

**REWRITING PLACE, WRITING HOME:  
ROBERT KROETSCH'S *SEED CATALOGUE***

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**Abstract.** *The paper focuses on the way Robert Kroetsch recreates his home place Alberta and Canada in his essays and poetry, especially in his poem Seed Catalogue. He stresses the need to unname the place, to free it of the inherited layers of meanings, and rewrite it again by generating and inscribing new Canadian meanings to it. Through the speaker's "memory of colonialism", the poem presents the history of European colonization of the prairies as problematizing its status as "home ground". Kroetsch's idea of "the dream of origins" and his desire to locate an origin in a place and construct a home through language derive from a profound sense of dislocation.*

In the *Hornbooks of Rita K.* (2000) Robert Kroetsch, meditating on the function of art and poetry, asks: "What's the poetic function of the hand?"<sup>1</sup> and answers by asking another question: "Is not poetry a questing after place, a will to locate?" (HRK 30) Kroetsch connects the function of poetry to a sense of belonging, and some of his poems are attempts to recreate his native place, the prairie. A case in point is *Seed Catalogue* which is about place and making home in the prairie by planting seeds of various origins. The reflections about poetry and place could be also read as questions of trace and remnant because he says: "The question is always the question of trace. What remains of what does not remain?" (HRK 8)

For Kroetsch the poem is stored in memory. What we think and read and write is the memory of what was never made present or seen. The memory is the memory of trace, a fragment which makes poetry possible and is also the very possibility of life. That possibility could be the trace of "the dream of origins", or "a local pride" as Kroetsch explains in his essay "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues", or it could be the erasure and the absence because erasure constitutes the trace as trace, makes it like the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kroetsch. *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2001. 31. All the other quotations are from this edition and are given in parenthesis (HRK).

snow that Rita admired, "disappear in its appearance,"<sup>2</sup> "disappear into art." (HRK 40) The poet explains in the *Hornbooks of Rita K.*: "We turn to speak and confront an absence. Thus we become, all of us, poets," (HRK 53) and before that, in the essay "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues":

Like the homesteaders before us, we are compelled to adjust and invent, to remember and forget. We feel a profound ambiguity about the past - about both its contained stories and its modes of perception.<sup>3</sup>

Kroetsch's long poem *Seed Catalogue* reflects on remembered constructed places and then itself constructs place and home. The relationship between home and place in the poem is based on the sense of "unsettling" experience by prairie people, because the prairie is to be accommodated into home through a sense of belonging. A newcomer, who is in search of home in the new territory, writes the place anew, by rediscovering and renaming it. Poets and novelists need to create a new home with a new language in which the buried experience is their own. Therefore Kroetsch explains that the first task of the Canadian writer is to unname his experience, to uninvent the world: "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>4</sup>

In the poem, place and home are defined in relationship to the historical context of Kroetsch's family migration from Germany to Alberta. He remembers his grandfather Henry J. Kroetsch who came from Germany to Canada, his uncle Freddie, his cousins Anna Weller, Kenneth McDonald. By stating that some of his ancestors returned to the Old Country, the poet concludes: "A terrible symmetry."<sup>5</sup> With almost the same words, the poet defines home and place:

the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian

the home place: one and a half miles west of Heisler, Alberta,  
on the correction line road  
and three miles south.

No trees  
around the house.  
Only the wind.  
Only the January snow.  
Only the summer sun.  
The home place:  
a terrible symmetry. (SC 454)

The home place in prairie usage is synonym for "homestead", and Kroetsch gives us the address of his family homestead where he and his ancestors lived: it is Heisler, Alberta, on the correction line, three miles south. The correction line divides the prairies into smaller parcels for settlement. Deborah Keahey in *Making Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* explains that "the correction line and the physicist's relativity both

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Kroetsch. "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues." *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. Toronto: Oxford University Press. 1989. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kroetsch. "Unhiding the Hidden". *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kroetsch. *Seed Catalogue. An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*. Russell Brown, Donna Bennett, Nathalie Cooke. eds. Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1990. 464. All the other quotations from the poem are given in parenthesis (SC).

function wonderfully as metaphors for the fundamental instability of our notions of place, of the way we impose various and changeable perceptual grids on space."<sup>6</sup> Or, in other words, we all impose our own views when defining space and place which sometimes could not be the true reflection of its authenticity. In a similar vein, Kroetsch says:

On the prairies the small town and the farm are not merely places, they are remembered places. When they were the actuality of our lives we had realistic fiction, and we had almost no poetry at all. Now in this dream condition, as dream-time fuses into the kind of narrative we call myth, we change the nature of the novel. And we start, with a new terrible, energy, to write the poems of the imagined real place.<sup>7</sup>

The place and the poem seem to be synonyms. We construct place through words, language, poems imposing our own perceptions upon it. In *Seed Catalogue* it is said:

This is the prairie road.  
The road is the shortest distance  
Between nowhere and nowhere.  
The road is a poem. (SC)

The way the correction line divides space into home places, the poet, the writer, or Rudy Wiebe, whom Kroetsch uses as an example, "breaks up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, builds a giant artifact. No song can do that ..." (SC 460) Kroetsch here refers to Rudy Wiebe's remark that fiction, as a mode of literature, is most appropriate to prairie space. However, Kroetsch argues for poetry as a more powerful mode of rendering prairie space. In that sense, *Seed Catalogue* is fighting to come into existence as a poem of prairie space.

