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Abstract

Salman Rushdie’s little guidebook to The Wizard o f Oz contains some compelling observations about diasporic experience. Dorothy’s wistful longing for ‘somewhere over the rainbow’ testifies to ‘the human dream of leaving, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots’ (23). The Wizard o f Oz, Rushdie attests, exemplifies ‘a great tension between these two dreams’, but ultimately it ‘is unarguably a film about the joys of going away’. What the film — and the song — really attest to, however, is that, despite the power of the ruby slippers, there is, ultimately, ‘no place like home’ (57). In other words, the place we call home, in the final analysis, cannot offer the sought-for psychic comfort of familiarity and ‘homeliness’.

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CYNTHIA SUGARS

'There's No Place Like Home': The Unhomely Paradox of André Alexis's *Childhood*

> [H]ow to belong — not only in the legal and civic sense of carrying a Canadian passport, but also in another sense of feeling at 'home' and at ease. It is only in belonging that we will eventually become Canadian. (Philip 16)
>
> [I]f you are Canadian, home is a place that is not home to you — it is even less your home than the imperial centre you used to dream about.... Try to speak the words of your home and you will discover ... that you do not know them. (Lee 46–47)

Salman Rushdie's little guidebook to *The Wizard of Oz* contains some compelling observations about diasporic experience. Dorothy's wistful longing for 'somewhere over the rainbow' testifies to 'the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots' (23). *The Wizard of Oz,* Rushdie attests, exemplifies 'a great tension between these two dreams', but ultimately it 'is unarguably a film about the joys of going away'. What the film — and the song — really attest to, however, is that, despite the power of the ruby slippers, there is, ultimately, 'no place like home' (57). In other words, the place we call home, in the final analysis, cannot offer the sought-for psychic comfort of familiarity and 'homeliness'.

The engagement with questions of home and homeland has formed a central theme in postcolonial writings, especially those written from within a context of diaspora or exile, which in a sense is why Rushdie playfully attests that *Over the Rainbow* ought to be 'the anthem of all the world's migrants' (23). This is certainly true of what is being termed the new 'international' literatures in English, which Bruce King identifies as 'a literature of cosmopolitans ... rather than of ethnic immigrants with separatist cultures that are in conflict with their new homes' (19).[1] Certainly writers such as Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ondaatje, and others have been overtly identified in this way. However, if it is the case that the 'cosmopolitan' writer has no singular sense of 'home', or seeks a home only to find that it is not

quite 'like home' should be, the case of many diasporic contexts and writings complicates things substantially. While Victor Ramraj has argued that many diasporic writings are not expressing a means of re-establishing home, he does highlight the ways they articulate a combined attachment to the 'centrifugal homeland' as well as a 'yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode' (216). As a result, many of these accounts apply a non-paradoxical vision of resistance and reconciliation to the circumstance of displacement *from* home. As Smaro Kamboureli phrases it, diasporic characters 'inhabit a space where they are both displaced and at home in some way or another. Significantly, this ambivalent condition is not presented as paradoxical' (17).

While the expatriate and immigrant experience is one that invites urgent meditations on issues of home — and in some cases, as in M.G. Vassanji's *No New Land*, the ways in which '*Canada-as-home*' has become a site of social and psychic resistance (New 205) — it is also true that related dialogues occur on an intra-national (and intra-psychic) level in the location of the postcolonial state. As Arun Mukherjee notes, 'alienation from a national entity called "Canada"' is a common feature of Canadian racial minority and Aboriginal writings (70). This ambiguity of national emplacement is a key feature of those 'settler-invader' societies in which the divide between us and them, self and other, is never too easily discernible — or dismissable. Indeed, Rushdie's phrasing rings very closely with the accounts of Canada's status as a conflicted and ambivalent settler-invader colony, which in itself is not surprising, for the descriptions of the psychic experiences of diaspora echo those formulations of the transitional condition of settler-invader societies (compare Slemon, Brydon, and Lawson with, for example, Clifford, Kamboureli, and Hall).[2] Canada, in many of these writings, is figured as a kind of 'unhomely state', or, to use Julia Kristeva's phrasing, a 'paradoxical community' (195), a term which 'signifies the difficulty we have of living as an *other* and with others' (103), while at the same time underscoring 'the limits of nation-states and of the national political conscience that characterises them' (103). The paradoxical community thus highlights any number of possible configurations of unsettlement or uncanniness.

