Ontological Instabilities and Spatial Transgressions in Jack Hodgins's *The Invention of the World* (1977) and Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* (1978)

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Abstract: Jack Hodgins's The Invention of the World (1977) explores the extra-ordinary history of Vancouver Island in a complex story that includes transhistorical and transcultural elements, as well as biblical and mythological allusions. A milestone in the history of Canadian literature, What the Crow Said (1978) is one of Robert Kroetsch's most cryptic and challenging stories. The novel has been hailed as a postmodern reimagining of prairie life, full of literary references, transgressions, and ironies. More specifically, both narratives reconstruct two crucial places in the Canadian context—the prairie and the island. Furthermore, The Invention of the World and What the Crow Said are relevant to a better understanding of how fictional texts innovated the art of novel writing in the twentieth century and the different strategies they employed to do so. Through close-reading of both novels, this article aims to analyse what Brian McHale describes as ontological instability in his seminal Postmodernist Fiction. The paper will also explore the various ways in which the two novels can be seen as complementary in terms of their narrative treatment of space. Both authors reimagine a quintessentially Canadian setting, ultimately reconfiguring our understanding of these spaces and challenging how we make sense of reality through storytelling.

Keywords: ontology, Canadian literature, space, postmodernism, prairie, island

Space, both literally and symbolically, has always been a significant thematic concern in Canadian literature. A land of dramatic and harsh natural beauty, Canada is reconstructed in literary texts both as a means to address issues of cultural identity and to signal a metafictional preoccupation with the act of writing. Jack Hodgins and Robert Kroetsch fictionalize two quintessential symbols of space in the Canadian context: the island and the prairie. These fictional

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reconstructions involve tapping into the mythical side of Canada, thus reconfiguring the understanding of space.

Robert T. Tally Jr. considers fantastic literature "useful for thinking about the real spaces of the world" (147). By the inclusion of apparently fantastic elements these authors weave "together a world that is both strangely familiar and utterly novel [. . .] to create a world that is also our own world" (Tally 150). Indeed, literature that uses fantastic topoi is useful for exploring real spaces in a new light. As valuable tools for reconfiguring real topographies, such fictional texts are relevant for shaping the reader's perception of existing places.

Jack Hodgins and Robert Kroetsch move away from conventional writing practices and create fictional spaces that rework spatial tropes and embrace what Brian McHale calls "ontological instability" (McHale 102) or Gomel "a *flickering* topology" (62) in which "two or more epistemic frameworks are superimposed upon a single textual space, resulting in ontological indecipherability" (Gomel 62). In other words, the ontological dimension entails the coexistence of paradoxical ontological levels within the diegesis in both *The Invention of the World* and *What the Crow Said* and the amalgam of the fantastic elements invading the fictional space leads to a double-coded ontological geography. To further complicate matters, including references from the actual world muddies the already complex ontological structure. This ontological indeterminacy extends beyond its relevance for the understanding of textual worldbuilding, it is also linked to metafiction and the subversion of realist convention.

The ontological indeterminacy of Jack Hodgins' fiction is evident, especially in *The Invention of the World* (1977). The novel explores the extra-ordinary history of Vancouver Island in a complex story that includes transhistorical and transcultural elements, as well as biblical and mythological allusions. The norms governing the world of *The Invention of the World* are rooted in the accepted rules from the actual world, and Hodgins masterfully transgresses these norms by including seemingly fantastic historical facts, so the text becomes a medium for exploring not only island life but also raising ontological and metafictional issues.

The novel "mythologizes and de-mythologizes, illuminates and probes, the sometimes beautiful and sometimes threatening landscapes or seascapes of his favourite setting, his native region" (Struthers 68). His text constructs an alternative space that offers his readers a glimpse into what it feels like to live on an island. As New explains,

Just as his work does not define a region, region does not define his

> work. Setting is important in his stories, but as *setting* and as *metaphor*, not as the main subject; his aim in writing is not to record what it looks like to live in a place, but what it feels like. The emphasis shifts from the place to the people whose lives are partly shaped by place (12).

Hodgins shows "an impressive ability to convey a sense of place—that Island which is both a vivid geographical place and an island of the spirit" (Laurence 26). The island is modelled on an existing place; similarly, Vancouver Island is taken out of this world's geography and transposed into fiction as Hodgins sees it: eccentric and miraculous. In other words, Hodgins' version of Vancouver Island projects the island as a place of apparent paradoxes - miraculous and ordinary at the same time. The geographical space is subordinated to the imagination and the island becomes what McHale calls "a playground for ontological improvisation" (54).

