence, between words consciously expressed and emotions unconsciously repressed. It becomes increasingly clear why Atwood believes the term 'paranoid schizophrenia' is an appropriate description for not just Moodie's but Canada's state of confused identity. Canada is not simply divided from the United States by its external border, but internally divided because of language and belief (religion), with regional French Catholic and English Protestant subcultures producing fears of separation and disintegration. From its beginnings, Canada was also 'divided down the middle', composed of Anglophone Upper and Francophone Lower Canada, each of the two provinces being governed independently and maintaining distinct, separate identities.<sup>41</sup> So despite the merger of both regions in 1841 to form the Province of Canada, the new infant nation was still referred to in the plural as the Canadas by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century immigrants, reflecting its divided dual identity in marked contrast to that of the politically unified United States.

The Canadian pioneer experience of the unfamiliar landscape that greeted newly arrived settlers was obviously profoundly disturbing. The sense of a split Canadian psychic response to the wilderness was further enhanced by the type of immigrant arriving in Canada and their immediate experience of arrival. Unlike those who chose to emigrate to the United States, which was seen as a land of hope and promise where opportunities abound, those arriving in Canada were, as Gaile McGregor puts it, 'more pragmatic, modest if not downright sceptical, on the whole less naively hopeful'.<sup>42</sup> There is no Canadian equivalent of 'the American Dream'. The motivation for emigration appears often to have been necessity rather than opportunity, with an emphasis on being forced to leave the old country rather than actively wishing to enter the new. Atwood describes Canada as a country 'founded not by idealists but by people who'd been kicked out of other places',<sup>43</sup> including those who emigrated for financial reasons: 'the impoverished gentlefolk, those younger sons of good families, half-pay officers and minor officials whose sinecures had become obsolete'.<sup>44</sup> Susanna Moodie certainly describes the decision to emigrate as 'a matter of necessity, not of choice',<sup>45</sup> while her emigrant sister, Catharine Parr Traill, addresses those 'who through duty or necessity are about to become sojourners in the Western Wilderness'<sup>46</sup> in her Canadian Settler's Guide (1857). The use of the word 'sojourner' implies the sense of temporary

residence which many far from 'settled' immigrants felt. Elsewhere Parr Traill suggests that the unappealing decision to leave for Canada was in many cases an act of self-sacrifice on the part of parents thinking to their family's future:

Children should be taught to appreciate the devoted love that has induced their parents to overcome the natural reluctance felt by all persons to quit for ever the land of their forefathers, the scenes of their earliest and happiest days, and to become aliens and wanderers in a distant country.<sup>47</sup>

Frye's and Atwood's sense that Canada is a place of exiles, therefore, rests on these specific historical precedents. No wonder some of the original Canadian settlers had trouble embracing the new land that greeted them, remaining insecurely 'foreign' in the country as a result. As David Stouck suggests, when contrasting the American and Canadian immigrant experience: 'Seeking a haven in which to preserve customs threatened at home is imaginatively at the opposite pole from rejecting the old order and emigrating in order to begin life anew'.<sup>48</sup> This experience clearly affected the Canadian immigrant response to both the physical and psychological borders of their new world. Frye proposes that Moodie demonstrates an example of what he has famously coined as the Canadian 'garrison mentality', describing her as 'a British army of occupation in herself, a one-woman garrison'<sup>49</sup> in her wish to maintain 'civilized' English standards, often at complete odds with her primitive wilderness surroundings. The 'garrison mentality' is an isolating psychological force, with the building of mental barriers a direct response to a sense of having the boundaries of one's identity threatened. Indeed, Frye attributes the religious and political 'sectarian divisiveness' of many mixed English/French Canadian towns to this 'garrison mentality'.<sup>50</sup> The minority French, in particular, feel their culture threatened by the English and vehemently seek to maintain a separate ethnic identity. Atwood sees this type of mentality not only splitting communities but internally dividing individuals by promoting 'feelings of suffocation inside the garrison and terror of what lies outside',<sup>51</sup> causing a schizophrenic response 'halfway between oppressive security and free-floating hysteria'.<sup>52</sup> This split existence is perpetuated, however, since 'the bleak and confined life inside the wall is preferable to the threatening emptiness that lies outside it'.<sup>53</sup> The garrison mentality may be usefully employed as a metaphor for examining

both the isolation of communities and the isolation of individuals, like Moodie, trying to reinforce the walls of her identity threatened by the need to adapt to survive effectively in the bush.

The distinction between Canadian immigrants and those from the United States, and their different experiences of arrival are reflected in the constitutional aims of the two nations. The American Declaration of Independence confidently asserts a set of ideals to live by - 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' - indicating an outward-going search for freedom and personal space. In stark contrast, the Canadian constitution, defined under the British North American Act, outlines a set of policies to govern by - 'peace, order and good government' - displaying an introverted need for security and self-containment couched in pragmatic and rather conservative terms. This situation - with Americans psychologically, if not physically, pushing the borders of their world outwards, while Canadians display a tendency to close inwards on themselves, drawing their boundaries closely around them for protection - is a result not only of the different types of immigrants arriving in the two countries, but also of their experience of the position of the frontier which confronted them on their arrival. Frye claims that 'to enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean', whereas 'to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent'.<sup>54</sup>

Entering Canada by boat up the Saint Lawrence river, as the Moodies and the Parr Trails did, the immigrant was surrounded and engulfed by the unknown country, with the frontier, Frye suggests, closing in around them. In contrast, the frontier in the American experience confronted the newcomer from a safely external perspective, as they viewed the land stretching out to the West. 'In the United States one could choose to move out to the frontier or to retreat from it back to the seaboard', Frye suggests, whereas 'in the Canadas . . . the frontier was all around one, a part and condition of one's whole imaginative being.'<sup>55</sup> Both on a national and personal level, the borders of the Canadian wilderness fail to remain clearly external and become disruptively internalized, splitting the Canadian psyche.

The United States has often been described as a 'frontier society'. Atwood interestingly extends this idea, using the concept of borders of various kinds to define the national characteristics of Canada, its former colonial ruler, Britain, and its powerful continental neighbour, beneath the 49th Parallel and to the west in Alaska.

She does so in terms of the 'single unifying and informing symbol' which she believes distinguishes each nation and 'functions like a system of beliefs . . . which holds the country together'.<sup>56</sup> Atwood suggests that the American 'Frontier' is 'a line that is always expanding, taking in or "conquering" ever-fresh virgin territory'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the corresponding symbol of England is 'The Island', a self-contained and insular concept in which England's coastal boundaries become symbolic of the English desire for protective security and stability, in contrast to the American wish for frontier adventure and expansion.<sup>58</sup> In relation to these two clearly geographical and boundary-orientated national symbols, Atwood's suggestion of a metaphysical concept, 'Survival, la Survivance',<sup>59</sup> as the symbol which embodies Canada's national mentality initially seems rather out of place. However, this concept is linked to the historic tradition of pioneering struggle for survival in the Canadian wilderness, which involved 'carving out a place',<sup>60</sup> defining the borders not only of one's personal property but also of one's psychological space, encapsulating the Canadian search for identity in relation to personal geographical setting. Canadians feel a need to strengthen physical and psychological borders if cultural survival is to be achieved. This survival has been made more difficult in the face of Canada's historically marginalized and victimized position under British and French colonial domination and subsequent post-colonial Americanization.

The irony is that Atwood's 'unifying . . . symbol' of Canadian national identity actually encapsulates national division, with its bilingual form suggesting the split between English and French-speaking Canada. Moreover, 'Survival/la Survivance' implies Canada's borderline condition as a marginalized country which is only just managing to resist partition and stay in existence as a coherent nation, because of the uncertain boundaries which barely define it. Survival as a theme does not 'hold the country together', it is about the need to find a means of holding the country together. Boundaries may be reassuringly stable and self-defining concepts in the case of England and America but in Canada they are an unresolved arena representing the problematic issue of a national identity beset by divisions. The national motto, 'a mari usque ad mare' ('from sea to sea'), might at first appear to refute Atwood's analysis by indicating a nation clearly defined by its coastal borders. But this reading belies the fact that the reference to these outer limits begs an important question. Exactly what is in

between? The phrase adopted by Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald (1815-91), was based on Psalm 72 and significantly reads in full: 'from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth'.<sup>61</sup> The initial opening may hint at borders but the sense of a vast terra incognita becomes one of an all-encompassing and limitless space stretching to 'the ends of the earth'. The borders seem to disappear into infinity and the conscience is divided between the images of two distant oceans, isolated in an undefined imaginative wilderness in between, the blank area which supposedly is the nation. Indeed, in a poem entitled 'What Is a Canadian?', the poet Miriam Waddington suggests that Canada is 'a country too wide to be single in'.<sup>62</sup>

### III

I shall now continue my discussion of national identity in relation to borders by looking at specific formulations of 'Canadianness'. Here I wish to explore the way in which geographical displacement, isolation and seclusion from view have become internalized in many Canadian psyches to produce a very distinct imaginative late twentieth-century response to the wilderness. As Atwood stresses:

Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it . . . I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost.<sup>63</sup>

Problems of location and identity on a national scale appear to promote questions about personal identity. This shift from physical to psychological location, from external to internal border issues, can be understood more clearly in terms of Atwood's 'unifying' national symbol of survival. As she suggests in her influential study, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972), 'the obstacles tend to become harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimal human being'.<sup>64</sup> The original frontier men and women were forced to face their own deepest fears, undergoing a journey into the wilderness of the psyche, as well as into the Canadian bush. The wilderness represents an unexplored zone where the

imagination is free to 'run wild' and where the disappearance or loss of self is a distinct possibility.

This experience is still highly relevant for modern Canadians, in a country where great expanses of land remain unexplored and where the wilderness literally is increasingly 'unknown territory' in contemporary urban life, intensifying the internalization of this once geographically undefined space. Frye, discussing the role of the northern frontier in the Canadian imagination, argues that,

An American who had never seen the Mississippi would not be regarded as a widely travelled man, at least in his own country; but few Canadians have ever seen the largest river in Canada, the Mackenzie [in the remote North-West Territories], and the existence of a vast hinterland which is both part of us and yet not a part of us creates something curiously self-alienating.<sup>65</sup>

Frye illustrates this divided Canadian response by quoting W.L. Morton's idea that 'the line which marks off the frontier from the farmstead, the wilderness from the baseland, the hinterland from the metropolis, runs through every Canadian psyche'.<sup>66</sup> Yet Frye acknowledges that this concept might be equally true of the American psyche. The difference which Frye interestingly uses to distinguish between American and Canadian reactions to the wilderness is that 'in the United States wilderness and baseland can be assimilated by a uniting consciousness. In Canada the wilderness, symbolized by the north, creates a kind of doppelgänger figure who is oneself and yet the opposite of oneself.'<sup>67</sup>

Canadians continue to experience an ambiguous divided response to their own native environment, seeing the wilderness as both a place of quest, a haven of contemplative solitude, and also a place of self-doubt, fear, alienation and otherness. In a comparative study, Atwood discusses the wilderness from a Canadian perspective, describing 'the North' as 'the place where you go to find something out. It's the place of the unconscious':

It's the place of the journey or the quest . . . the thing you go into to have a spiritual experience, or the contact with a deeper reality in Nature. And it's a place of ordeal, and vision.

The usual model in Canada is related to Eskimo and Indian practice, which was that at a certain age you were expected to go off by yourself and fast. And in certain Eskimo cultures it was believed that a spirit would come to you, and you would then struggle with the spirit - Jacob and the angel - and if you

overcame during that struggle, the spirit would be yours. But if it overcame you, you were in for bad times, trouble.<sup>68</sup>

So the wilderness is seen as a place of initiatory rites, of self-discovery, yet paradoxically it is also a potential place of self-destruction, of life, or identity threatening ordeal. The Canadian wilderness becomes a useful metaphor for the nation's schizophrenic situation of uncertain internal division, since it is a region without any well defined borders and thus a testing place that breaks down the clear distinction between self and other, civilisation and the wild, sanity and madness - which help constitute a coherent sense of identity.

In many ways, the wilderness comes to represent Canada. Atwood describes the representation of Canada by 'international' literature as being 'a place you escape to from "civilization", an unspoiled, uncorrupted place imagined as empty'.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that the very word Canada is taken from the Spanish for 'nothing here' (a ca nada).<sup>70</sup> The Americans with greater assurance of their own national identity, view Canada as their wilderness border, unknown and elemental, 'that blank area north of the map where the bad weather came from'.<sup>71</sup> Canadians' experience of a frontier existence is perpetuated by the overwhelming sense of bordering America to the south. And maybe justifiably so since ninety percent of Canadians live within a hundred miles of this border. The irony is that in many ways the frontier which Canada both embodies and possesses is an invisible one. The Canadian prairie author Rudy Wiebe mocks the 'imaginary' political construction of nations when he describes flying over the 49th Parallel: 'So much of Canada's southern boundary is invisible from the air; too much of its southern edge was conceived in the imagination of officials'.<sup>72</sup> Stressing the 'geographical artificiality' of the border, in contrast to naturally occurring phenomena, Wiebe adds: 'I have flown across that surmised edge often by day or night, and neither the sun nor the sundogs nor the light of the moon and stars . . . granted it the faintest visibility. They never will'.<sup>73</sup> This lack of national definition - here quite literal - is a source of anxiety, as the use of the term 'edge' suggests when used to describe the precarious border. McLuhan's memorable description of Canada as a 'borderline case' is based on his apprehension of Canadian identity as being in an uncertain limbo state of 'inbetween-ness',<sup>74</sup> balanced between its own wish for self-



definition and the cultural encroachment of America. Atwood describes Canada as 'a frontier society'<sup>75</sup> and relates how as school children 'Canada for us was not - America'.<sup>76</sup> Canada becomes what is beyond the culturally known United States, it is the frontier and the unknown geographical region beyond that frontier. In the United States the frontier can be a unifying symbol of national identity because the nation's boundaries help strengthen their sense of self-definition as these borders remain external. By contrast, the wilderness frontier in Canada exists not only within the country but in many respects is the country since, lacking borders, its extent is limitless.

Canada's identity as 'that blank area', an invisible landmass, which does not exist in its own right but acts as another nation's border has political origins. The country's sense of a lack of identity, or tentative marginal existence is heightened by the historic role of Canada as the gateway to somewhere else, a physical boundary or barrier to be crossed. The European search for the Northwest Passage in the mid-nineteenth century was an attempt to find a way to circumvent Canada so as to sail from the Atlantic to the Pacific, or eventually to discover the North Pole. As W.H. New observes: 'the desire for an Asian connection led European map-makers artificially to open a space through Canada, to draw a mythical Northwest Passage', adding that 'making Canada a 'gulf' through which imperial ships could sail to Asia was a way of refusing to recognise the unexpected empirical realities of the land itself'.<sup>77</sup> Later, the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway, built during the period of British colonialism and opened in 1885, was also seen in terms of achieving a physical link between Europe and Asia / the Pacific East. Even today the American installation of the D.E.W. line, the Distant Early Warning radar system in the Canadian North, shows Canada as perceived as blank space, a natural barrier between the United States and somewhere more important, namely Russia. As Frye has pointed out, one of the essential Canadian moods, expressive of such national feelings of insecurity and inferiority, is 'the feeling of apology for being so huge and tedious an obstacle on the way to somewhere more interesting'.<sup>78</sup> So Canada, in relation to the wilderness, can be seen as a border region both in psychological and physical, geographical terms. Largely absent from an American perspective, Canada has been a country complicit in its own disappearance with regard to national recognition. It is space not place.

Just as the act of drawing clearly external geographical borders is seen as being intensely problematic in Canada, so too have recent attempts to delineate political boundaries raised more difficulties than they were intended to resolve. The debate concerning Canadian identity is still very current in a nation which has been attempting to redefine its constitutional identity over the last decade, culminating in the Meech Lake Accord of 1987. This political declaration seemed long overdue, replacing as it did the British North American Act, instituted by colonial powers over a hundred years before. Initially, political discussions were mainly concerned with resolving the English / French Quebec question, with the province of Quebec demanding increasing independence from the rest of Canada and a stronger political voice in the country as a whole. However, the negotiations were greatly complicated by other groups, including Native Indians, immigrants and women, also coming forward to petition for better national representation. The Meech Lake Accord failed to unify Canada under a coherent declaration of nationhood but instead highlighted the conflicting and divisive interests and aspirations of its people, demonstrating the necessity for a plural conceptual approach to national identity. The crux of the problem is where one draws the line. Definitions of identity by nature both include and exclude, they can never be all-inclusive. By failing to define their national identity in sufficiently clear-cut terms, Canadians run the risk of having a delineation which is either internalized and thus divisive, as in the English- and French-Canadian split, or positioned in such a way as to be exclusive of all, resulting in the phenomenon of a country of foreigners, with everyone ironically on the outside of the border, at least in terms of a safely defined sense of what it is to be Canadian. In this scenario, the Canadian nation effectively disappears altogether as an indigenous people rather than as a geographical region.

#### IV

Many of these complex questions concerning the borders of national identity are raised in Atwood's novel, *Surfacing*. Although it was published fifteen years before the signing of the Meech Lake Accord, it deals with several of the major political issues raised by that agreement. In particular, it portrays the position of marginalized groups such as women and Native Indians in their search for a coherent identity within the nation as a whole. Equally important is the representation of Canada's own search for

self-definition and visibility in relation to the United States, as well as the problematic cultural, linguistic and religious divide between English and French Canada. It is also Atwood's clearest fictional portrayal of the 'paranoid schizophrenia' which she believes defines a sense of Canadian identity, with the central protagonist experiencing incidents of psychic splitting and disappearance in the wilderness which bear relevance to the situation of Canada as a whole. It is thus a nationalist text which clearly deserves more detailed study. However, it must be remembered that this image of Canadian national identity is cultural and historically specific because it is, after all, the feminist formulation of one white, Anglophone, female author from Ontario, writing in the 1970s. Admittedly, the work of other canonical authors during that decade, a period of heightened Canadian nationalism, indicates that many of Atwood's sentiments about Canada's marginal position in relation to the United States were widely held at that time.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, I intend to investigate a number of very different formulations of national identity produced in disparate ethnic, geographical, and historical circumstances in subsequent chapters. Atwood's widely-known novel Surfacing articulates some of the earlier and more well-established elements of Canadian national representation which later Canadian authors have chosen either to develop or reject.

In Surfacing, a personal female quest for identity is used to mirror Canada's search for national identity in the face of the 'masculine' cultural and political power of the United States. The nameless protagonist, whose identity is implicitly undefined, travels north, returning to the Quebec bush of her childhood to look for her missing father. This search in the wilderness becomes a search into her own past and her unconscious. The setting is of symbolic importance as the protagonist and her three friends leave 'the city limits'<sup>80</sup> behind them and cross the border into the bushland of Quebec. This is not just a provincial but a psychological border crossing, from safely bounded civilization into open wilderness. They discover that they are 'between stations'<sup>81</sup> on the radio, suggesting their uncertain position between areas of communication, effectively silenced as English-speakers in French Quebec. The reference to stations in this wilderness context also connotes being physically isolated between pioneering outpost stations. Indeed, there are many experiences in the novel which bear relevance to the original experience of pioneers like Moodie. Atwood stresses the ambiguity of her protagonist's divided response to this wilderness with the words 'we're on my home

ground, foreign territory'.<sup>82</sup> She is both physically and psychologically in 'border country',<sup>83</sup> split temporally, geographically and linguistically by her presence in this landscape. She is alienated by time since the bush represents her own past, her childhood. She may mentally accuse her father of geographically splitting his family 'between two anonymities, the city and the bush',<sup>84</sup> but she is the one who has perpetuated this sense of dislocation by rejecting the wilderness place where she grew up to live permanently in the urban conglomeration of the city.

When she was a girl the family lived an isolated and secluded existence on an island separated from the nearest village by a physical boundary of water, symbolizing the cultural and linguistic barriers that divide this tiny English enclave from the surrounding French province. This situation is a clear representation of Frye's Canadian 'garrison mentality'. The protagonist's sense of belonging is obviously deeply fragmented and disturbed as she journeys by boat towards her once island home and yet looks back at the village 'feeling . . . homesickness, for a place where I never lived'.<sup>85</sup> She is an acute portrayal of what Atwood has described as the 'displaced persons'<sup>86</sup> which constitute the Canadian population. She can never truly belong in this wilderness region. Unable to feel at home in the place where she once lived, the protagonist comes to represent the characteristic split Canadian response to the natural environment. Her friend, Anna, realizes that even as a child, she was 'cut off from everything'.<sup>87</sup> She was not just physically isolated from others, but psychologically cut off from a true sense of her own identity.

Significantly, the protagonist is alienated by language as an English-speaker in French Quebec. As the group of friends enter the province, their border crossing is 'marked by a sign that says BIENVENUE on one side and WELCOME on the other'.<sup>88</sup> In passing this dual-language sign, the female protagonist crosses a linguistic threshold, and her subsequent breakdown in the wilderness is manifested by her realization of the potential duplicity of language and her attempt to exist outside its defining yet divisive limits. 'Language', she says, 'divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole'.<sup>89</sup> This road sign, used for target practice by hunters, is permanently full of bullet holes no matter how often it is replaced. It obviously symbolizes the violent division which results from this Canadian linguistic split, within the individual, as well as society as a

whole. When the protagonist first meets her father's French friend Paul, their polarized linguistic backgrounds result in a confrontational stance: 'we stand there on either side of the fence'.<sup>90</sup> The protagonist's failed attempts at bilingual communication produce a psychological splitting which parallels the internal linguistic division in this Canadian community as a whole. Linguistic differences become another intensely complex and problematic barrier which can be destructive to the identity of an individual or group, when internalized. The English-speaking protagonist fails to communicate with Paul's wife, Madame, any better than her mother once did. Cultural and linguistic national divisions remain.

Even the English language becomes foreign to the protagonist. It is one which she 'translat[es] badly',<sup>91</sup> as she struggles to realize her own identity on the border between articulate sanity and silent madness: 'It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine'.<sup>92</sup> The language is 'foreign' both in gendered and in geographical terms. She believes the language does not belong to her because she sees it as a restrictive patriarchal construct. Moreover, it bears an onerous colonial inheritance.<sup>93</sup> Many other post-colonial countries have had to struggle to readjust the balance between colonial and native languages as a part of the quest for their own national identity and a return to their indigenous culture. Canada's linguistic problems of identity are complicated, not only because of their dual and therefore divisive colonial language inheritance, but also because there is no such thing as one clearly defined 'Canadian' native language to readopt. There are ten separate indigenous Indian language groups in Canada, some of them constituted by the existence of a single language, but others embracing as many as fifteen separate languages.<sup>94</sup> The vast majority of the population has only ever spoken the colonial languages of English and French, and other major ethnic groups are made up of other European and Asian languages, not Native languages. Chinese is the third largest language group in Canada.

Further to this complex linguistic situation, Canadian national identity is curiously defined by the main languages spoken. This type of distinction involves a psychic splitting since Canadians are defining themselves by two colonial languages which are essentially foreign to them. The protagonist's isolated status in Francophone Quebec is

denoted by the family's alien designation as 'anglais'.<sup>95</sup> As Hugh MacLennan observes in the foreword to his famous 1957 novel, tellingly entitled Two Solitudes:

No single word exists, within Canada itself, to designate with satisfaction to both races a native of the country. When those of the French language use the word 'Canadien', they nearly always refer to themselves. They know their English-speaking compatriots as 'Les Anglais'. English-speaking citizens act on the same principle. They call themselves Canadians; those of the French language French-Canadians.<sup>96</sup>

This form of designating national belonging is not only an example of Canadians' psychic split identity but also an illustration of another form of exclusion or denial. It ignores the fact that the real 'natives' of Canada are the Indians, whose minority position in Canada involves being linguistically marginalized. They are the invisible Native Canadians which this multicultural nation frequently fails to recognise. This situation is indicated in Surfacing by reference to 'the others',<sup>97</sup> the one elusive, silent Indian family left on the lake. They are a group of isolated individuals whose origin and home is significantly unknown - 'they would appear . . . condensing as if from the air'.<sup>98</sup> The government has 'corralled' their fellow Indians 'somewhere else', presumably in a reservation which again, tellingly, lacks a clear geographical location. The use of the word 'corralled' implies that they have not only been fenced in but fenced off, from their language and traditions. Their ancient rock paintings, whose spiritual significance is now lost, appear on sheer cliff faces, rock walls which physically symbolize the temporal barrier which now exists to understanding of these early signs. Their meaning is further obscured as they are literally submerged below the lake's surface because of additional Canadian government interference, when the water's level rises because of reservoir damming. This ethnic group's heightened spiritual knowledge is sadly referred to in the past tense: 'The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived'.<sup>99</sup> Like the protagonist, they are dislocated from their origins, language and system of beliefs.

Denied a context in which they can maintain their identity, this last Indian family look likely to follow the disappearance of their fellow people. They not only remain anonymous but are significantly never called by their specific 'Indian' ethnic classification, just as the protagonist is not referred to by her individual name or her

Canadian nationality. Indeed, no geographical name is given for either the city from which she has come or the old home to which she is returning. The novel shows how physical displacement is associated with a semantic dislocation between signs and their signification; belonging and a clearly defined presence can only be established through a linked sense of place and language.

Geographical and linguistic locations are associated through the combined acts of mapping and naming. The wilderness, as blank space, becomes a tabula rasa waiting to be inscribed. The protagonist bemoans the fact that other people litter the bush 'as if the endless anonymous water and unclaimed land, compelled them to leave their signature, stake their territory'.<sup>100</sup> She herself thinks she can do without maps and markers in this region familiar from childhood, but becomes confused by the 'absence of defining borders' in the bush.<sup>101</sup> She fails to locate her missing father and by implication her own origins, because she is unable to 'read' the empty wilderness and the 'illegible' trails,<sup>102</sup> where 'there's no sign; or there are too many signs'.<sup>103</sup> It is not until, in a pioneering move, she acknowledges a need to 'clear a space' of her own,<sup>104</sup> that she can begin to locate her authentic self. This recognition seems to be a prerequisite to composing her own story, which is the novel Surfacing as she narrates it. Atwood realizes that if a person is 'living in a place whose shape is unclear to him . . . one of his impulses will be to explore it, another will be to name it'.<sup>105</sup> Canada, as an undefined wilderness space inhabited by foreigners, is just such a place. Personal and national identity quests are both seen in terms of orientation, with Canada being portrayed by Atwood as culturally lost just as the protagonist is emotionally and psychologically lost:

What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is . . . a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately.<sup>106</sup>

Trying to orientate herself artistically, the protagonist defines her identity in terms of her career as an illustrator, but senses this existence to be a false one, 'it feels strapped to me, like an aqualung or an extra, artificial limb'.<sup>107</sup> The creative process is ironically seen as destructively divisive in this novel because the Canadian artist

attempts to discover herself from a position which is not truly her own. Her illustrations of fairy stories use unoriginal stereotypical images dictated by the publisher, whose limiting influence even goes as far as prescribing the colours she can use. She knows 'it isn't my territory',<sup>108</sup> but fails to stand her ground, allowing her art to be compromised as imitation. Physically isolated in the empty wilderness, she literally draws a blank, failing to progress at all with her commercial drawings.

Atwood believes that because Canadian artists have historically been placed in an uncertain marginal position in relation to their own unmapped culture they have a tendency to be 'isolated people'. They are, she claims, not only 'cut off', but in fact have 'something . . . cut off from them; as artists, deprived of audience and cultural traditions they are mutilated'.<sup>109</sup> It is significant that, in her creative maternal role as a child-bearer, the protagonist in Surfacing has experienced psychological and corporeal splitting through an abortion. McGregor supports Atwood's idea of the fissile position of national artists, describing how 'the Canadian creator . . . most typically feels himself to be a person radically divided, chronically unsure whether he is - or wants to be - self or other . . . balanced between sanity and madness'.<sup>110</sup> The wilderness is a region which physically promotes this position of divisive isolation, described by the Canadian poet A.M. Klein as 'schizoid solitudes' in his poem 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape' (1948). Indeed, the title of this poem aptly indicates the fate of the protagonist's father who fails to maintain the separation between self and other, apparently becoming a part of the landscape itself. He is neither corpse nor living man, having 'simply disappeared . . . vanished into nothing',<sup>111</sup> prompting local speculation that he may have become 'bushed'.<sup>112</sup> This colloquial term for going insane has the added connotation of not only becoming mentally and physically lost in the wilderness, but actually becoming the wilderness itself. Atwood supports this interpretation when she describes 'Death by Bushing' in Survival as a madness that results from a situation in which 'the character sees too much of the wilderness, and in a sense becomes it leaving his humanity behind'.<sup>113</sup>

The wilderness may be a place of physical and artistic freedom as an empty tabula rasa, but with the loss of confining borders definition is dangerously absent. The delineation of identity involves making one's own original mark, not straying into foreign territory by borrowing or copying from others. Self and other must remain



clearly distinct. The protagonist's father is described as 'an improviser on standard themes':<sup>114</sup> his whole lifestyle is an imitation of pioneer life. He ceases to exist as an individual because he becomes obsessed with recording a system of signs, a whole art form which is not his own. The protagonist is disappointed when she discovers 'his drawings were not originals . . . , only copies'.<sup>115</sup> His interest in mapping the location of Indian rock paintings directly results in his disappearance and death while surveying in the wilderness. Equally, Atwood knows that Canadians must find their own distinctive and original way of artistically and culturally articulating their identity, mapping out their own territory, if they are truly to 'find' themselves as a nation. 'Any map is better than no map as long as it is accurate',<sup>116</sup> the problem is Canadians' use of an inaccurate or false cultural map to locate their identity, attempting to discover themselves from the position of the other, namely the United States. Atwood uses the metaphor of looking at one's reflection in the mirror to suggest how this dislocated cultural position is psychologically damaging to identity:

They'd become addicted to the one-way mirror of the Canadian-American border - we can see you, you can't see us - and had neglected that other mirror, their own culture. The States is an escapist fantasy for Canadians. Their own culture shows them what they really look like, and that's always a little hard to take. <sup>117</sup>

Just as physical survival becomes intensely difficult in the borderless wilderness, so cultural survival is made more difficult due to media encroachment negating the existence of national boundaries in the modern age of information technology. This technological situation has increasingly important implications for Canadian national identity. Atwood believes that 'national borders, those little moats countries build around themselves, their ability to determine what will be seen and heard within and what will stay without, will have become ineffectual in a few decades' because of 'an expansion outward of the boundaries of whomever controls the technology for information transmission'.<sup>118</sup> The group of friends in *Surfacing* may be out of reach of radio transmission in the remote wilderness but they cannot escape the influence of modern communication technology, as they are all shown to be culturally conditioned. More importantly, they are heavily influenced by American media, conditioned by a culture that is not their own. It is significant that it is the former radio announcer,

David, who has fallen most foul of this insidious foreign control, influenced by the media in which he once worked. He speaks in clichés and platitudes, declaring his hatred of the Americans, yet ironically voicing his protests in Americanized terms. The protagonist feels repelled by her realization that he is effectively a spurious 'imposter', 'he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange'.<sup>119</sup> Canadian identity is vulnerable to foreign media influence because it is insecurely defined. McLuhan accentuates this point: 'Canadians have instant access to all American radio and television which, experienced in the alien milieu of Canada, feeds . . . the growing perforation and porousness of their identity image in this electronic age.'<sup>120</sup>

Just as Anglo-Canadians' language is influenced by the American presence to the south, so too other forms of Canadian national definition are appropriated with devastatingly confusing psychic effect. One of the first things the protagonists see as they cross the Quebec border is a family of mooses, national emblems of Canada. Yet one of these animals is waving an American flag and all are stuffed and clothed, representing not the free natural Canadian wilderness environment but American urban encroachment and destruction of Nature through commercialism and advertising. The mooses are ludicrously out of place, dressed in human clothes and standing in the forecourt of a garage. Canadians' sense of national identity is not only disturbed but divided by this breakdown between signs and their signifiers. Nothing appears to be clearly and safely defined in the Canadian wilderness. David suggests that the national emblem should be 'a split beaver', not the maple leaf.<sup>121</sup> He is amused by his own pun on the word beaver as 'slang for cunt',<sup>122</sup> allowing Canadian identity to be basely reduced by slippages in semantic definition.

Atwood's use of this violent image suggests that the various "splits" characterizing things Canadian - all the way along the dividing line of the 49th parallel<sup>123</sup> - are in some way feminized. Canada herself is a wilderness, whose penetration by the Americans produces a sense of national insecurity akin to the way in which the protagonist feels her bodily boundaries to be threatened by Joe's forced attempts to penetrate her. This incident occurs after she has been diving into the lake in an attempt at discovery which plunges her back into her own past and the depths of her psyche. Thinking of Joe, she wonders whether 'Perhaps for him I am the entrance, as the lake

was for me'.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, the lake is elsewhere depicted in womb-like terms, a feminine body of water from which the protagonist senses her lost child 'surfacing within [her], . . . rising from the lake'.<sup>125</sup> As well as being a site of violence, the Canadian wilderness has a divided status since it is also a restoratively feminine place of psychic renewal and fecundity. So the wilderness is a conflicted space: in physical as well as artistic terms, it is paradoxically both a destructive and a creative zone.

It is not just by means of the landscape that the characteristic feminized national division, which Atwood describes as 'our schizophrenic Canadian consciousness',<sup>126</sup> is extended from a psychic to a physical representation. It is also depicted through women's bodies. The violent divisions within Canada are symbolized in images of violent amputation and cleavage, all of which are inflicted on women in the novel. The most obvious of these is the protagonist's abortion in which she becomes physically as well as psychologically cut off from herself. The unborn baby is 'like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled'.<sup>127</sup> Later she describes how she felt 'amputated' after the operation.<sup>128</sup> Little divides the life of the mother from the death of the child. Atwood implies that survival is only truly possible if unity is maintained. Severed from its mother, the unborn baby dies and the mother herself suffers a mental breakdown.

The issues of division and survival raised by the abortion are symbolically relevant to the political situation in Canada, with fears over Quebec separatism and its implications for nation as a whole. Despite the novel's French-Canadian setting, Atwood is writing from a strongly nationalist Anglo-Canadian perspective and clearly believes that the very existence of the body of the Canadian nation state will be threatened if Quebec becomes partitioned off from the rest of the country. Indeed, another English-Canadian writer, Ramsay Cook, has described Canada as 'a stillborn nation', alluding to the destructive political forces inherent from the very moment of the nation's 'birth'.<sup>129</sup> Separatism will produce national disintegration, just as the physical separation of mother and unborn child in Surfacing results in mental disintegration. Images of somatic division and 'amputation' are used as a metaphor by other commentators discussing the French Canadian problem. D. Drache describes 'the struggle for a Free Quebec' as an act which attempts to 'dismember part of the colony' of Canada.<sup>130</sup> Surfacing's protagonist remembers the old storekeeper, Madame, who, cut off from the rest of English-speaking Canada by her native French language, was

also physically severed: 'she had only one hand',<sup>131</sup> the other a mutilated stump. Violent physical divisions come to represent the violent rift in the Body Politic of Canada itself.

David's joke about the 'split beaver' may link masculine American aggression with a split Canadian body. Yet, it is a Canadian himself who suggests this representation, and the female protagonist fails to raise any verbal objection to this crude, violent image, thus accepting male sexist abuse. In other words, these two Canadians readily accept their national or gendered positions of inferiority. Indeed, this passive agreement represents a more general scenario in which Canadians' insecure sense of identity has led to an inferiority trait whereby failure, victimization and invisibility are accepted almost as national characteristics.<sup>132</sup> In *Survival*, Atwood draws an analogy between the position of women and Canadians as victims who are 'exploited' and 'oppressed'.<sup>133</sup> With her dual stance as a feminist and forceful advocate of full post-colonial independence, Atwood believes that 'women as well as Canadians have been colonized or have been the victims of cultural imperialism'.<sup>134</sup> Although she is not the first writer to draw such a parallel, this association between women and Canadians is problematic. For gender is inescapably dictated at the point of an individual's conception, whereas nationality, though normally prescribed by country of birth, can be chosen and altered during the lifetime of an individual. Further, although female and male identities are traditionally represented as biological opposites, Canada and the United States definitely do not have diametrically opposed national characteristics. Thus, this analogous contrast of genders and nationalities betray Atwood's tendency to simplify questions of national identity into the polarized terms of America and Canada. This 'them' and 'us' formulation ignores Canada's complex inter-relationships with other nations, as well as establishing a national stance which, by its very configuration, is antagonistic. Ironically, it is just such a position, taken to extremes, which Atwood represents as being flawed in the case of her protagonist in *Surfacing*.

Nevertheless, in *Surfacing*, Atwood problematizes the association of women and Canadians through the concept of victimization. She does so by suggesting that national complicity is involved in maintaining a status of inferior identity, as demonstrated by David's 'joke'. Just as the protagonist has to accept responsibility for the destruction of her unborn child, Atwood implies so too must Canada accept

political responsibility for its internal divisions and cultural erasure. As Jeanne Delbaere-Garant suggests, in her essay 'Surfacing: Retracing the Boundaries':

The situation of the heroine can be said to parallel in many ways the coming of age of Canadian culture (often seen as feminine) . . . the divided identity . . . the passivity, the tendency to shift responsibility for stagnation on "the Americans" and finally, the awakening, the refusal to be a victim, the determination to be oneself.<sup>135</sup>

The danger comes in taking these parallels too far. Atwood is attempting two separate but linked enterprises in Surfacing, in the articulation of Canadian national identity and individual female identity. Yet I believe she succeeds more fully with the latter than the former. While presenting an original portrayal of one woman's highly individual attempts to repudiate female stereotypes, Atwood may also ultimately reject national stereotypes but they are still very much embodied in the parameters of the novel.

A case in point is the way in which the archetypal trait of Canadian passivity is questioned, and ultimately undermined, by Atwood, through her portrayal of the protagonist's ambiguous ethical position. The protagonist shows an abhorrence of violence while perpetrating her own acts of appalling cruelty, like piercing a live frog with a fishing hook,<sup>136</sup> and crushing the skull of a fish.<sup>137</sup> She believes that her 'mind is a small neutral country',<sup>138</sup> attempting to be detached, in an impartial gesture of 'sitting on the fence' which simply divides her psychologically in two. She tries to set up her own protective barriers by dissociating her thoughts from her emotions, in an attempt at survival - 'I was impersonal as a wall'<sup>139</sup> - only to discover that she had 'allowed' herself 'to be cut in two'. 'Woman', she continues, 'sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors . . . only with me there had been an accident and I came apart'.<sup>140</sup> This is a clear articulation of her rapid progression towards a paranoid schizophrenic breakdown. Her increasingly dangerous detachment from her own actions emerges in the marked transition from present to past tense in part two of the novel, as the protagonist attempts to maintain temporal, as well as emotional, distance from the events of her life.

Unable to cope with her human condition the protagonist renounces her connection with civilisation in an endeavour to become one with nature, disappearing into the wilderness: 'I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning . . . I am not an animal or a tree, I

am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place'.<sup>141</sup> This naturalistic process involves an act which is as much a slippage in signification as a metaphysical transformation. As her father's demise demonstrates, disappearance can signal death or loss of self. She realises that to survive, she has 'to get up, I get up'. 'Through the ground', she declares, she must 'break surface'. 'I'm standing now; separate again'.<sup>142</sup> The wilderness is ultimately not a place of escape, but of confrontation where borders of self become consciously realised. Her friends have by now organised a search party to find her. Yet the protagonist's disappearance is incomplete. Her retreat into the woods is not an unrealised longing for death but a process of psychological healing which will necessitate a return. It is an act which parallels the visionary retreat and fasting of Native peoples during a ceremony involving the acceptance of a new name and spiritual identity.<sup>143</sup>

There are aspects of Surfacing which parallel an earlier Canadian work about Native people and the wilderness, also involving disappearance. A comparison of the two novels allows for a greater understanding of the symbolic significance of the attempt by Atwood's protagonist to merge with the landscape. When asked about novels related to Surfacing, Atwood has suggested that the work which is most cognate with her novel is Howard O'Hagan's Tay John (1939).<sup>144</sup> O'Hagan's narrative is based on an ambiguous 'half-breed' Native figure who, like the protagonist of Surfacing, is fundamentally divided, moving between the worlds of the white man and the Native, life and death, lucidity and madness. His appearance symbolises his split position. 'Not as other men', the extraordinary Tay John is 'tall, dark of skin as an Indian, yet his hair [is] full and thick and yellow'.<sup>145</sup> Like Madame in Surfacing, he has only one hand, the other having been violently amputated. Despite working as a wilderness guide, he is also constantly working to lose himself, disappearing into the mountains or the forest. 'He vanish[es] as though he were leaving one form of existence for another',<sup>146</sup> only to return later. Thus, his fate at the end of the novel speaks not of the finality of death but the cyclical process of natural renewal. The story tells of Tay John's mythical birth out of the ground and it is to the earth that he apparently returns. Searching for Tay John lost in a blizzard, a fellow trapper named Blackie has the feeling that he 'hadn't gone over the pass at all. He had just walked down . . . under the snow and into the ground'.<sup>147</sup> His previous disappearances in the

novel assure the reader that the reemergence of Tay John and his story is to be expected. Similarly, the 'surfacer' does not bury herself literally in the wilderness but rises from the ground changed in mind, if not in name or form. *Surfacing* thus portrays disappearance in both a negative and a positive context as the different circumstances surrounding the loss of father and daughter in the wilderness portray. Yet before the protagonist can begin her process of psychological healing a deeper self-understanding is needed. Her disappearance is the end of her psychological trials in the wilderness, not the beginning. Her personal identity quest is initially articulated not in psycho-spiritual but in national terms.

When the protagonist and her friends discover a dead heron, killed cruelly and without purpose and strung up in a crucifixional position, an innocent 'lynch victim',<sup>148</sup> she feels 'a sickening complicity'.<sup>149</sup> But she attempts to distance herself from this act of human violence on the grounds of her nationality. Setting up mental barriers between 'them' and 'us', she decides that the heron was murdered, not by any of her own countrymen, but by the Americans: 'It must have been the Americans'.<sup>150</sup> This is a highly reductive identification, associating United States nationals with evil, life-destroying forces, thus grossly simplifying national characteristics and totally ignoring individual variants and the multiplicity of elements that combine to constitute identity. Atwood links this response with what she describes as 'the great Canadian victim complex'.<sup>151</sup>

If you define yourself as innocent than nothing is ever your fault - it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true . . . And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world but the usual female one.<sup>152</sup>

The protagonist accuses language of dividing her 'into fragments'.<sup>153</sup> But it is her use of its defining power that results in it becoming a problematic, fissile force. She is constantly guilty of making reductive definitions of those around her. Talking of her lover Joe she 'sum[s] him up, dividing him into categories'.<sup>154</sup> Finally, she comes to categorize all those around her as evil, 'they are all American now',<sup>155</sup> reducing identity and nationality to a polarized Manichaeian vision of good and evil so that the word American becomes synonymous with a state of mind, not a particular group of people

identified by their geographical location. Her own identity becomes unstable due to the way in which she separates language and reality, denying who she really is, as well as the identity of those around her. Her reaction when she discovers that the inept, destructive canoeists, murderers of the heron, are in fact her own countrymen is to deny any association with them, problematizing her own national identity in the process: 'But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still American'.<sup>156</sup> This episode raises a crucial question. Is nationality really as safely delineated as the terms American and Canadian might suggest?

Atwood accentuates the irony of national identification in this incident since both groups of canoeists mistake their compatriots for 'Yanks'. Canadians are portrayed as not even being able to identify their own. A flag on the bow of one of the canoes, mistaken for the American stars and stripes, is in fact a symbol of Canadians' inferiority trait, a baseball pennant of the New York Mets displayed by the owner, who is a supporter because, as he acknowledges, 'I always root for the underdog'.<sup>157</sup> It is not just language but other forms of signs and symbols whose signification is shown to be problematic in the borderland territory of the wilderness. Just as the protagonist describes the individual and national identity embodied in a passport as 'fraudulent',<sup>158</sup> possibly implying that a person's identity can not be reduced to a photograph and a few statistics, so too Atwood is aware of the dangers of categorization through language and its system of signs and symbols. Not only does Atwood choose to represent but not define the protagonist by name, but she also never uses the word Canada or Canadian anywhere in the whole novel, even though national identity is one of its major topics. This is one way of depicting a disappearing Canadian identity. She also acknowledges through these gestures that both personal and national identities are far too complex to be conveyed by a single word. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist wishes there were more words for the concept of love, remembering that 'the Eskimoes had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them'.<sup>159</sup> Atwood knows that 'not only is language slippery, but it's limited'.<sup>160</sup>

This linguistic problem for the writer reflects on the larger problem of defining Canadian identity as a whole. As Howells has suggested, 'the Canadian problem of identity may not be the problem of having no identity but rather of having multiple



identities, so that any single national self image is reductive and always open to revision'.<sup>161</sup> The protagonist may challenge the semantic boundaries of nationality when she extends the definition of Americans, but she does so by making it inclusive of everyone but herself. This is not a liberating act since it reduces rather than extends the available forms of definition. If 'they are all American now'<sup>162</sup> then she is, by implication, negatively categorizing herself simply as not one of them, not an American, rather than positively seeing herself as a Canadian. Semantic boundaries of nationality and personal identity need to be challenged, but not in this way. The wilderness with its unsettled borders is the ideal site for exploring and extending the boundaries of Canadian national definition. As a region of imaginative possibility, it is here that new formulations of identity may be realized. Howells believes that 'a cultural map of Canadianness' must 'exceed geographical limits, for national boundaries have to be extended at least imaginatively to accommodate the recognition of Canadians' multicultural inheritance'.<sup>163</sup> Frye's question of Canadian identity in the form of 'where is here?' takes on new and involved implications when viewed in these terms.

In Surfacing, different boundary issues are dissonantly displaced onto one another, with Canada and femininity uneasily linked by Atwood in a confused mass of symbolic images. What becomes apparent is that through the exploration of these topics in her fiction, Atwood reaches an impasse where the search for a coherent identity - a sense of Canadianness and secure femininity - reveals that those very terms occupy a negativity or 'split' where the only coherence that can be ascribed to them is precisely their inner divisiveness. However, Atwood's discourses on Canadianness and femininity in Surfacing occupy different historical 'territory' with regard to their position within the tradition of Canadian literature. In feminist terms, Atwood's female protagonist in Surfacing undertakes a new, ground-breaking female quest in the wilderness. Allison Mitcham has described her as a 'trail-blazer',<sup>164</sup> 'the first woman character in contemporary Canadian fiction to precipitate a northern venture and to hold the reins of the undertaking'.<sup>165</sup> Certainly, after its original publication in Canada the novel served as a model for other female wilderness quest narratives. These included Marian Engel's Bear (1976) and Joan Barfoot's Abra (1976), published in Britain under the title Gaining Ground (1980).

While Surfacing could be seen as a progressive novel for its time in feminist terms, its representation of national issues of Canadian identity is more reductive than liberating, and it is in this way that the novel appears to be more traditional or dated. In an interview, given over a decade later, Atwood herself admits that no longer accurate is the 'sombre and negative' image of Canada as an oppressed cultural minority,<sup>166</sup> as portrayed in Surfacing and her critical work Survival (published in the same year). In particular, she cites the portrayal of the Canadian artist as 'very isolated' or 'cut-off', as a representation which is now outmoded.

Surfacing demonstrates an obsession with the concept of Americanization, which Atwood symbolizes through the image of 'the disease . . . spreading up from the south'.<sup>167</sup> In contrast, Frye writing only five years later suggests that this idea of cultural encroachment might increasingly involve more of 'an exchange of identities'.<sup>168</sup> Since 'the American Dream' turned sour with the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal, Frye proposes that America has begun to self-consciously re-examine its own history, culture and identity, adopting a model not dissimilar to the experience of its neighbour to the north. In a radical intellectual move Frye proposes that 'perhaps it is not too presumptuous to say . . . that the American way of life is slowly becoming Canadianized'.<sup>169</sup> Frye is suggesting that the tables of national insecurity have turned. He continues:

Meanwhile, Canada, traditionally so diffident, introverted, past-and-future fixated, incoherent, inarticulate, proceeding by hunch and feeling, seems to be taking on, at least culturally, an inner composure and integration of outlook, even some buoyancy and confidence.<sup>170</sup>

Frye believes that this change is at least in part a result of Canada's changing relationship to the vast areas of its own national wilderness because of the impact of technology: 'The airplane and the television set, in particular, have brought a simultaneity into the country that has greatly modified the older, and perhaps underlying, blazed-trail and canoe mentality.'<sup>171</sup> How has this affected the tropes of division and invisibility associated with an insecure national identity? Do they still feature at all in a more positive and assertive national climate? I turn now to look at the writing careers of Aritha van Herk, Robert Kroetsch and Michael Ondaatje to

examine their evolving exploration of national identity in the context of the equivocal and shifting borders of the wilderness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 'BOUNDARY BUSTING': CANADA, THE WILDERNESS AND THE DISAPPEARING WOMAN - ARITHA VAN HERK AND MARGARET ATWOOD

#### I

In her influential study of contemporary English-Canadian women novelists, Private and Fictional Words (1987), Coral Ann Howells has suggested that 'throughout the Canadian literary tradition wilderness has been and continues to be the dominant cultural myth'.<sup>1</sup> Portrayals of female self-exploration in the bush predominate within writing by Canadian women that explores quests in the wilderness. This chapter seeks to investigate how and why such a distinctive tradition of Canadian writing about women in the wilderness should have emerged. More precisely, it questions how this specifically female - indeed, feminist - writing has redefined the powerful tropes of wilderness that have underpinned so much thinking that informs Canada's self-representation as a nation. For Howells, the recurrence of wilderness settings in Canadian women's writing has developed into a popular trait because this environment provides an ideal site for female literary self-discovery. As an undefined geographical region, it becomes, 'the symbol of unmapped territory to be transformed through writing into female imaginative space'.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, as a physical, not cultural, space that the wilderness is 'unmapped'. Far from being a tabula rasa, the wilderness as a distinctive Canadian trope - indeed, a trope of Canada - can be seen to be heavily inscribed with a maze of literary and cultural representations which this chapter will attempt to unravel. These representations are embodied in an area of Canadian literature which is not only frequently canonical, but also colonial and patriarchal. To claim this territory, women must actively enter and creatively transform the wilderness, not simply learn about it through quests based on patriarchal archetypes.

A comparison between the work of Margaret Atwood and Aritha van Herk is particularly illuminating in this context, not just because both writers share a preoccupation with the wilderness. It is useful to juxtapose their works because each writer explores very different representations of Canada and its imposing landscape.

Traditional Canadian canonical images portray the wilderness as a testing ground where the potential for loss of self arouses fearful emotions. Such images are at least partially based on the highly influential work of Northrop Frye which 'places man at the mercy of the landscape',<sup>3</sup> pitted against the openly hostile or cruelly indifferent forces of Nature. Atwood's early writing, such as *Surfacing* (1972), draws on this powerful idea of the wilderness as a testing and awe-inspiring environment. Frye's writing, which clearly influences Atwood's novels of the 1970s, can be viewed as both patriarchal and colonial in its perspective. So despite the fact that Atwood is largely regarded as a feminist writer, her early work is founded to some extent on cultural archetypes that can be viewed as masculinist. Frye's work is patriarchal in that it is derived from universal masculine archetypes representing man's fear of the wilderness as an unknown region of otherness, rather than traditional narratives of female identification with Nature and the wilderness, often represented as feminine. His writing has a colonial slant in that it is rooted in a pioneering perspective, with 'the garrison mentality' indicating insecure white colonial settlement in an unfamiliar wilderness environment. This formulation disregards the fact that the bush was already successfully and skilfully inhabited by Native peoples.

The Canadian dilemma of self-location - which comes to the fore in Frye's pressing question of 'Where is here?' - takes on a new perspective in the more overtly feminist writing of van Herk:

. . . we are nowhere and we are no one. . . [like] a person who has a foot in each territory. We could split up the middle and disintegrate. Still the edge is a fine place to write from. . . Having a foot in both worlds has a positive side. . . Perhaps only Canada can afford to. It's easier when you are a small people and often ignored, when you have all that landscape to vanish into.<sup>4</sup>

Van Herk suggests a new, positive way of perceiving the traditional models of dislocation and fissile duality associated with Canadian national identity, models established, at least in part, by Frye and Atwood. Van Herk's writing encourages readers alike to question some of the restrictive assumptions embedded in Atwood's early work. Van Herk rewrites Canada's geographical setting, its vast and potentially divisive, if not 'schizophrenic', wilderness as a highly enabling creative and subversive zone. To van Herk, marginality and invisibility are seen as positive characteristics

allowing the freedom to be anywhere rather than nowhere, to play a 'trickster role', where identity can be fluid rather than static.<sup>5</sup> 'We have been blessed', asserts van Herk, 'with the quixotic need to assume such a range of identities and characters that we can never be fixed'.<sup>6</sup> She believes that by exerting control over national self-representation, deliberately maintaining a mutable self-image through disguise and disappearance, Canada is actually in a position of power rather than uncertain vacillation. In her view, Canada's borderless wilderness symbolises the site for such empowering transformation, a region where clear distinctions are advantageously blurred and the freedom to recreate the self enabled through processes of disappearance and reemergence.

Despite Atwood's different perspective on these issues surrounding national identity, reworkings of the traditional images of Canadian marginality and invisibility are also apparent in several of her novels and short stories, especially in the fiction she has published since 1990.<sup>7</sup> The power to control self-representation by using shifting definitions of identity and tropes of absence / reappearance is one of the main subjects of Atwood's The Robber Bride (1993). Although set in urban Toronto this novel revises some of the concepts of wilderness that Atwood inherited as a young writer under the professorial influence of Frye. In contrast, van Herk sought from the beginning of her writing career to work against, rather than with, the national models of Frye. Yet in spite of the divergent traditions from which van Herk and Atwood originally emerged, their later narratives reveal certain interesting similarities. Indeed, in an interview with Gyrid Jerve, van Herk has acknowledged that, increasingly, as with her own representation of women, Atwood's female characters 'are getting less [like] victims'.<sup>8</sup> In Atwood's and van Herk's recent writing, the wilderness, far from being a region where the individual struggles with their repressed sexuality and unconscious needs in a quest for stable self-location, is now represented as a zone of open female sexuality and roving desire. This change is clearly demonstrated by the libidinous characters of Arachne in van Herk's No Fixed Address (1986) and Zenia in Atwood's The Robber Bride. The portrayal of these two female characters is highly complex, some might even argue problematic, because of their shifting and heterogeneous nature. One question arises from this similar evolution in

characterisation. Is female subjectivity in these texts being reconfigured or more radically dispersed?

By tracing the development of the wilderness trope, firstly in the writing of van Herk and then more briefly in Atwood's later fiction, I will illustrate the ways in which certain sexually expressive female narratives involving wilderness quests and the search for Canadian national identity represented in feminine terms have been problematically occluded by Canada's canonical history. Further, I shall indicate how this has produced a limiting and potentially negative effect on Canadian national self-representation and discuss the strategies Atwood and van Herk are consciously employing to break away from the strictures of these self-effacing and pessimistic national images.

## II

The attempt to discover a single accurate image or meta-narrative of Canada which is a true reflection of the country's politico-historical position as a nation may itself be regarded as a flawed objective. For the development of Canadian national identity might be perceived in terms of a series of subjective historical narratives which are both culturally and gender specific. Within what van Herk calls 'the narratology of nation'<sup>9</sup> there is one enduring question: Who gets to tell the story? This question occupies much of van Herk's critical writing. Challenging the boundaries of national narratives, she speculates on 'what happens in that spatial and imaginative vortex beyond the neat line of nation',<sup>10</sup> questioning the apparently clear yet colonially inscribed cartographical and constitutional limits defining Canada. As a feminist critic, she claims that the concept of Canada as a nation is not a reality but merely a construct based on patriarchal meta-narratives which are ultimately confining or limiting.

Her view could well be seen as a feminist development of Benedict Anderson's influential Marxist study, *Imagined Communities* (1983), where he defines the nation as 'an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.<sup>11</sup> Here Anderson is developing Ernest Gellner's idea that 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist'.<sup>12</sup> Van Herk articulates the fallacy of working towards a definitive expression of Canadian national identity when she discusses 'our once-conceived belief that we lack identity (as if it were a thing we could enclose with lines, or even words)'.<sup>13</sup> Canadian

identity, then, may not be safely enclosed or defined because of its shifting multicultural status and politically uncertain Anglo-Franco boundaries. Instead, van Herk suggests that the 'concept of nation' is nevertheless 'shut in a labyrinth that postulates its own confinement'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, she believes that Canadian identity has been 'confined' within 'a labyrinth' which is not an open maze of bewildering possibility but a decisively closed patriarchal structure of images where centripetal forces trap writers and commentators within a restrictive focal canon of established literary tropes.

Van Herk proposes that the myth of Canadian national identity is based on a handful of powerful figures associated with the wilderness: 'the bush garden, the garrison mentality, geometry, survival, two solitudes', all of which are imaginatively restrictive, not only because of their dominant recurrence but also because they are 'male forms of nation'.<sup>15</sup> Here she refers to the work of canonical male writers, such as Northrop Frye and Hugh MacLennan. But van Herk's list of male forms idiosyncratically includes Atwood's female concept of survival discussed in her Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. Through the reading of several of van Herk's essays, it becomes clear that she believes Atwood's critical ideas in Survival have problematically evolved within the parameters of Frye's conceptualization of Canada. Van Herk's objections to the premises on which Frye's writing is based originate from his work's gendered subjectivity, revealed through his choice of imagery. She suggests that Frye's proposal of a national 'garrison mentality' is only one personal and rather gothically slanted reading of the history of Canada's military / pioneer origins and Canadians' present day attitude to their own landscape. Van Herk believes that this phrase suggests an image of 'a beleaguered people crouching inside flimsy walls that barely stave off the terrifying and unknown wilderness'.<sup>16</sup> Referring particularly to Frye's contrast between arrival in America and Canada - 'To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent'<sup>17</sup> - van Herk accuses Frye of having 'taken uneasy refuge within the lineaments of a cartographical nightmare'.<sup>18</sup> Her objection is that Frye perceives the unknown wilderness landmass of Canada in wholly negative and fearfully confrontational terms.



Highlighting the bias of Frye's reading, van Herk juxtaposes her own very different interpretation of the experience of the pioneers' arrival in Canada: 'He chooses to read the map in a particular way. Another reader might perceive the Atlantic seaboard as a wall and the St. Lawrence as a path, a natural entrance.'<sup>19</sup> Contrasting female and male readings, van Herk suggests elsewhere that Sheila Watson's wilderness text, The Double Hook (1959), was ground-breaking, not just in style, but also content, because it represented 'at last an abnegation of the unforgivingness of that landscape'.<sup>20</sup> Such a landscape, argues van Herk, 'becomes a shelter, an entrance, a moment of knowing rather than a force immovable and impenetrable, simply immune to the puny movements of man across its face'.<sup>21</sup> From her feminist standpoint, van Herk clearly believes that Canada so far only possesses a decisively masculinist his/story. Her project is to encourage a rereading of Canadian literary history with the aim of creating a radically different herstory: she wishes to 'bust up [patriarchal / canonical] boundaries a little, move them around, blur them, so that the potential shape of an alternative nation is imaginable'.<sup>22</sup> Several theoretical issues remain unanswered. How far does van Herk succeed in transcending rather than simply inverting existing modes of thought by reclaiming for women territory formerly designated as male? What does her project involve and is it as radical as some of her comments suggest when viewed within the historical context of Canadian women's writing?

Van Herk wishes to demonstrate that established patriarchal models of national identity are not fully representative. The reason for this may be the limited pioneer narratives on which these models are based. Frye's summary of the Canadian 'literary collective unconscious' in rather paranoid psychological terms owes much to his partial historical selection of what he regards as founding fictional works of the invader-settler mentality, from Frances Brooke's epistolary portrayal of a literal English garrison in Quebec in The History of Emily Montague (1769) to Sara Jeanette Duncan's The Imperialist (1904), which narrates the cliquy political pretensions of the Murchison family.<sup>23</sup> Frye is also referring selectively to only one type of pioneer account by describing Susanna Moodie as an archetypal 'one woman garrison'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Atwood's early work is preoccupied with the figure of what she sees as the schizophrenically divided Moodie, as the poems collected in The Journals of Susanna Moodie reveal. Moodie chose to 'read' the Canadian wilderness with fear and

trepidation in Roughing It in the Bush, portraying herself as suffering within her hostile surroundings.<sup>25</sup> One only need read the work of her pragmatic sister Catherine Parr Traill to see how Moodie's own personality has heavily influenced her subjective account of the wilderness.

There are a number of contrasting accounts from the period in which Moodie was writing. One such journal, more positively entitled Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada (1838),<sup>26</sup> was written by a pioneer woman with a very different philosophical approach to life. Anna Jameson (1794-1860) was an early literary proto-feminist who had built a considerable reputation as a scholar in Britain for her psychological study of Shakespeare's heroines, Characteristics of Women (1832). Jameson's Winter Studies and Summer Rambles reveals a totally different response from that of Moodie, one that has important feminist implications for both van Herk and Atwood. In her study of Jameson's life and works, Marian Fowler suggests that Jameson was the first Canadian to eroticize the wilderness.<sup>27</sup> It may well be argued that Jameson was not a true Canadian at all, but an English traveller, visiting the country for only a year between the winter of 1836 and the autumn of 1837. However, since many Canadians at this time were immigrant 'visitors', still very much arriving in the new nation, I think Fowler's classification of Jameson as Canadian is less erroneous than at first it might appear. The type of attitude to the wilderness reflected by Jameson's writing may well be seen in van Herk's latest work, Places Far From Ellesmere (1990), where she describes the sensuous feeling of fording a Canadian Arctic stream, revelling in 'the water's fierce strength pushing / pulling... up to your thighs,... treacherous and snarling as liquid tiger'.<sup>28</sup> This image, one that captures the power of the wilderness environment in potentially erotic terms, may seem to locate this Canadian landscape clearly in a sexually liberated contemporary age. But the simile could well be derived from Jameson's 1838 account of the powerful yet playful Canadian Niagara rapids. Let me give one example. '[T]hey left in my fancy two impressions', Jameson recalls of her trip to the Falls in June 1837, 'that of the sublime and terrible, and that of the elegant and graceful - like a tiger at play.'<sup>29</sup> Just as Atwood's early wilderness work can be seen as drawing on the accounts of Moodie, van Herk, in contrast, is certainly more influenced by the type of feminist pioneering narrative represented by Jameson's journals.<sup>30</sup>

Van Herk's positive portrayal of the wilderness as an enabling region of liberation and emancipation is comparable with that of Jameson, who far from expressing fear, exclaims in superlative terms in a letter to her family the excitement she feels when reflecting on her unique wilderness experiences. 'I am just returned from the wildest and most extraordinary tour you can imagine, and am moreover the first Englishwoman - the first European female who ever accomplished this journey.'<sup>31</sup> The freedom of the borderless Canadian wilderness allowed Jameson to move psychologically as well as physically beyond the bounds of gender stereotyping and the social constraints of nineteenth-century Europe, which dictated that women should be dependent, delicate and sexually innocent.<sup>32</sup> Jameson visited Canada with the express purpose of arranging a formal separation from her husband Robert Sympson Jameson, a move that defied social expectations of the day.<sup>33</sup> Not only did she discover marital independence but she also experienced an overwhelming sense of physical liberation during her daring trip into the Ontario wilderness, accomplished alone, without a male escort.

This discovery of female physical and social liberation through the pursuit of experiences in the wilderness which defy gender stereotypes is a prominent feature of all of van Herk's writing, not least her first and award-winning novel *Judith* (1978). Setting this search for women's liberation in clearly geographical and politically territorial terms, van Herk has stated that 'I want all my characters to enter forbidden territory . . . the one thing you have to do is cross forbidden boundaries'.<sup>34</sup> In this novel, the protagonist of the title breaks from her conventional lifestyle as a secretary to escape the city and her unsatisfying lover/boss to become a pig farmer in rural Alberta. 'Here', where 'everything was greater than reality, boundaries undefined',<sup>35</sup> she can defy the limits of social convention. She works alone on her own remote farm without the help of male labourers, at one point realising that she has not seen anyone for three weeks.

Arguably, this cultivated landscape is not an entirely authentic wilderness, but the isolation of its setting can be seen to constitute what Heather Murray has described as a 'pseudo-wilderness location' - that is, a transitional zone between the city, on the one hand, and 'a "real" wilderness which may exist only as an imaginative possibility', on the other.<sup>36</sup> Murray believes that 'the basic framework underlying English-Canadian

fiction is this city / pseudo-wilderness / wilderness continuum', with a well-established pattern in which 'the city is a place of bound possibility, the pseudo-wilderness provides a field for transition and change, and the wilderness itself is a place of freedom'.<sup>37</sup> Van Herk's novel, therefore, defies this categorizable model and the archetypal Canadian wilderness quest on which it is based. Judith succeeds in transforming her imaginary dream of owning a rural farm into a reality, a personal space which allows her real freedom. She does not need to enter the actual wilderness to experience liberation and transformation. Instead she does so by entering into what may be called her psychological 'wild-other-ness' by discovering a natural and highly physical sexuality. Judith succeeds in freeing herself from the urban culture of sexual appearances in which femininity is artificially based on clothing, cosmetics, perfume and jewellery, adorning the female body to attract the erotic attention of men. Traditional gender representations of women as weak, delicate, gentle, graceful and self-effacing, emotionally and physically dependent on men, are undercut without negating or undermining the portrayal of Judith as a highly sexual woman.

The wilderness, however, is not simply a site for the disappearance of gender stereotypes. The urban self not only psychologically and physiologically changes to the point where it vanishes in this 'wild' setting, as the happy, self-assured and physically fit, muscularly toned new Judith demonstrates. Physical disappearance also becomes an important element in these female wilderness narratives. Judith literally disappears into the pseudo-wilderness of the Battle River Valley, leaving her lover without any warning or word, with no hint as to her whereabouts. This is a liberating act of disconnection, defying his sense of ownership and patriarchal power over her. It is also an ironic comment on the position of Judith, who is marginalised both as a woman and as a Canadian. This image of a double colonization construes a link between female and Canadian national identities. Both these groups are victimised parties who, as Atwood highlights in *Survival*, have (or at least had in the 1970s when *Judith* was written) a tendency to be silenced and ignored. As such they are made 'invisible', by those retaining political and cultural control, be they male or American.

In *Judith* invisibility is linked with inviting images which involve claiming one's own space through flight and escape. Judith imagines what would have happened if she had wallpapered her city apartment with the butterfly design she chooses for her farmhouse

bedroom. She contemplates the metaphysical possibility that 'the butterflies might have widened for her to disappear into', then, 'she would not have been his vortex, she would not have felt him expecting her to widen indefinitely and forever'.<sup>38</sup> 'Who has made disappearance a negation?', van Herk asks, articulating her belief in 'disappearance as pleasure - to disappear is an ultimate power, if one disappears the self rather than being disappeared by the other'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Judith can be seen as part of a tradition of women's wilderness writing in which female liberation is enabled through disappearance into a wilderness or pseudo-wilderness environment. In Ethel Wilson's The Swamp Angel (1954), for example, Maggie leaves her husband without a word and never informs him of her new location at a fishing lodge in the Kamloops. Having existed as an absent presence in his life, she decides she will simply disappear.

Female liberation is further embraced imaginatively, since both van Herk and Wilson reject the established patterns associated with the Canadian wilderness. In their texts the wilderness is neither a place of exile and isolation from a desirable civilised society nor simply a site of trial, involving descent and return, a testing environment where bare physical survival is the only aim. As Atwood has described, Canadian 'stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience, . . . that killed everyone else.'<sup>40</sup> In such accounts, the test of true manhood involves the ability to return, so as to tell one's story and thus prove one's masculine courage and endurance to others. By contrast, in their search for womanhood, the women in these wilderness narratives only have something to prove to themselves. Their test of real independence and rejection of social norms often necessitates the statement of non-return.

