

# INTRODUCTION

## **WRESTLING IMPOSSIBILITY: WILD WORDS IN ALBERTA**

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Attempts to essentialize Alberta's literary tradition are about as permanent as snow before a chinook. The writing aligned with Alberta (whether by accident or location) is a chiaroscuro, swatches of light and shade that dazzle and surprise, conceal and reveal. We're identified as young, unformed, the literary school (well, kindergarten) without a tradition or an encapsulating definition. Not for us the solemn blessing of Ontario Gothic or hip Toronto urbanism. Not for us the racy stripes of Montreal translative transgression. No, if anything, Alberta writing earns a dollop of good old "prairie realism" (which I have proven elsewhere does not exist) and then quizzical incomprehension. The books that erupt from Alberta are too unpredictable, too wide-ranging and varied to be summarized and contained. Alberta writing is a mystery, a tangent, a shock, unexpected and vigorous.

Three books are essential to anyone wishing to understand Alberta writing. Actually, they are two books, if one considers that George Melnyk's *The Literary History of Alberta* is a two-volume affair, altogether 540 pages. But

were I required to frame a bookshelf that declared the nature of Alberta's Wild Words, I would put at one end Melnyk's as-close-to-comprehensive-as-possible-under-the-circumstances literary history, and at the other end Robert Kroetsch's elusive evocation of absence, *The Hornbooks of Rita K.*

Already, I know, I am in trouble. Alberta writing, as I have learned to my own greedy delight, is a sprawling lovely monster. When I tried to include a bibliography of essential Alberta literature at the end of my idiosyncratic and unreliable history of Alberta, *Mavericks: An Incurrigible History of Alberta*, I knew the list to be terminally incomplete, remarkably inadequate. I included it anyway, determined to assert that Alberta, for all its reputation, has a literate culture and a complex literary life, one that embraces immigrants and newcomers, exiles and diasporic settlers, original peoples and carpetbaggers.

An Alberta writer is one of those strange designations that some say contains its own contradiction, like Alberta culture or military intelligence. What does an Alberta writer encompass? Someone who lives in Alberta and who writes about elsewhere, all the many elsewheres that tempt a global citizen? Someone who writes about Alberta even if they do not live here? Someone who frequents the buffet tables of the Banff Centre, but who literally can't figure out how to get there without a guide and who complains bitterly about the elk rutting on the grounds? Someone who drew a mark on this place even though she was here for the briefest of periods? As George Melnyk so eloquently argues, this is a place of "multiple and contradictory narratives" (Melnyk, Vol. 1 xvii), and there is simply no essential set of measures that can delineate an Alberta writer, unless that measure is itself multiple and contradictory.

Alberta is an evocative site for writing because it occupies a landscape that wears its metamorphosis proudly. Here presides a geography that has undergone movements and erosions, upheavals and glaciations that resonate still, however we might imagine the physical ground as a static or exhausted medium. It is impossible and, I would contend, it will always be impossible to ignore Alberta's spatial effect, unless one is truly insensate, aesthetically numb. What we see, whether lifting our eyes west to the mountains or east to the plains is a reminder of the world as beauty. What we see looking north is the imaginative future, and looking south, an early subversion of conterminal division. Our writing cannot help but be influenced, positively or adversely, by this spectacular space and our specular gaze. Even hidden in the *cul de sac* of a suburb it is impossible to ignore the intensity of the light.

Even hunkered away from an obliterating blizzard, it is impossible to remain unaffected. The very changes in barometric pressure will insist on prescribing a migraine.

This Alberta practices a version of disorderly inclusion, a peripheral and careless acceptance that frees the writing writer to focus, to fall in love with what words can do out here. Not what words mean – that is for the thematic interests of a Canada that shaped its trajectory and project long before Alberta became a distinct cultural entity. We have a different sense of literary engagement here, one impossible to define. Except that its effect is remarkable, as seductive as warm days and cool nights.

Let me cite an example. Out of fourteen Canadian writers who have been Markin-Flanagan writer-in-residence holders at the University of Calgary, six who came from elsewhere decided to stay in Alberta. Three more who could not stay (the tyranny of having a job) expressed open longing to stay. Four were already Albertans. Only one fled after what was clearly an experience determinedly unhappy. Now why this seeming conversion? Isn't Calgary the heart of Alberta's economic crassness? Isn't the literary energy percolating to the east or west more telling? Certainly, Alberta writing struggles against the old clichés that see us writing only about cowboys, nature, and isometric conservatism. Although that is not the issue at all.

