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Multiple Homes and Unhomely Belonging

Abstract I: In una società in cui la migrazione assume un ruolo significativo le nostre identità diventano ambivalenti per noi stessi e soltanto parzialmente comprensibili agli altri. Questo articolo riflette sul ruolo della parola scritta, ruolo politico, sociale e letterario, come una narrativa di ‘case multiple’. Tra le questioni che determinano i discorsi e le narrative di ‘case multiple’ e di ‘non-appartenenza’ vi sono il linguaggio e la politica del linguaggio (situazionale o reale), idee di identità come solide e identificabili, l’attraversamento costante di frontiere come elemento centrale nelle vite di molte persone, e la collisione dei codici sociali e culturali nelle pratiche e nei significati assegnati agli ‘stranieri’.

Abstract II: In a society where migration plays a significant role our identities become ambivalent to ourselves and only partly legible to others. This article reflects on the role of the written word, political, social, and literary, as a narrative of multiple homes. Among the issues which determine the discourses and narratives of ‘multiple homes’ and ‘unhomely belonging’ are language and language politics (situational or real), beliefs about identities as solid and identifiable, constant border-crossings as central to many people’s lives, and the collision of social and cultural codes in the meanings and practices assigned to ‘the foreigner’.

*and this each human knows:
however close our touch
or intimate our speech,
silences, spaces reach
most deep, and will not close.
“Space Between” (Wright 1991: 166)*

Many in today’s global world, dominated as it is by the migration of peoples, have a multi-cultural and multilingual background. Historically, however, migration, whether voluntary or due to conflict, meant being cut off from the country of one’s birth, and in some cases also mother tongue. With today’s freedom of movement the finality of migration in earlier times is lost. Many migrants are in a situation of having multiple ‘homes’, and concomitant with that an increased feeling of ‘unhomely belonging’ since they are not cut off from their

roots in the same manner. They may live in another cultural and social environment, but still retain, and can update, some of their former beliefs and cultural connotations. The sense of loss, which Said writes of, is no longer the case.

Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss (1993: 336).

What do we then mean by having 'multiple homes'? We live in a transcultural age when all are influenced, albeit at times unwillingly, by social media which have radically changed how we see the world. We have the possibility of being omnipresent. However, the constant interaction with, and exposure to, other cultures and languages and ways of life, as well as the intermingling of cultures, reveals an increasing tendency to create binary divisions in society. This leads to the stereotyping of the migrant and 'other', and results in a sense of 'unhomely belonging' – one is *of* the country but not wholly part of it – one does belong, yet feels a sense of alienation from one's country. The Australian writer Ania Walwicz has an ironic comment on this in one of her prose poems:

They're not us they're them they're them they are else what you don't know what you don't know what they think they got their own ways they stick together you don't know what they're up to you never know with them you just don't know with them no we didn't ask them to come here they come and they come there is enough people here already now they crowd us wogs they give me winter colds they take my jobs they take us they use us they come here to make their money then they go away
"Wogs" (1982).

The recent refugee crisis in Europe illustrates the complexity of this issue, as one of the prime causes of fear in European societies is that the balance of cultural and social codes will be upset. To some conceptualising and valorising what it is to have multiple homes is complex and ambiguous, despite the fact that historically from the time of the Romans migration has been a constant. We need to discuss how belonging to a global community is valued and understood, and to ask to what extent the historical past, long gone or recent, affects the way in which we define our sense of belonging.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that from ancient times until now, there has not been a period in which this question [of why you left your country] has not been put to a writer or an artist without regard to his nationality or the motives for his departure (Wali: 2003).

Transculturality is an appropriate term for describing this phenomenon as it illustrates clearly the constant fluctuations that people of mixed heritage experience, often unconsciously. It is this that gives a sense of 'unhomely belonging'.

