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Home and nation in Margaret Atwood's later fiction

“No place like home”

My opening phrase, taken from *The Blind Assassin* is, in its turn, a well-known quotation from *The Wizard of Oz*. In Atwood's novel, it relates to an episode from the Chase sisters' adolescence, where it is irreverent, odd, loony Laura who rewrites the sentence she heard many times from Reenie, the family housekeeper, whose language floods over with common sense, folk sayings, and popular wisdom. Laura's rewriting of "There's no place like home" – a stupid statement in her opinion – goes like this: "She wrote it out as an equation. *No place = home. Therefore, home = no place. Therefore home does not exist.*"¹ *The Blind Assassin* destabilizes received notions of home, with their conventional meanings of comfort, security, and custom. The Chase family estate – Avilion – acts as a refuge for the whole family; it functions as a bastion to keep the world outside at bay. In this novel, however, homes are also represented as provisional; they are unstable entities, like the patrimony of the Chase family. The sense of security, stability, and reassurance that Avilion has provided for Iris and Laura crumbles at one point in the narrative. Such a precarious figuration of home parallels the representation of nation and issues of national identity. Contemporary Canada, seen through Iris's eyes, appears, much to her astonishment, an odd assortment, a multicultural mosaic of ethnicities and languages with an elusive identity, which for people of Iris's generation and background comes very much as a surprise. Crucial also in this novel is the presence of an outsider, here embodied by Laura.² Iris's condition, on the other hand, is one of a beleaguered present and an excruciatingly painful past; her tale is one of place and displacement, constantly shifting between a now and a then. This tale underscores her dislocation and her dream of an elsewhere (both as a young and as an old woman).

Over the past ten years Atwood has argued against the importance commonly attributed to national identity for writers in postcolonial contexts,

maintaining that “we gave up a long time ago trying to isolate the gene for Canadianness.”³ In line with her postnationalist phase, which we could place around 1991 with the publication of *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood has developed such a stance further in *The Robber Bride*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Oryx and Crake*, challenging dominant discourses of home and homeland. However, in my discussion I have chosen one novel from the 1980s, *Cat's Eye*, before treating one from the 1990s, *The Robber Bride*, and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). All three novels problematize concepts of home and homelessness, in order to show how discourses of home are an extension of discourses of nation and national belonging, and how these are based on exclusion and oppression. In addition I would like to show how in these texts home as a repository of containment and safety shifts into “a discourse of insecurity.”⁴ In *Cat's Eye*, the visual artist Elaine Risley travels from Vancouver, where she lives in exile from her past, back to Toronto for a retrospective of her work. She starts to remember other journeys that belong to her adolescence, when her family moved from the wilderness to the city. At the time the experience of crossing the border on the way back to Toronto coincided with a movement from happiness, security, freedom, and peace to a sense of loss, pain, loneliness, humiliation, and the threat of more pain. As she recalls: “until we moved to Toronto I was happy.”⁵ Notwithstanding the passing of time, Elaine still considers Toronto to be the wrong place. The city seems to her oppressive and small, because of its intolerant and puritanical attitudes. In addition she feels constantly threatened by it: “their watchful, calculating windows. Malicious, grudging, vindictive, implacable” (*CE*, p. 14). Toronto represents an abhorrent world, as opposed to Vancouver, a place of refuge where she imagined she would be free of the past and would find happiness by starting afresh. Moving to Vancouver becomes an escape, a flight from the familiar, but also an act of amputation, of erasure which is also a denial of her previous life.