If the conflation of the paradoxical and the non-paradoxical appears confusing, it is because both terms have been used (sometimes interchangeably) in postcolonial and psychoanalytic discourse to highlight the inherent ambivalences and provisionalities of perceptual identity formations. If a paradox refers to a statement that is at once contradictory and true, the emphasis of the figure nonetheless remains on the contradiction, for it is this element which constitutes the figure's rhetorical effect. For incommensurate terms or perceptions to be non-paradoxical is to highlight the absence of contradiction as a point worthy of remark in itself.[3]

For Homi Bhabha, the notion of unhomely lives and/or texts suggests the centrality to postcolonial theory of a condition which is simultaneously paradoxical and non-paradoxical: living at the intersection of seemingly

incommensurate narratives of identity and belonging in a way which is not self-contradictory. The subjectivity which is grounded in this intersection is always provisional and partly indeterminate, but decidedly not aporetic. Emphasis on 'unhomeliness' is not about alienation — the strange as the familiar — but is an index of the extent to which the familiar is itself something which is always achieved out of a synthesis of the various contingencies which might in another framework have amounted to a sense of home. The non-paradoxical emphasises the synthesis rather than the disparity that is inherent in the idea of a paradox as a conjunction of seemingly dissimilar terms.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am interested in the notion of psychic/social domestic space as a site of 'uncanny strangeness', which Kristeva, following Freud, formulates as 'an immanence of the strange within the familiar' (183). It is the semantic ambiguity of the phrase, 'there's no place like home', which lends itself to treatment in much Canadian fiction, an inherent paradox which is perhaps a legacy of the nation's settler-invader-immigrant heritage which doesn't allow for easily reducible dichotomies between us-and-them, here-and-there. In this paper, I will focus on a particular postcolonial engagement with this phenomenon as it finds expression in André Alexis's 1998 novel *Childhood*, a text whose main character is neither of settler-invader ancestry nor a recent immigrant, but rather a second-generation Trinidadian Canadian for whom the idea of home has become an absurdity. Indeed, the novel is remarkable for its narrator's curious quest for 'no place like home'.

* * * * *

Childhood created something of a national and international stir when it first appeared in 1998. Although Alexis was a little-known writer at the time (he had previously published a collection of short stories in 1994 entitled *Despair and Other Stories of Ottawa* and was a frequent contributor to the *Globe and Mail* and *This Magazine*), he swiftly gained public acclaim. Not only had the international rights been sold before the book was published, but in Canada the book won the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award, tied with Alice Munro's *For the Love of a Good Woman* for the Ontario Trillium Award, and was nominated for the prestigious Giller Prize. Without doubt, as Leslie Sanders notes, the novel is '[t]he most celebrated work of fiction yet by an African Canadian' (171). And yet, *Childhood* has provoked a remarkably mixed response from a number of Canadian critics who fault the book for its failure to adequately address issues of race relations and black identity in a Canadian context (Hudson; Sanders; Walcott). While Judith Misrahi-Barak, conceptualising literary 'post-coloniality' in reductively mimetic terms, argues that 'Post-coloniality is hardly an issue' in *Childhood* (91), others have engaged with the undeniably postcolonial subtext which they believe the novel unsuccessfully seeks to repress. Of particular interest is the debate about 'national belonging' sparked by the book (Walcott 1999 62). If *Childhood* on one level articulates a (Caribbean) diasporic nostalgia

for an absent home, it is also seen to express a conformist desire to belong to the Canadian national status quo. In this sense, it has been accused of 'suggest[ing] a profound sense of ambivalence about the place and space of "race" in the present-day nation' (Sanders 173).

The mixed response to *Childhood* tells us something important about the text's ambivalent emplacement in the Canadian cultural context. If references to the characters' Trinidadian origins are relegated to footnotes in a tale more focussed on a deracialised account of abandonment and belonging in Canada, the work might also be seen to evoke the definitive non/paradox of the Canadian locale expressed by innumerable postmodern and postcolonial theorists on Canada.[4] As Alexis himself states, Canada is less a 'physical reality than [an] imagined possibility' (1995 20). For the (undoubtedly marginalised) black writer within (the already marginalised) Canada, the ambiguity of emplacement requires even greater imaginative will, which might suggest that rather than presenting a scene of complicit belonging to the national mainstream, the novel disallows any sense in which the condition of belonging is either an easily accomplished or superficially desirable state.[5]

Childhood thus delineates a resonant 'in-betweenness', for, like Kamboureli's observation about the films of Wim Wenders, it traces 'the possibilities of diaspora in a [work] that does not declare itself to be about ethnicity' (8). As Donna Bailey Nurse observes, 'Alexis is something of a rare bird: a black author who attempts to tackle issues like displacement and unbelonging without placing the major emphasis upon racism or race' (10). Alexis's exploration of diasporic/non-diasporic transitional space allows him to reinflect the condition of diaspora outside of the strict terminology of cultural/national identity and the estrangement of exile (and the nostalgia that accompanies it). With Bhabha, he 'captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home' (Bhabha 9), but not by delineating an experience of migration and dis/continuity. Instead, Alexis identifies this 'unhomeliness' of home as an existential condition located in one character's experience of the disjunctive present of Canadian domestic space. Yet, indirectly, through his protagonist Thomas MacMillan's meditations on home — and his sense of disconnection with his Trinidadian heritage — Alexis reveals the ways the 'recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions' (Bhabha 9), as well as the ways the social invades the psychic, and vice versa.