In spatial terms, the island is a marginal setting that exists on the fringes of society—both geographically and culturally—imagined as "the place of possibility" (Hutcheon 3). In *A Passion for Narrative*, Hodgins explains how "As a fiction writer, you are obliged to pay attention to place, I think, and to its effect upon its inhabitants, and to the metaphors it offers" (76). Hodgins "makes a microcosm from the local world and so translates it to the world at large" (Jeffrey 27). Thus, he shows new ways of understanding the island life and also shines a light on the meanings and realities hiding behind the ordinary. This is explicitly referenced in the novel: "Though the world looked nearly the same as it had before the mist, there was a sense that all of it was a fiction, an imitation world that hid a multitude of unsuspected unfamiliar things" (107).

Vancouver Island is rooted in objective geographical reality, but Hodgins looks beyond the visible and attempts to dig deeper into the collective psyche of the island. He urges us to rethink geographical space and by extension, the space his own readers inhabit. Through the process of fictionalizing, Vancouver Island is a reminder of the possibilities that marginal places can open up. At the same time, the spatial setting of the novel can be described as heterotopic. Foucault coined the term to refer to physical spaces such as ships, cemeteries, or asylums, which, unlike utopias, are "sites of crisis or of deviation within the social order" which "stimulate fundamental re-ordering" (Dennis 169). Starting form Bertrand Westphal's ideas, Dennis interprets Foucauldian heterotopias "a crossing that enables exploration and experimentation" (171).

The island is a heterotopia *par excellence,* a microcosm situated

at the fringes of civilization, populated by eccentrics and loners pushed to the margins of the socio-cultural space. Not coincidentally, the island is depicted as a space that cannot be determined in cartographic terms: "As if any man could draw proper lines on this ungovernable landscape" (221) or "Even the island itself was that way (…) defying geometry. Straight lines looked ridiculous here" (227). It is a space which prompts for imaginative improvisations and ontological plays. Maps cannot contain such a fluid terrain, so the island stays a place of mystery: "This blasted island is enough to drive you bats (…) Every time you turn a corner there's some place else you never heard of before" (18).

From a narratological perspective, Vancouver Island is the site for metafictional experimentation that seemingly does not obey real-world logic. Hodgins embeds a postmodern scepticism towards mimetic representations and opts instead to sketch the Canadian space as a multifaceted symbol. Hodgins weaves myths, local legends, tall tales, tape recordings, newspaper fragments, testimonies, and gossip into the fabric of the novel to explore the carnivalesque world of Vancouver Island and its eccentric inhabitants. The novel incorporates this search for historical truth to better understand the past. Becker, one of the characters, embodies this epistemological quest. He is obsessed with controlling history by collecting scraps and newspaper clippings, cassette tapes to find the tale that "exists somewhere at the centre of his gathered hoard, in the confusion of tales and lies and protests and legends and exaggerations" (xi), suggestive of the postmodern interest in reconstructing the past. At the same time, it reflects the idea that the island is governed by the made-up rules of its people, suggesting the impossibility of containment by official records or authorities: "Island people think they can make their own rules" (227).

Reminiscent of the Bakhtinian polyphony as a narrative strategy, using a polyphonic approach becomes a driving force behind the story and a vehicle to recreate Vancouver Island's history. Hodgins' reinvention of the island through fiction and the inclusion of different accounts on the history of the island can also be interpreted as reflective of the postmodern preference for "contingency, multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity" (Hutcheon 19) that would grant ampler freedom of expression to the novel. Hodgins seems to imply that crackpot voices and other versions of history are superior to official records, so, in a sense, these accounts are closer to historical truths that any documented and rationalized version.

History "always remains grounded in the real world of known

and familiar space" (Slemon 412), but Hodgins defamiliarizes these spaces by mythologizing historical facts and presenting reality as miraculous. Displacing myths and legends are "vehicles for insinuating the supernatural or paranormal into 'normal' reality" (McHale 174), and a means to look beneath the surface. At the same time, Hodgins insists that as hard as one might try, there is no plausible way to reconstruct the past: Julius Champney from the novel comments on such a feat while also hinting at the colonial past of Vancouver Island: "You can't pretend there is any history on this island, this is still the frontier" (54). Or, "The best he [Becker] can dig up will be little more than gossip. You can't turn that into history, no matter how hard you try. Not in a place like this. You are inheritors of a failed paradise" (54). The spatial setting is a canvas of failed dreams and utopias, the point that links the past and present, onto which the writer projects fragments from the past and snippets from the present.