An important aspect of this distinctive journey of no-return involves a wilderness archetype which owes more to biblical accounts of the temptation of Christ by the devil in the wilderness than it does to typical masculine Canadian tropes. In several women's wilderness novels, individuals from the female protagonist's former lives come to tempt them to return to their limited and spiritually unfulfilled past urban existences. For example, in Joan Barfoot's Gaining Ground (1978), when Abra's daughter tracks her 'missing' mother down at her reclusive rural hideaway, Abra is tempted to return but decides to stay in the wilderness which is now both her home and an integral part of her self. Published in the same year as Judith, this absorbing novel bears remarkable

similarities to van Herk's narrative. The emphasis on women striking out on their own indicates the increasingly feminist cultural climate of the 1970s, with a strong Canadian women's movement highlighting a need for female emancipation. In Gaining Ground, Abra escapes the social stereotypes constraining her role as wife and mother to live in an isolated cabin in the woods. The suburban familial Abra disappears literally and psychologically, and the reborn individual contacts her own physical strength and bodily needs by digging and planting a garden to feed herself.

Likewise, in van Herk's novel, when the protagonist's lover finally discovers the new address of his 'disappeared' secretary and writes to her, Judith is forced to make a decision about whether to return to him, to the city and to her old life or to continue with her physically demanding new existence. In an earlier manuscript draft he arrives in person to hound her for an explanation and bargain for her return with a proposal of marriage.<sup>41</sup> The published conclusion does not allow him to impose in this way on the autonomous feminine space Judith has carved for herself at the farm. The fact that his letter remains unread suggests that she feels under no obligation to justify herself in a reply. She chooses to remain silent, unanswering and invisible, at least to him. In an expansive symbolic gesture, which is an ironic comment on her perceived disappearance, Judith celebrates her new powerful and unrestricted self-image by stretching herself 'wide and unending, her arms out, her head tall, her legs long', as the novel ends with her jubilant assertion, 'Pigs . . . you win'.<sup>42</sup> The landscape does not represent a retreat, a temporary place of seclusion, but a permanent opportunity for escape, as van Herk indicates in positive and inviting terms: 'A scape is a scene of land or sea or sky but the archaic meaning of scape is to escape, an escape, or means of escape. Landscape beckons escape; escapade.'<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, Abra and Judith are not persuaded to return because their frame of geographical reference is no longer based around the 'central' city from which they departed, as the verb return would imply. If they left their newly established homes, then it would now be a matter of departure.

So in these narratives, one's absence or presence, one's situation at the centre or on the margin, is shown to be a matter of perspective. The stereotypical American view of Canada - which Atwood, in an interview she gave in the 1970s, describes as being one of 'that blank area north of the map'<sup>44</sup> - shows America's lack of perception about Canada as a country, not that nation's absence. In a parallel analogy, the women in the

novels of Wilson, Barfoot and van Herk do not really disappear. Instead, they simply become actively present in a new and often remote location, unknown to their male companions or family. In these novels there is a sense in which the wilderness setting of each enables a subversive reversal of centre and periphery, disturbing established socio-political boundaries. The marginal and often physically borderline pseudo-wilderness environments set on the edge of civilisation become the centre of these women's worlds. Paralleling this geographical shift, social norms are also inverted. Men become increasingly marginalised as the women in the novels discover the full extent of their self-sufficiency, often substituting their unfulfilling and inadequate relationships with male partners for closer physical connections with Nature, represented through the earth, water or animals. This substitution is a pivotal political element in these subversive feminist plots.

In her radical eco-feminist work, Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (1978), Susan Griffin draws on this association, describing how women, observed to be closer to the earth, are mystically empowered by being 'dark like the soil and wild like the animals'.<sup>45</sup> The female association between women and Mother Earth or a feminine Nature embodied through earth goddesses has been traditionally established throughout history; it is a female archetype on which another famous eco-feminist work, Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (1978), significantly draws. Radical feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, represented by these two writers, sought to portray women in wholly favourable ecological terms, celebrating female biological potential, fecundity and nurturing creativity by emphasising Woman's peaceful intimate co-existence with nature. Further, this apparently enviable state was by implication unavailable to violent, destructive, warring, industrial Man. Women nonetheless need to be wary of becoming too romantic about the association between woman and nature, even if forms of radical feminist thinking lead along such lines.

Increasingly feminists have questioned the origins and benefits of this identification of women with nature, suggesting that this concept is based on an essentialist binary scheme of thought which has been patriarchally established.<sup>46</sup> As Toril Moi writes in 1982, 'Gratifying though it is to be told that women really are strong, integrated, peace-loving, nurturing and creative beings, this plethora of new virtues is no less

essentialist than the old ones [of 'sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility'], and no less oppressive to all those women who do not want to play the role of the Earth Mother'.<sup>47</sup> Moi goes on to stress that 'it is after all patriarchy, not feminism, which has always believed in a true female / feminine nature: the biologism and essentialism which lurk behind the desire to bestow feminine virtues on all female bodies necessarily plays into the hands of the patriarchs'.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, there is continuing interest in this woman / nature association, which I have discussed so far in purely universal terms. How is this woman / nature analogy specifically developed by contemporary female Canadian writers? Hartmut Lutz states that 'Canadian authors in particular show heroines experiencing a closeness to the landscape which seems unparalleled elsewhere, and this is true in van Herk's novel[s]'.<sup>49</sup> Griffin's and Daly's work was first published in America in the same year as Judith - 1978 - indicating that at this time there was a strong pan-continental feminist focus on the development of natural associations, yet it is illuminating to see how such feminist woman / nature utopian philosophies are specifically born out in van Herk's Canadian fictional novel. It is striking that van Herk insists on a national and cultural dimension to the woman / nature equation in a way that Daly and Griffin do not.

Van Herk shares with radical feminist critics a thematic interest in this ecological connection but does not deploy these ideas for the sake of essentializing the distinctive femaleness of all women. Some feminists have taken women's identification with nature, embodied by the earth goddess, Gaia, to its extreme in a rejection of heterosexuality and a move towards lesbian separatism or celibacy. As Kenneth McLincock asserts, Judith 'repeatedly skirts contemporary feminist and pastoral clichés without falling into them'.<sup>50</sup> Van Herk refuses to be part of a feminist programme that tries to convince women that they are by definition more peaceable or morally 'good' than men. She cleverly forces her readers to rethink the woman / nature link by portraying Judith, notwithstanding her close intimacy and understanding of the natural world of her hogs, as being 'an unsympathetic character', 'angry . . . bitter, resentful'.<sup>51</sup> 'she is not a nice young woman'.<sup>52</sup> This characterisation was criticised by a number of reviewers who clearly wanted to warm to the central 'heroine'.<sup>53</sup> Despite approaching a topic very much of the time, van Herk is doing something quite unusual within the feminist climate of the late 1970s by suggesting that there are both good and bad sides



to women and that the good may not always outweigh the bad. Furthermore, van Herk advocates an intimacy with nature as enabling, while equally acknowledging the benefits of heterosexual relationships with men if they are not based on male domination. The novel is clearly structured around Judith's dual relationships with her pigs and with a male farming neighbour, James Stamby, both of which importantly involve elements of liberating sexual self-discovery.

Judith's relationship with her pigs is a clear example of a portrayal of the affinity between women and the wild, highlighting the link not only in gendered but sexual terms. Judith's interaction with her pigs involves physical contact which at times borders on the erotic. She has 'eyes only for them'<sup>54</sup> and is described as 'lov[ing] them passionately'.<sup>55</sup> Later she comes to them 'with an open impulsiveness that was almost sensual'.<sup>56</sup> It is only after Judith has had to castrate some of her male weaners that she can come to terms with human sexuality, her own and that of her father, enabling her to consummate her relationship with the neighbouring farmer's son, Jim. This act of castration forces her physically as well as psychologically to grasp / confront her pigs' male sexuality, allowing her to perceive the patriarchal figurehead of her dead father, himself a pigfarmer, and significantly also called James. These narrative features create an amusing play on the concept of 'male chauvinist pigs' - a catch-all term for male sexism in the 1970s - since all Judith's original herd are female sows.

Judith's erotic response to these female animals, along with her intimate friendship with Ed Stamby's wife, Mina, also suggests that Judith's sexuality need not be bound by heterosexual constraints. Accurate representations of masculinity and femininity are far more complex than stereotypes would imply. Indeed, male figures and their myriad different attributes are problematically conflated for Judith in this novel. The child Judy has idolised her father as paterfamilias, tutelar authority, and 'implausible lover'<sup>57</sup>. Now she faces the fact that her father's own masculinity, superficially a source of power, made him both mortally and physically vulnerable. This is clearly demonstrated by the emasculating act of castration she was never allowed to witness as a child. She realises through Jim's fear, as he watches her deftly work 'by instinct' with the scalpel, the vulnerability of men, particularly in the face of female strength. Judith has a conflicted desire, needing emotional, physical and sexual contact with men, while fiercely defending her independence and denying men's hold over her. Van Herk humorously

portrays the paradox that, as far as men are concerned, women 'can't do with them and . . . can't do without them'.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Judith may emasculate her male pigs for pragmatic reasons, yet she has no wish to hold this violent power over nature, feeling that she has betrayed her animals. This emotion is heightened because Judith has gradually developed an intimacy towards her pigs, not simply by naming the sows after famous women (who provide possible role-models for her), but more tellingly through the way in which she communes with them as humanised equals in the barn.

Indeed, it is Judith's 'wild' relationship with her pigs which initially takes precedence over her human relationships with the men in her new rural environment. The pigs are not simply 'dumb' animals but take on magical status conferring power on their female owner. As Judith jokingly says, 'they're supernatural. Whatever made you think I'd have ordinary pigs?'<sup>59</sup> Here, Judith deliberately plays on local perceptions of her as a mad, solitary witch-like female figure.<sup>60</sup> This image recalls women's historical affinity with animals, traditionally feared by men who burnt witches at the stake for their presumed links with animal familiars, as well as the classical myth in which the bewitching Circe changed men into pigs as a reflection of their real nature. In this novel the Circe / witch archetype is inverted as Judith turns the school girl-chasing male chauvinist, Jim Stamby, into a true gentleman. Consistently opposing the classical myth, van Herk indicates that it is the pigs who are notably the agents of metamorphosis for Judith: her 'transformation from an angry young woman into an independent and accepting person is accomplished through her relationship with the pigs: febrile, feral, fertile.'<sup>61</sup> This is a relationship suggestively charged with sexuality.

Van Herk amusingly structures the novel in such a way that the man, the human suitor, Jim, has to campaign hard so as to win the affection of the woman over her love for her animals. It is the pigs who voyeuristically observe the developing relationship as Jim and Judith work together in the barn. They act as the guarantors of the (sexual) relationship, becoming 'the mediators of desire' between the two humans. But how does this mediation operate? A consideration of René Girard's Deceit, Desire and the Novel (1966) illuminates this question. In this study, Girard uses the term mediation to establish a narrative model based on the concept of 'triangular desire',<sup>62</sup> using Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605/1615) and Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1856) as examples. However, triangular structures of desire, with a voyeur observing

two partners, characterize much western narrative. Van Herk's novel satirizes this classical form by enabling animals to become the third term. Once again, she will never subscribe to an orthodoxy when she realises one is present. The dynamics of the triangular relationship between Judith, Jim and the pigs provide a subversively comic element to the novel. The pigs are viewed as sexual rivals by Jim, promoting feelings of jealousy and envy because of the time, attention and affection Judith affords them. 'Pigs are more important than me?' he laments at one point.<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, they bear witness to the coital birth of Judith's new natural and uninhibited sexuality: 'in the barn the pigs heard it and knew, her drawn-out wail filtering through the wood like the announcement of a terrible birth'.<sup>64</sup>

Van Herk has described the anthropomorphic role of the pigs as 'certainly the most startling as well as the most obvious Canadian presence' in the novel.<sup>65</sup> In this narrative, Nature takes precedence over humans, and does so to such an extent that it usurps the omniscient narrator, often gendered as masculine. Here it is worth noting that in the original draft, submitted as her creative writing thesis under the supervision of the novelist Rudy Wiebe, Judith was narrated entirely from the perspective of the pigs. The novel was originally entitled When Pigs Fly, emphasising the animal rather than human protagonists. Yet despite the type of censorship against unorthodox modes of narration which many of these female wilderness narratives strive to overcome, Lily Poritz Miller, the Senior Editor of McClelland and Stewart, managed to persuade van Herk to change the narration into the third person since the publishers were nervous about the novel being told from an animal's point of view. Whether they thought this 'troublesome note'<sup>66</sup> was too outlandish and unacceptable a narratorial strategy, or simply a risible stylistic device which had failed, is not clear. Van Herk, nevertheless, slyly suggests that 'anyone who reads the novel carefully knows that the narrator is still the pigs',<sup>67</sup> as their thoughts on Judith's consummation of her relationship with Jim reveal. Rona Maynard stresses the innovative nature of van Herk's writing, regarding the pigs' uncanny knowledge and perception as 'a false note' in this instance but acknowledging it also as 'proof of a rare boldness in van Herk, a readiness to explore techniques that verge on the ridiculous'.<sup>68</sup> The narrative perspective of the novel is surely a political gesture. The normally omnipotent masculine description of nation and events remains silenced here.

Indeed, the presence of men is negated in these narratives in which animality, if not bestiality, is often the pivotal plot element. Midas Dekkers believes that, despite being a taboo subject, bestiality is common in the cerebral world of the imagination, if not in the actual world of the physical, as his work Dearest Pet: On Bestiality (1992) seeks to illustrate. He suggests that the child may kiss and hug its furry teddy but the woman dreams of making ursine love to bears, animals that rate high in Dekkers' survey of the 'cuddliness factor'.<sup>69</sup> Van Herk deliberately wanted to eliminate this sentimental element, consciously choosing pigs because they are 'not at all cute'.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, laying bare the sexual potential of large furry mammals has not been ignored in writing about the Canadian wild, as Atwood has noted: 'affairs with bears . . . seem . . . to be a peculiarly Canadian interest'.<sup>71</sup> In her essay, 'Affairs with Bears: Some Notes Towards Feminist Archetypal Hypotheses for Canadian Literature', Annis Pratt suggests that 'the reason for the association of feminine eroticism with nature and with asocial ['green-world' (animal)] lovers is that society forbids eroticism to women'.<sup>72</sup> The protagonist in Atwood's Surfacing describes her lover as being like a shaggy buffalo, and in her schizophrenic madness she fantasizes that he actually is in fact a furry animal disguised in human form.<sup>73</sup>

More daringly, Marian Engel writes about putting female fantasies into practice, in her Governor General's Award winning novel, Bear (1976). Here, on a remote island in the bush the central female protagonist, Lou, discovers more about her own sexuality in relation to the wild than she ever did in her relationship with her old urban lover/boss. As in Judith, she learns about sexuality and sensuality from a wild animal. Of all the female wilderness novels discussed, this is the most radical in terms of its portrayal of a woman exploring the possible limits of her eroticism. The main narrative is written in a realistic and not a fantastic or mythic mode and the relationship with the bear is a physical one. McClelland and Stewart chose initially to publish the hardcover edition of this controversial novel in a brown paper wrapping because they were uncertain about public reaction to it.<sup>74</sup> Through her literally scarring sexual relationship with a male bear, Lou learns that one can not domesticate the wild or superimpose human male/female roles on to it. Despite this lesson, as van Herk suggests, this 'pleasured text'<sup>75</sup> (as she calls it) is truly ground-breaking in its daring suggestion 'that a

bear might be preferable to a man'.<sup>76</sup> Judith and Lou may be fundamentally renegotiating their identities and heterosexuality, breaking heterosexual boundaries through their loving relationships with animals. But one lasting question remains: can women be in close contact with nature and man, who is often represented as the reasoning antithesis to instinctive Nature? Ultimately, the woman / animal relationships in Judith and Bear are didactic experiences that do not replace these women's sexual relationships with human male partners but enhance them through heightened sexual self-knowledge. Female love for men and animals is not fundamentally conflicted in the wild. Instead, it is positively enabling, allowing women - if you will - to get the best of both worlds.

Identification with wild animals, however, is not the sole preserve of women's writing about the wilderness but a dominant feature of much Canadian writing by both male and female authors. So how do the novels of van Herk, Engel, Wilson and Barfoot utilise this association with the 'wild' in a new and distinct female way? Atwood has suggested (again, notably in the specific Canadian political context of the era of nationalistic and feminist awakening in the 1970s) that Canadian 'identification with animals is the expression of a deep-seated cultural fear', since 'Canadians themselves feel threatened and nearly extinct as a nation, and suffer also from life-denying experience as individuals - the culture threatens the "animal" within them'.<sup>77</sup> Certainly, the equation between Canada as equal to Nature (animal / landscape) as equal to woman - an equation based on patriarchal and colonial exploitation - has long been established, and Atwood is here voicing one perspective of such a symbolic association. Atwood, however, indicates that this relationship is based on fear and powerlessness, whereas the 1970s novels of van Herk and Engel, in particular, not only extend this identification from a psychological to a sexual plain, but also celebrate this physical connection with animals and their natural environment in highly positive terms. They reject the status of Canada as a victimised, alienated nation in the process.

The connection between the sexual representation of women and national identity as perceived through the agency of the environment or landscape comes even more clearly into focus if we compare van Herk's narratives with Annette Kolodny's inquiry into literary representations of the landscape in terms of womankind. In The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (1975),

Kolodny discusses 'the land-as-woman symbolization'<sup>78</sup> used in many frontier narratives. Her research is demonstrably as relevant to Canadian as it is to American pioneering journals since these two countries not only share the same continental location but also historical aspects of their pioneering colonisation. Kolodny investigates 'the land's implicit sexuality',<sup>79</sup> describing the way in which the landscape was experienced as 'the female principle of gratification itself, comprising all the qualities that Mother, Mistress, and Virgin traditionally represent for men'.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, she demonstrates how images of penetration into untouched virgin territory or feeding from nurturing Mother Earth reveal the way in which the landscape has traditionally been viewed in relation to men, whether physically sustaining them, sexually removed from them, or exploited and conquered by them.

Van Herk believes that this same limiting categorisation of women, as patriarchally embodied in and through the landscape, also inhibits her own writer's freedom. Voicing her frustration at men's hold over the narration of the nation from her own regional Albertan perspective, van Herk is provoked to ask: 'Where, in this landscape constrained by male vantage, does the woman writer of the prairies enter?

. . . How can we enter fiction if we are fixed as mothers / saints / whores, muses all?'<sup>81</sup>

Van Herk goes on to reply to her own rhetorical question, suggesting that the answer lies 'through that indifferent landscape'. 'We can get into it, enter this world', she writes, 'because it belongs to us'. But this, she argues, can only be done in subtle ways by 'spying out the lay of the land'.<sup>82</sup> In other words, men's hold over the landscape and its representation must be disrupted. Yet women will have to enter this patriarchal region in disguise to escape the fixity of the models traditionally open to them. By imaginatively and subversively rewriting the established sexual and gender roles of women traditionally represented in Canadian fiction, van Herk implies that such negative and submissive associations with all things female or feminised can be undercut. This strategy includes a radical rethinking of national representation - of a feminised Canada as submissively weak and its 'unknown' wilderness, perceived by male writers as problematically 'other' and marginalised. Kolodny advances the view that 'our survival may depend on our ability to escape the verbal patterns that have bound us either to fear of being engulfed by our physical environment [in Canada, I would suggest], or to the opposite attitude of aggression and conquest [in America]'.<sup>83</sup>

It follows that sexual and gendered national imagery needs to undergo radical revision if Canada - the victim nation - shall not passively allow its own exploitation or destruction, but adopt the strong role of the survivor in the face of Americanization and Quebec separatism.

### III

The chronological development of female characterization in van Herk's four works of non-criticism (1978-1990) demonstrates this struggle to adopt new modes of identity. These works reveal a significant evolution in the way in which the female protagonists are sexually represented in relation to their environment and location, moving from masculine role-playing to positions of androgyny, from overt femininity to sexual / corporeal non-existence. Geographical territory - or, more specifically, any regional or national area restrictively delineated and defined by a boundary - is utilised by van Herk as a spatial metaphor for the restricted places and spaces allowed to women. Echoing the by now immortal words of the anti-nationalist, polemical feminist, Virginia Woolf in her pre-war treatise, Three Guineas (1938) - 'as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country'<sup>84</sup> - van Herk half a century later suggests that 'those beyond nation . . . those unwilling to be nationed' might 'not least [include] women'.<sup>85</sup> Since women have only been allowed certain limited regions of existence and representation, both Woolf and van Herk indicate a wish to break bounds into new and more open territory. Woolf memorably suggested that 'as a woman my country is the whole world',<sup>86</sup> denying the political designation of nationality ascribed to her by patriarchal authority and the arbitrary national boundaries historically instituted by men on which such definitions of national identity were founded. In a similarly radical gesture, van Herk discusses 'the region of woman', a territory defined by its sense of otherness, suggesting that 'by stretching the borders of the region we inhabit as women, we are inducing hair-line cracks, fissures, in all the things that men have defined as their territory'.<sup>87</sup> In a number of her writings, such as No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey (1986), van Herk goes so far as to imply that this new female territory may need to transcend terrestrial limits, entering a completely uncharted zone, entirely off the map.

But why does van Herk feel the need to adopt such extreme metaphysical solutions in response to the quest for the region of woman? The answer lies in the space normally afforded to womankind. Uninhibited female sexuality is generally occluded by national narratives, so that women are either forced to disguise their identity and true sexuality, becoming androgynous or pseudo-male, or to reject their ascribed location within the nation, limited to the restricted 'regions' of mother, whore, virgin. In her essay, 'Boundary Busting on the Front: Gender and Nation Transfiguration' (1988),<sup>88</sup> van Herk suggests some of these problematic and conflicting possibilities for women striving to reconcile their gender with an environment colonised as male. All of these strategies involve 'stretching the borders' of female sexuality and nationality - where sexuality and geographical space serve as metaphors for each other.

Both as individuals and writers, women striving for acceptance and inclusion in the patriarchal concept of nation might choose 'to invisible themselves, to disappear themselves', as van Herk idiosyncratically but actively verbalises it, for 'if they wish to gain the approbation of the male community (itself a nation), they have to become male. The only refuge is disguise'.<sup>89</sup> Surviving by pretending to be a man, as Judith initially does, adopting the masculine role of pig farmer based on her father and cropping her hair to give herself a boyish gamine appearance, is not a lasting solution as it negates sexuality altogether in a sterile divided position which is neither male nor female. This problematic strategy is highlighted when Judith's neighbouring male farmer, Ed Stamby, describes her as a 'genuine farmerette',<sup>90</sup> jokingly yet patronisingly pointing out the irony of her position, with the demeaning '-ette' suffix implying not simply her femininity but also her farmer role as a weak imitation or substitute for 'the real (male) thing'. The adjective 'genuine' emphasises the irony of the joke by turning the phrase into an oxymoron. Despite acknowledging the need for female characters to 'engender [themselves] in the nation's gender', van Herk nevertheless uses a violent, life-threatening, masculine, military figure of speech, stressing the necessity for these women to 'play that [masculine] role to the hilt'.<sup>91</sup> This role-playing is neither natural nor easy but a strain on the disguised female identity. Van Herk may describe the strategy of 'neuter[ing] yourself' as 'the ultimate camouflage . . . at least if you want to survive the myth of nation'.<sup>92</sup> This position, however, is problematic, as her



qualification of the statement and her choice of a sexually sterile / impotent or indeterminate verb - neutering - clearly indicates.

This problematic position is forcefully illustrated in van Herk's novel, The Tent Peg (1981). In this narrative, the female protagonist, J.L., decides that to enter the male territory of geological surveying and the team's tiny isolated Yukon camp she will have to adopt the disguise of a male bush cook. Failing to maintain the masking of her true gender, the female J.L. nevertheless penetrates the insular masculine 'garrison mentality' which initially confronts her in the all male camp of geologists. Moreover, she does so by discovering that she can derive far more benefit and power in the otherwise highly male-orientated camp by adopting the ancient female personas of witch and seer / storyteller. Indeed, Lutz suggests that the initial male or androgynous role that J.L. adopts is transformed as the novel progresses to the point where she 'gains an unbelievably "super-womanly" status'.<sup>93</sup> Certainly, she not only cooks for, cares for and counsels the men, but also possesses the magical power of the sibyl, communes with bears, calls down a mountain (in a retributive landslide) and dances like a maenad over the camp-fire.<sup>94</sup> Van Herk acknowledges that J.L. is 'not so much a real character but an emblematic figure',<sup>95</sup> which explains but does not negate Lutz's criticism that J.L.'s characterisation in the latter part of the novel is 'unbelievable'. The Tent Peg, centred on the symbolic J.L., portrays the whole range of gendered role-playing extremes and survival strategies open to women who wish to live in a man's world. As van Herk has stated elsewhere: 'That J.L. is a witch-figure is a foregone conclusion. Only her superlative ability enables her to survive within that male world.'<sup>96</sup>

The emphasis in this novel is notably on bare survival, not the liberating experience of living life more easily true to oneself. J.L. realises the insecurity of her androgynous position when she feels she has to defend it, acknowledging that 'I do look somewhat 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.'<sup>97</sup> When she adds that - 'I have never masqueraded as a boy'<sup>98</sup>- I believe that van Herk, well-versed theoretically as an academic, may be indicating the influence of Joan Riviere's ground-breaking psychoanalytical essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1921).<sup>99</sup> In the original draft this line simply reads 'I have never before been mistaken for a boy'.<sup>100</sup> Riviere's treatise

suggests that femininity is a construct which involves 'acting a part', using 'a mask of womanliness'<sup>101</sup> to survive and protect the female self (nonetheless possessing masculine attributes) from retribution in a patriarchally dominant society. This essay is relevant to The Tent Peg because Riviere points out the psychological difficulties, anxieties and insecurities associated with this role-playing position. I would like to invert the perspective of Riviere's analysis to shed light on J.L.'s attempt to adopt 'a mask of manliness' to hide her female attributes and strengths.

J.L. initially clearly believes that as a boy she can merge into the background of camp life, escaping her unsatisfying urban sexual liaisons with men, 'disappearing' into the solitary silence of the North, and undisturbed, accomplish the archetypal Canadian quest for self in the wilderness - 'I wanted to head for nowhere' she explains.<sup>102</sup>

'Nowhere' implies a location which is unmapped, undesignated and unclaimed beyond even the extreme delineations of marginal wilderness. It is ironic, therefore, that J.L.'s dreams of the coming summer in the Yukon, with the imagined 'promise of aloneness',<sup>103</sup> not only turn out to be impracticable and romanticised but are totally inverted. She becomes the communal and communicative centre of her environment, with all the male geologists' camp-lives revolving around and in relation to her precisely because of her powerful embodiment of intuitive womanhood. 'She has somehow become our center, we all orbit her. . . . We look to her for focus',<sup>104</sup> Thompson admits, while Franklin describes her as being 'like the pillar in the middle of the camp. We shuffle around her, matrixed'.<sup>105</sup>

J.L. may fear being alienated if she exploits her femininity in this male-preserve frontier society. However, she discovers that her female status is an advantage not least because she is the one attuned to Nature, the earth and the animals (notably bears). It is the men who are the real aliens in this landscape, penetrating and raping the earth for minerals, yet knowing it insufficiently well that they are nearly fatally crushed by a landslide, through which everyone but J.L. sleeps. Thomson's ironic earlier comment that 'the mountain isn't going anywhere',<sup>106</sup> demonstrates the inaccurate (masculine) assumption that the landscape is inert. The alienation of each of these nine men is emphasised by their names, all taken from those of famous Canadian explorers like Franklin and Mackenzie, foreign travellers unfamiliar with the land into which they journeyed. The men may wish to stake their claim to this Yukon territory

but J.L. is portrayed as the one who demonstrably 'owns' this wilderness region, which becomes a place of female power and worship through its associations with mythic women's narratives. Indeed, it is given to J.L. to stake the last post of the summer's geological claim. However, by being their cook (the most feminised role in the camp) J.L. is effectively a pander who enables the male geologists to carry out this 'lay of the land', as Kolodny would express it. J.L.'s complicity in this project of patriarchal pioneering and cartography is never addressed.

Despite this lack of a comprehensive fictional exposition of territorial appropriation, the landscape remains of central symbolic importance. One of the most sympathetically drawn male characters says, 'The Yukon is a magic place. . . . It's a place where reality is inverted'.<sup>107</sup> J.L. explains that 'up here there are no rules, no set responses, everything is new and undefined, we are beyond, outside the rest of the world. There are no controls here.'<sup>108</sup> This idea of the borderless wilderness being beyond the controlling boundaries of normal society has been expressed in similar terms elsewhere: an example of historical non-fiction points up how J.L.'s comment is relevant to the gender and sexuality issues being discussed. In her study of female Canadian pioneers, Fowler has suggested that the wilderness was enabling for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women about whom she writes because it introduced them to what she chooses to call 'the "androgynous" ideal', a term which she goes on to elucidate in a positive tone:

This ancient Greek word (from andro [male] and gyn [female]) defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes are not pre-determined, so that every human being can have a full range of expression of personality. The androgynous ideal constitutes an escape from the shackles of gender-stereotyping into a wide-open, freely chosen world of responses and behaviour.<sup>109</sup>

The image of J.L. managing to gain the benefits of both worlds through her state of androgyny is questionable, I would argue, because it is only accomplished at great personal cost by 'keeping up the act'. By showing the positive attributes of both genders J.L. is empowered to help the emotionally and psychologically more unstable men around her through their individual crises in the wilderness, leaving, however, little time to sort out any traumas of her own. Van Herk has described these men in

The Tent Peg as 'almost emblematically Canadian, gruff, taciturn, a little anti-social, more than a little mad. Most of them are slightly schizophrenic.'<sup>110</sup> But it is the woman whose subjectivity is having to split so that she can cope with a Canadian frontier environment gendered as male. Van Herk acknowledges the strain placed on J.L.'s character because of the pressure to be androgynous:

I wanted a woman character to penetrate that male world, succeed within it and act as an interpreter / interface [between the masculine world of geological surveying and the 'distinctively feminine' Canadian landscape]. The demands on this character are enormous; she needs to be androgynous enough to traverse both worlds successfully and she needs to be powerful enough to serve as a catalyst for the transformation of the men. Circe's pigs? Perhaps, but in reverse.<sup>111</sup>

How, if at all, does J.L. manage to liberate her own sexual identity in a transformative gesture of freedom which employs a more enabling form of disappearance than disguise, a less fissile position than androgyny? The answer lies in her location in 'the barrenlands', which - despite its name - is a fertile region for the imagination. Some of the men in the camp fantasize fearfully about the wilderness and its mountains which seem, to the 'alien' colonial mentality of the English Hudson, to 'surround you, they press you down, they laugh at you like teeth'.<sup>112</sup> J.L. draws on her feeling of comforting connection with the landscape, which in this novel is personified as female,<sup>113</sup> to make up some fantasies of her own. Her narratives are rooted in myth and legend, but beautifully reinterpreted from her own perspective as a woman. She is effectively rereading the patriarchal nation. For example, one of her stories is inspired by the affiliation she feels with the bear she has encountered outside her cooktent, unusually in the context of the (Canadian) sexual fantasies discussed earlier - a female she-bear with cubs, with whom she feels a mystic not a physical connection. She narrates a summary of Marian Engel's Bear, drawing on the power of shared female experience and imaginative myth-making across time to stake out not a physical but a psychological and emotional territory for women. J.L. loses herself in her story-telling to the men around the camp-fire, 'talk[ing] as if they're not present'.<sup>114</sup> She lifts their lewd tales of bestiality into the elevated realms of mythology. Having experienced the mesmerizing power of her storying, Mackenzie realises that when the summer is over

J.L. will 'vanish into a world of her own making'.<sup>115</sup> She can construct her own world, her own identity, through the power of her imagination, as demonstrated by her interpretation of her potentially dangerous encounter with the wild she-bear, which J.L. nonetheless imagines as a supportive animal embodiment of her friend Deborah. As Franklin says, 'she twists between us and stays herself unmarked'.<sup>116</sup> She will not ultimately allow herself to be claimed by any of the men in the camp and at the end of the novel manages to escape with her subjectivity uninscribed by the male myth of nation. J.L. vanishes from the masculine frontier world of the Yukon camp into a female existence with her intimate confidante - and, possibly, lover - Deborah.

Female sexuality eventually triumphs over disguise, androgyny and the patriarchal engendering of nation in this emblematically Canadian, yet definitively feminist novel. J.L.'s passage from the mask of masculinity to the open celebration of womanhood has however been a psychological and emotional trial worthy of any explorer's physical test in the wilderness. The novel ends with an image of J.L. as a tired survivor in need of rest. The Tent Peg leaves two important questions incompletely answered. Is it possible for the wilderness ever to become a 'boundary busting' zone of female freedom without such an extreme struggle? And do women ever fully get the upper hand in this Canadian bush environment of exploration and territory-staking engendered as masculine?

The Tent Peg shows the female protagonist negotiating the social and sexual boundaries of a masculine wilderness so that she can locate and secure a female space within this world. The alternative and far more radical position is to reject the myth of nation altogether and dare to move beyond politically, socially and culturally established boundaries into a wholly new feminised space. Certainly, this rejection of the myth of nation could be seen as the final strategy of Arachne Manteia, in van Herk's later novel, No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey (1986). Arachne does not merely negotiate such social and sexual delineations, as J.L. does, but initially tries to test, to stretch, and finally to bust the boundaries of gender stereotyping by working as a sexually predatory travelling saleswoman. She defies the rules of heterosexual acceptability, having sex with a nonagenarian, Josef, and later a woman who is so alike she could be her identical twin. Thus the possibility of same-sex female incest is

suggested along with a clear expression of Arachne's bisexuality. Engel's sexually radical novel is alluded to at this time - the doppelgänger's travel companion is a bear.

Blatant in her display of sexuality and non-conformity, Arachne irrepressibly desires to break all the rules - 'she was not the same, would never be the same. There was nothing she could do about her difference, nothing to do but exploit it, call attention to the fact that she was crossing every boundary'.<sup>117</sup> Ironically, this boundary-breaking lifestyle is Arachne's search for self-delineation, her 'way of declaring herself, of drawing a line. She knew where she stood. Outside.'<sup>118</sup> Van Herk has indicated that Arachne 'is looking for a centre . . . she can never find herself on the map'.<sup>119</sup> She has been marginalised on social and class grounds. Marlene Goldman deconstructs the novel's title to show how maintaining such a marginalised or ill-defined subjectivity can be viewed as a liberating political act, since 'the novel does not conclude by positioning the protagonist within the "fixed" bounds erected by the State'.<sup>120</sup> Instead, the title playfully utilises the dual semantic meaning of 'address' as both a physical location and a linguistic notion, signalling 'the disturbance created in the linguistic terrain when women choose to become invisible within the terms designated by traditional representations of Woman'.<sup>121</sup>

My argument returns to van Herk's notion of women attempting to enter a 'landscape constrained by male vantage'<sup>122</sup> where female representation is restricted to the defining extremes of mother, saint, whore. Arachne strays psychologically, as well as physically, from these traditional images of Woman. On the one hand, as a 'priestess of bad behaviour'<sup>123</sup> she eschews all possible responsibility, while also rejecting feminine cultural constructions of women as sweet, modest, subservient and humble. Arachne certainly fits neither of the first two categories of mother or saint, socially and morally representing 'good' women. Despite her libidinous, shamelessly amoral, dishonest lifestyle, she does not, on the other hand, simply represent a whore (a 'bad' woman) because men do not take sexual or commercial advantage of her; instead, she takes full manipulative self-satisfying advantage of them. Arachne is no frail female victim, managing to positively counter male power through her assertive behaviour. This situation leads one to speculate about how far van Herk's representation of Arachne can be seen to progress beyond simple inversions of male / female stereotypes, or the passive / active sexual model of virgin / whore, based on the moral

polarities of good and evil, positive and negative. Does this novel move towards a position which more radically deconstructs binary oppositions altogether, breaking the dualistic boundaries of patriarchal Manichaean philosophy in the process?

Licentious and liberated, Arachne subverts not only universal binary models but specifically Canadian ones as well. When van Herk stresses that 'Arachne travels to travel. Her only paradox is arriving somewhere, her only solution is to leave for somewhere else',<sup>124</sup> she is deliberately inverting a renowned regional work of criticism by Robert Kroetsch, 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space' (1979).<sup>125</sup> In this essay, Kroetsch - who is well-known for writing with a particularly masculine perspective on the landscape - proposes that the feminine / woman is static and the masculine / man is in motion. This configuration leads Kroetsch to suggest a gendered positionality which can respectively be symbolised by the house and the horse. Arachne symbolises a female representation completely to the contrary. Totally lacking in domestication, her character is embodied in the freedom of movement provided by her 1959 vintage Mercedes. Kroetsch generously and accurately responded to van Herk's novel, describing Arachne as 'a woman of no fixed address who is compulsively at home'.<sup>126</sup> Home and motion are conflated by van Herk through the car, which is more normally associated with masculine virility and power. Van Herk is equally parodying the American road novel, such as Jack Kerouac's On the Road (1955), switching the gender of the active questing 'hero'.

The French feminist Hélène Cixous stresses the necessity for women to break away from patriarchal binary schemes altogether, believing binary thought to be 'death-dealing' in its equation of femininity with passivity and death (as opposed to masculine activity and life). 'Either woman is passive or she does not exist', Cixous states in The Newly Born Woman (1975).<sup>127</sup> Does the disappearance of the highly dynamic, assertive and sexually active Arachne at the end of No Fixed Address simply reaffirm this patriarchal denial of the female and her body, traditionally defined in terms of lack, absence, chaos and non-being? If one is to read No Fixed Address as celebrating female empowerment, it is important to see the novel's enigmatic ending, not as reasserting this patriarchal disavowal of the existence of active female sexuality and subjectivity, but as a death-defying act asserting women's right to the power of presence and positive signification. Arachne may disappear but this does not mean she

ceases to be; the text itself and comments by the author imply otherwise, suggesting that Arachne's presence continues in another form. Like a cat with nine lives, or an immortal sibyl, Arachne literally 'goes west', returning to Vancouver and dying there; yet only 'one of her lives [is] certainly over'.<sup>128</sup> Any sense of a clear existential boundary between life and death, between endings and beginnings, is ultimately and radically denied in No Fixed Address. In an unpublished interview van Herk acknowledges a wish 'to bring [Arachne] back', allowing her to defy the limits of the earlier text by passing into a new novel and a new nation. 'She's not in Canada anymore. She has started travelling. Which is what you'd expect', van Herk explains.<sup>129</sup>

Failing to fit into preconceived national and social models of womanhood, Arachne, like the imaginative J.L. before her, is searching for 'a [new] story to inhabit',<sup>130</sup> even as the narrative of No Fixed Address unfolds. In her review of No Fixed Address, Jenny Abbott stresses that 'by seeing her life as something to fictionalize [Arachne] ensures that no one else can lay claim to it'.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, the protagonist's name lends strength to the image of Arachne 'spinning a yarn', a web of stories about her life, against a context of restrictive censorship and the forcible imposition of unnatural personas. In ancient Greek mythology, Arachne was punitively turned into a spider by Athena for spinning a tapestry telling a story (about the lechery of Athena's father, Zeus) which Athena did not want to hear. In No Fixed Address, van Herk instead portrays female solidarity in the close friendship between Arachne and her confidante, Thena.

Unlike van Herk's previous novels, No Fixed Address is focused not only on the reductive polarities of gender and the overturning of mythic and archetypal images of woman, but more on the complex issues of class and social acceptability. Arachne's lover, Thomas Telfer, attempts 'to provide her with camouflage, a disguise',<sup>132</sup> selecting a whole new designer wardrobe for Arachne to help her defy class boundaries. Contrary to Judith's and J.L.'s disguise acts, Arachne does not pretend to be of an alternative gender, but of a different social rank. Originally a scruffy working class tomboy street urchin, the grown woman has learnt to dissemble as a middle-class lady. Nevertheless, Arachne describes herself as 'an imposter' in 'the real world',<sup>133</sup> suggesting that the way in which she assumes a false character has less to do with gender, or even class ultimately, than with her position totally outside all such social delineations and the rules of society which frame a sense of reality. In a patriarchal



world it is fittingly ironic that it should be a man - Arachne's cartographer, Thomas - who teaches her, in the words of Goldman, 'to locate the boundaries of civilised society and to escape its borders'.<sup>134</sup> An important example of this is when Thomas allows Arachne literally to get above society through the gift of an aerial map that symbolically opens up a whole new potential world for her.

During her birthday balloon ride with Thomas, Arachne is able to look down at the ground and imagine 'spidering her own map over the intricate roads of the world'.<sup>135</sup> This trip, though only described briefly in the novel, is a pivotal moment in the plot since it provides Arachne with a vision of freedom and a world perspective far beyond her locationally limited origins. Discussing ideas of nationhood and self-location in the context of the works of Virginia Woolf, Gillian Beer writes about the way in which there is 'a reordering of the earth' from an aircraft, 'a reordering which does away with centrality and very largely with borders'.<sup>136</sup> She goes further to suggest that 'the patchwork continuity of an earth seen in this style undermines the concept of nationhood' altogether.<sup>137</sup> Certainly, Marshall McLuhan in the 1970s saw 'the new technology of air travel' as one of several scientific developments corroding cultural and national boundaries,<sup>138</sup> which he represents in his essay, 'Canada: The Borderline Case', in fearful, and some would say, alarmist terms. In No Fixed Address, Arachne's vision of a world without visible boundaries is a joyfully enabling one. The sight of an apparently tabula rasa landscape on which she can perform her own mapping liberates her into a world beyond social dictates or national laws. This is the beginning of her journey to 'the ultimate frontier',<sup>139</sup> in an Arctic wilderness that embodies the end, as well as the edge, of the world. The last 'sighting' of Arachne is flying over the most remote region, a truly 'roadless world',<sup>140</sup> in a helicopter. Yet this is not a 'siting', fixing this elusive character in locational terms. Arachne's sense of having 'arrived' does not involve achieving a set geographical goal but freeing herself from the landscape and the country altogether. Her passing becomes associated with the prophetic omen of a comet, not only a flying body but one from the reaches of space, a fitting symbol of Arachne's disappearance into an unknown domain.

Does the wilderness hold the key to a female Canadian Dream of liberty and happiness, if such a national dream indeed exists at all? Responses to this inquiry depend on one's reading of disappearance and ultimately corporeal non-presence or

death. Arachne 'vanishes'<sup>141</sup> from her regulated life after jumping bail, thus blatantly defying patriarchal law. She escapes first westwards to the Pacific Coast and then north into the borderline wilderness region beyond the Yukon provincial boundary until she 'reach[es] what seems to be', in Dorothy Jones' critique, 'her own and perhaps Canada's ultimate limit'.<sup>142</sup> As Arachne realises, she has travelled in the words of Canada's national motto 'from sea to sea'.<sup>143</sup> She ventures beyond the limits of the nation as previously conceived, in the process testing the boundaries of her own subjective being, pushing beyond gendered sexual identity by crossing new borders into the non-corporeal realm of death.

Van Herk explains Arachne's final gesture in terms of a positive search for a new country, an escape from the national identity that previously circumscribed her: 'We may perceive death as negative, but it is only another country, and my character's pursuit of it is her way of trying to immigrate to that country'.<sup>144</sup> Arachne may become the missing woman in the recurring subtitle, 'Notebook on a missing person'. Yet, it needs to be borne in mind that she has only been mis-located, as it were, by the narrator, since as an individual she knows exactly where she is and where she is going, pursuing a clear objective. Arachne strives to create other countries of existence and journey to these new places of possibility. She does not repent for her former immoral lifestyle but performs a positive act of disappearance from a world in which she can no longer viably exist. Not everyone would agree with my reading. Hartmut Lutz, for one, ignores the celebratory feminist message of the text when he says that Arachne 'pays the very high price of annihilation', for her free wanton behaviour, 'falling off the edge into "four-dimensional nothingness"'.<sup>145</sup> To Lutz, Arachne's absent status is only one of 'annihilation' and 'nothingness'.

This is certainly a contentious novel. The metaphysical conclusion to No Fixed Address is especially subversive. Van Herk, as author, accompanies her fictional character on her journey, 'crossing every boundary', by defying conventional narrative structures, realism and the constraints of consistent stylistic method, in a technique which seems to wish to deny the spatial limits of the text. In his review of the novel Kenneth McGoogan is not alone in finding difficulty with van Herk's disregard for generic boundaries, believing the novel fails artistically because of its jarring discontinuities: 'It's as if van Herk started to write a picaresque novel that would stand

the traditional male rogue on his head', he argues, 'and then growing bored with the idea, got swept up in the rhetoric of post-modernism'.<sup>146</sup> After a brief résumé of the narrator's role in this plot structure, McGoogan dismissively concludes: '[t]his is all very interesting, but it's a different novel - one concerned not with mirroring images of macho but with reality and narrative'.<sup>147</sup> But, to the contrary, I would ask why it cannot be both. Sexual stereotypes and stylistic conventions are equally parodied. The structural integrity and continuity of the novel is ironically provided precisely through the disruptive images of boundary-breaking and shifting relocation.

#### IV

Van Herk's preoccupation with female positionality and women's auto-geographies - her interest in location, landscape, transformation and disappearance - has a distinctly autobiographical origin. Despite being born in Canada, van Herk was the first child of Dutch immigrant parents who, while living in the Canadian mid-West province of Alberta, nevertheless continued to speak their native European language at home. Thus, van Herk was branded as an alien 'D.P.' (a Displaced Person) at school,<sup>148</sup> and, as an adult, has been countering this sense of displacement by linguistically and geographically exploring what she describes as 'situational possibilities' ever since.<sup>149</sup>

This approach can clearly be seen in her latest work of non-criticism, Places Far From Ellesmere (1990), which van Herk chooses to term a 'geografictione', signalling the plotting of both female fictional narratives and cartography. This semi-autobiographical piece is structured around the mapping of 'exploration sites' which represent the shifting geographical locations of van Herk's life. As a fragmented postmodern text Places Far From Ellesmere illuminates van Herk's dislocation with any notion of 'home', with the whole contention of cartography which insists that everything is mappable.<sup>150</sup> Yet there are advantages to this condition of dislocation. In her essay, 'Writing the Immigrant Self: Disguise and Damnation' (1991), Van Herk argues that in the dislocated absence or silence which represents the immigrant journey, in the hiatus between departure and arrival, an act of imaginative self-storying or fictional recreation can take place. Movement, especially border-crossing, enables subjective transformation through 'the magic disappearance and reappearance inherent in the act of immigration'.<sup>151</sup> Attempting to avoid the problematic reality of an

incompletely realised familial immigrant dream involving poverty and parental illiteracy,<sup>152</sup> van Herk articulates a desire to mirror the vanishing strategies of her fictional protagonists, Judith, J.L., and Arachne. She too, wishes 'to disappear, to drive off the edge of all the maps of tongue and literature into the fall of language', believing that such a place beyond written or spoken language might be located in 'the white space of the open page'.<sup>153</sup>

This quest becomes not simply an intellectual projection but a physical journey as van Herk, like Arachne, takes a trip north into what she sees as the 'tabula rasa', the 'great white page', of the Arctic desert wilderness, travelling to Ellesmere Island.<sup>154</sup> This landscape is literally and metaphorically uninscribed, representing the opportunity to 'un/read' identity in a space which is 'inexplicable', territorially anonymous, unclaimed. As van Herk stresses: 'these northerns belong to no nation, no configuration of (wo)man'.<sup>155</sup> As female space, this wilderness landscape of the north, offers a release from the over-determined, patriarchal representations of Woman. 'Ellesmere is', not simply 'absence',<sup>156</sup> but silence, and thus a potential linguistic space for new boundary-busting readings of female identity. In Places Far From Ellesmere such a rereading is demonstrated by the 'dis/placement' of Leo Tolstoy's famous heroine, Anna Karenin,<sup>157</sup> from one famous last northern wilderness - the Russian Siberian Steppes, to another - the Canadian Arctic of Ellesmere, from a masculine text to van Herk's feminist one.

Van Herk makes it clear that she 'chose not to write anything historical at all, to take a fictional character' because of her mistrust of the recent renewed interest in arctic male explorers like Sir John Franklin.<sup>158</sup> Such men falsely claimed to have 'discovered' land known and travelled by the Inuit for hundreds of years. Van Herk has no wish to be involved in 'attempt[s] to revive a dead hero',<sup>159</sup> choosing to give new life to a fictional heroine instead. Anna Karenin's presence on the island of Places Far From Ellesmere is structurally enabled by the narrator's choice of Tolstoy's novel as the reading book she will take with her on her Arctic camping trip. Van Herk is no longer rewriting the fiction of the prairies, as she did in No Fixed Address, but entering a whole new polar wilderness space, pioneering north not west. She acknowledges that 'the last frontier in Canada is the north'.<sup>160</sup> Since the West has already been claimed as a

male frontier, the North is women's last opportunity to open up new female territory. Indeed, this representation of uninscribed landscape potential has some historical precedent, as the pioneering traveller Agnes Dean Cameron describes the Arctic North as 'the silences' in her journals of 1910.<sup>161</sup> Thus, the extreme arctic of Ellesmere Island is a fitting place for van Herk to escape 'all the maps of tongue'.

The trip on which Places Far From Ellesmere is based was undertaken with her husband, Robert Sharp, an exploration geologist. But van Herk made a further trip, literally travelling to the ends of the inhabited earth, accompanied only by an Inuktitut-speaking native Eskimo guide, Pijamini. This journey to the most northerly Canadian community, an Inuit settlement at Grise Fiord, might be regarded as the modern equivalent of Anna Jameson's unaccompanied pioneering exploration of Canada: as van Herk realises she is 'beyond the intellectual comprehension or the geographical experience of most of those people who call themselves Canadians'.<sup>162</sup> This personal odyssey is certainly seen as liberating by van Herk, who describes the trip in In Visible Ink in ecstatic terms: 'in this distant, eerie world of ice, unwriting and unwritten, . . . I am inexplicably, immeasurably happy: because I am finally free of words'.<sup>163</sup> The academic lecturer, professor and novelist is, at least temporarily, free from having to speak, read and write. She goes further to describe her position as being one of disappearance in which she is 'suspended in an Arctic, not near Arctic or high Arctic but extreme Arctic, beyond all writing . . . I am at last beyond language, at last literally invisible'.<sup>164</sup>

Quite how successfully van Herk escapes language and its patriarchal limits, as she paradoxically attempts to record this experience in words, is not altogether clear, although the author is obviously aware of this irony. Indeed, whether such an idealistic position outside language is ever achievable is extremely doubtful, since human subjectivity is inevitably constructed through lexical means. However, linguistic definitions of subjectivity and nationality are undercut and possibly even denied in these two Arctic wilderness pieces, 'Ellesmere, woman as island' (1990) and 'In Visible Ink' (1991).<sup>165</sup> The snow and ice which constitutes Ellesmere Island is constantly shifting and changing, as this 'floating polar desert'<sup>166</sup> moves free of the land / sea delineation of normal coastal boundaries. The landscape literally breaks up as the puzzle ice thaws in an image which is as liberating for female subjectivity as national

demarcation. For this insular land mass and its boundaries take on female form. The front cover of Places Far From Ellesmere depicts the island literally as the body of a woman, looking down on an undifferentiated continent, which could be Canada. Van Herk's feminisation of the landscape emerges once again when the 'everywoman' figure of Anna is portrayed as an enigmatic picture in the 'ever-changing cloak of ice' which covers the region.<sup>167</sup> Ice becomes a figuration of a fluid femininity which cannot be contained. With the summer thaw the puzzle-ice portrait of Anna, of Woman, will break up to be liberated into a different watery form, transfiguring van Herk's un/reading and de-scribing of Tolstoy's Anna Karenin: 'The words are stirred, mixed, like the pieces of a jigsaw, broken up into their separate shapes and the whole picture lost', leaving the female depiction 'to be reconstructed by another, a different hand'.<sup>168</sup>

The polar desert is both a literally shifting landscape and a nomadic site where concepts of nation, as well as woman, are semantically freed from traditional limits. The native Inuit nation defies normal territorial boundaries, going beyond the land itself. 'There is a permeability between land and sea that isn't true in almost any other nation, except of course Antarctica', van Herk explains, 'And that permeability makes you realise that the notion of boundaries is an erasable one'.<sup>169</sup> Ice is again the enabling agent: 'For the Inuit, the land does not end where ocean begins: it only begins there'.<sup>170</sup> National borders become illusory constructs in this clear white wilderness, as van Herk, riding on a komatik (the traditional Inuit sledge) traverses 'another invisible line', 'bump[ing] off Cornwallis Island onto ice . . . No boundary crossed, a seemingly limitless surface tempting entrance'.<sup>171</sup> Van Herk and her female protagonists do not simply travel across the landscape but claim it by actively entering into it. In this disappearing act Van Herk can be seen to be engaging in a paradoxical project of self-definition which Kroetsch believes to be distinctly Canadian. He proposes that Canadians, in constructing themselves and their world, 'dare that ultimate "contradiction": they uncreate themselves into existence'.<sup>172</sup>

A study of van Herk's work leaves two important questions unanswered. If her writing about female disappearance in the Canadian wilderness is apparently autobiographical, does this trope have any relevance to issues of national identity, including the work of other Canadian authors? Or is it just an isolated motif? Equally, do these wilderness motifs have any bearing on the urban lives of statistically 'average'

Canadian citizens, who are geographically and psychologically as far removed from van Herk's Arctic wilderness in their city locations as it is possible to be? If the wilderness is to have relevance for contemporary Canadians an act of imagination will be required, for as van Herk says, 'Although most of Canada's land mass is northern, very few Canadians have been there'.<sup>173</sup> She continues by urging her reader to 'Think of this. A nation of almost four million square miles and most of its twenty-six million people cling to the bandaid of its southern fringe'.<sup>174</sup> Van Herk's use of unusual and arresting vocabulary, such as the verb 'cling' and the reference to a 'bandaid', conjures up images of desperation and damage in this linear urban population distribution pattern, as if Canadians are psychically as well as geographically cut off or severed from a wilderness north which is nonetheless feared. As Murray suggests, 'Wilderness in Canada is where you make it, or where you imagine it to be. It is not a place, but a category, defined as much by absences and contrasts as by positives and characteristics'.<sup>175</sup> One returns to Howells' image of the wilderness as 'female imaginative space'.<sup>176</sup> This flight of imagination represents a journey from the metropolitan present to the indigenous past, from the urban 'jungle' to a remote wilderness beyond civilisation, from the lived experience to the imagined, fantasized dream or nightmare.

This chapter has examined how van Herk's feminist writing has revisioned the 1970s concepts of wilderness established by Frye and Atwood. However, if I were to conclude my discussion of female representations of the wilderness at this point, I would not only be guilty of leaving unanswered the temporal question of how the wilderness effects contemporary Canadian urban lives, but also of giving a regionally biased perspective based on van Herk's prairie fiction to the exclusion of other regions of Canadian writing. Critics are increasingly defining the characteristics of Canadian literature in terms of geographical positionality - the place of origin of the text - be it West Coast fiction, Maritime literature or writing which displays an Ontario influence. By leaving my analysis of Margaret Atwood's urban fiction to last, I do not wish to suggest it has any kind of conclusive priority over the writing I have already discussed. This is an especially pertinent point in the regional context, since some writers outside the province of Ontario, which is central to Canada in administrative, political and

economical terms, regard the region's literary and media production as adversely hegemonic. It is important to look at Atwood's later fiction, however, because it undertakes revisionary work of her earlier material influenced by Frye. In a distinctly Canadian context, Atwood finds a zone for women that is nonetheless very different from that of van Herk. Atwood's writing involves both an alternative, Ontario-based perspective and a different definition of wilderness encompassing green areas within cities. Atwood particularly favours the ravines and parks of her home Toronto to represent these natural urban environments. In her novels and poetry the themes of female disappearance and mergence with a 'wild' landscape still predominate but with different archetypal and mythical significance. I shall begin with a brief survey of Atwood's urban wilderness texts, before passing on to the main discussion of her latest novel, The Robber Bride (1993), whose wilderness representation is both highly ambiguous and complex because of the depth of symbolic alternatives offer by the novel's settings and the portrayal of the main protagonist.

## V

In her afterword to The Journals of Susanna Moodie Atwood describes the urban jungle of Toronto as 'an unexplored, threatening wilderness'.<sup>177</sup> Elsewhere, she recognises that historical pioneer experiences in the early Canadian bush are not psychologically as far removed as one might expect from the perception of modern immigrants to Canada, for whom 'hostile cities replace hostile forests'.<sup>178</sup> The psychological passage between these two locations is an important symbolic element in Atwood's work. The nineteenth-century narrative persona of Susanna Moodie in the poem 'A Bus Ride Along St Clair: December'(1970), shows how the patriarchal tables forcing historical invisibility on to women can be turned when city / wilderness locations are inverted. The disembodied female voice of Atwood's Moodie rejects a vision of a far from secular urban resting place in the heavenly city of Jerusalem, for a naturistic reincarnation - 'at the last/ judgement we will all be trees'.<sup>179</sup> She subsequently asserts the right to bodily reappearance, in the form of an old woman, a passenger on a Toronto bus:

It would take more than that to banish  
me: this is my kingdom still.



Turn, look up  
 through the gritty window: an unexplored  
 wilderness of wires

Though they buried me in monuments  
 of concrete slabs, of cables . . .

it shows how little they know  
 about vanishing: I have  
 my way of getting through. . . .

Turn, look down:  
 there is no city;  
 this is the centre of a forest

your place is empty <sup>180</sup>

In a disturbing and haunting way, this poem defies not only the assumed boundary between city and wilderness, but also those between life and death, between presence and absence. The emphasis is again placed on border crossings, as Moodie materializes from 'the other side'. Susanna Moodie is certainly not safely dead and buried. Her 'wild' pioneer presence has far from vanished from the imagination of those living in the urban jungle of Canada's capital city. Indeed, maybe more than any other Canadian pioneering figure, this woman, 'roughing it in the bush', seems to have caught the national imagination, as demonstrated in the writing of Atwood, Frye and Carol Shields, to name but a few.<sup>181</sup> This level of interest would seem to demonstrate that Moodie's life in the wilds remains of relevance to modern day Canadians, at least on a psychological level. Several of Atwood's novels with urban settings reveal the wilderness to be internalised within the city, both psychically and literally.

These areas of wilderness take the form of deeply incised ravines within the heart of the generally flat landscape of Toronto city,<sup>182</sup> places where the city is physically split, mirroring the divided psychic state of Atwood's female protagonists who venture there. The symbolic characteristics of the Quebec bush in *Surfacing* remain true in this urban landscape. The wilderness is still an awesome environment in which to confront psychic fears in a search for identity, a place where civilised codes break down when the depths of the unconscious are explored. However, this urban wilderness is more explicitly sexual. As a physical fertile opening in the landscape the ravine becomes

representative of the female body and specifically the vagina and womb. This subliminal association causes the sexually shy Duncan in The Edible Woman (1969) to be repelled by the summer fecundity of the ravine wilderness. He describes the abundant vegetation as being 'too fleshy' for his liking.<sup>183</sup> In contrast, in a self-revelatory journey concerning her own female sexuality, his friend, Marian MacAlpin, safely traverses this wilderness zone, marked with a sign warning 'Danger', despite sitting for some time on 'the brink'.<sup>184</sup> The wilderness is both a liberating and frightening region for women. As she physically descends to explore the ravine, Marian also reaches into the depths of her own psyche to realise that the fissure in her psychological state is a result of the personality-engulfing union with her fiancé, Peter, and her previously unconscious desire to avoid social pressures to marry. Departing from an emotional wilderness of indecision, she resolves to remain sexually as well as legally independent, having symbolically left her male companion, Duncan, to make the journey back from the ravine on her own. As Maggie Humm suggests, the ravine wilderness frontier becomes the site of a 'border crossing',<sup>185</sup> as Marian crosses back from hysteric anorexia into the healthy, hungry desire of sanity.

Such female border crossings in the wilderness are not without danger, despite the fact that the wilderness is a distinctly feminised region in Atwood's work, as it is in van Herk's. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that Atwood's female landscape acts as a 'wild' region in more psychological ways than van Herk's. I shall take one of Atwood's later novels as an example. In Cat's Eye (1988), the urban wilderness of the ravine is literally bridged but this does not make traversing it any less frightening. The bridge itself is precarious, 'a decaying wooden footbridge', which disintegrates with the years.<sup>186</sup> It is the ravine, however, that holds the young female protagonist's fear. This wilderness is a dangerous place of the unknown, a place where 'boys, men. Not girls' go.<sup>187</sup> It is a place of frightening sexuality and 'otherness' represented by parental warnings against rape: 'We've been told . . . not to go down into the ravine by ourselves. There might be men down there' and 'These are not ordinary men but the other kind, the shadowy, nameless kind who do things to you'.<sup>188</sup>

The male domination of the urban wilderness in Cat's Eye does not mean, however, that the setting has been transformed from a female to a masculine region in this particular novel. The men are attracted to this area because it is a space of female

sexuality, physically embodied in the possibility of sex with women or girls. Indeed, the wilderness as a region of female sexuality may represent a necessary transition or crossing from childhood into womanhood. As a young girl, Elaine has a dream which, on a psychoanalytical level, appears to encapsulate her fear of the Oedipal split with her mother, a recognition of a post-natal separation connected with the discovery of independent sexuality:

I dream that the wooden bridge over the ravine is falling apart. I'm standing on it, the boards crack and separate, the bridge sways. I walk along what's left, clinging to the railing, but I can't get onto the hill where the people are standing because the bridge isn't attached to anything. My mother is on the hill, but she's talking to the other people.<sup>189</sup>

Similarly, Joan Foster in Atwood's Lady Oracle (1976) has an almost identical dream, based on a physical ravine setting remembered from childhood, while trying to realize her independence from her domineering mother and various lovers.<sup>190</sup> These dreams mirror physical waking incidences in the lives of both Joan and Elaine which marked important psychological bridging points towards complete adult autonomy from friends, as well as lovers.

Not all of Atwood's characters, however, have self-revelatory life-enhancing experiences in the wilderness. Sally, in the short story 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), lives with her husband, Ed, in a house 'on a ravine lot'.<sup>191</sup> This narrative serves as an important prelude to The Robber Bride, since both subversively rewrite a traditional fairy-tale in a modern context, using a form of female appropriation that owes much to the feminist fantasy influence of Angela Carter's contemporary fairy-tales.<sup>192</sup> Sally and Ed's superficial relationship is as precariously situated between fiction and reality as their house is between wilderness and civilization. It becomes apparent that Sally does not really understand her husband and shies away from a revelation of his maybe less than faithful, solid and dependable character; attributes which she tries to maintain by fantasizing fairy-tale images of him. 'She knows that she is sliding over the edge, into a ghastly kind of sentimentality',<sup>193</sup> but this escapism seems preferable to confrontation with reality. Not only is Ed's 'inner world' a frightening wilderness but it lacks reassuring border limits altogether: 'Ed's inner world is a forest, which looks something like the bottom part of the ravine lot, but without the fence'.<sup>194</sup> The wilderness can be

seen to be symbolically equated both with the imaginary and with the unconscious or psyche.

Terrified of the 'real' Ed she may discover, Sally's fear and uncertainty only increase because, unlike the other Atwoodian female characters whom I have been discussing, she refuses to cross the border into this psychic wilderness. She remains unhappily split between self-delusions and reality, desperately trying to hold her life and her marital relationship together:

But what is it she's afraid of? She has what they call everything: Ed, their wonderful house on a ravine lot, something she's always wanted. (But the hill is jungly, and the house is made of ice. It's held together only by Sally, who sits in the middle of it, working on a puzzle. The puzzle is Ed. If she should ever solve it, if she should ever fit the last cold splinter into place, the house will melt and flow away down the hill, and then . . . ) It's a bad habit, fooling around with her head in this way. It does no good. She knows that if she could quit she'd be happier. <sup>195</sup>

Sally thinks she would be more content if she could only stop 'fooling around with her head', by blocking her imagination. Yet she is unable to prevent herself from constructing a fictitious story of her life. Her narrative creativity acts both as a release into fantasy and also paradoxically as a confrontation with reality, unconsciously realised through her psychic fears.

## VI

So the urban wilderness is unquestionably an important part of Atwood's vision of contemporary city life in Canada, indicating the wider temporal and geographical relevance of this landscape topos in Canadian literature. But having established this point, a further question remains unanswered. Apart from the poetic persona of Moodie, do any of Atwood's fictional female characters merge invisibly with the physical wilderness? Indeed, is disappearance an important theme in Atwood's work at all? So far I have only discussed women who psychologically identify with, or mirror, the 'wild' natural environment in their disturbed mental states. There are, however, several examples in Atwood's poems and short stories where women blend with the landscape, acting as powerful yet invisible absent presences. Yet where in van Herk's work such female disappearance into the wilderness becomes an advantageous and

empowering act, Atwood's writing remains altogether more ambiguous. The status of some of her female characters is highly equivocal, as demonstrated by the figure of Lucy who experiences 'Death by Landscape', vanishing without trace in Wilderness Tips (1991). Similarly, the narrator of 'This is a Photograph of Me', Circle Game (1966), is an invisible drowned presence. Whether this 'lady of the lake' is a vocal message of suicide, accident or murder is unclear, her blurred subjectivity a positive or negative representation remains uncertain.<sup>196</sup> There is a possibility that these two women may have become 'bushed', also speculated by the unnamed protagonist as a solution for the disappearance of her father in Surfacing.<sup>197</sup> However, in the case of the 'surfacers' father, instead of becoming the wilderness in an act of insanity, he is discovered to have drowned by accident in a Quebec lake. He has not been subsumed but submerged by the water.

In the cases of Lucy and the drowned narrator in 'This is a Photograph of Me', these women seem to have merged with the landscape to become trees or water. As Lucy's friend Lois wonders 'Who knows how many trees there were on the cliff before Ludy disappeared? Who counted? Maybe there was one more, afterwards'.<sup>198</sup>

Alternatively, 'bushing' may involve taking on animal form. When the protagonist in Surfacing finally meets her father, her sighting takes the form of a vision based on the native myth of the wendigo. The wendigo is a werewolf-like being who symbolically embodies a form between man and animal, deity and human, life and death: 'He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone . . . it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes'.<sup>199</sup> This representation of a figure which is half 'realistic' and half mythical - in this case half animal, half spirit - existing between the realms of the actual and the fantastical, is significant to my discussion of the complex portrayal of Zenia as a bête noire figure in The Robber Bride. Many reviewers have notably found Zenia's characterisation difficult or unsatisfactory.<sup>200</sup>

In her essay on 'Canadian Monsters', Atwood reminds her readers that 'the Wilderness has traditionally been used in Canadian literature as a symbol for the world of the unexplored, the unconscious, the romantic, the mysterious, and the magical'.<sup>201</sup> This definition of the wilderness is central to my fairy-tale-based reading of The Robber Bride, a novel which superficially appears to have little relevance to the

wilderness, set as it is in the sprawling metropolis of downtown Toronto. Yet, the wilderness is actively present on a psychological and literal level in this novel too. I shall begin by looking at its geographical representation, which deviates from previous ravine settings, and then show how the wilderness is manifested in the novel's central female protagonist, Zenia. This character is a highly sexual, fearsome figure who comes to embody aspects of the inner psyche of all of the three other main women in the narrative. In his New York Times review of the novel, Michiko Kakutani perceptively acknowledges that 'Zenia is less a real character than a manifestation of the other women's fears and delusions'.<sup>202</sup> This revealing insight is supported by Atwood's own comments on Zenia, describing her in interviews as being 'the "Jungian shadow" in each woman' and 'a product of women's fantasy'.<sup>203</sup> In an early manuscript draft Zenia's name was changed to Zilla (Zillah is the Hebrew for shadow).<sup>204</sup> The title, The Robber Bride - which refers to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms' fairy-tale 'Der Räuberbräutigam / The Robber Bridegroom'<sup>205</sup> - indicates a subversive reworking of a traditional fantasy set in a forest which is symbolically sexual and menacing. The wilderness as fairy-tale forest is not just an imaginative or fictive space but more specifically a production of unconscious dreams and desires.