In truth, Alberta's literary world is inclusive and inspiring. It's even kind to buffalo hunters, those writers who move here when the economy is good, and who bag every grant and prize in sight, even if they care nothing about this place and contribute little to the writing community. It's quietly protective of its gentle sinners, those writers who have lived here forever, and who slowly grow more bent with time as they work away at tilling this sometimes-infertile soil. And it can be angry too, at writers who characterize this place as reductive or simple, those who visit and dismiss. Alberta has been home to or alienated enough writers to cause a modernist period, if we wanted something like that. Although we'd have to call it something else. *Wild Words* is a good description.

So why then do I insist on the bookends that I have chosen? Inclusive, comprehensive, and objective in its required compression, given the number of writers and texts that he apprehends, George Melnyk's *Literary History of Alberta* makes obvious sense. Melnyk provides a powerfully engaged sweep of this literature, from Writing-on-Stone and the messages recorded in the cliffs there to his closing with Thomas King and Richard Wagamese, both First Nations writers. That he leaves his history at the end of the twentieth

century and cannot engage with the most up to the minute contemporary writing is simply reflective of the time when he completed the project; the present cacophony of voices argues that there are more tentacles and offshoots than were even imaginable ten years ago. Melnyk does what he sets out to do, articulating three fundamental claims: “that Alberta has a literary history that is definable and worth knowing; that Alberta’s literary identity is multicultural and polyphonic; and that Alberta’s literary history is now moving toward a global synthesis” (Melnyk, Vol. 1 xx). For that reason, his is a reassuring and solid guidebook to our writerly inheritance.

But the other bookend, a strangely inconclusive poetic text published just after the turn of the century, by Robert Kroetsch, a man who might be called Mr. Alberta (along with having once been identified by Linda Hutcheon as Mr. Canadian Post-modern) except that he has not lived in Alberta since 1980, is a more arbitrary choice. And yet, it is exactly its bizarre “translation of strangeness” (Melnyk, Vol. 2 231) that argues for its synergy and its metaphorical positioning as writing that could be deemed “ur-Alberta.”

The very construction of *The Hornbooks of Rita K* declares the provisional nature of writing out here, the process of trying to piece together fragments into some kind of literary history.

Each line of the poem is a provisional exactness.

We write by waiting for the mind to disposess. (3)

So declares Hornbook #10, as if to persuade the reader that there is order to be found within the pages of this meditation, just so long as it knows enough to divest itself of possessiveness. Alberta is poem, poet, narrative, journalist, critique, critic, and archivist, and yet, always more. Claiming to be “intimate friends” with Rita K, the archivist (or whatever he is, perhaps even a literary historian in some way related to George Melnyk) pretends to serve as an interpreter for the bewildered reader, proposing to gloss Rita Kleinhart’s “dense poems” (7). Of course, her poems are not dense, and the reader is not bewildered. It is Raymond who is both dense and bewildered, he the johnny-come-lately to Alberta writing. Raymond pretending to be an expert on Rita (Rita the writer who exists and yet has vanished; the writer who has written enough to have a reputation, yet left almost no trace), is a gloss on those who would parse Alberta writing, those who would reduce it to its marginalia and location.

Raymond is careful to explain Rita’s provenance, thereby identifying her as a literary work:

Kleinhardt was invited, during the late spring of 1992, to visit Germany and lecture briefly to the Canadianists at Trier University. On her way back from Trier she paid a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and while at the museum mailed a number of postcards to friends. She was not seen alive thereafter.

Her ranch in Central Alberta – her house overlooking the coulees and the valley of the Battle River – contained at the time of her disappearance neat stacks of scrawled notes, manuscripts, partially filled notebooks and, yes, unfinished (or unfinishable?) poems. (8)

Here then is the model for the Alberta writer: a person of some international renown who when she leaves Alberta manages to vanish, although her “ranch” home (and the tongue-in-cheek irony encoded in that designation is beautiful considering the dread brand of ranching that all Alberta writing must resist) contains a huge repository of words, poems “unfinished (or unfinishable?)” as well as the story of who and where she is. Part poetics, part documentary, part fiction, Rita collects all genres into her writerly presence and then refuses their designation by leaving that category empty.