Alexis takes the notion of home as an unsettling or *unheimlich* place and turns it into the desired goal of his narrator, for Thomas, as he repeatedly attests, seeks a home that is 'no place like home' — or, to reformulate Bhabha's notion of national space, a home that is 'less than one' (97). Here, the concept of 'home' is explored as a seemingly paradoxical space which cannot be easily reconciled — a paradox, to use the words of object-relations psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, 'to be accepted and tolerated and respected', but not resolved (1991a xii). In other words, what Thomas articulates is the experience of home as a clearly *non-*

paradoxical space, a space which offers a potential for agency in the form of imaginative and cultural expression. In effect, what he must come to learn in the course of writing his memoir is that the 'home' he seeks exists in the very unhomeliness he feels around him. This constitutes a double movement between resistance and reconciliation, for the narrator neither mourns for a land left behind (he is born in Canada), nor does he seek a sense of coherent belonging (he avoids making attachments), but instead, like Dorothy, he fantasises about a non-paradoxical space whose allure resides in its very irresolvability. In this case, home exists as a place in which he can securely belong and not belong, a place which he is resistant and reconciled to at one and the same time. For the narrator, the 'unhomely' experience of 'home' is to him what is most familiar — hence he seeks a 'home' which will be recognisable by the subjective dislocation it evokes in him.

This experience of a home that is not a home corresponds very closely with Winnicott's conception of transitional spaces, which he defines as 'the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' (1991d 3). The transitional space functions as a 'third' area of experience (neither inner psychic reality nor external reality), a conceptual realm between illusion and reality, inside and outside (2). As a 'potential space' which coincides not only with a child's play activity but also an adult's imaginative and cultural experience, it enables the non-paradoxical acceptance of contradiction. In other words, it allows the retention of an ontological paradox, 'between me-extensions and the not-me' (1991b 100).

What this experience offers to the narrator is a potential very similar to that afforded many postcolonial writers — a generative space from which creative self-expression might emerge. This space lies somewhere between the inner life of psychic apperception and the pragmatic necessities of external reality, a hypothetical area between the two of these where, Winnicott insists, most living experiencing occurs (and out of which cultural expression emerges). However, it is also true that this 'potential space varies greatly from individual to individual' (1991c 110), and from one socio-experiential context to another, since '*it depends for its existence on living experiences*, not on inherited tendencies' (108). Which is to say that the postcolonial cannot be swept away in the guise of a universal agonistic condition. As Alexis observed in an interview with Branko Gorjup when asserting the necessity of 'alienation' to creativity: 'I couldn't write as I write now had I stayed in Trinidad' (1998 12). Hence it is significant that by the end of his narrative Thomas takes us to the point where he is finally able to assuage — but not resolve — his identificatory anguish by setting down (one version of) his personal memoir: 'I will have thousands of childhoods before time is done. But this one has its own necessity' (264).

* * * * *

Thomas Macmillan's displacement from a clear sense of home emerges from the vagaries of his unconventional upbringing. Having been abandoned by his mother at birth, and hence doubly displaced from home (see note 3), he has been left with his grandmother who, against her own inclinations, is left to raise the child in Petrolia, Ontario. This experience leaves Thomas grappling with an originary discontinuity or aporia at the core of his history, a gap in identity with which he struggles to come to terms throughout his life. Abandoned by his mother, who was in turn, apparently, abandoned by Thomas's father, he becomes a kind of paradigmatic existential *étranger*,[6] who because of his alienation from his diasporic ancestry, is unable to forge any clear sense of even alienated homelessness. How, after all, can you define yourself in terms of diasporic dis/continuity if you do not know what you are displaced from?[7]

His grandmother offers little illumination, for 'You couldn't always tell where you stood with her' (5). From the outset, Thomas's memories of her are mixed. On the one hand, it may be that she loves him; on the other, she regards him with hostility: 'She could have drowned me, poisoned me, left me in traffic, or fed me to wild dogs — all of which she threatened to do. Instead, in her own way, she sheltered me. (There is even, at the edge of memory, a memory of sleep in her arms; her sour smell, her dry white hair ...)' (11). That her 'sheltering' evokes a memory of a 'sour smell' testifies to the double-edged experience of warmth that becomes the vector of familiarity for Thomas from early on — to feel comforted is also to be enveloped in sour resentment. As he admits of his grandmother's response to him, 'The less she saw of me, the more tolerable I was' (12).