The integration of the mythical past into the present moment serves as a means "to reconcile the factual history and the exaggerated legend of one Donal Keneally, founder of the (fictional) Revelations Colony of Truth on Vancouver Island" (Hutcheon 56). As Becker from the novel observes, "Myth (...) like all the past, real or imaginary, must be acknowledged" (314). This process of acknowledging the mythical past is most aptly embodied in the figure of Donal Keneally. Donal Keneally, "fathered by a black bull from the sky" (x), is an apparent incarnation of myth with magical powers, but soon turns into a source of parody:

> In case they doubted his ability to create this paradise, he continued to astonish them with more and more incredible acts of magic, causing demons to appear and disappear, voices of the dead to speak from the mouths of the living, logs to raise themselves and shift their position and lie down in new and more convenient places (117).

Donal impersonating the saviour is an essentially fantastic deed as he appears at the beginning of the story as a quasi-mythological hero. Through hyperbole and parody, Hodgins effectively constructs Donal as a paradoxical embodiment of the ontological hesitancy that the novel projects.

Themes of illusion and reality abound in the novel. Things are not always what they seem, Hodgins insists. One strategy that Hodgins frequently uses in the novel to suggest that reality is illusory or flickering is to create descriptive passages from an upper position. For instance, during his trip to Ireland, Wade notices how different the world seems below: "From here, the farm below seemed less than real,

the village a cluster of toy buildings" (311). Or the pilot's words on what he sees as the true reality also mirror the same idea: "It is a shock to me every day (...) when I walk on the streets or drive on the pavement I see only the lies and things that people have tried to put there, but when I get up here, in my plane, I see the real island. (...) That's what's real is, that's what true is, it can be hid but it can't be changed (323)

Wade's fort, an artificially created space which juxtaposes the replica with the idea of a real fort, is a key symbol for the illusion-reality conundrum. Wade's apparent contempt for the tourists' ignorance while visiting the place is another strategy to dwell on the real-unreal paradox:

> They came into the place looking as if there was a real treat in store for them, and went out again looking as if something had just been added to their lives. (...) It probably wouldn't even bother them to be told what they'd paid for was only a rough counterfeit of the real thing (156).

The fort also has a metafictional function, namely to be a metaphor for literature as a whole. As Struthers explains, Hodgins contributed immensely "the way we imagine and therefore see and finally comprehend the world of British Columbia" (67). This is especially relevant in the context of imagining or understanding literature as something that imitates the real thing and mirrors a replica version of what exists, which can be helpful for shaping the way we understand it. This idea is echoed in the novel and the text might suggest that invention can give as much insight into history as official records or validated data can:

> If you've offered it to them with love, if you're giving them this because it's a closest you can come to the real thing, and if the real thing is something you want them to have, then you're not really cheating them at all. They spend their lives being satisfied with reasonable facsimiles (160).

As seen, the text evokes a hybrid ontological landscape and is constructed on dichotomies such as past and present, myth and factuality, real and replica, history and story. In *The Invention of the World*, "the power of imagination and legend, of fiction and myth, confronted the stubborn tenacity of fact and document" (Hutcheon 216), and this confrontation results in a rich tapestry of contrasting elements and becomes a celebration of the *island* and island life. History as story and story as history appear as central pillars in the

exploration of the past and the quirky everyday realities of Vancouver Island.

A similar interest in ontological transgressions is embedded in the fiction of Robert Kroetsch. Dubbed "Mr. Canadian Postmodern" (Hutcheon 160), Kroetsch is one of the most idiosyncratic writers of twentieth-century Canada. His background in literary criticism lends his work a theoretical aspect which makes his literary texts even more challenging to decipher. His fiction is characterized by paradoxes and ambivalence (see Hutcheon, page 162), as well as a penchant for linguistic experimentation.

His preference for parody, fragmentariness, and discontinuity, as textual strategies, is deeply embedded in *What the Crow Said*. As Bertacco explains, "From the start, the reader is immersed in a world that is hybrid in that it blends reality and magic, and follows the natural and the supernatural world orders at one and the same time" (191). More precisely, the opening paragraphs detail the miraculous birth of Vera Lang's child, who later turns out to have singular speaking abilities and the power to predict the future. This fictional universe "describes a world run out of order where events border almost constantly on the super-natural, while its inhabitants try, nonetheless, to find meaning and establish cause and effect links for the various phenomena" (Bertacco 161). Paradoxically, it is a topsy-turvy world ordered by chaos in which nothing is what is appears to be, almost like an impossible world—or anti-world—that is constantly undermined by its governing laws.

