12. There's No Place Like Home: Unhomely moments in three postcolonial picture books

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Abstract: One of the principal strands of postcolonial theory and critical practice is the interrogation of received versions of colonial history. This paper investigates the extent to which three contemporary picture books, Gavin Bishop's *The House that Jack Built*, John Marsden and Shaun Tan's *The Rabbits*, and Thomas King and William Kent Monkman's *A Coyote Columbus Story*, mobilise postcolonial strategies in their representations of place. In particular, it focuses on how postcolonial textuality unsettles and transgresses notions of “homeliness” in narratives involving the displacement of colonised and colonising peoples. As the shifting power relations of colonialism render unhomely what has previously been homely (especially for colonised peoples), so they involve a contrary move in which unhomely spaces are changed into simulacra of lost or abandoned homes. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's formulation of materialist historiography, Homi Bhabha describes what he terms ‘the unhomely moment’ as that in which personal and psychic histories intersect with the violent dislocations of colonialism. This paper will argue that such unhomely moments shape the visual and verbal narratives of *The House that Jack Built*, *The Rabbits* and *A Coyote Columbus Story*, all of which deal with the trauma which occurs when cultures previously geographically and psychically distant are brought into close contact with each other. Written to and for children who are citizens of postcolonial cultures, these texts disclose the unease which persists in contemporary societies where colonial histories are rehearsed and revisioned. However, the paper will argue that the three texts position readers in quite different ways; for instance, while the verbal text of *The Rabbits* constructs an implied author capable of speaking for the colonised and offering readers a very circumscribed subject position, Thomas King's narrative in *A Coyote Columbus Story* engages in a dialogic playfulness which allows readers to adopt a variety of reading positions. For each text, some key representations of unhomely moments will be considered, and the paper will explore the extent to which they construct forms of temporality which negotiate the space between history and its significances within crosscultural and intercultural formations.

Home and the loss of home constitute a recurring motif in colonial and postcolonial literatures, encompassing the psychic and physical experience of colonised and colonisers, as well as in the contact zone where cultures meet and identities are formed which encompass heterogeneity and hybridity. Most nations shaking off colonial histories and assuming independence engage in various forms of cultural amnesia through the repression of memory or the repudiation of the colonised. A central task of postcolonial theory and practice is that of recovering the past, in both historical and psychological senses. The three picture books I consider - Thomas King and William Kent Monkman's *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992), Gavin Bishop's *The House that Jack Built* (1999) and John Marsden and Shaun Tan's *The Rabbits* (1998) - retrace moments in the colonial past, respectively, of Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and my discussion considers the extent to which these texts embody what Homi Bhabha, in his essay “The World and the Home”, calls “the stirring of the unhomely” (p.445).

Bhabha's analysis of the unhomely moment in literature draws on Freud's essay “The ‘Uncanny’”, which argues that “the Unheimlich [translated as ‘uncanny’] is what was
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...heimisch, home-like, familiar; the pre-fix 'un' is the token of repression" (Bhabha 1997, p.450). Bhabha's discussion hinges on the idea that when traumatic histories are turned into narrative, the aesthetic process "introduces into our reading of social reality not another reified form of mediation - the art object - but another temporality in which to signify the " ‘event’ of history" (pp.448-9). This temporality is not a "transcendental passage" (p.448) but a "moment of ‘transit’ " (ibid.) in which private and public worlds collide, producing a sense of shock at the struggle to “frame and name ... social reality” (ibid.).

In narratives which figure unhomely moments, fictional subjects may be represented as conscious of the meanings of the historical processes in which they are involved; but Bhabha says that these narratives are characterised by “an incommunicability that shapes the public moment, a psychic obscurity that is formative for public memory” (p.447). There's an obvious tension, then, between incommunicability and psychic obscurity on the one hand, and on the other the dominant agendas of children's texts, which are concerned with rendering the world comprehensible to child readers. The picture books which I discuss are written to and for children living in complex interracial nations where the colonial past is still present in negotiations between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures; child audiences, moreover, who will read these narratives very differently depending on whether they identify as Māori or Pākehā; Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal; Native or non-Native. To complicate these narratives further, some of their authors and illustrators are indigenous, others non-indigenous: Thomas King, the author of A Coyote Columbus Story, is of Cherokee descent; the illustrator William Kent Monkman is Kree; Gavin Bishop is of Māori and European descent; John Marsden and Shaun Tan are non-indigenous Australians.