Nor does his grandmother offer him the solace of origins in the form of a cultural tradition, as is evident in her rejection of her own Trinidadian background. His grandmother, he tells us, had 'swept Trinidad from her life' (139), and has done this 'so thoroughly that I could not have guessed her origins were anything but Canadian' (29). Instead, Edna Macmillan has created an alternative home in the 'Dickens Society of Lambton County'. Enthralled with the works of Dickens and Archibald Lampman, Edna fashions her home as a kind of nineteenth-century salon, and yet, beneath the surface, Thomas glimpses artful traces of her repressed roots: 'the flag of Trinidad is the same red, white, and black as my grandmother's dresses' (29). Whether this is merely wishful confabulation on Thomas's part is uncertain, though it is noteworthy that he remarks on the Trinidadian origins of his mother's partner, Henry Wing, some years later. Although Henry, too, has surrounded himself with Victorian trappings, his home offers Thomas the tastes of Trinidad through the meals that are prepared by Henry's house-keeper, Mrs. Williams. Once again, Thomas responds to these ancestral origins — which both are his and are not his — ambivalently. When Mrs. Williams serves him a meal of okra and rice, he finds the green vegetable 'repulsive' (138). And yet, although Mrs. Williams' Caribbean cooking is

'inexplicably foreign', he takes 'to plantain and roti, dasheen and doubles as if [he] were born to them' (139).

Eventually, it is Mrs. Williams who comes to fill the role that might have been played by Thomas's mother or grandmother, for she takes it upon herself to tell him the stories and legends of her own childhood. Lamenting the fate of what she terms this '"unfortunate" child', she 'took up my education, teaching me old and peculiar songs like "Caroline" and "Gold Bond soap to wash your punkalunks"' (155). Thomas's intimacy with Mrs. Williams makes his betrayal of her, at the behest of his mother, all the more surprising, and testifies to his own discomfort with a too-homely maternal role model. By accusing Mrs. Williams of theft and thereby 'abandon[ing]' her (159), Thomas restages a scene of primary repression and re-enacts a symbolic displacing of the mother. In the process, he contributes to the ambiguous nature of his new household (what was once familiar becomes repressed). Although, with Mrs. Williams 'out of the picture', he admits that 'Henry, my mother, and I, did grow closer' (160), this closeness provokes Thomas's subsequent rejection of a home that has become too (superficially) homely and content.

The memoir Thomas writes is an attempt to come to terms with this mixed legacy following the death of his mother — an attempt to revisit the *unheimlich* traces she has left in his life history. His quest for his lost and ambivalently figured mother is more comfortably displaced onto images of home, for in his memoir he traces his life via the places he has lived. In part because of his lack of clear origins, Thomas is obsessed with place — not with landscape, but with domestic social and psychic space. Because the home he grows up in is unwelcoming, Thomas becomes fascinated with the idea of homes (and mothers) that are not his own. As he says towards the beginning of his narrative, 'I was obsessed with other people's houses' (13). It is for this reason that we are given a far more detailed rendering of the neighbouring homes than of his own, which remains something of an all-too-present absence in Thomas's tale of non-originary origins.

Significantly, Thomas is most enthralled with the Berwicks' house which borders his own at the back: 'Though other houses were more inviting, the Berwicks' was where I would have chosen to live' (13). The choice of this particular house is odd because it is the Berwicks' home that functions as something of an empty signifier in the novel: 'It smelled clean. It was ethereal in its cleanliness. ... The kitchen was spotless ... no signs of violence. The furniture, what little there was, was all straight lines' (13). That the spartan aspect of the place is largely related to Sandy Berwick's asthma is irrelevant to Thomas — what he likes about the place is its uninviting blankness, its resonant potential as a void.

Thomas's quest for the unhomeliness of home is closely linked to the *unheimlich* character of his mother, who exists as a familiar but estranged presence

in his life. In a sense, the non-homes he seeks function as a kind of objective correlative to her characteristic ineffability. Not only is he unable to glean any reliable information about her — people's stories of Katarina are always changing — but when he eventually does get to know her, he realises that she is inherently unfathomable: 'my mother [is] constant in the most mercurial of instincts' (216). His relationship with his mother is described as 'a loving relationship with chaos' (222). This is magnified by the fact that he can never quite accept the fact that she is, indeed, his mother; as a result he often contorts his phrases so that he does not have to use this term when addressing her (120–21). Initially, Thomas has trouble accepting the non-paradoxical character of his mother's identity — namely the identity of his mother *as* his mother.[8] Although he admits that 'mothers are *both/and* — both frightening and loving', he continues to separate her into distinct selves: 'I think of her kinder self as Mother, and it is disconcerting to have less vivid memories of my mother as Mother than I do of my mother as Katarina' (219).

The more Thomas is obsessed with getting the facts straight about his mother's identity and the places she has lived, the more he exhibits an adamant refusal to accept the contingency of change. As he questions the woman next door, Lillian Schwartz, about his mother's early years, he especially wants to know whether 'my mother's Petrolia was like the one I inhabited', to which she responds with the paradoxical cliché, 'Plus ça change...' (38). Although he states that this was 'an idea I wouldn't understand for decades, if I understand it at all', it will become clear that Thomas understands the concept of home only in these terms. The more he tries to get a fixed sense of his background, in which ancestry is transposed onto place, the more he finds it evading him — and the more it seems to be most peculiarly *his*.

