Margaret Atwood’s Alternative Spaces: “Wilderness Tips” and “Death by Landscape”

Post-colonial writing abounds with spatial images and references such as maps and boundaries, displacement and homecoming. Colonial and post-colonial geographies have been referred to as politicised and ideologised, violent and erasing, restrictive and exclusionary, imaginative, overlapping and discrete. Bearing in mind Edward Said’s famous proposition in *Orientalism*, that “geography is produced out of the relationships between people” (Said, 273), it can be argued that space and place are also involved in colonial interactions and undergo various changes due to them.

The white settler country, such as the USA, Canada and Australia, represents an example of a great spatial transformation, because it is formed out of the encounters between distinct peoples, cultures and mentalities, which result in the technologically less advanced indigenous people of the newly settled territories relatively quickly becoming a minority. Furthermore, the process involves the erasure both of the indigenous spatial structure and their foundation story, as well as the superimposition of the *tabula rasa* rhetoric, which “cleans up” the territory for colonial expansion and justifies the settlement. This inevitably entails a neat spatial positioning of the dominant white and the inferiorized Native so that overlapping could be avoided. Consequently, the rigid division between the civilized urban and the wild emerges, and, eventually, between the city and the reserve. Resulting from the colonial appropriation of the indigenous territories of a country such as Canada-to-be, this division has persistently pervaded both (settler) white and indigenous writing ever since.

The postcolonial “project” for the Native people has quite expectedly been to dismantle ideologically loaded colonial representations of the settler space as a *tabula rasa* by providing it with (pre)history, with a story that reaches before the time of colonization. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins similarly state in their thematic survey of post-colonial drama that:
Both settler and indigenous playwrights engage, albeit often in quite different ways, with the spatial aspects of imperialism. In many cases, dramatized images of the landscape reveal how space has been constructed by imperial history and, concomitantly, how it might be deconstructed and reorganized according to the imperatives of various colonized groups (Gilbert et al., 145).

This juxtaposition between the imperial construction of space and its indigenous reconstruction speaks of an inevitable collision between two alternative versions of the foundational story of a colonial space, especially when this issue is taken up by Native writers. Mieke Bål, with reference to postcolonial discourse, similarly speaks of undoing colonial foundations:

[…] going back to a time when the space was a different kind of place is a way of countering the effects of the colonizing acts of focalization that can be called ‘mapping’. Mastering, looking from above, dividing up and controlling is an approach to space that ignores time as well as the density of space’s lived-in quality. In contrast to such ways of seeing space, providing a landscape with a history is a way of spatializing memory that undoes the later killing of the space (Bål, 48).

The urge of white Canadians of “settler origin” is understandably different. It is them who originally created this particular representation of the wilderness as a binary opposite to urbanity, and endowed it with the characteristics of immense power and monstrosity as well as the potential to engulf and evoke awe. This representation, vivid examples of which are provided by the canonical Group of Seven or even Emily Carr’s paintings, has haunted white Canadian art and literature for a long time and was – or indeed has been – a way of asserting a distinct nationhood, based on the possession of a unique “representational space” and also a specific “representation” of it (Lefebvre, 38-39). While the homogenous, regular and abstract North American urban grid, a result of the colonial mastery of space¹, repeats its pattern almost all over the continent, it is the wilderness that has offered Canada a unique story and a source of imagery, distinct from both Great Britain and the USA.

¹ E.g. consider what Northrop Frye says of Canada’s urbanity: “there is little adaptation to nature: in both architecture and arrangement, Canadian cities and villages express an arrogant abstraction, the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it” (Frye, 224).
Equally canonical Margaret Atwood’s own fascination with the distinction between the two alternatives, the urban(e) and the wild, is also pervasive, as evident both from her early writing and much later work. For instance, in *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) as well as in the famous *Surfacing* (1972), or theoretical *Survival* (1972), she elaborates upon the overwhelming, the monstrous and the awesome in the wilderness, as well as the “exotic”, epitomized in the image of the Indian. It is to the wilderness that a contemporary city person of these texts comes and it is there that his/her transformation occurs. A similar motif recurs in Atwood’s much more recent collection of short stories, *Wilderness Tips* of 1992, where, for example, in the title story as well as in “Death by Landscape”, we encounter urban dwellers on a regular holiday detour to the wilderness: “up north”, in a family lodge (“Wilderness Tips”) or a summer camp for children (“Death by Landscape”).