Raymond happily and lavishly interprets the absent writer for a would-be reader. She was intrigued with back doors and escape (10); she worked from photographs (11); she admires snow (19); she is fascinated by prairie cemeteries (12) – all claims that Raymond makes on Rita’s behalf. Rita herself speaks only through a few Hornbook fragments, enigmatic as inspiration and elusive as the metaphorical effect of literature itself. But I am dwelling on minutiae, taking up the cudgels that Raymond so assiduously beats. Let me get straight to the point. I suspect that Rita *is* Alberta writing.

This textual anthropomorphism speaks to the numinous nature of Alberta writing. “Her disappearance ... had everything to do with entrance into the world. Only by disappearing could she escape the bonded ghost she had become to her readers” (27). The playful conundrum of appearing by disappearing is indeed the template for Alberta writing. Alberta writing occupies that fugitive category of doubt that inscribes by vanishing, that articulates its existence by an act of erasure. So different from the declarative trumpets of “national” writing, this text is a “bonded ghost,” haunting and yet geographically determined, a writer of and from Alberta and yet impossible to identify, let alone lay eyes on.

Raymond tells us that Rita “was at work on a huge – and I would say bizarre – work that ultimately... caused her disappearance. She held to the

conviction that... she would leave each object or place or person that fell under her attention undisturbed” (16). The Alberta writer is indeed an ethical thief, estranged from her own material or at least shy with that material, shading in a few words to delineate this bizarre and eccentric world, careful not to damage its integrity, almost afraid to recite its distinctiveness. And the open question of creativity vibrates through *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, as if it were a tuning fork for Alberta writing. “One of the considerable and neglected art forms is the stack of papers” (75). This then, is the essence of Alberta writing. A stack of papers, unsifted and disorderly, intent on what they have not yet booked. Wild Words.

The writer and the written engage in a dance that must exhaust the writing, which, even as it persists, endures. By disappearing, claims Raymond, Rita gives freedom to her writing. And yet, around the corner of Raymond’s obsessive tabulations, snooping, discussion, and analysis, Rita’s words remain, endure. Enigmatic, almost aphoristic, the Alberta writer defines home and its hold over us.

Home is a door that opens inward only.  
So how will you get out, stranger? I say  
to myself. (33)

It may be that Alberta writing does not “get out” at all, but circles its own secret knowledge of its own discomfort, its own one-page brevity. In fact, there is the rub. Alberta writing is stealthy, attributive, mysterious. Hornbook #55 declares, “We turn to speak and confront an absence” (55), yearning to say what we want to say but at a loss for audience. The result then can only be writing as a dance with words that cannot quite define a place, and yet eternally engages with the infinite variety of this place.

Writerly influences – the literary history that the writer circles and lies down with – cannot be neglected either, and here Melnyk’s *Literary History* echoes Rita K. Rita confesses, “Sometimes I hear in my speech traces of languages I don’t remember knowing” (14). All the different backgrounds and inheritances that inflect Alberta’s character speak through those who try to write, whether they know it or not. And so, the essays in this volume, *Wild Words*, their careful reading paying attention to both sides of the phrase, Alberta writing, can be read in two directions, through George Melnyk’s survey, and through Rita Kleinhart’s transience.

*My name is Rita Kleinhart. My heart is tough, a clenched and patient fist, determined to beat. Wild Words hum in my bones. Here is my summary of these essays that demarcate a few renditions of my Alberta.*

Successful mourning, as Christian Riegel declares in his gentle admonition of Robert Kroetsch's *Stone Hammer Poem*, requires attention. We need practice in elegy and monument, the work of writing that incites the paradox of loss, a respect for what has gone before. Raspberry baskets hold more than harvest; they invest in the scent of the future.

How can we defend ourselves with poems, asks Douglas Barbour, and who is an Alberta poet? All of us, he answers, Watson and Wah, Mandel and Markotic, Whyte and Noble and Barbour himself, intimate immigrations of image. Those we miss show up in these pages, complete with words, the distinct energy of their outpourings, linguistic constructions. The poems work hard, the waitresses work hard, the service has aching feet. We can, Barbour asserts, defend ourselves with outriders, whose poetic "prologue lines" are intent on longing more than chronicle.