The representation of Elaine as a misfit, a victim of her girlfriends' tyranny, especially that of Cordelia, and ultimately as a stranger and an outsider can be connected with the novel's postcolonial implications. Elaine's first schoolteacher, Miss Lumley, is a proponent of English rule and British Empire:

“The sun never sets on the British Empire” . . . Before the British Empire there were no railroads or postal services in India, and Africa was full of tribal warfare, with spears, and had no proper clothing. The Indians in Canada did not have the wheel or telephones, and ate the hearts of their enemies . . . The British Empire changed all that. It brought in electric lights. (p. 79)

Miss Lumley advocates the conventional ordering of an imperial center and subsidiary margin. But something is not quite right, and Elaine, albeit unintentionally, undermines her teacher's teaching: "Because we are Britons," she muses one morning after class has sung "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia," "we will never be slaves. But we aren't real Britons because we are also Canadians. This isn't quite as good, although it has its own song . . . *The Maple Leaf Forever*" (p. 80). The position Elaine occupies with respect to Cordelia and the other girlfriends who bully her unmercifully – seeing her as on the margin and not quite measuring up – has obvious colonial (and thus also religious and racial) analogies in the text. She is, for example, impressed by how much the difficulties of Mr Banerj, her father's postgraduate student from India, are similar to her own. Likewise, she is attracted to Mrs Finestein, for whom she works as a baby-sitter, because this Jewish woman can happily ignore the prevailing Christian conception of what a wife and a mother should be.

Other considerations on who rules and to what end run throughout the novel. Carol Osborne has remarked on how Elaine's resistance to Cordelia is "associated with blackness," while Cordelia and her friends are "associated with white images." The usual symbolism of black and white is thereby reversed, and Elaine "aligns herself with minorities, both literally and figuratively, in order to overcome the oppression of white middle class Canadian society,"⁶ an oppression which mirrors others, like Canada's subjection to both British and American imperialism. Indeed, Burnham High School, with its official school plaid, crest, and Gaelic motto, and with a picture of Dame Flora MacLeod, the head of the MacLeod clan, hanging next to the portrait of the Queen, underscores just that. A number of displaced persons show up in Elaine's paintings. Even at the end, during her show, Elaine still feels displaced in Toronto: "I shouldn't have come back here, to this city that has it in for me" (p. 410).⁷

Atwood's subsequent novel *The Robber Bride* is set in an early 1990s Toronto still dominated by a white elite, though in fact it provides a problematic representation of Toronto as a global multiethnic city. A preoccupation with questions of home and estrangement, national identity and belonging runs through this novel, which is populated by characters who experience a literal or metaphorical exile. It is accompanied, however, by the recognition that such a displaced condition is different for "those from other countries,"⁸ that there is an "us" (white Anglophones) and a "them" (the immigrants) (*RB*, p. 99). In *The Robber Bride* the attention to visible minorities foregrounds difference, but the kind of difference highlighted in the novel is not simply multiculturalism, difference among cultures. It is also difference within culture and within the self.⁹ In this novel each one of the

protagonists – Tony, Roz, and Charis – feels estranged and foreign from her community, her family, her home country, like Zenia, who is the foreigner par excellence. I wish to draw a connection between the representations of home, mother country, and community in this novel, since as Benedict Anderson has argued, home, nation, and family operate within the same mythic metaphorical field.¹⁰ I want also to show how the very notion of home country is called into question.

In *Cat's Eye*, for the protagonist, “‘home’ is a foreign word in a place [Toronto] where [she] feels like a foreigner, where she felt and still feels out of place, isolated and excluded as if she were a member of a different culture or race.”¹¹ When Elaine comes back to her birthplace for an exhibition of her paintings, she wanders through the streets like a transient, nomad stranger: “In my dreams of this city I am always lost” (*CE*, p. 8). The questioning of the importance commonly attributed to a place called home is not altogether absent from Margaret Atwood's earlier fiction. In *Bodily Harm* (1981) Rennie muses over the meaning of roots:

Rennie is from Griswold, Ontario. Griswold is what they call her background. Though it's less like a background . . . than a subground, something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you'd want to go into. Those who'd lately been clamouring for roots had never seen a root up close, Rennie used to say. She had, and she'd rather be some other part of the plant.¹²

To come back to *The Robber Bride*, the rootlessness motif is central: the protagonists feel like foreigners in their home country.¹³ Such a theme of estrangement allows the text to probe further into the characters' experiences of a sense of “being at home” and “not being at home.” In so far as Tony, Roz, and Charis are represented as outsiders and homeless strangers, the novel brings into focus notions of home. To look into even metaphorical exile means to look into what or where it is to be at home, the place of inheritance, where one belongs as if of right. It requires a reflection on the meanings of home and a sense of place, with their implications of stability and security. It means also to look into dispossession, into what has been lost, and into what the three women try to re-create.