It is only upon his grandmother's death that Thomas begins to get an inkling of his unusual relationship with this home that he must now leave behind. Looking at his house from a bedroom in the house next door, he comments, 'The house looked almost foreign to me' (69). When he ventures back into the house to retrieve some of his things, he comes to recognise the place for the first time: 'on this second venture into what had been my home, I felt something of the bond I had with what was, after all, the only house I'd ever truly known' (69). Although his grandmother had assured him that this was not his true home, and that he 'would be taken to [his] "rightful home"' in due course when his mother finally retrieved him, Thomas realises that this is the only 'home' he really has, and what marks this feeling of homeliness is the very ambivalence it evokes in him: 'I longed for this: a house that was not mine and not quite not-mine' (70). The echo of Winnicott's terms here is itself uncanny, for ultimately Thomas seeks the reassurance of a transitional space which is compelling for its irresolvable connection to both inner and external reality (1991d 14). While this may appear a sign of Thomas's alienation from a clear sense of emplacement and identity, it is also true that this configuration more adequately describes the experience of

the rootlessness of home. As Bhabha says, 'To be unhomed is not to be homeless' (9), which is perhaps one of the key implications of the novel's exploration of this subject as a metaphor for a postcolonial defamiliarisation with place. It is worth noting, therefore, that Thomas echoes this phrase towards the end of his narrative when he describes his eventual acceptance of home upon returning to Petrolia for his mother's funeral. During this last visit to the town, Thomas feels a clear sense of 'belonging' in this place 'that was neither mine nor, as yet, not-mine' (248). 'I have rarely felt so stable', he asserts at this moment.

The death of his grandmother marks the termination of the first stage of Thomas's narrative. When his mother arrives to take him to his 'rightful home', Thomas discovers that she herself is homeless. Significantly, their first exchange (this is the first time either of them has spoken) revolves around a quest for home. When Katarina hurriedly tells Thomas, 'We have to go', he fills in the missing word himself: 'Home?' (72). To which she vaguely replies, 'Somewhere' (72), thus confirming the very instability of the signifier in his mind. Struck by how easily his mother once again 'quit[s] her childhood home' (73), as he is to do some years later when he sells his grandmother's house, Thomas is about to experience a literal experience of homelessness, for the home that is not clear anywhere soon becomes a series of hastily pitched camps along the highways in southern Ontario. His final thought upon leaving Petrolia is that he is quitting a 'community to which, despite myself, I almost belonged' (75).

Thomas's ambivalent sense of his emplacement in the world is illustrated in the dichotomy he sets up between the positions of Heraclitus and Parmenides when he is speculating on the implications of home. For Heraclitus, he notes, 'all is in flux'; there is 'no permanence except the permanence of change and becoming' (81). Significantly, Thomas chooses to apply this observation to a definition of home. What Heraclitus teaches, he insists, is that 'home won't persist': 'Once you go away, you can never return' (81). However, to push the Heraclitean principle to its limits is to realise that stability is an impossibility: 'even as you sit within it, home changes ... no stasis can keep home home' (82). For Parmenides, it is change that is impossible; all alteration is an illusion. In which case, 'The only thing that persists is home' (82). Ultimately, the Parmenidean principle, much as a tormented character such as Thomas might long for its validity, is the more distressing, for it renders the potential of perception (and agency) static and null. That Thomas acknowledges this fact is an indication of the nature of his quest, for the ideal conception of home might be one that combines the haunting persistence of an *idea* of home with the Heraclitean inevitability of change. Which might also be to suggest that the most welcoming conceptualisation of home is one which both is and is not 'home' at any given time. Plus ça change....

The shifting nature of his grandmother's house in space and time is 'brought home' to Thomas later on upon sharing memories of the place with his mother. The house, which had long been something of a semiotic minefield to Thomas,

is suddenly 'familiarised' by Katarina's account of her memory of 'what had been home': 'Did I realise the small hole beside my bedroom door was one she'd made with a pencil? And then: a name carved in the baseboard, a broken door, a cracked pot handle, a stain on the kitchen wall ... all her doing. If I'd only known where to look, I'd have seen her marks everywhere' (110). Realising that the signs of his mother — like the purloined letter — were there to be discovered all along, the house is in a sense secondarily defamiliarised for Thomas all over again: 'The house I'd lived in was different now that I knew the secret signs of Katarina's presence' (120). The stability of the place, with its inherited marks and scratches, has been temporally upset by Katarina's 'presencing' of moments of agential expression into the scene, thus rendering the place both familiar and foreign to Thomas, who (in actual space/time) remembers the same physical location, but who (in mental space/time) envisions it as a place in which his mother was woefully absent.