Gavin Bishop’s deployment of the traditional rhyme “This is the house that Jack built” foregrounds a colonial system of meaning-making where British forms and social practices displace those of the tangata whenua, the people of the land. The clash of ontologies central to this displacement is symbolised by the red door and the bolt of red flannel glimpsed at the beginning of the narrative as Jack leaves Britain, and featuring in a later illustration, where door and cloth signify an individualistic economy in which trees are cut down for Jack’s dwelling and the trading of cloth anticipates the demise of traditional arts of weaving and garment-making. This illustration foreshadows the unhomely moment in its framing of the scene: viewers look at and past the broken and grotesque shapes of ponga stumps at the front of the picture, to infantilised Māori men admiring European products under Jack’s smiling salesmanship. Beyond Jack and present to viewers (but not to the men engaged in their commercial transaction) are the eyes of the gods, fixed within patterns which suggest order and continuity. In Bhabha’s terms, the public and outward nature of the historical process is privatised through Bishop’s focus on Jack, his house and the Māori men; and this clash of historical time and fictional space is realised through the gods’ presence. Distinctions between private and public are disrupted as the private space of Jack’s house is exposed to supernatural forces.

In the narrative sequence which follows, Jack’s house transmutes into a trading post and hotel and finally the nucleus of a settlement, and the influence of the gods is weakened by the impact of the European presence. But by the end of the narrative, the
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gods have regathered their strength and Tumatauenga, the war god, calls on the “people of the land” (Bishop, 1999, p.33) to avenge the earth mother. In the book’s final doublespread, the red door appears as a sign of the collapse of Jack’s empire and, by inference, of the systems of belief and valuing which it represents: “and this was the house that Jack built” (p.32). Bishop’s note “About This Book”, which appears opposite this picture and within the doublespread, signals a prolepsis which flashes ahead to a contemporary time when, he says, “the conflict is recorded for future generations on the wall of a meeting house in a folk art style blending traditional Māori and European art forms. Both cultures are now intertwined in the rich history of Aotearoa” (p.33).

The images to which Bishop refers are those of the book’s final endpapers (Plate 3), where Te Pākehā and Te Tangata Whenua are ranged on either side of Tumatauenga. The problem with Bishop’s suggestion of prolepsis is that it appears only peritextually, and is therefore outside the visual and verbal discourses which construct the book’s symbolic codes. The “now” to which Bishop refers is likewise outside the narrative, so that far from an intertwining of cultures, the back endpapers convey the impression of cultural formations fixed in conflict through the warlike postures of the three figures. The closure of the narrative occurs at the unhomely moment when Jack’s attempt to reproduce Britain in Aotearoa founders on the gulf between cultural systems, and it asserts the ascendancy of Māori culture by its insistence on a victory of spiritual over material values, and of indigenous over Western traditions. Here, historical time and fictional space “lie uncannily beside each other” (p.447), producing meanings which sit awkwardly with the book’s final endpapers. For the narrative closure is clearly on the side of the gods, and the fixity of the figures depicted in the endpapers leaves in abeyance questions of cross-cultural engagement. Thus, the narrative does not provide for a reading position between or within the polarities suggested by these final images. Margins and centre are transposed and the land reclaimed as the home of the gods and of Māori culture, without any allowance for hybridity or identities formed between Māori and Pākehā.

Despite the qualifying gesture of Bishop’s note, this is an uncompromising position, and it affords a striking contrast with the slipperiness of the second text which I discuss, The Rabbits by John Marsden and Shaun Tan. This book was published in 1998, when John Howard promoted the notion of the “black armband version of history”, a phrase adopted from the historian Geoffrey Blainey, and arguing that contemporary Australian history overemphasises the negative impact of colonialism on Aboriginal peoples and cultures and undervalues white heroism and achievement. Within this artificial and polarising divide, The Rabbits was widely regarded as an anticolonial or “black armband” text, so that throughout the public-domain discussions of the book which abounded when it won the CBC Picture Book of the Year award in 1999, there lurked the assumption that to criticise The Rabbits was to collude with the Howard/Blainey view of history. Because of this and because of the painterly qualities of Tan’s illustrations, its verbal and visual discourses escaped critical scrutiny. I want to argue that this text seizes upon the symbolism of home and homelessness to construct a dehistoricised, uncomplicated and undynamic past.