“Wilderness Tips” tells the reader of a day in Wacousta lodge, a cottage in the wilderness that belongs to a white Torontonian family, consisting of three sisters, Pamela, Prue and Portia, brother Roland, as well as youngest Portia’s husband George, a Hungarian immigrant, and because of this, a contemporary settler of sorts. Having left the city for a weekend, the family members play out their pent up tensions and frustrations, caused by complicated relationships within the family. “Death by Landscape” is the story of an aged woman, Louis, who, having isolated herself in a Toronto condominium, watches her collection of the Group of Seven paintings and remembers a childhood canoe expedition, while in a summer camp in the wilderness, during which she lost her best friend, Lucy.

In both short stories, there is a clearly established distinction between the two “alternative” spaces: one (the city) for school, business, and relationships, that is, “real life”, another (the wilderness) for holiday, an escape. However, unlike in a traditional border narrative, the crossing of the boundary between the two spaces is not a venture into the alien unknown. By contrast, border-crossing seems to be an all too familiar process, something that has been repeated over years, with always the same place as the destination. For instance, as the protagonist of “Death by Landscape” says, “girls her age whose parents could afford it were routinely packed off to such camps, which bore a generic resemblance to one another” (Atwood 1992a, 103). In this context, instead of an awesome and overpowering space, the wilderness...
basically becomes a site of regression. This is marked, for instance, by the characters’ relapse to such inurbane unindustrial pseudo natural activities as chopping wood, paddling a canoe or making pottery and clothes. Similarly, their resistance to motor boats, which epitomize technology, speaks of the same regression. Prue says: “‘I think all those motorboat people should be taken out and shot dead. At least the ones that go too fast.’ Prue herself drives like a maniac, but only on land” (Atwood 1992b, 197-198).

Thus, the awesome, unpredictable wilderness can also be a space of passivity and fixity, where any uncontrolled movement and intervention is forbidden. The absence of movement inevitably implies the absence of change. Consequently, as such, the wilderness becomes a space of stasis and stagnation as well. Indeed, as Lois in “Death by Landscape” says of the children camps, “she knows such camps still exist. […] they are one of few things that haven’t changed much” (Atwood 1992a, 104). Or, as George’s outsider eye in “Wilderness Tips” sees it, this is a space where any development is halted:

Prue, who in the city is the first with trends – the first white kitchen, the first set of giant shoulder pads, the first leather pants suit have been hers over the years – is here as resistant to change as the rest of them. She wants everything on this peninsula to stay exactly the way it always has been. And it does, though with a gradual decline into shabbiness (Atwood 1992b, 197).

This impression is furthermore strengthened in the same short story with the help of the image of the stuffed birds that decorate the lodge: “‘They are hermetically sealed,’ says Prue. ‘You know: nothing goes in, nothing comes out. Like nuns’” (Atwood 1992b, 197). With this image, however, fixity acquires another dimension – that of the imposed order and the impossibility of change. The glass border over the birds is invisible, but nevertheless persistent and controlling. What it controls is a displaced fragment of wilderness, epitomized in the image of a stuffed wild bird (a duck, a loon, a grouse). This is the wilderness turned into an attraction to which one knows the route, a safe place with a regular and familiar set of rules: a camp, a summer lodge.

As such, familiarised, tamed, made habitable, in short, appropriated by the white settler-intruder, the wild and unpredictable – live – element transforms into an ordinary place in Michel de Certeau’s proposed sense, which sees a place precisely as a form of imposed order:
A place (lieu) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the “proper” rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability (De Certeau, 117).