It is the homeless wanderer Zenia who shatters the sense of comfort, safety, and sanctuary attained by Roz, Charis, and Tony in their homes. Like exiles they experience a feeling of discontinuity within themselves. Like exiles they are double, split into a “now” and a “then,” a “here” and a “there”; this self-division is reinstated by their doubled or tripled names: Charis/Karen, Roz Andrews/Rosalind Greenwood/Roz Grunwald, Tony Fremont/Tnomerf Ynot – names that represent a part of the self they wish either to ignore or

suppress. The three of them have tried to gloss over their own discontinuity, to forget their past as homeless “orphans.” In their adult lives they all try to create a sense of home, to achieve a sense of stability and safety. However, they are forced to renegotiate such feelings as Zenia bursts into their lives and shatters them, showing how precarious and provisional that security was. They are forced to face chaos and instability both inside and outside, and are pushed into “perennial borders” (*RB*, p. 49), shifted into disorder.

During childhood and adolescence Tony, Roz, and Charis feel like strangers and/or homeless outsiders. “Tony spent her first days motherless. Nor – in the long run – did things improve” (p. 136). Tony’s mother, who is English, has never fully accepted her new situation in Canada nor her Canadian husband, whom in the end, she leaves.

She was forced . . . to this too-cramped, two-storey, fake Tudor, half-timbered, half-baked house, in this tedious neighbourhood, in this narrow-minded provincial city, in this too-large, too-small, too-cold, too-hot country that she hates . . . *Don’t talk like that!* she hisses at Tony. She means the accent . . .

So Tony is a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father also, because, although she talks the same way he does, she is – and he has made this clear – not a boy. Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting. Like a foreigner she keeps an eye out for sudden hostile gestures. Like a foreigner she makes mistakes. (pp. 144–45)

Tony is represented as a homeless outsider, alien to the world of her contemporaries. At college she stays “by herself” (p. 115), not having “much in common” with the other girls, and not having a “warm homely home” (p. 159) to return to during vacations. With time things do not change a great deal. As an historian and a female expert on war, Tony feels like an interloper; she is remote and aloof from her colleagues and from academic life. Tony’s sense of non-belonging is expressed also by her habit of writing words backwards; she feels at home only in the other world of her own creation where she is no longer Antonia Fremont but “TNOMERF YNOT. This name had a Russian or Martian sound to it, which pleased her. It was the name of an alien, or a spy” (p. 137).

Through the story of Roz the novel highlights two social problems of contemporary Canada: the phenomenon of mass displacement and the presence of DPs (Displaced Persons) in Canada. Roz’s immigrant background (her father is a DP of Jewish origin) contributes to the “undercurrent of exile” around her (p. 63). Roz feels foreign to Canadian culture and like a foreigner she tries to assimilate: “She wasn’t like the others, she was among them but she wasn’t part of them. So she would push and shove, trying to break her way in” (p. 322). During her adolescence Roz would continue to feel an

“interloper” (p. 341), and in her adult life, in spite of her financial success, she never feels at ease in her own community. She fears to appear as a foreigner to her own children, obsolete and archaic: “She spent the first half of her life feeling less and less like an immigrant, and now she’s spending the second half feeling more and more like one. A refugee from the land of middle age, stranded in the country of the young” (p. 77).

The other character, Charis, is virtually an orphan, without a home or family. Hers is a story of isolation, pain, and sexual abuse. Her perennial feeling of being dis-anchored is well rendered by the narrator’s comment: “Charis meandered: Tony saw her sometimes on the way to and from classes, wandering slantways across the street” (p. 118).