The rabbits are the colonisers, viewed from the perspective of the verbal text as “them”: “The rabbits came many grandparents ago. At first we didn’t know what to think. They
looked a bit like us. There weren’t many of them. Some were friendly” (Marsden and Tin 1998, pp.4-7). Along the continuum of anthropomorphism, the rabbits are humanoid, being dressed in suits and uniforms, arriving in sailing ships, building houses and surrounded by signifiers of science and technology. The “we” of the verbal narrative, in contrast, are far closer to animal: they are unclothed, live in the trees and are afraid of some of the animals imported by the rabbits. The association of indigenous people with native animals evokes colonial discourses which locate Aboriginal people either at the very border between animal and human or within the category of the animal; more than this, it constructs the indigenous as a powerless and victimised population. Tan’s illustrations often represent the indigenous as silhouetted forms seen along the same plane as the colonisers but sharply differentiated from them: the rabbits carry instruments of science and assume postures of authority; and the indigenous are naked and submissive, objects of colonial power and of the viewing eye.

Colonisation in *The Rabbits* is represented through a litany of events catastrophic to the indigenous: “Still more of them came. Sometimes we had fights, but there were too many rabbits. We lost the fights. They ate our grass. They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends ... and stole our children” (pp.18-25). Tan’s depiction of this last event represents the indigenous as not merely helpless (positioned on the horizontal plane, where they hold up their arms in supplication) but as forced into collusion with the colonisers, as the thumbprints on the documents demonstrate. The stolen children too are helpless and objectified, curled in the box kites suspended from the rabbits’ black helicopters. This is no unhomely moment; the past is not opened up to a present in which social reality is renamed and reframed. Despite its ingenuity, the illustration merely reinscribes colonial discourses as it mobilises binaries which distinguish colonised from colonisers: nature and culture; primitive and advanced; ancient and modern; child and adult. Certainly the objectification of the indigenous constructs a sense of pathos, but again this is characteristic of Australian colonial discourses in which Aborigines are sentimentalised as helpless victims of modernity.

The final pages of the text see a shift into an overworded and heavily descriptive register quite different from the plain style attributed to the indigenous “we” up to this point: “The land is bare and brown and the wind blows empty across the plains. Where is the rich, dark earth, brown and moist? Where is the smell of rain dripping from gum trees? Where are the great billabongs, alive with long-legged birds? Who will save us from the rabbits?” (pp.29-32). The final illustration shows two figures now unified by a common dilemma as rabbit and indigenous face each other over a water-hole in a degraded landscape. The “we” of the narrative constructs an alliance between indigenous and non-indigenous as they oppose a mechanistic and depersonalising modernity. Through this sleight of hand, the text constructs a dehistoricised domain in which “we are all victims together”. If *The House that Jack Built* leaves no scope for the halfway house of “in-betweenness”, *The Rabbits* elides colonial history and postcolonial politics altogether, reconfiguring colonisation as anomie or alienation.

King and Monkman’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* adopts a narrative strategy which relies on the “ ironic recoding” (Hutcheon, 1985, p.101) of parody. Coyote, a trickster figure within Native traditions, is represented by Monkman as a young female dressed in tanktop, shorts and runners, her constructedness signalled textually by the fact that
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when she thinks or laughs too hard her nose falls off. It's because of a silly mistake by Coyote that colonisation occurs: in her desire to play baseball, she creates beavers, moose, turtles and finally human beings (that is, Native people), but “that sneaky one made up the rules, and she always won” (King and Monkman, 1992, p.10). When the human beings grow weary of playing and find better things to do (such as shopping, sky diving, big-time wrestling and going on a seven-day Caribbean cruise), Coyote becomes bored:

Well. That silly one sings a song and she dances a dance and she thinks really hard. But [she] doesn’t watch what she is making up out of her head.