Within such a place, space can “occur” only if any sort of action is allowed, that is, any sort of intersection – relationship – among the otherwise rigidly arranged elements (De Certeau, 117, 126). In other words, what would call the immobile place to life and make it “occur” is practice – action and movement, the rejection of the pervasive stagnation (De Certeau, 117). Unpractised, it remains an arranged system, a map, a picture as well as a set of rules that are taken for granted. However, any creative – or destructive for that matter – movement is arrested in Atwood’s short stories. The characters undertake no action whatsoever, but, instead, adjust to the orderly arrangement in the ways they consider fit and convenient. Thus, for instance, the children in “Death by Landscape” are assigned names of various wild animals and, when embarking on a canoe trip, get their faces painted to resemble Native people. In other words, they (are) put on masks to adapt to the space of the wild, which is popularly still considered both animalistic and also “Indian.” Similarly, George in “Wilderness Tips” “sometimes thinks Roland can change color slightly to blend in with his backgrounds; unlike George himself, who is doomed to stand out”, almost irrespective of the rules that govern this place (Atwood 1992b, 196).

3 Space as relational has been discussed in much detail by e.g. human geographers and social theorists. Many of them are strongly influenced by Henri Lefebvre’s influential analysis of social space, which he conceptualises as a set of relations among things and “everything that there is in space, everything that is produced either by nature or by society, either through their co-operation or through their conflicts. Everything: living beings, things, objects, works, signs and symbols” (Lefebvre, 101). Taking up a similar line of argument, theorists of human geography, for instance, Doreen Massey propose to consider space as taking the form of the “simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations at all geographical scales” (Massey, 168). Place in this context refers to a specific use of a segment of space (Lefebvre 11-2, 16) and a particular unique configuration of social interrelations and interactions at various levels within a given location (Massey 168-71). As such, similarly to de Certeau’s definition, Lefebvrean place also implies a certain degree of order.

---

Margaret Atwood’s Alternative Spaces: “Wilderness Tips” and “Death by Landscape”
Actually, it is precisely George, as an outsider – he is a Hungarian immigrant – and thus a successful invader-settler himself (seen exactly in this way by Roland, the masculine protector-figure), who is eventually the only one to resist the neat arrangement – order – of this place and to break its rules. Earlier, he has continuously refused to make love to his sister-in-law and lover Prue in this particular place, thus helping her unsettle the order:

She wanted him to make his usual rakish, violent, outlandish brand of love to her on the reindeer moss and pine needles; she wanted to break some family taboo. Sacrilege was what she had in mind: that was as clear to him as if he’d read it. But George already had his plan of attack worked out, so he put her off. He didn’t want to desecrate Wacousta Lodge; he wanted to marry it (Atwood 1992b, 199).

George recognizes the particularity of the spatial order of Wacousta Lodge and realizes that he needs to subject himself to its rules. However, in the short story, he, having just reiterated to himself that here “he will perform no violations”, (Atwood 1992b, 193), George nevertheless disturbs the stagnation of the place by seducing the eldest sister, prude and dignified Pamela, who after the death of their mother has incarnated stability and the order itself. In this, Atwood plays with the ambivalent settler-invader or else, creator-destructor, rhetoric: apart from the alien invader George, the only other character capable of evoking change and development in the family was the great-grandfather. It was him who built the arrogant massive lodge in the middle of the wilderness, thus appropriating and transforming it, and it is he whose gaze from a portrait on a wall still controls the place that he himself created. It is only him who had the power to transform the wilderness – or transform at all. After him, everything here has been (preserved) the same. None of his progeny has equalled him in this transformative power. Prue has failed in her desire to desecrate the place; other sisters do not even think of anything similar and only keep following the usual rituals. Their brother Roland openly admits his failure:

He knows he is not a success, not by his great-grandfather’s standards. The old man sneers at him every morning from that rosewood frame in the washroom, while he is shaving. They both know the same thing: if Roland were a success he’d be out pillaging, not counting the beans. He’d have some gray, inoffensive, discontented man counting the beans for him. A regiment of them. A regiment of men like himself (Atwood1992b, 205-206).
Margaret Atwood’s Alternative Spaces: “Wilderness Tips” and “Death by Landscape”