In The Robber Bride, the wilderness is physically manifested in the off-shore presence of Toronto Island in Lake Ontario. The novel's idealistic, bohemian, new-age 'flower child' character, Charis, is fittingly the one who lives on the Island, trying to adopt a healthy, self-sufficient lifestyle in the pastoral mode. The Island is apparently an Edenic natural space from which the city can be viewed from a safe distance. From afar, Toronto takes on the fairy-tale quality of a translucent jewelled castle in the clouds: 'on the mist the city floats, tower and tower and tower and spire, the glass walls of different colours, black, silver, green, copper, catching the light'.<sup>206</sup> This rather romantic representation gives the city a potential spiritual significance by suggesting the heavenly citadel of Jerusalem viewed from the Happy Isles of the Blessed.<sup>207</sup> Although the city may look 'mysterious' from the Island, Charis realises that this impression is an illusory one sustained by her own imagination, 'her belief, and meditation': it is 'like a mirage, like the cover of a book of science fiction'.<sup>208</sup>

It is not just Charis's view of the city that transpires to be a fiction. Commuting by ferry to work in the city, Charis is all too aware of Toronto's grimy, congested,

polluted reality. However, her wilderness escape from these evils of urban life to her beloved Island garden, with its wildly rampant vegetation, is also an illusion. 'The air on the Island is good' but only comparatively so; 'the soil is rich', with the help of her intervention that is, as she digs in henshit and compost.<sup>209</sup> The Island is no Eden, despite apparently being a garden wilderness. The earliest holograph draft of the novel explicitly highlights this motif. In the original version Petra (later to be renamed Charis) has an apple orchard for her garden, parodying 'The Garden' in Genesis with its Edenic atmosphere: 'mist . . . dripp[ed] from the twisted branches of the old wild apple tree that still clung to life in the field outside'.<sup>210</sup> The fruit of 'The Tree of Knowledge' becomes equally unutopian in Atwood's manuscript: 'There were a few brownish, frost-bitten apples on the branches'; the windfalls are strewn 'in rotting piles at the base of each tree'.<sup>211</sup> The reality of Charis's 'idyllic' existence is that she lives in a cold, damp, dilapidated house in a geographical location renowned for its social deprivation, poverty and single-parent families. One of Charis's less idealistic reasons for living on the Island is the practical reality of low house prices.

Nonetheless, the consistent symbolism of the wilderness as feminised space continues, thus significantly suggesting a concept of womanhood based on both positive and negative characteristics. One of Atwood's main aims in this novel is to allow women the full range of their humanity in her varied portrayal of the region of Woman, a new type of feminism in which, in Atwood's own words, 'equality [for women] means equally bad as well as equally good'.<sup>212</sup> In The Robber Bride, the Island wilderness emerges as female territory through contrast with the masculine urban development of Toronto. Looking out over the metropolis from her top-floor high-rise office, Ros can see the Island from one window and the CN Tower, which so potently symbolises the city, from another. While she sees the CN Tower as potentially phallic,<sup>213</sup> she thinks of Charis's home in naturalistic womb-like maternal terms, as a 'tiny falling-apart mouse nest of a house', a cosy image of the female nesting instinct based on a sexual procreative response.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, the 'wild' generative female Island space is at 'war' with the destructive forces of the phallic male city, with its many skyscraper towers and spires. The masculine urban powers of municipalism and cultivation wish effectively to annex the Island by demolishing all the houses on it to turn it into a man-made park.<sup>215</sup>

The Island and the city are, nonetheless, not so easily polarised into binaries such as beautiful / ugly, good / evil, nature / mechanisation, as Charis discovers; the two geographical regions remain intimately connected. Indeed, the ferry journey over the water between the island and the metropolis becomes a symbolic rite of passage associated with death. In Greek mythology Charon (whose name is notably similar to that of Charis) is the ferryman who conveys souls across the River Styx into Hades, the world of the dead, before they drink of 'the River of Forgetfulness', Lethe, as Charis recalls.<sup>216</sup> Since topographical, locational and residential symbolism are prevalent in this novel, this allusion is highly significant. At the end of the novel the troubled waters of Lake Ontario will receive the ashes of Zenia from Charis's hands, in a parody of the Greek myth of Lethe. The date is Remembrance day, an occasion on which the dead are remembered, not forgotten.<sup>217</sup>

Charis's island location is not just a physical but a psychological one. She lives in an insular dream world in which she tries to create her own reality based on an acknowledgment of only the good, positive things in life. When her hens are bloodily slaughtered, their throats cut by her 'friend', Zenia and Charis's lover, Billy, before the two abandon her after months of her care, Charis's naive illusions are cruelly shattered. She can not block the evil and violence of the contemporary world out by holding on to the innocent belief that it cannot happen, 'not on the Island, where there are so many trees and people don't lock the door when they go out'.<sup>218</sup> Charis goes on to try and deny that such evil events could happen in the larger 'pure' wilderness of Canada as a whole: 'Not in this country, familiar to her and drab, undramatic and flat'.<sup>219</sup> Zenia supports this illusion, describing Canada as 'a safe haven . . . such a gentle place'.<sup>220</sup> In her critical work, *Second Words* (1982), Atwood sees this as a wider national self-misconception about the country and its people, the 'mistaken Canadian belief: the belief that it can't happen here'.<sup>221</sup>

The insular Canadian garrison mentality is still an important contemporary psychological phenomenon in Canada, as not just Charis, in her physical and mentally limited island existence, shows. Tony, the historian, tries to isolate herself in time, living in a residence 'stronghold' which looks like a fortified Gothic castle; 'her armoured house, her one safe place', where 'she can hole herself up . . . and pretend she's invulnerable'.<sup>222</sup> Similarly, the millionairess, Roz, tries to cushion herself from the



outside world with her money and business power. She lives in an extensive 'barn' of a mansion, which she has tried to establish as 'a safe house' for her children,<sup>223</sup> and works as company president in a tower-top office well away from ground level street life. Each woman is trapped into maintaining an illusion of safety behind extensive physical and psychological defences metaphorically suggested by the walls of the garrison. But all three women discover that they can not keep their lives palisaded off from the fearful big wide world outside, which Roz contemplates in terms of a dangerous 'wild forest', which she is reluctant to let her twin girls, Erin and Paula, enter.<sup>224</sup> In his influential thematic study of Canadian literature, Butterfly on Rock (1970), D.G. Jones suggests that 'the only effective defence for a garrison culture is to abandon defence, to let down the walls and let the wilderness in, even to the wolves'.<sup>225</sup> Charis, Tony and Roz encounter the wolfish embodiment of just such a threat to their security - one which they need eventually to confront if they are to successfully survive as stable individuals.

Zenia is the character who stimulates the paranoid fears of these three women because of the emotional damage she has already caused them. She comes to embody the terrifying forces of an unknown, all-powerful wilderness, a figure who is shady and obscure enough to prompt the imagination to run wild. Compared to the others' need for the safe but restricted reassurance of a set abode, Zenia is a wanderer, 'never much of a one for houses. Only for breaking into them'.<sup>226</sup> She is beyond civilisation. At points in the novel she may be described as being 'a street fighter', 'raging unchecked somewhere out there in the city',<sup>227</sup> a cyberwoman figure who has been reconstructed by so much plastic surgery that 'pure latex [might] flow in her veins. Or molten steel'.<sup>228</sup> However, in her sexual proclivities as a metaphorical hunter and 'man-eater', who is 'on the prowl',<sup>229</sup> she is far more of a wild than an urban figure. Tony describes her as being 'brilliant, and also fearsome. Wolfish, feral, beyond the pale'.<sup>230</sup> After a close menacing encounter with her, she 'expects to hear a feral growl', as she turns tail to leave Zenia's room.<sup>231</sup> The cannibal Robber Bridegroom living in the fairy-tale woods of Grimm's story is imaginatively transformed by Atwood into the female man-eating Robber Bride, Zenia, 'lurking . . . in the dark forest, preying on the innocent'.<sup>232</sup>

One of the main discoveries of the novel is that such a dark other side is present in all women,<sup>233</sup> embodied through the composite mind, body and soul female figure represented by the academic Tony, the physically substantial Roz and the meditative Charis. These three women have to face up to their murderous nature; all are potential Robber Brides. Roz asks a telling question when she wonders, 'Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of women?'<sup>234</sup> In her illuminating analysis of the novel, Sherrill Grace suggests that 'the ogre in these tales is not the natural world per se, or some identifiable monster "out there", but human memory, perception and imagination . . . projecting a violent inner world . . . upon an external world and the people who inhabit it'.<sup>235</sup>

Significantly, it is in 'the dark wolfish forest, where lost children wander and foxes [such as the vixen-like Zenia] lurk' that 'anything can happen'.<sup>236</sup> The wilderness is not just a place of possible lurking evil but a place of imaginative potential, for negative and positive fairy-tale endings, for bad and good. It depends upon who controls the plot. Zenia's power comes ultimately through her control of fictional narratives, holding sway over Tony, Charis and Roz by manipulating their personal psychological weaknesses, engaging their imaginations as well as their sympathy, so that they unwittingly become participants in her version of the story. At various points in the novel Zenia claims to have been forced into child prostitution after having been exiled with her White Russian mother to Paris; to have been orphaned when her Roumanian gypsy mother and Finnish father were killed in the Second World War; to have been adopted after her German Jewish parents were abducted by the Nazis from Berlin; and to be a Greek immigrant, psychologically damaged through sexual abuse. Apart from damage and loss, the only consistent elements in all these stories are multiculturalism and the suggestion of a possible reason for making a border-passage from Europe into exile in Canada. The disappearing and reappearing act of immigration again enables the reworking of life stories. Zenia goes further though, using her apparent death, disappearance and fragmentation (she has supposedly been killed by being blown apart by a bomb) to hold power over the other three women despite her ostensible mortal non-presence throughout the main narratorial body of the novel.

As a wilderness force, Zenia represents not only the imaginary but the ex-centric. She is an ever-creative artist figure living on the margins.<sup>237</sup> As Atwood has said in a

BBC radio interview, 'She is what happens when you colour outside the lines. She is a real outsider'.<sup>238</sup> In a borderless world the imagination can defy the boundaries of reality, escaping definition in the process. Zenia is a nationless individual in possession of three fraudulent passports at the time of her death. Her use of disguise, disappearance and subterfuge in the war of the sexes allows her literally to become a double agent, if this particular one of her stories is to be believed. Zenia exists outside national and female definition, situated between the knowingly archaic history of Europe and the young naive innocence of Canada, between the past and the present. She exists between old and new manifestations of femininity, between life and death. Her identity, unlike the three other female protagonists, is not split in a divided dual subjectivity but liberated in a multiple and shifting persona entirely of her own creation. As she empoweringly composes a different version of her life hi/story for each new audience, it is notable that unlike the nominal fluctuations in the other characters Zenia retains this and only this name, whose very meaning is ambiguous, implying both friend and stranger.<sup>239</sup> As a highly post-modern shifting hybrid figure she cannot be linguistically or geographically fixed. She is not even patronymically designated by a surname. Everything else about her changes - her body, her health, her background - but her single first name remains unaltered. She seems to be entirely constructed through language, devising herself through words. We are left with only a name.

Zenia disappears taking her story with her. This is the point with which reviewers have had most difficulty. Lynne Van Luven describes her as 'the "black hole" at the core of the novel',<sup>240</sup> while Maureen Nicholson argues that 'the most interesting story in The Robber Bride, Zenia's, simply isn't present enough'.<sup>241</sup> Claire Messud finds fault with Atwood's characterisation, writing that 'Zenia is not, finally, believable . . . she is revealed as pure concept',<sup>242</sup> a criticism supported by Candace Fertile's reading of the novel, believing that 'credibility is strained . . . by the figure of Zenia', whom she describes as being 'the pivot around which the others turn, but they are the characters of substance. Zenia disappears, turns into a device'.<sup>243</sup> As I see it, these reviews miss the point of the novel, which is that incomplete stories have the most potential power. The loss or disappearance of Zenia and her narrative is the central intriguing preoccupation of the novel. As the epigraph by Günter Grass states, 'Only what is entirely lost demands to be endlessly named: there is a mania to call the lost thing until

it returns'.<sup>244</sup> The truth about Zenia deliberately lies out of reach. Charis believes that 'Zenia has the real story',<sup>245</sup> but the novel demonstrates that there is no definitive 'real' story, just many versions. It is Zenia's power 'to switch the plot',<sup>246</sup> as Roz says, that gives her control and presence in the narrative as a whole.

In a final scene, the devilish figure of Zenia three times tempts a listener to believe in her version of events, conjuring up images of Jesus's temptation by Satan in the wilderness. Charis contemplates how 'they were tempted, each one of them, but they didn't succumb . . . succumbing would be believing her . . . letting her take them in, letting her tear them apart'.<sup>247</sup> No longer able to control her life story, Zenia is left to switch the ending one more time to take control of the narrative of her death, apparently committing suicide by taking an overdose and falling from her high-rise hotel room after discovering that she has fatal cancer. The novel ends with an image of Roz, Tony and Charis telling stories, having finally succeeded in taking control of the integrated narratives of their own lives. Female power is embodied in the command of oral narrative, a feminine form of story-telling often superseded by masculine written forms which become the recorded past, history, indeed his/ story.

This narrative creativity is an empowering position not just for women but also for Canadians and those of other nationalities. Zenia states that 'you can be whoever you like',<sup>248</sup> there is no need to follow existing delineations or narrative patterns. Powerful, manipulative and aggressively sexual, Zenia is everything a woman and a Canadian should not be. But on whose definition of female and national identity is this based? Atwood's novel prompts such questions. Using established national stereotypes, Roz jokes, 'aggressively Canadian, what a contradiction in terms'.<sup>249</sup> Shannon Hengen suggests that Zenia is 'as memorable as any fairy-tale villain',<sup>250</sup> memorable for being bad not good. As the delightfully subverted figure of the wicked ugly sister says, in Atwood's collection Good Bones (1992), 'you can't get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it'.<sup>251</sup> Tony, as an historian, knows that 'history doesn't concern itself much with those who try to be good'.<sup>252</sup> If Canada as a nation is to be a memorable country worthy of inclusion in world his/story it needs to change its victim image of a compromising people who are flat, opaque and self-effacing. Tony thinks that the next Canadian female generation, represented by her goddaughters - Erin and

Paula, Roz's twins and Charis's daughter, Augusta - are certainly far more confident, strident women. Unlike herself, 'she hopes they will gallop through the world in style'.<sup>253</sup>

Maybe Canada needs to enter the twenty-first century as a more colourful if less 'nice', morally correct nation, perhaps with women in the lead. Is it a coincidence that the novel focuses on female power and control at the same historical moment that Canada had its first female Prime Minister, Kim Campbell (another initially successful but ultimately unpopular woman)? This representation of the evil and good in women has been enabled through the use of Grimm's 'Robber Bridegroom'. In Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics (1993), Sharon Rose Wilson states that such intertexts serve in Atwood 'to structure the characters' imagination or "magical" release from externally imposed patterns, offering the possibility of transformation for the novel's characters, for the country they partly represent, and for all human beings'.<sup>254</sup> The wilderness of alternative pasts, as well as futures, is ultimately based on visibility not disappearance; power is through control of one's own version of the story.

Van Herk and Atwood clearly believe that the wilderness is not just a useful, but a vital, site for female liberation, self-discovery and creativity, as demonstrated by their thematic preoccupation with it as a subject over the whole span of their writing careers. If the wilderness is so central to the Canadian female thinking, where, if at all, do its limits - in terms of national application - lie? And are contemporary women prepared to share this innovative and enabling female territory with men? I shall now turn to the highly masculinist writing of Robert Kroetsch to investigate these issues and suggest how male authors may be striving to develop their own distinctive region, or psychological wilderness, within the context of this all important Canadian archetype. However, my discussion will deliberately provide no definitive answers, leaving the vanishing clarity of gendered and national delineations in the wilderness open to question. Such an approach is appropriate when exploring the vast, open and undefined expanses of the unanswering Canadian landscape.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 'THE FICTION MAKES US REAL': MISLEADING APPEARANCES IN THE PRAIRIE WRITING OF ROBERT KROETSCH

#### I

Like Van Herk, Robert Kroetsch investigates the wilderness in a prairie context in which the representation of gender is a crucial issue. In this chapter, I look at five of his novels and his latest work, an autobiography, each of which shows his increasingly complex and parodic expressions of Canadian masculinity. Kroetsch experiments with a wide variety of fictional modes, moving from sombre realism to comic fantasy and fabrication (in the form of the tall tale), as he examines the limits of separate genres with each successive work. However, Kroetsch demonstrates an important unity of purpose, if not style, in his writing. His canon is devoted to repeated attempts to find different yet distinctly Canadian methods for representing a quest west that is definitively not American. His male-orientated work contrasts with both certain Canadian feminist writing and Western fiction south of the border. Nevertheless, Kroetsch's writing is neither simplistically opposed to other forms, nor easily categorised by critics whose interpretation of his fiction varies greatly. A more detailed analysis is needed to clarify Kroetsch's regional and gendered position within the Canadian literary canon. Here I explore the ways in which archetypal structures of journeying, personal transformation and disappearance (a type of departure with no return) emerge in a distinctly Canadian mythical western context free from the assumed masculinism of the cowboy.

A study of Kroetsch's work serves as a useful comparison to that of van Herk, not simply because she is reworking some of his essays and novels in No Fixed Address and has been a highly active commentator on his work more generally. Even though van Herk and Kroetsch share the same childhood home setting in Alberta's Battle River Valley, separated only by a generation, their representation of the prairies as a wilderness space is widely divergent. Van Herk suggests that the wilderness can be reclaimed physically and psychologically as feminised space thus escaping patriarchal delineations, while Kroetsch's project involves remythologising the male quest in a

search for masculine subjectivities not bound by existing gender stereotypes. They may both write out of the same prairie landscape but it is the symbolic use to which each puts this landscape that is distinctive. As Kroetsch says, 'The notion that there is a landscape that you can describe realistically is nonsense because each of us is perceiving the landscape subjectively'.<sup>1</sup> Many commentators have argued that Kroetsch's own subjective vision is a highly masculine one, but recent critics have read his work differently. Susan Rudy Dorscht goes so far as to suggest that 'there is . . . a sense in which Kroetsch and Van Herk are participating in the same feminization' of 'travel literature and of the traditional Western form'.<sup>2</sup> Kroetsch's work is compelling not only because his contentious sexual politics contrast with those of van Herk. His writing is also notable because he is one of the most prominent Canadian prairie regionalists. Kroetsch has described himself as 'a frontiersman' pioneering into an uncharted literary space.<sup>3</sup>

As a writer and academic, Kroetsch is unusually positioned between cultures and traditions: he spent nearly twenty years working abroad in the United States, teaching among other things American literature. Kroetsch is thus in an ideal situation to contrast the myths of the Canadian and American Mid-West. His postmodern interest in boundaries and borders - he edited the distinguished postmodern journal which he titled Boundary 2 - further increases his fascination with national subjective delineations. His authorial position is located on the border between different nations and narratives, 'caught', as Robert Lecker would have it, 'between Canada and the United States, silence and noise, invention and remembrance'.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I investigate how far Kroetsch is 'caught' and how far he is liberated by his unusual positioning between Canadian and American traditions. In thematic terms, it is the shifting, borderline definitions of self that frequently feature in Kroetsch's work.

Kroetsch's investigation of Canadian male subjectivity may be in a mythic context but it also has important personal relevance. Before turning to his fiction, I shall examine how Kroetsch's upbringing on the prairies has influenced the thematic approach he takes in his own writing. Kroetsch acknowledges that the macho-masculinist stance which his work seeks to parody is related to the historical agrarian gendered role divisions in the prairie West. They do not reflected Canada as a whole. Thus, it is important to establish how regional experiences differ from national ones

more generally, before tackling the question of gender representation which I have indicated is crucial to Kroetsch's oeuvre.

Critics have often analysed Kroetsch's work in the context of a famous remark made early in his career: 'In a sense we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real'.<sup>5</sup> But the context of this oxymoronic statement, made in 1970, during 'a conversation' with fellow prairie writer Margaret Laurence, is often overlooked.<sup>6</sup> In this interview the regional concerns of Laurence and Kroetsch are in distinct contrast to the location in which the dialogue occurred: the metropolitan centre of Toronto. The discussion of a provincial identity represents a departure in emphasis from the more all-inclusive nationalist Canadian sentiments which were beginning to be articulated by other writers at this time. This is a search in which the aim is not to discover the quintessential truth about national subjectivity but instead to create the self through a communal fiction. To understand the local dimensions behind such a project, as undertaken by Laurence and Kroetsch, it is important first to investigate Kroetsch's more general philosophies concerning identity and its narration. Elsewhere, Kroetsch reiterates his belief that 'the question of identity is not exactly the Canadian question' because 'that is an interpretative matter for people who already have their story'.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that Canada has no defining narrative of origin to match that of the United States and the 'American Dream' with its frontier manifestations or 'the convict moment' of Australia.<sup>8</sup> In his view, Canada's historical beginnings are traditionally conceptualised as evolutionary rather than revolutionary.<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising that Kroetsch's emphasis is on story and not history, with the implied need for an imaginative rather than factual (re)construction of national identity. This approach has much to do with his position as a post-colonial writer. Making 'real' through fiction is, for Kroetsch, a subversive counter-response to a situation in which he perceives historical 'reality' as a colonial fiction, rejecting the verisimilitude of the imperial meta-narrative as an account 'that lied to us, violated us, even erased us',<sup>10</sup> causing Canadians to become an invisible people lacking their own story. Indeed, Canadians' very interest in 'the question of identity speaks its presence in a curious way', Kroetsch suggests, 'that presence announces itself as an absence'.<sup>11</sup> Kroetsch accepts that Frye's insight into the Canadian existential dilemma, 'Where am I?', is basic



to the unriddling of whatever it is to be a Canadian'.<sup>12</sup> But he believes Frye's emphasis is incorrect because it 'slights a question that is at least manifest if not central'.<sup>13</sup> This is the question of Canadian invisibility. Writing a decade later, Kroetsch clearly believes such a reformulation should rather be in terms of 'what is the narrative of us?'.<sup>14</sup> As he says, 'We continue to have a crisis about our own story'.<sup>15</sup>

Kroetsch's emphasis on the discovery of identity through a paradoxical absent presence indicates that he is not totally rejecting the importance of spatio-geographical models. He believes firmly in locating the self, but in doing so through plotting one's position in terms of narrative. In his essay, 'Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue' (1981), he discusses the need for a national narrative in terms of Canada as a whole. But the earlier conversation with Margaret Laurence indicates how much his views originate from the experience of growing up on the prairies, away from both the metropolitan and the imperial centre. In this respect, both he and Laurence had a similar childhood experience. When he stresses that 'we haven't got an identity', the plural pronoun may be read as including all Canadians, but it specifically refers to those living in the prairie West. 'We didn't have the advantage that a young writer might have in an older area where there is a literature about his experience',<sup>16</sup> Kroetsch adds: 'I remember reading voraciously as a boy, and the fictional boys I read about were always doing things I couldn't begin to do, because we didn't have the big oak trees or whatever'.<sup>17</sup>

For Kroetsch, then, there was always a disparity between life and literature. The authority of the metropolitan or imperial text seemed to deny the reality of his lived experience, and resulted in a sense of alienation that made him feel that he 'had to go see'. 'I didn't believe you could construct a world without huge wheatfields'.<sup>18</sup> Kroetsch is hardly the only writer to have felt isolated by this childhood experience on the Canadian prairies. Born in the rocky bush country of northern Saskatchewan, Rudy Wiebe, a friend and contemporary author, describes how the defining line between reality and fiction, life and fantasy, blurred for him, after reading about urban lives totally remote from his own:

I never saw a mountain or a plain until I was twelve, almost thirteen. The world was poplar and birch-covered; muskeg hollows and stony hills . . . In such a world a city of houses with brick chimneys, telephones, was less real than Grimms' folk tales, or Greek myths.<sup>19</sup>

In her conversation with Kroetsch, Laurence supports these statements, recalling how, until the arrival of the novels of the prairie writer Sinclair Ross (1908-1996), 'the books you read were not related to your experience'.<sup>20</sup> The lack of narratives about their home location results in an apparently paradoxical and antagonistic response by these prairie writers involving a desire 'to get out' and 'go see' the pre-defined world which they have read about. Yet they also wanted to locate the self in a regionally specific way. It was their intention to make 'a new literature out of a new experience'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, both Laurence and Kroetsch spent long periods abroad, in Africa and America respectively, before returning to Canada.

Laurence describes this conflicted response as Kroetsch's 'split desire to go or to stay, which is a very western thing'.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that this antithetical pull is not just a Canadian, but also an American, and therefore a North American, 'western thing'. Hermione Lee, writing on the literary life of Willa Cather, a writer brought up in mid-western prairie Nebraska, describes how 'home itself was . . . the central stage for th[e] tension - which was to be so fruitful for the writer - between belonging and separateness, involvement and individualism',<sup>23</sup> a situation which Cather calls a 'double life'.<sup>24</sup> But, as Atwood points out in *Survival*, this motif is stressed differently in the literatures of these two distinct North American cultures. Frequently, the American desire to establish a sense of separation from 'home' emphasizes the need to escape the family, while the Canadian impulse involves a stronger accent on the pull back towards the home. Kroetsch affirms Laurence's reading of his own 'double life' by locating this impulse regionally and historically, describing how in his earliest fiction he 'was wrestling with that western problem that goes back to the homesteaders: do I stay or do I leave?'<sup>25</sup> As Dick Harrison records: 'It was estimated that only one homesteader in three ever intended to become a farmer. The others hoped to "prove up", sell out, and move on'.<sup>26</sup>

One of the paradoxes of the Canadian West centres on its settlement pattern. Founded on the family farm, the homestead or 'home place' ironically represented both an alien and a temporary abode for many of those from eastern Canada who came west to start a new life. In fact, the way in which Kroetsch discovers a possible meta-narrative or myth of the Canadian West is by developing these paradoxes associated

with the archetypal pattern of departure and return. He emphasises how this motif embraces the need both to leave, embarking on 'a quest not for truth or the holy grail, but a quest for the self',<sup>27</sup> and to return, only to find that self rooted in the home place and the very landscape of the prairies. So if Kroetsch is asking one question, then it is this: How do you undertake the mythic quest of 'going West' when you are already in the West? His fictional dynamic is based not so much on Laurence's suggested 'desire to go or to stay', but instead, on a desire to go and to stay.

This pattern emerges in the quest fiction of But We Are Exiles (1966), the parodic 'Out West' triptych (1966-73) and Badlands (1975). All these writings are located in the wilderness regions of the Mackenzie River of the North, the agrarian 'wild' Mid-West of the plains, and the incised coulees of the Albertan Badlands. Searching for Canadian definitions of self and home in distinctly regional yet very varied settings Kroetsch alludes to many diverse quest narratives, not all of which are native to Canada. In fact, the two registers of questing that his work invokes most clearly are the American Western and the Homeric myth, both archetypal narratives involving journeys out and back.<sup>28</sup> This mixed classical and North American heritage plays an insistent role in his rendering of Canadian prairie experience. My discussion shows why Kroetsch adapts and parodies these 'foreign' myths to claim them for his own. Lastly, I consider how Kroetsch's Canadian use of the classical quest narrative differs markedly from American models. Kroetsch never hesitates to parody the American motif of mobility as a distinctly sexual metaphor, especially in relation to the road novel established by the Beat Generation of the 1950s.

## II

The difficulty which faces the Canadian prairie writer is that there is no large body of traditional narratives on which to base one's account of home. Thus pre-existing myths have to be 'brought into being' if they are not to be borrowed from abroad. Kroetsch can be seen struggling to escape the pre-established non-indigenous narratives that threaten to define him. In The Anxiety of Influence, Harold Bloom suggests that writers deliberately 'misread' their influential predecessors in 'an act of creative correction . . . [and] wilful revisionism', an attempt 'to clear imaginative space for themselves'.<sup>29</sup> Kroetsch is certainly undergoing such a process: he wants to speak out

of a international tradition of quest narrative but at the same time wishes to speak in his own Canadian voice. He desires to be both part of that tradition and apart from it. Bloom's belief that the writer 'quests for an impossible object',<sup>30</sup> by attempting to write a text in which he has the freedom to create himself, certainly throws light on the inevitable failure of the Canadian quest. Can successful individual self-creation ever realistically be achieved? Kroetsch looks beyond the conventional traditions of autobiography by searching for an answer through the life of an extraordinary historical Canadian figure.

Kroetsch suggests that the shifting figure of the prairie writer Frederick Philip Grove might be viewed as paradigmatic of the Canadian artist.<sup>31</sup> Struggling to 'give birth to himself',<sup>32</sup> as so many Canadian pioneering immigrants had before him, Grove strove to be reborn into a new life. It is not surprising that Kroetsch is captivated by the figure of Grove. His is truly a remarkable life story. Grove was born Felix Paul Greve, on the Polish-Prussian border, (a place located between nations and remote from home) during a journey made by his parents from their town of Schwerin. Defying the boundaries of subjectivity and the border between reality and fiction, life and death, Grove as a grown man faked his own suicide and emigrated to North America quite literally to begin a new life. In Kroetsch's words 'he departed Europe; in mid-Atlantic he uninvented himself, unwrote his history, arrived in Canada a new self, Frederick Phillip [sic] Grove'.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, Grove can be seen to be engaged in an act of nominal and subjective deconstruction which parallels Kroetsch's stated aesthetic. 'Having uninvented the world', Grove dares 'to invent a new one'.<sup>34</sup> In an opening statement to his famous essay, 'Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction' (1974), Kroetsch indicates an important change in the structural focus of his writing: 'At one time I considered it the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that on the contrary, it is his task to un-name'.<sup>35</sup> Kroetsch conceives of this process not as the negation of subjective definition but as a positive liberating type of self-delineation, suggesting that 'to avoid a name does not deprive one of an identity; indeed it may offer a plurality of identities'.<sup>36</sup> Such a plurality of identities was embraced by Grove.

Grove's reinvention and renaming of self is an important act for Canadian identity, since it is a country attempting to escape the controlling imperial and neo-colonial meta-narratives of Europe and America. Such a change suggests the possibility of choosing one's own beginnings and endings, one's own history, and in the process sabotaging existing historical narrative structures. Grove freed himself from the externally imposed limitations of the autobiographical form, choosing his own story. He wrote an autobiography, In Search of Myself (1946), in which he makes himself 'real' through the fictional creation of an early life.<sup>37</sup> This account is as much the product of his own imagination as any of his novels. Of all his writing, it was ironically this work of 'fictional reality'<sup>38</sup> which was the most publicly proclaimed by the Canadian literary community, winning the Governor General's Award for non-fiction in 1947, a year before his death. In his poem, 'F.P. Grove: The Finding' (1973), Kroetsch may refer to Grove as an 'old liar',<sup>39</sup> but the poem highlights the fact that Grove is also the dreamer, the dramatist and inventor, the man with imagination - the all-embracing figure of the artist. Similarly, the Saskatchewan prairie writer Eli Mandel draws attention to the paradox of Grove's life as 'an extraordinary liar',<sup>40</sup> inverting the customary artistic process of working from reality into fiction: 'Believing the strangest dreams, in search of himself, one could say Grove's life was created by his own fiction, his novels that - it seems now - literally wrote him into existence'.<sup>41</sup>

Grove's career exemplifies a distinctly Canadian predicament: the writing act becomes necessary both for the creation and hiding of self. In her study of Grove's life and work, Margaret Stobie emphasises the schizophrenic dualism of 'the man who constantly asserted his unyielding individuality while he went to extraordinary lengths to hide his identity'.<sup>42</sup> His life-stories in In Search of Myself and the semi-fictional autobiographical A Search for America (1927), both notably based on explicit quest themes, were so involved and complex that despite years of research by several Grove scholars it was not until quarter of a century after his death that 'the Grove Enigma' was resolved by Douglas Spettigue in 1972.<sup>43</sup> Ironically FPG's quest was an attempt to lose himself. Greve, escaping serious debt, the taint of a year in prison for fraud and in all probability a wife,<sup>44</sup> literally disappeared into the Canadian Mid-West of Manitoba.

Why did Grove chose the Canadian prairies as the setting in which to disappear? And how does the experience of this European immigrant relate to a Canadian-born homesteader like Kroetsch? In what respect, if any, does the archetypal Western quest motif of departure and return operate since, like other immigrants before him, Grove as a self-imposed exile took a one-way journey from Europe to North America never to return 'home'? Exploring these questions, Kroetsch argues that 'the more [Grove's] literal life comes into doubt, the more we find ourselves attracted to the man. As his reality, so to speak, comes into doubt, he comes more and more to represent our predicament'.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Grove became Canadian by writing out of a silent, unnamed, self-created place of origin. He may have done so voluntarily but this action parallels that of other early prairie writers attempting to articulate both the physical and literary silence of their region, having 'both, and at once, [to] record and invent these new places called Alberta and Saskatchewan'.<sup>46</sup> Grove's importance to Kroetsch as a writer comes to the fore when Kroetsch reveals that 'I keep a copy of In Search of Myself on my desk'.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the shifting figure of Grove becomes a model for Kroetsch as a writer, elusively avoiding (auto)biographical definition and the boundaries of literary form. No wonder Kroetsch, whose maternal family shares Grove's Germanic origins, exclaims: 'Good God, maybe he was a Canadian'.<sup>48</sup>

So in what specific ways can the German Grove be seen as truly Canadian? There are not one, but two important responses to this question. The first is connected to Canada's uneasy linguistic post- and neo-colonial relationship with Britain and the United States, and the second with Canadians' uneasy physical relation to their own landscape. In 'Unhiding the Hidden', Kroetsch argues that there is a 'painful tension between appearance and reality' in 'recent' fiction (from the 1960s and 70s):

The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works within a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing. But . . . there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American.<sup>49</sup>

Here Kroetsch echoes Dennis Lee's famous Canadian post-colonial treatise, 'Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space' (1974), in which Lee states that 'the words I knew said Britain, and they said America, but they did not say my home. They

were always and only about someone else's life', adding that 'to be authentic, the voice of being alive here and now must include the inauthenticity of our lives here and now'.<sup>50</sup> Grove becomes the archetypal Canadian artist for Kroetsch because he embodies this pull between authenticity and inauthenticity. Kroetsch formulates his solution to this problem in terms different from Lee. He sees the only way of resolving 'the tension between this appearance of being just like some one else and the demands of authenticity' through 'the radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define them. Or more comprehensively . . . uninvent[ing] the world'.<sup>51</sup>

One such controlling mythic archetype in Canada is that of the exile, alien or outsider, who will never really belong. It is based on the concept of Canada as a whole nation of immigrants. Certainly, Lee, writing in the 1970s, believed that 'if you are Canadian, home is a place that is not home to you'.<sup>52</sup> The irony is that Grove through his fiction created a 'true' home out of the alien space of Canada. As Spettigue suggests, Grove may have been 'a fugitive from his own past', but his story totally reconfigures the Canadian archetype of the exile, for 'in Canada, as his epitaph acknowledges, he was also the exile returning home'.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, the image of an Odysseus figure, the wanderer in search of home, pervades Grove's as well as Kroetsch's writing.<sup>54</sup> In a passage from In Search of Myself Grove reveals the paradoxical desire to be both lone voyager and settled married man; journeying 'on the frontier of civilization', while wishing to 'plant an island of domestic life in the wilderness'.<sup>55</sup> As Kroetsch writes in 'F.P. Grove: The Finding', the 'hobo' Grove is searching 'to find a place to be from'.<sup>56</sup>

Kroetsch sees the prairies as an imaginatively enabling place to emerge from because of the blank, unwritten space they historically, physically and climatically represent. Talking about the effects of the Depression on the prairies, Kroetsch describes how 'the 30s wiped us all out. Right down to zero. So we started to invent a new concept of self'.<sup>57</sup> Climate and economy are intimately linked in this farming landscape. In another interview, Kroetsch uses an identical phrase, 'the clean sweep . . . [t]he wipe-out', to describe the effect of 'our winter, our snow . . . the snow-filled Canadian night'.<sup>58</sup> Erasure is clearly a strongly perceived characteristic of this environment. But Kroetsch views it in a positive context. The second section of 'F.P.

Grove: The Finding' is based on Grove's reflections on a winter journey in Manitoba, entitled 'Snow' from his collection Over Prairie Trails (1922). In it the old world is transformed into a new landscape by the snowy weather which buries all pre-existing forms beneath it. Kroetsch equates this climatic phenomenon with the burial of the old self, Felix Greve, who lies deep beneath layers of fiction, nevertheless still present as 'the name under the name'.<sup>59</sup> 'The drifted snow'<sup>60</sup> of the poem metaphorically represents the shifting concepts of language and identity Grove has used to reinvent his world. Kroetsch, attempting to define his own home place in 'Seed Catalogue', describes how

West is a winter place.  
The palimpsest of prairie

under the quick erasure  
of snow, invites a flight.<sup>61</sup>

The snow is the transformative agent of resurrection that 'lift[s]' FPG, the buried man, into a new 'coyote self'.<sup>62</sup> The coyote is a native figure of transformation and shape-shifting aligned with the trickster.<sup>63</sup> In his study of the trickster, Paul Radin describes him as 'possess[ing] no well-defined and fixed form'.<sup>64</sup> The severe continental climate of the prairie interior which, along with the flat topography, produces a shifting wind-blown landscape of winter snow and the dust of summer drought, allows one to see why the shape-shifter Grove chose this ever-changing environment which he describes as a 'wilderness' to become his 'real home'.<sup>65</sup>

In fact, the prairies operate as a particular type of undefined, undelineated pseudo-wilderness landscape, despite their apparent agrarian characteristics as a bounded and cultivated region, originally settled by strictly regulated section divisions under the Dominion Lands Acts.<sup>66</sup> It is the perceived unenclosed tabula rasa of the prairies which as a geographical trait both troubles and attracts writers like Kroetsch. In his seminal study, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (1977), Dick Harrison suggests that 'the vastness of the plains is at once enticing and threatening to the civilized imagination',<sup>67</sup> a sentiment that echoes the schizophrenic response of Susanna Moodie to that other renowned Canadian pioneer wilderness, the Ontario bush. While Laurence Ricou asserts that the basic image of Canadian prairie fiction



portrays 'man's dramatic [and highly visible] vertical presence in an entirely horizontal world',<sup>68</sup> another writer - W.O. Mitchell - emphasises that the same open visibility afforded by the landscape suggests disappearance, 'the vanishing point' of the omnipresent prairie horizon. In Mitchell's 1973 novel of this title, Carlyle Sinclair is awed by the open, emptiness of the prairie he has drawn, and fearfully imagines 'being vanished from himself [ . . . ] getting smaller and smaller and smaller . . . dwindling right down to a point',<sup>69</sup> as if paling into the distance. Harrison suggests that such divided reactions and images result from 'the openness of prospect which frees the spirit [but] also threatens it with the loss of security, order and ultimately all human meaning'.<sup>70</sup> He goes further, however, in proposing that the extremity of both the topography and the climate of the prairies makes it a particularly difficult wilderness landscape to humanise. For Kroetsch, it is not the land but humanity who becomes featureless in a landscape typified by absence, where ironically 'there is too much'.<sup>71</sup> He clearly appreciates the positive possibilities in being no longer recognizably yourself, in a paradoxical prairie landscape which actively facilitates the enabling pre-transformative condition of invisibility.

The paradoxical dynamic at work in the prairies affects the specific type of quest undertaken there. In an open space in which the self is surprisingly easily lost, journeys are confounded. Kroetsch stresses that 'the prairies . . . are labyrinthine. They have been mapped like grids, all those roads, but you can get lost in them so easily'.<sup>72</sup> In 'Seed Catalogue' (1977), Kroetsch defines a prairie road as being 'the shortest distance/ between nowhere and nowhere'.<sup>73</sup> In such a landscape, any quest which is undertaken seems doomed to failure, a trope parodically supported by Kroetsch's fiction, especially his 'Out West' triptych. The Canadian West may be renowned for its lack of natural boundaries, but free movement here does not imply easily obtainable goals or destinations. The one dominant natural boundary - the horizon - embodies many of the characteristics of the apparent defining lines of the prairies. It is a shifting, illusory, unobtainable point of delineation. In As For Me and My House (1941), Sinclair Ross named his hopeless, 'dead-end', 'Main Street' prairie town Horizon. Kroetsch, commenting on this novel, points out the ironies of a name which is 'place and space at once, somewhere and nowhere, always present and never to be reached'.<sup>74</sup>

This inability to reach a destination could, one might imagine, jeopardize the chance of arriving at or obtaining home. But Canadian prairie fiction does not bear this out. Indeed, the failure of the quest is precisely compounded by the fact that one can never effectively depart from home. The solitude of the prairies is juxtaposed with the tight community groups that have settled it.<sup>75</sup> The prairie, as a lived experience, is both open and very claustrophobic. Kroetsch describes how his 'growing up in a closed society in Heisler', a tiny Albertan farm community of two thousand people,<sup>76</sup> induced a 'struggle to escape that society', which, despite his 'longing back to that closeness', expresses itself in his 'novels of escape, of loners'.<sup>77</sup> Laurence certainly echoes this sense when she describes the paradoxical nature of her childhood in the small Manitoban town of Neepawa on which her Manawaka series of novels is based: 'It was both a stultifying experience and a very warm protective one too'.<sup>78</sup> In his poem, 'Seed Catalogue', Kroetsch struggles to define his home, the farm 'N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian . . . one and a half miles west of Heisler, Alberta',<sup>79</sup> and tries to escape or move beyond the entrapment of its exact placing via cartography and grid references. Instead, he goes on to describe it as a house surrounded by shifting cyclical seasons bringing ill-defined wind, snow and sun. Not so much delineated but balanced in space and time, 'the home place' nonetheless has 'a terrible symmetry'.<sup>80</sup> Later in the same poem, 'the home place' is described in terms of 'the double hook',<sup>81</sup> an image of being caught through symmetry which clearly invokes Sheila Watson's novella of that name.

The Double Hook (1959) deserves closer attention, not only because of its central importance in Canadian prairie fiction generally, but because of Kroetsch's fascination and frequent reference to it. The duality symbolised by 'the double hook' becomes paradigmatic of Kroetsch's writing style, based on concurrent oppositions which emerge from the physical paradoxes of the prairies. In the character of James Potter, Watson creates the archetype of the failed western Canadian questor. Having committed matricide, James wishes to escape his past and the claustrophobic hold of his home and family in the search for a new detached life. But he ends up back where he started. 'I ran away . . . but I circled and ended here the way a man does when he's lost', James explains.<sup>82</sup> He has been 'freed . . . from freedom'.<sup>83</sup> Watson certainly invokes the American Western archetype of the cowboy free from law and order riding

solitarily down a main street as James, alone and on horseback, rides into town seeking social and sexual freedom at a beer parlour and brothel. Yet she has stated that, in The Double Hook, she 'wanted to do something . . . about the West, which wasn't a Western'.<sup>84</sup> This Canadian novel deliberately parodies the macho-frontier quest. James fails to cross any untried boundaries: drinking not a drop of the hard liquor he has paid for, he cannot bring himself to sleep with the prostitute. He loses not only his sexual prowess but also his financial status in the process, as she pickpockets his wallet. The far from heroic, isolated man is forced back to his community, although Watson implies that his return is inevitable; he is literally 'bound to come back'.<sup>85</sup> Symbolically tied to the wilderness valley of his birth, James is not the exception but the rule. He is caught in a peculiarly Canadian quest in which, as one of Watson's characters says, 'a person only escapes in circles no matter how far the rope spins'.<sup>86</sup>

The deep irony is that in order to succeed the Canadian quest must fail. As James realises, 'I . . . [am] looking for something I hope is lost'.<sup>87</sup> Why should the Canadian expectation be one of failed encounters with the environment, while the American model involves successfully taming the frontier into submission? The motif of a doomed Canadian western frontier quest which fails to reach out into unexplored territory may well partly be the result of historical circumstance since, as Kroetsch notes, 'the frontier had in a sense 'closed' by the time the Canadian prairie opened to settlement'.<sup>88</sup> Canadian prairie pioneers arrived not in a 'wild' and lawless West, as in the American model, but in a frontier society governed by the Mounted Police, with ordered settlement patterns following the stations and trading posts pre-established by the Canadian Pacific Railway and Hudson Bay Companies.<sup>89</sup> The repeated failure of the western Canadian quest is indeed double-edged. From a subjective angle, it strongly roots the individual in a personally specific and well-established homeplace, while depriving him of that individuality through subsumption in community. From a narrative perspective, it allows for a particular Canadian rewriting or reinvention of the pre-existing meta-narratives of the American Western and the epic Homeric journey, while suggesting a model of Canadian identity which unfortunately operates through bathos and negation. This is an act which effectively predicates a re-reading or return to the earlier meta-narratives if the full dramatic force of contrast is to be realised. Finally, the wilderness prairie landscape, which Kroetsch demonstrates at times to be

enabling in creating the self anew, is apparently the same landscape in which effective self-realisation through questing becomes impossible. So where does one go from here? Kroetsch's aesthetic logic is necessarily contradictory.

The physical need for freedom, itself set against the attraction to the established home place, parallels the stylistic dichotomy of Kroetsch's own writing. His narratives move between the polarities of experimentation and tradition, chaos and order. On the one hand, the 'double hook' is potentially debilitating in artistic terms. On the other, it can be viewed as the paradigm which forms the compelling basis of Kroetsch's work. Kroetsch has described the double hook as 'the total ambiguity that is so essentially Canadian: be it in terms of two solitudes [or] the bush garden'.<sup>90</sup> Accepting MacLennan's and Frye's earlier literary motifs of national identity, Kroetsch goes on to propose that 'behind the multiplying theories of Canadian literature is always the pattern of equally matched opposites. Coyote:God / Self:Community / Energy: Stasis'.<sup>91</sup> These opposites are equivalent to many other antagonistic patterns, such as transformation: permanence / journey: home / chaos: order / experimentation: tradition. Kroetsch acknowledges the problem inherent in such dichotomies, since 'the balance, whatever the specifics, is always so equal that one wonders how paradigm can possibly issue into story'.<sup>92</sup> Narrative as well as the questing narrator may become trapped in stasis.

In probably his most famous (if not infamous) essay, 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space' (1979), Kroetsch suggests the use of just such a set of paired dichotomous symbols - the horse and the house, motion and stasis, male and female - to thematize prairie literature into sexually specific regions. His system is based on the extension of gender binaries. In this essay and elsewhere, Kroetsch might well be criticized for his theoretical stance towards the landscape. He has a tendency to use geographical and environmental models reductively as the basis for his far from simplistic, and often ambiguous, standpoints. A number of feminist commentators, including scholars like Dianne Tiefensee, have critiqued Kroetsch's delineation of gendered territory in 'The Fear of Women'. Nevertheless, few critics have pointed out the difficulties associated with Kroetsch's frequent reliance on the prairies as a specific topographical and geographical setting, while he refers to the region as a whole in his essays, without any qualification. He treats the prairie region as if it were a

homogenous, unified landscape, which clearly it is not.<sup>93</sup> He conceptualises the prairies as a tabula rasa which if not already empty can be unnamed back to a more enabling blankness. Such a representation, however, relies heavily on a colonial cartographical construct which is widely regarded as outmoded because of its historical denial of the crucial native presence in such regions.

As a consequence, Kroetsch seems lost in his own aesthetic, drawing on problematic mythic and archetypal models while parodying them in an attempt to create new forms. The conflicting impulses towards tradition and experimentation collide in his work, as they do in his response to his indigenous environment. 'The western landscape is one without boundaries quite often', Kroetsch suggests, 'so you have the experience within a kind of chaos, yet you have to order it somehow to survive'.<sup>94</sup> His writing seems committed to a trope of the journey as defeat, trick or even farce, yet the quest remains centrally important to his novels. Ultimately, his work spurns the literary genre from which it derives its initial energy, repelling what it demands in terms of a model of narrative.

### III

My discussion of Kroetsch's fiction begins with But We Are Exiles, his only novel written in a tragic mode. This work explores various archetypes, including the Canadian North and the colonial narrative of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899),<sup>95</sup> dealing with these models ironically. Thus it indicates Kroetsch's position in relation to pre-established story motifs, both of the Canadian wilderness and the psychological dimension of such a quest through this landscape. But We Are Exiles is a novel whose self-acknowledged limitations encouraged Kroetsch to turn to an increasingly parodic comic prose form.

In her biocritical essay on Kroetsch's manuscript collection, van Herk reads But We Are Exiles as an apprentice novel, one which 'reveals its inexperience by its movement from north to south . . . The movement of all the other fiction is east and west'.<sup>96</sup> Despite its preoccupation with a journey north along the Mackenzie River to beyond the Arctic Circle, this work has an important bearing on Kroetsch's other western quest narratives. West as a possible destination, as well as compass bearing, is a cartographical construct inaccurately defining the prairies. As Lewis B. Thomas points

out, 'the north is . . . a region that has a peculiar relationship with the prairie', equating the two zones by suggesting that 'much of the land of the prairie provinces, though much less of their population, is "northern" in an even more specific sense than that of most of the thickly populated areas of Canada as a whole'.<sup>97</sup> Van Herk hints at this geographical phenomenon when she writes of the novel 'encompassing a world from Alberta's height of land to the Arctic Ocean'.<sup>98</sup>

The connections between the West and the North, however, are far from being purely geographical: they are equally connected with the author's own personal experiences and the precedent of actual historical journeys. As a borderman, Kroetsch defies neat locational delineations. Just as he is a Canadian writer who has spent much time in the United States, so too is Kroetsch a prairie writer who has lived and travelled in the Arctic, working on the Mackenzie River boats and on an air base in Labrador for six years. In an essay describing his experiences in the North, he suggests an important imaginative link between Canadian images of northern and western quests which, I believe, is operating in But We Are Exiles: 'If the North American quest westward is in its many disguises a quest for Eden, the quest northward is the quest for the secret passage to that unimaginable place, the Indies'.<sup>99</sup> Kroetsch gives this journey into an alternative unexplored wilderness a specific Canadian context: 'Going North, we join Sir John Franklin and his crew . . . And in that search for the Northwest Passage, . . . [we] turn . . . north to seek westward'.<sup>100</sup>

Certainly, the central characters in But We Are Exiles take not only a voyage north by boat, but also a trip west by car. It is a revealing pairing of journeys. Franklin's fatal failed expedition of 1845 is not directly mentioned in the narrative. But this symbol of the ultimate hopeless quest, searching for a passage that was, in fact, not a channel at all but an impenetrably blocked strait of ice is implicitly ever present. The route that Guy follows as a river pilot, navigating up the Mackenzie as it begins to freeze into an impassable icy reach, is constantly dominated by the Franklin Mountains, named after Sir John Franklin, following an early expedition of 1825 centred on the mouth of this river. Kroetsch mentions this mountain range overshadowing the route of the ship not once, or twice, but three times in the novel,<sup>101</sup> thus stressing the Franklins as a brooding and persistent reminder of potential failure.

Contrasting the divergent American and Canadian responses to their native environments, Kenneth Mitchell suggests that, unlike the frontier myth of heroic success and conquest embodied in the American Dream, 'Canadians have never been able to dominate their environment, historically or culturally'.<sup>102</sup> He stresses that this inconclusive struggle is in large part the result of the extremely rigorous nature of the Canadian climate and landscape. Mitchell observes that the 'Arctic frontier of Canada seems . . . a kind of frozen avalanche brooding above us, threatening at a whisper to rush down and obliterate us all'.<sup>103</sup> This threat is not simply one of death but disappearance and erasure. Certainly, Kroetsch would support Mitchell's impression. 'There is a sense of man's littleness . . . in Canadian writing . . . you don't get the feeling of supreme confidence that you find in American writers, . . . Americans are "masters of the world"; Canadians have never had that experience'.<sup>104</sup> Using the terms 'man' and 'masters', rather than more generic terms, he suggests that he is concerned with masculine, rather than human, failure to control the landscape.

It now becomes evident that while van Herk's work represents the wilderness as a positive and liberating space for the exploration of female sexual identity, Kroetsch examines it as a problematic zone for the articulation of male sexuality. Why might this be so? How far are the inflated expectations and the idealised characteristics of the American masculine model of heroic questing really to blame in a Canadian context? What is the reality behind these male myths anyway? Kroetsch offers his readers two potential types of masculine sexual identity, which are linked to the two contrasting kinds of national wilderness quest, one Canadian and Arctic, the other American and 'Western'. Yet both models are ironically shown to be inadequate and impotent versions of manhood. In But We Are Exiles, Kroetsch portrays Canadian manhood in the symbolically named Peter Guy. As Dorscht points out, 'his name signifies both his stability (Peter is . . . the Rock) and his unpredictability ("the prick and its vagaries")'.<sup>105</sup> Peter is an euphemism for the male phallus. Despite his name, Peter Guy demonstrates neither steadfastness nor virility when confronted with a glimpse of 'his best if very new friend',<sup>106</sup> Michael Hornyak, having sex with Guy's girlfriend. His reaction is to flee north to the Arctic to contemplate at a distance his failure to attain his goal. During their two year relationship he has never 'possessed' Caroline 'Kettle' Fraser, either physically, through sexual intercourse - he remains a virgin at the time of

his first meeting with Hornyak - or legally, through marriage. In contrast, Hornyak has married Caroline within eight days of meeting and sleeping with her.

Guy and Hornyak are antithetical characters in many ways, yet how far are their quests really fundamentally different? Guy is the epitome of the brooding taciturn male, a Canadian Heathcliff, although his chosen northern wilderness landscape leaves him without the accompanying stormy, confrontational competitive male spirit of rivalry. Both Guy's passive acceptance of his loss of Kettle - he never confronts her or Hornyak - and his silence about the issue, mirror what Kroetsch believes to be the typical Canadian reaction to conquest. This conquest is in a pioneering rather than sexual context, though the two are closely linked. Kroetsch asserts that Canadians demonstrate 'a peculiar will towards silence. Something that on the surface looks like a will towards failure'.<sup>107</sup> This is an impulse towards silence that he believes 'is summed up by the north'.<sup>108</sup> Unlike the American frontier, this Arctic limit has not been claimed and controlled but 'remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence'.<sup>109</sup> Kroetsch ascribes this difference to the fact that, as Canadians, 'We don't want to conquer it [the wilderness]. Sometimes we want it to conquer us'.<sup>110</sup>

Guy may attempt to escape to the North because he perceives it to be an ahistorical region that will free him from his past. He hopes that his in-depth knowledge and tight control of the environment will hold his painful memories in check. He is, after all, a pilot and navigator, 'a white river bum with [eleven hundred miles of] river in his head to keep everything else out'.<sup>111</sup> But he is ultimately not master of this Arctic wilderness or his destiny. As the novel ends, he gives himself up to his memories and his fate at the hands of a violent wintry storm on an unsteerable, unpowered, drifting barge. Even the narrative mirrors Guy's directionless state, for it has no definite conclusion. The reader is left unsure whether Guy survives the storm or is drowned in his parodic ark, disappearing into the waters of Great Slave Lake forever. The ambiguity of his fate is symbolised by a door repeatedly slamming in the wind, open one moment and closed the next.

Even if the Canadian northern quest in the wilderness has not been a success, one senses that Guy never intended it to be. He flees Kettle by circling, returning to her childhood home in Aklavik to visit her father and undertakes a job that never reaches a goal but always involves repeated return journeys up and down the same stretch of



river, passing through Aklavik regularly. As Kroetsch points out, 'you don't ask where you are going; going is what you are there to do'.<sup>112</sup> Elsewhere, he amplifies this statement by explaining that 'travel, for all its seeking, acts out an evasion'.<sup>113</sup> Guy does not really wish to arrive since sexual desire - his masculine sex drive - is based on an act in potential and not in attainment. This phenomenon is illustrated by Hornyak's suggested symbol of manhood, 'a great damned phallus, like one perpetual hard-on'.<sup>114</sup> Sexual consummation involving ejaculation is also the end (temporarily) of a man's phallic posturing and potency.

Certainly, Kroetsch parodies the image of motion and speed associated with male virility and symbolised in the context of the American road novel by the car. Michael Hornyak may be Canadian, although we never discover exactly where he originates from, yet in his antagonistic doubling with Guy he embodies many attributes associated with the American quest. The taciturn, brooding Guy is contrasted with the loud, boasting man of action, Mike Hornyak - his name embodies both the colloquial word for talk, 'yak', and the abbreviated word for a sound amplifier, a microphone, as well as that of a horn. Stopping only when his consumerist appetite for food, drink and women dictates, 'Horny'/ak (if you will) is a lecherous stud-like figure questing west across the prairies in explicitly modern-day American cowboy style. In the sweaty heat of the day, 'stuck to the genuine leather saddle' of the car seats,<sup>115</sup> 'Mike fed more gas to the wild horses under the hood of that black Rolls [Royce]'.<sup>116</sup> He uses sexual innuendos to joke crudely about his loaded gun,<sup>117</sup> and sings the Confederation song 'Glory, Glory, What a Hell of a Way to Die', and 'Home on the Range', the quintessential American cowboy song about the idealised freedom of a home on the plains.<sup>118</sup>

In contrast, the title of But We Are Exiles is taken from the Canadian Boat Song of 1829 written by a Scottish immigrant, which reads 'Fair these broad meads, these hoary woods are grand/ But we are exiles from our father's land'.<sup>119</sup> Exile implies a home that is missing, one that it is possible to find. Kroetsch's male characters belie this sense, since for Guy 'home . . . was a scattering of relatives',<sup>120</sup> and Hornyak does not even have this vague amorphous sense of location. Indeed, Kettle expresses amazement that in all the six years of her married life to Hornyak, '[h]e didn't tell' her 'where his home

was. No relatives phoned to say they were passing through town. No mail came. Nothing.<sup>121</sup> The profound irony is that when Hornyak tries to set up home by having a family with Kettle, he discovers that despite his assumed virility he is sterile. The American Western image of male sexuality and mobile potency is equally a sham and Hornyak is ultimately shown to be, like Guy, drifting, not driven by sexual whims. The two types of mythic national quest, one north, one west, are not so clearly distinct as their juxtaposition might imply. It is only when Hornyak meets with the hitchhiking Guy that he travels west, doing a U-turn in the process; previously, he had been heading east on Highway One. Simplified equations between Canada and the North or American and the West are thereby undercut.

Kroetsch's own quest for a possibly viable image of masculine identity seems also to have failed, no Canadian hero has been found. He comes increasingly to believe that 'the real hero is a person who's writing, not the traditional questing figure'.<sup>122</sup> His own journey into the Arctic was a result of a quest for a new story: 'I had myself, in going North, reverted to hunting and gathering, trying to pick up a story after failing to grow my own'.<sup>123</sup> Struggling in his own search, as a not-yet established writer, he claimed it was 'the landscape [that] had become a kind of hero' to him.<sup>124</sup> But We Are Exiles brought Kroetsch up against the limits imposed by serious (and often heroic or tragic) masculine quest narratives. Looking for new narrative directions and rejecting the notion of human heroes, Kroetsch turns to humour and the comic form, developing his sense of parody in the process. But We Are Exiles hints at this progression, where the comedy is of a dark and depreciating nature: travelling through a section of rapids ominously called 'The Ramparts', Guy relates in self-mockery that 'they were making progress. Enough progress to keep them trying and not enough to get them to their destination'.<sup>125</sup> The Words of My Roaring (1966), the first of the 'Out West' triptych, suggests how Kroetsch's comic form turns in a more positive, self-asserting direction.

#### IV

Dick Harrison has suggested that comedy is a form which is naturally compatible with the Canadian western experience of starting afresh (after implicitly abandoning or failing at the old). This idea is in striking contrast to the frequently grim realism of earlier prairie writers like Frederick Grove, Martha Ostenso, Sinclair Ross and Robert

Stead. 'The habit of beginnings, of starting again, is deeply ingrained in the western consciousness', he proposes, 'and comedy is its necessary expression'.<sup>126</sup> With this model, man's failings become ironically humorous rather than tragic. Certainly, Kroetsch regards the existing western Canadian male 'macho posture . . . hooked on the notion of a quest' as comically grotesque.<sup>127</sup> He humorously parodies these postures in The Words of My Roaring, attempting in the process to break such 'self-inflicted definition[s] of maleness'.<sup>128</sup>

In this novel, Kroetsch subverts several significant generic patterns common to prairie literature, both in terms of man's relation to the land and his physical status in it. Tyrannical, power-seeking characters like Ostenso's Caleb Gare in Wild Geese (1925) and Grove's Abe Spalding in Fruits of the Earth (1933) attempt to assert their iron masculine will against the environment by trying to tame and control their natural surroundings. They are effectively endeavouring to bring order to the random and uncontrolled wilderness landscape. Johnnie Backstrom, the central character in Words of My Roaring, may set himself up publicly as a traditional shamanistic 'rainmaker', but he makes no pretence about controlling the elements and the agricultural production which relies on them. He freely acknowledges that 'nobody makes it rain' and further that he is 'no performer of miracles'.<sup>129</sup> And so he opens himself up to the possibility of random disorder and comic confusion, 'driving hard for the old chaos'.<sup>130</sup>

The masculine assertion of strength, power and influence over people, as well as the environment, is similarly subverted. Backstrom is a giant figure standing 'six-four in [his] stocking feet',<sup>131</sup> a fact which he as narrator never allows readers to forget. He explicitly equates his size with the extent of his sexual prowess. In his autobiographical introduction he says he is 'a man consumed by high ambitions, pretty well hung, and famed as a heller with women'.<sup>132</sup> Given his towering stature, he could well be seen to be modelled after other famous 'giant' male protagonists of prairie fiction, including Fusi Aronson (Wild Geese), Abe Spalding (Fruits of the Earth) and Lars Nelson (Settlers of the Marsh (1925)).<sup>133</sup> This physical character trait, however, illustrates Kroetsch's subversion of old forms, 'hav[ing] become somewhat impatient with certain traditional kinds of realism'.<sup>134</sup> Ostenso and Grove, working within this realist tradition, stress their male protagonists' size poignantly to heighten the tragedy of their failure to

conquer the land. These characters may be 'giant[s] in the landscape', as Henry Kreisel points out, but once 'pitted against a vast and frequently hostile natural environment' they are dwarfed into submissive failure.<sup>135</sup>

In contrast, Backstrom's assertion of his own height becomes highly comic because of his boastful repetition of it and the image conveyed by his wording - 'in his stocking feet' - of a man standing in just his socks, possibly wearing little else. Later he stands naked but for a single sock in Doc's garden.<sup>136</sup> Far from being dwarfed, Backstrom has to suffer his ludicrous inability to 'conceal my huge frame' when he senses his own potential failure and 'want[s] simply to disappear' with embarrassment.<sup>137</sup> Yet the motif of disappearance in relation to a prairie setting is still highly pertinent to this novel. In the comic world of The Words of My Roaring, Doc Murdoch suggests that a man has the option of being either 'a fool' or 'a coward'.<sup>138</sup> These two conditions are represented in the foolish Backstrom and the structurally paired figure of the cowardly Jonah Bledd. As a result of these character traits, both men effect a different type of disappearance in this western landscape.

Peter Thomas believes that 'in Johnnie Backstrom . . . Kroetsch began to question the relationship between prairie absence and the compulsion to bullshit'.<sup>139</sup> The tall man has some equally tall tales to tell. Faced with absence, silence and thus possible negation, he is tempted imaginatively to narrate his way into the empty space of the prairies by 'talking big'.<sup>140</sup> Kroetsch has stressed that, in his narration, Backstrom is 'talking to the silence, creating himself into it'.<sup>141</sup> Backstrom's 'bullshitting' - his bragging, boasting and exaggerating - is not simply shown as verbal acts of male bravado but is part of an important oral prairie tradition centred on the 'male preserve' of the beer parlour.<sup>142</sup> This is a place that the Dionysian figure of Backstrom is portrayed as spending much of his time.

Kroetsch has described the prairie beer parlour as 'the sacred place' where 'we are allowed to change identities - in our laughter, in our silences, in the stories we tell . . . In a beer parlour . . . we are God's blessed creatures . . . sharing the poet's divine madness'.<sup>143</sup> Letting one's drink 'do the talking' becomes a creative art form for Kroetsch. He states that 'the bullshit artist is telling the truth by his exaggerations, by his art you see, by his distortions'.<sup>144</sup> And he goes on to stress the importance of

'mak[ing] that leap to where you see the exaggerations as being a revelation, the fiction as being a revelation'.<sup>145</sup> Discussing Kroetsch's novels, Ann Mandel points out how universal this oral phenomenon is in the Mid-West: 'the voice of the prairies . . . is the voice of gossip. There are no facts. Everyone's life has a fictional smell'.<sup>146</sup> One can not help but recall Grove in this context.

As a larger-than-life figure, Backstrom is both highly present and in some ways also absent, a comic actor who like his double, the rodeo clown, puts on a performance, successfully disguising and hiding his private persona in the process. Standing for political office as a Social Credit candidate, he bases his election campaign on the promised assurance of rain in the middle of one of the worst droughts in prairie history: the novel is set in 'The Dust Bowl' era of the 1930s. As Robert Lecker suggests, Backstrom is 'the two-faced artist as shaman, and as sham'.<sup>147</sup> Yet being a fraud, and a comic one at that, is not a negative attribute. Discussing versions of the comic with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, Kroetsch proposes that 'the idea of the self as a comic joke' is a positive conceptual development in which 'the self is just a kind of a fragment, a shifting pattern', allowing 'freedom from definition'.<sup>148</sup> As a carnivalesque character, Backstrom effectively liberates himself from the confining forces of order and set definition, allowing his life, his future political career and the community's perception of him to rest on the totally chance occurrence of rain.

Backstrom is at least partially aware that his quest for political power through election to the Legislative Assembly of Alberta is almost certainly doomed to failure. Kroetsch increases the comic effect by portraying a man who, as Morton L. Ross points out, is 'wisely self-mocking even as he embarks on yet another unwise course'.<sup>149</sup> Having the confidence to laugh at one's self seems to be an important way forward in the search for a regional and national masculine identity. The sense of a failed quest may be one reason why, as Geoff Hancock suggests, 'the Canadians make themselves the butt of their jokes, while the Americans make somebody else the butt of theirs'.<sup>150</sup> Yet the tone of The Words of My Roaring is far less self-belittling and more positively affirming and liberating in its comedy than But We Are Exiles. As Laurence Ricou has pointed out, 'sheer gusto' and 'an unquenchable exuberance' characterise Kroetsch's irreverent protagonists in his later fiction.<sup>151</sup> Through his cocksure confidence in his

own masculine sexual prowess, Backstrom has sufficient belief in himself to risk failure and ridicule. He does not back down on his drunken joking promise of rain.