Kroetsch masterfully estranges the Canadian space of the prairie by stretching and even erasing the boundaries between real and fantastic ordinary and extra-ordinary: "Realistic elements are still present, but they stretch toward the fantastic, the larger-than-real, blending the two dimensions with such natural ease that ends up underlying the improbability of what is being described" (Bertacco 163). The combination of real-life elements and the intrusion of the fantastic results in ontological strangeness and unpredictability. The reimagining "of a rural Alberta in mythic terms and out of an oral tradition of story-telling" (Edwards 192) has a twofold purpose: it functions as a metafictional tool while also deconstructing and reconstructing the familiar.

The hybrid or flickering ontology that *What the Crow Said* embeds reflects Kroetsch's "deep suspicion of all referential frames, myth, fictions, the sensory world" (Thomas 14-15) and becomes a narrative tool to canvass his distrust of fixing and stable frameworks. "Instead of realist fiction, Kroetsch finds for himself a form of magic

realism or pseudo-historic fantasy characterized by intertextuality, carnival scenes, linguistic and thematic playfulness expressly meant to unsettle the reader's expectations" (Bertacco 24). Kroetsch achieves such subversion of expectation by embracing ambiguity and chaos, as well as experimental storytelling strategies.

His preference for semantic plurality, logical fallacies, hallucinatory instances, mythical reenactments, and absurd twists are trademarks of his fiction and reflect his ardent desire to reinvent both the novel and the way reality is understood. He abandons conventions and slips into a narrative mode that is grounded in a juxtaposition of material reality and the wondrous, all on the same ontological level, complicated by absurd events. He also integrates references to myths, legends, and biblical episodes to challenge the writing process and the fictional representation of reality.

What the Crow Said is governed by ontological incongruities and anti-logical ideas, leaning towards a mode of narration that is both unreliable and paradoxical in essence. The novel is set in "an immensely vital and unmappable world" (Davey 155), yet the spatial setting is recognizably Canadian. More precisely, Kroetsch fictionalizes the small prairie town that is the locus of strange occurrences, such as Vera Lang's seduction and impregnation by bees, Martin Lang's frozen corpse haunts Big Indian, a mute boy talks to a crow and communicates through farting or Liebhaber remembers the future, a card game lasts for 151 days and the list could continue. To such bizarre, even miraculous, situations, the characters can only react in a typically playful, but inherently ironic, manner: "Mich O'Holleran, in violent reluctance to believe his own ears, stamped his missing foot. Andy Wolbeck, accidentally, twisted off one of his artificial toes" (132). This is symptomatic of the topsy-curvy ontology, governed by anti-logic and ambiguity.

Spatial symbols like the bees, the tower, the crow, or the snow, are visual markers of ontological instability. For instance, the tower becomes a metaphor for the men's search for coherence and logic. Or the crow, always voicing obscenities, expands the limits of linguistic expression while undermining it simultaneously. Even time becomes paradigmatic of the ontological instability and self-deception, as summarized in Isador Heck's ideas: "He had a lingering suspicion that time might be one thing that didn't exist; time might be an agent of self-deception, the means whereby man explains to himself his own ignorance of the existence of everything else" (Kroetsch 181). Seasons are also suspended in Big Indian. No wonder the characters appear astonished at what real-world normality is: "The simplest matter,

unexplainable: the innocence of a man who dressed in June clothing because it was June" (Kroetsch 16).

Another important symbol is the schmier game that lasts for 151 days. The game has a revelatory function: "They knew, those men, studying their cards (...), they knew there was no meaning anywhere in the world" (94). Soon the game turns into a grotesque carnival:

> They looked like a pack of scarecrows. (...) they farted, and their farts almost warmed them. Their assholes were bleeding from the combination of diarrhoea and prairie hay that was full of thistle and buckbrush. They tried once or twice to sing, but then Alphonse Martz cursed instead, pointing to a magpie that hopped off the road, away from a dead rabbit. The magpie began to follow the sleigh: it was joined by another magpie, then another (101).

This almost carnivalesque scene allows for play and renewal and gives the readers an insight into the prairie reality.