The novel presents recurring and conflicting notions of home through the three main characters. For them home connotes, in the first instance, safety, refuge, and protection from the outside world, be it Roz’s Rosedale mansion, Charis’s cottage on the Island, or Tony’s “turretted fortress” (p. 387). Roz has a clear perception of what Tony’s home represents for her, the “red-brick Gothic folly. Perfect for Tony though, what with the turret. She can hole herself up in there and pretend she’s invulnerable” (p. 288). Roz herself as an adult tries to build the sense of home and family she did not have as a child. She wishes to secure feelings of permanence, adherence, and stability for her children. “*Secure*, is what she wants them to feel; and they do feel secure, she is certain of it. They know this is a safe house, they know she is *there*, planted solidly, two feet on the ground” (p. 301). Tony’s own perception of her home place undergoes major shifts and restructuring. The sense of protection she feels in “her armoured house” (p. 409) is disrupted by Zenia’s intrusion in her life. The events will prove the provisionality of such feelings, and, as a result, the identity of Tony’s home will prove to be unfixed. “In the waning light the house is no longer thick, solid, incontrovertible. Instead it looks provisional, as if it’s about to be sold, or to set sail” (p. 37). Similarly, Roz’s mansion will eventually fail to provide the sense of bounded assurance, solidity, and refuge. It will no longer function as an oasis, as a harbor. In her fantasies her own bathtub becomes full of “sharks” (p. 105) or, in turn, her kitchen is transformed into a gloomy forest in which Roz finds herself “Wandering lost in the dark wood” (p. 389). With the help of Roz and Tony, Charis manages to “exorcise” her house from the “fragments” of Billy and Zenia, and to reclaim it. “*Her* house . . . her fragile but steady house, her flimsy house that is still standing” (p. 283).

Zenia’s reiterated and predatory actions force Tony, Roz, and Charis back into feeling not at home, estranged from themselves and from their familiar places: “Tony felt safe this morning, safe enough. But she doesn’t feel safe now. Everything has been called into question . . . Menace, chaos, cities

aflame, towers crashing down, the anarchy of deep water” (p. 35). Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, in their influential essay, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” have exploded the received notions of “home” and the ambience of safety, security, and individualism that the word has gathered around itself. As they argue, the notion of “home” is constructed on the tension between two specific modalities, “being home” and “not being home”: “Being ‘home’ refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself.”¹⁴ In the novel such a fracture within the self is opened up by Zenia’s invasion into the other women’s lives.

It has earlier been argued here that home, nation, and family belong to the same mythic metaphorical field. As Roger Rouse suggests, “the old paradigms within which we used to situate ourselves (via such concepts as ‘mother tongues,’ ‘fatherland,’ ‘cultural identity,’ or ‘home’) are becoming inoperative. Yet this does not mean that we have simply lost what formerly held us in place, that we are homeless migrants.”¹⁵ He argues that the terms which define who, what, and where we are must be reformulated in the light of the new social and psychological spaces we create for ourselves. In addition, the shifting notions of home in the novel suggest that home partakes in a logic of inclusion and exclusion. Home is not a neutral place: it is a political concept, like nation. As Rosemary George Marangoly has so forcefully argued:

Homes are built on select inclusions . . . grounded in a learned (or thought) sense of kinship . . . Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control . . . Homes are not about inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses . . . Imagining a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power.¹⁶

In *The Robber Bride* the seemingly conflictual qualities of comfort and terror, of power and violence are suggested by this refashioned perspective that Tony has of her own place: “She takes off her glasses . . . From the street her room must look like a lighthouse, a beacon. Warm and cheerful and safe. But towers have other uses. She could empty oil out the left-hand window, get a dead hit on anyone standing at the front door” (*RB*, p. 188).

The dividing line between the inside and the outside begins to falter: closed borders do not hold. By way of analogy, shifting borders come into play when the novel looks into questions pertaining to national, ethnic, and even religious identity. Authenticity is undermined whether in national character,

religion, race, or the self. The three main characters merge at various moments with “not – I,” namely Zenia. Despite their hatred for her, they reflect themselves in Zenia, at times they desire to be her in a play of splitting and doubling. “Tony looks at her [Zenia], looks into her blue-black eyes, and sees her own reflection: herself, as she would like to be. *Tnomerf Ynot*. Herself turned inside out” (p. 166). “Sometimes – for a day at least, or even for an hour . . . sometimes [Roz] would like to be Zenia” (p. 389).