This state of inbetweenness – neither at home nor away, is often expressed in literature,

in the theatre, in song and even in politics, and is a key to understanding our new global world, providing us with space to step back and evaluate the feeling of inbetweenness. Literature tells the lives of peoples, their reactions both as individuals and as a group, and therefore has both a pedagogical and informative purpose. The intersection between the literary text and its wider social and cultural context is central as Veronica Brady so rightly insisted. Her mantra was “through the medium of great literature we can grow as human beings”. Her contribution to current debates put this into perspective historically, and literally with her fight for the inclusion of Australian literature in schools and higher education. She understood that one of the main sources for understanding others and other cultures is the literature of a nation and peoples, and the views expressed therein. We may not agree, even dislike, some of the author’s attitudes, but nonetheless their narratives enlighten us and are part of the discourse of a nation.

One text that portrays the complexity of ‘unhomely belonging’ is *The Book of Negroes* by the Canadian writer, Lawrence Hill. This epic novel of slavery covers six decades, from being traded into a state of slavery to when the African slaves gained their freedom in the US and moved to Nova Scotia. Captured as a young girl and transported to America as a slave, the protagonist, Aminata Diallo, after experiencing the emancipation of slaves, and reporting to the Abolition committee in London, finally decides to return to Africa only to find she no longer belongs there, but has become a ‘foreigner’ to her own origins. Neither can she accept some of their cultural ways of life, especially those gender-related. In other words, the return home, as so many have found, is fraught with frustration and disillusionment.

But it is in world literatures in English that we find some of the most expressive narratives of the sense of unhomely belonging which, not least, former empires have impacted on other peoples, as the ubiquity of English proves. Texts, fictional in particular, have been used to debate social and health issues as in *The Invisible Weevil* by the Ugandan writer Mary Karooro Okurut who depicts the effect of AIDS on Ugandan society, and how one family deals with this situation. Human rights are frequent themes for transcultural literature, for example in Ngugi’s work, and in Mudrooroo’s early novels and short stories such as “Struggling”. This story illustrates the discriminating treatment of Aborigines. The young people are also depicted as torn between city life and their Aboriginal homelands. “Once we had to run away from our homes in the country and come to the city, but now things are different. It wouldn’t be running away, just returning, coming back to where you belong” (Paperbark 1993: 269).

Three major aspects of inbetweenness are language, identities and social and cultural codes answering questions such as which languages you think in, dream in and count in, where you belong, and certain things which one does intrinsically, socially and culturally, that betray oneself as a ‘foreigner’.

Communication and language

Among the issues which determine the discourses and narratives of unhomely belonging are language and communication, both situational and real. A view echoed by the Iraqi writer Najem Wali in the journal *Words without Borders*:

For in the end, the writer's homeland is the language in which he writes, and his house is the world that he constructs through his work, just as the homeland of the traveler is wherever his feet may fall (Wali: 2003).

It is not coincidental the Ngugi's famous text *Decolonizing the Mind* has played such an important role in all discussions of language and writing. He pointed out in a lecture in Auckland that the language writers choose and how "the use to which language is put is central to a definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment" (1985, cited in Rønning 2009: 18).

In many countries in our postcolonial and transcultural global world people are bilingual and trilingual, yet social and political reasons make them feel not entirely at home. Why is this? To what extent does language define who we are? Language has a "dual character" both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture since "language and culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Ngugi 1981: 93; 15-16). This history is not only in the past but equally in the present. Certainly the first language often has cultural connotations that are automatic, and by contrast one may express oneself differently when using a second or third language where competence is not an issue, but sometimes the small and petty details of con-text. It is not necessarily the words themselves which cause racial and disparaging comments and reactions, but the body language with which they are expressed, and the tone patterns used. Issues of encoding and decoding are paramount. Language skills do not mean just speaking a language grammatically correct, but knowing the social codes and connotations that are associated with the words. Here many transcultural/bilingual people fall short. As Brian Castro says in "Writing Asia" (1995):

Language marks the spot where the self loses its prison bars – where the border crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others. [...] Each language speaks the world in its own ways [...]. Other cultures and languages reinforce and enrich us by powerfully affecting or destabilising our familial tongue. We gain by losing ourselves.

Linguistic border-crossings occur when countries are bilingual at the political and educational level. For many African writers this has meant not writing in one's native tongue. For example, when the South African writer Lauretta Ngcobo was asked at a conference in Bergen why she did not write in her native language, Zulu, she pointed out that her whole education had been in English – that was the language in which she had learnt to express herself.