Jonah Bledd, Backstrom's best friend, is similarly put in a position where male pride in his own actions and abilities is put to the test when he is made redundant from his work on the railroads. Fearing to look the fool when he is denied the patriarchal role of family provider, Jonah decides to disappear into the landscape rather than attempting to change his identity to fit his altered circumstances, as Backstrom did by acting out the part of the politician. Jonah is caught by the West's macho ideal of 'the working man'. He justifies his existence through physical labour and the Puritan work ethic, afraid to be ostracized and pushed to the edge of society as a result. He cannot see, in Kroetsch's words, that 'constant metamorphosis is . . . a strategy for survival: if you think you're on the margin you keep shape-shifting; this stops you being caught or at least defined against your own wishes'.<sup>152</sup> His body is never found in the waters of Wildfire Lake after a fishing trip, only a drifting empty boat, he has become 'sheer absence'.<sup>153</sup> The lack of viable Canadian western masculine archetypes is physically manifest at Jonah's funeral. Doc Murdoch is disturbed because the catafalque is empty. Once 'a model among men; a model for men',<sup>154</sup> Doc believes that Jonah can no longer be an example for others because of his absence and the ignominy of his end.

Thomas claims that Jonah 'exemplifies the life of responsibility, caution, and dogged faith in the rightness of the social and economic order'.<sup>155</sup> Jonah has tried to take macho identity seriously and it has resulted in his undoing. The clowning comic chaos of Backstrom is portrayed as the more enabling, if less morally-founded, strategy. Jonah betrays his restrictive, controlled limitations more fully, however, in his death than his life. Despite Backstrom's romanticised image of Jonah becoming one with Nature in 'the water's close embrace',<sup>156</sup> Murdoch criticises Jonah for being cowardly, believing that he took his own life, faking an accidental drowning. Why is this the case when apparent drowning, a recurring motif in Canadian literature, is so often associated with transformation and metamorphosis - a type of resurrection theme? There are many indications that Kroetsch is highly allusive in the passages concerning Jonah's death. These sections incorporate various Canadian historical and literary models which lie at the heart of the present study.

The similarities between Jonah's disappearance and that of the artist, Tom Thomson, on Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park on 8th July 1917 are too great to be overlooked. A conscious parallel is clearly being developed by Kroetsch. Like Thomson, Jonah drowns alone on a lake in the wilderness while fishing in the afternoon; his empty drifting boat alerts others to the fact of his disappearance. Mystery veils the fates of both of these skilled boatmen. A pamphlet accompanying the manuscript drafts of Kroetsch's poem, 'Meditation on Tom Thomson' (1973), describes the artist as being 'an expert canoeist',<sup>157</sup> while Doc comments that Jonah 'was more at home in a boat . . . than he was on dry land'.<sup>158</sup> Despite two days dragging and searching, Jonah's body is never found, although Backstrom believes it to be caught and anchored by rope on the lake-bottom.<sup>159</sup> It was ten days after Thomson's empty boat was sighted that the discovery of his body 'wrapped in fishing wire' was reported in the Toronto press.<sup>160</sup> Notwithstanding this revelation, Thomson's (by now romanticised) disappearance ensures that the popularly established Canadian myth holds that his body was never found.<sup>161</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of all these similarities there is a very important difference between these two disappearances. The Words of My Roaring points entirely to the fact that Jonah committed suicide to avoid the problems he faced in his life, and he is thus shown to be a coward. He does not escape from - but ends - his life, closing off possibility in the process. In contrast, Kroetsch portrays Thomson in heroic terms as the ideal paradigm of the Canadian artist, 'the man who took risks, got free, perished',<sup>162</sup> who deliberately dived to 'seize unearthly shades . . . [to] seize the drowned land', both in his art and in his disappearance.<sup>163</sup> The uncertainty surrounding his death stimulates the collective imagination as Thomson effectively defies the ordering principle of mortality with its strict limits of birth and death. 'The "if" of his life, confronting the primal wilderness' may be the intriguing factor for Canadians, as Kroetsch suggests,<sup>164</sup> but it is also the way in which the figure of Thomson avoids the narrative closure of his life story. The artist liberatingly breaks free.

Jonah's biblical name might allude to the possibility of a resurrection of sorts. His surname, Bledd, suggests the blood of the Eucharist and Christ's crucifixion.<sup>165</sup> More importantly, like Jesus in the tomb, Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of the

whale before he literally rose again, being spat to the surface, emerging a changed man after escaping death and drowning. This image has particular relevance to the metamorphosis accomplished by many Canadian immigrants because it extends Frye's influential 'Leviathan motif'. Frye describes entering Canada by boat up the Saint Lawrence as 'a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent'.<sup>166</sup> But, of course, the new pioneers were liberated back on to dry land in Quebec and Ontario after this often hellish trip by water. The identity-shifting Grove went on this kind of journey by boat to enable his own transformation, faking his suicide by drowning on the first leg of his voyage to Canada via Sweden.<sup>167</sup> Yet such a metamorphosis carries with it risks that Jonah Bledd is not prepared to take. He never surfaces.

Discussing the image of Margaret Atwood's protagonist diving into the lake in Surfacing, Kroetsch asserts that 'the terror of her journey is not that she, like her drowned father, like her drowned and revived antipodal brother, almost drowns; it is rather that she surfaces'.<sup>168</sup> He never elucidates this suggestion, although it is clearly connected with revealing disguised or hidden truths. In an equally ambiguous statement, made in 1971, Kroetsch proposes that, as Canadians, 'we live with the exquisite fear that we are an invisible men [sic]'.<sup>169</sup> He goes on to acknowledge that 'we are reluctant to venture out of the silence and into the noise; out of the snow; into the technocracy. For in our very invisibility lies our chance of survival'.<sup>170</sup>

Just as Kroetsch problematises and parodies motifs associated with the strident assertion of masculine identity in Western fiction, so too he reworks the gendered designation of the prairies as a male agrarian landscape. And he does so using another biblical motif, that of the garden. The wilderness in this domesticated form still operates in Kroetsch's work as the site where subjective designations are challenged. Backstrom imagines the prairies as 'one big garden',<sup>171</sup> but this conventional image of an Edenic wilderness waiting to be cultivated is undercut. Kroetsch certainly believes 'that in Canadian literature [as opposed to American literature] there's more of a sense of irony about that Eden', the pure 'virgin' frontier, as conceptualised by the early pioneers.<sup>172</sup> Murdoch's garden in The Words of My Roaring is no innocent Eden but, instead, is associated with orgiastic, riotous sexual liberation. 'The Hanging Gardens of Babylon must have looked a lot like Murdoch's back yard',<sup>173</sup> Backstrom observes,



recalling the city famed in 'Revelations' for the excesses and fornication of its inhabitants. The exchange of biblical motifs signals significant changes in the representation of this unique environment. Kroetsch's garden is a boundary-breaking area of sexuality in other respects too.

In Kroetsch's symbolic masculine appropriation of the wilderness, the garden is a pseudo-wilderness space between the house and the field, between civilisation and the wilderness, between female and male space. It operates as an utopian intermediate zone where the strictures of gender roles and definitions are also confounded, a space never again fully realised in Kroetsch's later works. He describes how, on a farm, a garden is 'ambiguous . . . It involves women's work but often men help'.<sup>174</sup> It is a place of symbolic 'possibilities'.<sup>175</sup> This equivocal gendering of the garden is very much related to Kroetsch's own personal boyhood experience growing up on his parent's homestead in Heisel:

I grew up on a big farm, and there was a high definition of male and female activity . . . I had allergies so that I couldn't do a lot of the male work in buildings - but I could work out of doors . . . but I couldn't work in the barn or anything like that. But I couldn't work in the house either because that was the sphere of female activity - and I was the only son and the oldest, and all those privileged things. And the one place where I found a kind of open field was the garden.<sup>176</sup>

Elsewhere, he recounts how the hired men called him 'useless as the tits on a boar . . . my first introduction to the problems of language'.<sup>177</sup> Kroetsch shows that gender is undoubtedly a social and linguistic construct. Backstrom tries to dispose of the trappings of his constructed masculinity by tearing off his clothes and flinging them around the garden, disposing of his 'disguise'. But in his new beginning, 'start[ing] over, from the ground up, from my birthday suit out', as a pseudo-Adam figure,<sup>178</sup> he cannot escape his sexuality. His physicality and male desires emphasise the fact that he is definitely a naked man, not a naked person.

Backstrom's lover, Helen Murdoch, does not outwardly attempt such a departure from her gendered position as a woman. Is this because she is inherently more in tune with herself and her environment? Backstrom may use stereotypical romantic imagery, associating women and Nature, in describing Helen as being 'the garden, the forest of

my soul, a forest tangled and scented. A forest wild'.<sup>179</sup> Nevertheless, as a figure who is able to transcend borders, Helen has some symbolic affinity with the boundary-defying space of the garden. Her middle name is Persephone, recalling the mythical figure of seasonal fertility who was able to pass between the underworld of Hades and the upper earthly world of mortals, between death and life, between winter and spring. As a borderline character, she embodies many antithetical qualities: 'her eyes were sad and shining [with a smile] at the same time', 'she was so wild and gentle', 'bold and shy', she is 'the paradox of [Backstrom's] dreams'.<sup>180</sup> Is it because she is a woman, the absent 'Other', free from definition and the strictures of the phallic 'I', that she is able to attain this borderline position? If so, then Kroetsch is still entrapped in gendered binary oppositions. Backstrom remarks with a frustration that could be that of Kroetsch, 'the old dualities. Always the old dualities. When you're in a tight fix: mind and body, right and wrong [ . . . ] good and evil, black and white . . . '.<sup>181</sup>

As an ambiguous intermediate space, the garden of The Words of My Roaring potentially breaks down gender-defined roles and divisions. John Clement Ball describes how 'Johnnie comes together with Helen . . . through sex . . . in a beautiful, Eden-like garden'.<sup>182</sup> Since the symbolism of the setting is more complex than Ball's words suggest, what about the act that occurs there? To what extent does Backstrom fundamentally defy the separation imposed by a binary gender model? The heterosexual roles of the passive woman waiting for the roving active man are still in place, as Helen patiently awaits Backstrom at night after he has spent the day travelling the countryside canvassing for votes. The power continues to reside with the male. To explain why this dynamic operates in the work of this politically aware writer, I shall now turn to 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction', outlining the structuring models it contains. I will then analyse The Studhorse Man (1970), because it is effectively a fictional exposition of this seminal essay.<sup>183</sup> Throughout this novel, and the 'Out West' triptych more generally, Kroetsch is preoccupied with defining and, to a certain extent, challenging the limits of sexual geographies within the parameters of the inevitable failure of the male quest.

## V

In 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction', Kroetsch uses a sexual metaphor to represent what he sees as the gendered landscape of the prairies in a peculiarly Canadian way. Kroetsch portrays the questing sexual impulse, normally associated with the expansive movement of conquest on the frontier, as leading men away from and not towards the wilderness. In so doing, he inverts and brings disorder to the established American male myth of the cowboy / outlaw riding out into the bush on his psycho-sexual quest in search of masculine fulfillment.

Kroetsch proposes that 'the basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy-line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be in a house is to be fixed: a centering into stasis.'<sup>184</sup> Yet this is not simply a model based on the dichotomous pull between civilisation and the wilderness, between home and journey, but one which Kroetsch suggests is based on the fundamental binary of gender. 'Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse : house. Masculine : feminine. On : in. Motion : stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure: duty.'<sup>185</sup> Both women and men are trapped however, since rather than being free to ride off into the distance the Canadian man, attracted by woman and domestic comfort, circles the house, in a sterile / unproductive sexual economy of the 'horse-house' or 'whore's-house'.<sup>186</sup> The woman in Kroetsch's scheme becomes a type of femme fatale who is both desired and feared: 'The love of woman . . . is violently rivalled by a fear of woman as the figure who contains the space'.<sup>187</sup>

In the formal response she made to this essay when it was originally delivered as a conference paper in 1978, Sandra Djwa was the first, but by no means the last, commentator to regard this as a 'sexist formula'.<sup>188</sup> Defending himself against the charge of sexism in his essays and fiction more generally, Kroetsch stresses that 'this is often a male chauvinist society particularly in the west, where men have a lot of exciting things to do, and women are left holding the fort - to go back to the garrison-bush metaphor'.<sup>189</sup> Here it is men who are associated with the bush and the wilderness, albeit in pioneering and not naturalistic terms, while women are strikingly linked to the (usually male) military community of the garrison - the fixed living or pseudo-domestic space associated with civilisation.

Kroetsch may claim that gender is a pre-existing social construct which defines agrarian roles and by which he himself is bound. Yet by pinning his 'horse : house' model, not simply on gender distinctions, but on anatomical sexual characteristics, he makes the binary virtually inescapable: 'We conceive of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis: external, expandable, expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal.'<sup>190</sup> Kroetsch could well be accused of perpetuating the patriarchal myth that anatomy is destiny, that identity is a pre-cultural essence. He chooses to develop this biological association despite acknowledging in the same essay that some prairie fiction does try to break away from the limiting definitions of heterosexuality through homo-erotic portrayals and 'dreams of androgyny'.<sup>191</sup> But this is hardly the case in The Studhorse Man (1969) - despite his appeal to an androgynous figure in the male narrator, Demeter, named after a Greek goddess of fertility.

In portraying the ridiculousness of male sexual behaviour, Kroetsch is still only part way to achieving what Toril Moi has described as a sexually revolutionary task: 'to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasure of open-ended textuality'.<sup>192</sup> As Rosemary Sullivan stresses, Kroetsch is still caught in the famed Canadian position of balanced equilibrium, of stasis: 'He rephrased the binary distinctions between nature and culture, man and woman, west and east, as an opposition between horse and house, and like a good Canadian, was unable to see these except as equally matched opposites in mutual dependency.'<sup>193</sup>

In The Studhorse Man, the binary models suggested in 'The Fear of Women' confound the quest around which the novel is centred. The questions posed by Kroetsch's essay are highly relevant to this later work. Kroetsch opens 'The Fear of Women' with the question: 'How do you make love in a new country?' He links this inquiry through the ambiguously defined activity of 'intercourse' with a further question: 'How do you write in a new country?'<sup>194</sup> Sex itself, not just sexuality, needs redefining. It is, for Kroetsch, an important form of communication and creativity, a physical act of male articulation with which he is much preoccupied in The Studhorse Man. In the open expanse of the prairies, physical distance becomes a metaphor for the psychological and social distance that is yet to be crossed by men: 'How do you establish any sort of close relationship in a landscape - in a physical situation - whose

primary characteristic is distance?'.<sup>195</sup> Kroetsch does not yet entertain the possibility for women to enter on the quest, to be sufficiently socially mobile to leave the house and make such a journey. This lack of female emancipation exists in Kroetsch's work even if in the private safety of the home he represents women as becoming more active sexual partners.

Simultaneously, fearing and being attracted to women, Kroetsch's male figures not only have difficulties in bridging the distance, but more importantly in setting out on the quest to cross it in the first place. The entire occupation of the studhorse man, Hazard Lepage, in Kroetsch's novel of that title, centres on the search for mares to be covered by his highly phallic stallion, Poseidon. Yet, faced with initiating such an explicitly sexual quest, Hazard admits that 'the thought of departing was somehow and suddenly unbearable'.<sup>196</sup> He is stuck in his daily domestic routine, as the possible pun on his surname, Lepage, a famous Canadian glue company, may well ludicrously imply. He has quested nowhere and yet he is already 'confronted [with] failure'.<sup>197</sup> The binary dynamics of Kroetsch's essay are clearly revealed: 'he felt secure in his old house; it was the road he dreaded - travel'.<sup>198</sup> Despite the potential to resolve the dichotomy between male and female suggested by the fact that Hazard 'keeps horses in his house',<sup>199</sup> in the conclusion to the novel the horse kicks loose of the confinement of the house. Poseidon jumps through the bay window, in an act which can be read as a victory of order (through the re-establishment of the binary 'horse: house' model) over disorder (random chance - Hazard) who is stampeded to death. The phallic principle, embodied in the stallion, wreaks destruction on its owner.

In parodying such masculinist behaviour, Kroetsch portrays Hazard as having far more success with 'Old Blue', his euphemistic fetishised name for his own penis, than with 'his beautiful blue beast of a virgin stallion'.<sup>200</sup> The owner engages in more sexual activity than his stud animal. When he finally departs on his quest for mares, this type of success in 'cock-peddling',<sup>201</sup> apparently results more from the humorously lascivious actions of the women he encounters than a strong initiating desire on his part - the story of his copulation with the excessively ugly widow, Mrs. Lank, being a case in point. Despite the highly phallic emphasis of the novel, Kroetsch breaks boundaries in his portrayal of Canadian western men. The traditional phallic symbols of the gun and the stallion may be frequently present in the novel, but the studhorse man is no

stereotypical Western sexual male, and these associated symbols are likewise undermined.

It is notable that Hazard at no point fires a gun. In fact, he never carries one. Hazard's successor, Demeter, rests in such a way that his 'shotgun lay between my legs'.<sup>202</sup> But given the opportunity to take a Deane and Adam revolver and holster, Hazard rejects the chance to adopt these English colonial trappings of masculine sexual power.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, when Hazard is first offered a stallion, Poseidon's sire, by a mysterious shamanistic Indian figure, he tries to refuse the gift, disclaiming ownership: 'It is not mine . . . I'm a stranger here myself'.<sup>204</sup> The role of studhorse man is effectively foisted upon him. Despite leading his stallion with him wherever he goes, Hazard never sits astride this phallic beast. He only once rides his other horse, mis-named Girl - it is in fact a gelding - and even then he mounts him at someone else's suggestion. On this occasion, the horse is shot from under him. The phallic sexual symbol literally collapses, as if to show that the horse has already been castrated.

Emphasising the persistence with which the Canadian Western male myth is perpetuated, Kroetsch describes how 'on the cover of The Studhorse Man . . . there is a picture of a cowboy on a horse'.<sup>205</sup> Yet he wishes to stress that 'one of the things about the hero of the book is that he never once dresses like a cowboy. I was trying to deceive that kind of reader expectation, but the artist, of course, believed that if the story took place in Alberta, there must be a real live Hollywood cowboy in that book somewhere, so he put one on the cover'.<sup>206</sup> The first time Hazard is described as moving on his own two feet, he walks lamely; the studhorse man has a limp, hinting at a possible sexual shortfall.<sup>207</sup> On all levels, he parodies the American use of mobility as a sexual metaphor in the Western narrative.

Sullivan emphasises that, 'as a border man, Kroetsch began by demythologizing the myth that threatens to define him - the American cowboy myth', noting that 'with a typical Canadian irony, he turns the romantic, energetic myth into a myth of impotence'.<sup>208</sup> The conclusive and resounding irony of the novel is that obsolete Poseidon is put to a new use impregnating mares so they can produce PMU, Pregnant Mares' Urine, to provide estrogen for use in the female birth control pill. The sexual act results in assured infertility. Stallions are no longer needed for the breeding of new generations of agricultural work-horses in a mechanised post-war age but this change

in roles signals not only the end of the age of the horse, but also the end of the previous human and some would argue, patriarchal, social order. From the 1960s onwards, the availability of 'the pill' gave women the freedom to be more sexually active and increasingly career-orientated, liberating them from the rigours of child-bearing and rearing.

The novel is set in 1945, at a time when the boundaries of social identity were radically changing for both sexes, following the imminent end of the Second World War when 'the goddamn Yanks have [just] crossed the Rhine'.<sup>209</sup> During this period, the war-initiated oil boom propelled Alberta from a rural provincial back-water into an important Canadian urban economic centre based on the cities of Calgary and Edmonton. Harrison describes the 'Out West' triptych, of which The Studhorse Man is the middle part, as chronicling 'the fall of the West' in its 'wild West' manifestation: 'The Studhorse Man is the central narrative of that fall . . . span[ning] . . . the transition from rural agrarian to urban industrial'.<sup>210</sup> Born in 1927, Kroetsch has been witness to the fact that, as Albertans, 'we move from the apogee of a hunting culture to the emergence of an oil-based technology in a mere century'.<sup>211</sup> Kroetsch recognises that the province's social rooting in rural communities is causing problems in the face of urbanisation, since 'we have come into our glorious urban centres with a way of thinking that dates back a generation'.<sup>212</sup> Men, looking to the pioneer past, are still naively and grotesquely 'hooked on the notion of a quest', of 'hav[ing] to ride out and win the favour of a woman'.<sup>213</sup>

The Studhorse Man witnesses not the disappearance of an individual into the wilderness but the first stages of the disappearance of collective agrarian 'man' in the city. The unenviable alternatives represented in the novel are to vanish either into the grave or the madhouse. As Demeter Proudfoot points out, the arrival of a new social order, through the infertility of 'the pill', means that 'man . . . would soon be able, in the sterility of his own lust, to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself . . . from the face of God's creation'.<sup>214</sup> Harrison's observation that 'the opposition between man and nature becomes an opposition between man's will and his own nature, between conscious and unconscious' is relevant here.<sup>215</sup> In his review of the photographs collected in Petrigo's Calgary (1975), Kroetsch suggests that urban sterility prevails despite the phallic Calgary Tower - which he calls 'that locating of the centre, the

turning point, the focus' of the city.<sup>216</sup> Calgary, he claims, is 'the kingdom of the male virgin', an embodiment of the urban 'failure of sexuality', through repression and abstinence, 'as if [the city] came into being without anything so gross as a good fuck'.<sup>217</sup> 'Whoever thought', Hazard laments to Poseidon, 'that screwing would go out of style? But it did, it is . . .'.<sup>218</sup> As if to point up this motif, there are many scenes in The Studhorse Man which include invisible voyeurs, emphasizing the increasing tendency to fail to commit oneself to the sexual act, watching others instead. In an interview, Kroetsch acknowledges that 'at the core of the new version [of the urban] there's going to have to be a new definition of the male / female relationship'.<sup>219</sup> W.H. New certainly believes that, in The Studhorse Man, Kroetsch has 'contrived a provocative fable for the modern man'.<sup>220</sup> Is the sexual quest in the wilderness to be redefined or more fundamentally eradicated?

Talking in terms of past western models of masculine identity, Kroetsch suggests that 'in order to go west, a man had to define himself as an orphan, as an outlaw, as a cowboy', acknowledging the difficulties these imposed, since 'with those definitions, how can you marry a woman? How can you enter the house again? You have to lose that self-definition. That's the problem for the male'.<sup>221</sup> Man cannot enter into the new order with these roles. In The Studhorse Man, Hazard tries on a number of models of national masculine identity, needing a disguise to escape the strictures of the positions in which he finds himself. He puts on the authoritative roles of law and religion represented by the guises of the Mounted Police and the priesthood. Max Westbrook has noted the contrast between the American 'love of the personal and single hero in the West of the United States' and that of 'the impersonal or group hero of Canada', citing the Mounted Police as an example.<sup>222</sup> Hazard commands respect, receiving military salutes and clerical titles as a result of the costumes he has adopted, but it is the institution not the individual to which people are responding. In a parody of the cloaked comic book heroes, Hazard, dressed as a Mountie, 'practise[s] a salute with a white gauntlet, only to get tangled in his cape'.<sup>223</sup> It is through the burlesque humour of such descriptions that Kroetsch undermines the lawful and rule-bound order of the Canadian heroic model of the Mountie.



National heroic quests are parodied in other important ways. Kroetsch believes that (Canadian) men 'are victims of a story that tells us to be heroes', acknowledging 'the impossibility of being a hero'.<sup>224</sup> Russell Brown points up the intended parallel in The Studhorse Man with Homer's Odyssey, linking Hazard to the ancient Greek hero Odysseus: 'Hazard, journeying across the open prairie after World War II, delaying a return to his potential home with [his fiancée] Martha and Demeter, recalls for us Odysseus on his way home from the Trojan War to his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus.'<sup>225</sup> Brown stresses that 'the name of Hazard's horse helps make the analogy with the Odyssean story explicit, because it is that of the sea god Poseidon - the god responsible for the problems and delays that Odysseus himself experienced'.<sup>226</sup> However, by literalising the metaphor of a man being led around by his prick, in a mockery of the sexual quest, Kroetsch's comic Hazard is more of a Quixotic than an Odyssean figure, a type of anti-hero. His quest is definitely a mock-odyssey. Here, the title of George Woodcock's study, Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays on Canadian Writers and Writing (1970), is revealing, since within a Canadian context it implies that it is the ongoing and therefore never completed nature of the Odyssean quest which is the important factor. Odysseus effectively circles the house. This motif is common to much Canadian fiction.

In his essay discussing the novels of Hugh MacLennan, Woodcock states that 'the Odyssey itself was the product of a people in the process of becoming aware of itself'.<sup>227</sup> It is highly appropriate for Kroetsch to use The Odyssey as a parodic narrative in his search for new national and sexual self-definitions. As Walter Pache points out, by playing with the pun on the word 'mare', a female horse and also the Latin for sea, Kroetsch parodies established national definitions. 'Lepage's search for the mare, which takes him from coast to coast across a large part of Canada, resembles an ironic reenactment of a national myth',<sup>228</sup> embodied in the national motto: 'a mari usque ad mare'. Canada stretches from sea to sea, like Hazard's quest with his stallion - the sea-associated Poseidon - from (if you will) mare to mare. Kroetsch's deliberate undermining and destruction of existing national mythic formulations and structures is physically represented in The Studhorse Man when Poseidon kicks out, his 'two hind hoofs smash[ing] a hole in the patterned wall' of Hazard's parlour, thus severely damaging the wallpaper with its 'white and blue and gold with alternating lions and

fleurs-de-lys'.<sup>229</sup> The symbols of the old colonial order, the English lion and the French fleurs-de-lys are literally torn apart, smashed to pieces. This image seems prophetically to signal the increasing destructive strength of the Québécois separatist movement towards Canadian national disintegration. The pre-existing order must make way for the new if a fresh nation is to be born.

Hazard and Poseidon are linked through the motifs of shape-shifting, identity changing and phallicism to an important archetypal figure who, Kroetsch believes, allows for just a gesture of 'kick[ing] loose'.<sup>230</sup> The comic trickster is 'the force that gets you out of the rational frame. Out of the frame-up'.<sup>231</sup> The links between Hazard and this symbolic character are not incidental: Kroetsch asserts that 'I read Paul Radin on the trickster figure before I wrote The Studhorse Man'.<sup>232</sup> Radin, in his highly influential study The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (1956), suggests that this priapic figure, with his extraordinarily 'long penis . . . wrapped around his body',<sup>233</sup> is 'the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries'.<sup>234</sup> The trickster is a likely inchoate being to overcome 'the kingdom of the male virgin' as he 'instills a sense of the absurdity of all sexuality'.<sup>235</sup> He not only has the shamanist powers to transform himself into the shape of animals - his incarnate state combines elements of the human, the animal and the divine - but he can also change sex. Commenting on Radin's work, Carl Jung, renowned for his psychoanalytical theorising of timeless archetypes, describes how 'even [the trickster's] sex is optional despite its phallic qualities: he can turn himself into a woman and bear children'.<sup>236</sup> In this situation, the trickster, known by the Blackfoot as Old Man, is not merely playing at being a woman but physically is a woman. Karl Kerényi emphasises this important trickster characteristic in boundary-breaking terms: 'His nature, inimical to all boundaries, is open in every direction. . . . his own sexuality knows no bounds, he does not even observe the boundaries of sex. His inordinate phallicism cannot limit itself to one sex alone . . . he cunningly contrives to become a bride and mother', through disguise, dressing in women's clothing.<sup>237</sup>

It is on this point that I think Kroetsch's narrative departs most fundamentally from its trickster model, investigating a less radical and profound sense of sexual shape-shifting. There is no cross-dressing in The Studhorse Man, despite its emphasis on

disguise and costume and the attempts at a gesture of androgyny are unadventurous. Kroetsch suggests that, in the ambiguously named figure of Demeter, 'there was a strange union of male and female', which Demeter 'couldn't quite deal with, so later on through narrative, through telling the story . . . he puts himself together'.<sup>238</sup> 'Demeter literally gets himself together by putting those two figures - Hazard and himself together'.<sup>239</sup> The biographer allows the boundary between himself and his subject to slip but he is still in the male realm. Dorscht believes that 'the struggle in Kroetsch's texts is always a struggle to break down the . . . oppositions between masculinity and femininity, indeed, the opposition between self and other, and so to engage in a post-feminist manoeuvre which questions the notion of identity itself'.<sup>240</sup> She clearly thinks that Kroetsch has succeeded in achieving this contentious post-feminist position, describing Demeter as a character who 'signifies a slippage in sexual and textual identity. Neither and yet both 'he' and 'she', Demeter is a woman who is not one'.<sup>241</sup> Yet throughout the novel it is Demeter's male sexuality that is stressed. Beyond his name, he appears to have no female attributes. He sits naked in the bath 'playing with himself by setting 'a little triangular [paper] hat . . . on my perky fellow's noggin',<sup>242</sup> and later relates an incident where he masturbates to the point of ejaculation.<sup>243</sup> Masculine phallicism is highly predominant in this character, as with Hazard. Yet, Dorscht asserts that Kroetsch has successfully deconstructed binary oppositions for 'the studhorse man is a woman'.<sup>244</sup> At the conclusion of the novel the stud-farm is under the influence of D. Lepage, Hazard's daughter, who is christened Demeter after the narrator. Nevertheless, this character is still trapped in the old obsolete occupation of the horse-breeder. New roles have not been created. The failure of masculine sexuality in 'the kingdom of the male virgin' has not been remedied or transformed, only replaced.

The opportunity for transformation, however, is not negated in The Studhorse Man. Van Herk has described Kroetsch himself as 'this master of the art of deception, this trickster incarnate'.<sup>245</sup> The story-teller is the one with the true shape-shifting power to alter identity. The most liberating gesture that Demeter makes is as narrator: he revels in postmodern narrative discontinuity, disregarding realist literary conventions, especially those pertaining to (auto)biography. Traditionally, the narrator is seen as the guide, 'the artist is supposed to know the way'.<sup>246</sup> But Demeter freely and gleefully

acknowledges that, on his narrative quest, he has lost the plot: 'I have some bad news my patient reader. The bald truth is, I have not the foggiest notion how the two men got out of their fix'.<sup>247</sup> Kroetsch is aware of the 'fix' in which he himself, as a writer, is caught. The Studhorse Man articulates Kroetsch's theory of a gender-based Canadian prairie dynamic so successfully that his work is restricted by the equilibrium he portrays. As Peter Cumming has observed, 'Kroetsch's distinctive inscription of dualities may ultimately be his biggest limitation'.<sup>248</sup> Searching for a new structural and narrative perspective, his next two novels Gone Indian (1973) and Badlands (1975) involve a questing protagonist who, in the former work, is an American, and in the latter work, a woman. This change in the identity of the narrator from Kroetsch's former Canadian male model, allows him to investigate national and gender issues unexplored in his previous work. The sexual antithesis between male and female characters and the geographical contrast between the United States and Canada are still important structurally in these novels. But they operate in less clearly opposed distinction as Kroetsch's writing becomes more enigmatic and boundary-blurring.

## VI

Badlands contrasts with Kroetsch's 'Out West' triptych by investigating the possibilities of a female quest. It particularly works against some of the models established in The Studhorse Man. That is why I turn to it now before completing my analysis of the 'Out West' triptych. By subverting the horse / house: male / female analogy in Badlands through the portrayal of a questing woman, Kroetsch, as Sullivan says, 'renders the static principle mobile'.<sup>249</sup>

The tone of this novel, however, is hard to interpret. Several feminist critics, in admiration of his writing, have tried to reclaim Kroetsch's phallogentric fictional world for their own feminist agendas. In her study, Gynocritics (1987), Barbara Godard claims Kroetsch denounces the imbalance produced by 'women's containment and exclusion', thus breaking down stereotypes in a move towards equality.<sup>250</sup> By comparison, Van Herk describes Badlands, in particular, as 'a profoundly feminist work', believing that 'the novel underlines the power of the matriarch, the woman as mistress of all, despite men's folly, men's obsessions. . . . The women undercut the whole notion of male quest and male story'.<sup>251</sup> Yet Kroetsch himself has admitted that

'initially I thought [Badlands] would make a great parody of the male quest. . . . But as I worked on the material I became rather sympathetic to some of the folly involved in such a quest.<sup>252</sup> This shifting emphasis is signalled by the novel's complex structural perspective. The novel consists of Anna's direct authorial comments in her own voice (preserved in italics), juxtaposed with sections of William Dawe's field notes which are presumably quoted verbatim. The bulk of the narrative recollecting the archaeological expedition is recorded in passages which are not clearly from either Dawe's or Anna's perspective, though their imagery is phallogcentrically loaded. Stating that 'a story has its own energy which carries it along', Kroetsch indicates that by 'letting this happen', he is aware that he 'got a double effect, a playing off between the ['male'] story and the woman's narration, almost a discomfort for the reader who wonders where the story comes from'.<sup>253</sup>

The discomfort is not only on the part of the reader. Kroetsch likewise acknowledges a certain anxiety about his task. Describing Margaret Laurence as 'radical in making women her questing heroines', he admits that 'what is new and frightening in her work, at least for male readers, is that suddenly there is a woman who is questing through the world, having sexual encounters and going to different places instead of a man'.<sup>254</sup> In Badlands, the narrator, Anna Dawe, acknowledges that traditionally, at least in epic literature, 'women are not supposed to have stories. We are supposed to sit at home. Penelopes to their wars and their sex. As my mother did. As I was doing'.<sup>255</sup> Yet there is a hesitancy associated with this statement, which could be attributed just to the character of Anna, or might be partially that of Kroetsch. In her 'radical' gesture, questing as a woman after her own story, Anna admits to doubt: 'Why it was left to me to meditate the story I don't know'.<sup>256</sup> The 'master' narrative of the Odysseus quest is paradoxically firmly established at the same time it is being rejected. 'I was not Penelope because no man wagered his way towards me', Anna exclaims.<sup>257</sup>

In Badlands, the pattern of heterosexual desire as a motivating force takes on incestuous overtones as the forty-five-year-old virgin, Anna, quests in search of the father 'who violated [her] inherited dream' of herself, sexually molesting her as a teenager.<sup>258</sup> It is not her father's missing body which Anna searches after. (He apparently drowned in a canoe accident.) William Dawe has been psychologically and

emotionally, as well as physically, absent from much of his daughter's life. So she attempts to 'find' her father by retracing the route of his past archaeological expedition, using his field notes to discover his life story. This quest is concerned with buried or repressed emotions, as well as memories, symbolised by the coulee topography of the Alberta Badlands which is located below ground level. Her journey is about the recovery of a disappearing past in a literally vanished landscape which is absent from prairie view. As Kroetsch stresses, the Badlands are 'symbolic of so much about our own past' because when 'you drive across the prairies . . . you don't know they're there'.<sup>259</sup>

Anna escapes the falsity of her family situation which is represented by the temporary and pseudo-wilderness location of 'a winterized summer place'.<sup>260</sup> This Georgian bay 'cottage' has always been more a mansion or a fortress than her home. No longer 'held prisoner'<sup>261</sup> by her father - 'he locked me up in the house I had inherited'<sup>262</sup> - and therefore freed of patriarchal and paternal constraints, this woman is now at liberty to quest, travelling west. Initially, she simply follows in her father's footsteps, journeying from Ontario to the Red Deer River of Alberta. But then she inverts and parodies his serious voyage of discovery by boat, travelling in drunken revelry by car up-river. Finally Anna departs from his male quest pattern altogether. She and her companion, Anna Yellowbird, decide not to go to Tail Creek (the original expedition's starting point, if paradoxically implying its end) but to the source of the river (the beginning). Anna's account is about narrative initiation and continuity, not closure. Sterile facts give way to life-giving fictions. Anna lets her father's field notes, which she has carried with her for ten years, follow their author: she 'drowns' them, flinging them into the lake at the river's source. She is now at liberty to reconstruct or fabricate his life as she wishes, having gained complete narratorial control.

Anna rejects the limited perspective of the male characters, symbolised by the confines of the coulee down which the men travel. She exchanges their journey, devoid of the sweeping view of the prairies,<sup>263</sup> for a situation more open to possibilities. She decides to live in the Rocky Mountains, with an unrestricted vista, from where she 'can look to the east, and downwards, to where it is all behind [her]'.<sup>264</sup> Later, however, she declares: 'we did not look back, not once, ever'.<sup>265</sup> Emphasising the recollected nature of the narrative, Lecker argues that no sooner is this concluding comment reported

'than she proceeds to look back on a story which brings her to the point at which she tells us she did not look back'.<sup>266</sup> He is surely reading too literally when he goes further to suggest that 'if Anna never looked back ("not once, ever"), if she drowned the notes, why is it that they appear with such insistence to form the imaginative core of her story? The truth is that she has only looked back, that she has not thrown away the notes, that she wants to provide an ending appropriate to her intent, but an ending she cannot live'.<sup>267</sup> Ignoring the optimism of the novel's conclusion, Lecker pessimistically asserts that 'she is left in a vicious circle, forever creating the story she will never be able to forget'.<sup>268</sup>

Despite this apparent misreading of the novel, Lecker's analysis raises the serious question of whether the self can really be found through the narration of someone else's story, even if that person's life overlaps one's own. Whose story is it? Kroetsch has commented: 'in Badlands I was playing with the woman's first person narration and with the whole notion that a story speaks in what I call the male story. The knight out (the night out!) questing or hunting . . . and in the process generating desire'.<sup>269</sup> In one of the more balanced critiques of the novel, Arnold E. Davidson suggests that 'to align the text exclusively with the perspective (and the sexual politics) of either Anna Dawe or William Dawe is to reduce a complex, multivocal, and willfully contradictory novel to a simple and schematized tract'.<sup>270</sup> Anna is not yet predominantly recording her own experiences but voicing those of the men around her. In this important sense, her quest has only just begun. The final image in the novel is a positive one of mutual support in female community - the two women walk 'hand in hand, arm in arm, holding each other'.<sup>271</sup> But while this gesture inverts the egocentric archetypal myth of the lone Western male quest, Kroetsch's two solitudes, male and female, remain.<sup>272</sup> The tone of the novel's conclusion is ambiguous, since the liberation expressed is only relative to the narrator Anna's previous restricted experience.

## VII

One needs to return to the final novel in the 'Out West' triptych to find Kroetsch's most liberated and celebratory depiction of sexuality and male-female companionship. Gone Indian opens with an epigraph quotation from Frederick Jackson Turner's study The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1894): 'for a moment, at the frontier,

the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant'. Despite the emphasis on emancipation, the words 'for a moment' suggest a temporality associated with this borderline liberation. Is there the possibility that such freedom is illusory? Quoting Kroetsch, Lecker proposes that, at least in this latter half of the twentieth century, 'the once powerful metaphors of the frontier consciousness - absence, silence, space, the myth of the golden west - are no longer viable. "The United States is a space culture come to the edge of its space, noisily confronting time"<sup>273</sup> In complete contrast, Kroetsch believes that 'Canada is as timeless as winter'; it is 'a space culture' in which 'silence is the language of space'.<sup>274</sup> Working as a professor at the State University of New York, Binghamton, in the 1960s and early 1970s, he observed that while 'all over the world people are moving from the country into the city . . . the American dream goes the other way'.<sup>275</sup> The wilderness quest still captures the North American imagination despite the forces of urbanisation.

Gone Indian was written and published while the Vietnam War (1955-1975) was still in progress, during a period in which the American public were increasingly disillusioned with the neo-imperialism and political hypocrisy of this conflict. Kroetsch describes how, at that time, the Americans were 're-moulding Canada as part of, as a corrective to, the failing dream', with his American students 'seeing in Canada . . . the sense of space, the sense of freedom - the sense of authentic experience, even, that they believe they can no longer get here in the east[ern United States]'.<sup>276</sup> Gone Indian is Kroetsch's fictional journey 'to follow through and see what happens when the dreamer really goes and makes his visit'.<sup>277</sup> Can Canada really embody this idealised environment of possibility despite - or maybe even because of - its association with inconclusive quests and ill-defined goals?

The border that Kroetsch investigates in Gone Indian is not only the 49th Parallel between the United States and Canada. In a sense, the whole of Canada takes on the characteristics of the frontier no longer to be found in the American West. Kroetsch has described Canada as 'a peculiar kind of border land - and a border land is often the place where things are really happening . . . there's that tremendous sense of the wilderness'.<sup>278</sup> Jeremy Sadness, the all-American student, 'arriving in [Canada,] the land of his imagination',<sup>279</sup> does so only to realise that he is in an uncertain subjective space



'set down [on] . . . the vanishing frontier'.<sup>280</sup> The very place in which he is located is conceptualised as disappearing. In a certain sense, Jeremy has fallen out of time, in a northwestern Canadian landscape which borders increasingly on the surreal. 'This is a peculiar land . . . [where] illusion is rife'.<sup>281</sup> When he arrives at Edmonton International Airport, the city which is the self-professed 'Gateway North' to the wilderness, the first person he encounters is a transvestite. On being strip-searched at customs, this 'beautiful blonde . . . takes off her tits' along with her clothes, so that Jeremy is left wondering if 'the cock and balls are fake too'.<sup>282</sup> This border incident humorously represents the theory of gender as performance, so thoroughly elucidated by recent critics such as Judith Butler in Gender Trouble (1990).<sup>283</sup> More importantly, it immediately signals the thematic of disguised or ambiguous selves, not just sexualities, which is to prevail throughout the Canadian borderline world of this novel. Jeremy escapes customs cunningly 'disguised as myself'.<sup>284</sup> Kroetsch's characteristic motifs of transformation and disappearance are most radically developed in this, the final, novel of the 'Out West' triptych.

The novel becomes a complex web of disappearances in which identities are not only disguised but exchanged in a snowy Canadian prairie landscape that is instrumental to the erasure and obscuration of self. There is a strong suggestion that one can be whoever one chooses in this landscape, since identity is pure invention. Ann Mandel suggests that 'the characters exist within each other's fictions in classic Borgesian confusion about who is writing and who is being written'.<sup>285</sup> For example, in the letter with which the novel opens, Kroetsch, the Canadian author working from his American university, gives his own New York home address as that of the novel's exiled Canadian professor narrator, whose first name is also Robert. Fact and fantasy become inextricably linked as the creator and the created merge.

One of the jokes of the novel is that Jeremy, rejecting the inauthentic mythical archetype of the American cowboy, decides instead to become a Canadian Indian. Nevertheless, it immediately becomes apparent that this is an equally unviable, fictional rather than factual, national stereotype. Jeremy wears a buckskin jacket and moccasins, and dyes and braids his hair, in imitation of his hero Grey Owl, 'the truest Indian of them all'.<sup>286</sup> He tries to assume Grey Owl's native Canadian identity despite knowing

that, in fact, this man was a 'strayed Englishman'.<sup>287</sup> Grey Owl was a famous historical fraud. Born Archibald Stansfeld Belaney in Hastings, England, in 1888, he 'died into a new life'.<sup>288</sup> Belaney posed as a half-breed on emigrating to Canada in 1903, when he became a trapper, guide and forest ranger in New Ontario. He gradually assumed full blood status and later an Ojibwa name, Washaquonasin, 'He Who Walks By Night'.<sup>289</sup> The extent of his public deception as an Indian naturalist writer and lecturer - he wrote about his experiences protecting the national symbol, the beaver - was only discovered at the time of his death. Kroetsch describes how 'Grey Owl's . . . life is somehow a paradigm of our experience . . . That English boy became a Canadian by going Indian . . . he uninvents to invent'.<sup>290</sup> Kroetsch believes this figure to be more importantly 'a paradigm for the artist', emphasising his ambiguous borderline status as 'Conservationist? Murder?'.<sup>291</sup> In Gone Indian, Daniel Beaver, a genuine Plains Cree, reminds Jeremy that Grey Owl 'killed a man . . . one time, in a fight', to which Jeremy's rejoinder is 'he killed himself . . . He killed Archie Belaney. Then he became Grey Owl'.<sup>292</sup> To free one's identity from restrictive delineations involves sacrifices, as Jeremy discovers to his cost when he is beaten up in a racist attack for being an Indian. His disguise has worked too well.

As he undergoes many transformations of identity, Jeremy comes to embody the stated 'consequences of the northern prairie to human definition; the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self'.<sup>293</sup> A single new persona is insufficient. Jeremy exchanges identities with one Roger Dorck by accidentally swapping suitcases and wardrobe with him at the airport. Eventually, he takes over his role as Winter King in the local carnival, as if the clothes literally 'maketh the man'. Furthermore, he also adopts the role of partner to Bea Sunderman, the former wife of Robert Sunderman, 'who one night . . . walked into the darkness, vanished from the very surface of the earth',<sup>294</sup> after apparently falling through the ice. Not at all surprisingly in a Canadian context, his body is never recovered. The narrative hints that he has, in the style of Grove, faked his own death by drowning to escape a wife and problematic former life, only to resurface as Jeremy's supervisor. He is reborn as Professor R. Mark Madham. The former Canadian sends his American student out 'into the eternal goddamned temptations of the wilderness',<sup>295</sup> as a vicarious substitute

for making his own quest homewards. This situation also allows Madham the chance to carry on his affair with Jeremy's wife, Carol. In other words, the two men have effectively swapped wives, as well as lives, nationalities as well as locations. In his essay, 'Will the Real R. Mark Madham Please Stand Up', Davidson outlines the textual clues that Kroetsch provides to signal such an exchange has occurred, suggesting that 'Jeremy fulfills his unacknowledged mission too well, by-passing Edmonton to reach Notikeewin [Madham's former home town], ending up in Bea Sunderman's bed'.<sup>296</sup> Jeremy regains his waning sexual ability in the process: this is one quest which does not fail despite the ambiguity surrounding his eventual fate.

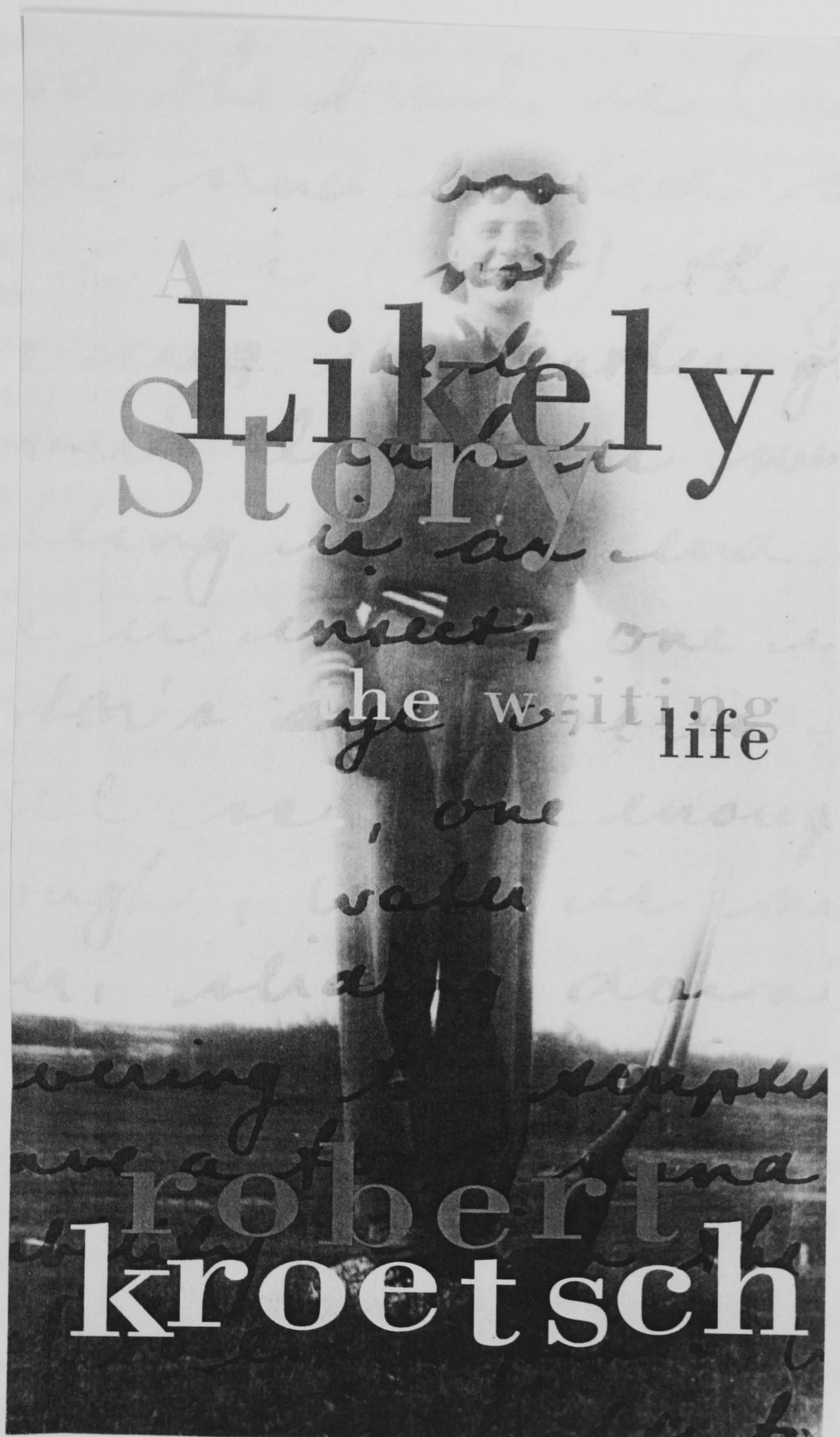
Jeremy never reaches the job interview he is supposed to be attending in Canada. He too disappears, this time in a blizzard, literally falling into the space and silence which is so representative of the prairie environment. Jeremy and Bea not only disappear into the landscape, in some senses they become it.<sup>297</sup> This metamorphosis is signalled earlier in a number of phrases: 'covered in snow, Jeremy and you . . . were moving landscapes'.<sup>298</sup> And it reappears in Jeremy's description of his out-of-body shamanistic experience in which his 'mind was the landscape'.<sup>299</sup>

Hancock is not completely accurate when he suggests that all Kroetsch's characters 'have to deliver themselves into the landscape, plunge into the landscape to redeem themselves from failure'.<sup>300</sup> Jeremy and Bea's joint leap signals the risks and freedoms involved in taking imaginative flight. By disappearing into fiction, they actively dare the possibility of failure rather than redeeming themselves from it. This reading of a fictional escape gives a double meaning to Jeremy's assertion that, having found happiness with Bea, he is going to 'lie here. Ha. I am going to lie here for the rest of my life'.<sup>301</sup> Creative lying becomes an artist act, a form of fiction. Uncertain of their end, Madham likewise admits that by inventing the concluding scenes of the novel, 'the rest [of their lives and the text] is fiction'.<sup>302</sup> The irony is that the whole of Madham's unreliable testimony has been fiction in the form of the narrative, Gone Indian. Eli Mandel raises an important point in relation to the opening of the present chapter: 'To say, . . . as Robert Kroetsch says, that we have no identity until someone tells our story, that fiction makes us real, is not paradoxical but tautological. The statement surely means identity is fictional; it exists only in stories, in dreams, in fantasy'.<sup>303</sup>

Such invention, however, is problematic and perilous. Brown emphasises that Jeremy perceives his life as 'perpetual falling / failing' - the novel's second working title was Falling - but he comes to the final realization that 'falling is the payment for flying'.<sup>304</sup> Since flying is associated with the imaginative leaps needed to recreate the self, falling is about accepting the potential creative / artistic failure involved in such an act. Comparing Tom Thomson to Icarus, Kroetsch links the tropes of flying, falling and drowning. He describes Thomson and his associated Group of Seven artists as 'sun poets, these men who paint; flying too near the sun'.<sup>305</sup> Thomson 'took the risk, got free, perished'.<sup>306</sup> Kroetsch believes that creation and destruction are closely associated in the Canadian artist.<sup>307</sup> He acknowledges that by 'play[ing] on the edge of convention' he, himself, 'take[s] the risk of falling right into language'.<sup>308</sup> As an experimental author, Kroetsch playfully explores forms of representation in his autobiography, A Likely Story: The Writing Life (1995), daring to make literal the 'kind of erasure of self [which] goes on in fiction-making'<sup>309</sup>. I now turn to the ultimate disappearance: Kroetsch's own vanishing-act as an author.

## VIII

Kroetsch's own narration of self provides a good example of what he believes to be the remythologised North American quest within a Canadian context. In Canada, he writes, 'to go west is to find "I" and to lose it in the finding'.<sup>310</sup> In A Likely Story, a collection of essays and poems, he states - in typical Kroetschian oxymoronic style - his aim to 'attempt . . . to write an autobiography in which I do not appear'.<sup>311</sup> As the title suggests, Kroetsch is writing within the tradition of the tall tale. This wish to subvert the traditions of subjective self-creation is announced on the front cover of the work and is repeated throughout the collection. The cover photograph (illustration 1), which depicts a boy who is presumably Kroetsch, fades gradually from the feet upwards, hinting at ultimate disappearance. So, the most distinguishing personal corporeal features, the head and face, are those that are most indistinct. Moreover, the whole image is written over by a text, which in its handwritten form suggests a personal signature which is also denied or absent. The superimposed text is



1. Front Cover, Robert Kroetsch, A Likely Story:

The Writing Life, Red Deer College Press, 1995.

fragmentary and indecipherable, thus acting to obscure rather than define the image of Kroetsch. Both language and image fail to clearly signify the self. Further, the word 'not' significantly covers the boy's smiling face in an apparent assertion of self-negation within a positive context.

The cover invites further comparisons with American individualism when we see that Kroetsch is dressed as a ranch-hand-cum-cowboy, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a gun, an archetypal image of the North American West one might assume. But this declaration of western masculine identity is undermined since the photograph is clearly of an adolescent who has not yet reached manhood and the hand holding the gun is faded to the point of absence, so that Kroetsch's connection with the gun - an archetypal symbol of masculine phallic power is tenuous. In the collection, Kroetsch describes his 'inability to deal with violence';<sup>312</sup> the gun is not to be fired. So how is a Canadian prairie man, such as Kroetsch, to discover any form of gendered identity in the face of such impotence? Only it seems by inverting the established myth of western male virility and thus substituting a motif of unproductive sterility. This inversion denies the creative 'jouissance' of the pen / penis analogy of male productivity suggested by Roland Barthes in The Pleasure of the Text (1975).<sup>313</sup>

Indeed, why continue to quest at all when it is apparently so self-negating? As a leading Canadian theorist, Kroetsch adopts a postmodern scepticism about the ability ever to achieve a coherent and static subjective. He states that 'It is not possible to write an autobiography',<sup>314</sup> there being no 'true' self to discover. Yet at the same time he admits: 'By the time I learnt that lesson it was too late for me to avoid the necessity'.<sup>315</sup> Avoidance becomes part of Kroetsch's autobiographical technique. In an unpublished letter, Kroetsch reveals that 'the photo on the cover . . . is not a photo of me. In fact I took the picture - [which is of] . . . our hired man'.<sup>316</sup> Kroetsch is the invisible observer behind the camera. Stressing that not even the handwriting on the cover is his own, he goes on to add, 'in the case of the handwriting as with that of the photo, I seem to have disappeared in the course of the making of the book'.<sup>317</sup> Nevertheless, most readers would be unaware of this extra dimension to the evanescent photographic image. Kroetsch plays a trickster role, able to change his appearance and his identity as it suits him. He successfully misleads his unsuspecting readers in the process, so that they accept a bogus other as self. All defining

boundaries, including those between containing fact and the imaginative excesses of fiction, are overlooked in Kroetsch's borderless prairie world. In the photographed landscape over which the cover-text runs, the flat grasslands stretch to the horizon and the words symbolically spill beyond the margins of the page itself.

The prairies enables self-invention or reinvention precisely because any existing self can easily be lost or made absent and invisible in this landscape. In conversation with Kroetsch, Shirley Neuman suggests that within his aesthetic representing the failure of the male quest: 'the only possible heroic act becomes the telling of the story'.<sup>318</sup>

Kroetsch acquiesces with this statement. Like the labyrinthine Canadian quest which reaches no destination, death in Kroetsch's fiction becomes rather a recreative (and thus fictionally based) rebirth, not a Western stereotypical heroic end but a resurrectional circle to a new beginning. In 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart', the least factually based of the Likely Story pieces, Rita disappears on 26 June, Robert Kroetsch's birthday. Unlike the enigmatic conclusion to Kroetsch's novel, Gone Indian, Kroetsch does not leave us in any doubt about the nature and motivation behind Rita's vanishing act. He spells it out clearly, stating that her disappearance does not 'hint at a longing for death' but 'had everything to do with entrance into the world'.<sup>319</sup>

Other aspects of Rita's disappearance, however, are not so deceptively simple. In the context of the image of a vanishing poet, Rita's surname - Kleinhart - is clearly meant to recall A.M. Klein's poem, 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape' (1948), which debates the possible causes for a poet's disappearance. Through this suggested link, Kroetsch stresses the trope of the disappearing Canadian artist as an historically recurring phenomenon. He shows the development of the motif since Klein's day, now that Canadian artists are no longer struggling for visible regional and international profiles, as artistic recognition and profiles have been raised since the nationalist movement of the 1970s. Klein's poet is not so much everyman as no-man, made invisible by others who ignore him. In complete contrast, Kroetsch has his poet willing her own absence, her own invisibility, to escape 'the bonded ghost she had become to her . . . readers'.<sup>320</sup> She wishes 'to erase herself from the restrictive context of a by now well-established 'literary scene'.<sup>321</sup>

The interest in this narrative is not so much on the process of disappearance itself but the nature of the double who choses to be absent. Rita Kleinhart does more than

share Robert Kroetsch's initials, birthday and original ranch home on the Battle River. In this piece she is described as travelling to Germany to give a lecture at the University of Trier, a journey Kroetsch actually undertook in January 1983 and which he describes in an earlier poem, 'The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof', from Advice to My Friends (1985). There is a doppelgänger figure in this poem also but it is that of a man who in voice and appearance mirrors Kroetsch himself. Writing a decade later, Kroetsch radically reworks the earlier poem to create a far more complex double or alter ego and thus a more ambiguous and problematic version of self. In an interview, Kroetsch makes an illuminating statement about his concept of self-creation through poetry, which holds equally true for the creative essay form of A Likely Story:

We're too busy lying to ever be autobiographical, I think. You write the poem with your life by not creating a safe boundary between poetry and life. It would be nice if there sometimes were a clear boundary, but in fact the two keep spilling back and forth; exchanging.<sup>322</sup>

In 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart', Rita is apparently Kroetsch's anima and lover / muse. But the relationship between narrator and his double or other is rapidly confused. The dialogue makes the association between the 'real' and the 'fictional' undecidable, so one is prompted to ask which R.K. is really doing the disappearing act here? At one point the Kroetsch persona describes himself as Rita's 'invisible muse',<sup>323</sup> and later goes on to ask - 'Why do I imagine phone calls in which she tells me I have disappeared?'<sup>324</sup> The concept of the Other is not simply embraced but inverted with the possibility that the self is Other, the Other is self. Who is creating whom?

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



experience? To understand these issues it is important to examine the description of Rita's disappearance in more detail.

The Kroetsch persona in 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart' fleetingly glimpses Rita after her initial disappearance and this sighting is highly significant, as is the place of her departure into silence. Geography is crucial within the context of my discussion of the western quest for self, since Rita vanishes not on the Canadian prairies but in the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt. I would argue that this choice of location is not, on Kroetsch's part, simply a gesture of imaginative return to Germany (the country of his maternal family origins). Nor is it an extension of the mythical cycle of birth and death. Instead, I suggest that Rita's site of disappearance is directly related to Kroetsch's poem, 'The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof', in which he encounters his double while making one of several journeys, all of which are westward. Having travelled from West Berlin to Frankfurt he is aided by his *doppelgänger* in his search for a train to Trier, located on Germany's western border with Luxembourg. Kroetsch's double, Rita, in A Likely Story makes this trip, but it is the return journey from Trier to Frankfurt; she is travelling east. And she continues to travel east after she has 'disappeared into art'<sup>325</sup> from whence she comes, transparently signalled by her vanishing in the Museum of Modern Art. When Kroetsch next glimpses her she is on a subway train in Singapore, a city that is not only located to the east, but for some epitomises the East.<sup>326</sup>

I believe that Kroetsch is trying to suggest that, as a woman, Rita has been able to escape or at least invert the pre-established North American masculine quest narrative. She not only travels east rather than west. She also rejects the notion of doing so overland - the train she has caught is underground. Kroetsch may well be trying to signal the need to search for the self in radically new and imaginative ways. But by implying that the female persona is mutable and thus capable of escaping the monolithic, phallic, signifying 'I' in a way that as a male he cannot, potentially is to slip into very antiquated gendered binary oppositions. Is Kroetsch's representation of Rita, in fact, a patriarchal one? As long ago as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir in Le deuxième sexe (The Second Sex), argued against the construction of 'woman' as man's Other, seeing such a representation as a denial of the right of women to their own subjectivity. Beauvoir's influence on Western feminist thought, especially through the publication of

The Second Sex, cannot be underestimated, and it would be surprising if the theoretically astute Kroetsch was not familiar with the tenets of her argument, even if he chooses not to engage them fully in 'The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart'. Kroetsch's link between femininity and the East similarly opens the narrative up to a possible charge of exoticism. Certainly, Rita seems far more erotic and desirable because she is now unobtainable through her absence, existing only as a fantasy and not as a reality. Absent and silent, she is further reduced to an image, a reflected object rather than a subject. 'Seeing her as I did, through a moving window', Kroetsch's male persona reminisces, 'I was reminded of her photographs of back doors - photos in which, by accident, she more than once captured herself as a reflection in glass'.<sup>327</sup> While Rita's self-effacement is suggested as a utopian gesture of freedom by Kroetsch, an act which involves not passive but active disappearance, this action still leads to her ultimate non-existence. The man is present, the woman absent. Equally, Rita may free herself from the male / female binary of her heterosexual relationship in the narrative, yet textually she remains Kroetsch's double, his 'other half'.

In the mid-1970s, an influential work extended and developed much of Beauvoir's thought on Woman as Other. In her challenging feminist thesis, Spéculum de l'autre femme (Speculum of the Other Woman) (1974), the psychoanalyst and philosopher, Luce Irigaray, confronts some of these reductive representations of women. In this work, she discusses the ways in which patriarchal discourse situates woman outside representation, 'in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines',<sup>328</sup> a negative or mirror-image of man. Irigaray takes particular issue with the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud. In Freudian theory, female sexuality is perceived in terms of absence or negation of the male norm (the lack of a penis or any visible equivalent). Freud suggests femininity is inscrutable, exotically mysterious and unknown; a dark continent. Since there is 'nothing to be seen' (rien à voir) it is not just 'woman' but her female sexuality which is invisible or absent - hence the title of another of Irigaray's works, Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un (This Sex Which is Not One) (1977).

Kroetsch's decision to investigate his own gendered subjectivity using the device of a disappearing or absent female other appears increasingly suspect in such a context. Irigaray not only mocks Freud's theory of penis envy in women by advancing the idea that this hypothesis is a projection of his own male fear of castration. She more

radically suggests the possibility of confounding the masculinist Freudian model of self and other, by proposing that 'woman' embody both states, being 'two but not divisible into one(s), . . . dazzlingly multifaceted',<sup>329</sup> embracing opposite states at one and the same time. Irigaray affirms femininity as exceeding or denying a masculine imperial economy since it is uncontainable. Kroetsch himself is still caught in the old dynamics, left searching for his boyhood self as Other, not on a far-flung quest, but in his western boyhood home. Rita accuses him of being 'a prisoner of space'.<sup>330</sup> But he acknowledges that he is more likely a prisoner of language. He remains partly bound by universal binary concepts embodied in psychoanalytical and patriarchal linguistic thought, trapped in an attempt to construct a meaningful identity only through reference to an absent Other.

As this chapter shows, Kroetsch has escaped Canadian macho prairie definitions of maleness and American Western cowboy models, thus beginning the process of reversing the gendered iconography of the West as he does so. However, his project to subvert gender stereotypes is more cogently theorised and articulated in his representation of men than women. His work hints at a new order, but it is not, as yet, effectively conceptualised. Kroetsch's strength emerges from his humorous mockery of the shortcomings of men, himself included, even as he acknowledges his inability to completely escape such failings. In true Canadian prairie fashion, the quest is not a total success. Kroetsch recognises that 'by borrowing fragments of other lives I borrow an autobiography of my own', enabling him simply to 'disappear, only to discover that I have once again made a turn in the labyrinth'<sup>331</sup> - of language, of genre, of subjective representation? Kroetsch does not say. Nevertheless, the labyrinthine maze of the intricate 'Poetics of Rita Kleinhart' is a success in terms of its thought-provoking, enigmatic narrative. As a story-teller, at least, Kroetsch can make a heroic journey, one into the imagination.

Kroetsch has declared that 'the artist him/her self: in the long run, given the choice of being God or Coyote, will, most mornings, choose to be Coyote'.<sup>332</sup> Kroetsch wishes not for omnipotence or omniscience, but for the boundary-breaking qualities of the trickster - he who can change himself and his story at will. Coyote tricks others with such switches and transformations, but is tricked in turn. Kroetsch likewise makes no claims to infallibility. Despite the daring gesture - in sexual political terms - of

making his female persona vanish, Kroetsch nonetheless is still working within an established Canadian trope of disappearance. Kroetsch pushes as much as he can against the borders of artistic form and representation in his work. Yet try as he might to dissolve the limits of traditional structures and archetypes, he is still contained by them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ON THE EDGE OF DISINTEGRATION: UNCERTAIN BOUNDARIES IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S IMAGINATIVE WILDERNESS

#### I

In the context of my discussion of individual and national boundaries and their possible disintegration, Michael Ondaatje is undoubtedly an appropriate contemporary Canadian author to study. This author's relevance to my argument is demonstrated by an examination of his unique place in the Canadian literary canon and his shifting global location. Ondaatje, as a Canadian poet, novelist, cinematographer, journal editor and dramatizer, has been described by Margaret Atwood as 'evad[ing] categorization'.<sup>1</sup> In his influential collection of essays on Ondaatje, *Spider Blues* (1985), Sam Solecki stresses that Ondaatje's 'characters, landscapes, stories and themes resist any taxonomies based on an overtly Canadian thematics', while the writer himself is described as having an 'anomalous status within our literary culture'.<sup>2</sup> Ondaatje's importance within the field of Canadian literature is unquestionable. He has won three Governor General's Awards, as well as the Booker Prize (he was the first Canadian to do so), and received the Order of Canada in 1988. But critics still struggle to define him and his work.

Many commentators have proposed that Ondaatje occupies a borderline position, suggesting not that his writing is marginal, but rather that it is medial, balanced between different genres. Ondaatje's own subjectivity is equally uncertain, multiple and shifting, as Susan Spearey emphasises in the context of migrant metamorphosis: 'as post-colonial by birth and by naturalization, as a male from a privileged Sri Lankan Burgher background [a descendant of the Dutch / Portuguese colonists], as a migrant, and as a Toronto writer working within the academy', Ondaatje is ideally placed, she believes, 'to examine the implications of the wearing of a succession of skins'.<sup>3</sup> I would argue that Ondaatje's different personas or 'skins' are not just successively multiple but often maintained simultaneously. He is in an ambiguous position geographically, socially and intellectually because of the complexities of his own personal cross-cultural inheritance. He has moved not simply between countries but across continents,

from East Asia (Ceylon) to Europe (England), and on to North America (Canada). Ondaatje has defied the restricting limits of borders both in his life and in his art.