When Coyote stops all that singing and dancing and thinking and she looks around, she sees three ships and some people in funny-looking clothes carrying flags and boxes of junk.

Oh, happy days, says Coyote. You are just in time for the ball game.

Hello, says one of the men in silly clothes with red hair all over his head. I am Christopher Columbus. I am sailing the ocean blue looking for India. Have you seen it?

Forget India, says Coyote. Let’s play ball. (p.14)

But far from playing ball, Columbus and his men search for treasure: gold, chocolate cake, computer games, music videos, until finally they seize upon the idea of selling human beings.

The disruptive present in which King and Monkman rehearse the “freak displacements” (Bhabha, p.448) of colonialism stretches out into a neocolonial world in which marginalised peoples are bought and sold according to the requirements of global capitalism; thus, Columbus goes back to Spain and “sells the human beings to rich people like baseball players and dentists and babysitters and parents” (King and Monkman, p.26). A Coyote Columbus Story ends where it began when Coyote attempts to take back the past in order to “fix up” the world (p.29). Again she “sings her song, dances her dance and she thinks really hard” (p.30). But another “bunch of funny-looking people” appears (ibid.), one of whom is Jacques Cartier: “I’m looking for India, says Jacques Cartier. Have you seen it? Coyote makes a happy mouth. And that one wags her ears. Forget India, she says. Maybe you want to play ball” (p.32).

Bhabha’s reflection on unhomely moments in literature leads him to speculate on whether “the perplexity of the unhomely, intrapersonal world” can “lead to an international theme” (p.449) in which “transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions - may be the terrains of world literature” (ibid.). Novels for children and young adults increasingly rehearse such ‘transnational histories’, principally as they relate to individuals and their development as subjects in the world. But there are comparatively few picture books which propose revisionings of colonial histories: in Australia, only the anti-bicentennial text My Place (1987) and Alan Tucker’s illustrated books, which include Too Many Captain Cooks (1994) and Side by Side (1998); in New Zealand, only The House that Jack Built; in North America, in addition to A Coyote Columbus Story, a small cluster of texts including Jane Yolen and David Shannon’s Encounter (1992), Paul Goble’s Death of the Iron Horse (1987) and the illustrated book This Land is My Land (1993), by George Littlechild. One explanation for the small number of such picture books lies
in the processes of pre-censorship which determine which narratives best fit with cultural value-systems. In particular, picture books for young readers are centred, in the main, on narratives which promote stability and personal identity in the context of domestic and familial relations.

Another explanation relates to the predominantly white world of authors, illustrators and publishers for children. Marcia Langton has said of Australian cultural production that there is no reason to imagine that “Aboriginal people will make ‘better’ representations of [Aborigines], simply because being Aboriginal gives ‘greater’ understanding” (1993, p.27); to suppose so is to assume that there is a single indigenous identity irrespective of differences of gender, history and location. It is nevertheless also true, to quote Langton again, that “from inside, a culture is ‘felt’ as normative ... it is European culture which is different for an Aboriginal person” (1993, p.36). In contrast, as Richard Dyer says in his study of whiteness in film, white representations of blackness tend to work towards the formulation of white identities, through a discourse that “implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject” (1997, p.13). This is, I think, what happens in The Rabbits, where Aboriginality is reduced to a universal victimhood figured within Western metanarratives. I hasten to say that my argument is not that non-indigenous producers cannot contest colonial histories; only that it’s always difficult to think otherwise than within the frameworks of one’s culture. The foolish mistake by which Christopher Columbus is created in A Coyote Columbus Story, and the intervention of the gods in The House that Jack Built, are moments beyond control, when “historical understanding is transformed through the signifying process” (Bhabha, p.450). Such metaphors for history lie outside and contest Western paradigms; they render unhomely events and places formerly comprehensible and familiar to non-indigenous audiences, and they occur within counter-narratives which interrogate colonial histories. They are therefore risky choices for children’s publishers seeking to please mainstream audiences.

References