According to Tony the historian, populations are nothing but hybrids. For this reason she has a peculiar arrangement on her table display of war maps down in the cellar. Tony uses kitchen spices for every different tribe or ethnic group. In this way she can visualize interbreeding and hybridization; for she is convinced that populations are not homogeneous but mixtures. As for religious identity, the novel presents an assortment of blends. Roz is first a Catholic, then a Jew because of her father. In the end she proudly proclaims herself a “pastiche” (p. 343). For Roz national identity is like putting on an act, it is staged as in a play: “Even the real thing looks constructed . . . Maybe that’s what people mean by a national identity. The hired help in outfits. The backdrops. The props” (p. 88). Unlike her partner, the American draft dodger Billy, terms like “country” and “nation” don’t mean all that much to Charis. “For Billy his country *was* a kind of God, an idea that Charis finds idolatrous and even barbaric” (p. 211). Charis herself would very much like to be like Shanita, the only non-white character in the novel. Shanita can metamorphose into anything non-Western she wants. As Charis considers: “She can be whatever she feels like, because who can tell? Whereas Charis is stuck with being white” (p. 57). Charis finds this condition exhausting, and hopes in her next life that she will be, like Shanita, of mixed race. Shanita’s capacity to be “in-between” like the “indeterminate colour” of her skin, “neither black nor brown nor yellow. A deep beige, but beige is a bland word” (p. 57), envisages the liberating effects of multiple locations “between cultures” as opposed to the restraint and constraint of origins.¹⁷ It is not accidental that such an aspiration to a liminal condition is experienced primarily by Charis, who is represented as a “vagrant” (p. 19), a drifter, “wandering” (p. 18), and “transient” (p. 217).

It is orphaned and nationless Zenia who disrupts the other three women’s illusory stability, who “reminds them of their divided, multiple conditions,” and “makes them feel disoriented and unsettled” (Staels, *Margaret Atwood’s Novels*, p. 196). *The Robber Bride* does not emphasize fluidity without borders but rather the awareness of the non-static, non-fixed quality of borders: “There is a continuous ebb and flow, a blending, a shift of territories” (*RB*, p. 112). Hence the desire to transgress, to trespass beyond the borders of nation and race, to extend beyond the bounds of the self. In the tension

between place, cultural homogeneity, and national identity it is the migrant figure who exceeds the space of nation-state because her status remains in-between. Cultural, temporal, spatial, and political displacements complicate the space in-between, “resisting the neat containment of multiculturalism’s ethnic categories as well as generalized notions of nomadism.”¹⁸ Atwood’s recent short short story “Post-Colonial” foregrounds the divisions within Canadian society, the existence of a “we” and a “them.”¹⁹ That story ironically emphasizes a version of Canadian history which highlights “the narrative of Canada as a generous land open to immigrants (where the other is welcomed on *our soil*”) (Manning, *Ephemeral Territories*, p. 68).

Children of the future

We children of the future, how can we be at home in this world of today!²⁰

Oryx and Crake partakes of a similar logic of representing processes of inclusion and exclusion, of inside and outside. The protagonist’s isolation and temporal displacement makes him the ultimate outcast, compelled to “live,” albeit surreptitiously, in the past, a past which is populated by reveries, dreams, memories, and nostalgia. In this, Atwood’s recent novel, the notion of a geographical and historical home gives way to constructs of imagination and memory. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood has gone back to the future with the dystopian genre, and as in *The Handmaid’s Tale* the reader is aware of two dimensions of time (a before and after) through the narrative reconstructions of the protagonist Jimmy/Snowman. When the novel opens it seems that, besides Snowman, this barren world is populated only by the genetically engineered beings called Crakers, invented by Snowman’s best friend, Crake, in a secret experiment intended to generate a new race not troubled by sexual needs, aggression, religious and racial impulses. They are infantile, multicolored, and consider Snowman their mentor. After all, it is he who has led them to a place called “*home*.”²¹