This conflation of space and time parallels the confusion between inside and outside, private and public, of which Bhabha (10) and Winnicott speak — a perception from the perspective of an 'insider's outsideness' (Bhabha 14). That Thomas has 'as much trouble knowing where I am in Place as I do in Time' is evidence of the shifting nature of his perception of his emplacement, and echoes the functioning of the transitional space as a 'continuity-contiguity moment' (Winnicott 1991b 103). If place is a function of time, as this notion of 'homeliness' necessarily is, then the subject's self-location is constantly undergoing revision, a phenomenon which is only exacerbated by Thomas's peripatetic childhood. His vision of Ontario, for example, is de-territorialised in his accounts of his travels through the province with his mother and her then boyfriend, Mr. Mataf. In order to subvert conventional notions about this familiar 'home' territory (and thereby make it more amenable to his experience of the event), Thomas combines space and time via a mode of non-simulacral cartography: Ontario can be charted according to the changing emotions of those who pass through it in time (112–16) and it can be spatially figured, through a kind of cartographic absurdity, as 'a fish with its head cut off' (83).[9]

It is in Thomas's perception of Ottawa, however, that this non-paradoxical conceptualisation of shifting self-location is most clearly established. The conflation of self and other which marks the experience of transitional space is clearly enunciated when Thomas notes how the city has changed upon his discovery of it. When he first encounters the city it is 'Ottawa-as-Ottawa'; now it has become 'Ottawa-as-Thomas' (199). As soon as Thomas leaves the confines of his mother's and Henry's house, he discovers that he is 'unable to do without "belonging", but I had discovered a "somewhere else" more hospitable than their "there"' (198). If his mother was always out of place in Ottawa, 'without ever feeling at home' (198), it is because she was 'looking for a place that felt other than temporary' (198). Likewise, Henry made of Ottawa a 'somewhere

else', an echo of a Victorian colonial inheritance, 'one in which Lampman and Scott might have taken tea' (199).[10] For Thomas, Ottawa is a vista of unresolved locations and memories. Because he expects nothing from it — or should I say, because he expects it *not* to be home — it functions as a scene of seemingly incommensurate possibilities: 'It has been everything to me since: my ocean, my desert, my plain' (199).

The experience that provokes Thomas's intense self-identification with the city is an unusual one and reveals a great deal about his sense of belonging in time/place. The day that he and his friend, Lucie, set out into the city begins positively: it is warm, the sky is blue, they wander alongside the canal. When they enter the Market area, however, the homely atmosphere quickly gives way to the unhomeliness of the place, for each pleasant detail is subverted by a something 'strange':

> At the Market, there were so many people, it was like drifting on a tide. The place smelled of fish, of cheese, of apples and cucumbers, tomatoes and green peppers, and, by the cages, of chicken shit.
>
> It was on this day that I saw a man take a chicken from its cage of wooden slats and wring its neck. ... It was also on this day that I saw a German shepherd pounce on a rat that had run out from the back of a shop. ... I took a stick and chased the dog away, but when I went back to see if the rat were alive, the poor thing bit me and scuttled away, finding protection under a wooden pallet....
>
> I know it's odd that moments like these should have drawn me to the city.... (200)

This apparent paradox also occurs in Thomas's dreams of the city. The familiar and comforting landscape of Ottawa — the Parliament buildings, the war memorial, the canal — becomes the scene of 'knife-wielding lunatic[s]' (125) and forbidding angels (126) in his dreams. As Thomas acknowledges, 'there are two strands of the city in my imagination. There's the city I walk in. ... Then there's the city I negotiate in dreams and daydreams. They aren't entirely distinct, of course. Ottawa feeds the city of my dreams, and the city of my dreams is a dimension of the city itself' (126).

That Thomas's initial obsession with Ottawa is associated both with comfort — 'I threw myself into the arms of the city' (199) — and distortion/alienation — through its scenes of death — is significant of the way he comes to determine his 'homes' in terms of the very unsettlement they evoke in him. As a result of his foray into the Market, he is made 'conscious of not being myself in a place that included me' (202). This experience, in which he is neither himself nor not himself (neither me nor not-me), becomes an exhilarating one for him since it enables him to be 'blessedly, unselfconscious, and that was how I came to recognise home' (202). Not only does the city function as 'a crucial messenger in the dialogue between my mind and my body' (127), but Thomas's identification with the place assumes even more profound proportions: 'I sometimes think I am its embodiment' (129).

That the actual city and the fantasised one co-exist in his mind reveals the ways the city of Ottawa — the home outside of home — functions as another transitional experience for Thomas. As both Winnicott and Kristeva attest, uncanniness, 'occurs when the boundaries between *imagination* and *reality* are erased' (Kristeva 188), partaking 'simultaneously of reality and illusion' (Rudnytsky xii). It is significant, therefore, that it is through Ottawa that Thomas discovers his bearings away from his other home, that of his mother and Henry. What he discovers is that 'the outside world mattered more to me than mother, father, home and hearth' (202), which is revealing because home for him has never been associated with these things. However, it is also true that up to this point of rupture, Thomas has responded to Henry's house as his home, one which he finds 'both comforting and disturbing' (172). Henry's house, in many ways, exists as a kind of in-between location for Thomas — a 'half-way' house which disrupts clear-cut evaluative identity markers. Henry's friends are neither clearly men nor women; science and literature, fact and fiction, become merged in Henry's alchemical pursuits; truth and falsehood, good and bad, are subverted by Henry's apparent leniency towards Thomas's thefts and lies (which reaches its zenith when Thomas accuses Henry of putting him up to the thefts). Henry's house, especially his library, is in a state of apparent chaos under which resides an inherent order (234). Finally, Henry's status/identity as Thomas's missing progenitor remains unclear by the end of the novel. In Thomas's interminable quest for origins, he discovers a man who is not quite his father nor not quite *not* his father, which in the end is the only father that is meaningful to him: 'I am, I think, Henry's son, whoever fathered me' (247).