The opening sentence, "People, years later, blamed everything on the bees; it was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything (7), sets the tone for the whole novel and Vera becomes a symbol for Kroetsch's postmodernist poetics that entails paradoxes, ambiguities and anti-logic. As such, she is both divine and mortal, dead and alive, the beginning and the end. More than that, Vera is also the prairie—and by extension Canadian— variation on the biblical story of the immaculate conception and Leda's rape by Zeus in Greek mythology. In this context, Vera can only become an ambiguous and paradoxical representation of myth. She thus both mystifies and demystifies the story and is symptomatic of the double-coded symbolism that the novel embraces. Including mythical references is reflective of Kroetsch's distrust of coherent narratives and realistic fiction.

At the same time, all the characters are "exiles, outsiders, outrageously eccentric" (Hutcheon 175), and Kroetsch might be hinting at a specifically Canadian stereotype, namely, imagining Canada as the outsider, both geographically and culturally. They also embody the paradoxes that Kroetsch is so fond of, so they also serve a metafictional role within the novel. Kroetsch offers a distorted, yet distinctively Canadian, mirror of the small town, by creating heterotopic representations of it. In *Postmodernism and Experiment*, McHale explains that heterotopias act like "sites where fragments of worlds are arranged experimentally in assemblages" (McHale 146), so these in-between places are fundamentally ambiguous and ambivalent.

Similarly to the island, the spatial setting of the novel is

deliberately marginal: "The Municipality of Bigknife lay ambiguously on the border between the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan; no one, due to a surveyor's error, had ever been able to locate conclusively where the boundaries were supposed to be" (Kroetsch 36). Canada is repositioned as the land of the miraculous, a frontier place full of possibilities and wonder, a canvass on which the writer can project existential and metafictional conundrums. Kroetsch "offers a compound but deformed image of ordinary Alberta, or even of an ordinary small North American prairie town" (Bertacco 163) and uses transformational metaphors to establish a new site from the ruins of the existing one. At the same time, "The prairie world is depicted in phantasmagoric shapes, as a giant creature dozing, half sleeping and willing both to go on in that self-preserving condition and to be absorbed and assimilated into the world at large, where human experience turns into history, where identity and foreignness meet (Bertacco 163-164).

Nothing in the novel is ever fixed or fixable. Instead, Kroetsch opts for multiple and fluid frameworks, challenging his readers to rethink the deconstruction of binary modes of thinking, often pushing the boundaries of meaning. At the same time, readers become active participants in the narrative process by having to speculate about the hidden layers of meaning embedded in the text. Moreover, the different voices that proliferate in the novel suggest narrative unreliability, which further reinforces the need to decipher the text on a subjective level, which also means that the ideas will be different with each reading. A symbolic episode in the novel concerns a corpse that is recovered from the water and cut into four pieces to be pulled from the icy environment. Then, the others rearrange the body into a whole, but the result is grotesque and different, suggesting that any reconstruction leads to different outcomes and nothing stays the same. Suspending disbelief and embracing absurdity reflects the ludic side of the text, and, as "One thing is certain; to read *Crow* we must enter into its spirit of play and realize that it is possible to read without an end or message in mind" (Lecker 105).

Thus, Kroetsch's Big Indian is a site of revelation and a carnivalesque setting that allows for experimentation and renewal. It is a liminal site, located at the edge of Canada, that becomes a hybrid space both unfixed and liberating: Kroetsch uses this cartography to break free from the literary tradition and its conventionality. He not only challenges our understanding of the familiar but also reinvents how reality can be perceived. A chameleonic and non-conformist storyteller, Kroetsch writes a provocative novel built on paradox and

ambiguity, even on an ontological level. His blending of the mythic with the mundane offers a new way to project a flickering ontological landscape more radically than Hodgins does. Irony, hyperbole, and parody are some of the strategies Kroetsch uses to destabilize meaning and coherence while also problematizing the complicated relationship between fiction and reality in a chaotic and irrational setting, yet meaningful, environment.

Both Jack Hodgins and Robert Kroetsch create alternate spaces envisioned as ever-changing, fluid sites and the spatial metaphors are fundamental for laying bare the complex ontological ramifications of the fictionalizing process. Both novels mirror complex articulations of Canadian spaces—the island and the prairie—and both explore the myriad possibilities that marginal places open up, so, in this sense, they are complementary. Reading these texts offers a valuable insight into the ontological poetics of twentieth-century Canadian novel. More importantly, both master storytellers urge their readers to rethink the familiar and see the world with a renewed sense of wonder and awe.

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