

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Mapping Becomes Controversial Manners in

Aritha van Herk's novel Restlessness

Aritha van Herk is universally recognized as one of the most original and imaginative writers in Canada. She gained her first international literary prominence with the publication of *Judith* (1978) which received the Seal First Novel Award. The second novel *The Tent Peg* (1981) was not as widely successful as the previous one, but gained a lot of interest from scholars as well as van Herk's readers. Her other works are *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (1986); *Places far From Ellesmere* (1990); *Restlessness* (1998); *In*

Visible Ink (1991) and a Frozen Tongue (1992). She is a member of the Royal Society of Canada, and a professor who teaches Canadian Literature and Creative Writing in the Department of English at the University of Calgary. Aritha van Herk is the author of a number of highly acclaimed books. Her award-winning novels have been praised throughout North America and Europe. Her works have been published in eleven countries and nine languages. She has travelled extensively, giving lectures on her work.

Aritha van Herk's fifth novel *Restlessness* was published in 1998, the protagonist of the novel is Dorcas. From her childhood, she makes a trip in various places depending upon her need. This typical attitude is reflected only from Canadian Literature. Dorcas in *Restlessness* is the true melancholic character. She is the type of forever journeying and never arriving character. Frequently, she makes her long and dangerous journey restlessly.

From early history on, humankind has been trying to get a grasp of its surroundings, on relations between different places, and the means of choice have been mapped. While communicating with someone by describing a spatial relationship, the depiction should arouse a parallel image in the mind of a person. The eminent way to be sure that will happen to provide such a visual illustration of the image. This kind of visual illustration of the geographical setting is called map. A map can never be an adequate impression of the reality of a place, it can only be mirrored image. One such mirror can be found in writing, as "[l]iterature is not only a mirror, it is also a map, a geography of the mind" (Atwood, *Survival* 18-19), describing a reciprocal influence between literature, mind and map. This connection is also visible in the way the word "map" is ingrained in the English language. Indeed, the term map is often used metaphorically to explain other types of knowing and communication. In everyday conversation, the word map is used to convey the idea of clarification. It is worth quoting the comments of van Herk's, on the importance of maps in her Canadian perspective.

It is no wonder that we turn to maps as oracles, that we make cartographers heroes. And it is no wonder that the concept of mapping is so inherent in the way we see ourselves-as nation, as people, as literature. Because we are such a new country, we have almost perfect records of our own charting and because of our youth, we continue to participate in that mapping, it remains both an ongoing process and a metaphor for our particularity. (“Mapping as Metaphor”⁵⁴)

Aritha van Herk is aware of the different literal and metaphorical uses of maps and mapping and pair them with the typical Canadian mindset of the prairies and the North in her novels. Map making and journeys referred as an attempt to arrive at the truth underlying all experiences. *Restlessness* is a self-reflexive novel, where the whole narrative is a journey through the mind of the narrator Dorcas. As she has spent much of her life travelling, she makes some specific reflection on travel. She speaks about a book that she has with her, Monty Reid’s *Dog Sleeps*, which calls travel “an uninhabited restlessness, a terrible convulsion of some subject searching for a way to inhabit a moment, to declare having been at somewhere” (Rest 14). She calls this as her hymnal because her restlessness has been caused by her frequent travels. As a working tourist, she is “expected to shift between borders and currencies as effortlessly as the birds that fly above” (Rest 16). But for Dorcas, travel is not an easy mobility, as it involves a dual perspective. On the one hand, it may be said that she travels to escape herself. On the other hand, she thinks that travelling would give her “a perspective, a point of view, a character” (Rest 81). In other words, it becomes a search for an identity, which is typical of a Canadian, whose ancestors hail from Holland.

Travelling gives a person a sense of freedom from the stultifying atmosphere of a small town, where all one’s actions are watched by others. Dorcas feels this sense of freedom which anonymity gives her:

Avoiding recognition's one of travel's seductions. Travel enables that shift to an anonymous world, where you can faint and not wake humiliated, where you can sit at a café table and read without fear of recognition or interruption, having escaped the density of a place that harbors the habits worn into days and weeks, time spun inward. (Rest 32).

She admits that her continuing journeys are “acts of self-trickery” (Rest 37). Though she has been a traveller by profession, she sees herself as a *picara* too:

Travelling in order to escape my essential laziness. The picaresque tradition historically argues for travel as a self-conscious activity metadestinal, wickedly aware that it seeks its own extinction. Picaresque travellers long to behave badly, and while they see themselves as unmaskers of a hypocritical world, they also know themselves, to be cowards with a failed cause, able only to pursue their own pursuit. So I work to stay ambiguous, watching myself following myself and rejoicing in the small indiscretions I manage to commit. (Rest 92-93)

Dorcas tells her assassin that she never takes a camera with her during the journey, as she believes that travelling without a camera would help her to travel erratically.

The planned trip, metaphored by photographs, is a setup, a tawdry gamble, like the columned ads in the Sunday paper placed by single both travel and its record is to live n unfinished cartography, following the street that never appears on the map, the name that vanishes once it has been spoken, the country that has never been vanished. (Rest 100-101)

She remembers a boat ride through the canals of Amsterdam, viewing “the slime-green canals and the gabled house with their hoist cranes, the elliptical streets converging and converging

toward the city's sheltering dike" (Rest 97). Beside her, there was a woman who was clicking with her camera and taking photographs. What Dorcas saw as a lively scene was divided into a sequence of rectangular frames for the woman who saw everything through the lens of the camera.