Tongue steeped in its childhood tea, I have stepped off the train at Strathcona, fought my way through the crowds in Edmonton to search for the settlement office. Being multilingual is both gift and limitation, as Jars Balan gently unpacks the trunk of Michael Gowda's voice, how to speak, when having just arrived here, your own voice must adapt to the needs of others. The question is repeated over and over: how do you write in Alberta, complete with the prescribed order, the limitations of ideology and economy?

If Alberta theatre can exhort the paradox, unpack destructive consequences, and shine the flashlight into dark corners, it will. Anne Nothof recites a diverse and diasporic staging, subliminal reaches toward cultural diversity, with neither prairie realism nor cowboy iconography in sight. No frustrated creativity, but a graceful acupuncture in the dramatists she identifies. Together with Sherrill Grace's clear-eyed examination of Sharon Pollock's theatre, changing names and changing places to take on the role of Alberta. Pollock proclaims a place where the self can reinvent the self and still shape the locale that shapes writing. With the land as a character, not landscape but character, she questions the inheritance that the generations await. Here in Alberta, the reinvention of a self is not only possible but probable.

Helen Hoy takes up the contradictory narratives of self in Suzette Mayr's *Moon Honey*, cacophonous race, gender, and sexual orientation. Hoy shows how those categories dissolve in an Alberta no longer monochromatic but hybrid, how parodic intervention and infused refusals of realism implicate

bland liberal racism, and juxtapose power with social chemistry. This is, says Hoy, “the site where the imagination meets the skin.” Both come away naked.

Rudy Wiebe’s restless kinaesthesia, tracked by Malin Sigvardson, declares that home is always many steps away. In this migration, Alberta becomes destination but never quite location, a worship of what may never be, as opposed to what is present. You get what you settle for with memory and the future both, but the mergence of religious and geographical movement can propose a stasis too, travel-suffering another name for perambulatory virtuousness.

Frances W. Kaye retribalizes Alberta with the Ojibway presence of Richard Wagamese taking to the pages with polemic and passion in equal measure. Seeking explanation, learning lessons, questing for understanding, the First Nations writer negotiates this space. Defying the binaries of non-white and white, these wounded nomads must grapple with the truth of dispossession and its affect, wounds that must be reconciled to a place and its peoples.

Animals too in their speaking reject the mapped borders of “civilization” and occupy an entirely different site, one that does not recognize Alberta at all. In the grizzly world of the Russells, Andy and Charlie, a new language begins to take shape, claims Pamela Banting. In fact, the Alberta writer who carries a gun smells different, cannot embrace the metaphor of ethics, etiquette, and protocol.

Lisa Grekul takes extinction one step farther, in her examination of Myrna Kostash’s wrestling match with genre. “The crisis of non-fiction” argues an Alberta bloodline that includes life writing, witness, analysis, and debate. Chronology and cause and effect contribute to a travelogue of the world larger than Alberta and yet historically and socially rooted in the horizon of Alberta. The imaginary coherence of this unpredictable – and yes, even doomed – place still argues that we come from the same village, even after we invent that village.

In this Alberta, then, reading these essays in the generous spirit they were written, I confess that my name is Rita Kleinhart. My heart is tough, a clenched and patient fist, determined to beat. Wild Words hum in my bones. The community that Fred Stenson describes in “Writing in Alberta – Up, Down, or Sideways” is my community, replete with memoir-writing, wispy-haired men who went to one-room schoolhouses, and with recalcitrant lyric poets. Fred Stenson’s useful degree in Economics is the same degree I have;

I too remember when Culture was a proper ministry and not just a word at the end of tourism, recreation, and et cetera. I too taught in penitentiaries and shuffled my feet at meetings in rude and sophisticated Toronto. And yes, I too ran off to Europe with a backpack and managed to vanish in the Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art even while I remain, scribbling lines in a ranch house, there overlooking the valley of the Battle River. I am what is called an Alberta writer. I practice wild words.

And still, “somewhere out there, the fence is down” (Kroetsch 56). Escape is possible, indeed encouraged. The open door beguiles. Write and disappear. And yet, it is not so easy to vanish, or to stop being an Alberta writer. Hornbook #43 confesses to such a writer’s irrepressible and unquenchable desire. “We write as a way of inviting love. Each text is a request that says, please, love me a little” (Kroetsch 19). Yes, this is the truth. Disappearance or not, from or within an elusive and illusory and contested Alberta, our writing is asking for exactly that.

Please, love our words a little.

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