Linguistic hybridity is a term which has been used to express this feature of language, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (1981: 358). An understanding of dialogism gives us insight into the creative process of communication – the effect of social and cultural milieux. Stuart Hall states that "to speak a language is [...] also to activate the range of meanings which are already

embedded in our language and cultural system" (1999: 122). The language of meanings is particularly visible in translated texts, when often the source language is still apparent in the target language. Such language interference is exemplified in an interview with Ania Walwicz where she comments on a translation of her work into Polish: the translator told her that "she found this very easy to do, that the structures of the language I use, are the same as in Polish. I wasn't aware of this. So the language I use in writing has incorporated the first language. Perhaps this is a kind of fusing of the two languages. It is a kind of incomplete English using Polish structure" (Lysenko & Brody 1982). In the late 80s early 90s critics such as Ashcroft saw linguistic hybridity as a process of appropriation and abrogation but this is no longer the case. Instead we get a plethora of language mixes such as in Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* where he consciously writes a new kind of South African English, what Noussi has called "the Xhosa-ification of the English language" that also has a political and ideological purpose (2009: 291).

Language also makes others unhomey – it can be subversive as when the use of foreign or indigenous words in a text makes the reader for whom these are not familiar the 'other'. This is common in literature written by First Nations peoples, and today also those of former colonies. One interesting phenomenon is that many of these words which make us the 'stranger' are words for flora, fauna, food, artefacts, and buildings (for instance, New Zealand natural flora and fauna are untranslatable). This adds to a language a whole cultural context which turns the tables on who is the 'other'.

Identities: an Unhomey Belonging

Descartes' "I think therefore I am". Is this our identity? The issue of where I belong and who I am is highly complex, and has a long history. With the growth of the independence of nations in the late twentieth century issues of identities became prevalent. Belonging and cross-cultural border-crossings became part of the individual's everyday life and therefore in a transcultural world our identities become ambivalent to ourselves and only partly understandable to others. The legacy of Empire means that the culture of the colonizer often dominates that of the native, as the ubiquity of English proves. This, of course, results in us living in a world of inherent 'contra-diction' as very few countries have a relatively homogenous population. Just as texts are suspended between the past and the future, so are our identities, both closely interwoven. Stuart Hall suggests that

rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an ongoing process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by others (1994: 122, italics in original).

In his book *Calibrations* Ato Quayson has compared this interweaving and interdependence between identities and languages to the dependency of wheel cogs on each other in machinery. Our identities are irrevocably linked to each other and will vary according to time and place.

In one of his many essays on identity Hall suggests, following Freudian ideas that “identity is actually something formed through unconscious processes over time”, and “[t] here is always something ‘imaginary’ and fantasized about its unity” (1994: 122). His work thus counters narrowly cultural identitarian thought by supporting ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’, and the ‘routes’ taken in the course of this, as a more profitable way of constituting ourselves than looking at our ‘roots’:

Actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves (1996: 4).

Thus we become outsiders and insiders to the society in which we live, and therefore insiders or outsiders to our own lives. This is particularly true in our attitudes, and in our critique of writers. Salman Rushdie suggests that writers who have migrated, especially from countries with a very different culture, “are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of ‘whole sight’” (1992: 19). But he has also warned against the construction of an imaginary identity:

Writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by an urge to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – [...] that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (1992: 10).

This is equally true of all who live in more than one country in their lifetime and especially those who settle elsewhere, a not uncommon theme in Australian writing; the glorification of ‘home’ into something it never was, for instance, by the Scottish family, the McIvors, in David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*.

There is a wealth of literature that has the conflict of identities as a theme. One interesting text, which won the *Sunday Times* Fiction Award for 2004, is that by the South African writer Rayda Jacobs. *Confessions of a Gambler* (2004) is about a Muslim woman of Indian heritage in Cape Town who juggles two existences. Outwardly she is dressed and behaves as a good Muslim mother, but she is also another person who spends most of her days gambling at the Casino, hooked on the freedom it gives her. The depiction of Abeeda’s double life not only describes brilliantly the compulsive gambler’s mindset, but also illustrates the juggling of lives which many people with multiple home backgrounds experience in today’s society, in their attempt to combine traditional and religious attitudes and life in a new, and often very different, society. We can ask which of Abeeda’s lives is the ‘real’ Abeeda.