This chapter investigates how Ondaatje's immigrant status has affected his representation of various fictional landscapes that might be regarded as foreign or 'other', thus linking Ondaatje's subjectivity, geographical positioning and artistic production. The wilderness settings that Ondaatje chooses to describe are often closely related to inner psychic landscapes, and less to the specific and accurately portrayed regional locations that we find in the prairie locale of van Herk's and Kroetsch's fiction. Indeed, unfamiliar or imagined landscapes become the key to the process of discovery through 'the Other' as Ondaatje is attracted to foreign settings in which identities are defamiliarised or destabilised. He repeatedly deals with personal issues through the portrayal of fictional figures who are displaced, marginalised or 'lost' in some way, often disappearing in the process. Just as Ondaatje, the man and the author, slips over borders, making his national and artistic positioning uncertain, so too do his characters exist in ambiguous psychic states. The defining line between mental stability and instability, psychological as well as physical absence or presence, is often extremely tentative in Ondaatje's writing. It is important to examine Ondaatje's own experience in relation to his changing environments before looking closely at his fiction, so as to establish the extent of Ondaatje's autobiographical investment in his characters and landscapes. How might Ondaatje's approach to issues of personal and national identity differ from those of the other contemporary Canadian authors which I have discussed so far?

While Kroetsch explores disappearance, transformation and hidden identities through historical figures such as Grove and Belaney, and van Herk looks at disguised subjectivities and invisibility in relation to fictional female characters, Ondaatje's sense of metamorphosis, though fictionally portrayed, is part of a lived experience as an immigrant. Canada, as his adoptive home nation, is seen by Ondaatje to be an ideal location for such transformative change. In his introduction to The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories (1990), he describes Canada as 'a country of metamorphosis, where we have translated ourselves . . . We put on new clothes here'.<sup>4</sup> Canada, for him, 'is still documenting and inventing itself'.<sup>5</sup> In interview, Ondaatje draws parallels between national and personal situations, enthusiastically explaining the

advantages of 'be[ing] in a new country at an age when you are also remaking yourself'.<sup>6</sup> Landscape was all-important in the development of this writer. Ondaatje believes that he began to write creatively for the first time on his arrival in Canada because of 'the effect the Canadian landscape had on me . . . Canada gave me a sense of place. I felt comfortable in the landscape'.<sup>7</sup> He had never felt 'at home' in this way during his adolescence in England, a country he admits he did not like. In an image which captures the possibilities Canada embodied for the newly arrived nineteen-year-old, Ondaatje explains elsewhere that 'I felt a sense of discovering a real landscape . . . What was great about Canada was that it showed you your horizon',<sup>8</sup> a distant defining line ironically without limit or end. As with Kroetsch and van Herk, this process of personal questing and transformation goes hand-in-hand with a certain degree of self-erasure.

Ondaatje is a highly private writer who remains enigmatic and elusive. Even in his own (auto)biographical portrayal of his family and his early boyhood in Ceylon, Running in the Family (1982), the one missing character in this exaggerated tall tale is Michael himself. This semi-fictional account may 'make real' for the reader the Ondaatje family and colonial Ceylon during its hey-day, but it is far from realising any details about the author. Present only as a narrative voice, he disappears into the polyphonic maze of the text. This personal disappearing act recalls that of Kroetsch in A Likely Story. And it may well be the case that Kroetsch himself was influenced by Ondaatje's earlier Asia-based account. Both works ignore factual conventions and generic delineations by means of a technique which Kroetsch, praising Running in the Family, describes as 'writ[ing] down the literal world as a version of art'.<sup>9</sup> These two contemporary Canadian authors have worked together to realise the image of 'hidden' or obscured figures and landscapes, travelling by canoe down the Red Deer River through the concealed Alberta Badlands in 1977 in quest of the experiences of William Dawe. Ondaatje later wrote a screenplay based on Kroetsch's Badlands and the 'amazingly bizarre landscape' of the region - 'The William Dawe Badlands Expedition 1916' (1983).<sup>10</sup>

Disappearance and invisibility are an important part of Ondaatje's work, just as they are in the writing of Kroetsch and van Herk. However, the artistic purpose behind such recurring motifs is very different in the oeuvre of this immigrant author. His use is

predominantly connected neither with gender nor regional issues. Instead, the ambiguous representation of many of Ondaatje's characters seem to reflect personal preoccupations. Ondaatje has acknowledged in interview that his protagonists often 'reflect [his] age and concerns at the time', so that 'in a way these are all self-portraits and possible fictional portraits. There's . . . a lot of invention going on'.<sup>11</sup> Disguise and disclosure operate in paradoxical union in his writing: 'I found I could both reveal and discover myself more through being given a costume'.<sup>12</sup> The imaginative novelty of his different foreign settings enables each to become 'a kind of stage, a set perhaps',<sup>13</sup> against which Ondaatje can act out his process of self-discovery through a disguised or fictional other. Yet his extremely various geographical backgrounds do share a common characteristic.

Given the environmental context of Canadian literature, it comes as no surprise that Ondaatje uses the wilderness as the setting for his exploration of personal borderline subjectivities. Nevertheless, Ondaatje shows this landscape - often represented as epitomising Canada - to be far from nationally specific, since the wilderness takes on multifarious manifestations in his writing. His wildernesses include the Australian outback, the American Wild West of New Mexico, the Ceylonese jungle and the African desert. Despite their specific settings, Ondaatje's wildernesses are not simply geographical but imaginative spaces. As Maureen Garvie has stated, 'Ondaatje's fiction begins in the real, tracking out from there into unknown territory at the end of the bridge span, out into the desert'.<sup>14</sup> He steps out into landscapes that are often more imagined than recollected. This boundary-busting writer shows scant regard for the national specificity of territories, the sanctity of pre-established narratives and authoritative facts, appropriating biographies, myths and landscapes at will to suit his artistic purposes.

Only one of his works is clearly based in Canada. *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) is set for the most part in the early-twentieth-century urban construction 'jungle' of Toronto, a city in the making. This historical novel includes a section entitled 'The Bridge' about the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct (1915-18) over the Don Valley, a narrative which would at first appear to be very specific to Toronto, Ondaatje's home. Yet the story is in fact based on Rudyard Kipling's short story 'The Bridge-Builders' (1898), which is set in India.<sup>15</sup> The unacknowledged use Ondaatje makes of Kipling's



description of the construction of 'the great Kashi Bridge over the Ganges'<sup>16</sup> gives a new ironic understanding to Eleanor Wachtel's counter-impression that in In the Skin of a Lion he 'transforms the city into an exotic . . . place'.<sup>17</sup> Familiar with border crossing as an immigrant writer, Ondaatje has no difficulty imaginatively spanning continents in his incorporation of various narratives, just as he steps with ease over the boundary between fact and fiction.

Ondaatje has expressed a wish to free himself altogether from the restrictions that specific landscapes place on him as a writer. 'I can't wait', he declares, 'to write a book where I have people talking on the telephone. You don't know how frustrating it has been for me to have books set in the desert, the Australian outback, early New Orleans'.<sup>18</sup> This is a rather disingenuous comment, however, since setting is an integral, if complex, element in much of Ondaatje's writing. It is the conventions of realism and the notion of accurate representation that Ondaatje is seeking to work against here. As he has stressed in interview, the settings of his early works, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970) and Coming through Slaughter (1976), are 'mental landscapes'.<sup>19</sup> The central protagonists in these two works are on the edge of society and community, and this social positioning is developed into a corresponding feeling of being 'on edge', close to mental breakdown. Physical and psychological states are mirrored in these, as in other, works by Ondaatje. All his wilderness settings represent extreme environments, which prove testing or revealing for characters pushed to their physical or mental limits. Ondaatje is attracted to these settings as marginal or ex-centric spaces because they produce the appropriate conditions for the exploration of his favoured 'borderline' characters. In his poem, 'White Dwarfs', Ondaatje describes how '[he] loves most/ among [his] heroes those/ who sail to that perfect edge',<sup>20</sup> the precarious divide between self and other, sanity and madness, life and death. From an artistic perspective the wilderness - a space lacking definition - facilitates the breakdown of such clear distinctions.

The most clear articulation of mental breakdown is to be found in Ondaatje's earlier works, the man with seven toes, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming through Slaughter, in which increasingly complex psychological portrayals are paralleled by the developing symbolic intricacies of the landscape. I shall turn initially to the first of these three works because the similarity of the man with seven toes to

another psychological Canadian poetic portrayal by Margaret Atwood makes it a good comparative starting point to investigate Ondaatje's technique in dealing with the popular Canadian trope of the wilderness from a peculiarly personal perspective.

## II

Renowned for his stylistic experimentation, Ondaatje's earliest narrative explorations of a mirrored mental and geographical landscape, demonstrates a number of strikingly unusual methods of presentation and narrative. The man with seven toes (1969), like Atwood's The Journals of Susanna Moodie (published the following year), is a long poem based on a historical frontierswoman who is mythologized. Both the Moodie persona and Ondaatje's female protagonist undergo a mental breakdown in the wilderness. Yet Ondaatje's poem is about Australian aborigines, convicts and pioneers. So what are the similar dynamics operating in these two works? Atwood, in an interview with the Australian cultural historian, Jim Davidson, draws a parallel between the Canadian bush and the Australian outback, relating these two national wildernesses to the concept of the psychological quest. 'The North is to Canada as the Outback is to Australia', she believes, because 'it's the place where you go to find something out. It's the place of the unconscious. It's the place of the journey or the quest'.<sup>21</sup>

Ondaatje seems unconcerned with pointing up such geographical parallels. Indeed, in his poetic description he removes from any national context the wilderness and the historical facts concerning Mrs. Fraser's experiences of being lost in the bush. Significantly, Ondaatje's poem uses the image of an anonymous white woman, never named as Mrs. Fraser, surrounded by natives who are not referred to as aborigines, in a swamp: a 'desert and pale scrub' wilderness which is geographically unidentified.<sup>22</sup> Ondaatje revels in the possible inaccuracy and unreality of his setting: 'All the geographical references in the book are probably wrong and I'm sure all Australians think that the book is geographically ridiculous'.<sup>23</sup> Instead, the landscape emerges as an imaginative nightmare world of ambiguity, of fearfully unspecified events and places, which are too frightening to recall:

So we came from there to there

....

Things came at us and hit us.

Things happened and went out like matches.<sup>24</sup>

It is not only the protagonist but the narrative and its setting which threatens to disappear, vanishing in a lack of detail.

M. Travis Lane has suggested that the poem is the female protagonist's 'encounter with . . . her own sexual wilderness, her "shadow" self',<sup>25</sup> thus suggesting a more ambiguous internal landscape rather than a specific external one. The territory which is being discovered is as much herself as her surroundings: 'She moved onto the rough skin,/ traced the obvious ribs, the running heart,/ sensing herself like a map, then/ lowering her hands into her body'.<sup>26</sup> This is an exploratory journey involving pioneering forays into her own sexual psyche, here through masturbation. Earlier, this woman has tried to absent the 'me' whose body is betrayed by its own sexual vulnerability when she is raped by aboriginies: 'they stripped clothes off like a husk'.<sup>27</sup> The personal pronoun is missing. She loses herself in more ways than one.

The poem is paradoxically both about the loss and the discovery of self. There is a parallel here between Ondaatje's protagonist and Atwood's Susanna Moodie suffering the 'inescapable doubleness of . . . vision' of paranoid schizophrenia,<sup>28</sup> as 'she praises the Canadian landscape but accuses it of destroying her'.<sup>29</sup> In the man with seven toes the psychological progression follows the physical state of Mrs. Fraser, lost in the wilderness and later found and returned to civilisation. She continues to carry her newly discovered 'wild', unconscious, and primal state of sexuality with her, as the above quotation shows, describing her in the cultivated environment of a Royal Hotel bedroom. Has she really left the wilderness behind?

Solecki believes that, in this poem, a 'merging of self and wilderness' has occurred. The 'experience of the physical wilderness', he writes, 'has led to a reperception, or even an initial awareness of the natural world within'.<sup>30</sup> The psychological nature of this wilderness landscape is stressed by Ondaatje's climatically incongruous psychic metaphor of 'green wild rivers in these people/ running under ice that's calm'.<sup>31</sup> The emphasis in Ondaatje's poem is on an accurate mental and not physical setting, hence the ambiguous geographical location. Ondaatje sees this artistic emphasis as a recurring problem in the critical misreading of his work: 'what disturbs me in having my work interpreted as either physically or biographically right or wrong is that there's

an emotional and psychological rightness which, for me, is more important than the other two'.<sup>32</sup>

Just as the narrator's schizophrenic breakdown is signalled by the breakdown of her use of language in the man with seven toes, so too are linguistic modes cleverly used to mirror physical events and settings. Like the figure of Mrs. Fraser physically wasting away through hunger and exhaustion as the poem progresses, the language equally becomes more sparse and the number of words on each page gradually reduces, so that the poetry is pared to the minimum. Both the woman and her narrative move towards total absence and silence, signalling the potential death of the protagonist and her story.

Ondaatje's poem is ground-breaking in its combination of visual and linguistic representation. The layout of the book is striking. The words are set in lonely isolation. It is as if the words are overwhelmed by expanses of blank whiteness, lost on the page, silence and erasure threatening to overcome them. The protagonist is situated not just geographically but lexically in a barren space. The reaches of almost bare page mimic the open empty outback. This technique in setting the text is visually striking,<sup>33</sup> more so I would argue than the structural experimentation with language which becomes so extreme that Ondaatje risks losing his readers, having tempted them into an expectation of a narrative thread, which in fact leads nowhere. It is only the endnote by Colin MacInnes, relating the historical events surrounding the now named Mrs. Fraser, that allows readers to regain their bearings. The poem's stylistic success or otherwise seems to be a question of how accessible one believes Ondaatje intended this work to be. Ondaatje's writing is often highly complex, cryptic and challenging, as his wilderness representation in the man with seven toes demonstrates. But what of the link between Ondaatje's fictional concerns and his focus on the enigmatic figure of Mrs. Fraser?

In his study of alterity in the work of four contemporary Canadian authors, Winfried Siemerling discusses the relationship between self and other in Michael Ondaatje's writing, noting the author's fascination with protagonists who escape definition. Siemerling believes that 'the attraction of these semi-defined "heroes" lies precisely in their disappearance'.<sup>34</sup> He describes how 'the reader is drawn into enigmatically meaningful universes, in which a number of searchers and detectives seek

to come to terms with elusive figures that seem constantly to disappear from a world certain of its laws'.<sup>35</sup> Why might disappearance be the key to Ondaatje's fascination with these figures? I shall turn to an investigate one of Ondaatje's 'out-laws', Billy the Kid, a figure who is regarded as highly present and clearly represented in the American mythic imagination. In the light of Siemerling's statement, this seems an odd choice of protagonist for Ondaatje. My discussion of The Collected Works of Billy the Kid focuses on the ways in which Ondaatje re-presents Billy to enable his escape or disappearance from the strictures of the mythic, cinematic and historical accounts which surround him.

### III

In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970), Ondaatje continues his experimentation with typographical setting and design, stylistically bordering that of concrete poetry. He stresses that 'the presentation of the poem is very important to me. . . . Certainly with The Collected Works of Billy the Kid design was very important . . . the printing itself is an art form and I'm deeply involved with it'.<sup>36</sup> Ondaatje is fascinated with photographic and cinematic images, as my discussion of his next two works will show. Visual images, and particularly the frames that conventionally contain them, are especially important to Ondaatje's artistic concept of this comic book and film character. Billy is always overstepping the border, legally, geographically and representationally. Ondaatje experiments with and dismisses the borders of form in other ways in this work, combining poems and prose, in a text which is neither poetry nor fiction but an amalgamation of both.

Ondaatje is constantly challenging the boundaries of genre. Despite the text's central character and its New Mexico setting, Ondaatje has stressed that this is not a Western,<sup>37</sup> a point signalled by Tom O'Folliard's decision 'to go east' as the work commences.<sup>38</sup> The first detailed description of Billy on horseback also involves him turning to ride east.<sup>39</sup> Westerns are inherently associated with the American imperialist dream of frontier conquest. When The Collected Works of Billy the Kid won the Governor General's Award in 1970, during a period of heightened Canadian nationalism, there was heated argument in the press about its suitability for this prestigious prize. This furore was prompted after the ex-Prime Minister, John

Diefenbaker, expressed 'outrage that this book that won the award was about an American'.<sup>40</sup> However, as Ondaatje has indicated, this book, in many ways, is not about either an American or the United States. The text may initially seem to be set realistically in New Mexico - genuine geographical places in Lincoln County are named - but the landscape is not only imaginatively reconstructed but invented: Ondaatje never visited the region before writing Billy the Kid.<sup>41</sup> Ondaatje admits that some of the place names are made up: 'I was putting geographical names into [Billy the Kid] cos I like the sound of them. Chupadero Mesa, Punta de la Glorieta'.<sup>42</sup> In a comment that mocks the hegemony of the United States and its overemphasised political and cultural world influence, Ondaatje states that 'the question that's so often asked about why I wrote about an American hero doesn't really interest me cos I hardly knew what an American was when the image of "cowboy" began that germinating process', as a boy, in Ceylon.<sup>43</sup>

Issues of nationality, and particularly national stereotypes of identity, are problematised in Ondaatje's work. In his writing, and in his comments in interview, Ondaatje has a tendency to set himself against both the nationalist impulses of commentators like Atwood and the regionalist stance of writers like Kroetsch and Van Herk.<sup>44</sup> Ondaatje's inclination to resist geographical boundaries and delineations of all sorts can be seen in his choice of the cowboy figure. In his poem 'Late Movies with Skyler' (1979), Ondaatje describes watching a Western in which Stewart Granger 'girl-less and countryless/ rides into the sunset'.<sup>45</sup> This cowboy is not an American. Possibly as a function of his immigrant imagination, the cowboy for Ondaatje represents not simply freedom, but a nationless, border-defying existence. Billy, demonstrating his disregard for national boundaries, describes how 'two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country . . . the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico'.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, as an outlaw, he is always on the wrong side of the border. Despite the misleading suggestion 'that there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image',<sup>47</sup> this description is of central symbolic importance to this work, whose own narrative also lacks any clear linear direction, evading its readers. Billy moves across

borders not just in his ride north-south across three countries but also west-east across three states: visits to Arizona and Texas are mentioned, as well as the many places around Fort Sumner, New Mexico. Never stationary, Billy is always staying with others or over-nighting in hotel rooms. He has no place of his own and leads a semi-vagrant lifestyle, not riding, but 'drift[ing] down to Mexico'.

This is not the decisive, clear-cut, 'go-getting' environment of the standard American Western. Atwood has suggested that Canadian writers have adapted the image of the West in line with their own divergent national experiences. In American films such as 'How the West Was Won' (1962, directed by John Ford, George Marshall and Henry Hathaway), this frontier region is represented, she suggests, as 'a place to be conquered and claimed'.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, 'the West, or the wilderness, is in Canadian fiction much more likely to come through as a place of exile'.<sup>49</sup> Billy is clearly an eccentric, repeatedly represented as being 'on the edge',<sup>50</sup> exiled to the borders of society as a fugitive from the law. As such, he may not only have personal interest for Ondaatje as an immigrant author, but also be represented in this way to emphasis his potential Canadian relevance as an outcast figure. Ondaatje believes that Canada's diverse population is united by the shared national characteristic that 'we came as exiles',<sup>51</sup> a characteristic borne out in Canadian fiction by 'the preoccupying image of figures permanently travelling, portaging their past, still uncertain of where to settle in this country'.<sup>52</sup>

Billy is a borderline figure in a borderline world, crossing not just geographical boundaries but moral ones too. The distinction between heroes and villains, good and evil, totally vanishes in Billy the Kid. In a review of this narrative work, Alan Young describes Billy as 'both villain and victim', noting that the boundaries between the law (Garrett) and the outlaw (Billy) become increasingly indistinct, in 'the presentation of Billy as killer-victim and Sheriff Pat Garrett as cold law-and-order assassin'.<sup>53</sup> No 'verdict' is pronounced on Billy's character. In the text, Sallie Chisum concludes her recollection of the two men by stating that 'there was good mixed in with the bad/ in Billy the Kid/ and bad mixed in with the good/ in Pat Garrett./ . . . Both were worth knowing'.<sup>54</sup> Is this narratorial change to an uncertainly divided moral world influence by what Linda Hutcheon describes as 'Canada's national reputation . . . of negotiation

and compromise: that doubleness able to see both sides at once"?<sup>55</sup> Or is it possibly a result of Ondaatje's wish for this moral dilemma to be internalised, so as to portray Billy as a fundamentally divided (and possibly schizophrenic) character? Maybe both? Certainly such an equivocal inner division was intended by Ondaatje: 'For me in Billy I can see just as much gentleness as violence; for me there's a balance . . . - the violent and the gentle - but both exist'.<sup>56</sup>

There is a Canadian tradition of parodying the rigid certainties of the Hollywood Western, a tradition in which I believe Ondaatje has a part. Contemporary Canadian writers seem resistant to the statically polarised moral and gendered world of the mythic American West, in which even the geographical setting takes on a staged inauthenticity. Atwood, in her poem 'Backdrop Addresses Cowboy' (1968), parodically mocks the artifice of the typical American Western film setting as a 'Starspangled cowboy/ sauntering out of the almost-/ silly West . . . tug[s] a papier-mache cactus/ on wheels behind' him.<sup>57</sup> Equally, the poet Al Purdy, in 'At the Movies' (1967), describes the juxtaposition of settings in an Arctic cinema and in the featured Western, 'as really unreal'.<sup>58</sup> He subverts 'the way it always does in American movies/ with an obvious moral a clear-cut denouement',<sup>59</sup> by 'rejecting the obvious',<sup>60</sup> thus ending his poem inconclusively with no moral or 'point' to his reminiscence.

Likewise, Ondaatje is highly resistant to 'an obvious moral', a clear-cut resolution in his work, playing with film conventions. David Donnell believes that the 'south-western landscape [of Billy the Kid] has a quiet documentary film quality',<sup>61</sup> while Manina Jones describes The Collected Works as a kind of . . . "screenplay." It begins . . . with an empty frame, a blank screen (5), and ends with a list of "CREDITS" which identify the poem's documentary sources (110).<sup>62</sup> Yet the narrative is delivered more in a series of disconnected 'snap-shots', suggesting photographic and not cinemagraphic images, and the text escapes the fixities of the Western, its potential American model.

Just as it is difficult to discover any clear line separating good and evil in 'the casually brutal human wilderness'<sup>63</sup> of Ondaatje's frontier society, so too it remains hard to hold the line between inside and out, self and other, in this extreme environment. Billy describes a photograph that was intended to capture him and his surroundings. Looking at it again after taking 'red dirt' (marijuana), 'water started



dripping out of the photo', spilling across the frame.<sup>64</sup> There is a sense that the extreme light, heat and aridity of the desert landscape also has a hallucinogenic 'unreal' quality, causing the breakdown of borders. Both Tom O'Folliard and Billy have visions of collapsing somatic boundaries when pushed to the limits of physical survival in the New Mexico wilderness.<sup>65</sup> The 'red dirt' becomes the unstable, shifting, wind-blown desert sand and dust which threatens to engulf and obliterate Billy.<sup>66</sup> In a description which is suggestive of snorting cocaine, Billy elsewhere relates how 'we sat . . . heads leaned back taking lover wind/ in us sniffing and sniffing/ getting high on the way/ it crashed into our nostrils'.<sup>67</sup> This is a 'fix' that does not secure Billy's world but loosens the parameters of his environment. The illusory nature of the landscape causes Billy to have an apparently paranoid tendency to perceive it only through frames, as if trying to hold on to the borders of reality and self as reassuringly stable.<sup>68</sup>

There are only a few occasions on which Billy describes being outside, and those are usually at night, where the darkness can offer some sense of enclosure. He often views the world from indoors, looking through window and door frames, with their rigid limits, or observing the corners and angles of rooms. Billy wants to feel safely bounded by the walls around him, which exclude the chaos of the wilderness outside. This is the same whether hiding in the barn where he recuperates from a fever - 'the sun poured blocks and angles in';<sup>69</sup> eyeing events outside through an open doorway when cornered by Garrett;<sup>70</sup> or 'watching the white landscape in its frame'<sup>71</sup> from the relative safety of the Chisums' ranch. Dennis Cooley notes that Billy frequently assumes a position sitting by the doorway, pointing up the ambiguous antagonism of a situation in which 'in every way an out-law, [Billy] tries, at times distends and transgresses, boundaries. More often, he fears to cross the lines, hopes to defend his hard-held borders against all trespassers'.<sup>72</sup> In this situation, Cooley believes, it is the doorway that provides Billy with the rigid framework he needs: 'Its straight vertical and horizontal lines hold th[e outer] world in place, as Billy himself wants and needs to contain it'.<sup>73</sup> Photographic, cinematic and comic book frames are also suggested by such images, as if Billy's existence outside such limits would ironically undermine the validity of this fictionally constructed figure. Billy's demise comes when he is half inside and half outside, breaking across a frame, shot in the head by Garrett as he

punches his right arm through a window pane.<sup>74</sup> 'Red grass' (marijuana) is again mentioned at this moment of the breakdown of frames, both structural and corporeal. The maintenance of frames is associated with reality and sanity; pain brings with it boundary-dissolving visions and hallucinations.

In the 'visionary' imagination of Ondaatje's world, Billy is not as securely located as these architectural framing images might suggest. His death and life are highly questionable, both historically and in Ondaatje's writing. Billy the Kid actually disappears as soon as his 'collected works' open: he is missing, presumed dead. The reader is initially presented with an empty frame, 'a picture of Billy' emphasising his absence, and on the following page he is listed under the heading - 'these are the killed'.<sup>75</sup> If this is really the case, who is the first person narrator of Billy's life story from this point onwards? Smaro Kamboureli describes The Collected Works as 'a discourse without a subject', arguing that the absence of 'the opening photograph signifies [Billy's] death. The poem's discourse . . . is largely uttered by a dead subject . . . Billy does not die in the poem. He is already dead when he utters his first monologue'.<sup>76</sup> Such an argument would seem to be supported by Ondaatje's comment: 'I think this [account] is a flashback in Billy's mind after he's dead'.<sup>77</sup> Yet, the author expresses doubt about the status of his own character with the words 'I think'. Ondaatje plays with the idea of authorial omniscience when Billy, as narrator of his life story, states his wish 'to be invisible watching'<sup>78</sup> events after he is apparently deceased. Just how far is Billy contained by his own death, symbolised by the walls of his wooden coffin?

Several critics have described Billy's final position in the casket in terms of framing, an attempt 'to box the Kid in a grave (a photographic frame)'.<sup>79</sup> Even if 'a coffin becomes the ultimate frame-up',<sup>80</sup> all agree that linguistically, if not physically, Billy 'transcend[s] stasis, the framing of words, and the final framing of the coffin'.<sup>81</sup> The work itself is resistant to closure, and there is a sense of Billy's absence as in some way defining, being framed not so much by death, as non-being. In the same way in which the photographer has failed to shoot a picture of Billy on film at the beginning of the text, the work concludes with Poe questioning Garrett's assertion that he has succeeded in shooting Billy. 'Garrett told Poe, ". . . I think I got him.'" "Pat," replied

Poe, "I believe you have killed the wrong man".<sup>82</sup> Billy cannot be imaginatively captured in words or images any more than Garrett can claim to have 'got him' physically.<sup>83</sup>

As a legendary character, Billy exists on the border between reality and fiction, in the same way in which he is ambiguously situated between life and death. This work does not frame either a fictional Billy or the historical William Bonney. Ironically, the only time the text itself is literally framed is when Ondaatje reworks material from the comic book legend, Billy the Kid and the Princess.<sup>84</sup> This 'true life of Billy the Kid'<sup>85</sup> is, in fact, a romanticized version of the story which is as far removed from historical events as it possibly could be. Just as the reader is without a photographic 'proof' or print at the beginning of the work, so too they are without proof (in terms of facts and evidence) at the end. Billy has evaded artistic, as well as physical, capture. Ondaatje has no wish to use his creative talents to confine this historical figure in a static narrative text restricted by factual events. Billy taunts those who would wish to catch him - 'I could only be arrested if they had proof, definite proof, not just stories'.<sup>86</sup> Billy is not 'arrested', closed off and fixed, in words. In the same way in which Ondaatje avoids providing us with photographic proof of Billy, his artistic aesthetic deliberately also works towards obscuring the historical identities of the characters he ambiguously depicts. In his poetry, Ondaatje's persona declares that 'all this writing should be then./ The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment/ so they are shapeless, awkward/ moving to the clear'.<sup>87</sup> In another poem, collected in the same volume and dedicated 'for people who disappear',<sup>88</sup> Ondaatje describes 'mov[ing] to the perfect white between the words'.<sup>89</sup> Characterised as being in constant motion, Billy is a figure who is definitely 'moving to the clear', a blurred image, 'stumbling into dots'.<sup>90</sup>

Words and images merge in the process of obscuring the subject. The comic book story also ends in a series of dots, with a conjunction and an ellipsis signalling a lack of narrative closure: 'Before Billy the Kid can defend himself, La Princesa Marguerita has taken him in her arms and . . .'.<sup>91</sup> The text may dissolve in silence but it is a pregnant silence waiting to be filled by the reader's imagination. Ondaatje describes Billy's legend as 'a jungle sleep',<sup>92</sup> a fecund image placed in striking contrast to the desert setting of the text. This exotic metaphor (taken from Ondaatje's own childhood

experiences, one can assume, from descriptions in Running in the Family (1982)) suggests a dreaming or semi-conscious state, in which unidentified sounds from the 'jungle' wilderness might filter through to someone lying at night in the dark, encouraging the imagination to run wild.<sup>93</sup> Heard but not seen, this image is highly appropriate for a narrative given by a hidden or absent speaker, in a text where one is lost in a wilderness 'maze' of signifiers,<sup>94</sup> with no clearly signified object behind them.

This is not the only gesture towards Ondaatje's childhood in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid. Billy may be an absent presence but so too is his author. The initial empty photographic frame of Billy the Kid is finally filled on the last page with a picture of Michael the Kid, dressed in full cowboy outfit at the age of seven in Ceylon.<sup>95</sup> Dominick M. Grace believes that this final image of the author as Billy occupies only a small corner of the empty frame because Ondaatje wishes to 'make . . . clear that even his book does not fill the empty frame . . . Only one small segment of the frame, empty at the beginning, has been filled, by Ondaatje'.<sup>96</sup> More importantly, this framed emptiness suggests the absence of Ondaatje's own life story. Billy's life is a narrative with no photograph, Ondaatje's a picture with no text. In interview, Ondaatje describes his work on Billy in terms of 'writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself, not out there in a specific country'.<sup>97</sup> Yet this personal relevance is only briefly and obscurely alluded to in Billy the Kid.<sup>98</sup> The reader is deliberately left guessing as to how much this work is actually about Ondaatje. Solecki believes that in the man with seven toes, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming through Slaughter Ondaatje has 'chosen figures from the pre-contemporary era . . . all of whom lived in places and societies radically different from his own', because 'the choice provides him with an immediate temporal and spatial distance from the real subject of his work, himself and the nature of his creativity'.<sup>99</sup>

I shall now turn to the last of these three works to demonstrate how motifs of revelation and concealment - far from being mutually exclusive in Ondaatje's writing - have an important personal and artistic relevance. In Coming through Slaughter, the link between the author and his creative subject, a jazz musician, is made more explicit than in Billy the Kid. Indeed, Urjo Kareda believes that, in his portrayal of Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje has produced 'one of the most acute portraits of an artist yet

produced in our [Canadian] literature'.<sup>100</sup> The imaginative use of his own personal identification with Bolden has clearly been to Ondaatje's artistic advantage.

#### IV

Ondaatje's first full-length prose work, Coming through Slaughter, is his most disturbing exploration of the complicated exchange between internal and external landscapes. Here, as in the man with seven toes, the wilderness represents a tortured state of sexual and psychic chaos. The protagonist describes his return from a period of self-imposed exile, breakdown and creative sterility 'like walking out of a desert'.<sup>101</sup> I will demonstrate that this work is a personal exploration for Ondaatje. It is particularly interesting in its portrayal of insecurely defined boundaries, a motif which here is almost entirely psychological but subsequently develops in later works to include important national and cultural issues. Questions concerning the borderlines of identity become less intimate and internalised as Ondaatje's career progresses.

Coming through Slaughter portrays the life of the jazz cornetist Charles 'Buddy' Bolden (1876?-1931), a historical figure whose life was barely recorded and whose music never was. Searching for this 'lost' or missing figure Ondaatje begins with 'His geography',<sup>102</sup> a secular litany of signs and street names in New Orleans that lists rather than describes the area where Bolden once lived. This also introduces the image of labelling which is to prove psychologically problematic for Bolden as a public figure later in the text. As Ondaatje says, 'the landscape of the book is a totally mental landscape. It really was a landscape of names and rumours'.<sup>103</sup> Ondaatje situates the musician in sound rather than place, not so much in music as in language, with this opening barrage of proper nouns. Bolden is represented at the centre of community gossip working in N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor. He seems very much at home and at ease in Storyville, his local district, where hearsay, rumours and tall tales are the norm: 'he roamed through conversations as if they were the countryside'.<sup>104</sup>

This is not the calm, secure, homely setting it might appear. Bolden's world is not 'sound' in other ways. Indeed, one would not expect such a stable environment in Ondaatje's writing, where loners and exiles preponderate. Uncertainty and insecurity predominate in an ever-changing environment. Bolden is cavalier with biographical details, fabricating, altering and concocting 'news' for his scandal sheet, 'The Cricket',

taking 'all the facts and dropp[ing] them into his pail of sub-history'.<sup>105</sup> Equally, in his music 'he . . . dive[s] into the stories found in the barber shop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change'.<sup>106</sup> He not only has the power to alter the appearances of his customers by 'manipulat[ing] their looks' with his razor and his shaving soap,<sup>107</sup> but he can also change their identity through the written and musical narratives he tells about them. A fellow band member suggests that Bolden 'tore apart the plot',<sup>108</sup> viewing boundaries and rules as there to be broken in his performances, his journalism and his life. Nevertheless, Bolden's attempt to maintain artistic control of his own life, creating himself in the process, becomes violently self-destructive rather than liberating, as the verb 'tear' implies.

Bolden lacks control of his own limits, be they psychological, corporeal or artistic. These uncertain delineations fascinate Ondaatje who uses this text to explore the question of where one might choose to draw one's creative limits and what occurs if one over-steps the socially prescribed mark. Ondaatje extends the psychoanalytical metaphor of 'the room of the self' into a structuring architectonic symbolic motif. Windows in Coming through Slaughter are paradoxically both containing frames and openings, thresholds onto the outside world. They are explicitly linked to the image of an artist reaching out to his audience, beyond his own self-containment, as Bolden exhorts first Willy Cornish and then Webb to 'put [their] hands through the window'.<sup>109</sup> Bolden is not content to look through windows, he wants to move through them as well, in a symbolic gesture of breaking beyond bounds. The glass offers him a temptingly fragile limit to transgress. Bolden has a tendency to break windows, smashing through these glass boundaries in angry arguments both with his wife, Nora Bass, and Tom Pickett.<sup>110</sup> Robin Brewitt asks in exasperation which window Bolden will break next as their stormy sexual relationship becomes more violent.<sup>111</sup>

This smashing of windows could be seen as a vain attempt on Bolden's part to break away from his 'Other', represented both by these two female lovers and by his image reflected in the glass of the window. Smashing through the pane of glass may harm him but not as much as breaking through the pain of insecurity caused by the identity crisis he experiences as he psychologically crosses the border between sound and silence, self and other, sanity and insanity. This image of Bolden ignoring conventional borders is illustrated by the way in which he often uses windows as if they

were doorways. He shows disrespect for their normal function as a frame through which one sees but he remains separated from the world outside or within. He goes out through the 'empty frame' of the window of the barber's shop, to continue his fight with Pickett, having pushed him out through the glass first.<sup>112</sup> Later, he enters the shop through the now boarded up window,<sup>113</sup> and when he visits Brock Mumford, he both enters and exits through his upstairs bedroom window.<sup>114</sup>

Like his actions and emotions, Bolden's creativity is not only exceptional but excessive. His music is ultimately self-destructive because it goes beyond the bounds, in Leslie Mundwiler's words 'beyond consciousness but also beyond sanity'.<sup>115</sup> This is symbolically represented by the blood and semen which rips across Bolden's bodily boundaries. His music is his life blood, and when he collapses in a parade in New Orleans the music issuing from his cornet becomes the blood issuing from his lips in a description which is also deliberately suggestive of ejaculation. He literally cannot contain himself.

Julia Kristeva's feminist psychoanalytical work, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1982), provides a conceptual framework for understanding Bolden's psychological portrayal. Her observations about abjection concern the link between corporeal boundaries and human identity, two themes which are equally related in Coming through Slaughter. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva discusses the sense of 'The Horror Within' with 'the collapse of the border between inside and outside':<sup>116</sup> 'It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self" . . . gave way before the dejection of its content . . . Urine, blood, sperm, excrement'.<sup>117</sup> This description by Kristeva aptly describes Bolden's body and mind 'giving way' in the parade, an event which is pre-empted by his declared desire to be an over-flowing 'reservoir where . . . people drank, blood sperm music pouring out'.<sup>118</sup> Kristeva describes the skin as 'the essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individuation',<sup>119</sup> but Bolden seems uncertain of his skin's ability to hold him together, to define him. He not only cannot hold himself in but he can't keep things and people out. After 'two days picking up the dirt the grime . . . the wet slime from toilets, . . . the alley shit . . . piano sweat, trombone spit, someone's smell off a towel',<sup>120</sup> he wishes he could block all of his surroundings out 'until he couldn't be entered

anymore'.<sup>121</sup> He is vainly attempting to reassert his corporeal borders as stable and secure.

Borders of separation are a central motif in the novel, as the distinction between life and art also becomes increasingly blurred. This is the case not just in Bolden's life - his music is described as being 'immediately on top of his own life'<sup>122</sup> - but also in Ondaatje's account, as biographical facts imperceptibly make way for fictive speculation. The narrator of the tall tale is actually Ondaatje. Faced with 'a desert of facts',<sup>123</sup> the author imagines personal characteristics for Bolden, including his tendency to exaggerate and semi-fabricate his stories. How far has Ondaatje created Bolden in his own image? To answer this question, it is necessary to ascertain who is really doing the disappearing act in this 'desert' of missing details - why, where and how.

At the height of his musical career, 'Bolden lost himself'.<sup>124</sup> His wife, struggling for words to signify his absence, tells Webb, 'Buddy went, disappeared, got lost, I don't know . . . but he's gone'.<sup>125</sup> The man of sound is silent, removing himself from the reach of language. He can no longer be the anonymous barber lost in the obscuring steam and soap, the ice vapour and the gossip of Joseph's Shaving Parlour. He is too highly defined as 'the famous fucker . . . the famous barber . . . the famous cornet player'.<sup>126</sup> Wishing to escape delineating labels he disappears up north,<sup>127</sup> actively losing himself so that there is no description of his surroundings at the Brewitts' house where he stays for two years. The sense that he does not know where he is temporally, where his life and career are going, is extended into the impression that he doesn't know where he is spatially. The physically unlocated building is only ever described by Bolden in terms of its rooms, walls, doors, as his totally internalised mental state is somatically reflected by the fact that he seems bound by interiors, not just at the Brewitts but also later at Webb's cottage. Kamboureli suggests that the Brewitts' names are significant: 'Robin and Jaelin . . . contain a sense of enclosed space . . . Bolden . . . is jailed in her husband's house, Jaelin'.<sup>128</sup> This statement, however, overlooks the fact that Bolden has voluntarily walled himself in, needing enclosure for psychological safety. I would argue that more nominally significant is the fact that Bolden goes missing at Shell Beach. It is here that 'his body exploded',<sup>129</sup> where he



fears that he may burst his containing boundaries, leaving him gutted, no longer with an internal life, 'the shell of a man'.

Bolden's old friend, Webb, now a detective, enigmatically suggest that the musician's mysterious disappearance is a gesture of 'landscape suicide'.<sup>130</sup> What can be meant by this arresting phrase? Webb indicates that it may involve Bolden erasing his existing life, not just geographically but temporally, 'wiping out his past'.<sup>131</sup> On the one hand, Bolden is 'dead' to his natural environment, roomed in and confined away from his home and audience. On the other, pictorial representations of inland scenery are described as landscapes, and in this sense the phrase might suggest Bolden's disappearance into art, into a visual and not an auditory creative world. He certainly vanishes from sound rather than sight, retreating into silence and stasis. This reading is supported in the novel through two fleeting but significant references to a historical artist. The American naturalist painter, John James Audubon (1785-1851), is mentioned initially in the context of another character's disappearance (the image of drowning birds is introduced at this point) and then again when Bolden might himself be considering suicide by drowning.<sup>132</sup> Drowning is a common form of self-erasure or suicide in Canadian literature, and it is associated with the recurring image of becoming part of the landscape. Is this explanation what Webb means by 'landscape suicide', landscape as land-escape? Certainly, both of Bolden's physical and psychological retreats during this period involve him moving towards the water's edge, be it the ocean coast (of Lake Borgne) at the Brewitts, or the inland waterside of Lake Pontchartrain on which Webb's cottage is situated. Yet, given the chance to drown himself in a tributary of the Mississippi, just north of the ominously named Slaughter, he stands indifferently on the bank, resisting the temptation of a less-than-violent end. He comes through, and thus rejects, slaughter. Maybe in this sense Webb is incorrect in speculating that Bolden will undertake 'landscape suicide'. As with other points of ambiguity in Ondaatje's work the reader is left guessing.

Finally, Bolden falls over the edge into permanent paranoid schizophrenia, slipping beyond fame and the frame of sanity into a totally internal territory. He effectively becomes anonymous and invisible to the outside world. Solecki suggests that although Bolden's madness is itself a type of suicide,<sup>133</sup> it is nonetheless a positive act, allowing Bolden an opportunity 'to reconstitute the self'.<sup>134</sup> Notably, Bolden goes mad as he

reaches 'Liberty' (Street) during the parade. His psychological condition, however, remains ambiguous even after this graphically narrated breakdown. Ondaatje's room imagery reveals the author's position concerning the portrayal of Bolden's final mental state, which has been much debated by critics. Bolden's condition has been described in widely ranging terms, from enduring 'a kind of death in life'<sup>135</sup> to resting in 'a heaven of silence'.<sup>136</sup> The 'King of Corners'<sup>137</sup> reconstructs the room of the self, redefining his personal space in the hidden security of the mental asylum:

In the room there is the air  
and there is the corner  
 and there is the corner and there is the corner  
 and there is the corner.<sup>138</sup>

The boundary of his surroundings is complete and solid. Ondaatje himself has suggested that 'Bolden is completely sane and refuses to talk to us',<sup>139</sup> a revelation that might radically alter many critics' readings of this novel. Given the opportunity to escape by Lord - whose name parodies the idea of heavenly deliverance - Bolden rejects it.<sup>140</sup> He has no wish to renounce his privacy by venturing 'outside'.

Finally death causes Bolden to fall apart physically, as his body decomposes. His disappearance is now total, his true identity obscured forever: 'There is the complete absence of him - even his skeleton has softened, disintegrated'.<sup>141</sup> The grave is unmarked.<sup>142</sup> There are no records in any sense of the word. 'The place of his music is totally silent'.<sup>143</sup> Ondaatje may be left with an empty space, the vacant grave, the non-existent life account, the missing musical score. But is this 'desert of facts' a sterile one? It is necessary to reject this question because landscapes do not necessarily maintain their expected associations in Ondaatje's work. This 'desert' allows for freedom of imaginative invention, as Ondaatje moves beyond the few known facts about Buddy Bolden's life. This type of liberation is exemplified by an incident which demonstrates the narrative freedom Detective Webb gains through a lack of evidence. He is able to invent an incredible and far-fetched story about the death of Mrs. Bass, precisely because all proof of her is gone. Her body, like that of Bolden, has disappeared completely. Kamboureli extends this idea of open-ended possibility from the writer to the reader, suggesting that 'the vacant spaces between paragraphs,

between lines or single words, are the land that language has not inhabited yet. This space is not empty by any means. It is the terra incognita that the reader should explore and map by way of his imagination'.<sup>144</sup> This comment is, in fact, aptly applicable to all of Ondaatje's work, not just Coming through Slaughter.

Bolden's biographical details are extremely sketchy, a situation Ondaatje capitalises on. Equally, the only photograph that still exists of Bolden and his band, reprinted on the title page or cover, is faded and indistinct. Ondaatje makes the point that 'as a photograph it is not good or precise'.<sup>145</sup> However, this indistinctness is good artistically, working to his advantage by enhancing the motif of disappearance, in a way similar to the fading figure featured on the cover of Kroetsch's A Likely Story. In the turn-of-the-century original, this black-and-white photograph would actually be sepia brown, adding to the sense that Bolden is not as clearly defined as the signifying words and images that attempt to capture him suggest. Webb watches the image of the absent Bolden gradually coming into view in the developing tray of the photographer E.J. Bellocq. It is a print of 'the friend who in reality had reversed the process and gone back into white, who in this bad film seemed to have already half-receded'.<sup>146</sup> The black man has gone into the white of unrecorded history, the black type of the text into the white page of silence, the practically empty final page with which the work concludes.

This whited-out image is one of literal over-exposure, a condition from which Bolden is certainly suffering in New Orleans. After Webb's departure, Bellocq destroys the photographic original in an act of friendship which Lorraine M. York describes as 'protective concealment'; 'Bellocq prefers to allow Buddy to sink into obscurity and sanity, like the negatives slowly dissolving into whiteness in his tray'.<sup>147</sup> This famous black man wants 'white privacy',<sup>148</sup> to be 'anonymous and alone in a white room'.<sup>149</sup> He craves his opposite, his other, in a self-destructive but escapist attempt to be someone else.

Bolden is not the only figure in the text who feels the necessity to 'remove . . . [him]self from the 20th century game of fame' in such a way.<sup>150</sup> Ondaatje refused to aid his most recent biographer, Ed Jewinski, describing himself as 'too over-revealed',<sup>151</sup> and thus in need of privacy. He is very much a hidden presence in this work, attempting to discover his own identity from the position of the Other by physically

reaching out to Bolden, as if he were his mirror image. This gesture resembles Bolden's highly destructive wish to mirror and unite with a girl in the parade crowd, the moment at which he goes mad.

Ondaatje's identification with Bolden occurs in a pivotal passage in the novel where the first person narrator switches unsignalled to the voice of the author. Only a single page of scant biographical facts separate the two men in the text, as they do in Ondaatje's fictional engagement with Bolden. The 'I' which was previously that of Bolden, becomes that of Ondaatje, so that the two are associated through the shared pronoun, later to become 'we'. Ondaatje, like his character Bolden, becomes an imaginary construct, writing himself into the fiction of his own novel as yet another one of the speaking voices who in turn narrate Bolden's life story. Ondaatje fails to retain the objective stance of a biographer. He declares to Bolden that he does 'not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body'.<sup>152</sup> The author startlingly breaks across temporal, fictional and psychological barriers in his empathy for Bolden. At the same time, Bolden's personal history of self-mutilation reflects the past of Ondaatje, or at least that of the Ondaatje persona, to such an extent that it seems to transport him towards total identification:

When he went mad he was the same age as I am now.

The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair.

Defiling people we did not wish to be. . . .

What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself?<sup>153</sup>

Ondaatje topples over the edge, the mirror shatters, the barrier breaks down, as Asian / Afro-Caribbean, Canadian / American, writer / musician merge. Ondaatje and Bolden experience a crisis of alienation, attempting to know themselves through an external image. But is this move towards a position of self as other entirely destructive? What might be Ondaatje's artistic purpose in this brief but dramatic revelation?

In his critique of the novel, Robert Kroetsch, himself a master of disappearance, asserts that 'in the mirror Ondaatje reads not so much his own text as his own

absence'.<sup>154</sup> This is a deceptive comment because the defining line between absence and presence is so tentative in Ondaatje's work. How 'present' is Bolden as he sits totally silent, static and internalised in the asylum? Ann Wilson argues persuasively that 'Coming through Slaughter is not a portrait of Bolden but a reflection of Michael Ondaatje: a fictive biography radically transformed into a (fictive) autobiography. Ondaatje has appropriated the form of Bolden's life to explore his own'.<sup>155</sup> Talking of his need for privacy and creative freedom, Ondaatje has described the way in which 'for writers in Canada today, there's so much stuff being written around them that it's almost like being surrounded and locked up'.<sup>156</sup> Are these shades of Bolden, constrained by fame and later by the walls of the House of Detention and the asylum? Bolden fears he has been packaged to the point where he is a series of labels, 'read the labels. The labels are coming home'.<sup>157</sup> Such a psychological portrayal takes on personal relevance for Ondaatje when one studies his comments in interview. Ondaatje, resisting self-classification, is adamant that 'it's dangerous for a writer to be living in a community obsessed with all these categories'.<sup>158</sup> No wonder then that Ondaatje seeks elusively to slip from sight despite his personal quest for self.

Ondaatje may not wish to be classified as a particular type of author (novelist, poet, or the like), but this does not mean he renounces all need for group identification, for 'belonging'. Community is important to him. I shall now turn to Ondaatje's most direct artistic investigation of the family and national communities to which he somewhat problematically belongs. It is this context that reveals further complications to the insecure and shifting subjective boundaries that criss-cross his work.

## V

Running in the Family is Ondaatje's clearest articulation of what he describes elsewhere as 'the possibilities of finding your own mythology in your own landscape'.<sup>159</sup> His aesthetic continues to be bound up with mythologising historical figures through disappearance, but in this text such a process takes on the dimensions of personal, physical loss. Ondaatje is left imaginatively searching for his father, Mervyn, who even before his death was divorced from his family, both legally and geographically. In Christopher Ondaatje's account of his own first return journey to Sri Lanka, he describes his brother's novel Running in the Family as 'in many ways . . . a love letter to

the father [Michael] never knew, a large and glamorous man away in the distance'.<sup>160</sup> Michael Ondaatje only spent time with his father as a small boy before his departure for school in England. I shall argue that the cross-national characteristics of Ondaatje's life have naturally led to his continuing fascination with the wilderness, a physical and imaginative landscape he can call his own precisely because it is a concept that signifies the uncultivated areas of more than one of the disparate nations in which he has lived.

In an interview conducted in the late 1970s, Ondaatje described himself as being 'in a way . . . a very displaced person', further admitting that he 'really env[ied] roots'.<sup>161</sup> This is a common immigrant experience, but it was not until fifteen years into his writing career that Ondaatje decided to return to Ceylon (by now named Sri Lanka, since 1972)<sup>162</sup> to retrace his family roots. He made two visits, in 1978 and 1980, the first since his departure from the country as an eleven-year-old, in preparation for the writing of an (auto)biography. Running in the Family is about his family and his father in particular, but it is also about his own complex quest for identity. Such complexities may partially explain Ondaatje's delay, as noted and criticised by some commentators,<sup>163</sup> in returning physically and creatively to the place of his birth.

As a citizen of Canada, Ondaatje adopted a less than secure or coherent national identity, but the Ceylonese one he left behind was no less problematic. In Running in the Family, Ondaatje describes his fellow Sri Lankans as 'a mongrel collection part Sinhalese part Dutch part Tamil',<sup>164</sup> the lack of punctuation signifying the absence of clear separation between the different inter-married races. Earlier, Ondaatje relates how 'Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of [those on the island] when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was'. 'God alone knows, your excellency' came the reply.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, as Burghers of colonial descent, the Ondaatjes were alienated from other sectors of the Ceylonese population by the social privilege of wealth and class, and associated with that imperial position, 'a weakness for pretending to be "English"'.<sup>166</sup> Nationality takes on the dimensions of farce when it is a matter of performance or pretence. Ondaatje, implicitly referring to Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, adds 'part ass' to his 'mongrel collection' of insular national groups.<sup>167</sup> Yet this colonial 'British streak' in the Ondaatje family encourages his biographer, Jewinski, to suggest that before emigrating to England, Michael was

already 'a stranger in a strange land, even the one he called home'.<sup>168</sup> No small wonder then that Ondaatje, both in his life and writing, has continually struggled against a sense of displacement.

Throughout Running in the Family, Ondaatje refers to the country he is visiting as Ceylon, thus signalling the psychological and emotional difficulties encompassed by his return journey. This is a place (in name at least) which no longer exists on any world map, so that Ondaatje's cartographical search for 'possible routes to Ceylon'<sup>169</sup> involves a physical impossibility, achieved instead as a journey of the imagination back into the past. Ondaatje emphasises that in ontological terms location is a matter of mental not physical placing by opening the work with a section entitled 'Asia', set entirely in Toronto, Canada. It is his 'dreaming' of the continent, his imaginative travel, that is important.<sup>170</sup> Geography becomes highly personal and internalised: 'I carry my own landscape in me', Ondaatje declares.<sup>171</sup> For an immigrant writer, this inner geography can be seen as one strategy for striking a balance between the decision to 'Tell this landscape/ Or the one we came from'.<sup>172</sup> Ondaatje may speak enthusiastically about the advantages of being 'allowed the migrant's double perspective',<sup>173</sup> but fissile forces also operate within such a dual vision, a phenomenon Ondaatje clearly experienced on his visits to Sri Lanka. Douglas Barbour describes Ondaatje's 'schizophrenic sense of simultaneously belonging and not belonging to th[e] magical place'<sup>174</sup> which Ondaatje represents Ceylon as being in this family account.

In Running in the Family Ondaatje stresses that 'we own the country we grow up in or we are exiles and invaders'.<sup>175</sup> This ownership is an imaginative, not a legal or a physical one. Ondaatje knows that his own temporary and potentially distanced position as an observer of his former native land is precariously similar to those 'foreigners . . . who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the "inquisitive natives" and left'.<sup>176</sup> Recognising his ambiguous borderline position, Ondaatje declares, by way of oxymoron, that 'I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner'.<sup>177</sup> This sense of having forgotten the familiarities of life in Ceylon/Sri Lanka to such an extent that Ondaatje might feel himself to be a foreigner is illustrated by an earlier incident when his niece (still living in Colombo) has to warn him to "Watch out for snakes!" as he sets off through the bush in his sandals.<sup>178</sup> This split status as both

an insider and an outsider in Sri Lanka is clearly represented in terms of Ondaatje's subjective positioning in relation to the text. While 'witness[ing] everything',<sup>179</sup> Ondaatje may be an invisible I/eye intimately narrating events 'from the inside'. But there is a sense in which he is removed from these happenings, not just temporally but perceptually: 'Often I didn't have time to watch the country slide by thick with event, for everything came directly to me and passed me like snow'.<sup>180</sup> As a Canadian in tropical Sri Lanka, he is an outsider and the incongruous simile signals this distance. In his poem, 'Tin Roof' (1984), also set abroad on a tropical island, Ondaatje acknowledges linguistically the subtle but important distinction between 'those who are in/ and . . . those who look in',<sup>181</sup> by a single change of verb.

This is not the only way in which Ondaatje's positioning is ambiguous in relation to the boundaries of inclusion or exclusion. In other works by Ondaatje, the reader only becomes consciously aware of the author as an absent presence through the self-reflexive gestures he makes near the end of the text. In Running in the Family, the writer is not absent (one is often reminded of his physical presence: 'the air reaches me unevenly with its gusts against my arms, face, and this paper', 'I write this . . . sweat down my back'<sup>182</sup>). But he is anonymous. To be sure, Ondaatje is very much inside the text as the person actively writing the work from its opening onwards. Yet he also stands outside it as a figure whose life and characteristics are never narrated.

Ondaatje exists only in the present time framework of Running in the Family. Past recollections exclude him. He emphasises his own phantasmic presence, playfully disappearing before the readers' very eyes by deliberately disappointing their expectations of glimpsing him. Having related over a hundred pages of family history which exclude anecdotes about himself, the section titled 'How I Bathed' appears to offer a revelation, a reminiscence by Gillian about her brother Michael. She 'begins to describe to everyone present [including the reader] how I used to be bathed when I was five',<sup>183</sup> the authorial persona's own anticipation heightening ours. But the boy Michael does not appear from the obscurity surrounding him. The tale turns out to be about Ondaatje's nurse or ayah, Maratina, and the authoritarian regime she imposed at Bishop College School where he was a pupil. Similarly, a photograph of four children in front of a waterfall, which could very well be Michael and his brother and sisters, Christopher, Gillian and Janet,<sup>184</sup> is not elucidated at all, even though we have already



been given a detailed description of the previous photograph featuring Ondaatje's parents together on their honeymoon.

So even if Running in the Family is the 'most accurate book in terms of geography'<sup>185</sup> that Ondaatje has written to date, it would be a mistake to assume that he is attempting an accurate portrayal of himself or his father, his possible other in this text.<sup>186</sup> In the acknowledgments to the novel, Ondaatje stresses that 'the book is not a history but a portrait or "gesture"'.<sup>187</sup> Yet he omits to say of whom it might be a 'portrait', since the work shows a number of figures mythically constructed through superstitions, tall tales and anecdotes. Through this statement, Ondaatje tries to preempt the sort of withering criticism levelled at the novel by commentators like Arun Mukerjee, who lambasted the work and its author for a lack of political and historical engagement with the colonial exploitation of Sri Lanka's past and Ondaatje's own personal history of immigrant 'otherness'.<sup>188</sup> Ondaatje apologizes for 'the fictional air' of his pseudo-biography but suggests that such a tone is highly appropriate to 'Sri Lanka [where] a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts'.<sup>189</sup> The emphasis in this work is on humour not accuracy of historical representation.

Similarly, in the acknowledgment to Coming through Slaughter, Ondaatje refers to 'the truth of fiction',<sup>190</sup> recalling Kroetsch's statement about fiction 'making real' in Canadian literature. 'I started to discover I was being more honest when I was inventing, more truthful when dreaming',<sup>191</sup> Ondaatje thought-provokingly suggests. His aim is not so much to work towards any sort of factual 'reality' but to concentrate on verisimilitude of mood or tone. Christopher Ondaatje, admiring the imaginative journey his brother has undertaken in Running in the Family, asserts that 'even when [Michael] exaggerated certain facts he remained truthful to their spirit'.<sup>192</sup> Just as Ondaatje has lamented the restrictions imposed upon him by specific landscapes, so too he strives to overcome 'the limitations [one experiences] when you're dealing with real people',<sup>193</sup> a situation, he believes, in which the writer feels obliged to represent their subject 'properly with some kind of decency, or with some kind of accuracy'.<sup>194</sup> Ondaatje dismisses the conventions of mimetic realism, showing a complete disregard for the genre boundary between fact and fiction. In his only other biographical project involving a person known personally to him - Ondaatje's 'fantasy documentary' film

about bp Nichol (1944-1988), Sons of Captain Poetry (1970)<sup>195</sup> - he recollects how he had to keep telling the poet that 'it's not real'. 'It's not really Barrie Nichol, this is a fictional character we're gonna present'.<sup>196</sup> Asked by an interviewer if there was anyone else about whom he would like to make a film, Ondaatje replied that he would be interested in 'playing with biography' by filming a piece on the eccentric, reclusive American inventor, manufacturer and mining and oil magnate, Howard Hughes (1869-1924): 'The film would never show him of course, he'd just appear as a shadow going around corners'.<sup>197</sup> The sense that Ondaatje's father is fleetingly glimpsed in Running in the Family is only partly a result of the fact that Ondaatje was 'too young and oblivious'<sup>198</sup> to notice or later recall the family dramas going on around him as a small boy in Ceylon. I believe that Ondaatje never intended to fully or 'accurately' reveal his father, even with the help of his family. But what of his own partial subjective representation in the text?

Ondaatje is not the only immigrant Canadian to choose disappearance as a strategy for the paradoxical attempt to discover the boundaries of the self. The Canadian Daphne Marlatt describes her own difficulty in physically revisiting, writing and coming to terms with her 'Penang past',<sup>199</sup> as a poet and novelist of Malaysian origin. This experience was made more problematic by the fact that when she was 'a young immigrant she long attempted to disappear into Canadian society',<sup>200</sup> denying her roots in the process of assimilation. Marlatt's experience of a doubleness of place and identity, where geographical and subjective divisions need to be overcome before any coherence of self can be achieved, reflects clearly on the experiences of Ondaatje. Sections of her Penang journal were published in a 1979 issue of the Capilano Review alongside excerpts from Running in the Family,<sup>201</sup> and Ondaatje acknowledges Marlatt's special contribution to the editing of his Sri Lanka-based work.<sup>202</sup> She describes how 'the sense that the you you were in that place is not the same you as the you you are in this place, though the two overlap, produces a desire to knit the two places, two (at least) selves, somehow'.<sup>203</sup> At the end of Running in the Family, Ondaatje attempts to link his past and present selves, the Ceylonese boy and the Canadian man, as self and other (here a former 'foreign' self) collide. 'There is nothing in this view . . . that might

not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven',<sup>204</sup> he observes on the point of a second departure as an adult.

Marlatt believes that 'writers who feel this [duality] are often interested in myth and symbol which are common to disparate phenomena and form a universal language underlying the specifics of the local'.<sup>205</sup> The overriding symbolic link in the writings of Michael Ondaatje is the landscape, and specifically the wilderness, which 'knits the two places' he might call home together. The wilderness may be frequently associated with Canada, but not so often with the lesser known Sri Lanka. Christopher Ondaatje, however, recounting his safari in search of leopards, stresses that 'the jungle - so called in Ceylon, [is] more a dry wilderness of thorn bushes and scrub than a rain forest'.<sup>206</sup> He continues to use this term throughout his account.

The wilderness becomes a symbolic zone for his brother Michael, allowing for the mythic construction of shifting and disappearing figures, precisely because it enables changing signification and location. The word wilderness is a flexible and undelineated signifier denoting not only the vegetation and the landscape. It is also implicitly associated with behaviour, in 'the wild, carefree life' lived in Ceylon between the wars,<sup>207</sup> where children (and adults) enjoyed immense freedom and space. Ondaatje goes further still, linking memory and a fertile imagination with the rambling excesses of the wilderness. 'Memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here',<sup>208</sup> he suggests, later describing how 'tea bush became jungle, branches put their arms into the windows. If you stood still you were invaded'.<sup>209</sup> Ondaatje portrays the paranoid dipsomania of his father in terms of 'nature advanc[ing]',<sup>210</sup> suggesting here what his brother makes explicit, that his father's mad psychological condition is a 'wilderness', one which 'could be extreme . . . border[ing] on self-destruction'.<sup>211</sup> The wilderness is total internal and external environment, as the boundaries between habited and uninhabited spaces, civilisation and the wild, order and chaos, sanity and madness, break down: 'wildlife stormed or crept into homes'.<sup>212</sup> Ondaatje's aunt lives in a dilapidated house 'whose wings are now disintegrating into the garden and bush', in the same way that her mind is decaying towards senility.<sup>213</sup>

Ondaatje's writing and his own imaginative aesthetic seem caught in a balance between freedom (whose wild extreme is madness) and rational order. 'I wanted poetry to be walnuts/ in their green cases',<sup>214</sup> he says, suggesting 'in a nutshell' the artistic limits of succinctly encapsulated forms and images, 'but now it is the sea/ and we let it drown us'.<sup>215</sup> Ondaatje balances the suggested chaos of the wilderness with the symbolic order it brings to his work. 'Writing is trying to make order, to understand something about yourself', he states, acknowledging that 'orderless situations are, for me, the most interesting things, and I tend to write about the finding out of order'.<sup>216</sup> In Running in the Family, Ondaatje sees the role of succeeding generations as one which involves 'eliminat[ing] the chaos . . . and with "the mercy of distance" writ[ing] the histories'.<sup>217</sup> It is with this added 'distance' that Ondaatje engages more fully with Canadian and European history in his last two novels, In the Skin of a Lion and The English Patient (1992).

## VI

In the 1980s, Ondaatje stated that: 'I do feel now that I am a Canadian'.<sup>218</sup> Having integrated his feelings of displacement and exile into a new sense of belonging with the help of temporal distance, Ondaatje suggested that he 'feel[s] more comfortable about writing of Canada' now, but that he 'had to do Running first'.<sup>219</sup> In his latest two novels, difficulties in defining national identity are increasingly linked to Ondaatje's earlier questioning of private and personal subjectivities.

In In the Skin of a Lion, Ondaatje continues to deal with the portrayal of neo-colonial social structures, as well as the personal displacement evident in Running in the Family. The concepts of insider and outsider, native and alien, presence and absence, articulation and silence still preoccupy Ondaatje. However, in his far more politicised novel about the building of Toronto, these polarised characteristics are inverted rather than conflated. As Hutcheon points out, 'the outsiders, the "ex-centrics" . . . are made the paradoxical (and very postmodern) centre of the novel'.<sup>220</sup> Ondaatje's reversal of centre and margin illustrates an important quality of writing which is literally situated on the border, at the edge of an incomplete bridge span, within the limits of a tunnel. Such boundaries are sites of subversion, as Maggie Humm has observed: 'Border people are likely to have a heightened perception of symbolic

boundaries, the experience of being simultaneously "insider" and "outsider".<sup>221</sup> Centre and margin can more easily be inverted at the border. The Don Valley is a geographical boundary, and by building the Bloor Street Viaduct the immigrant workers manage to 'link the east end with the centre of the city',<sup>222</sup> spanning a cultural and linguistic gap, as well as a physical one. This construction work thus symbolically indicates the possibility for decreasing the gulf and therefore invalidating the distinction between centre and margin.

This bridging motif could be potentially utopian but throughout In the Skin of a Lion Ondaatje emphasises that marginality, and the invisibility associated with it, is not an existential state that all peoples are free to decide upon or alter. Many of his earlier characters are portrayed as choosing exile and disappearance for a variety of personal reasons, but the luxury of deciding on the extent of one's public profile or visibility is not afforded to those who actually built urban Canada - namely, the immigrant labourers and the working classes with which they are associated. Ondaatje believes that 'Canada has always been a very racist society, and it's getting more so'.<sup>223</sup>

Throughout In the Skin of a Lion he reverses the temporal process of recorded 'history' in which inanimate architectural structures remain long after the lives of those who built them are forgotten and 'lost'. It is only through his own writing that the marginal becomes central. Ondaatje voices this situation with some anger as he discusses his research work on the Bloor Street Viaduct with Barbara Turner: 'I can tell you exactly how many buckets of sand were used, because this is Toronto history, but the people who actually built the god-damn bridge were unspoken of. They're unhistorical!'.<sup>224</sup>

This discovery may well account for Ondaatje's decision to 'reject . . . an early, intricate plot centred on the deals of [Ambrose] Small',<sup>225</sup> a millionaire entrepreneur and theatre owner (born 1867), whose historical disappearance on 2nd December 1919 'occasioned the most vigorous man-hunt in Canadian history'.<sup>226</sup> Small was never found, dead or alive. Nevertheless, he was sufficiently well-placed, both in financial and social terms, to make a conscious decision to go 'underground', out of public sight, a scenario Ondaatje imagines in In the Skin of a Lion.<sup>227</sup> Rather than concentrating on the possibly staged disappearance of this wealthy and prominent figure, Ondaatje's interest shifted to the invisibility imposed on others, the unwritten histories of the poor, effaced migrant workers, represented in the novel by Patrick Lewis and Nicholas

Temelcoff. Temelcoff was the name of an actual Macedonian immigrant who arrived in Canada in 1913 and as 'a man who had no apparent fear of heights' found work with the Dominion Bridge Company.<sup>228</sup> Ondaatje 'discovered' this figure in an unpublished socio-historical thesis and 'had to decide whether or not [he] was going to use [Temelcoff's] real name'.<sup>229</sup> 'It became very important to me to use his real name', Ondaatje explains, 'because he's someone who has been overlooked historically'.<sup>230</sup>

Michael Greenstein stresses the complex interweaving of different strands of the motif of disappearance, erasure and absence in the novel when he attempts to describe its fragmented narrative: 'Ambrose is missing, Patrick disappears into Clara who got lost in piano music, Nicholas looks for his absent nun, and the reader becomes another searcher refilling historical absences'.<sup>231</sup> Yet *In the Skin of a Lion* is not such an unstructured confusion of images as this description suggests. Ambrose's privileged decision to disappear contrasts with that of the worker and union activist, Cato, who is murdered by his logging employers in the wilderness north. His body is burnt and disposed of beneath the ice in an attempt to obliterate his identity and fake his disappearance. This is a violent act which physically parallels the historical, textual 'burial' of the nameless workers in undocumented obscurity. Ondaatje inverts the common Canadian thematic image of 'natural' disappearance in the wilderness when he describes Cato as one who 'knows snow country . . . He can, it seems, disappear under the surface of it' for safety and concealment, with no loss of self.<sup>232</sup> Humanity, not Nature, is the destructive adversary.