Kroetsch relates the problem of language and authenticity to the Canadian 'colonial mentality' and its effect on the writer: "Just as there was in the Latin word a concealed Greek experience, so there is in the Canadian word a concealed experience, sometimes British, sometimes American."<sup>8</sup> According to Heidegger, the essence of things changes with time. Things for the Greeks had a rootedness that made their experience of the world authentic. After that, things have been experienced by people in the West inauthentically. This happens when things have no solidity or rootedness in language. Kroetsch proposes that, in order to find 'the hidden truth', to get to the essence and authenticity of things, one has to discard the layers of inherited meanings. The way to do that seems to be destruction, especially the destruction of place as Kroetsch points in his essay "Unhiding the Hidden" discussing the novel *Surfacing* and the 'clearing of space' when the main heroine burns her faked illustrations in a northern cottage. A similar clearing of space, the burning down of the Heisler hotel, occurs in the poem:

The Heisler Hotel  
Burned down on the night of June 21, 1919. Everything  
In between lost. Everything: an absence.  
  
of Satin sheets  
of embroidered pillow cases

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Keahey. *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature*. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1998. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kroetsch. "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues." *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Kroetsch. "Unhiding the Hidden." *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. 58.

of tea towels and English china  
of silver serving spoons.

*How do you grow a prairie town? (SC)*

The burning down of the Heisler hotel, "of satin sheets, embroidered pillow cases, English china", etc. is the burning down of old world gentility, "of things that spoke a language of things that was alien to the country to which they had come."<sup>9</sup> The most paradoxical of all destructions, "clearing of spaces", in the poem happens when Kenneth McDonald releases a cargo of bombs over Cologne in his ancestral homeland in 1943.

Obviously, the poem is concerned with the unfamiliar languages that are inherited and with the need to clear a space in order to perceive and free ourselves from them. The inherited words carry with themselves the whole value systems, ideologies. The poem opens with the following quotation:

No. 176 - *Copenhagen Market Cabbage*: 'This new introduction, strictly speaking, is in every respect a *thoroughbred*, a *cabbage of highest pedigree*, and is creating considerable *flurry* among professional gardeners all over the world.' (SC 452)

In words such as "thoroughbred", "pedigree", and even "professional" lie whole value systems. Not only do these words, as well as the words "satin sheets, embroidered pillow cases, English china", etc. cover over our authentic being with ideologies but they are also irrelevant for our experience of place in the prairie. It is the destruction, the burning in this case, that frees us into authenticity and provides us with a liberating absence.

However, Kroetsch does not stop at the point of destruction. In the vein of the Heideggerian philosophy, which he advocates, he is also interested in the process of rebuilding, reconstructing, creating. After asking a question: "How do you grow a prairie town?", he gives an answer "The gopher was the model." (SC 457) In other words, the original model is to be found on the prairie and not anywhere else. Then the poet gives the whole list of absences on the prairie: Lord Nelson, Sartre and Heidegger, the Parthenon, Aeneas, the Rhine, the Danube, the Thames, psychiatrists, sailing ships, pyramids, etc. The list represents the whole cultural history of Europe in short which is ill adapted to the life and the landscape of prairie. This list of absences in the poem is given a greater presence and truth because, according to Heidegger, as quoted by Douglas Reimer, "the thinking subject most authentically experiences the presence of specific things if they are absent."<sup>10</sup> However, the poem does not leave us without a solution. The poet asks once again: *How do you grow a prairie town?* and answers "rebuild the hotel when it burns down." (SC 458) The old hotel is replaced by a new one, new seeds of life are planted. The planting of vegetables and new seeds of life is followed by associations to poetry and the crucial question: "How do you grow a poet?"

The authentic material that a good poet of *Seed Catalogue* uncovers on the prairies appear to be best represented by its authentic oral voices: Pete Knight, the prairie poet, the king of all cowboys, who sings with the appropriated British accent, who starts cultivating the Canadian cultural garden. The questions about how to grow things on the prairie - how do you grow a lover? how do you grow a gardener? how do you grow a past? - are seeds in the ground of prairie stillness. Thus with the poet in the process of becoming, the prairie presence and culture emerge into life as opposed to high European culture.