In the dystopian future described by Snowman’s narrative before the catastrophe occurs, life in the Compounds where Jimmy and Crake grew up is coerced and controlled – though in a soft and seemingly privileged manner. In the Compounds live the privileged gated communities which belong to vast international biotech corporations. The inhabitants’ movements in and out of them are strictly monitored. One of the main worries of these immensely wealthy corporations is to protect their employees from the lawless “pleblands.” Thus the novel reveals that here already “home” is a “compromised site.”²² The supposed security of Jimmy’s family is achieved at a high cost

by means of implementing a policy of authoritarian monitoring and control. This is how Jimmy's father explains it to his son:

Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and the dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies . . . and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside. (O&C, p. 28)

Atwood here returns to the medieval images of turrets and fortresses; as in *The Robber Bride*, such imagery is suggestive of strong demarcations between inside and outside. In *Oryx and Crake* to be "at home" implies living within a policed enclosure.

After the catastrophe, however, Snowman finds himself stranded and displaced in an alien environment. In this new context he is portrayed as the ultimate outsider, possibly the last survivor of the human species. Snowman is in a position where he feels excluded from other living beings but obscurely related to them, and he wishes that he could make them understand that relationship, and so recognize kinship with himself: "*I'm your past*, he might intone. *I'm your ancestor, come from the land of the dead. Now I'm lost, I can't get back, I'm stranded here, I'm all alone. Let me in!*" (p. 106). He is outside the world of the living and of the dead, but somehow still in both of them. He remains an in-between figure, a state that anthropologist Victor Turner has called "liminality," where a group or individual, having separated from an established place in the social structure, is "neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification."²³ Snowman's liminal status is underscored repeatedly in the text: "But those rules no longer apply, and it's given Snowman a bitter pleasure to adopt this dubious label. The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and its backward-pointing footprints" (pp. 7–8). Like a foreigner in a culturally and linguistically alien environment, Snowman must be always on the alert; like a foreigner he is profoundly alone in his condition, cannot share his pain with anybody, and lives haunted by his memories.

An outsider, a stranger, ultimately an exile. Like an exile he has been split into two, with two different names, Jimmy and Snowman; like an exile he is split between a "before" and an "after," a "here" and a "there" (which exists only in his mind), and an elsewhere where he would like to be: "Maybe he's merely envious. Envious yet again. He too would like to be invisible and adored. He too would like to be elsewhere. No hope for that" (p. 162). Like an exile he has to cope with loss: loss of his previous life, but more importantly, the loss of his beloved Oryx. Like an exile he is haunted by nostalgia,

and by the “presence of absence” (Rubinstein, *Home Matters*, p. 5). Like an exile he is in that liminal condition between longing and belonging. Like an exile Snowman constantly desires: another place, other company, another future. He is in a state of suspension between two dimensions: a past he cannot recover and a future which is unimaginable. As a liminal figure he is in a state of suspended time; when the novel opens and when it ends, it is “zero hour.” Snowman looks at his watch and its blank face “causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time” (p. 3). He is at a crossroads, suspended in the present, “up to his neck in the here and now” (p. 162).

In such a displaced condition Snowman’s relation to language soon becomes one of estrangement. Like an exile, he experiences a vertigo of meaning, as English starts to become like a foreign language to him. Snowman’s peculiar relation to language comes, however, not as a surprise. In his prior life as Jimmy, the protagonist of this novel, he is defined as a “word person.” The thematics of language, of different sensitivities towards it, is highlighted by the constant distinction in the text between “word persons” and “numbers persons.” Jimmy/Snowman is repeatedly defined as a “word person,” unlike his father and Crake, who as scientists are definitively “numbers persons.” Even as a youngster, Jimmy shows a particular sensitivity towards language; for example he is very aware of clichés and for the most part avoids using them, except when he is trying to seduce women. His love for words is underscored throughout the text:

He compiled lists of old words too – words of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today’s world, or *today’s world*, as Jimmy sometimes deliberately misspelled it on his term papers . . . He’d developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them. (p. 195)