Ondaatje, trying to redress the balance of historical visibility, is well aware of the power of the written word as he acts as a documentary conjuror bringing the lives of the 'disappeared' back into public sight. Ondaatje believes that 'the drama of entrance into a new land is central in [Canadian] writing'.<sup>233</sup> Those entering Canada now are still important pioneers, people who should have equal rights to both Canadian citizenship and representation, despite their historical moment of arrival. The workers chart new ground through their labour on the viaduct and the waterworks. They are either above or below the city, but never truly a part of it. The bridge builder, Nicholas Temelcoff, 'knows the panorama of the valley . . . better than the surveyors of 1912 when they worked blind through the bush'.<sup>234</sup> Yet as he works in the darkness and isolation of the

empty expanse under the bridge, he may have 'charted all that space'.<sup>235</sup> But his territory is composed of thin air and silence. Equally, the migrant workers tunnelling below the surface of Lake Ontario have 'the whole continent in front' of them.<sup>236</sup> At the same time, they are working in a void which represents their empty and dark, hidden existence in Canada. So why are immigrants denied proper territorial and documentary rights by a Canadian society which is itself composed of foreign settlers? This is the question implicitly raised by Ondaatje. To a large extent, the answer lies in linguistic disparities and the socio-political boundaries different languages create.

These immigrant workers may have made very considerable border crossings across geographical divides to reach Canada but when they arrive they discover there is a language barrier which may prove even more difficult to cross. Temelcoff knows that 'If he didn't learn the language he would be lost',<sup>237</sup> in an isolated and silent linguistic wilderness every bit as terrifying as the unknown Canadian bush which greeted the original settlers. He is not alone in this experience. Boundaries may well hinder those on both sides and the language barrier proves to be no exception.

Affiliation is a highly problematized concept in this novel because it questions the criteria for national identification. Ondaatje ironically reverses the sense of who really belongs in the landscape of urban Canada. It is not the immigrants who are 'outsiders' in *In the Skin of a Lion*, but native Canadians like the Ontario-born R.C. Harris.<sup>238</sup> Despite his status as Commissioner, Harris is ignorant of his country in various important respects, unable to communicate with those putting his dreams into practice. Another such figure is Patrick Lewis, the novel's central protagonist - of sorts.<sup>239</sup> Perceiving himself to be the immigrant, the Canadian Patrick lives 'in silence, with [foreign] noise and conversation all around him'.<sup>240</sup> As a result of his provincial, rural upbringing, he is as much 'an immigrant to the city'<sup>241</sup> as the other foreign labourers, knowing little of his nation's history and geography: 'He has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place . . . a searcher gazing into the darkness of his own country'.<sup>242</sup> His alien status comes to the fore because he lives among his fellow workers in the Bulgarian and Macedonian ghettos of Toronto. While Patrick is portrayed as a passive onlooker, an invisible watcher of events, who has emotionally 'disappeared' into himself,<sup>243</sup> the

immigrants have claimed this area as Macedonian territory through their active communal presence in it. Patrick realises that 'his street' is 'their street, for he was their alien'.<sup>244</sup>

Separated into their different language groups, Ondaatje portrays the resounding irony of inclusive yet divisive national distinctions when he describes the workers calling to each other - 'knowing little more than each other's false names or true countries. Hey Italy! . . . Hey Canada!'.<sup>245</sup> Patrick is just another foreigner, and one from a minority group in terms of the population of migrant workers. As an anonymous man, he may come to represent Canada through language (and to a lesser extent birth). Conversely, he is alienated by 'his lack of language'<sup>246</sup> in his own 'home' country. Despite being a Canadian in Canada, it is language that becomes a barrier, one Patrick 'tr[ies] desperately to leap over'<sup>247</sup> so that he can attain a sense of community and affiliation with his fellow workers.

Ondaatje gestures at the notion of hyphenated Canadian identity in this passage, with Italian-Canadians and Macedonian-Canadians. But what of a Canadian-Canadian? Such a concept mocks these definitions as oxymoronic conjunctions, demonstrating that the very use of the term immigrant, and its associated classifications, precludes belonging. How far would Ondaatje support Neil Bissoondath's claim that the Canadian policy of multiculturalism - <sup>248</sup> a policy which encourages foreign distinction among the country's sizable immigrant population - 'depends on the distancing created by that infamous hyphen, all the while demeaning that which it claims to preserve'<sup>249</sup> Are the distinctions of multiculturalism (which became official public policy in 1971) a better option than the historical portrayal of a Canadian migrant labour force treated as homogenous by employers in *In the Skin of a Lion*? Dennis Duffy proposes that such a representation is 'not . . . some socialist vision of a boundaryless, global fraternity of workers' but, instead, 'stark evidence of the faceless, interchangeable nature of manual labourers' in Canada in the first half of this century <sup>250</sup> - another form of blanket disappearance imposed by state authorities. Is multiculturalism an attempt to marginalise even as different immigrant groups apparently gain more visibility? The Trinidadian-born Bissoondath, now a citizen of Canada, goes as far as to suggest that this government policy is 'a gentle form of apartheid'.<sup>251</sup> Faced with such viewpoints,



where might one draw the line with distinctions of identity? Both Michael and his brother agree with the necessity for some form of assimilation. But how far should this go? Like language, nationality is seen as learnt or conditioned behaviour by Christopher Ondaatje: 'To be a success' here in Canada, he asserts, 'the first thing you have to learn is to be Canadian - which fundamentally means you have to think like a Canadian'.<sup>252</sup> Equally, Michael, already an English-speaker, nevertheless made a conscious decision 'never to talk about Ceylon', having observed with disgust, 'those new Canadians who came from Britain and never stopped talking about it'.<sup>253</sup> So can one ever be fully Canadian if not Canadian-born?

Ondaatje views national identity in the context of performance where migration and metamorphosis must go hand-in-hand if the conditions of alienation and exile are to be overcome. Significantly, the novel had a working title, 'Available Light', indicating the importance of turning the spot light of textual focus on the lives of the previously present but invisible players on the historically darkened stage of nationhood. Fotios Sarris has explored at length the symbolic contrast of light and darkness in the novel, suggesting that 'the ghostly evanescence of the unrecorded lives that lie behind the herringbone tiles and copper roofs' of the municipal Toronto Waterworks 'can never fully emerge from the darkness'.<sup>254</sup> Sarris fails, however, to emphasise the importance of a more positive theatrical metaphor of self-discovery. In this model, the need for visible statements of identity is highlighted in the context of the possibility of staging one's subjectivity. Recurring theatrical imagery suggests that identity, both national and personal, is a performative gesture but no less authentic for that. Alice appears as an accomplished actress to her lover, Patrick, as he admires how 'she leaps from her true self to her other true self',<sup>255</sup> playing new roles on stage, unaware that she has undergone a more radical transformation from her former existence as a nun. Once cloistered in hidden silence, she is now a mime actress on the 'dangerous new country of the stage'.<sup>256</sup> Alice represents the silent oppression of the workers in non-verbal but highly visible and public ways, thus demonstrating that communication goes beyond the limit of words.

Theatrical transformation connects with another associated motif in In the Skin of a Lion: the wearing of skins as exchangeable costumes. Susan Spearey stresses that 'the skins that each character wears can be seen as manifestations of various personalities

and subject positions rather than disguises which serve to conceal an essential and predetermined character'.<sup>257</sup> In Coming through Slaughter and Billy the Kid, the skin is represented as a boundary of individuation to be rigidly held. Here Ondaatje associates it with metamorphosis, a type of garment to be cast off in a liberating act. Such dermal symbolism is appropriate since the skin is biologically characterised as a flexible corporeal membrane or boundary, constantly being shed in a process of regeneration. In a series of images dealing with changing skin pigment, Ondaatje demonstrates that hard and fast distinctions should not be made on the basis of skin colour, since this is only one superficial aspect of identity which can be manipulated for good or bad ends. During the course of their work, the dyers temporarily lose their sense of cultural identity along with their natural skin colour. But in the shower afterwards, 'the colour disrobed itself from the body . . . and they stepped out, in the erotica of being made free'.<sup>258</sup> Canada's history of economic reliance on the fur trade, the trafficking of skins, has its twentieth-century equivalent in commerce that is still based on the exploitation of different skin types. Ondaatje depicts the immigrant labourers as disadvantaged and discriminated against because of their race - of which colour and creed are two important constituents. In this incident, the tanners are symbolically trapped by their skin pigment.

But in other situations artificial skin colourings are beneficial. When painting the roof of the prison sky blue the Italian-Canadian thief Caravaggio, whose very name suggests his potential skill with a brush, manages to escape by painting himself blue. Thus he becomes invisible, passing over the boundaries of the penitentiary in the blue skin of 'an exotic creature'.<sup>259</sup> It is the change in skin colour that is important in this novel. Patrick is described as 'a chameleon',<sup>260</sup> an animal renowned for its ability to alter its skin colour. His lover Clara's parting gesture is to give him another type of lizard, an iguana, an animal which Ondaatje describes in his poetry as having the ability to 'undress out of his skin'.<sup>261</sup> Patrick himself manages to disappear into the night using blacking, 'invisible except to touch, grease covering all unclothed skin',<sup>262</sup> in an act of freedom which, like that of Caravaggio, appears in the context of 'demarcation'.<sup>263</sup> Contrary to its normal definition, Ondaatje uses this word to mean a lack of marks or distinctions - affording the liberty associated with a loss of boundaries, an invisibility

which here is enabling. This type of redefinition indicates the change in perception which Ondaatje is advocating.

Skin (and its distinction on the basis of pigment) is a barrier to be shed if it is not to be used, like language, as a point of difference to divide people. How one retains one's sense of cultural identity, of which skin colour and language are constituent elements, while still integrating into the larger identity of the nation, is a dilemma which Ondaatje never directly tackles in this or any other work. Ondaatje appears to believe that it is necessary to adapt one's linguistic, as well as corporeal, perceptions, showing a willingness to alter one's limits in the face of change. In other words, immigrants need to be linguistic chameleons, changing their language according to their surroundings as a strategy for psychological survival. The language barrier must be overcome. To be in the skin of a lion confers linguistic power; the coat of animal pelts used in the workers drama is passed among them, cloaking the wearer in words so they are 'able to break through [their] chrysalis into language',<sup>264</sup> in an act which clearly entails metamorphosis. Gordon Gamlin suggests that 'in Ondaatje's novel, the skin of the lion . . . suggests the acquisition of previously foreign attributes and qualities', so that 'one's skin [becomes] emblematic of the gaining of a new cultural identity'.<sup>265</sup> Patrick feels his 'skin coming off his cheek and back'<sup>266</sup> as he struggles through one of the tunnel barriers at the waterworks. But such physical suffering is a small price to pay for gaining the liberating chance to voice himself and the workers in the captive hearing of the Commissioner. Previously a taciturn character, Patrick effectively becomes a new, more vocal, if not visible man, able to narrate his whole life story to Hana - in the form of the novel In the Skin of a Lion.

The story - recounted by the composite layered voices of Ondaatje, Patrick and Hana - demonstrates how language can be both an obstruction and a link between people. Lines may divide or unite. People can erect barriers or build bridges. In this novel, Canada is seen as a country divided linguistically not so much by the classic Anglo / French issue but by the gap between the immigrant and settler-descendent populations, in a multicultural society in which all should rightfully be regarded as true Canadian citizens.

The increasing racism of which Ondaatje talks about in 1987 continues to be evident nearly a decade later in the very high-profile and widely broadcast speech by

Quebec Premier, Jacques Parizeau, after his Yes side lost the October 1995 Referendum on Quebec sovereignty. Blaming the allophone ('other', non-French / English-speaking) electorate, his notorious statement - 'It's true that we were beaten, but by whom? Money and the ethnic vote'<sup>267</sup>- prompted calls for his resignation. Despite the dual linguistic, cultural and political choice which the referendum question effectively but indirectly offered,<sup>268</sup> Parizeau's words clearly indicate the multiple racial complexities at play on constitutional issues of national identity. Ondaatje's novel works directly against such divisive linguistic distinctions.

Humm believes that 'passing across the borders of language is a way of making the arbitrariness of national cultures very visible'.<sup>269</sup> Certainly, Patrick discovers he has more affinity with the Macedonian workers than he does with the Canadian-born Commissioner. Nationality may divide not unite people living within the same borders. Ondaatje describes Canada as 'a country of metamorphosis, where we . . . put on new clothes'.<sup>270</sup> To assimilate properly into a new environment, one needs to be prepared to let down one's barriers, to risk jumping out of one's old skin into a new identity. Temelcoff daringly leaps off the bridge as he leaps into his new-found language. The celibate nun Alice falls from the viaduct, symbolising her later brave step into the sinful secular world of heterosexual interaction, without even a scream.<sup>271</sup> As 'outsiders' living on the edge of society, both these two characters have faced fearful plunges into the unknown, like all those who choose to emigrate, and so have less to fear or lose in subsequent border crossings.

The Canadian people may themselves need to take a leap of faith in embracing the changes to the structure of their society, breaking down the barriers to allow for the acceptance of immigrants and indigenous Native peoples into the main body of the Canadian nation. Significantly, the Canadian, Patrick, is the one main figure in the novel who teeters on the brink, but fears to make the border crossing which Ondaatje represents as so liberating in this work. Patrick wants to unite with others through language but something in his silent, reclusive nature inhibits him. When he meets his lover, Clara, after a long separation he describes his state as being 'on the verge as usual'.<sup>272</sup> He recognizes that 'there was a terrible horizon in him beyond which he couldn't leap. Something hollow, so when alone . . . he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community'.<sup>273</sup> Unlike Temelcoff, he is not a

bridger of gaps. He has very rigid limits: 'There was a wall in him that no one reached'.<sup>274</sup>

Border crossings are particularly cathartic for Patrick. It is only when Patrick allows some of his barriers to break down, that he can undergo his own psychic passage across borders to reconcile his painful past with the present; to pass from silence to articulation and from individual isolation to the unity of community. Borders are typically areas where much movement occurs. But it is the direction of this movement which is important. Patrick makes an important political gesture by swimming along the intake tunnel of the waterworks and across two barriers to confront Harris. He journeys back against the direction in which he originally helped dig and thus moves against his oppression as a manual labourer, making a gesture on behalf of all his fellow workers and friends. 'Whereas William Bonney, Buddy Bolden, and Mervyn Ondaatje move away from all social gesture towards silence', Christian Bok emphasises, 'the proletarian worker Patrick Lewis moves in the opposite direction and finds in a newly discovered language some sense of social communion and social purpose'.<sup>275</sup> Both Patrick and Harris survive their potentially life-threatening encounter through genuine interaction which involves both men making some form of accommodation in their views or intentions, effectively shifting the boundaries of their original position. Canada's survival as a united yet diverse multi-cultural nation may equally depend on it becoming more flexible at its margins, be they linguistic or geographical.

## VII

As he demonstrates in his most recent award-winning novel, The English Patient (1992), Ondaatje's continuing artistic exploration of the complex issues surrounding borders and boundaries has resulted not in a clarification of these border issues but an imaginative critique which increasingly problematises the way in which boundaries affect national and personal identity. Eradicating certain linguistic and social national divisions may be the utopian possibility suggested in In the Skin of a Lion. But even if such national distinctions were to disappear, what form of identity would be left? Further, what is the role of a writer like Ondaatje, in attempting to create an artistic vision of a socio-politically boundless world, when his very craft depends on

delineation through language and the imposition of semantic limitations in the act of naming?

In his latest work, Ondaatje explores these questions directly. Here the central character is burnt beyond recognition, his national and personal identity eradicated along with the individuating boundary of his skin. He has all but disappeared, physically, as well as in name. The geographical mapping of nations and personal literary representations are linked in the novel, as the anonymous English patient transpires to be not only a story-teller but a map-maker as well. As he says, 'I am a man whose life in many ways, even as an explorer, has been governed by words. By rumours and legends. Charted things. Shards written down'.<sup>276</sup> The English patient slowly maps out his own personal history within the framework of larger world histories, uniting earlier images in Ondaatje's work of personal and national quests for identity.<sup>277</sup> He is a pioneer figure whose life has been involved in the drawing of lines, be they boundaries on a chart or lines of writing on a page. Yet he attempts to discover in the vast unclaimed wilderness tracts of the desert an escape from the boundaries of social class as well as the possessive delineation of geographical territory. The desert comes to represent an utopian land for him since it is here that 'it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation'.<sup>278</sup> Demarcation is lost, not just physically in the numerous sand storms, but linguistically in the nationality ascribed to people and countries:

The desert could not be claimed or owned - it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before . . . battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. . . . All of us . . . wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. <sup>279</sup>

Despite the apparent freedom of his existence as an explorer of this desert wilderness, the English patient can still not escape the violence of national divisions with the onset of the Second World War, an all-embroiling conflict over boundary disputes.<sup>280</sup> This situation, indicating the unavoidable divisive presence of boundaries, may lead the reader to wonder whether a dream is worth pursuing even if it is at best unobtainable and at worst illusory? Ondaatje is aware that the romantic notion of the freedom of the artist or creator to venture imaginatively wherever he wishes to go only

allows for a delusive release from a world where the existence of national borders is inescapable and violence inevitable. Ondaatje stresses that 'what I was tapping into [in The English Patient] was not my take on the desert, but the English take on the desert, the mental state of those Englishmen who were happier in the desert than they were in Putney'.<sup>281</sup> The desert is not, in fact, an empty expanse, an historical tabula rasa.

Instead, it is a massive natural barrier, one which men have written trails across for centuries, in border crossings to which the ancient paintings in 'The Cave of Swimmers' bear witness. Humanity is divided against itself geographically and psychologically, with geomorphological, as well as national frontiers becoming sites of political, social and military confrontation.

The English Patient takes to a much more physical and explicitly national extreme the potential psychological violence that the divisive presence of boundaries promotes because of personal psychic splitting. The novel represents these national border issues through the disintegration of the old European order with the ending of the Second World War in 1945. In his earlier works, Ondaatje's underlying concern had been with the instability of identity within the context of former colonies, implicitly through unfavourable comparison with a coherent centre of empire. In Coming through Slaughter, for example, there is the guide to prostitutes in New Orleans, 'listing alphabetically the white and then the black girls, . . . and then the octoroons',<sup>282</sup> of mulatto, white and negro origin. By comparison, Running in the Family accentuates the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan inter-racial mix. But in The English Patient Ondaatje concedes far less to the stability of the national identity of the colonizer. In particular, the novel questions the pre-eminence of Britain at a historical watershed when its empire was crumbling and its status as the colonial centre was being severely called into question.<sup>283</sup> That is why the novel is set in the bombed ruins of an Italian villa surrounded by fragmented reminders of a more opulent European past. But as in Ondaatje's other fictions, it is the characters rather than the specific location that are most significant, since Ondaatje is strategically unconcerned with geographical accuracy.

Ondaatje introduces a highly complex and at times symbolically confused web of inter-relationships between his four main characters: Hana, the Canadian nurse; her father's Italian-Canadian friend, David Caravaggio; the Indian Kirpal Singh (nicknamed

Kip),<sup>284</sup> a sapper in the British army; and the mysterious English patient who transpires not to be English at all. These four characters are at least partially representative of the nations from which they originate, though Ondaatje is aware of the possibility for oversimplification which such an equation carries. Hana, for instance, somewhat naively 'imagines all of Asia through the gestures of this one man',<sup>285</sup> the Indian Sikh, Kip. Nonetheless, Ondaatje portrays a poignant image of Hana attached to the dying older English patient, who is both her father-figure and her potential lover - although the relationship is never consummated. Even if her emotional relationship to him remains ambiguous, it is overwhelming. She is inextricably linked to him through a psychological bond that remains enigmatic. In many ways, their relationship bears parallels to the political ties between Canada and England. Hana risks her own survival in caring for the English patient in the unprotected and land-mined remote villa despite the impossibility of his recovery. In so doing, she remains disconnected from her true origins and family, physically and emotionally distanced from her home, when others are returning to their native countries as the war draws to a close. It is only after the death of the English patient that Hana returns to Canada to be reunited with her remaining family.

The novel, therefore, encourages us to draw an analogy between a youthful Canadian state still historically tied to the dying body of the British Empire - a central but ailing Body Politic - unable to establish a genuine sense of independence and national identity until such potentially dangerous links are broken. Canada may have something to learn from European history, just as Hana discovers important truths about self-knowledge through listening to her English patient's account of his life. But this learning is no substitute for piecing together and accepting her own painful history. It comes as no surprise that the Canadian Hana forms a closer affiliation with the Indian Kip. They share a cultural affinity because they both come from countries which have a common post-colonial relationship to Britain. Yet, through the rift in Kip and Hana's union at the end of the novel, Ondaatje shows his awareness of the danger of equating too closely the histories, experiences and identities of these two nationals: 'Between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world'.<sup>286</sup> The Canadian and the Indian are ultimately worlds apart.



Ondaatje's fiction has never been based on straightforward symbolical and metaphorical schemes, as the complex significance behind Hana's web of relationships with the male characters in the novel demonstrates. Pearl Bell voices the opinion of a number of reviewers when she states that 'the larger symbolic meaning of The English Patient is hard to grasp'.<sup>287</sup> The suggestion of a political allegorical model is ultimately not fully supported in the novel, since the narrative veers away from the national towards the personal. Speaking to Stephen Smith, Ondaatje acknowledges that 'right from the beginning . . . [The English Patient] was a very political book - though not from the point of view of a politician or a sociologist - but in [the sense] that it's about the effect on four real humans of this panoramic event' of the Second World War.<sup>288</sup> The English patient may be physically as well as thematically central to the novel, lying in bed surrounded by the characters of other nations, but he is far from securely representative of England as a nation. There is a sense of the emptiness of what it means to be English both in the total absence of any distinguishing features - he is 'nonexistent except for a mouth'<sup>289</sup> - and in the ironic discovery that he is not in fact English at all but Hungarian, a spy capable of stealing and creating identities. National identity becomes a sham when it can be so convincingly adopted by anyone who so chooses. Ondaatje parodies colonial distinctions of race through his emphasis on the completely blackened skin of this supposedly archetypal English white man.

Uncertainty and instability are universal conditions of individual and group identity, characteristics which national models and stereotypes efface. Ondaatje's fiction seems to suggest that distinctions work better on a personal rather than on a generalised national level. Hana is subtly psychologically damaged and desperately unsure of herself. Likewise, her fellow Canadian, Caravaggio, is physically dismembered and mentally maimed. But both survive their ordeals as distinct individuals. As Caravaggio says, when teased by the English patient about his name, 'At least I have a name'.<sup>290</sup> Even a fragmented identity is better than none, a necessary constituent for life. This point is brought out when the English patient's lover, Katharine Clifton, repeatedly accuses him of being 'inhuman' and links this to his fear 'of being owned, of being named'.<sup>291</sup> So what distinguishes humans from animals is their use of language and sense of nominal identity. Without such linguistic delineations, one becomes non-existent. The effectively nationless and nameless (English) patient's condition is fatal.

Even before his death, the English patient's existence is extremely precarious. He is close to disappearance because of his physical disfigurements: 'there's very little left of him other than his mind and his memories'.<sup>292</sup> Ondaatje continues to explore the condition of being metaphorically 'on the edge' in this novel. He moves from the North American context of many of his previous works to a temporal setting in European history to realise the precarious position of other nationalities, especially the British. Lord Suffolk, Kip's sapper unit leader, is the epitome of the English nobility, limited by the boundaries of his class, for he 'had never stepped out of England'.<sup>293</sup> Nevertheless, in some sense he is also mis-named and mis-placed, residing in Devon despite his title. Suffolk lives on his own edge, not just in his work as a bomb disposal expert, but also in the physical location of his home, which is very close to the border between Somerset and Devon, the garden 'on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Bristol Channel'.<sup>294</sup> The whole English class system is about to topple in the aftermath of the war, and Suffolk, already at the edge, will not be a survivor. He may be a kind colonial but he is still part of a destructive system, 'the English machine . . . the great English web',<sup>295</sup> one which will also destroy him and his fellow upper-class British. The English Geographical Society explorers, Madox, Geoffrey Clifton and his wife Katharine, spend much of their lives at the centre of Cairo society but they too are situated on an edge, this time the wilderness, the margins of the North African desert. Not surprisingly, all lose their sanity, tumbling over into suicidal acts of self-destruction, whether physical or emotional. 'The wall of [their] class'<sup>296</sup> is ultimately no protection, but only another social construct, a falsely imposed limit, like the lines these colonialists mark on their maps.

The self-destructive, divisive power of delineations emerges when the English patient asserts that 'we are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations'.<sup>297</sup> So by exploiting the symbolic power of these 'edges', Ondaatje demonstrates his increasingly explicit resistance to what constitutes national identity, seeing it as a territory of violence and splitting. Canada may have historically suffered from the problems of divided identity, with geographical and psychological border conflict caused by pressure both from without and within the nation. However, the pressure exerted by boundaries in the case of the British is more insidiously from within. The highly delineated class system divides the whole of British society, which is

represented as self-destroying, if not suicidal. In the eyes of Kip, the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima (on 6 August 1945) and Nagasaki (three days later) signifies how national boundaries are partially destroyed as the world becomes simplistically divided between brown and white peoples - 'American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman'.<sup>298</sup> But this idea of the uniformity of race with a total lack of national distinction is a dystopian one based on racial prejudice. Kip may be right in suddenly seeing the English as far less civilised than the pretence of their social veneer might lead one to believe - they are now clearly perpetrators of violence - but by his over-reaction he rules out the personal element that might produce a better world.<sup>299</sup> In their own isolated world of the villa, counter to the antagonistic developments within nationally divided war-torn Europe, the Indian, European and the two Canadians had been working towards concord, an understanding of each other as individuals not as representatives of a particular nationality. They were 'shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others'.<sup>300</sup> There is a need for tolerance and acceptance if the ultimately inescapable divisions of nationality are at least to be bridged. It is only after Hana, as one of the white race, has been abandoned by her lover, Kip, that she can come to appreciate 'the sacredness of bridges'.<sup>301</sup> Ondaatje retells the Egyptian myth about the bridge over the Siloam being made of wood from the Tree of Good and Evil.<sup>302</sup> In interview, Ondaatje acknowledges that he 'thought that [the Villa San Girolamo] was an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war . . . Then, with the news of other bombs, suddenly this became, perhaps, the last Eden'.<sup>303</sup> But in this Eden, the utopian vision of innocent harmony does not hold. Ondaatje's final representation of the existence of national divisions includes a gesture towards compromise in an imperfect world where love cannot always triumph over violence, bridging the rift of nations, as Kip and Hana's relationship demonstrates.

Ondaatje's personal relationship to nation states is intensely problematic in this novel because of his own divided national and linguistic allegiance as a post-colonial immigrant. He writes against the British colonial empire-building and charting represented by the Geographical Society's exploration of unmapped territories. Yet through the very language he uses in this narrative, he is implicitly associated with

England and its colonial naming. The Asian Ondaatje received all of his secondary schooling in England and thus the relationship between the Indian Kip and his English 'teacher' Lord Suffolk is illuminating.

Here Ondaatje reworks Rudyard Kipling's classic Kim (1901): 'the sapper entered their lives, as if out of this fiction. As if the pages of Kipling had been rubbed in the night like a magic lamp'.<sup>304</sup> Ondaatje's construction of a very similar character name, Kip, from an abbreviated form of the author's surname clearly signals the association between Kipling's and his own text. In Kipling's narrative, it is the orphaned Sahib Kim who has the higher social, if not spiritual, status. His teacher is a lowly Tibetan lama. Differences in conventional status between teacher and pupil are reversed in The English Patient, as perhaps is the identity of the learner, in a post-colonial revision of 'master discourse'. 'As an Indian in England and then in Italy', D. Mark Simpson observes, 'Kip must turn the (post)colonial tables on the British Kim in India'.<sup>305</sup> Kip certainly has important experiences which would enlighten Suffolk, such as his observation about the wastefulness of the British: 'What he saw in England was a surfeit of parts that would keep the continent of India going for two hundred years',<sup>306</sup> and this is during a period of national war-time shortage. Lord Suffolk, however, does not take advantage of his superior social position in his relationship with Kip, but genuinely befriends him and welcomes him into his extended family when Kip is alone and cut off from his own family.

The relationship is not simple, however, for it is impossible to escape the fact that by removing Kip from the racist anonymity and invisibility of his marginalised position as a foreign serviceman, singling him out for special attention over and above all the other possible sapper recruits, Suffolk is selecting him for the dubious honour of dying for his 'mother-country': 'Life expectancy in these units was ten weeks'.<sup>307</sup> Colonial Asia's relationship to Britain is portrayed as being far from straightforward: apparently advantageous, but carrying with it dangerous conditions. An example of this can be seen in the fact that Ondaatje obviously benefited from his English schooling to become an accomplished exponent of the language. Indeed, his use of English has facilitated the process of his becoming a writer of international acclaim, with a world-wide audience. But in so doing he relinquished his native Sinhalese. Ondaatje describes his move to Britain as 'traumatic', suggesting a very personal aspect to the writing of a

narrative about a man pretending to be English: 'There was something in me that was able to click into having to become an Englishman', he says of his departure from Ceylon as a boy, yet 'that [transformation] was probably the most traumatic' part of his emigration.<sup>308</sup>

In a nationless world one would avoid having to make choices in allegiance, both national and linguistic, which by necessity are exclusive,<sup>309</sup> and which Ondaatje had forced upon him at the tender age of eleven. The English patient describes both himself and Kip as 'international bastards - born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives'.<sup>310</sup> There is a sense of always being on the wrong side of the border. Ultimately the only way to eliminate the feeling of displacement that accompanies this situation is to do away with borders themselves. Referring to the identity of the English patient, the novel's fundamental question is worded as if it is to be rhetorical, yet concluded with interrogative doubt - 'It doesn't matter what side he was on, does it?'.<sup>311</sup> In other words, are distinctions important and should individuals accept responsibility for where they are situated, geographically, morally and socially? Ondaatje indicates that post-colonial nations do not need to be governed by the supposed power of other countries, one is free to choose. However, the onus of responsibility which comes with independence and the freedom of choice is not necessarily any less problematic than the restrictions imposed by dependency.

The English patient attempts to disregard all borders in an effort to attain freedom, but although he does not wish to hold allegiance to any nation he still cannot transcend the boundaries of national and ethical responsibility altogether. For finally it emerges that he is actually Count Ladislaus de Almásy, a double and then a triple agent working for both Britain and Germany during the war, guiding spies across seemingly untraversable areas of desert using his skill as a border-crosser. His duplicity eventually results in the death of his adulterous lover, Katharine, whose true identity he fails to reveal, saying that she is his wife. His spy code name, Anubis, is significant. It is the name of an ancient Egyptian god who adopts both the side of humans and animals, as a hybrid figure with the body of a man and the head of a jackal. Is Almásy's choice of this particular nominal cipher little more than a gesture at local exotic colour, or is it part of a more profound wish to escape the limits of mortality which he must face daily

as a war-time spy? Traditionally, Anubis is an important guide in the after-life, conducting the souls of the dead over to 'the other side' from the world of the living. Ondaatje describes him as 'the "opener of the ways" . . . The jackal with one eye that looks back and one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are pieces of the past he delivers to you'.<sup>312</sup>

So the border crossing into death might be regarded as an escape in this novel, especially when we consider the physical suffering of the English patient. But although agent Anubis can see into the future and anticipate his imminent mortal end, it is the delivering up of his own past that causes him the greatest suffering. He cannot escape his own responsibility for the death of Katharine and her husband, Almasy's friend, Clifton. Equally, while withholding his identity, he cannot totally renounce his name and his own personal history, despite the fact that as a story-teller, he can also cross boundaries, in the mind's eye bringing the African desert into a Tuscan villa, the dead to life. Ultimately, border crossings do not provide all the answers to the inescapable presence of boundaries.

The narratorial strategies of Ondaatje, as author, and Almasy, as story-teller and explorer, bear striking similarities. As Almasy pieces together his past, so too does Ondaatje piece together the history of this character, based on a real historical figure.<sup>313</sup> 'Fiction can't compete with real people or events; that's why I'm drawn to historical subjects', Ondaatje admits, 'fiction comes in the means of presenting, in how you set all those pieces of information together'.<sup>314</sup> Just as the cartographer Almasy renounces the ultimate power of mapping by acknowledging that 'the ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonialists push against',<sup>315</sup> so too Ondaatje seems to wish to disown some of the power normally associated with authorial control and the omniscient ability to make temporal border crossings from past to future. In this way, Ondaatje signals the inversion of the structures of domination and subordination normally existing between author and reader.

It is on these grounds, however, that English novelist Hilary Mantel criticises Ondaatje for failing to link the allusions in The English Patient to other characters in In the Skin of a Lion. She claims that the reader is left 'doing the hard work to connect the books, doing that fiddly technical stuff that some writers think is their job'.<sup>316</sup> Like the gaps within the narrative itself, Ondaatje wants to encourage his readers also to use

their imagination to link the fictional lives of his characters by bridging the gulf between these two disparate novels.<sup>317</sup> It is in exactly this manner that the story-teller, Hana, does not make any allowances for periods when her listener, the English patient, is asleep or misses some of the narrative when she reads on silently to herself. 'So the book for the Englishman . . . had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents . . . She gave no summary of the missing chapters'.<sup>318</sup> This strategy of narration aptly indicates Ondaatje's own technique. In an interview with Garvie about The English Patient, Ondaatje describes writing the novel as if he himself were a reader:

When I began this book I wasn't sure who the nurse was, any more than I knew who the patient was. The book really started with who the patient was, and I thought that was going to be the main story. . . . Then there was this nurse who was damaged subtly, and I realized it was Hana. . . . As they emerged - turned up on the scene - it seemed that . . . I was really writing and discovering new people. It felt very new to me.<sup>319</sup>

Ondaatje may be able to cross both an imaginative and a geographical divide at the end of the novel with a transcendently romantic gesture towards a less border-restricted world. In a fleeting moment of connection which might be associated with magic-realism, Hana in Canada drops a glass and Kip on the Indian sub-continent simultaneously reaches out to catch a falling object of tableware. Ondaatje renounces his omniscient control over his characters in a narratorial intervention which indicates his uncertainty about the extent of the power of the writer and his ability to soar over the obstacles of reality: 'Hana . . . is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life'.<sup>320</sup> He may wish to protect his creation but as the novel ends, he has to relinquish control to the reader and let them in turn take imaginative flight. Consequently, Hana disappears into the uncertain world from which she came. The most important lesson the English patient teaches Hana, Caravaggio and Kip during his time with them, is that although they each in their own individual ways are readers,<sup>321</sup> trying among other things to read him, they can easily bridge the divide to become writers themselves, recorders of their own narratives. Ondaatje is showing us that borders are there to be crossed.

Nevertheless, in the end the vision of a totally borderless world remains that of the English patient, not his author. If that vision did come true, there would be no fiction by Michael Ondaatje whose work is predicated on boundaries, differences, confusion and division. As Spearey suggests, 'knowledge or recognition of boundaries and of the forces that operate within them is an essential precondition to their effacement, or to the project of pushing back their limits'.<sup>322</sup> I hope that this chapter has revealed how and why Ondaatje continues to push these limits, both in his innovative and idiosyncratic style and in his unique subject matter.



## **CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

In 1965 Northrop Frye posed the question 'Where is here?',<sup>1</sup> thus addressing Canadian writers with a challenge, one which involved defining their country in relation to its geography. As this dissertation demonstrates, over the last three decades much literary and cultural mapping has been undertaken to define Canadian identity. Canadian intellectuals have sought to bring the nation out of obscurity towards greater world prominence in cultural, if not political, terms. The writing of my four chosen Canadian authors demonstrates that Canada, the land located as 'here', is a multifarious place, perceived by necessity from a shifting, local and subjective perspective. Definitions of nationality will always involve generalisations and simplifications of complex demographic groups. Such communities are unified by geography within political boundaries, but often spread across widely varying landscapes and equally lacking unity in terms of race, religion, culture or language. This situation is exacerbated in Canada by the sheer size of the country and the extent of cultural diversity encompassed by its predominantly immigrant population.

By ironically suggesting the impossibility of discovering a coherent and distinct set of national characteristics, the thematic critics and national commentators of the 1970s struggled towards a definition of Canadian identity which would embrace the national mood of insecurity and uncertainty. Canada was frequently defined through negation, with an emphasis on what the country was not - not America, not united, not well-defined. In other words, Canada was portrayed as a divided and fissile nation, a foreign unknown landscape, an empty barren wilderness which was not familiar but to be feared. Likewise, the Canadian people apparently had little or no sense of belonging, but were exiled and alienated by their surroundings, operating in isolated solitude rather than within the security of community. The emphasis was on bare survival as individuals and as a beleaguered people. These models in part reflected the nation's historical development as 'a country of arrival' where almost everyone was an immigrant. Thus some might argue that such articulations of Canadian identity demonstrated a tendency more towards realism than pessimism. Yet a national paradigm perceived in almost purely negative terms was clearly not going to advance

the national cause very far. Nevertheless, it operated as an important point of critical debate and intellectual departure.

Nearing the end of the millennium, with two hundred years of settler history behind them (since the Canada Act of 1791), Canada can now be seen as a nation of survivors. The nation has endured the disadvantaged and exiled nature of many of its immigrant founders. There was the war of 1812 which was fought - and won - against the invading armies of the United States. More recently, frequent referendums have contained separatist agendas. Moreover, throughout the twentieth century there has been an influx of immigrants in numbers that would have put a severe strain on a country of smaller size, greater population density, with fewer natural resources. Having already survived these rigours intact, it is time to look beyond survival as a strategy and the trait of victimization in particular, which Atwood perceived in 1972 as a national characteristic.<sup>2</sup> Despite hopefully projecting towards a position in which the majority of Canadians, including writers, would be 'creative non-victims',<sup>3</sup> Atwood's definition is still backward-looking, since it is fixated on the past. There is a need to move beyond any reference to victimization.

Aritha van Herk has set about redefining existing thematic tropes, not simply through reimagining the Canadian wilderness in more inviting and enabling ways - especially from a female perspective - but also by suggesting that the terms themselves can be reconceptualised. Instead, in van Herk's work, isolation becomes a process of standing out as a unique and independent individual, free of oppressive social stereotypes and expectations. Duality offers the possibility for diversity and choice, the ability to gain the best of both worlds. Exile is a mental state which exists only if one longs to return to the place that is left. This act can instead involve new beginnings in a new space. Likewise, in the writings of Robert Kroetsch the failure of the male quest is actually perceived as a type of home-coming where the loss or disappearance of self presents an opportunity for transformation and rebirth. Kroetsch demonstrates a sense of pride in being a Canadian man, despite portraying this national form of masculinity as frequently inept and hopeless. His mode of expression in exploring problematic issues of Canadian identity involves laughter not despair. Atwood, who is continually developing different forms of female characterisation, writes in the 1990s about women protagonists who increasingly demonstrate a new confidence and assertiveness.

even if this position is only achieved by confronting the realities of life head-on. Atwood suggests such progress is not achieved without personal cost.

Michael Ondaatje is the author whose vision remains the most psychologically disturbed and disturbing, both from a personal and a Canadian context. There is a painful intensity of image and emotion in his representation of the divisions within the artist or narrator. But it is not always possible to attribute such split or fractured identities to an analogy with more general national characteristics. Much of Ondaatje's writing works on a far more personal level in his attempts to come to terms with the complexed duality of his immigrant background. As a Ceylonese-born Canadian citizen and writer, Ondaatje deals with issues of identity almost exclusively through the mirror of 'the Other', be that Other an American, a musician, a Canadian-born farm-worker who feels alienated in the multicultural metropolis of Toronto, or a former spy disguising his identity by adopting the colonial position of an Englishman.

It is significant that the most hopeful ending to any of Ondaatje's writings is in In the Skin of a Lion. This is Ondaatje's only work that depicts Canada and his adopted 'home' setting of Toronto. All his other writings depict foreign environments. The novel ends with an act which literally lights the way ahead, looking to the future, as Patrick asks his daughter to switch on the headlights of their car. They are about to commence a journey which will involve an act of home-coming for his long-absent lover, Clara. Patrick is now content and at ease in the comfortingly familiar environment of his Toronto neighbourhood after a period of great isolation, alienation and loneliness. In his 'animal-like noises of satisfaction' Patrick is equated with the local urban racoons who move in ways which suggests that they 'own . . . the territory'.<sup>4</sup> I believe In the Skin of a Lion indicates that, after the geographical and familial displacement and divisions Ondaatje has experienced in his earlier life, he is in the process of 'coming home'. His quest for a viable identity and a sense of belonging is an increasingly fruitful one in the context of Canada. This dissertation has illustrated a growing assurance on the part of these writers in their choice of protagonists, subject-matter and narrative forms. All these features have become progressively more daring or adventurous through the use of innovative techniques and unusual characterisations. But it is hard to know how far these developments are a symptom of the increasing

maturity of established writers, or whether these new forms of narrative adventurousness indicate the more positive outlook of a maturing culture.

Disappearance is an act which has special cultural connotations in a Canadian context, and the pervasiveness of this phenomenon reveals much about contemporary shifts in national identity and confidence. Disappearance into the wilderness will always be a part of Canadian reality, even if it becomes an infrequent one with modern technology and equipment. In the past, this phenomenon has included acts of evanescing in which the individual or group submissively accepts self-effacement. Another process is obscuration, which involves deliberately making others invisible. While Canada apologetically hid from the world stage for many decades, making depreciating comments about its own culture, Canadians were equally guilty of attempting to efface the many Native cultures residing above the 49th Parallel. Rejecting these negative forms of disappearance, contemporary writers such as van Herk and Kroetsch suggest that invisibility can be enabling rather than self-destructive. One can choose to be invisible - an absent presence - by adopting a physical or nominal disguise, thus effecting a change in self rather than environment. More boldly, one can disappear altogether in an active relocation, discovering new territory, not just a new subjective space.

Going into the wilderness or becoming one with the wilderness has traditionally been associated either with mysticism or accidental death / suicide - the common motifs in Canada include drowning (in which bodies are often not found) or disappearing into the ground or into the elements, especially into blizzards. This observation is hardly an original one. In 1972 Atwood identified such themes as 'Death by Nature' in *Survival*.<sup>5</sup> Yet in works published after *Survival*, Canadian writers reveal that disappearance is increasingly an ambiguous, not a fatal act. Kroetsch demonstrates the importance of the Canadian landscape as the setting for the immigrant transformations of Frederick Philip Grove and Grey Owl, who used a combination of invisibility and disappearance as transformative strategies. Both Kroetsch and van Herk portray characters who disappear, not into the ground, the snow or the forest, but literally into thin air. This particular act points to an ambiguous fate which is possibly fatal, on the one hand, and embodies the possibility of transcendence, on the other. Jeremy Sadness and Bea Sunderman leap from a bridge, while Arachne is last seen in a

helicopter. Disappearance as an established theme in Canadian literature encourages creative development not stasis. It does not rigidly define identity or suggest a limited frame of imaginative reference. Unlike the older images of isolation and exile, it does not possess only negative connotations but is an enigmatic act which reveals as much about the attitudes of those who interpret it, as those who perform it.

I have argued that this changing representation of disappearance as a recurring motif indicates a growing confidence in Canada's unique and enabling position as a nation whose citizenship might be coveted. Canada has long been a sanctuary for those who have needed to escape from various disadvantageous situations, be they the nineteenth-century financial and religious discriminations of Europe or the Vietnam war draft in the United States (1967-1975). But the writers I have discussed would argue that Canada is also a country to escape to. It is a place which enables the development of identity. This is not to suggest a romanticized image of escapism. For disappearance may well involve facing reality. Van Herk's Judith and J.L. both 'escape' into the Canadian wilderness only to discover that they still have to face up to the patriarchal nature of society, as well as the not necessarily welcome self-knowledge that comes with struggling in physically and emotionally strenuous environments. Kroetsch's men experience failure and frustration in their sexual quests into the wild West. At times, they discover that the Canadian 'True North, strong and free'<sup>6</sup> traps them with that very freedom. In Atwood's and Ondaatje's writings the wilderness is often a schizophrenic place of madness, fear and potential psychic, if not physical destruction. It is a testing environment, not for the faint-hearted.

Generalisations and assumptions about disappearance in a Canadian environment are not useful. The different reasons for these authors' personal investments in disappearance help illustrate this point. The vanishing act which van Herk wishes to effect involves a romanticised attempt to escape into silence away from her language-dominated writing and academic life. Kroetsch's disappearance is a theoretical postmodern gesture which sees him struggling to define the place of women more generally in his work. Ondaatje's desire to hide behind his fiction and poetry is an act of privacy undertaken for very personal reasons. Atwood has expressed no personal wish to disappear at all. Responses of disappearance are entirely individual, prompted by existing paradigms within Canadian literature, but not controlled by them.

Yet if personal disappearance is portrayed as an advantage for the individual in diverse situations, what does disappearance mean for a whole community? Throughout In the Skin of a Lion, Ondaatje works to reverse the colonial racism which historically obscured the contribution of immigrant labour in building Toronto and thus helping to found the nation of Canada in its modern form. He forcefully demonstrates that invisibility may be good for the individual, seeking privacy in a withdrawal from society, but not so the community, wishing for acknowledgement and inclusion in the larger national public sphere. The adopted policy of Canadian multiculturalism has not silenced discussion about the degree to which immigrant assimilation should be taken. The extent of cultural visibility and autonomy is at the heart of the debate about Canadian identity and the direction of the nation, as Québécois separatism illustrates. Minority groups are contesting their position within Canada with increasing vociferousness, pushing and pulling at the boundaries of the nation, both in terms of linguistic and geographical definition. Immigrants are not the only people who were made historically invisible in the Canadian past. There is one other group which cannot be ignored but demands inclusion and representation in a broader Canadian polity.

The indigenous Native populations of Canada have often been marginalised and, some would argue, systematically eradicated by European diseases, territorial encroachment, the destruction of the buffalo herds on which traditional Native hunter/gatherer societies were based and forced displacement onto reservations. Although Canada prides itself on a better record in its treatment of indigenous peoples than the United States, the result of pioneer 'progress' across the Canadian plains still involved an element of racial genocide as Native populations inversely declined. Nevertheless, contemporary issues of Native disappearance are evolving in a different direction.

Thomas King, a Canadian Native prairie writer of mixed Cherokee, Greek and German origin, dismisses the suggestion that Native peoples are a disappearing group heading for extinction. He is at the forefront of Native studies as an author, editor and academic teacher, committed to furthering knowledge about Native literature and culture. King describes how white society 'bemoan[s] - with great sadness - the passing away of Native culture', stressing that 'Indians are dying off. Indian languages are dying off. The cultures are vanishing', yet he believes this to be a 'notion of [white] cultural superiority'.<sup>7</sup> 'Non-Native society likes "their" Indians to remain the same' and view

these traditional ways and peoples as vanishing.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, King proposes that as a group, Native peoples have demonstrated both the tenacity and the adaptability to survive change: 'Hell, we were here for thousands of years before Europeans arrived, and in spite of the kinds of pressures that have been put on us, we're still here, and, all things considered doing rather well. But nobody talks about . . . how we've managed to maintain ourselves through five hundred years of colonisation'.<sup>9</sup>

King's position on Native disappearance is supported by his fiction. In his novel, Green Grass, Running Water (1993),<sup>10</sup> he portrays four elderly Indians whom the United States government have locked away in a mental hospital in the hope that eventually they will simply die off, like America's Native people more generally.<sup>11</sup> However, after one hundred and twenty years - the novel has many surreal elements to it - the Indians are not only still alive and well, but have chosen to pull their own 'disappearing act', escaping to Canada where they unsuccessfully try to solve various problems involving the clash of traditional and modern worlds. King suggests that Native people are not to be romantically idealised as having all the answers, especially on environmental issues, but equally they are not to be ignored.

Recent historical events show the political dangers of ignoring this indigenous sector of the Canadian population. In 1987, the Native leader Elijah Harper used the political delaying tactic of filibuster to prevent the ratification of the Meech Lake Accord in Manitoba. To go into effect the accord needed to be ratified by all ten of Canada's provinces by 23 June 1990. Harper's symbolic blockage of the Meech Lake Accord was matched in the same year by the defiant stand of the Mohawk Warriors in Oka against the Quebec police and the Canadian Army. These armed Natives dramatically attempted to 'hold their ground' over a sensitive land rights issue, bringing world media attention to the Native cause. Native peoples continue to play a significant and highly visible role in political debate over the definition of the nation. The Cree Nation and the Inuit boycotted the 1995 Referendum on Quebec, holding their own votes a week earlier, to display their anger at Quebec's insistence on placing their territorial claims before those of indigenous people. The Cree, Inuit and Naskapi Indians demanded equal rights to self-determination and voted to secede from an

independent Quebec. This action would have been a major blow to the new Francophone state because 83 per cent of Quebec is unceded Native territory.

King believes that Native literature is a useful 'counterpoint to Canadian literature, a new voice, if you will, a different voice in the literary amphitheatre'.<sup>12</sup> This voice goes well beyond the literary sphere in suggesting new angles in the exploration of Canadian identity. Lee Maracle, a Metis / Salish writer from Vancouver, emphasises the way in which tribal groupings ignore the national distinctions which supposedly define the populations of North America. Describing the continent, she relates how Native peoples 'have a word for this island, we call it Turtle Island. We don't even have Mexican or Canadian, or U.S. distinctions'.<sup>13</sup> King supports such a concept describing 'the line that divides Canada and the U.S.' as 'a political line . . . [which] has damn little to do with Native people. It's a figment of someone else's imagination'.<sup>14</sup> This insistence on a different concept of the nation involving tribal unity across the Canadian / U.S. border was demonstrated in 1990 in the politically united commitment of 'Canadian' and 'American' Mohawk Indians during the Oka crisis.

Maracle uses military imagery to describe the way in which Natives feel threatened: 'we are half a million in 26 million people; we're surrounded; we're beseiged'.<sup>15</sup> Frye in his garrison metaphor conceptualised man attempting to protect himself from the wilderness and the natural forces it frighteningly embodied. In complete contrast, the barricade established by the Mohawk Nation at Oka was attempting to protect the land and the uncultivated wilderness forest from man. Their sacred burial grounds were due to be bulldozed by developers hoping to build a golf course on the land.<sup>16</sup> For indigenous peoples the natural Canadian environment has never been foreign or alien. It is not landscape to be viewed as 'out there', but traditionally is home, an integral element of their society and beliefs.<sup>17</sup> The borderlines of Canadian identity are still being contested in the context of the land and the wilderness, despite the urbanisation of Canadian society, as the numerous recent court battles over Native land claims attest.

Despite a strong indigenous commitment to the positive affirmation of Native identity and rights, there is still a considerable way to go in terms of Native representation. King declares that 'a greater problem than the lack of a definition is the presence of a set of expectations that have attached themselves to Native literature' and



society.<sup>18</sup> Stereotypes and preconceived ideas about identity 'tend to limit imaginative play'.<sup>19</sup> The Native experience has wide-ranging implications for Canada as a nation, not only in questioning the very premises on which that nation is founded, but also more positively by demonstrating the vigorous determination to refuse to be defined by a foreign, colonial imagination. King has stated his wish to dispel Native stereotypes through his humorous fiction. Likewise, contemporary Canadian writers are working hard to dispel the stereotype of Canadians as a boring, indistinct, highly forgettable nation of people, whose conservative outlook precludes daring, challenging or assertive behaviour.

Other forms of generalised misrepresentation are also being overturned. There is increasingly an emphasis in Canadian literature on personal articulations of national identity which deliberately reveal a regional or ethnic perspective. Native peoples similarly embrace group diversity in the Confederation of the Six Nations. The term Canadian, like the term Native, may be a generic definition which allows for insufficient diversity. The Guyanan immigrant poet Cyril Dabydeen idealistically suggests that Canada is working 'towards a vital celebration of the oneness of the evolving Canadian consciousness'.<sup>20</sup> In contrast Kim Campbell's recent discussion of Canadian identity on British radio was entitled 'Diverging Dominions: Canada - Maple Leaf Blues?'.<sup>21</sup> What is the truth behind these conflicting suggestions? Maybe there is in fact a position between these two poles of exuberant optimism and doom-laden pessimism, which would embrace diversity of national character while accepting a sense of a common bond strong enough to see Canada progress into the new millennium still intact as a nation. For this scenario to be achieved the boundaries of national identity will need to be flexible enough to encompass the demands that Canada's disparate population will continue to place on the nation in the next century of political, constitutional and literary debate.

## NOTES

## INTRODUCTION: 'Where Is Here?', pp.9-25.

- 1 B.W. Powe, A Climate Charged (Oakville, Mosaic Press, 1984), p.73.
- 2 Statistic from The Globe and Mail, 27 January 1996. See Richard Mackies article 'Most Quebeckers Expect Separation Within 10 Years', pp.A1 and A8. In the 1995 Referendum 2,361,526 (49.7%) voted against Quebec sovereignty, 2,308,028 (48.5%) for it. The spoilt ballot papers - 86,675 (1.8%) - were greater than the margin between the two sides.
- 3 'The OH! Canada Project' was staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario, from 16 February to 5 May 1996. Reviews were predominantly critical, some damning. See John Bentley Mays' article 'Uh-OH! Canada', The Globe and Mail, 17 February 1996 and Robert Fulford, 'Absurdly Deperate Museums May Self-Destruct', The Globe and Mail, 6 March 1996. Press cuttings provided by Michael Tooby, The Tate Gallery, St.Ives. No page numbers given.
- 4 When it was formed in 1920 the Group of Seven included Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald and F.H. Varley. One of the major influences on these artists was Tom Thomson, but he was never a member of the Group having died three years before its formation. A.J. Casson joined the Group in 1926, after the departure of Frank Johnston.
- 5 Other landscapes included the Arctic of Ellesmere Island, the mountains of British Columbia and Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, but the Group of Seven is still most famous for its depiction of the Ontario wilderness. Empty and uninhabited landscapes were not the Group's only subject - portraits, industrial scenes and cultivated environments were among other images painted.
- 6 This 'general' Canadian public was nonetheless predominantly Ontario / Toronto based.
- 7 'Oh! Canada' was only adopted as the Canadian national anthem as late as 1980, when the government under Pierre Trudeau decided that it was no longer appropriate for Canadians to sing 'God Save the Queen', as Canada began cutting its more traditional ties with Britain.
- 8 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (London: Routledge, 1989), p.36.
- 9 I refer here not only to the major studies of the work of van Herk, Kroetsch and Ondaatje in this dissertation but also to the writing and commentary of

- other authors such as Frederick Grove, Howard O'Hagan, Sheila Watson, Rudy Wiebe and Marian Engel, which are mentioned during the course of my argument. Michael Ondaatje has an increasingly high international profile but his renowned status outside Canada was only confirmed when he won the Booker Prize with The English Patient in October 1992. His world popularity as an author is likely to be further enhanced by the release of the film, The English Patient, written and directed by Anthony Minghella and starring Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Willem Dafoe and Kristin Scott Thomas, released in Canada in November 1996 and in England in March 1997.
- 10 See Rosalind Jennings, unpublished M.A. dissertation, 'Canada's Borders: Atwood's Boundaries', York University, England, 1992.
- 11 See Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972), p.35, and Earl G. Ingersoll, ed., Margaret Atwood: Conversations (London: Virago Press, 1992), p.94. This association is dealt with in much more detail in Chapter One.
- 12 Northrop Frye, "Conclusion" to Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English, ed. Carl F. Klinck, vol.III, pp.318-32 (Toronto: University of Press, 1976), reprinted in The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971), pp.321-51 (p.225). Warren Tallman's essay 'Wolf in the Snow', Canadian Literature, 5/6 (Summer/Winter 1960), 7-20, is widely regarded as the first example of Canadian thematic criticism. Tallman focused on the themes of isolation and alienation of the individual.
- 13 The full titles of these works are Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature and Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction.
- 14 See Russell M. Brown, 'Critic, Culture, Text: Beyond Thematics', Essays on Canadian Writing, 11 (Summer 1978), 151-83 (p.153). Brown is here referring to the critics not the four works mentioned.
- 15 See Frank Davey, 'Surviving the Paraphrase' in Davey, Surviving the Paraphrase: Eleven Essays on Canadian Literature (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1983), pp.1-12; B.W. Powe 'A Climate Charged: The Intellectual Atmosphere in Canada', in A Climate Charged (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1984), 72-92 and Brown, 'Critic, Culture, Text', 151-83, for a survey of the gathering body of critical opinion in the 1980s which challenged the popular national critical approach of the previous decade.
- 16 D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p.3.
- 17 Davey, 'Surviving the Paraphrase', p.3.

- 18 Atwood, Survival, p.18.
- 19 Examples of such fragmented and evanescent postmodern characters include Fevvers in Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus (1984), the unnamed protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) and the eponymous character in Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987).
- 20 Brown, 'Critic, Culture, Text', p.180.
- 21 Ibid., p.180.
- 22 Ibid., p.180.
- 23 'Passing over to the other side' is a euphemism for death, which also aptly describes the passage of European emigrants across the Atlantic.
- 24 Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.62. Later in an interview with Mary Norris (March 1986), Atwood amends this statement: 'Maybe I shouldn't have said "illness". Maybe I should have said "state of mind"' (Earl G. Ingersoll, ed., Margaret Atwood: Conversations (London: Virago Press, 1992), p.240). Atwood sees this condition not as a sickness but as a justifiable response to Canada's situation, especially in relation to the 'big and powerful' United States, whose national characteristic she describes as being 'megalomania' (Journals of Susanna Moodie p.62). Throughout my dissertation I shall use the term schizophrenia to mean a split personality or mental state, adopting Atwood's loose semantic reading of the word, derived from the Greek 'skhizo' - to split - and 'phren' - mind. I am aware that the current medical definitions of this mental disorder undermine the popularly held misconception that schizophrenia involves a split personality and instead characterizes the illness in terms of disturbances of feelings, thought and relations to the outside world.
- 25 Barbara Godard, 'Mapmaking: A Survey of Feminist Criticism', in Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing, ed. Godard (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), pp.1-30 (p.2).
- 26 Ibid., p.2.
- 27 Ibid., p.2.
- 28 Elaine Showalter uses this 'wild zone' terminology to represent women's culture in her essay 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', in which she discusses 'the wilderness of theory' (p.9) in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp.9-35 (p.30). She expands on this concept in spatial, experiential and metaphysical terms: 'Spacially it stands for an area which is literally no-man's-land, a place forbidden to men . . . Experientially it stands for the aspects of the female life-style which are outside of and unlike those of men . . . But if we think of the wild zone metaphysically . . . the 'wild' is always imaginary; from the male point of view,

- it may simply be a projection of the unconscious . . . men do not know what is in the wild.' (p.30)
- 29 See Kroetsch's essay 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space', Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1979), 73-83 and Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), pp.21-24.
- 30 Unpublished interview with Aritha van Herk, with Rosalind Jennings, Calgary, 20 November 1995.
- 31 Donald Cameron, Conversations with Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p.86.
- 32 Ibid., p.83.
- 33 Text accompanying Gel:nlyogweda:ge's installation 'Be It So, It Remains in Our Minds', part of the 'OH! Canada' exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, February-May 1996.
- 34 Norman Newton, 'Wilderness No Wilderness', Canadian Literature, 63 (Winter 1975), 18-34 (p.20).
- 35 Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger, eds., Nationalisms and Sexualities (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.2.
- 36 Ibid., p.1.
- 37 See Dennis Denisoff, 'Homosocial Desire and the Artificial Man in Michael Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid', Essays on Canadian Writing, 53 (Summer 1994), 51-70. Denisoff takes the term 'homosocial desire' from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Between Men (1985), where she points out that 'while the term "homosocial" has generally been used to describe social bonds between persons of the same sex, it has also been applied to "such activities as 'male bonding', which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality." Sedgwick's purpose in joining "homosocial" and "desire" is "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire', of the potentially erotic"'(Denisoff, notes, p.68).
- 38 Graham Dawson in his discussion of homosexuality and colonialism in Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities (London: Routledge, 1994) notes that while colonialism 'has received much sophisticated and rigorous attention a reading across and between both subjects [of homosexuality and colonialism] has been less common, as if analysis of one required the other's exclusion' (p.7).
- 39 Denisoff, 'Homosocial Desire and the Artificial Man', p.52.

- 40 Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient (London: Picador/Pan, 1993), p.3.
- 41 The English patient does more than apparently share Lawrence's nationality and love of the desert. Like Lawrence, Ondaatje's character is also an archaeologist, cartographer, aviation enthusiast, military expert to the Bedouin and a spy during the war. Most notably Lawrence was equally a man who assumed identities, not only as a 'white Arab' and 'blond Bedouin' adopting native dress in the North African desert, but also as John Hume Ross, an assumed name Lawrence adopted to enlist incognito in the Royal Air Force in 1922.
- 42 Dawson, Soldier Heroes, p.170. Dawson believes this to be based in part on 'the spectacle of that masculine of men, the soldier, elaborately arrayed in flowing skirts, in transgression of gender fixities (p.167).
- 43 Ibid., p.187.
- 44 This is actually the title of Jack Warwick's second chapter in The Long Journey: Literary Themes of French Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), pp.34-47. Atwood similarly describes the necessity for 'a geography of the mind', Survival, pp.18-19.
- 45 Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, eds., A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest Press, 1986), preface, pp.ix-xi (p.xi).

#### **CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Territory: Frye and Atwood, pp.26-59.**

- 1 Robert Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.188.
- 2 Ibid., p.188.
- 3 Robert Kroetsch, 'Reading Across the Border', in Studies in Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays, ed. Arnold E. Davidson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), pp.338-43 (p.338).
- 4 Linda Hutcheon, The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.3.
- 5 Ibid., p.3.

- 6 Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in Nation and Narration, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.291-322 (p.297).
- 7 Ibid., p.299.
- 8 Ibid., p.297.
- 9 Ibid., p.299. Bhabha expounds on this split discourse in the following terms: 'In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation.' (p.297).
- 10 Ibid., p.298.
- 11 Marshal McLuhan, 'Canada: The Borderline Case', in The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp.226-48.
- 12 Northrop Frye, Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture, ed. James Polk (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982), pp.77-78.
- 13 Margaret Atwood, Second Words: Selected Critical Prose (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982), p.94.
- 14 This insecurity has a historical basis, since in 1812 American Confederate troops attempted to invade Canada in a military action later known as the Fenian raids. But as Margaret Atwood sardonically remarks about America's later cultural and economic 'invasion' of Canada - 'the historical moment at which mild congratulation might seem in order - the War of 1812 . . . cannot sustain elation in the face of the irony of history: Canada repels invasion in 1812 and the Yanks take over anyway'. Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972), p.170.
- 15 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.25.
- 16 In Canada's 1991 census there were twenty seven ethnic categories of origin ranging from African to Ukrainian, with British and French still being the largest 'ethnic' groups, but no one is listed as being Canadian. In contrast, the United States 1990 Census of Population and Housing is divided into only five major 'race' groupings, including white, black, Asian / Pacific Islander and other race, subsequently subdivided into those of Hispanic and non-Hispanic origin. Significantly, the smallest group, the Eskimo or Aleut peoples, are defined as American Indian.
- 17 Northrop Frye was one of Margaret Atwood's professors at Victoria College, University of Toronto when she was an undergraduate there between 1957-61.

- 18 Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.62. This idea is a prominent one in Atwood's writing. In her important critical thesis on national identity, Survival, she also discusses issues of alienation. She quotes from John Marlyn's Under the Ribs of Death (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957): 'It is meaningless to call anyone a foreigner in this country. We are all foreigners here', p.147.
- 19 Atwood, Second Words, p.113.
- 20 Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971), p.220, quoted in Atwood, Survival, p.10. Such 'borrowings' are mutual, as Frye acknowledges in the preface to The Bush Garden that the title of his book was 'pilfered from Margaret Atwood's Journals of Susanna Moodie, a book unusually rich in suggestive phrases defining a Canadian sensibility' (p.x). See poem entitled 'Dream 1: The Bush Garden', The Journals of Moodie, p.34, in which Nature, embodied by the wilderness, overcomes human attempts to cultivate it and 'civilize' the land.
- 21 Michael Ondaatje, The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories (London: Faber, 1990), p.xvii (my emphasis).
- 22 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.167.
- 23 Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s (London: Methuen, 1987), p.25.
- 24 Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, p.62.
- 25 Tom Nairn, The Break-Up of Britain (London: New Left Books, 1977), p.359, quoted by Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991), p.5. Similarly Bhabha suggests that one encounters 'the narcissistic neuroses of . . . national discourse', Nation and Narration, p.300.
- 26 Donald Cameron, Conversations with Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p.85.
- 27 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.48.
- 28 Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, p.63. See poems such as 'The Double Voice' (p.42) in this collection, which opens: 'Two voices/ took turns using my eyes', and 'Thoughts from Underground' (p.54): 'I felt I ought to love/ this country./ I said I loved it/ and my mind saw double.'
- 29 Ibid., p.62.



- 30 Susanna Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush or Life in Canada with an introduction by Margaret Atwood (London: Virago Press, 1986), p.20, quoted by Atwood in her introduction, p.xii.
- 31 Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush, p.7 (my emphasis).
- 32 Ibid., p.264.
- 33 Ibid., p.8.
- 34 Ibid., p.72.
- 35 Margaret Atwood, 'Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer', from The Animals in That Country (1968), in Margaret Atwood: Poems 1965-1975 (London: Virago Press, 1991), pp.60-63 (p.60).
- 36 Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush, p.62.
- 37 Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, p.62.
- 38 Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush, Atwood intro., p.viii.
- 39 Ibid., p.viii.
- 40 Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, p.62.
- 41 The province of Upper Canada, originally established with a separate government in 1791, was merged in 1841 with the predominantly French-speaking province of Lower Canada to form the Province of Canada. But the two regions again received separate provincial governments (as Ontario and Quebec) within the Confederation of 1867.
- 42 Gaile McGregor, The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p.27. This sense of pragmatism is even embodied in the national anthem whose lyrics, written by Robert Stanley Wier, suggest that Canada is a 'land of hope' but only 'for [those] who toil' (v.2, l.6). The Canadian anthem ends on a note of tentative hope, tempered by the insecurity suggested by a constant need for self-defence: 'As waiting for the better day,/ We ever stand on guard.' (v.4, ll.5-6). In contrast, the more idealistic American national anthem finishes on an assertive, confident and aggressive note: 'Then conquer we must, for our cause it is just/ . . . / And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave/ O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.' (v.3, ll.5, 7-8, words by Francis Scott Key).
- 43 Atwood, Second Words, p.383.
- 44 Margaret Atwood, Days of the Rebels 1815/ 1840: Canada's Illustrated Heritage (Toronto: Natural Science of Canada, 1977), p.38. Here Atwood

quotes Susanna Moodie, who describes how 'Canada became the great landmark for the rich in hope and poor in purse'.