Similarly Patricia Grace and Alan Duff analyse aspects of dual racialism in their texts. In *Mutuwhenua* Grace depicts a young girl, Ripeka, who, in an effort to assimilate, rejects her Maori ancestry, and gives herself an English name, Linda. It is only when she herself be-

comes a mother that she acknowledges her ancestry. Here Grace, though writing from a New Zealand perspective, touches on one of the criteria often used when evaluating people who apply for a job – their name immediately identifies them as from a different background. This is a form of discrimination, especially in Europe, which has been highly criticised. In much of Alan Duff's writing, especially *Once Were Warriors* and *Both Sides of the Moon*, the issue of 'unhomely belonging' and intercultural awareness¹, the protagonists being neither Pakeha nor Maori, is a paramount theme, though the solution is vastly different in the two books. Gang mentality is opposed to historical, mythological genealogy, though both texts express violence. Literature of this kind which counterposes the loss of the past and centres on problems of fitting in with the present is, in my opinion, of fundamental importance in helping individuals to understand our contemporary multicultural world, and should be included much more in language courses as a starting point for discussions of cultural difference. Such courses often put primary emphasis on correctness of language skills, and culture is treated as a separate issue, but literary texts provide insight into both.

Social and Cultural Codes

The fluidity of any meaning is influenced by cultural codes. As Benedict Anderson has said, nations "express an immemorial past and a limitless future, working alongside and against *large cultural systems that preceded them*" (1991: 19, italics in original). Edward Said points out that "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (1993: xxv.) Central to transculturalism are border-crossings, often subconsciously, of cultural and social codes and ideas – a perpetual back and forth, a weaving of different strands of one's life to become an ever changing someone else. Elsewhere I have called persons who mix social and cultural codes 'hyphenated people' (JEASA 2009). Such people often have a constant sense of alienation, even after generations in the new country. For others, however, the situation may be different as Soyinka suggests:

If the nature of departure from homeland has been marked by total rejection, by the necessity for a near-total obliteration of memory, then an encounter with an environment that is a complete antithesis of the place of setting out – from topography to emotive and sensory properties – may find the wanderer breathing a sigh of relief. Finally, I have arrived (2002).

However, today's society demands intercultural competence, a context and a con-text. It is vital to address the issue of the background and con-text, (by that I mean environment in its widest sense,) in which ideas and behaviour originate. Social codes vary from nation to nation, but also operate at the glocal level, for example, codes of manners and politeness, clothing, etc. It is a question of what to do and what not to do in a given situation and place. Many international negotiations and meetings have failed for this very reason – people

¹ For a more detailed discussion see Rønning's "Intercultural awareness and understanding identities in Alan Duff" (Riem *et al.* 2013).

not understanding the social and cultural codes of those they are dealing with. One might ask whether such knowledge is necessary, but, in my opinion, an appreciation that others have different approaches to the same issue can not only be intellectually stimulating and lead to new thought and action, but is also a prerequisite for intercultural communication. Social media is disruptive in this respect as not only are many unfortunate attitudes flourishing there, but they are given a credibility which often ignores the con-text in which such utterances or the topics were written originally. Attempts have been made to encourage an understanding of interculturality, institutionalized in programmes such as The Pestalozzi programme, *Recognising Intercultural Competence* (2012)² with its emphasis on attitudes, empathy, skills and knowledge, and in the "Hordaland model", a programme on intercultural understanding in the workplace that has been developed in Norway.

One ideal way of learning these codes is to turn to the theatre. It is not coincidental that Shakespeare and Ibsen are still performed frequently, as fundamental to their texts are an understanding, and not least critique, of social and cultural codes looked at through a dramatist's eye. Though the ideas and codes of manner are portrayed in a different age or place they have a universality that makes them equally applicable in another setting and culture such as the present. The universality of literature, be it fiction or drama, is one of its most wonderful features.