The reassuring effect of words returns again and again, as he whispers them quietly to himself, like a magic incantation: “*Succulent. Morphology. Purblind. Quarto. Frass,*” for through such words he finds a peculiar sense of calm (p. 344). It is, perhaps, for this reason that in a time of crisis and depression Jimmy’s relation with language changes dramatically. When the sense of temporariness and rootlessness overwhelms him, language loses its “solidity”; it becomes “thin, contingent, slippery” (p. 260). That condition becomes exacerbated when Jimmy turns into Snowman. For him, signifier and signified are disjointed, and as a result language loses its ability to evoke any meaning at all: “From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can’t reach the word. He can’t attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of

meaning" (p. 39). Snowman at times is afraid of having lost control over his mind and consequently over language. In the post-catastrophe world he finds himself in a vertigo of sense which tries to suck him in and from which he is constantly trying to escape. He feels as if he is on the border of a cliff above a precipice where it would be too dangerous to look down. Yet unpredictably, words also preserve their meaning at times and allow Snowman to tell, remember, think over his story, on how he got where he is now, in the narrative present. Words are also a salvation, a way to remind him that he is still human and alive; they become like stones fastened to his body in order to prevent him from falling down into the abyss of non-sense: "‘Hang on to the words,’ he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones" (p. 68).

The act of storytelling, here as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, has multiple resonances. It is a means of survival that allows Snowman to avoid sinking into a world where words lose their consistency, use, and meaning. He would like to resume his old habits as a "word man," telling and listening, reading books and studying them, immersing himself in the shifting patterns of language. Instead, he is in danger of being overwhelmed by the loss of his most valuable skill: "‘I used to be erudite,’ he says out loud. *Erudite*. A hopeless word. What are all those things he once thought he knew, and where have they gone?" (p. 148). In his liminal condition of stranger, the act of storytelling becomes the only place where he can feel housed. For Snowman narration becomes his itinerant, nomadic home, where his *étrangeté*, understood as strangeness, estrangement, alienation, foreignness, "take[s] up residence" (Manning, *Ephemeral Territories*, p. 73). Snowman's narration also signifies hope for the future, since it implies a "you," as in *The Handmaid's Tale*: "a story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just you, without a name."²⁴ As Atwood's protagonist, Offred, elaborates: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (*HT*, p. 279). Snowman's narrative is also therapeutic in that it helps him to cope with the oppressive sense of guilt for merely witnessing Crake's dangerous plan without acting; but non-acting has, of course, its consequences. Snowman does his best to forget the past and his own willful self-centered ignorance, though of course being human he cannot be like the Crakers, who have been constructed without a sense of past and future; at best, he can repress memory, but it has the uncanny habit of returning, and ironically his only relief comes through storytelling. The act of telling his tale to an unspecified listener (or any listener at all, even a rakunk) helps Snowman to understand what happened; but his story is full of gaps for himself and for the reader. Meaning constantly escapes him, till the very end of the

novel with its elusive, open-ended conclusion. Does Snowman survive? Who are the people he sees? Are they going to kill him? Is he going to kill them?

As in Atwood's earlier dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, her major concern in *Oryx and Crake* lies in the present, rather than in the future. It is perhaps useful to stress that in *Oryx and Crake* there is no single mention of Canada. Atwood's most recent novel to date is suggestive of a thinking and feeling beyond the nation. Her quest for Canada's and Canadian literature's visibility started in the 1970s, and now fully realized, has provided room for a whole set of different themes and concerns: the possibilities and risks involved in the fast-paced discoveries of new technologies, as well as the "second wave" of xenophobia and intolerance for cultural, class, and racial diversity. The persistent habit of considering "strange" whatever is different from ourselves (in skin color, habit, custom, ultimately citizenship) is hard to do away with.²⁵ For such reasons her recent novels put into question narratives of national attachment by refusing to adhere to the limitations of the nation-state and its related discourses of territory and identity. Those nationalist discourses sustain certain definitions of the domestic, where the capacity of home to domesticate lies in its very power to define inside and outside, not solely because of what is enclosed, but also because what remains the "outside" is still controlled by the logic of the enclosure. Despite such investments in power and control, these novels seem to warn us that "any notion of habitation is fragile" and that home is no longer "a locus of safety" (Manning, *Ephemeral Territories*, pp. 56, 52).

NOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 447.
2. For an analysis of the role of Laura vis-à-vis her sister Iris, see Hilde Staels, "Atwood's Specular Narrative: *The Blind Assassin*," *English Studies* 85.2 (April 2004): pp. 147–60.
3. Margaret Atwood and Robert Weaver, eds., *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. xiii.
4. Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 40.
5. Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), p. 21.
6. Carol Osborne, "Constructing the Self through Memory: *Cat's Eye* as a Novel of Self-Development," *Frontiers* 14.3 (1994): p. 104.
7. For a lucid analysis of Elaine's displacement see Arnold Davidson, *Seeing in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's "Cat's Eye"* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1997).
8. Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 36.
9. Trinh Minh-hà, "Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism," *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 90.
10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 6–7.

11. Hilde Staels, *Margaret Atwood's Novels. A Study of Narrative Discourse* (Tubingen and Basel: Francke Verlag, 1995), p. 187.
12. Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 18.
13. Shannon Hengen, "Zenía's Foreignness," *Various Atwoods*, ed. Lorraine York (Toronto: Anansi, 1995), pp. 271–86. See also Coral Howells, "The Robber Bride; or, Who Is a True Canadian?" and Carol L. Beran, "Strangers within the Gates: Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*," *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations*, ed. Sharon R. Wilson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), pp. 88–101 and pp. 74–87.
14. Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" *Feminist Studies/Cultural Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 196–97.
15. Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* 1.1 (Spring 1991), quoted in Angelika Bammer, "Editorial," *The Question of Home, New Formations* 17 (Summer 1992): p. viii.
16. Rosemary George Marangoly, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 6–9.
17. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, eds. Michelle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 89.
18. Dianne Nemiroff, "Crossing," *Crossing* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1998), p. 28.
19. Margaret Atwood, *Bottle* (Hay: Hay Festival Press, 2004), p. 39.
20. Friederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage: New York, 1974), Book v, par. 377.
21. Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 354.
22. Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 73.
23. Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 232.
24. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 50.
25. See Earl G. Ingersoll, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 139 and p. 214.

The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood - April 2021. The argument focuses on concepts of home and estrangement, showing how discourses of home are an extension of discourses of nation and national belonging, and how across Atwood's later novels discourses of home have shifted into discourses of insecurity and alienation. Here storytelling is of paramount importance, providing patterns of meaning and a form of therapy as it becomes a poetics of survival in a postapocalyptic world where any idea of habitation is fragile and home is no longer a place of safety. Keywords: national identity. Margaret Atwood, Canadian writer best known for her prose fiction and for her feminist perspective. Her notable books included *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Testaments* (2019). Learn more about Atwood's life and work. What was Margaret Atwood's childhood like? Margaret Atwood began writing at age five and resumed her efforts, more seriously, a decade later. As an adolescent, Atwood divided her time between Toronto, her family's primary residence, and the sparsely settled bush country in northern Canada, where her father, an entomologist, conducted research. What awards did Margaret Atwood win? Margaret Atwood's *Straddling Environmentalism* asks why Atwood crosses the Canada-US border in her dystopian fiction. It takes Atwood's 2004 comments that *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) partly grew out of her irritation when people say "it can't happen here" and her claim that she decided to set the novel in Cambridge, Massachusetts as being related to that irritation - "It can't happen here," she explained, "should be placed in the most extreme 'here' - as a prompt." Such a precarious figuration of home parallels the representation of nation and issues of national identity. Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer, best known for her novels, short stories and poems. This biography of Margaret Atwood provides detailed information about her childhood, life, achievements, works & timeline. She is a feminist by nature and her fiction revolves around a woman character in most of her novels. Her writing has an impact on the reader's mind and one is forced to think about the connection between reality and fiction after reading her stories and poems. Her fictional work consists of historical as well as scientific backdrops with a strong and independent woman as its central character. Her stories have realistic yet imaginative textures which converge thoughtfully with open endings that tend to make a greater impact on the society.