- 45 Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush, p.xv.
- 46 Catharine Parr Traill, The Female Emigrant's Guide, and Hints on Canadian Housekeeping (Toronto: Maclear, 1854), p.xi. It was the later, seventh edition of 1857 which went under the more well-known title of The Canadian Settler's Guide.
- 47 Catharine Parr Traill, The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters From the Wife of an Emigrant Officer, New edition (London: Charles Knight, 1846), p.7, my emphasis.
- 48 David Stouck, "Secrets in the Prison-House": Mrs. Moodie and the Canadian Imagination', p.471. Quoted by McGregor, The Wacousta Syndrome, p.28.
- 49 Frye, The Bush Garden, p.237.
- 50 Ibid., p.226. French Canadians, as the minority group outside Quebec, have wished to politically strengthen the boundaries of their province, where they would become the major linguistic and cultural group if full independence for the province were to be achieved.
- 51 Atwood, Survival, p.218.
- 52 Ibid., p.219.
- 53 Ibid., p.218.
- 54 Frye, The Bush Garden, p.217.
- 55 Ibid., p.220.
- 56 Atwood, Survival, p.31.
- 57 Ibid., p.31.
- 58 Ibid., see pp.32-33. Here I use the term England rather than Britain because this is the form Atwood adopts to describe her insular Anglo-nation, which presumably is the British Isles.
- 59 Ibid., p.32.
- 60 Ibid., p.32.
- 61 The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testament, Authorised King James Version (1611), Psalm 72, verse 8. The name 'Dominion of Canada' was adopted by Macdonald from this biblical reference which begins - 'He shall have

- dominion also from sea to sea'. The phrase, truncated in the national motto, was first used about 1906. Frye describes how Canada's attempts to imagine itself as a single nation extending 'from sea to sea' were doomed to failure since 'there was so much empty space inbetween, the Canadian consciousness could hardly match the American sense of a vast society pushing a frontier westwards until it reached the Pacific', Divisions on a Ground, p.43.
- 62 The beginning of this poem reads: 'What is a Canadian / anyway?... / a yes-no somehow-or-other maybe / might-be should-be could-be.' Miriam Waddington, 'What Is a Canadian?', Miriam Waddington: Collected Poems (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.125.
- 63 Atwood, Survival, p.18.
- 64 Ibid., p.19.
- 65 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.46.
- 66 W.L. Morton, 'The Relevance of Canadian History' in Contexts of Canadian Criticism, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp.48-70 (pp.52-53), quoted in Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.46.
- 67 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.46.
- 68 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.98.
- 69 Atwood, Survival, p.16.
- 70 See W.H. New, A History of Canadian Literature (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.2.
- 71 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.78.
- 72 Rudy Wiebe, Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Artic (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1989), p.9.
- 73 Ibid., pp.9-10. Equally, Wallace Stegner, who grew up a few miles north of the 49th Parallel in a Saskatchewan town called Whitemud, describes how 'for all my eyes could tell me, no line existed . . . We ignored the international boundary in ways and to degrees that would have been impossible if it had not been a line almost completely artificial', Wolf Willow: A History, A Story and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p.83.
- 74 Marshall McLuhan 'Canada: The Borderline Case', p.233.
- 75 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.10.
- 76 Atwood, Second Words, p.85.

- 77 New, A History of Canadian Literature, p.20.
- 78 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.78.
- 79 Atwood's nationalistic literature survey, Survival, published in the same year as Surfacing and articulating many of the same themes, sold over 80,000 copies. The average English Canadian literary work can normally be expected to sell only about 700 copies. Publication figures from Andy Lamey, 'Literature, Nationalism and Lousy Taste: The Wacousta Syndrome', a review of Margaret Atwood's Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature, The New Republic, 24 June 1996, 33-41 (p.35). As Lamey stresses, 'it would be difficult to overestimate [Survival's] influence'(p.35).
- 80 Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (London: Virago, 1979), p.1.
- 81 Ibid., p.4.
- 82 Ibid., p.5.
- 83 Ibid., p.20.
- 84 Heather Murray in her essay 'Women in the Wilderness' describes the setting of Surfacing as a 'pseudo wilderness', a log cabin locale uneasily split between the city and 'a "real" wilderness'. See Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, eds., A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986), pp.74-83 (p.75).
- 85 Atwood, Surfacing, p.24.
- 86 Margaret Atwood, ed. with intro., The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.xxx.
- 87 Atwood, Surfacing, p.29.
- 88 Ibid., p.5.
- 89 Ibid., p.140.
- 90 Ibid., p.13.
- 91 Ibid., p.70.
- 92 Ibid., p.100.
- 93 Atwood highlights this issue in an interview with Jim Davidson (1978) where she talks about Surfacing. She cites one of the protagonist's problems as being 'that none of the languages with which she has been provided seems to be adequate or accessible. And I think the push is towards a third language, if you like, or another language. And, of course, this is one of our difficulties: . . . in

- Canada . . . we write in English. And the French write in French. And that means that the literary tradition that history has provided us with was created in another country.' Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, pp.91-92.
- 94 These Indian language groups are Algonquian, Athapaskan, Haida, Iroquoian, Kutenai, Salishan, Siouan, Tlingit, Tsimshian and Wakashan. Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, belongs to an eleventh language group, Eskimo-Aleut. There are also several extinct Canadian Indian languages. See New, A History of Canadian Literature, pp.4-5.
- 95 Atwood, Surfacing, p.14.
- 96 Hugh MacLennan, Two Solitudes (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957), foreword.
- 97 Atwood, Surfacing, p.79.
- 98 Ibid., p.98.
- 99 Ibid., p.139.
- 100 Ibid., p.104.
- 101 Ibid., p.77.
- 102 Ibid., p.39.
- 103 Ibid., p.43.
- 104 Ibid., p.171.
- 105 Atwood, Survival, pp.114-15.
- 106 Ibid., pp.18-19. It is important to remember that Atwood wrote this statement in the 1970s when Canada's artistic and cultural position in relation to world literature was less clearly mapped than it is today in the 1990s. Indeed, Atwood has described Survival as being just such 'a diagram of Canadian literature', Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.52.
- 107 Atwood, Surfacing, p.46.
- 108 Ibid., p.46.
- 109 Atwood, Survival, p.184.
- 110 McGregor, The Wacousta Syndrome, p.283.
- 111 Atwood, Surfacing, p.18.
- 112 Ibid., p.55.

- 113 Atwood, Survival, p.55. A similar situation to the one described in Surfacing forms the basis for the much more recent story 'Death by Landscape' (1991). Lucy, enjoying a canoe trip from her Summer Camp, is with her friend Lois one moment and 'gone' the next. 'Lucy had simply vanished' (p.124). Her body is never found. Margaret Atwood, 'Death by Landscape' in Wilderness Tips (London: Quality Paperbacks Direct, 1991), pp.107-29.
- 114 Atwood, Surfacing, p.38.
- 115 Ibid., p.97.
- 116 Atwood, Survival, p.246.
- 117 Atwood, Second Words, p.385.
- 118 Atwood, Survival, p.390. This statement was written in 1972. A decade later Atwood shows no sign of altering her opinion as satellite communications develop and increase in number: 'this big-dish television is just going to obliterate national borders of all kinds', she declares in April 1983. Jan Garden Castro, 'An Interview with Margaret Atwood', Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms, eds. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1988), pp.233-43 (p.229). This strong sentiment is supported by Frye who also believes that information technology is eroding national boundaries. 'Canadian writers are, even now, still trying to assimilate a Canadian environment at a time when new techniques of communication . . . like television . . . are annihilating the boundaries of that environment'. Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.219.
- 119 Atwood, Surfacing, p.146.
- 120 McLuhan, 'Canada: The Borderline Case', p.247. Elsewhere in this article McLuhan outlines this idea in radical, international terms: 'The vast new borders of electric energy and information created by radio and television have set up world frontiers and interfaces among all countries on a new scale that alter all pre-existing forms of culture and nationalism.'(p.241)
- 121 Atwood, Surfacing, p.113.
- 122 Ibid., p.113.
- 123 This is the line of latitude which represents the majority of Canada's southern border with the United States of America. It is the 45th Parallel which briefly forms the border of New Brunswick and Maine (U.S.A.) south of Montreal.
- 124 Atwood, Surfacing, pp.140-41. In psychology diving into water is often associated with plunging into one's unconscious.
- 125 Ibid., pp.155-56.

- 126 Atwood, Survival, p.171.
- 127 Atwood, Surfacing, p.42.
- 128 Ibid., p.138.
- 129 Ramsay Cook, The Maple Leaf Forever: Essays on Nationalism and Politics in Canada (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p.60.
- 130 D. Drache, 'The Canadian Bourgeoisie and Its National Consciousness', in Close the 49th Parallel etc.: The Americanization of Canada, ed. by Ian Lumsden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp.3-25 (p.6).
- 131 Atwood, Surfacing, p.21.
- 132 In Survival Atwood questions whether the 'Canadians have a will to lose which is as strong and pervasive as the American will to win?', p.35.
- 133 Ibid., p.35.
- 134 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.94.
- 135 Jeanne Delbaere-Grant, 'Surfacing: Retracing the Boundaries', Commonwealth Essays and Studies: Canadian Literature / Margaret Atwood, 11-2 (Spring 1989), pp.1-10 (p.8).
- 136 See Atwood, Surfacing, p.58.
- 137 Ibid., see p.59.
- 138 Ibid., p.81.
- 139 Ibid., p.131.
- 140 Ibid., p.102.
- 141 Ibid., p.175.
- 142 Ibid., p.175.
- 143 In Howard O'Hagan's Tay John (1939) this rite of passage is described in the following way: 'Still [Kumkleseem (Tay John)] was not fully a man . . . till he had gone away from the people to a place of his choosing, to sit alone without food for a period of days that he might have a vision to show him the shape and the colour of the life before him, and to know the spirit that would guide him'. Tay John (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), p.45. See also Rudy Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973) for a historically based exposition of this practice.

- 144 See Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.76.
- 145 O'Hagan, Tay John, pp.64 and 82, respectively. The name Tay John is a mispronunciation of Tête Jaune.
- 146 Ibid., p.89. Tay John is frequently described as 'not leav[ing] so much as . . . disappear[ing] from view' (p.156).
- 147 Ibid., p.264.
- 148 Atwood, Surfacing, p.110.
- 149 Ibid., p.124.
- 150 Ibid., p.111.
- 151 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.13. See Atwood's critical work Survival, where she suggests that four 'basic victim positions whether the victim is a country, a group, or an individual'. These are:

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim. . . .

Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, . . . or any other large general powerful idea. . . .

Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. . . .

Position Four: To be a creative non-victim. [e.g. a writer] (pp.36-38)

The protagonist in Surfacing makes a psychological journey between position two defeatism and position three repudiation during the course of the novel, as it is obvious Atwood hopes Canada will.

- 152 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.13.
- 153 Atwood, Surfacing, p.140.
- 154 Ibid., p.36.
- 155 Ibid., p.163.
- 156 Ibid., p.123.
- 157 Ibid., p.122.
- 158 Ibid., p.138.



- 159 Ibid., p.100.
- 160 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.210.
- 161 Howells, Private and Fictional Words, p.26.
- 162 Atwood, Surfacing, p.163.
- 163 Howells, Private and Fictional Words, p.10.
- 164 Allison Mitcham, The Northern Imagination: A Study of Northern Canadian Literature (Moonbeam, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 1983), p.96.
- 165 Ibid., p.95, my emphasis.
- 166 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.232.
- 167 Atwood, Surfacing, p.1.
- 168 Frye, Divisions on a Ground, p.83.
- 169 Ibid., p.82.
- 170 Ibid., pp.82-83.
- 171 Ibid., pp.82-83.

**CHAPTER TWO: 'Boundary Busting': Canada, the Wilderness and the Disappearing Woman - Aritha van Herk and Margaret Atwood, pp.60-109.**

- 1 Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s (London: Methuen, 1987), p.11.
- 2 Ibid., p.15.
- 3 Aritha van Herk, A Frozen Tongue (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1992), p.58. See van Herk's essay 'Mapping as Metaphor: The Cartographer's Revision', pp.54-68 in the same collection, for an exposition of the way in which Frye has imposed his vision on the Canadian landscape.
- 4 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, pp.74-75.
- 5 Ibid., p.75. Van Herk revels in this notion of Canadians as 'quintessential tricksters'; 'only a sly culture like Canada's would take such a position [of

apparent duality] and play it as a game, shifting from one foot to the other, and laughing while the world of critics scurries after definition'. (p.74)

- 6 Ibid., p.74.
- 7 Since 1990 Atwood has published four works - Wilderness Tips (1991), Good Bones (1992), The Robber Bride (1993) and Alias Grace (1996) (in the U.K. all London: Bloomsbury). In Alias Grace, Atwood writes about Grace Marks, a woman convicted of murder in Toronto in 1843, bringing this once (in)famous but now obscure historical figure out of the shadows. Described in a short chapter in Susanna Moodie's lesser-known sequel to Roughing It in the Bush (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), Life in the Clearing Versus the Bush (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), Atwood uses this and other historical material to write a substantial novel based on the facts of Grace Marks' life and times.
- 8 Gyrid Jerve, 'Interview with Aritha van Herk', Kunapipi, 8-3 (1986), 68-76 (p.70). The context in which this statement was made can be illuminated by quoting this particular section of the interview more fully: Jerve: 'You said somewhere that the main difference between your women and Margaret Atwood's women is that your women are less victims.' Van Herk: 'Well, I think her women are getting less victims . . . maybe she's more of a realistic writer than I am.' (p.70)
- 9 Ibid., p.163.
- 10 Ibid., p.162.
- 11 Anderson, Imagined Communities, p.6. Anderson supports his position in spatial terms, arguing that 'the nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.'(p.7).
- 12 Ibid., p.6. Here Anderson quotes from Ernest Gellner, Thought and Change (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), p.169, emphasis added by Anderson.
- 13 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.82.
- 14 Ibid., p.162.
- 15 Ibid., p.163. Three of these tropes are taken directly from the titles of Canadian publications - Northrop Frye's The Bush Garden (1971), Margaret Atwood's Survival (1972) and Hugh MacLennan's Two Solitudes (1945). Another, 'the garrison mentality' is a quotation from Frye's 'Conclusion' to A Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English, 2nd edition, ed. Carl Klinck, vol.III, pp.318-32 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), reprinted in The Bush Garden, pp.231-51 (p.225). Among these four, 'geometry' stands out oddly as containing no direct literary reference. By

- 'geometry' I believe van Herk to be referring to the scientific delineation of Canada through mapping and pioneer recordings.
- 16 Ibid., p.59.
- 17 Frye, 'Conclusion' to A Literary History of Canada in The Bush Garden, p.217. Quoted by van Herk in A Frozen Tongue, p.59.
- 18 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.59.
- 19 Ibid., p.59.
- 20 Ibid., p.133.
- 21 Ibid., p.133.
- 22 Ibid., p.163.
- 23 Other literary 'garrison mentality' models referred to involve far more contemporary twentieth century writers, such as Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) and Edwin John Pratt (1882-1964).
- 24 Frye, The Bush Garden, p.236.
- 25 In Roughing It in the Bush, Moodie chooses to cast herself in the role of a sentimental Gothic heroine, innocent and terrified by the dark, sexually suggestive, wild Nature which surrounds and imprisons her. She remains a voyeuristic observer of her environment, her sexual feelings hinted at but repressed.
- 26 Anna Brownell Jameson, Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada, 3 vols., (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838). Subsequent references to this work are to the Coles Canadiana Collection facsimile edition (Toronto, 1972).
- 27 Marian Fowler, The Embroidered Tent: Five Gentlewomen in Early Canada (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), p.169.
- 28 Aritha van Herk, Places Far From Ellesmere (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1990), p.99.
- 29 Jameson, Winter Studies and Summer Rambles, vol.2, pp.52-53. This recollection is of a summer visit to the rapids above the Crescent Fall on 13 June 1837.
- 30 In an unpublished interview with Rosalind Jennings, Calgary, 20 November 1995, van Herk acknowledges that 'Anna Jameson is someone that I am much more interested in than the Moodies, or the Strickland sisters as they were called'. Van Herk suggests that she was attracted to Jameson because, instead of claiming rights to the land, Jameson carefully observed it as a 'tentative

tourist'. 'She recognises the problematics of that position without ever becoming an appropriative guest', van Herk suggests.

- 31 This letter was sent to England, dated 17 August 1837. Quoted Clara Thomas, Love and Work Enough: The Life of Anna Jameson (London: Macdonald, 1967), p.118. Jameson's route was from Mackinaw to Sault, and from there to the annual Indian conclave at Manitoulin Island. Travelling by boat and canoe, she then journeyed to Penetang and Lake Simcoe, before returning to Toronto.
- 32 See Fowler's chapter on Anna Jameson in The Embroidered Tent, pp.137-79, for a fuller exposition of the social expectations of Jameson's day.
- 33 In a letter written before her departure for Canada to her great friend Otilie von Goethe (dated 18 June 1836) Anna Jameson confides that she is 'meditating a step, which will require great courage to execute, but which will make me at ease and in some respect independent for the rest of my life'. Quoted in Love and Work Enough p.102. Jameson succeeded in arranging a formal separation in which her husband granted her permission to live apart from him and provided her with an annual allowance of £300.
- 34 Dorothy Jones, 'Interview with Aritha van Herk', Span 25 (Oct 1987), 1-15 (p.11).
- 35 Aritha van Herk, Judith (London: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1978), p.22.
- 36 Heather Murray, 'Women in the Wilderness', in A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing, Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, eds. (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest Press, 1986), pp.74-83 (p.75). In a footnote Murray acknowledges that 'in developing the idea of a 'pseudo-wilderness' I have drawn on the concept of a 'pseudo-North' in the literature of French Canada / Quebec as proposed by Jack Warwick, The Long Journey: Literary Themes of Franch Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 41-44', p.75. Linda Hutcheon defines this female genre as 'the cabin or cottage novel', The Canadian Postmodern, p.132.
- 37 Ibid., p.76.
- 38 Van Herk, Judith, p.105. This liberating image may well be a subversive play on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1891), where the female narrator is 'imprisoned' in her room by patriarchal medical and marital authority. This possible textual link is made more probable through Judith's realisation that her new butterfly wallpaper would have been a refreshing change from 'the yellowish walls' of her city apartment.(p.105)
- 39 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.291.
- 40 Atwood, Survival, p.33.

- 41 See Aritha van Herk Papers: First Accession, University of Calgary Library Special Collection, 53.2.9.f111-16.
- 42 Van Herk, Judith, p.190.
- 43 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.140.
- 44 Ingersoll, Margaret Atwood: Conversations, p.78.
- 45 Susan Griffin, Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (London: The Women's Press, 1984), p.177.
- 46 See Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.288.
- 47 Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', in The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism, eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp.117-32 (pp.123-24). This essay was first published in a longer version, entitled 'Feminist Literary Theory', in Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction, eds. Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1982), pp.204-21.
- 48 Ibid., p.124. For further examples of feminist questioning of the essentialist woman / nature association see Monique Wittig, 'One Is Not Born a Woman', in her collection The Straight Mind and Other Essays (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp.9-20 (p.13) and the title essay in Teresa de Lauretis collection Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), pp.1-30 (pp.20-21).
- 49 Hartmut Lutz, "Meat and Bones Don't Matter": Mythology in The Tent Peg, Ariel, 20-2 (April 1989), 41-67 (pp.53-54). Here, Lutz is referring to the novel The Tent Peg, but I suggest his statement is relevant to all four of van Herk's works of non-criticism under discussion in this chapter.
- 50 Kenneth McLintock, Choice, February 1979, Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.4.6.f13.
- 51 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.277.
- 52 Ibid., p.277. Van Herk admits that 'I wanted to make Judith nicer until I realised "this woman is like this"'. Rebecca Wigod, Victoria Times Colonist, 1983, Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.5.1.49.
- 53 See reviews by John C. Offutt, Nashville Banner, 24 February 1979, and Ceris Price, Books and Bookmen, December 1978, Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.4.6.f22 and 53.4.7.f8, respectively.
- 54 Van Herk, Judith, p.16.

- 55 Ibid., p.110.
- 56 Ibid., p.168.
- 57 Ibid., p.183.
- 58 Ibid., p.155. See also p.111.
- 59 Ibid., p.158.
- 60 Because of her unconventional, lone behaviour Judith is variously described as 'a sorceress' (p.147), 'a witch' (pp.149 and 166), 'a madwoman' and 'a crazy lady' (p.158). Despite her youth, Judith is regarded by her surrounding farming community within the parameters of the female archetype of the crone. See Annis Pratt, Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), for her explanation of 'the Craft of the Wise' or witchcraft.
- 61 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.277.
- 62 René Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1966), trans. Yvonne Freccero, p.2. The whole of the first chapter elucidates on the concept of 'Triangular' Desire, pp.1-52.
- 63 Van Herk, Judith, p.125.
- 64 Ibid., p.184.
- 65 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.276. Justifying this statement and the fact that 'it is sometimes said that Canadian literature is overburdened with nature', van Herk stresses that 'this is not an odd conclusion to come to about a country so thinly populated but so hugely physical' (p.276). See Margaret Atwood, Survival, chapter 3, 'Animal Victims', pp.69-86, where she discusses the Canadian tendency to identify with animals. Michael Ondaatje edited an entire collection of 'animal poems', The Broken Ark: A Book of Beasts (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1971) which demonstrates the Canadian tendency to adopt the perspective of the animal when writing about nature.
- 66 See 'Letter to van Herk from Lily Porita Miller, Senior Editor of McClelland and Stewart Ltd', 27 March 1978, Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.1.14.2a-c, quotation from 2a.
- 67 Jerve, 'Interview with Aritha van Herk', p.75. At certain points in the novel the narrative is actually within the consciousness of the pigs. A newly born piglet emerges into the world to the sound of Judith's laughter: 'It was the first sound he ever heard and he would remember it all his life' (p.68).

- 68 Rona Maynard, Miss Chatelaine, March 1979, Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.5.1.17.
- 69 Midas Dekkers, Dearest Pet: On Bestiality, trans. Paul Vincent (London: Verso, 1994), p.54.
- 70 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.277.
- 71 Margaret Atwood, 'Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction', The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp.97-122 (p.121). Apart from Marian Engel's Bear (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), which I discuss here, other Canadian works in which bears play a significant part include Robertson Davies, The Manticore (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972); Gwendolyn MacEwen, 'The House of the Whale' in Noman (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1972); and Howard O'Hagan, Tay John (1939, rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974).
- 72 Annis Pratt, 'Affairs with Bears: Some Notes Towards Feminist Archetypal Hypotheses for Canadian Literature', in Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing, ed. Barbara Godard (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), pp.157-78 (p.173).
- 73 Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (London: Virago Press, 1979). Here I shall give just a few textual examples: 'From the side he's like the buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction' (p.2); 'he was rising out of the fur husk, solid and heavy' (p.141); 'he feels his way into the room . . . and unzips his human skin . . . he is shivering . . . He needs to grow more fur' (pp.154-55).
- 74 Critical reaction to Bear was indeed very mixed, and polarised along predominantly gender lines. While fellow women writers described the novel as 'combin[ing] courage and craft' in 'a disturbing novel' (Gwendolyn MacEwan); 'an outstanding novel . . . which . . . celebrate[s] the mystery of life itself' (Margaret Laurence); 'a strange and wonderful book' (Margaret Atwood); several male reviewers slammed Bear as 'rather a silly novel' and a technical and erotic (pornographic) 'failure' (John Mills). Scott Symons went as far as to lambast the novel as 'national gangrene of the soul'. See Gwendolyn MacEwen, 'Bear, Marian Engel', Quill and Quire, 42-7 (May 1976), 36; John Mills, 'Recent Fiction', Queens Quarterly, 84-1 (Spring 1977), 99-102, which includes quotations by Laurence and Atwood, p.102, and Scott Symons, 'Lower Middle-class Canada on the Make', Canadian Forum, 57-673 (August 1977), 30.
- 75 Van Herk refers to Engel's works as 'pleasured texts' in a tribute to the writer after her death, Calgary Herald, 23 February 1985, reprinted in A Frozen Tongue, pp.233-35.

- 76 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.237. Van Herk's celebration of Bear is highlighted when she includes a beautifully articulated summary of its narrative in her own 1981 work of fiction, The Tent Peg, which I believe is worth quoting in full:  
 "And once there was a writer who wrote a very strange and beautiful story about a woman who loved a bear. The bear was a tame bear, but he was a bear, a big furry beast. He made love to the woman, licked her in such marvellous and intricate ways that she was satisfied as she had never been satisfied by a man. But of course he was a beast and when she forgot that, he reminded her. Strangely enough, her love for him made her clean and good. And that love was neither frustrated nor killed, but allowed to stand in its own time and place when both the bear and the woman went on with their lives". The Tent Peg (London: Virago Press, 1989), p.155, my emphasis.
- 77 Atwood, Survival, p.79. To support her argument, Atwood refers to Ernest Thompson Seton's Wild Animals I Have Known (Schocken Books, 1898). She continues to develop her analogy by suggesting that 'for the Canadian animal, bare survival is the main aim in life, failure as an individual is inevitable, and extinction as a species is a distinct possibility'.(p.79) It is important from a nationalistic point of view to remember that these comments were written in 1972 and should be regarded as historically specific.
- 78 Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p.ix.
- 79 Ibid., p.12.
- 80 Ibid., p.150.
- 81 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.143. This quotation is taken from a seminal essay, 'Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape', which first appeared in Kunapipi, 6-2 (1984), pp.15-25, and is reprinted in A Frozen Tongue, pp.139-51. The link between female representation, the wilderness and the marginal positionality of women is also established critically in the work of Toril Moi, especially in her feminist critique Sexual/ Texual Politics (London: Routledge, 1985): 'Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will . . . share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known or unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins or Mothers of God. In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos' (p.167). The frontier becomes a marginal position placing women between sexual licence and virginity, between guilt and innocence.



- 82 Ibid., p.143, my emphasis. I believe that the use of the phrase 'the lay of the land' is an allusion to Kolodny's work of this title, as referred to elsewhere in van Herk's critical writing.
- 83 Kolodny, The Lay of the Land, p.137.
- 84 Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p.125.
- 85 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.174.
- 86 Woolf, Three Guineas, p.125.
- 87 Jones, 'Interview with van Herk', pp.1,3.
- 88 'Boundary Busting on the Front: Gender and Nation Transfiguration' was first given by van Herk as a paper at the fourth biennial conference of the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, Australian National University, Canberra, A.C.T., Australia, June 1988. Printed in A Frozen Tongue, pp.161-74.
- 89 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.168 and p.169.
- 90 Van Herk, Judith, p.59. It is interesting to note that van Herk has some autobiographical experience of this situation, having 'spent a year working as her father's "hired man"' on their family farm in Alberta. See Kenneth McGoogan, 'Profile / Review of No Fixed Address', Quill and Quire 52 (1986), 34. In In Visible Ink (Crypto-Frictions) (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1991) van Herk stresses the gendered paradox of her upbringing further, acknowledging that she was 'raised as a boy . . . But delineated as a girl' (p.169).
- 91 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.168.
- 92 Ibid., p.168, my emphasis.
- 93 Lutz, 'Meat and Bones Don't Matter', p.46.
- 94 Van Herk acknowledges that J.L. 'is depicted as a realistic character, but at the same time the things she does are completely unrealistic . . . impossible actions': A Frozen Tongue, p.282.
- 95 Ibid., p.46. This is taken from an unpublished interview with van Herk in September 1987.
- 96 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.282.
- 97 Van Herk, The Tent Peg (London: Virago Press, 1989), pp.37-38. In one manuscript draft J.L. adds that, despite looking 'somewhat like a boy', 'it is not deliberate', Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.5.13.f33. In the published version, this

phrase is omitted, indicating a more conscious attempt at disguise on the part of J.L.

98 Van Herk, The Tent Peg, p.38.

99 Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', first published in The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, vol.10 (1929), pp.303-13, reprinted in Formations of Fantasy, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), pp.35-44.

100 Aritha van Herk Papers, 53.5.13.f34.

101 Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', Formations of Fantasy, p.35.

102 Van Herk, The Tent Peg, p.23.

103 Ibid., p.23.

104 Ibid., p.151.

105 Ibid., p.168.

106 Ibid., p.71. J.L. criticises the men for having 'no connection to the earth' (p.121).

107 Ibid., p.126.

108 Ibid., p.86.

109 Fowler, The Embroidered Tent, p.10. In her essay, 'The Impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgyne', Francette Pacteau, in Formations of Fantasy, eds, Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), pp.62-84, voices this sense of androgyny as liberating in boundary-busting terms. She sees the androgyne as being 'excessive in its transgression of the boundaries of gender identity' (p.79). I am aware that my reading of androgyny is a rather negative one. Pacteau acknowledges in sexual and psychological terms the possibility for both 'a negative androgyny and a positive androgyny: the impotency of the asexual being and the plentitude of the pre-Oedipal' (p.71). But I believe that a close textual analysis of Judith and The Tent Peg supports my reading of androgyny as negative in the context of van Herk's work.

110 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.280.

111 Ibid., p.281, my emphasis.

112 Van Herk, The Tent Peg, p.66.

- 113 Mackenzie describes the 'frozen country spreading herself under our [aeroplane's] shadow' (The Tent Peg, p.13). J.L. celebrates the abundance of the wilderness, 'the way the earth has given birth to herself' (p.137) and earlier describes 'the earth gathering herself' (p.120) before the landslide; my emphases.
- 114 Van Herk, The Tent Peg, p.154.
- 115 Ibid., p.203.
- 116 Ibid., p.168.
- 117 Aritha van Herk, No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey (London: Virago Press, 1989), p.143.
- 118 Ibid., p.143.
- 119 Hilda Kirkwood, 'Kiss of the Spider-Lady: An Interview with Aritha van Herk', Canadian Woman Studies, 8-3 (1987) 85-89 (p.86).
- 120 Marlene Goldman, 'Earth-Quaking the Kingdom of the Male Virgin: A Deleuzian Analysis of Aritha van Herk's No Fixed Address and Places Far From Ellesmere', Canadian Literature, 137 (1993), 21-38 (p.27). This article is taken from Goldman's unpublished doctoral thesis, 'No Man's Land: Recharting the Territory, Female Identity in Selected Fictions By Contemporary Canadian Women Writers', University of Toronto, 1993. See Chapter Five, 'Abandonning the Map: From Cartography to Nomadology - the Fictions of Aritha van Herk', pp.155-98, for a fuller analysis of all four of van Herk's non-critical works.
- 121 Ibid., p.27.
- 122 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.143.
- 123 Ibid., pp.287-88.
- 124 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.164.
- 125 Robert Kroetsch, 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space', in Robert Kroetsch: Essays, eds. Frank Davey and bp Nichol (Toronto: Open Letter, 1983), Fifth Series, 4 (Spring 1983), pp.47-55. First published in Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979).
- 126 Robert Kroetsch, A Likely Story: The Writing Life (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1989), p.114.
- 127 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.64.

- 128 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.301.
- 129 Unpublished interview with Rosalind Jennings, 1995.
- 130 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.112.
- 131 Jenny Abbott, 'Dulling the Desires: Aritha van Herk's No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey', TLS, 4506 (Aug 1989), p.878.
- 132 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.139.
- 133 *Ibid.*, p.103.
- 134 Goldman, 'Earth-Quaking the Kingdom of the Male Virgin', p.28.
- 135 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.223.
- 136 Gillian Beer, 'The Island and the Aeroplane: The Case of Virginia Woolf', in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.265-90 (p.265).
- 137 *Ibid.*, p.266.
- 138 Marshall McLuhan, 'Canada: The Borderline Case', in The Canadian Imagination, ed. Staines, pp.226-48 (p.239).
- 139 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.316.
- 140 *Ibid.*, p.310.
- 141 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.241. In her positive resolution of the fate of Canadian saleswoman Arachne, driving 'off the road' in No Fixed Address, I believe that van Herk is parodying the failed 'American Dream' embodied in Arthur Miller's play, Death of a Salesman (1949), in which an American salesman, Willy Loman, eventually commits suicide by crashing his car.
- 142 Dorothy Jones, 'The Spider and the Rose: Aritha van Herk's No Fixed Address', World Literature Written in English, 27-1 (1987), 39-56 (p.53).
- 143 Van Herk, No Fixed Address, p.292. For the full origins of this phrase see Chapter One, note 61.
- 144 Jones, 'Interview with Aritha van Herk', p.11.
- 145 Lutz, "'Meat and Bones Don't Matter'", p.44. Lutz quotes from No Fixed Address, p.317, when he refers to 'four-dimensional nothingness', but this is the perception of the narrator not Arachne, who in contrast 'know[s that] she has arrived' (p.310).

- 146 McGoogan, 'Profile / Review of No Fixed Address', p.34.
- 147 Ibid., p.34.
- 148 See van Herk's essay 'Of Viscera and Vital Questions' in Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English, eds. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990), pp.272-78 (p.278), reprinted in In Visible Ink, pp.129-37 (p.137).
- 149 Jones, 'Interview with Aritha van Herk', p.5.
- 150 This reading is supported by the comments made by Aritha van Herk in her unpublished presentation of Places Far From Ellesmere, entitled 'The Map's Temptation', on 5 April 1995, at the 'New Cartographies: Commonwealth and Post-Colonial Literatures Conference', at St. John's College, Oxford.
- 151 Van Herk, In Visible Ink, pp.173-88 (p.178). 'Writing the Immigrant Self: Disguise and Damnation' first appeared in The Dutch in North America: Their Immigration and Cultural Continuity (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1991), pp.154-64.
- 152 See Jones, 'Interview with Aritha van Herk', pp.3-4: 'I would never write a novel about my family, and even intruding fictionally on the whole discourse of being an immigrant child is very difficult. Yet, I've spent a lot of time denying that narrative. I was born the child of very poor parents, semi-literate in English. Because they came to Canada in their thirties, it was difficult for them to relearn the things they already knew. I spent a lot of time working my way out of that, becoming my own creation. It's a complicated issue that I'm not comfortable talking about, let alone writing about.'
- 153 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.289.
- 154 Van Herk, Places Far From Ellesmere, p.77, and In Visible Ink, p.8.
- 155 Van Herk, Places Far From Ellesmere, p.125. Ellesmere Island is part of Canada, yet essentially uninhabited except for a few government designated 'homelands', artificially established Inuit communities, like Grise Fiord. Yet the island's very nominal designation reveals the irony of 'ownership'. Both the French female pronoun, 'elle', and the word for mother, 'mere', are embodied in a name which seems to suggest female- or mother-land, but the island was in fact named after a man, the Earl of Ellesmere, in 1852 during the Inglefield expedition. In an unpublished lecture, 'Disruptive Geographies, Mapping the Region of Women: Contemporary Women's Writing in Canada', Coral Anne Howells acknowledged this irony, suggesting that Ellesmere might ultimately be seen as 'elsewhere'. This lecture was given on 5 April 1995 at the 'New Cartographies Conference', Oxford.

- 156 Van Herk, Places Far From Ellesmere, p.77.
- 157 Here I follow van Herk's use of the form Anna Karenin. Van Herk's source was Rosemary Edmonds' translation (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977). In a preface note Edmonds explains that she 'prefer[s] the form Anna Karenin, since the feminine form (Anna Karenina) is not used in English, where Countess Tolstoya appears as Countess Tolstoy, Madame Blavatskaya as Madame Blavatsky, and so on'.
- 158 Unpublished interview with Rosalind Jennings, 1995. Such studies include Margaret Atwood's essay, 'Concerning Franklin and His Gallant Crew', Books in Canada, 20-4 (May 1991), 20-26; John Moss's study, Enduring Dreams: An Explortion of Arctic Landscape (Concord, Ont.: Anansi Press, 1994); Mordecai Richler's novel, Solomon Gursky Was Here (Markham, Ont.: Viking/ Penguin Books, 1989); and Rudy Wiebe's Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1989) and A Discovery of Strangers (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1994). Some of these references to the Franklin myth are parodic but van Herk clearly believes that they still involve remaining within a patriarchal frame of male voyaging and discovery.
- 159 Unpublished interview with Rosalind Jennings, 1995.
- 160 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.280.
- 161 Agnes Dean Cameron, The New North: Being Some Account of a Woman's Journey through Canada to the Arctic (New York: D. Appleton, 1910), p.35. Quoted by Marni L. Stanley 'Traveler's Tales: Showing and Telling, Slamming and Questing', in A Mazing Space, eds. Neuman and Kamboureli, pp.51-60 (p.59).
- 162 Van Herk, In Visible Ink, p.3. Compare Jameson's comments on her 1887 journey, quoted earlier in this chapter (note 31) - 'I am just returned from the wildest and most extraordinary tour you can imagine, and am moreover the first Englishwoman - the first European female who ever accomplished this journey'. Both Jameson and van Herk emphasis that their trips are beyond both the experience and imagination / comprehension of the majority of the population.
- 163 Van Herk, In Visible Ink, p.2.
- 164 Ibid., p.3.
- 165 'Ellesmere, woman as island' is the final section in Places For From Ellesmere, pp.77-143. 'In Visible Ink' is a previously unpublished account in the collection of 'crypto-frictions' which bears its title, pp.1-11.
- 166 Van Herk, Places Far From Ellesmere, p.78.
- 167 Ibid., p.112.

- 168 Ibid., p.113.
- 169 Unpublished interview with Rosalind Jennings, 1995.
- 170 Van Herk, In Visible Ink, p.2.
- 171 Ibid., pp.4 and 5. Van Herk expands on this idea in her interview with Jennings: 'You begin to understand with the landscape of the north that even the edge of the continent is an imaginary line. . . . The boundary between the land and sea, in winter at least, is frequently erased and all that sense you have of a definite landfall is gone.'
- 172 Kroetsch, 'Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction' in Robert Kroetsch: Essays, pp.17-21 (p.21).
- 173 Van Herk, A Frozen Tongue, p.279.
- 174 Ibid., p.279.
- 175 Murray, 'Women in the Wilderness', p.75.
- 176 See Chapter Two's opening paragraph, note 2. Howells, Private and Fictional Words, p.15.
- 177 Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.64.
- 178 Atwood, Survival, p.149.
- 179 Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, p.59.
- 180 Ibid., pp.60-61.
- 181 Carol Shields's 1976 novel Small Ceremonies (London: Fourth Estate, 1995) is based on the life of a fictional biographer, Judith Gill, who is writing about Susanna Moodie. Shields' own master's dissertation was based on Susanna Moodie; it was published under the title Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1977). For a fuller list of authors writing on Susanna Moodie and her journals see Murray's discussion of 'the frequent attempts to "re-read" Moodie, creatively or critically', in 'Women in the Wilderness', p.78.
- 182 See Howells, Private and Fictional Words, p.15, and Maggie Humm, Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Woman Writers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p.136, for a discussion of the ravine as urban wilderness in Atwood. The author herself uses the term 'wilderness' to describe the ravine in the short story 'Bluebeard's Egg', in Bluebeard's Egg, and Other Stories (London: Virago Press, 1988), pp.131-64 (p.131).

- 183 Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman (London: Virago Press, 1980), p.263.
- 184 Ibid., see pp.260-65 for the full account of this journey.
- 185 Humm, Border Traffic, p.152.
- 186 Margaret Atwood, Cat's Eye (London: Virago Press, 1990), p.48.
- 187 Ibid., p.187.
- 188 Ibid., p.48.
- 189 Ibid., p.145.
- 190 See Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (London: Virago Press, 1982), p.65.
- 191 Atwood, 'Bluebeard's Egg', p.151.
- 192 Angela Carter published her seminal collection of feminist fairy-tales, The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories (London: Penguin) in 1979. In a 1987 interview Atwood lists Angela Carter as one of her 'favourite authors' in 'A Conversation: Margaret Atwood and Students', moderated by Francis X. Gillen, Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms, eds. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp.233-43 (p.233). It is notable that Atwood is rewriting the fairy-tale form of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) as early as 1969, with The Edible Woman. Atwood is not alone in subversively reappropriating universal fairy-stories within a specifically Canadian context. David Arnason has recently published a series of 'fractured prairie tales', The Dragon and the Dry Goods Princess (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1994).
- 193 Atwood, 'Bluebeard's Egg', p.133.
- 194 Ibid., p.150.
- 195 Ibid., p.151.
- 196 The only piece of information which the reader is given is that 'The photograph was taken the day after I drowned'. See Margaret Atwood: Poems 1965-1975 (London: Virago Press, 1991), p.8. This piece of poetry was used by the American publishers, Doubleday, on the back cover of their free pamphlet, The Book Group Companion to Margaret Atwood's 'The Robber Bride' (New York: Doubleday, 1993), presumably implying a thematic link between the Circle Game poem and Atwood's latest novel through the image of disappearance.
- 197 See Atwood's Surfacing, p.54. In Earle Birney's poem 'Bushed' (1951) this phenomenon is not only associated with madness but a premonition of death. In a paranoid state the narrator believes he knows that 'the winds/ were



- shaping its peak to an arrowhead/ poised// And now he could only bar himself in and wait/ for the great flint to come singing into his heart'. The emphasis here is on destruction, not on disappearance. See Birney, Trial of a City and Other Verse (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1952), p.63.
- 198 Margaret Atwood, 'Death by Landscape', in Wilderness Tips (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), pp.107-29 (p.129).
- 199 Atwood, Surfacing, pp.180-81. See Margaret Atwood, Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), for a discussion of the wendigo in Canadian literature, 'Eyes of Blood, Heart of Ice: The Wendigo', pp.62-86.
- 200 While Nora Foster Stovel describes The Robber Bride as 'leav[ing] the reader wondering whether Zenia is primarily warrior or victim', The International Fiction Review 22-1/2 (1995), 114-16 (116); Pearl Bell declares that Zenia 'is more laughable than sinister, as scary as a Halloween pumpkin', 'Fiction Chronicle', Partisan Review, 61-1 (1994), 80-95 (p.90). See p.107 of this chapter for more critical responses to the novel and Zenia in particular.
- 201 The full title of this essay is 'Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction', The Canadian Imagination, ed. Staines, p.100.
- 202 Michiko Kakutani, 'Three Heroines and a Woman They Love to Hate', review of Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, The New York Times, 26 October 1993. Press cutting provided by Atwood's British publishing agent O.W. Toad. No page numbers given. Subsequent press cutting from this source are referenced as (source Toad, p.n/a).
- 203 See Julianne Pidduck's article, 'Margaret at Work', based on The Robber Bride, in Montreal Mirror, Montreal, 30 September 1993, p.26 and Michael Smith's interview, 'Margaret and the Art of the Deliberate Lie', in The London Free Press, London, Ontario, 27 September 1993 (source Toad, p.n/a).
- 204 The Margaret Atwood Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, 200.131.1, typescript p.52 (numbered p.7 of 'The Toxique').
- 205 See an original version of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, such as the beautifully illustrated turn of the century translation by Mrs. Edgar Lucas (London: Constable, 1909) in which 'The Robber Bridegroom' appears on pp.120-24. In an interview with Linda Sandler Atwood acknowledges that 'Grimm's Fairy Tales was the most influential book I ever read', Margaret Atwood: Conversations, ed. Ingersoll, p.46. This fairy-tale influence can be seen throughout Atwood's work. In the context of my discussion of The Robber Bride it is notable that her 1981 novel, Bodily Harm, was originally entitled 'The Robber Bridegroom' (The Margaret Atwood Papers, typescripts, Box 33) and some drafts of the novel even use an epigraph from the fairy-tale (Atwood Papers, Bodily Harm drafts, Box 33). See Sharon

- Rose Wilson, Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), specifically pp.200 and 204. The epigraph from 'The Robber Bridegroom' reads: 'Then said the bridegroom to the bride: "Come my darling, do you know nothing? Relate something to us like the rest." She replied: "Then I will relate a dream."' 200.33.2, typescript p.2 and 200.33.6, typescript p.3. The emphasis here, as in The Robber Bride, is on the power of story-telling as a means of female expression.
- 206 Margaret Atwood, The Robber Bride (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p.43.
- 207 Atwood may also be alluding to Alfred Tennyson's poem, 'The Lady of Shalott' (1832, revised 1842), with its description of 'many-towered Camelot' (l.5). The poem's imagery emphasises bright colours. Tennyson's poem is an important intertext in Atwood's earlier novel, Lady Oracle (1976).
- 208 Ibid., pp.52 and 43.
- 209 Ibid., p.51.
- 210 The Margaret Atwood Papers, 200.131.1. holograph p.45 (numbered p.1 of Petra's story).
- 211 Ibid., holograph p.45.
- 212 Marilyn Smulders interview with Margaret Atwood about The Robber Bride, 'Devil in a Blue Dress', Halifax Daily News, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 12 September 1993 (source Toad, p.n/a).
- 213 As the Canadian National Tower was being completed in 1976, several Toronto journalists covering the construction story noted the tower's phallic shape, emphasised by the recent addition of the bulbous 'sky-pod' near the top of the tower.
- 214 Atwood, The Robber Bride, p.289.
- 215 Ibid., p.52. This policy is not fiction but historical fact. Most of Toronto Island is now a municipal park.
- 216 Ibid., p.53. It is in Lake Ontario that Roz's husband Mitch drowns.
- 217 In this way the significance of the time setting at the conclusion of The Robber Bride is comparable with Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano (1947), set on the Mexican Day of the Dead.
- 218 Ibid., p.211.
- 219 Ibid., p.211.
- 220 Ibid., p.367.

- 221 Atwood, Second Words, p.395. This comment is informed by Atwood's active involvement in Amnesty International.
- 222 Atwood, The Robber Bride, pp.413 and 290.
- 223 Ibid., p.303.
- 224 Ibid., p.390.
- 225 D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p.8.
- 226 Atwood, The Robber Bride, p.437.
- 227 Ibid., pp.103 and 135.
- 228 Ibid., p.104.
- 229 Ibid., see pages 37, 281, 392 and 102, for relevant quotations and references.
- 230 Ibid., p.133. This quotation recalls the comments of D.G. Jones. A 'wolf' is slang for a man who habitually tries to seduce women, but Zenia demonstrates an equally strong female proclivity for wolfish philandering.
- 231 Ibid., p.414.
- 232 Ibid., p.295.
- 233 Atwood had already explored the darker side of adolescent girls in Cat's Eye (1988). In this novel it is Cordelia who is 'the villain of the piece'. This character shares other important affinities with Zenia, as a consummate liar and dissembler. Elaine describes Cordelia as a dramatic figure, 'like someone making herself up as she goes along. She's improvising.'(p.301). See later in my discussion for an analysis of Zenia's portrayal, which is similar.
- 234 Atwood, The Robber Bride, p.85.
- 235 Sherrill Grace, 'Atwood's Postmodern Fairytale', Canadian Forum (March 1994), pp.44-45 (p.44).
- 236 Atwood, The Robber Bride, p.293.
- 237 Sharon Rose Wilson discusses the archetype of 'the female artist as a Medusa witch' in Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p.5. Atwood herself admits that 'over the years I've been on the receiving end of every bias in the book . . . Witch, man-hater, man-freezing Medusa, man-devouring monster. The Ice Goddess, the Snow Queen', Language in Her Eye, eds Scheier, Sheard and Wachtel, p.20.

- Atwood's portrayal of Zenia as a story-teller, creator may be partially based on this experience.
- 238 Margaret Atwood in conversation with Valentine Cunningham on the 'Night Waves' programme, broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 7 October 1993.
- 239 Zenia's name is deconstructed on p.461 of the novel, where two of the possible derivations for the word include 'Xenia, a Russian word for hospitable' and 'Xeno, Greek, a stranger, as in xenophobic'. For a discussion of Zenia's lack of name changing see Atwood's comments to Val Ross in 'Playing the Atwood Guessing Game', The Globe and Mail, Toronto, 7 October 1993, C.1-2 (p.2). The name Zenia might establish an analogy with Zenobia in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance (1852). This is certainly a novel with which Atwood is familiar, as she mentions it in the context of her essay 'Canadian Monsters', Second Words, p.230. Apart from possible parallels with the 'romance' genre, Zenia and Zenobia have in common 'disguise', lack of surname, apparent suicide and an emphasis on female orality.
- 240 Lynne Van Luven, 'Atwood Questions Women's Nature', a review of Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, The Edmonton Journal, Edmonton, 17 October 1993 (source Toad, p.n/a).
- 241 Maureen Nicholson, 'Unpopular Gals', a review of Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, The Vancouver Review (Spring 1994), 22.
- 242 Claire Messud, 'Nemesis in Female Form', a review of Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, TLS, 4723 (1993), 27.
- 243 Candace Fertile, 'Atwood Again Fashions Real Lives From Words', a review of Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, The Calgary Herald, Calgary, 23 October 1993 (source Toad, p.n/a).
- 244 See 'Atwood on Reading, Writing and Writers', an interview with Margaret Atwood in Pique, 28 October 1993, pp.11 and 13, for Atwood's comments on selecting quotations for the front of the novel.
- 245 Atwood, The Robber Bride, p.428.
- 246 Ibid., p.383.
- 247 Ibid., p.443.
- 248 Ibid., p.167.
- 249 Ibid., p.93.
- 250 Shannon Hengon, 'Atwood's Novel May Be a "Potboiler" of a Modern Tale', a review of Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride, The Sudbury Star, Sudbury, 6 February 1994 (source Toad, p.n/a).

- 251 Margaret Atwood, Good Bones (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p.30.
- 252 Atwood, The Robber Bride, p.462.
- 253 Ibid., p.402.
- 254 Wilson, Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics, p.34.

**CHAPTER THREE: 'The Fiction Makes Us Real': Misleading Appearances in the Prairie Writing of Robert Kroetsch, pp.110-164.**

- 1 Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, 'Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', Arts Manitoba, 1-1 (Jan-Feb 1977), 32-39 (p.39).
- 2 Susan Rudy Dorscht, Women, Reading, Kroetsch: Telling the Difference (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991), p.10.
- 3 Donald Cameron, 'Robert Kroetsch: The American Experience and the Canadian Voice', Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1-3 (Summer 1972), 48-52 (p.49). Also published under the same title in Quill and Quire (January 1972), 3 and 7-8, in a slightly different version. For ease of reference all citations are from the Journal of Canadian Fiction edition of this article.
- 4 Robert Lecker, Robert Kroetsch (Boston: Twayne, 1986), p.27.
- 5 Robert Kroetsch, 'A Conversation with Margaret Laurence', in Kroetsch, ed., Creation (Toronto: New Press, 1970), pp.53-63 (p.63). See his essay 'Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue', Mosaic, 14-2 (Spring 1981), pp.v-xi, for further discussion of national narrative.
- 6 The introduction to Peter Thomas's study, Robert Kroetsch (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980), is a prime example of this, see p.2.
- 7 Frank Davey and bp Nichol, eds., Robert Kroetsch: Essays, Open Letter, 5-4 (Spring 1983), p.88.
- 8 Robert Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.182.
- 9 Kroetsch is far from being alone in this perception of Canadian national origins. In a famous ironic poem, 'Can. Lit.', Earle Birney writes 'we French and English never lost/ our civil war/ endure it still/ a bloody civil bore'. Birney, Rag and Bone Shop (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), page unnumbered. Northrop Frye also remarks about this contrast in a number of

- his essays, describing 'the pragmatic, compromising, ad hoc, ramshackle Canadian tradition vis-à-vis the far more integrated and revolutionary American ones'. Frye, Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture, ed. James Polk (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982), p.75.
- 10 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.84.
- 11 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.41.
- 12 Ibid., p.41.
- 13 Ibid., p.41.
- 14 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.88.
- 15 Ibid., p.88.
- 16 Kroetsch, Creation, p.62.
- 17 Ibid., p.62.
- 18 Ibid., p.62.
- 19 Rudy Wiebe, 'A Passage By Land', Canadian Literature, 48 (Spring 1971), 25-27 (p.25).
- 20 Kroetsch, Creation, p.62.
- 21 Ibid., p.53.
- 22 Ibid., p.53.
- 23 Hermione Lee, Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up (London: Virago Press, 1989), pp.22-23. It is appropriate to refer to Willa Cather here since she is clearly an author who has influenced Kroetsch's thinking about North American motifs, as can be witnessed in his essay 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space', based in part on Cather's novel My Antonia (1918).
- 24 Willa Cather, 'Katherine Mansfield', in Cather, Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1936), pp.123-47 (p.136). Quoted by Hermione Lee, Willa Cather, p.23 (page reference incorrectly cited by Lee).
- 25 Kroetsch, Creation, p.54. The piece of writing that Kroetsch is specifically referring to here is 'That Yellow Prairie Sky' (1955).
- 26 Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), p.39. Harrison statistical source is James H. Gray, Men Against the Desert (Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1967), p.9.

- 27 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.13.
- 28 The Homeric myth of the Odyssey clearly embodies the important framing incidences of Odysseus departure and return to Ithaca. The American Western's journey is based less on a motif of departure and return, more on arrival and departure. As John R. Milton says in his essay 'The Novel in the American West', one of the formula stories of the Western is that of 'the mysterious stranger riding into a town beset with evil, ridding it of its evil, and riding off into the sunset.' William T. Pilkington, ed., Critical Essays on the Western American Novel (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1980), pp.3-19 (p.5).
- 29 Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.30 and 5, respectively.
- 30 Ibid., p.10.
- 31 See Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.56.
- 32 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.20.
- 33 Ibid., p.20. Philip is mis-spelt in this publication of the essay, but corrected in the later The Lovely Treachery of Words.
- 34 Ibid., p.20.
- 35 Ibid., p.17.
- 36 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.52.
- 37 It is this breaking with conventional forms that Kroetsch, as a writer, finds so fascinating. As he says in an unpublished essay ('Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel', p.4) quoted by Peter Thomas: 'Grove is a writer of great moral intensity because he is himself a sham, a liar, a criminal, a fraud. Out of the terrible pressures within himself he created moral predicaments and explored in violent and new ways the connections between autobiography and the novel, between fiction and reality.' Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, p.2.
- 38 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.20.
- 39 Robert Kroetsch, 'F.P. Grove: The Finding', The Stone Hammer Poems 1960-1975 (Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1975), pp.46-47 (p.47).
- 40 Eli Mandel, 'Romance and Realism in Western Canadian Fiction', in Anthony W. Rasporich and Henry C. Klassen, eds., Prairie Perspectives 2 (Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Wilson, 1973), pp.197-211 (p.201). As Douglas Spettigue states, 'in a sense all his writings are autobiographical, a working out of an image, and a rationale, of himself . . . perhaps we shall never confidently

- separate the fiction from the fact'. F.P.G.: The European Years (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1973), p.20.
- 41 Ibid., p.201.
- 42 Margaret R. Stobie, Frederick Philip Grove (New York: Twayne, 1973), p.189.
- 43 See Douglas O. Spettigue, 'The Grove Enigma Resolved', Queens Quarterly, 79-1 (April 1972), 1-2. See also Desmond Pacey, 'In Search of Grove in Sweden: A Progress Report', Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1-1 (Winter 1972), 69-73. Before Spettigue's revelations, Pacey, who had already written a full length study, Frederick Philip Grove (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970), was sceptical about Grove's ability to totally invent his European life. 'I find it very difficult to believe', writes Pacey, 'that he told a series of outright lies . . . Grove undoubtedly had a powerful imagination, but that it was powerful enough to invent the first twenty years of his life and to endow it with such versimilitude as the account [in In Search of Myself] possesses, seems unlikely.' (p.73).
- 44 See Spettigue, F.P.G.: The European Years. In a letter of 1902 Greve announced to a friend that he had married, but Spettigue believes that this German marriage, if it took place at all, occurred in 1904. The woman, Elsa, whose full identity is uncertain, may only have been FPG's common-law wife. Grove gave his marital status on his Canadian marriage certificate to Catherine Wiens in 1914 as 'Widower', but this claim like other details of his life is almost certainly spurious. Spettigue believes that FPG 'abandoned [Elsa] in 1909' (p.81), when he faked his suicide and left for Canada. It was from prison in Bonn in 1903 that Greve first suggested to his publisher the use of a writer's pseudonym - Friedrich Carl Gerden - to mask the identity and name he had brought into disrepute through his fraudulent dealings.
- 45 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.56.
- 46 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.75.
- 47 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.56.
- 48 Ibid., p.35. This anecdotal statement appeared in an essay entitled 'The Canadian Writer and the American Tradition', first published in 1971. It is thus linked to a moment of increasing nationalist feeling in Canada, which gained in strength throughout the 1970s, especially in the literary community.
- 49 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.17.
- 50 Dennis Lee, 'Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space', Boundary 2, 3-1 (Fall 1974), 151-68 (pp.162 and 165). Kroetsch may well have heard this essay in a shorter form, given as a talk at the 'Recontre Québécoise internationale des Ecrivains', held in Montreal in the spring of 1972. Certainly,



- by 1974, the year of the first publication of 'Unhiding the Hidden', he was familiar with the piece since, as general editor, he included it in that autumn's edition of his journal, Boundary 2.
- 51 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.17.
- 52 Lee, 'Cadence, Country, Silence', p.163.
- 53 Spettigue, Frederick Philip Grove, p.148. Grove's epitaph, written by Thomas Saunders, reads 'In this once-alien Canadian earth/ my bones shall lie,/ Claimed from the claiming death,/ Home' (quoted p.156).
- 54 It is notable that the only two texts that the Philip Grove persona, Phil Brandon, takes with him on his journey in In Search of Myself are a copy of the New Testament and The Odyssey. Grove refers to The Odyssey in his account of a winter journey, 'Snow', in Over Prairie Trails (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1922).
- 55 See Frederick Philip Grove, In Search of Myself (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), pp.299-302, quotations are from pp.299 and 301.
- 56 Kroetsch, 'F.P. Grove: The Finding', pp.46-47.
- 57 Alan Twigg, 'Male: Robert Kroetsch', For Opener: Conversations with 24 Canadian Writers (Madiera Park, B.C.: Harbour, 1981), pp.107-116 (p.115).
- 58 Cameron, 'The American Experience and the Canadian Voice', p.51.
- 59 Kroetsch, 'F.P. Grove: The Finding', p.47.
- 60 Ibid., p.47.
- 61 Robert Kroetsch, 'Seed Catalogue', Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), pp.32-51 (p.49).
- 62 Kroetsch, 'F.P. Grove: The Finding', p.47.
- 63 In Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, Kroetsch describes Grove as 'the true trickster'(p.20).
- 64 Paul Radin, The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p.x.
- 65 Grove, In Search of Myself, p.301. Stobie describes 'the Big Grassy Marsh country of Manitoba, where Grove and his family lived from 1917 to 1919, as being 'as close as Grove ever got to "the wilderness" and he did not stay long' (Stobie, Frederick Philip Grove, p.70). The important point is that whether or not Grove really ever did live in the wilderness, he romantically perceived it to

be such a place, where he could let his pioneering imagination move freely across an unclaimed, unmarked landscape.

- 66 The Canadian government divided the West into townships six miles square, containing thirty six sections of 640 acres, each in turn divided into 60 acre quarter sections.
- 67 Harrison, Unnamed Country, p.7.
- 68 Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man / Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p.ix.
- 69 W.O. Mitchell, The Vanishing Point (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p.322. Issues of visibility have racial significance in this novel about a white teacher who is an Indian agent on a Stony Indian reservation.
- 70 Ibid., p.7.
- 71 See Wiebe, 'Passage By Land', p.26. The full quotation reads: 'There is too much here, the line of the sky and grass rolls in upon you and silences you thin, too impossibly thin to remain in any part recognisably yourself.'
- 72 Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), p.80. See Robert Kroetsch, 'Writing From Prairie Roots', Alberta School Library Review, 8-1 (Fall 1971), 7-14 (p.8), where Kroetsch describes a personal experience of getting lost on the prairies despite being on a completely straight road. This is not an uncommon prairie experience. Rudy Wiebe describes getting 'lost in broad daylight' on a prairie road, in 'Passage By Land', p.26.
- 73 Kroetsch, 'Seed Catalogue', p.43. Kroetsch reiterates this image in his novel, The Words of My Roaring (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), in which the narrator describes 'all those damned dirt roads running nowhere in straight lines' (p.59).
- 74 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.53.
- 75 The Mennonites are a prime example of such close-knit settlements. They live in insular communities structured on a religious based philosophy which emphasises the group over the individual.
- 76 See Brian MacKinnon, "The Writer Has Got to Know Where He Lives": An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', Writers News Manitoba, 4-1 (Feb 1982), 3-18 (p.3).
- 77 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.144.
- 78 Kroetsch, Creation, p.62.

- 79 Kroetsch, 'Seed Catalogue', p.34.
- 80 Ibid., p.34.
- 81 Ibid., p.34. Like home, the double hook is a symbol of a paradoxical mixed blessing, as Watson explains: 'you can't catch the glory on a hook and hold on to it . . . when you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too . . . if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear'. Sheila Watson, The Double Hook (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), p.50.
- 82 Watson, The Double Hook, p.116.
- 83 Ibid., p.106.
- 84 Sheila Watson, 'What I'm Going To Do', Sheila Watson: A Collection, Open Letter, 3-1 (Winter 1974-75), 181-83 (p.182).
- 85 Watson, The Double Hook, p.106.
- 86 Ibid., p.116.
- 87 Ibid., p.93.
- 88 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.50.
- 89 This image is poetically rendered as a moment of poignant disappointment in Margaret Atwood's poem 'Migration: CPR'. Travelling on the Canadian Pacific Railway, Atwood's narrator describes how 'we ran west/ wanting/ a place of absolute/ unformed beginning', only to discover that 'There are more secondhand/ stores here than we expected' and the forest is already logged, its paths pre-trodden. The Canadian West is not a place of completely new pioneer beginnings. See Margaret Atwood, Circle Games (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1966), pp.52-56 (pp.52 and 54 respectively).
- 90 Diane Bessai, 'Death is a Happy Ending: A Dialogue in Thirteen Parts', in Diane Bessai and David Jackel, eds., Figures in a Ground (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), pp.206-15 (p.215).
- 91 Ibid., p.215.
- 92 Ibid., p.215.
- 93 For instance, fifty percent of the prairie province of Alberta is not plains at all but forest, while northern Saskatchewan is rocky bush country. Even the plains are not flat and featureless, but present a rolling landscape incised by rivers, coulees and valleys.
- 94 Russell M. Brown, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', The University of Windsor Review, 7-2 (1972), 1-18 (p.2).

- 95 Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness was serialised in Blackwood's Magazine in 1899. The novella was first published in full in 1902, in Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories ('Youth', 'Heart of Darkness', 'The End of the Tether'). Kroetsch acknowledges that Heart of Darkness is an important source of imaginative inspiration, see Labyrinths of Voice, p.12. The sentiments of the Scotsman Gordon Fraser, living on the Mackenzie in the remote North West Territories in But We Are Exiles, resemble those of Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, who likewise is a soujourner-cum-inhabitant of a riverside wilderness. Fraser laments that rather than shutting the wilderness outside, he has effectively been garrisoned inside it: 'A man is free here . . . He is so free that nothing else in the world is ever as good again. Never. But it's a screwing jail, this place. I can't leave' (But We Are Exiles, p.46). Kurtz's Russian 'disciple' relates to Marlow how Kurtz 'hated all this and somehow he couldn't get away' (Heart of Darkness, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p.56). The wilderness is equally feared and desired, giving both social and sexual freedom to Gordon Fraser and Kurtz, but trapping them in the process.
- 96 Aritha van Herk, 'Biocritical Essay', Jean F Tener and Apollonia Steele, eds., The Robert Kroetsch Papers: First Accession: An Inventory of the Archives of the University of Calgary (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1986), pp.ix-xxxviii (p.xxi).
- 97 Lewis G. Thomas, 'Prairie Settlement: Western Responses in History and Fiction; Social structures in a Canadian Hinterland', in Dick Harrison, ed., Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979), pp.59-72 (p.60).
- 98 Van Herk, 'Biocritical Essay on Robert Kroetsch', p.xxi, my emphasis.
- 99 Robert Kroetsch, A Likely Story: The Writing Life (Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1995), p.26.
- 100 Ibid., p.26.
- 101 See Robert Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), pp.8, 20 and 102.
- 102 Kenneth Mitchell, 'Landscape and Literature', in William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds., Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), pp.23-29 (p.27).
- 103 Ibid., p.27.
- 104 Brown, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.8. This comment is both misquoted and incorrectly cited by Mitchell as being from 'A Conversation with

- Margaret Laurence', Kroetsch, Creation, p.53, in *Landscape and Literature*', pp.27-28.
- 105 Dorscht, Woman, Reading, Kroetsch, p.58. 'The prick and its vagaries' is a quotation by Kroetsch from Labyrinths of Voice, p.100.
- 106 Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p.48.
- 107 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.11.
- 108 *Ibid.*, p.11.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p.11.
- 110 *Ibid.*, p.11.
- 111 Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p.103.
- 112 Robert Kroetsch, Alberta (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1993), p.30.
- 113 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.54.
- 114 Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p.135. Dorscht emphasises that through his name, 'Peter Guy signifies the emptiness of the phallic position, the lack at the centre of "male" authority'. Dorscht, Women, Reading, Kroetsch, p.58.
- 115 Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p.137.
- 116 *Ibid.*, p.135.
- 117 *Ibid.*, p.143. Asked by a park official if they have any guns, Guy replies in the negative, an answer that Hornyak counters, boasting that, in fact, they have 'Two. Loaded'.
- 118 'Home on the Range' was first printed in 1911. It is said to have been sung on the doorstep of Franklin D. Roosevelt's home by a group of newspaper reporters the night he was first elected President and includes a patriotic line about 'this dear land of ours'. The opening verse and chorus are as follows:  
 Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo roam,  
 Where the deer and the antelope play;  
 Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,  
 And the skies are not cloudy all day.
- 119 See Cameron, 'The American Experience and the Canadian Voice', p.52, for these lyrics and Kroetsch's discussion of them.
- 120 Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p.59.
- 121 *Ibid.*, p.52.

- 122 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.180.
- 123 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.28.
- 124 Ibid., p.36.
- 125 Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p.82.
- 126 Harrison, Unnamed Country, p.179. Harrison's emphasis on comedy is not a result of a lack of knowledge about the tragic mode of much of the earlier literature of the Canadian West - a field in which he is extremely well-versed.
- 127 Twigg, For Openers, pp.109-110.
- 128 Ibid., p.112.
- 129 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, pp.14 and 179.
- 130 Ibid., p.181.
- 131 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.4.
- 132 Ibid., p.4.
- 133 See Henry Kreisel, 'The Prairie: A State of Mind', Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada 6-4 (June 1968), 171-80 (p.172) for an exposition of this giant motif in the fiction of the authors mentioned. Kroetsch's deliberate play on the stature of these other characters is highlighted by Backstrom's otherwise insignificant mention of the fact that 'I am what is popularly known as a big Swede, though I am incidentally half-Norwegian in descent' (p.31). There is a literary tradition of towering Norse men - while Fusi Aronson is Icelandic, Lars Nelson is Swedish.
- 134 Kroetsch, Creation, p.53. In an interview Kroetsch elucidates on this sentiment: 'The notion that there is a landscape that you can describe realistically is nonsense because each of us is perceiving landscapes subjectively . . . That's what interests me - the perception of landscape and how it alters. I think landscaping is very much an interior thing at the same time.' Enright and Cooley, 'Uncovering Our Dream World', p.39.
- 135 Kreisel, 'The Prairie: A State of Mind', p.173.
- 136 See Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.162. Backstrom even makes love to Helen in this ridiculous state of minimal attire.
- 137 Ibid., p.6.
- 138 Ibid., p.68.