Ironically, it is when the relations between Henry and Katarina begin too closely to resemble that of a family that Thomas seeks a retreat for a more comfortably ambiguous 'home' outside in the city. As long as Henry's status remains tenuous — as long as Thomas remains unfathered — the unhomely character of Thomas's home environment exists as a reassuring factor for him (176). When his 'parents' relations cease to be ambiguous, Thomas can no longer 'live in hope of family' (176), in a perpetual and tantalising state of shifting and ambivalent imaginary desire. Once this desire appears close to fulfilment, Thomas takes action and quickly subverts it by sowing seeds of dissent between them, effectively unhousing his home.

The final section of the novel is aptly entitled 'Housecleaning', for the closing of the book culminates in Thomas's taking up his pen to write his personal memoir of ambivalence.

Having inherited Henry's house, another home that is both his and not his, Thomas asserts his reassuring discomfort with a place in which he does not quite belong:

> How strange it is that certain rooms, the ones I don't often visit, should become untidy.

> I mean, you'd think it was my presence that brought untidiness, and, it's true, the rooms I visit often are more conspicuously untidy.
>
> Yet even unfrequented rooms, like those in the basement and those on the third floor, need constant looking into. (263)

It is the act of housecleaning, through writing, that propels Thomas's acceptance of his unhomely condition — a condition at once diasporic and not-quite not diasporic. The non-experience of home ultimately offers Thomas a potential that has been invoked by many postcolonial writers/subjects — a generative space which fosters the expression of creativity and agency. Indeed, Thomas's memoir evokes not only those writings which treat of diasporic and immigrant experience, nor only those which treat of settler-invader alienation, but perhaps enacts a non-paradoxical combination of both these postcolonial contexts in which the unhomely functions as both an internal and external (psychic and social) alien space or condition. As Bhabha argues, if 'the "unhomely" is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites' (9).

* * * * *

To conclude, it might be helpful to refer back to the apparently contradictory epigraphs that introduced this essay. If belonging might lead one to become comfortably Canadian, as Marlene Nourbese Philip proposes, to be Canadian is also to feel, with Dennis Lee, that one does not, in any comfortable sense of the term, belong.[11] Or is the celebration of such ambivalence the privilege of those whose 'belonging' is never, ultimately, called into question — at least not within the nation itself? This contrast in perspectives highlights the problematic ambiguity of Canada's status as a postcolonial nation, a dilemma that was addressed at a conference at the University of Manitoba in September 2000 devoted to the question, 'Is Canada postcolonial?' The question not only demands a clarification of one's definition of the term, but also an acknowledgement that postcoloniality is differently experienced in the multivalent context of any number of national belongings. As Charles Taylor expresses it, there are different 'ways of belonging' within the national whole (183), and, therefore, different ways of 'being' postcolonial as well. In this sense, the text for which postcoloniality was deemed to be 'hardly an issue' (Misrahi-Barak 91) might be seen instead as the crystallisation of a central postcolonial (and diasporic) dilemma, in which home is at once an 'apparent fixity yet also subject to a dangerous fluidity' (Philip 11).

To suggest that 'In *Childhood* ... belonging is achieved only by the repression of longing' (Sanders 185) is to over-simplify a crucial aspect of the central character's obsession with the ambivalence of emplacement, whereby belonging, in any real sense, is only achieved by an insistence on longing. In this way, 'the desire to belong', to echo the title of Rinaldo Walcott's analysis of *Childhood*,

must be understood in terms of the psychoanalytic notion of desire: while belonging is continually deferred, it is a deferral that is itself a form of satisfaction — what a Lacanian might identify as the 'desire to desire', or, in this case, the longing to (never quite) belong.

In Thomas's account, homelessness comes to describe both an existential *and* postcolonial condition — a condition, says Rey Chow, which is not teleological but 'of which "permanence" itself is an ongoing fabrication' (15). Thus does Heraclitus trump Parmenides. In the end, it is important that Thomas realise the full implications of the non-paradox of his not-quite-one inheritance: 'After all, I come from somewhere' (265). While transitional phenomena offer a non-paradoxical space in which me/not-me are not clearly distinguishable, they are also, according to Winnicott, 'the place where we live' (104), which might be to say, with Rushdie (and with Dorothy), that there is, finally, no place like home.