The one who does have such a regiment is George with his “unorthodox business practices” (Atwood 1992b, 194). Having come to Canada as a refugee from Hungary in the late 1960s, he has basically appropriated as much as he wanted:

He’d made his money quickly, and then he’d made more. It had been much easier than he’d thought; it had been like spearing fish by lamplight. These people were lax and trusting, and easily embarrassed by a hint of their own intolerance or lack of hospitality to strangers. They weren’t ready for him. He’d been as happy as a missionary among the Hawaiians. […] Seize the moral ground, then grab what you can get (Atwood 1992b, 201).

The parallel with missionaries and Hawaiians makes clear the colonial implications that George’s persona bears. He has “invaded” a territory and established his own (“unorthodox” business) rules. Likewise, he has intruded into Wacousta Lodge and taken over: having seduced mother-figure Pamela right there, he has seduced and disturbed the order of the place itself. Nothing will ever be the same and this is precisely what drives his otherwise patient and tolerant wife Portia to suicide – in the lake of Wacousta Lodge.

Similarly, in “Death by Landscape,” the children in the summer camp are also controlled by the rules and order of that particular place. Moreover, this applies not only to the territory of the camp, but also to the route that the girls take on their canoe trip “into the wilderness”:

“You go on big water,” says Cappie. This is her idea – all their ideas – of how Indians talk. “You go where no man has ever trod. You go many moons.” This is not true. They are only going for a week, not many moons. The canoe root is clearly marked, they have gone over it on a map, and there are prepared campsites with names which are used year after year. But when Cappie says this – and despite the way Lucy rolls up her eyes – Lois can feel the water stretching out, with the shores twisting away on either side, immense and a little frightening (Atwood 1992a, 110).

The route that is mapped and studied – as well as used – beforehand still pertains to the same appropriated and thus safe fragment of the wilderness. Despite the “Indian” masks that the girls put on, they are still within their familiar white spatiality on that canoe trip. However, the moment the
protagonist’s best friend Lucy, also an outsider from the USA, turns from a pre-trodden path in the wilderness, where the group has stopped for a night, she disappears without a trace and is never found. Its reputation (as a secure place) is lost, this incident eventually destroys the whole camp.

Thus it is indeed as if the only place that poses no threat to the dominant white-settler identity is one “under” an invisible glass jar, the place, which is mastered and appropriated. Even the Group of Seven landscape paintings that the protagonist Lois has in her apartment cannot fully capture, frame and control it:

Because there aren’t any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense, with a gentle hill, a curving river, a cottage, a mountain in the background, a golden evening sky. Instead there’s a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock. No matter how far back in you go, there will be more. And the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour (Atwood 1992a, 121).

The rest of the wilderness is still an untamed and live space with its own spatial practices and set of rules, totally irreverent of pseudo-adaptive masks and strategies. This is a space that escapes the newcomer’s grasp and comprehension, and as such can not be labelled or described in familiar terms: “there aren’t any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense,” says the protagonist. In other words, this is a space that is untranslatable. To make sense of it, one has to subjugate it (or part of it) with a new spatial order, that is, to impose a new set of rules. This would allow the wilderness to become an extension of the urban spatial order – in the same way that the settler colony itself emerged as an extension of the Empire, when settlers “transplanted” a familiar spatiality in a new territory, irrespective of the indigenous one. To conclude, as late as in the 1990s, the division between the two spaces, the urban(e) and the wild is still persistent even in white Canadian writing, as exemplified by Margaret Atwood’s work. This representation of the wilderness as alien, ungraspable and incomprehensible allows for further “exoticising” of it, and as such it continues to perform the role of both an exciting alternative to the every day’s safe urbanity and as an incessant source of national imagery.
Margaret Atwood's Alternative Spaces:
“Wilderness Tips” and “Death by Landscape”

Works Cited