The collision of social and cultural codes is a frequent theme in much Australian writing. David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* raises some interesting questions regarding the issue of codes. There is a marked contrast between the attitudes of the settlers to Australia and to their home country, and that of Gemmy. He is born white, in Britain, but was shipwrecked in Australia and brought up by the Aborigines. His attempt to return to a white settlement illustrates the complexity of social and cultural codes. Where does he really belong? Sadly probably nowhere, as the lack of closure in the text demonstrates. This theme is also central in Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*. Kate Grenville, and Brian Castro are other Australian writers who deal with the conflict of belonging, whether due to issues of ethnicity or history.

In conclusion I will refer to two Australian authors who have addressed the conflict of belonging at the personal and the global level. David Ireland's *Burn*, a text from 1974, illustrates how a family, multicultural and racially mixed through three generations, is received in Australian society. Written against the background of the White Australian Policy this text at one level discusses the treatment of Aborigines and people of mixed race, but at another it illustrates clearly the confusion of the younger generations as to where they belong. Their great-grandfather, Goroooh, is Aborigine, and their grandfather, MacAllister, Scottish. One of his grandchildren, Gordon, has received education, but he is not accepted in social circles in the city since he is neither brown nor white. On returning home, "[l]ooking at the brown skin on the backs of his hands, [he says] 'I know it's not dirt [...]. But while they look on it as dirt, it's dirt [...]. Getting the poison out of my family in the future will be just like getting white myself'" (1974: 132), because "[no] amount of schooling could integrate me" (133). In other words integration is a failure. Interwoven with the family story Ireland contrasts, in

² A tool developed by a group of 30 teachers from all over Europe under the sponsorship of the Council of Europe.

a stream of consciousness narrative style, the position of Gunner, MacAllister's son, in the Second World War when his mixed race made little difference whereas now, suffering from post-traumatic syndrome he is only thought of as an Aborigine. This text thus typifies one of the many human rights issues for which Veronica Brady campaigned.

One author who, in my opinion, epitomizes in her writing and stage performances the outsider/insider cultural and social conflict is Ania Walwicz. In "Look at me Ma-I'm Going to be a Marginal Writer!" she maintains that literature "is processed, a salami sausage and packaged", but

literature is not static. It exists as a living organism, expanding and re-creating itself, metamorphosing [...]. My own work has been identified with the positions of marginality, multiculturalism, ethnicity, migration, abjection, experimentation, feminist literary theory, postmodernism, the avant-garde. [And she asks] Do I have to provide [...] a sense of belonging to a group? (1995: 162-163).

Her narratives are an ironic critique of Australian views, but also have a universality. Many of her prose poems illustrate how social and cultural codes enforce feelings of 'unhomely belonging' in people's failure to accept difference. Walwicz describes herself in the prose poem "Europe" thus: "i'm europe deluxe nougat bar i'm better than most i'm really special rich and tasty black forest cake". And in "Australia" she concretises difference:

You never accept me. For your own. You always ask me where I'm from. You always ask me. You tell me I look strange. Different. You don't adopt me. You laugh at the way I speak. You think you're better than me (1981).

These are just some reflections on this topic. We will soon all have 'multiple homes' and increasingly a sense of 'unhomely belonging'. Is this a negative factor? We need to debate the role of literature as a bridge and mediator of national, ethnic and global or glocal cultures and cultural forces, thus assisting the general public in understanding our own and others' positions. That is something which I am sure Veronica Brady would have approved of. We need to acknowledge the unhomeliness of our being in this global world, expressed so clearly by Najem Wali, whose comments need not only refer to writers, but also to all who have moved elsewhere:

Writers in exile [and migrants] often face the question of why they left their countries, and whether this departure has not resulted in a loss of memory, a vagueness about those cherished places where they lived – whether it hasn't made their writing lose the heat and immediacy of those who are still living inside, made their positions lose the same degree of credibility [...]. And whatever the explanation that those posing the question – usually more interested in politics than they are in literature – claim to have arrived at, in the end they don't look at the writer by what he writes, but rather evaluate him by where he lives, or by the location of "the room" from which he writes, as the Peruvian writer Vargas Llosa noted in his commentary on the issue in one of his articles (2003).

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