As an international courier, Dorcas has had access to many cities around the world. She has a gold card, and has access to a special reservation in line. "In half an hour I've arranged another trip to Amsterdam, via London may be, on the runways of Heathrow, where the double-decker buses go in circles and police dogs snarl round the baggage destined for Tegeran" (Rest 105).

Dorcas tells that cities have personalities. "They're like people we live with, try to understand, fight, hold in our arms. People we miss desperately and take for granted" (Rest 110). She describes some of the cities she has visited. She does not have a good impression of Jakarta, because she is hunted by the sight of the poor children selling coloured water between the lines of traffic. "Their eyes boomed with fever, desperation, those bobbing, plastic baggies slung on a stick over their shoulders, and the water slashing in those laughable cartoon colors..." (Rest 64). Dorcas' eyes fill with tears whenever she remembers the sight.

Dorcas' favourite city in the whole world is Vienna, which she calls a covetous old city where one finds the overprotective assurance of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which came to an end after the First World War. It is a historical city with eighty museums and eighty-two libraries with eighteen million books. Dorcas felt "clumsy, stupid, and cultureless" (Rest 113) there. The reason that the city appeals to Dorcas is the fact that "everything in the city is textured with death, deliciously grotesque" (Rest 113). The central cemetery has almost six hundred acres with about three million graves. There is a street

Blutgasse, named for the Knights Templar who were massacred there in 1312. Dorcas calls it a wonderful place, “all that blood for a bland Canadian to dabble her fingers in” (Rest 116). There is a memorial to plague victims, a baroque column of tortured bodies, “figures...racked with pain, their teeth bared, their bodies ravaged, writhing in death above a modern square of heartlessly exclusive perfume shops and haidressers” (Rest 117). There is also an undertaking museum that covers the history of funerals and embalming. Dorcas ends her account with the detail of the dead being propped up in a chair for a photograph before being put into coffins. She considers this a proper way of reclaiming the dead.

Dorcas remembers a school trip to Paris, when she longed for a relationship that could set on fire. On the contrary, Paris seemed then to be too romantic and not as passionate as she wanted it to be:

I watched and wandered and sniffed at the dirty scene, thinking my patience would reward me. I wanted to be surprised, seduced by an outrageous recognition. I was waiting for a touch, a breath to inflame me. All I learned was that Paris was the wrong stage for discovery, too mythologized, too adamantly, romantic. Paris was full of pilgrims, itinerants like the students I was with, lurking on its fringes. If I wanted to be a part of a collage, I could tear myself to pieces, but I wanted to be whole when love reached for me. I wanted to have faith in my surrender. I imagined being burned by a gaze, I imagined smothering my conscience in hot steam, but I could not imagine myself as painter’s model or sad inspiration. May be I just missed the prairies.

(Rest 124-25)

Dorcas as a courier once made a trip to Las Vegas which is seen to be the gambler’s paradise. “Vegas is a city that has decided to imitate the past, but on a manage scale, an entire

city false-fronted and composed for a movie set. What's poignant about Vegas is its crayoned color, as if the subtle shades of the desert need to be driven back, kept at bay" (Rest 129). There was a sense of playfulness around and the city insists on nightless nights. "If the place hadn't been a shrine to freewheeling capitalism, it would have been surreal" (Rest 130). The first time that Dorcas went to Los Vegas, she thought that she might meet her end there. Later she came to the conclusion that the city was meant only for enjoyment:

I enjoyed myself. Like a kid, I gaped and I wandered. I gawked and I plunked quarters into machines here and there, without expecting dividends just for the sound of the whirling tumbrels, the lemons and the stars trying to outspin each other. I delivered the parcel I was couriering- some kind of pharmaceutical formula, I think-the next morning, drove it to the outskirts, to an elegant phalanx of office buildings, then drove back and had the valet at the Emerald City park my rental again. I walked up the yellow brick path, had a wonderful lunch of cornmeal pancakes and decided to concede that the city was only for fun. (Rest 131).

So naturally, her next trip was to the pyramids in Cairo. She is taken by the guide into the pyramid of Chephren. The weak loop of electric bulbs inside the pyramid looks like a lantern transporting her to another era. The guide entertains her with the tales of "how Caliph Manum had broken the passage open with fire and vinegar, how various adventures had encountered their worst nightmares and died of terror, how bats as large as eagles used to nest in the passages, how stones were judiciously positioned to crush the bones of intruders...when he was bending down to gather up his torch and thermos" (Rest 139).

Dorcas reflects that the cities which are cultural and political centres, really spring from swamps or deadfall. She also makes a passing reference to Tolfino, which is not really a

city, but rather a little resort village on the western shoulder of Vancouver Island, the farthest West of Canada, crowded with cedars and the splash of endless rain. She sees the place as “the edge of the world, a place to contemplate silence” (Rest 142).

In *Restlessness*, van Herk portrays a woman who is restless and wandering, whose life and work is to travel, decides that the only way she can soothe herself from the dreadful nostalgia is residing the side of death. The protagonist Dorcas, plans her chosen oblivion and makes love to cities. She says that she “engages in an act of hunger, a ravenous plan of escape” (Rest 8). She sees travelling as a version of self-punishment, and wonders if death is a happy ending to her journeys. In one way, her journey towards death may be seen as a journey of self-discovery like Judith who is not sure whether she has reached her destination.

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