- 139 Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, p.38.
- 140 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.164.
- 141 Brown, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.15.
- 142 See MacKinnon, 'The Writer Has Got to Know Where He Lives', pp.3-18. Despite the fact that Kroetsch describes 'the prairie pub' as only being 'a male preserve until twenty years ago',(p.7) it must be remembered that The Words of My Roaring is set in the 1930s when the pub could still definitely have 'served as an escape from the female world' (p.7). This historical phenomenon has influenced the development of the Canadian prairie oral tradition, Kroetsch suggests, stating that: 'I think that the tall tale is the male version and the pub certainly served to nurture the tall tale - while the kitchen table served as a focal point for the woman's world and there gossip was important.' (p.7).
- 143 Robert Kroetsch, 'One for the Road: An Introduction' to Glen Sorestad, Prairie Pub Poems (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1976), pp.i-iii (p.iii).
- 144 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.38.
- 145 Ibid., p.38.
- 146 Ann Mandel, 'Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch', Open Letter, 3rd Series, 8 (Spring 1978), 52-71 (p.69).
- 147 Robert Lecker, 'Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic', Journal of Canadian Studies, 17-3 (Fall 1982), 124-33 (p.128).
- 148 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.7. Kroetsch goes on to explain that 'A tragic vision involves a sense of inevitability; the comic world contains sheer chance and the kinds of absurdities which are neither logical nor rational',(p.8) thus freeing representations of self from rigid constraints. No wonder Kroetsch moves increasingly to this more liberating comic mode.
- 149 Morton L. Ross, 'Robert Kroetsch and His Novels', in Donald G. Stephens, ed., Writers on the Prairies (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), pp.101-14 (p.110).
- 150 Geoff Hancock, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', Canadian Fiction Magazine, 24/25 (Spring/Summer 1977), 33-52 (p.47).
- 151 Ricou, Vertical Man / Horizontal World, p.133.
- 152 Lee Spinks, 'Puppets and Puppeteers: Robert Kroetsch Interviewed', Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 29-2 (1994), 13-22 (p.20).
- 153 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.152.

- 154 Ibid., p.141.
- 155 Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, p.41.
- 156 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.137.
- 157 This pamphlet is entitled 'Tom Thomson: A Biography of the Artist' and was published by 'The Tom Thomson Memorial Gallery and Museum of Fine Art', Owen Sound, Ontario. It reads: 'In July 1917 . . . Tom Thomson was drowned in Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park. He was alone. It was a quiet day in the park. He was an expert canoeist. How it happened is one of the mysteries of the North Country'. See University of Calgary Libraries Special Collections, The Robert Kroetsch Papers: First Accession, 27.17.41.10.
- 158 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.72.
- 159 Ibid., p.143.
- 160 Malcolm Kelly, 'Tom Thomson Did His Best Work in Ravine Below Rosedale Mansions', North Toronto Town Crier, Sept 1995, p.30. See also 'Toronto Artist Drowns in North', The Globe, Toronto, 18 July 1917.
- 161 In his poem, 'Meditation on Tom Thomson', (The Stone Hammer Poems, pp.50-51 (p.50)), Kroetsch uses the phrase 'the grave mystery' to describe Thomson's disappearance. In a letter to Fraser Sutherland of 25 May 1973, Kroetsch explains the reason for choosing this wording. It was an attempt 'to play with the bald pun on grave since the grave is now such an essential part of the Thomson myth'. See, The Robert Kroetsch Papers, 27.17.41.19.
- 162 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.56.
- 163 Kroetsch, 'Meditation on Tom Thomson', p.51.
- 164 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.56.
- 165 Dick Harrison discusses the linked biblical figures of Jonah and Jesus, in relation to The Double Hook and The Words of My Roaring, in his essay 'The American Adam and the Canadian Christ', Twentieth Century Literature, 16-3 (July 1970), 161-67. In this piece he suggests that pseudo-Christ figures are an important archetype in Canadian literature.
- 166 Frye, The Bush Garden, p.217.
- 167 See Spettigue, F.P.G.: The European Years, pp.161-64 and 168.
- 168 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.18. I believe that Kroetsch was at least unconsciously thinking of Atwood's protagonist diving in search of her father in Surfacing when he wrote about Jonah's drowning. Jonah is imagined in the



same terms as the surfer's father - both are bodies which fail to surface. Like Atwood, Kroetsch describes his drowned body using the indefinite pronoun, 'it', and the passage in which he does so (Words, p.143) also emphasises the contrast between the upper- and the underworlds, the surface and the depths, in which the body floats. Atwood describes her body 'trailing limbs' (London: Virago Press, 1979, p.136) while Kroetsch also emphasises that 'the arms and legs [of Jonah's body are] like petals rising and moving' (p.143). Both authors mention fish swimming near the body.

- 169 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.15. Kroetsch's reference to 'invisible men' in the context of an implicit North American national comparison with the United States, suggests Ralph Ellison's work, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1947). Elsewhere Kroetsch has stated that 'If we look to the invisible characters in American writing, the invisible man, or the voice that says "nobody knows my name", those are the voices of people who feel they are being made nameless by others. The Canadian narrator makes him - or herself invisible'. The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.44. In Ellison's highly politicized work it is the dominant white society who has made the black American 'invisible'.
- 170 Ibid., p.15.
- 171 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.20.
- 172 Brown, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.7. See the work of Annette Kolodny, such as The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) and The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers 1630-1860 (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1984), for a discussion of the gendered representation of landscape in early American pioneer literature.
- 173 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.156.
- 174 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.21.
- 175 Kristjana Gunnars, "Meditation on a Snowy Morning': A Conversation with Robert Kroetsch', Prairie Fire: A Special Tribute to Robert Kroetsch 8-4 (1987-88), 54-67 (p.61). Kroetsch suggests the garden is a place of symbolic possibilities in the following personal context: 'I used to like gardening so much as a kid . . . those vegetables and plants and possibilities of whatever a garden might mean, keep recurring.' (p.61).
- 176 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.21.
- 177 Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, p.4.
- 178 Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, p.166.

- 179 Ibid., p.208.
- 180 Ibid., pp.128, 156, 158 and 208 respectively.
- 181 Ibid., p.94.
- 182 John Clement Ball, 'The Carnival of Babel: The Construction of Voice in Robert Kroetsch's "Out West" Triptych', Essays in Canadian Writing, 39 (Fall 1989), 1-22 (p.7), my emphasis.
- 183 The Studhorse Man was actually written nine years before the first publication of 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction' in 1979, in Harrison, Crossing Frontiers, pp.73-83. All references to this essay quoted here are from Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, pp.47-55.
- 184 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.49.
- 185 Ibid., p.49.
- 186 Ibid., p.49.
- 187 Ibid., p.49.
- 188 Sandra Djwa, 'Response: The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space', in Harrison, ed., Crossing Frontiers, pp.84-88 (p.87).
- 189 Hancock, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.51.
- 190 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.179.
- 191 Ibid., p.54.
- 192 Toril Moi, Sexual / Texual Politics (London: Methuen, 1985), p.108. In fact, Kroetsch extends his model of binary oppositions still further to suggest that 'external space is the silence that needs to speak, or that needs to be spoken. It is male. The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed.' (Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.47) He admits the difficulty of 'intercourse' between the two; distinctions and difference remain.
- 193 Rosemary Sullivan, 'Summing Up', in Harrison, ed., Crossing Frontiers, pp.144-57 (p.154).
- 194 See 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction', p.47, where Kroetsch discusses 'how book [internal / female] and world [external / male] have intercourse'. Later, in his essay 'On Being an Albertan Writer', Kroetsch answers his own question, 'How do you make love in a new country? . . . One way to make love is by writing. Indeed, without writing, I sometimes suspect there would be no such thing as love . . . Perhaps the sub-question is, then: How do you write in a new country?', Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.70.

- 195 Ibid., p.47.
- 196 Robert Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man (Toronto: Random House, 1995), p.10.
- 197 Ibid., pp.10-11.
- 198 Ibid., p.14.
- 199 Ibid., p.17.
- 200 Ibid., p.9, my emphasis. This link between human and animal sexual status may well be suggested by Kroetsch's own personal experience. The arrival of the studhorse man when Kroetsch was a teenage boy is associated with his own (sexual) initiation into the world of grown men: 'Every spring this [studhorse] man showed up with his stallion, and it was a kind of mystery . . . And then one day I was invited to join the men - and that [was a] kind of initiation'. Kroetsch, Creation, p.56.
- 201 Ibid., p.104.
- 202 Ibid., p.175.
- 203 Ibid., see p.43. This type of firearm was manufactured by Deane/Adams & Co., England, in the 1850s, 60s and 70s and became a popular revolver for English pioneers, as well as being issued to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.
- 204 Ibid., p.77.
- 205 Kroetsch, 'Writing From Prairie Roots', p.12. This cowboy cover picture was on the first edition of the novel (Toronto: Macmillan / London: Macdonald / New York: St. Martin's, 1969). The latest publication (Toronto: Random House, 1995), has rectified the earlier mistake and far more appropriately has a blue-tinted photograph of 'Horse Torso', 1991, by Graham Law - a riderless horse.
- 206 Kroetsch, 'Writing From Prairie Roots', p.12.
- 207 'He limped up the gangplank', The Studhorse Man, p.10.
- 208 Sullivan, 'Summing Up', p.154.
- 209 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, p.15. The American First Army secured a landing on the east bank of the Rhine at Remagen, between Bonn and Koblenz, on 7 March 1945. British and Canadian troops, together with the American Ninth Army, crossed the lower Rhine on 23 March 1945.
- 210 Harrison, Unnamed Country, p.206.

- 211 Robert Kroetsch, 'Kingdom of the Male Virgin', NeWest Review, 1-4 (Nov 1975), 1.
- 212 Twigg, For Openers, p.110.
- 213 Ibid., p.110.
- 214 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, p.191.
- 215 Dick Harrison, 'Across the Medicine Line: Problems in Comparing Canadian and American Western Fiction', in Merrill Lewis and L.L. Lee, eds., The Westering Experience in American Literature: Bicentennial Essays (Bellingham: Western Washington University Press, 1977), pp.48-56 (p.54).
- 216 Kroetsch, 'Kingdom of the Male Virgin', p. 1.
- 217 Ibid., p.1.
- 218 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, p.13.
- 219 Twigg, For Openers, p.110.
- 220 W.H. New, Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p.186.
- 221 Twigg, For Openers, p.112.
- 222 Max Westbrook, 'Summing Up', Harrison, ed., Crossing Frontiers, pp.158-62 (p.160).
- 223 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, p.43.
- 224 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.179.
- 225 Russell M. Brown, 'Robert Kroetsch', Jeffrey M. Heath, ed., Profiles in Canadian Literature 2, no.27 (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1980) pp.97-108 (p.101). See pp.101-102, for a further analysis of the parallels between The Studhorse Man and The Odyssey. Also see New, Articulating West, pp.180-82, for a more detailed elucidation of the correspondences between the two works.
- 226 Brown, 'Robert Kroetsch', p.101.
- 227 George Woodcock, 'A Nation's Odyssey: The Novels of Hugh MacLennan', Canadian Literature, 10 (1961), pp.7-18; reprinted in Woodcock, Odysseus Ever Returning: Essays on Canadian Writers and Writing (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), pp.12-23 (p.13). As well as Hugh MacLennan's Barometer Rising (1941) and Kroetsch's The Studhorse Man

- (1970), other works such as James Joyce's Ulysses (1922) and Derek Walcott's Omeros (1990) use Homer's Odyssey as a parodic narrative source for post-colonial literary nationalism.
- 228 Walter Pache, "The Fiction Makes Us Real": Aspects of Postmodernism in Canada', in Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik, eds., Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985), pp.64-78 (p.71).
- 229 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, pp.186 and 12, respectively.
- 230 Cameron, 'The American Experience and the Canadian Voice', p.50. Poseidon's action can be read as a figurative representation of Kroetsch's artistic aims: 'In art I look for the tension of opposing forces: the form itself, and with it the force, the energy within the form, that threatens to bust the form apart, kick it to pieces'. Robert Kroetsch, 'A Correspondence with the Editors', see 'Robert Kroetsch (Binghampton) to David Antin (Solana Beach), 5 October 1974', Boundary 2, 3-3 (Spring 1974), pp.626-27 (p.626).
- 231 Ibid., p.50.
- 232 Brown, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.6.
- 233 Paul Radin, The Trickster, p.x.
- 234 Ibid., p.185.
- 235 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.100.
- 236 Carl G. Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure', translated by R.F.C. Hull, in Radin, The Trickster, pp.195-211 (p.203).
- 237 Karl Kerényi, 'The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology', translated by R.F.C. Hull, in Radin, The Trickster, pp.173-91 (p.188).
- 238 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.173.
- 239 Ibid., p.173.
- 240 Dorscht, 'How "The Studhorse Man" Makes Love: A Post-Feminist Analysis', Canadian Literature, 119 (1988), 25-31 (p.28), my emphasis.
- 241 Dorscht, Women, Reading, Kroetsch, p.29.
- 242 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, p.45.
- 243 Ibid., see p.72.
- 244 Dorscht, 'How "The Studhorse Man" Makes Love', p.30.

- 245 Van Herk, 'Biocritical Essay', p.ix.
- 246 Kroetsch, The Labyrinth of Voice, p.50.
- 247 Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, p.109.
- 248 Peter Cumming, "The Prick and Its Vagaries": Men, Reading, Kroetsch', Essays on Canadian Writing, 55 (1995), 115-39 (p.127).
- 249 Rosemary Sullivan, 'The Fascinating Place Between: The Fiction of Robert Kroetsch', Mosaic, 11-3 (Spring 1978), 165-76 (p.174).
- 250 Barbara Godard, ed. and intro., 'Mapmaking: A Survey of Feminist Criticism', Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), pp.2-30 (p.9).
- 251 Van Herk, 'Biocritical Essay', pp.xxix and xxviii, respectively. See Cumming, 'The Prick and Its Vagaries', for his discussion of the possible sexism of Kroetsch's fiction, in contrast to the fact that 'some important readings of Kroetsch by women tend interestingly, more towards adulation than interrogation'. (p.116).
- 252 Hancock, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.46.
- 253 Wilson and Neuman, Labyrinths of Voice, pp.170-71.
- 254 Ibid., p.120, my emphasis.
- 255 Robert Kroetsch, Badlands (Toronto: General Paperbacks, 1982), p.3.
- 256 Ibid., p.3.
- 257 Ibid., p.3.
- 258 Ibid., p.3.
- 259 'Interview with Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe', CBR - Calgary, 'Canada AM', 6 May 1976, The Robert Kroetsch Papers, 27.28.3, pp.1-7 (pp.5 and 4, respectively).
- 260 Kroetsch, Badlands, p.3.
- 261 Ibid., p.264.
- 262 Ibid., p.110.
- 263 The novel emphasises this phenomenon. The male archaeologists can only see the sky and feel the wind coming off the open prairies (p.58) as an indication

- of the landscape above them. When liberated from work on a day off, Web feels an impulse to physically free himself from the confines of the canyon, as well as Dawe's bullying control. After climbing, 'Web lifted himself up over the edge of the valley . . . stood up on the prairie . . . He had not once come out of the canyon; now, in the cloudless day, he could see straight out to the flat horizon' (p.165).
- 264 Ibid., p.264.
- 265 Ibid., p.270.
- 266 Robert Lecker, 'Freed From Story: Narrative Tactics in Badlands', Essays on Canadian Writing, 30 (1985), 160-86 (p.164).
- 267 Ibid., pp.164-65.
- 268 Ibid., p.165.
- 269 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.170.
- 270 Arnold E. Davidson, Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p.85. He sees Badlands as 'an attempt to unwrite the tired scripting of gender in the very quest epics which the novel pays tribute to - and parodies.' (p.85).
- 271 Kroetsch, Badlands, p.270.
- 272 Badlands emphasises the solitude not only of women, who are depicted in numerous passages as being 'desperately alone . . . sadly alone' (p.63, see also pp.45 and 264 for examples), but also men in 'their male solitude' (p.2). Kroetsch's protagonists are not only individually isolated but are remote as gender groups from the community which could be established through genuine contact with, and understanding of, the opposite sex.
- 273 Lecker, 'Bordering On', p.126. Here Lecker quotes from Robert Kroetsch, 'A Canadian Issue', Boundary 2, 3-1 (Fall 1974), 1-2 (p.1).
- 274 Ibid., p.1.
- 275 Cameron, 'The American Experience and the Canadian Voice', p.48.
- 276 Ibid., p.48. In the context of the Vietnam War Canada represent not just freedom, but a place of escape where one could dodge the draft.
- 277 Ibid., p.48.
- 278 Brown, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.14.
- 279 Robert Kroetsch, Gone Indian (Nanaimo, B.C.: Theytus Books, 1973), p.17.

- 280 Ibid., p.8.
- 281 Ibid., p.8.
- 282 Ibid., p.8.
- 283 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990). In this seminal, ground-breaking study Butler asserts that '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (p.25). Furthering this argument, she states: 'That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject' (p.136, my emphasis). Kroetsch represents such border control quite literally in the incident at the airport with the transvestite. Discussing transvestitism specifically, Butler declares that 'drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.' (p.137).
- 284 Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p.8.
- 285 Mandel, 'Uninventing Structures', p.60.
- 286 Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p.80.
- 287 Ibid., p.80.
- 288 Ibid., p.62. Belaney is not the only historical figure to have adopted a completely new identity and alias in 'going Indian'. Despite being of mixed blood origin, Sylvester Clark Long (1890-1932) reinvented himself in Canada as Buffalo Child Long Lance, a Blackfoot Chief. By doing so he attempted to escape the 'negro' racism of his American North Carolina home, claiming full-blooded Cherokee heritage when he went west to Alberta, in a successful bid for respect and social status. See Donald B. Smith's Long Lance: The True Story of an Imposter (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982).
- 289 This is Grey Owl's own translation of his Objibwa name. As Donald B. Smith points out in From the Land of Shadows: The Making of Grey Owl (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990), the name Washaquonasin simply means 'white beak owl' (p.92).
- 290 Hancock, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.48.
- 291 Ibid., p.48.



- 292 Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p.100.
- 293 Ibid., p.152.
- 294 Ibid., p.148.
- 295 Ibid., p.60.
- 296 Arnold E. Davidson, 'Will the Real R. Mark Madham Please Stand Up: A Note on Robert Kroetsch's Gone Indian', Studies in Canadian Literature, 6-1 (1981), 135-39 (p.138).
- 297 The image of a man and a woman disappearing together into a snowy landscape, ambiguously moving either towards death or alternatively a new life, recalls Howard O'Hagan's Tay John (1939). In this tale Tay John and his lover Ardith Aeriola similarly become lost, merging with the landscape in the midst of a blizzard. I believe this is a conscious parallel being made by Kroetsch, who is familiar with the story-line of O'Hagan's novel having used this narrative as the basis for his essay, 'The Veil of Knowing'. See Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words, pp.179-94. In a humorous gesture of modernisation on the part of Kroetsch, the toboggan which Ardith is riding in Tay John is replaced by a snowmobile in Gone Indian.
- 298 Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p.57.
- 299 Ibid., p.88.
- 300 Hancock, 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', p.49.
- 301 Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p.149.
- 302 Ibid., p.157.
- 303 Mandel, 'Romance and Realism in Western Canadian Fiction', p.211.
- 304 Russell Brown, "Freedom to Depart": Robert Kroetsch's Gone Indian', Canadian Literature, 61 (Summer 1974), 103-104 (p.103). 'Learning to fall, [Jeremy] was thinking: that's the trick. Flying is easy. The whole, the absolute mastery resides in knowing how to fall', Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p.78.
- 305 Davey and Nichol, Robert Kroetsch, p.14.
- 306 Ibid., p.14.
- 307 Kroetsch has acknowledged that 'the risk of creation involves the risk of destruction' as 'we weave and unweave ourselves'. Robert Kroetsch, The Crow Journals (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1980), p.19.

- 308 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.50.
- 309 Ibid., p.50.
- 310 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.153. In his own autobiographical quest for self in A Likely Story, Kroetsch initially sets out on his quest north into Canada's Arctic tundra. His journey, and A Likely Story begin with 'Why I Went North and What I Found When He Got There' (pp.13-40). The Arctic is another important wilderness site for disappearance in Canadian literature. Nevertheless, as a very different landscape it does not operate symbolically in the same way as the prairie West. Since I have already examined this landscape in relation to the work of Aritha van Herk and Kroetsch's But We Are Exiles, for the sake of concision I shall not develop this motif further in relation to Kroetsch's autobiographical disappearance of self.
- 311 Ibid., p.194.
- 312 Ibid., p.34.
- 313 See Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), for a discussion of the pleasure associated with reading and writing - which Barthes terms jouissance. He believes that this feeling is equivalent to the bliss accompanying orgasm. For Barthes, writing is a form of artistic ejaculation in which pen and penis can be symbolically equated. However, such an analogy of creativity is clearly exclusively relevant to male writers.
- 314 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.117.
- 315 Ibid., p.117.
- 316 Robert Kroetsch, letter (12 March 1996), Victoria, B.C., from Robert Kroetsch to Rosalind Jennings.
- 317 Ibid., single page, unnumbered.
- 318 Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, p.179.
- 319 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.191.
- 320 Ibid., p.191.
- 321 Ibid., p.206.
- 322 Gunnars, "Meditation on a Snowy Morning", p.67.
- 323 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.182.
- 324 Ibid., p.188.

- 325 Ibid., p.204.
- 326 I qualify this statement about Singapore 'epitomising the East' because such an equation involves a very compromised representation - interweaving the exoticism of the feminized Orient (such as the Singapore Airlines advertisements), the authoritarian paternalism of the state (highlighted abroad by publicity about harsh punishment for public order offences, censorship and the state-run marriage bureau), in sharp contrast to the city's renown for its westernized high-tech economy. I am also aware that in western Canada Singapore's geographical positioning as part of the 'East' is problematicised by the fact that one would actually travel west, across the Pacific, to reach it. Rita, however, would naturally have travelled east from Europe (Germany) to Singapore.
- 327 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.190.
- 328 Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), trans. Gillian C. Gill, p.20. A speculum is a concave mirror used by gynaecologists to view the inside of a woman's body, to examine the 'cavities' of her sexual self.
- 329 Ibid., p.239.
- 330 Kroetsch, A Likely Story, p.214.
- 331 Ibid., pp.117-18.
- 332 Bessai, 'Death is a Happy Ending', p.209.

**CHAPTER FOUR: On the Edge of Distintegration: Uncertain Boundaries in Michael Ondaatje's Imaginative Wilderness, pp.165-216.**

- 1 Margaret Atwood, ed., The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), introduction, M.A.1982, pp.xxvii-xxxix (p.xxxviii).
- 2 Sam Solecki, ed., Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1985), p.7. This collection also includes reviews and two interview with Ondaatje from 1975 and 1984.
- 3 Susan Spearey, 'Mapping and Masking: The Migrant Experience in Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion', The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 29-2 (1994), 45-60 (p.48).

- 4 Michael Ondaatje, ed., The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), introduction, M.O. 1990, pp.xiii-xviii (p.xiii).
- 5 Ibid., p.xiii.
- 6 Urjo Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', Saturday Night, (Dec 1983), 44-51 (p.47), my emphasis. The sense of 'new' here is 'young'. Canada isn't simply new to Ondaatje, in many ways it is new itself as a politically defined nation.
- 7 Gretchen Pierce, 'Canada Gives Writer "Sense of Place": Author of "Billy" Keeps Low Profile', Halifax Chronicle Herald, 10 October 1975, p.30.
- 8 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.47. This use of an image of (expanding) horizons is both metaphorical / artistic and literal. Discussing the contrasts between Ceylon and Canada, Ondaatje states that 'the difference is something to do with the horizon . . . In Ceylon you don't look up and see the sky [as you can in Canada]: the landscape is too crowded. (A friend said that it was just like my poems - no horizon)'. Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.51.
- 9 Robert Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.64-65.
- 10 Michael Ondaatje, 'The William Dawe Badlands Expedition 1916', Descant, 14-4 (1983), 51-73 (p.51).
- 11 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.241.
- 12 Ibid., p.240.
- 13 Ibid., p.241.
- 14 Maureen Garvie, 'Listening to Michael Ondaatje', Queens Quarterly, 99-4 (1992), 928-34 (p.931).
- 15 Spearey in 'Mapping and Masking', reveals this short story as a surprising Asian intertext to In the Skin of a Lion. Ondaatje uses Kipling as an important narrative source elsewhere in his canon, as I will demonstrate in relation to the character of Kip in The English Patient. The correspondences between Ondaatje's 'The Bridge' and Rudyard Kipling's 'The Bridge-Builders' are based on their shared portrayal of the gulf between servants and masters in these two British projects of empire-building. Both stories emphasise the divisive hierarchy between the chief colonial engineer and the oppressed workers, labouring to turn his dream into reality. It is indicated that many workers died or were injured in these Public Works construction projects. Similarities are not just thematic but include specific narrative details - an accident involving a faulty crane or derrick, the description of someone breaking their right arm while working on the bridge, and the presence of a talking parrot. In another section of In the Skin of a Lion the Toronto Waterworks narrowly escape

- being blown up, while there is reference to 'Lockhart's big water-works burst[ing]'(p.20), possibly in some kind of explosion, in 'The Bridge-Builders', The Day's Work (London: Macmillan, 1946), pp.1-47.
- 16 Kipling, 'The Bridge-Builders', p.1.
- 17 Eleanor Wachtel, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', Essays on Canadian Writing: Michael Ondaatje Issue, 53 (Summer 1994), 250-61 (pp.250-51).
- 18 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.325.
- 19 Tom Shapcott, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', Westerly, 27-1 (1982), 65-69 (p.65).
- 20 Michael Ondaatje, 'White Dwarfs' in The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems (London: Picador/Pan, 1989), pp.53-54 (p.53).
- 21 Margaret Atwood, interview with Jim Davidson, 6 March 1978, Melbourne, Australia. Printed as 'Where Were You When I Really Needed You', in Earl G. Ingersoll, ed., Margaret Atwood: Conversations (London: Virago Press, 1992), pp.86-98 (p.98).
- 22 Michael Ondaatje, the man with seven toes (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1971), p.9. Solecki suggests that 'Ondaatje universalizes the meaning of [Mrs. Fraser's] experiences' to create 'the potential for her development as an archetypal or mythic figure', Spider Blues, p.138.
- 23 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.20.
- 24 Ondaatje, the man with seven toes, p.38.
- 25 M. Travis Lane, 'Dream as History: A Review of the man with seven toes' in Solecki, ed., Spider Blues, pp.150-55 (p.151).
- 26 Ondaatje, the man with seven toes, p.41.
- 27 Ibid., p.11.
- 28 Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.63.
- 29 Ibid., p.62.
- 30 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.145.
- 31 Ondaatje, the man with seven toes, p.42, my emphasis.
- 32 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.23.

- 33 Travis Lane disagrees with this statement, describing the book as 'odd-shaped'. He believes that one reason for its unusual layout is 'to slow down the reader's eye pace', but suggests that 'to do so by changing the shape of a book to the shape of a child's picture book is doubtful practice'. He pedantically concludes that 'librarians may have to file the man with seven toes sideways, without the title showing - a bibliophile's abomination.' Solecki, ed., Spider Blues, p.155.
- 34 Winfried Siemerling, 'Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Work of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje and Nicole Brossard', D.Phil diss. University of Toronto, Ontario, 1991, p.156. This work was revised and published under the same title (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), the quotation appears on p.109.
- 35 Ibid., p.157 (p.110 in published text).
- 36 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.21.
- 37 See Pierce, 'Canada Gives Writer "Sense of Place"', p.30. Ondaatje suggests that 'Billy is confusing some people because they think it's a western. It is set in the west and the central character was an outlaw but that's where it ends'.
- 38 Michael Ondaatje, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems (London: Picador/Pan, 1981), p.7.
- 39 Ibid., see p.42. 'Blindfolding the horse I veered it east when the [dust] storm let down'.
- 40 Shapcott, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', p.68. See 'Diefenbaker Raps Poet', London Free Press, 30 November 1971, p.27. Confusing Billy the Kid with that other archetypal American frontiersman, Davey Crockett (1786-1836), Diefenbaker is quoted as saying: 'We need some good writers and historians to publicize the great stories of this country's development. We have some great figures in our country every bit as colorful as that what's-his-name in the coonskin hat'.
- 41 Ondaatje has stated in interview that he 'had never been to New Mexico until about three years ago [ie 1987], years after Billy was published': Solecki, Spider Blues, p.243, my emphasis.
- 42 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.20. Ondaatje's lack of concern for geographical accuracy can also be seen in his reference to places that do exist, many of whose names are spelt inaccurately in Billy the Kid - typographical errors maybe, but ones that have not been picked up on and corrected by Ondaatje. The first of three spellings of Mescalero on p.42 is inaccurate, as is the first reference to Carrizozo, p.50 (compare the correct spelling on p.76). Oscuro is spelt with an 's' on p.76 - an extra consonant the geographical place does not possess. These inaccuracies occur in the original Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1970 edition, not just in the subsequent London: Picador/Pan, 1981 edition which I refer to in this chapter.

- 43 'An Untitled Interview with Michael Ondaatje', Manna, 1 (March 1972), 19-22 (p.20). In another interview Ondaatje discusses the issue of national appropriation in relation to his two American characters - Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden - suggesting that 'maybe I've colonized them to Canada'. Mark Witten, 'Billy, Buddy, and Michael: The Collected Writings of Michael Ondaatje Are a Composite Portrait of the Artist as a Private "I"', Books in Canada (June-July 1977), 9-10, 12-13 (p.13).
- 44 See Shapcott, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', for his comments on 'emphasiz[ing] a purely Canadian landscape, or region'(p.65). He suggests that such an artistic strategy is limiting, and describes the regional designation of writers as 'a cliché'(p.66).
- 45 Ondaatje, 'Late Movie with Skyler', in The Cinnamon Peeler, p.74-75 (p.75). See also the suggestion that the cowboy is a universal archetype, 'galloping . . . timeless, dateless, full of life' in 'William Dawe Badlands Expedition 1916', p.66. Here the cowboys are in Canada although their actual nationality is never mentioned and seems irrelevant.
- 46 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.20. See also his description of his forced ride with Garrett where they 'moved back and forward, side to side over the country, avoiding people and law' (p.76).
- 47 Ibid., p.20.
- 48 Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972), p.121.
- 49 Ibid., p.121.
- 50 See Smaro Kamboureli's essay 'Outlawed Narrative: Michael Ondaatje's Collected Works of Billy the Kid', Sagetrieb, 7-1 (Spring 1988), 115-29 (especially p.124). For an extended version of this article see the chapter 'Outlawed Narrative: Michael Ondaatje' in Smaro Kamboureli, On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp.184-202.
- 51 Ondaatje, The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories, p.xiv.
- 52 Ibid., p.xvii.
- 53 Alan Young, 'Particular Horrors' - The Collected Works of Billy the Kid - Michael Ondaatje, Times Literary Supplement, 4091 (28 August 1981), 988.
- 54 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.89.
- 55 Linda Hutcheon, Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.17.

- 56 Jon Pearce, Twelve Voices: Interviews with Canadian Poets (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1980), p.134.
- 57 Margaret Atwood, 'Backdrop Addresses Cowboy', in The Animals in That Country (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.50-51 (p.50).
- 58 Al Purdy, 'At the Movies', in Al Purdy: Selected Poems (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), pp.73-74 (p.73), originally from his collection North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island (1967). The poem recalls the author watching 'a technicolour western shootemup', (p.73) starring Gary Cooper and Burt Lancaster, in an Inuit Nissen hut-cum-cinema in Pangnirtung, Baffin Island, N.W. Territories.
- 59 Ibid., p.73.
- 60 Ibid., p.74.
- 61 David Donnell, 'Notes on The Collected Works of Billy the Kid', in Solecki, Spider Blues, pp.240-45 (p.241).
- 62 Manina Jones, 'The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Scripting the Docudrama', Canadian Literature, 122-23 (1989), 26-38 (p.30).
- 63 Young, 'Particular Horrors', p.988.
- 64 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.50. Billy also describes 'mixing red dirt and alcohol' on his twenty-first birthday (p.7), the night before Pat Garrett became sheriff and began his campaign to force Billy across the state boundary and out of his jurisdiction.
- 65 Tom's survival is described in terms of unreality: 'Finding water finally, he drank and it poured out of his ear' (p.50); 'later the shrubs started appearing with him following them' (p.51). Billy describes how, on a force-ride, 'the sun turned into a pair of hands and began to pull out the hairs in my head', reaching inside him, 'the cool fingers pulled . . . my cock . . . out of my head' (pp.76-77).
- 66 See the description of Billy riding through a dust storm, p.42. Desert sand or dust is frequently characterised as being red. The outback of Australia's Northern Territory is often referred to as 'the Red Centre' and the dust-bearing rains from the Sahara are called 'the red rains'.
- 67 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.49.
- 68 See Dennis Cooley, "'I Am Here on the Edge": Modern Hero / Postmodern Poetics in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid', Solecki, ed., Spider Blues, pp.211-39, for a detailed discussion of architectural, corporeal and photographic frames in Billy the Kid.



- 69 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.17.
- 70 Ibid., see pp.22 and 48.
- 71 Ibid., p.74.
- 72 Cooley, ' "I Am Here on the Edge" ', p.212.
- 73 Ibid., p.212.
- 74 See Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, pp.94-95.
- 75 Ibid., see pp.5 and 6, respectively.
- 76 Kamboureli, 'Outlawed Narrative', Sagetrieb, pp.115 and 120 respectively.
- 77 Stephen Scobie and Douglas Barbour, 'A Conversation with Michael Ondaatje', White Pelican, 1-2 (Spring 1971), 6-15 (p.14).
- 78 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.83.
- 79 Elliott Clarke, 'Michael Ondaatje and the Production of Myth', Studies in Canadian Literature, 16-1 (1991), 1-21 (p.7).
- 80 Jones, 'Scripting the Docudrama', p.35.
- 81 Steven Heighten, 'Approaching "That Perfect Edge": Kinetic Techniques in the Poetry and Fiction of Michael Ondaatje', Studies in Canadian Literature, 13-2 (1988), 223-43 (p.229).
- 82 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.103.
- 83 Just as language is not contained by the frame surrounding it, so photographic representations spill beyond bounds. Not only has Billy escaped the frame of the initial photograph with which the text begins, but neither of the other two photographs of him described in the narrative have a clear sense of containing boundaries. I have already discussed the hallucinogenic disintegration of the borders in the image of Billy pumping water, p.50. Equally, he remembers a picture taken of him in which 'there was a white block . . . where somebody had come out of a building . . . and ridden away while I was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm', p.68.
- 84 Billy the Kid and the Princess (Carlton Press, 1969). Citation information from 'credits', Billy the Kid, p.109.
- 85 See 'Wide Awake Library' comic book cover, Billy the Kid, p.98, my emphasis. Michael Ondaatje's friend and poet contemporary, bp Nichol, published a parodic piece on Billy the Kid, The True Eventual Story of Billy

the Kid (Toronto: Weed / Flower Press) in 1970, the same year as Ondaatje's Collected Works. Nichol also plays on the verity of his representation. His humorous work opens: 'this is the true eventual story of billy the kid. it is not the story as he told it for he did not tell it to me. he told it to others who wrote it down, but not correctly. there is no true eventual story but this one. had he told it to me i would have written a different one. i could not write the true one had he told it to me.'(first page, no number given).

- 86 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.81.
- 87 Michael Ondaatje, "The Gate in his Head", in The Cinnamon Peeler, p.46.
- 88 Ondaatje, 'White Dwarfs', *ibid.*, p.53, from his earlier collection, Rat Jelly and Other Poems 1963-78 (London: Marion Boyars, 1980).
- 89 *Ibid.*, p.54.
- 90 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.85.
- 91 *Ibid.*, p.102.
- 92 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 93 See Ondaatje's description of 'all the noises of the night' while sleeping in Sri Lanka, in Running in the Family (London: Picador/Pan, 1984), p.136. He also tells of jungle dreams on pages 17 and 20. Similarly, his brother Christopher describes the 'constant noises' (p.53) of the Sri Lankan jungle, while relating an account of a disturbed night, in Christopher Ondaatje, The Man-Eater of Punanai (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993), pp.53-54.
- 94 Ondaatje, Billy the Kid, p.20: 'Here then is a maze to begin, be in'.
- 95 See 'Untitled Interview', Manna, p.20. Asked by the Manna interviewer 'When were you first interested in Billy the Kid . . . ?', Ondaatje replied, 'From about the age of seven. Roughly when the last picture in the book (of me in Ceylon in a cowboy outfit) was taken'.
- 96 Dominick M. Grace, 'Ondaatje and Charlton Comics' Billy the Kid', Canadian Literature, (1992), 199-203 (pp.202-203).
- 97 'Untitled Interview', Manna, p.20.
- 98 In Billy the Kid, p.72, there is an ambiguous description of the narrator (Ondaatje or Billy?) writing, and later plural pronouns are used (does this refer to Ondaatje and Billy or Billy and Angela?). The identity of the writer is never clearly ascertained and the description of 'hands that need the rub of metal' might refer to the barrel of a pen or a gun. The final passage (p.105) describes 'a bad night' in a hotel room filled with stale cigarette smoke. Billy is often described as being in hotel bedrooms, but Ondaatje is known to be a heavy

smoker - quite a few photographs show him with a cigarette in hand. The 'I' persona could again be either Ondaatje or Billy at this point.

- 99 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.255.
- 100 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.49.
- 101 Michael Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter (London: Picador/Pan, 1979), p.120.
- 102 Ibid., p.8.
- 103 Witten, 'Billy, Buddy, and Michael', p.9.
- 104 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.56.
- 105 Ibid., p.24.
- 106 Ibid., p.43.
- 107 Ibid., p.48.
- 108 Ibid., p.37.
- 109 Ibid., p.14. Here Bolden is talking to Cornish. See p.91 for a very similar remark made to Webb. Naomi Jacobs describes the origin of this phrase in her article 'Michael Ondaatje and the New Fiction Biographies': 'According to Louis Jones, Bolden used to urge his band to play louder, in order to lure the audience away from the neighbouring park where another band was playing, by saying, "Come on, put your hands through the windows. Put your trombone out there. I'm going to call my children home"'. Quoted from the Bolden biography by Donald Marquis, In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p.62. Quoted by Jacobs, in Studies in Canadian Literature, 11-1 (1986), 2-18 (p.17). Ondaatje, thus, emphasises with some historical accuracy the fact that Bolden 'had [a] tendency to go to a window to play to [the] outside world', Coming through Slaughter, p.137.
- 110 See Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, pp.16 and 74, respectively.
- 111 Ibid., see p.69.
- 112 Ibid., see p.74.
- 113 Ibid., see p.80.
- 114 Ibid., see p.76.

- 115 Leslie Mundwiler, Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), p.93.
- 116 Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.53.
- 117 Ibid., p.53.
- 118 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.112.
- 119 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, p.101.
- 120 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.40.
- 121 Ibid., pp.40-41.
- 122 Ibid., p.37.
- 123 Ibid., p.134.
- 124 Ibid., p.32.
- 125 Ibid., p.19.
- 126 Ibid., p.106.
- 127 Nora describes Shell Beach, where Bolden goes missing, as being 'north of here' ('here' being New Orleans). In fact, Shell Beach is south east of the Louisiana state capital. This may just be a geographical mistake on Ondaatje's part or it may be a conscious artistic manipulation of the facts by this Canadian author. Might Ondaatje be placing Bolden's disappearance in the context of physical and psychological quest motifs common to his own national literature, which frequently involve journeys north into more unpopulated wilderness regions? Shell Beach certainly suggests a more natural and less urban environment than the metropolis of New Orleans from which Bolden comes.
- 128 Smaro Kamboureli, 'The Poetics of Geography in Michael Ondaatje's Coming through Slaughter', Descant, 14-4 (Fall 1983), 112-26 (p.123).
- 129 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.58.
- 130 Ibid., p.22.
- 131 Ibid., p.22.
- 132 Ibid., see pp.25-26 and p.155, respectively. Audubon is famous for his paintings of birds in their natural surroundings.

- 133 See Sam Solecki's essay 'Making and Destroying: Coming through Slaughter and Extremist Art', in Spider Blues, pp.246-67: 'I call Bolden's fall, or rather rush, into madness a suicide because he himself refers to "suicided brain"[(119)] and to Webb's notion that "all suicides all acts of privacy are romantic" (101). Also the text tends to treat his madness as synonymous with suicide . . . ' (p.260).
- 134 Ibid., p.263.
- 135 Heighten, 'Approaching "That Perfect Edge"', p.237.
- 136 Clarke, 'Michael Ondaatje and the Production of Myth', p.11.
- 137 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.86.
- 138 Ibid., p.146.
- 139 Witten, 'Billy, Buddy, and Michael', p.10.
- 140 For a description of Bertram Lord's escape see Coming through Slaughter, p.142.
- 141 Ibid., p.133.
- 142 Ibid., see p.137.
- 143 Ibid., p.133.
- 144 Kamboureli, 'The Poetics of Geography in Michael Ondaatje's Coming through Slaughter', p.118.
- 145 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.66, my emphasis.
- 146 Ibid., pp.52-53.
- 147 Lorraine M. York, "The Other Side of Dailiness": Photography in the Works of Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Laurence (Toronto: ECW Press, 1988), pp.113 and 114.
- 148 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.68.
- 149 Ibid., p.86.
- 150 Ibid., p.134.
- 151 Ed Jewinski, Michael Ondaatje: Express Yourself Beautifully (Toronto: ECW Press, 1994), p.9. This quotation is taken from a letter to the author, 23 May 1991.

- 152 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.134.
- 153 Ibid., pp.133-34.
- 154 Robert Kroetsch, 'The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English Canadian Fiction', in Frank Davey and bp Nichol, eds., Robert Kroetsch: Essays, Open Letter, 5-4 (Spring 1983), pp.57-64 (p.62).
- 155 Ann Wilson, 'Coming through Slaughter: Storyville Twice Told', Descant, 14-4 (Fall 1983), 99-111 (p.109). Wilson is not the only critic to express this point of view. John Moss, for instance, asserts that 'Coming through Slaughter is not really about Buddy Bolden . . . it is about Michael Ondaatje . . . it is the artist's soul that is being offered up'. Moss, A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), p.223.
- 156 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.328.
- 157 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.106.
- 158 Solecki, Spider Blues, p.329.
- 159 Ibid., p.15.
- 160 Christopher Ondaatje, The Man-Eater of Punanai, p.38.
- 161 Witten, 'Billy, Buddy, and Michael', p.13.
- 162 The country did not change its name when it gained independence on 4 February 1948. The decision to change the name in 1972 was a result of the political upheavals surrounding the 1971 Insurgency. Sri Lanka means 'Resplendent Land'.
- 163 See Arun P. Mukherjee, 'The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness', Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 20-1 (1985), 49-67, especially p.50. There is also implicit criticism in Leslie Mundwiler's assertion that it is 'necessary to view much of Ondaatje's work as, in a crucial sense, a denial' (Mundwiler, Michael Ondaatje, p.46) because 'the references which seem to underpin [his work] . . . are opposites to what we might conceive of as Ondaatje's own experience' (p.45).
- 164 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.188. Other major ethnic groups not mentioned by Ondaatje, include: Moors, of Arabic descent; Malays, originally from Malaysia; and Veddahs, descendants of Sri Lanka's first known residents.
- 165 Ibid., p.41.
- 166 Ibid., p.56. Here Ondaatje is specifically referring to his father, but Michael's brother, Christopher, in his autobiographical account of a return trip to Sri Lanka, describes their mother as someone who 'in truth . . . believed herself to

- be English', despite being from a Dutch Burgher family. She 'was one of those anglophiles who manage to be more English than the English', The Man-Eater of Punanai, p.48.
- 167 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.188.
- 168 Jewinski, Michael Ondaatje, p.21.
- 169 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.22.
- 170 Ibid., see pp.21-23.
- 171 Ondaatje, 'Her House', in The Cinnamon Peeler, p.155.
- 172 Ondaatje, 'Red Accordion - An Immigrant Song', in The Cinnamon Peeler, pp.182-84 (p.182).
- 173 'Michael Ondaatje: Interview by Linda Hutcheon', in Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, eds., Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.196-202 (p.197).
- 174 Douglas Barbour, Michael Ondaatje (New York: Twayne, 1993), p.145.
- 175 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.81.
- 176 Ibid., p.80.
- 177 Ibid., p.79.
- 178 Ibid., p.68.
- 179 Ibid., p.70.
- 180 Ibid., p.70, my emphasis.
- 181 Ondaatje, 'Tin Roof', in The Cinnamon Peeler, pp.102-23 (p.109), originally published in Secular Love (1984). This poem was written on Waikiki Island, Hawaii.
- 182 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, pp.24 and 190, respectively.
- 183 Ibid., p.138.
- 184 Ibid., see p.183. Deborah Bowen also presumes that this photograph is of Michael Ondaatje and his brother and sisters. See 'The Well-Lit Road and the Darkened Theatre: Photography in Biographies by Michael Ignatieff and Michael Ondaatje', World Literature Written in English, 31-1 (1991), 43-49 (p.48). Nevertheless, another possibility emerges when one reads Ondaatje's poem 'Light', from Pig Glass (1973-78), first published in There's a Trick with

a Knife I'm Learning to Do (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979). This poem is also based on his family in Ceylon and in particular on a series of photographs reminding him of these relatives. The photos described include one of Ondaatje's mother and her brother in fancy dress, like the people pictured in Running in the Family on p.103. Might not the reference in 'Light' to a photograph which 'is [of] my brother at 6. With his cousin and his sister/ and Pam de Voss' (The Cinnamon Peeler, pp.3-5 (p.3)) also indicate a photograph used in Running in the Family, that of the two girls and two boys on p.183? If so, Ondaatje is eluding representation yet again, absent despite the suggestion of presence.

185 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', pp.49-50.

186 The dramatic device of Ondaatje's mirrored association with the main subject of the work (here his father), as used in previous texts, is ultimately denied. Father/son identification is suggested through the images of a cinnamon peeler (p.187), removing a bottle top (p.188), and reaching page 189, either in their reading or writing. Yet moving towards an incident of mirrored identification to match that of Buddy Bolden and Ondaatje in Coming through Slaughter (p.133), such an image is at the last moment rejected as Ondaatje's father 'forget[s] the mirror' (p.189) in his drunken stupor.

187 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.206, my emphasis.

188 In his article, 'The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen', Arun Mukherjee contrasts Ondaatje's work, particularly his poetry, unfavourably with that of the Guyanan poet, Dabydeen. He believes that 'Ondaatje's success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada' (p.50). Mukherjee further asserts that Ondaatje 'has simply refused to address himself to the particular needs of his community. The otherness is a fact of life and the universalist, by overriding it, is simply in retreat from the questions of ideology, power, race and class. It is only history which makes one confront these questions' (p.65). Discussing Running in the Family directly, Mukherjee criticises Ondaatje for his 'sentimental tone and lack of perspective'; 'no contemporary picture of Sri Lanka' emerges (p.57).

I shall not argue directly against such criticism; Ajay Heble has already done so very effectively in "'Rumours of Topography": The Cultural Politics of Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family', Essays in Canadian Writing, 53 (Summer 1994), 184-203. In a more balanced critique of the novel, John Thieme laments that the text has not 'gone further and explored the relationship between the discourse in terms of which the family have constructed their lives and that of the Lakdasa Wikkramasinha poem' ('Don't Talk to Me About Matisse', pp.85-86, about the ruthless suppression of revolutionaries in Ceylon), but acknowledges that to do so would be 'to ask for a different kind of text'. John A. Thieme, "'Historical Relations": Modes of Discourse in Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family', in Coral Ann Howells and Lynette Hunter, eds., Narrative Strategies in Canadian Literature: Feminism and



- Postcolonialism (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp.40-48 (p.48).
- 189 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.206.
- 190 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1976), p.159 (not in 1979 Picador/Pan edition). The full quotation reads 'While I have used real names and characters and historical situations I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers. There have been some dates, some characters brought together, and some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction'.
- 191 Wachtel, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', p.257.
- 192 Christopher Ondaatje, The Man-Eater of Punanai, p.37.
- 193 Scobie and Barbour, 'A Conversation with Michael Ondaatje', p.12.
- 194 Ibid., p.9.
- 195 The Sons of Captain Poetry, Mongrel Films, 1970, directed by Michael Ondaatje; photography by Robert Fresco; edited by Ondaatje and Fresco. The title for Ondaatje's film is taken from bp Nichol's poetry collection The Captain Poetry Poems (Vancouver: Blewointment Press, 1971) and includes footage of Nichol 'performing' several of his sound poems and reading from this collection. The film is in the form of a question and answer dialogue, edited so as to be presented as a monologue by Nichol. It is Ondaatje who is, in fact, the marginal 'ghost' presence, an essentially invisible and silent interviewer whose questions are never heard. Nevertheless, he affirms a statement by Nichol with the words 'Mmm! Yes'. Just as Ondaatje is a minimal verbal presence, so too he is a marginal visual presence, appearing once on the edge of the shot, an arm reaching for a bottle of beer. It is interesting that these suggestions of Ondaatje's presence have not been edited out.
- 196 Scobie and Barbour, 'A Conversation with Michael Ondaatje', p.9.
- 197 Ibid., p.12.
- 198 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.170.
- 199 Daphne Marlatt, 'Entering In: The Immigrant Imagination', in W.H. New, ed., Canadian Writers in 1984 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), pp.219-23 (p.221).
- 200 W.H. New, A History of Canadian Literature (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.260. Ondaatje to a lesser extent also tried to assimilate himself into Canadian (literary) society, revising his early poems 'to mute some of their initial exotic or Ceylonese qualities'. 'Of the influence of Ceylon

on his work, especially at this point in his career when he wanted to be considered and accepted as a Canadian poet of importance, he could only allow (in the Manna interview [p.19]), "It is there I suppose, but not in any conscious way. There are a couple of poems which refer to images of Ceylon, but mostly I was concerned with coming to terms with the present [Kingston, Ontario] landscape of that time." Jewinski, Michael Ondaatje, pp.49-50.

- 201 See The Capilano Review, 16/17 - 2/3 (1979), Michael Ondaatje, '[excerpt from] Running in the Family', pp.5-43; Daphne Marlatt, 'In the Month of Hungry Ghosts', pp.45-97. Sharon Thesen compares the two pieces in her introduction, pp.2-3, describing how 'both [writers] had journeyed on separate occasions to the distant but proximate places of their childhood', to record 'personal history, gathered up in a foreignness that is yet familiar' (p.2).
- 202 See Ondaatje, Running in the Family, 'Acknowledgments', p.206. Jewinski explains that 'Marlatt had only recently returned from a visit to Penang, Southeast Asia, where she had lived for six years with her family before moving to Vancouver in 1951. She was writing about her journey, and so was an extremely sensitive reader for Ondaatje, and understood some of the feelings he was experiencing': Michael Ondaatje, p.112.
- 203 Marlatt, 'Entering In', p.223.
- 204 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.203.
- 205 Marlatt, 'Entering In', p.223.
- 206 Christopher Ondaatje, The Man-Eater of Punanai, p.10, my emphasis.
- 207 Ibid., p.27. This is clearly a salient feature of Christopher Ondaatje's memories of his childhood, since he mentions the 'wild' nature of his upbringing on two other occasions in his travel journal (see pp.116 and 120).
- 208 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.112.
- 209 Ibid., p.189.
- 210 Ibid., p.189.
- 211 Christopher Ondaatje, The Man-Eater of Punanai, p.162.
- 212 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.135.
- 213 Ibid., p.111.
- 214 Ondaatje, 'Tin Roof', p.123.
- 215 Ibid., p.123.

- 216 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.49.
- 217 Ondaatje, Running in the Family, p.179.
- 218 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.51.
- 219 Ibid., p.51.
- 220 Linda Hutcheon, "Ex-Centric" - In the Skin of a Lion: A Novel - Michael Ondaatje', Canadian Literature, 117 (Summer 1988), 132-35 (p.133).
- 221 Maggie Humm, Border Traffic (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p.20. Toril Moi also emphasises 'the disconcerting properties of all frontiers', which are that by being situated on them one is 'neither inside nor outside', Sexual / Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Routledge, 1988), p.167. Humm and Moi are here discussing the marginalisation of women in relation to concepts of borders and frontiers. Their comments are relevant to my discussion because of the possible parallels that can, and have, been drawn between the position of women and post-colonial peoples in terms of silencing and marginalisation by hegemonic powers.
- 222 Michael Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion (London: Picador/Pan Books, 1988), p.26.
- 223 Barbara Turner, 'In the Skin of Michael Ondaatje: Giving Voice to a Social Conscience', Quill and Quire (May 1987), 21-22 (p.21).
- 224 Ibid., p.21.
- 225 Martha Butterfield, "The One Lighted Room" - In the Skin of a Lion - Michael Ondaatje', Canadian Literature, 119 (Winter 1988), 162-67 (p.162).
- 226 Turner, 'In the Skin of Michael Ondaatje', p.21.
- 227 This scenario is purely a supposition, but one which is supported by the circumstances surrounding Small's disappearance. He vanished soon 'after selling his lucrative theatre business for almost two million dollars'. See Peter Kenter, 'Unexplained Phenomenon: The Vanishing Businessman', Toronto Life, November 1996, p.22.
- 228 Lillian Petroff, 'The Macedonian Community in Toronto to 1940', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, Ontario, 1983, p.143. Ondaatje acknowledges Lillian Petroff's help in a list of personal thanks after the dedication, In the Skin of a Lion, prefatory pages. Charting Temelcoff's diverse succession of jobs, which Ondaatje partially draws on for his characterisation in In the Skin of a Lion, Petroff describes how Temelcoff worked as 'an apprentice baker in Northern Ontario, a Toronto construction

- labourer, dock hand, ice cream parlour operator, grocery store butcher and, finally, proprietor of a bakery' (p.187).
- 229 Garvie, 'Listening to Michael Ondaatje', p.932. Ondaatje based the character of the immigrant in In the Skin of a Lion on the details of Temelcoff's life provided by Petroff's taped interview with the Macedonian (recorded on 6 July 1975). Yet concerning the subject of working on the bridge Temelcoff said only that it was 'very difficult'. So despite his historical source Ondaatje 'had to invent all the bridge life' (Garvie, p.932). In this sense Temelcoff remains an invented figure.
- 230 Ibid., p.932.
- 231 Michael Greenstein, 'Ondaatje's Metamorphosis: In the Skin of a Lion', Canadian Literature, 126 (1990), 116-30, (p.123).
- 232 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.155.
- 233 Ondaatje, The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories, p.xv.
- 234 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.49.
- 235 Ibid., p.35.
- 236 Ibid., p.105.
- 237 Ibid., p.46. Ondaatje's emphasis on Temelcoff's (unusual) desire to learn English is based on Petroff's records of the historical immigrant. Discussing Temelcoff, Petroff points out that 'as sojourners, few Macedonians had wanted to learn English. They saw the acquisition of the language as unnecessary or a threat to their migrant frame of mind and way of life . . . [a] young Macedonian [Temelcoff] had his English language texts burned in the stove by a concerned brother who feared that schooling would make the young man unfaithful to his pledge to go home or send money home'. Petroff, 'The Macedonian Community in Toronto to 1940', p.401.
- 238 Roland Caldwell Harris (b.1875) is a historical figure who, despite representing the Canadian authoritarian establishment in In the Skin of a Lion, was in fact only two generations removed from his own immigrant roots (like many Canadians of this era). His paternal grandparents were Irish, those on his maternal side Irish and Scottish.
- 239 Butterfield points out that In the Skin of a Lion is 'strangely devoid of a main character that is a catalyst for action. Patrick Lewis is primarily an observer, a watcher, a recorder of life (not unlike a writer). He has his moment of action, it is true, but for very few pages. The action is, by contrast, distributed quite generously among a wide group of characters that form the book's community'. 'The One Lighted Room', p.166. This lack of a central protagonist is in contrast to Ondaatje's earlier works and reflects the preoccupation in In

the Skin of a Lion with community rather than the individual, the marginal rather than the central.

- 240 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.138.
- 241 Ibid., p.53.
- 242 Ibid., pp.156-57.
- 243 Craig Seligman discusses this trope of disappearance in Michael Ondaatje's work from Coming through Slaughter to The English Patient, linking it to 'the notion of silence'. Seligman suggests that 'the characters who don't have the resources to disappear from the scene disappear into themselves. Patrick Lewis reduces his life "almost to nothing" [p.113] when his first love leaves him'. The New Republic, 15 March 1993, 38-41 (p.39).
- 244 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.113.
- 245 Ibid., p.135.
- 246 Ibid., p.133. Specifically Patrick lacks Macedonian.
- 247 Ibid., p.113.
- 248 Bissoondath is referring to The Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada (1971), better known by its short title The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Chapter C-18.7); revised in 1988.
- 249 Neil Bissoondath, 'True Expatriate Love', Saturday Night (June 1991), 44-46 (p.45). See also Bissoondath's article, 'A Question of Belonging' in The Globe and Mail, 28 January 1993, A.17.
- 250 Dennis Duffy, 'A Wrench in Time: A Sub-Sub-Librarian Looks Beneath the Skin of a Lion', Essays on Canadian Writing, 53 (Summer 1994), 125-40 (p.134).
- 251 Bissoondath, 'True Expatriate Love', p.45. When his full length work, Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada (Toronto: Penguin, 1994), was published advocating such radical views, it raised heated public and political debate in Canada.
- 252 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.51.
- 253 Ibid., p.47.
- 254 Fotios Sarris, 'In the Skin of a Lion: Michael Ondaatje's Tenebristic Narrative', Essays on Canadian Writing, 44 (1991), 183-201 (p.188).
- 255 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.153.

- 256 Ibid., p.116.
- 257 Spearey, 'Mapping and Masking', p.52.
- 258 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.132.
- 259 Ibid., p.180.
- 260 Ibid., p.128.
- 261 Ondaatje, 'Sullivan and the Iguana', The Cinnamon Peeler, p.41. Ondaatje describes the lizard gecko as possessing an 'almost transparent body' ('Tin Roof', p.108) and the 'chameleon' Patrick similarly describes himself as 'feel[ing] transparent' in In the Skin of a Lion, p.166.
- 262 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.228.
- 263 Ibid., see pp.179 and 228.
- 264 Ibid., p.157. The phrase 'in the skin of a lion' is associated with the need for healing transformation in the wilderness - an environment associated with psychological trial and purgation: see the novel's epigram taken by Ondaatje from The Epic of Gilgamesh, translated by N.K. Sandars (London: Penguin, 1960), p.93.
- 265 Gordon Gamlin, 'Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion and the Oral Narrative', Canadian Literature, 135 (1992), 68-77 (p.72).
- 266 Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.231.
- 267 Quoted from the front page of The Globe and Mail, 31 October 1995 (André Picard, 'Parizeau Promises to "Exact Revenge" for Sovereignist Loses', p.A1).
- 268 The actual wording of the question on which Canadians voted on 30 October 1995, was as follows: 'Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign, after making a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?'
- 269 Humm, Border Traffic, p.22.
- 270 Ondaatje, The Faber Book of Contemporary Canadian Short Stories, p.xiii.
- 271 See Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion, p.32. There is suggestion of the biblical 'Fall'. Not only does Alice lose her state of devotional piety in her fall into the masculine arms of Temelcoff, but her black habit causes him to view the nun as 'a black-garbed bird' (p.32). Black is normally associated with satanic animals and birds of ill-omen. For me, the image suggests a member of

Lucifer's angelic host, expelled from Heaven and falling with singed and blackened wings outspread.

- 272 Ibid., p.97.
- 273 Ibid., p.157.
- 274 Ibid., p.71.
- 275 Christian Bok, 'Destructive Creation: The Politicization of Violence in the Works of Michael Ondaatje', Canadian Literature, 132 (1992), 109-24 (p.119).
- 276 Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient (London: Picador/Pan, 1993), p.265.
- 277 He literally writes his diary within a copy of The Histories by Herodotus, 'cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations' (p.16). This act demonstrates that history is a communal account of the past, composed of many personal histories, a composite narrative.
- 278 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.267.
- 279 Ibid., pp.138-39.
- 280 The beginning of the Second World War was ultimately triggered by Adolf Hitler's German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, in defiance of the sovereignty associated with national borders. He subsequently ordered the movement of German troops into Czechoslovakia later in the same month. The Nazi dictator was driven by his desire to extend the boundaries of the German empire, creating lebensraum for his Aryan people, against the wishes of most other European countries.
- 281 Wachtel, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', p.255.
- 282 Ondaatje, Coming through Slaughter, p.9.
- 283 The Second World War promoted a reassessment, not just of the boundaries within Europe, but also over other issues of sovereignty further afield. 'The Canadian Citizenship Act' of January 1947 enabled Canadians to truly assert their own separate identity, independent of Britain and France. India obtained its full independence from Britain (as a dominion of the British Commonwealth) in the same year, on 15 August 1947.
- 284 As a bomb disposal expert Kip is associated with the element of fire (and light), as is the character of the same name in Sheila Watson's The Double Hook (1959). For an explicitly developed nominal link, this time with Kipling's Kim (1901), see later in my discussion of The English Patient.
- 285 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.217.

- 286 Ibid., p.112.
- 287 Pearl Bell, 'The English Patient - Michael Ondaatje', Partisan Review, 60-1 (1993), 72-74 (p.74).
- 288 Stephen Smith, 'In the Skin of the Patient: Michael Ondaatje on the Structure, Intimacy, and Politics of His New Novel', Quill and Quire (September 1992), 69, my emphasis.
- 289 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.247.
- 290 Ibid., p.116.
- 291 Ibid., p.238.
- 292 Wachtel, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', p.253.
- 293 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.187.
- 294 Ibid., p.219.
- 295 Ibid., p.237.
- 296 Ibid., p.155.
- 297 Ibid., p.138.
- 298 Ibid., p.286.
- 299 Hilary Mantel, in a lengthy review of The English Patient, mistakenly (I believe) equates Kip's views with those of Ondaatje. She quotes the lines I have given (EP, p.286) and describes them as 'a crude polemic', indicating a pretence 'not to know why certain wars [like the Second World War] were fought' (p.23). Based on this false premise she ends her review with a damning dismissal of the novel and more importantly its author, as one who 'sneaks from responsibility - as a storyteller, as a thinker' (p.23). "'Wraith's Progress" - The English Patient - Michael Ondaatje', New York Review of Books, 40-1/2 (1993), 22-23. Ondaatje may not provide any conclusive answers in The English Patient but his views are certainly nowhere near as extreme as Kip's.
- 300 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.117.
- 301 Ibid., p.70.
- 302 Ibid., p.70.
- 303 Wachtel, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', p.252.
- 304 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.94.



- 305 D. Mark Simpson, 'Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial English Patient', Essays on Canadian Writing, 53 (Summer 1994), 216-37 (p.220).
- 306 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.188.
- 307 Ibid., p.184.
- 308 Wachtel, 'An Interview with Michael Ondaatje', p.259.
- 309 Although a person can hold a passport of dual nationality, they cannot live in two countries at the same time. Similarly, while a person may be bilingual they cannot simultaneously write or speak in two languages.
- 310 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.176.
- 311 Ibid., p.165.
- 312 Ibid., pp.258-59.
- 313 In the 'acknowledgements' to The English Patient, Ondaatje refers to 'R.A. Bagnold's review of Almasy's monograph on his explorations in the desert' (p.305). He is indicating that his novel is, in part, based on the historical figure of Laszlo Ede Almasy, count of Zsady and Torokszentmiklos (1895-1951), whose accomplishments included 'the discovery of the lost oasis of Zarzura in the Libyan Desert, the discovery of prehistorical paintings in the caves of the Uweinat Mountains, the cartography of the Libyan Desert ..., the development of civil aviation in Egypt . . . and [the publication] of several works in Hungarian, French and German about his travels, discoveries, and experiences in the Second World War'. See Steven Totosy de Zepetnek, 'The English Patient: "Truth is Stranger than Fiction"', Essays on Canadian Writing, 53 (Summer 1994), 141-53 (p.143).
- 314 Kareda, 'An Immigrant's Song', p.48.
- 315 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.141.
- 316 Mantel, 'Wraith's Progress', p.22. Mantel is specifically referring to the main characters of Hana and Caravaggio, who also feature in In the Skin of a Lion, as well as more minor references to Clara and Patrick, Hana's mother and step-father.
- 317 As Ondaatje has indicated in interview, he 'do[es]n't like the idea of sequels - Hana Goes to Spain, that sort of thing.' Garvie, 'Listening to Michael Ondaatje', p.932.
- 318 Ondaatje, The English Patient, pp.7-8.
- 319 Garvie, 'Listening to Michael Ondaatje', p.932.

- 320 Ondaatje, The English Patient, p.301.
- 321 Hana, the nurse, reads books to her patient; the sapper, Kip, 'reads' the complex patterns of detonator fuse wires, 'a book, a map of knots, a fuse board' (p.111); while Caravaggio, as a thief, not only cautiously 'reads' the rooms and buildings he enters, but also the mysterious English patient, who complains: 'You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read.' (p.253). All the characters in the novel discover something of their own personal narratives and selves while trying to read the others around them.
- 322 Spearey, 'Mapping and Masking', pp.55-56.

**CONCLUSION: 'Where Do We Go From Here?', pp.217-225.**

- 1 Northrop Frye, 'Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English, 3rd edition, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976) p.220.
- 2 See Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972) especially ch.1, 'Survival', pp.25-43, for her discussion of Canada as 'a collective victim' (p.36).
- 3 Ibid., p.38. While suggesting that 'strictly speaking . . . [this] is a position not for victims but for those who have never been victims at all', Atwood admits that she is also embracing 'ex-victims' in this category.
- 4 Michael Ondaatje, In the Skin of a Lion (London: Picador/Pan, 1988) p.244.
- 5 Atwood, Survival, p.54.
- 6 I am thinking here particularly of Peter Guy in But We Are Exiles (1966), although the experiences of Jeremy Sadness in Gone Indian (1973) would also apply to a lesser extent. The quotation is a refrain taken from the national anthem (v.1, l.4 and v.2-3, l.6).
- 7 Priscilla L. Walton, 'An Interview with Thomas King', Chimo, 21 (1990), 24-28 (p.26).
- 8 Ibid., p.26.
- 9 Ibid., p.26. See also King's discussion of Native character portrayals in fiction, in 'Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction', Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (1983), 4-10, where he suggests that 'unlike the historical and

- contemporary Native characters in white fiction, these characters [in Native fiction] survive and persevere, and, in many cases, prosper' (p.8).
- 10 The title of the novel refers to the type of wording used to sign various historical Native peace treaties and land agreements, pledging that both parties would hold to the terms of the pact for as long as 'the grass is green and the water runs', i.e. forever. With this title, King gestures both at the broken promises of white governments and the permanence of native culture, beliefs and traditions.
  - 11 This incarceration is based on the historical imprisonment by the U.S. Army of a number of American Plains Indians at Fort Marion, St. Augustine in 1874, after their refusal to be forcibly moved onto reservations. Parodying colonial literary and cinematic stereotypes of lone outcasts, King names the group of four Indian friends - Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and the Lone Ranger. Throughout the novel, humour is the main satirical device.
  - 12 Thomas King, 'Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial', World Literature Written in English, 30-2 (Autumn 1990), 10-16 (p.11).
  - 13 Jennifer Kelly, 'Coming Out of the House: A Conversation with Lee Maracle', Ariel, 25-1 (January 1994), 73-88 (p.79).
  - 14 Walton, 'Interview with Thomas King', p.27.
  - 15 Kelly, 'Coming Out of the House', p.77.
  - 16 Lee Maracle explores the events of Oka through her semi-autobiographical novel, Sundogs (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books, 1992). For a historical account, see Geoffrey York and Loreen Pinder, People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Legacy of Oka (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991).
  - 17 I recognise the danger of drawing an essentialist connection between Native peoples and the land or the wilderness. Not all members of the Native community, especially those living in urban areas, have this connection, but traditional beliefs involving the land reveal a very different concept of Canada's natural environment from those held by the white settler society.
  - 18 King, 'Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction', p.6.
  - 19 Ibid., p.6.
  - 20 Cyril Dabydeen, ed., A Shapely Fire: Changing the Literary Landscape (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1987), 'Introduction', pp.9-12 (p.10).
  - 21 Kim Campbell, 'Diverging Dominions: Canada - Maple Leaf Blues?', BBC Radio 4, 22 May 1996.

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### **Dissertations**

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