NOTES

1 The risk of 'universalising' these literary contexts beyond recognition is a legitimate fear of those theorists interested in sites of the postcolonial. Bhabha qualifies this version of world literature through his suggestion that '[t]he centre of such a study would neither be the "sovereignty" of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture', but a focus on historical displacements and contingencies (12). In *Literary Pluralities*, Christl Verduyn, quoting Joseph Pivato, notes the ways Canadian ethnic writing, specifically, has 'internationalised' Canadian literature, 'taking Canadian writing into a truly international context of comparative study and exchange' (15).

2 James Clifford suggests that it may be the diasporic experience which most clearly reconceptualises notions of identity, for it reveals 'unresolved historical dialogues between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality' (108). Likewise, Alan Lawson has suggested that the settler-invader context provides the most evocative context for disruptions of too easily dichotomous structures of identity and colonisation. It is in the 'settler colonies', he states, 'where the processes of colonial power as negotiation, as transactions of power, are most visible' (22).

3 'Non-paradoxical' is therefore not the same as 'not paradoxical', for it retains the premise of the paradox at its centre. With this in mind, Sigmund Freud's conception of the *unheimlich* might be considered a famous non-paradox, for it contains both the notion of the familiar (the homely) and the unfamiliar (the unhomely) at one and the same time: 'the word *'heimlich'* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas ... on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight' (345). One sense of the *unheimlich* is the way the familiar becomes unfamiliar (through the act of repression) by the very fact that it is *too* familiar (and hence had necessarily to be repressed); glimpses of this repressed content create the feeling of the uncanny or *unheimlich*. If images of home, as Freud later attests, are associated with the mother's genitals (368), this might be to suggest that home is, in the first instance, always both familiar and unfamiliar, and secondly, that one can never go home again–both of which evoke the multiple meanings of 'there's no place like home'.

4 There is a wealth of critical material on Canadian identity and culture which addresses this aspect of Canadian in-betweenness, from such early anti-colonialist pieces as Northrop Frye's 1971 Preface to *The Bush Garden*, his 1965 'Conclusion' to the

Literary History of Canada, and Dennis Lee's 1973 'Cadence, Country, Silence'; to those postmodern configurations of the Canadian psyche offered by Robert Kroetsch and Linda Hutcheon; to many postcolonial accounts of Canada as a settler-invader culture, such as those provided by Diana Brydon, Alan Lawson, and Stephen Slemon. Walcott, writing on Alexis, notes the 'in-between' character of black Canadian space specifically. 'To be black and "at home" in Canada', he writes, 'is both to belong and not belong' (1997 136).

[5] In his 1995 article for *This Magazine*, 'Borrowed Blackness', Alexis notes how he was once told 'that in order to discover my "Black self" I should move to the United States. ... black Canadians were not Black enough'. 'Canada is *often* invisible in American writing', Alexis continues, 'black Canada even more so' (17). Alexis's account of the gap between black Canadianness and African-American-ness has been criticised by Walcott and Hudson for failing to take into account the commonalities of experience among black diasporans. While this critique is valid, it seems to me that critics have nonetheless too readily applied Alexis's comments in 'Borrowed Blackness' to produce over-simplified readings of *Childhood*, a text which has itself suffered from being deemed 'not Black enough'. As a writer 'preoccupied with the idea of making this country his own' (Nurse 1), Alexis's vision of national belonging is far from easy. For Alexis's comments on this aspect of the reception of *Childhood*, see Michael Redhill's 'An Interview with André Alexis'.

[6] This configuration, when stated in very general terms, applies not only to writings which treat of diasporic and immigrant experience, but also plays a role in the experience of psychological colonialism or internalised foreignness — what Kristeva expresses as the experience of being 'strangers to ourselves' — where 'home' is not only considered inferior to the imperial centre, but where every home is also at once an alien psychic space or condition. However, if the metaphor of homelessness, as Kristeva uses it, comes to describe an existential condition, the postcolonial critic must take care not to erase the social and political particularities of any given psychic state. The social and the psychic are coterminous and mutually invasive.

[7] See Stuart Hall's 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' for an account of the ways cultural identity is framed by the two simultaneous vectors of continuity and rupture (395).

[8] One could also reformulate this as a resistance to recognise her as a distinct and unidealised individual — what in object relations terms is known as depressive experience. That Thomas longs for the unresolved transitional space of a non/home might signal his inability to resolve the confusions surrounding his own experience of his mother at the same time as it might represent a longing preservation of the only experience of 'mothering' he has known.

[9] See Graham Huggan's 'Decolonising the Map' for his account of how 'the provisional connections of cartography suggest an ongoing perceptual transformation which in turn stresses the transitional nature of post-colonial discourse' (131). In a sense, Thomas's many 'emotional' maps push this subversive potential of cartography to its limits.

[10] For non-Canadian readers, it might be helpful to clarify that Lampman and Scott are references to two nineteenth-century Canadian poets, Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott.

[11] Perhaps, to invoke Philip's notion of 'be/longing' (22), this is because the settler-invader can never claim a sense of having been here long enough.

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