<sup>9</sup> Russell Brown. "Seeds and Stones: Unhiding in Kroetsch's Poetry." *Open Letter* 5 8:9 (Summer-Fall 1984): 158.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Reimer. "Heideggerian Elements in *Seed Catalogue*." *Open Letter* 9 5-6 (Spring-Summer 1996): 55.

The prairie comes into being by way of poetry and poems about its authentic representatives: besides Pete Knight, the prairie reality is represented by eternal and indestructible brome grass, by various prairie folk's home remedies for both the body and the spirit:

For appetite: cod-liver  
oil.  
For bronchitis: mustard  
plasters.  
For pallor and failure to fill  
the woodbox: sulphur  
& molasses.  
For self-abuse: ten Our  
Fathers & ten Hail Marys.  
For regular bowels: Sunny Boy  
Cereal. (SC 459)

The prairie place is rewritten and the prairie world blossoms, grows, emerges in the poem, becomes uncreated into a new home which doesn't reflect European culture any more but the original prairie reality.

By claiming that "it is in culture that we can seek out the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases *belonging to* or in a place, being *at home in a place*,"<sup>11</sup> Edward Said allows for the creation of "home" in different places. In a similar way, John Berger argues:

To the underprivileged, home is represented, not by a house, but by a practice or set of practices. Everyone has his own. These practices, chosen and not imposed, offer in their repetition, transient as they may be in themselves, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging. Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived.<sup>12</sup>

Kroetsch asks in his essay "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues": "How do you write in a new country?"<sup>13</sup> He emphasizes the need to find new names for the prairie landscape because the inherited literature and culture of European past and eastern North America is the culture of people who have not lived on the prairies. The impulse to rewrite place again and find a new sense of belonging, home, is inherent in Kroetsch's phrase that he discusses in the same essay - a local pride. A local pride comes from an awareness of the authenticity of our own lives and experience. It enables us to create our own culture by "lifting an environment to expression."<sup>14</sup>

An act of creation for Kroetsch is based on memory and oral tradition, on the act of storytelling. Thus he says: "We haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real."<sup>15</sup> The memory of the past moments, which could become a beginning when reordered, the rebirth of a sense of place which time has made uncertain, Kroetsch calls "the dream of origins."<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, the search for original place becomes the search for original voice. Most often, as in *Seed Catalogue*, the search for home becomes the recovery of authentic voice from constraining layers of false myth and speech:

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said. *The World, The Text and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983. 8.

<sup>12</sup> John Berger. *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*. New York: Vintage International. 1991. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Kroetsch. "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues." *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Kroetsch. *Creation*. Toronto: New Press, 1970. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Kroetsch. "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues." *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. 6.

Start: from an invocation  
invoke -

His muse is  
his muse/if  
memory is

and you have  
no memory then  
no meditation

no song (shit  
we're up against it) (SC 458-459)

These lines direct us to Kroetsch's belief that a true poem is a combination of memory and meditation.

The poem *Seed Catalogue* relates the poet, place, prairie and home, and authentic living. Only when redefined and rewritten, when its essence becomes known, the place could be turned into home. In *Stone Hammer Poem* the poet realizes that the land, the place, does not belong to anyone. We develop a sense of belonging to it by uncreating it and turning it into home. Kroetsch's exploration of uncreating and un hiding of the prairie place entails writing it again into existence. And he does that through poetry. The poem remains to be the only mark on the blank page, on the prairie. It may be redefined like place, it may be found again and made more comforting like home. In *Seed Catalogue* Kroetsch says:

As for the poet himself  
we can find no record  
of his having traversed  
the land/in either direction

no trace of his coming  
or going/only a scarred  
page, a spoor of wording  
a reduction to mere black

and white/ a pile of rabbit  
turds that tells us  
all spring long  
where the track was

poet ... say uncle. (SC 460)

And the "spoor of wording" can help us find the right track when we are in unknown surroundings.

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## **PONOVRNO ISPISIVANJE MESTA, STVARANJE DOMA: SEED CATALOGUE ROBERTA KROUČA**

**Tanja Cvetković**

*Rad se bavi načinom na koji Robert Krouč iznova stvara svoje rodno mesto Albertu i Kanadu u svojim esejima i poeziji, posebno u svojoj pesmi Seed Catalogue. On insistira na potrebi da se razimenuje mesto, da se oslobodi nasleđenih slojeva značenja, i da se ono ponovo ispiše reflektovanjem i upisivanjem novih značenja koja će biti kanadska. Kroz pesnikovo „sećanje na kolonijalizam“, pesma predstavlja istoriju evropske kolonizacije prerije i problematizuje njen status "domovine". Kroučova ideja "sna o poreklu" i njegova želja da locira poreklo mesta i da stvori dom kroz jezik potiču od njegovog dubokog osećaja dislokacije.*