

HOMELESSNESS AND GLOBALIZATION: THE EVIDENCE OF LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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The following article discusses the question of what research into children's texts might look like in this putatively globalizing world. The author's analysis of the texts *Erik is Homeless* by Keith Elliot Greenberg and *Tom Finder* by Martine Leavitt featuring homeless young people suggests some ways in which such texts allow the reader to see how home comes to be established, and what the implications and costs of such an establishment are. As the two given texts share the system of meaning and the theme of displacement, the author places them into a certain thematic niche in the modern children's literature. Another important issue discussed is the need for systematic, collaborative, international and comparative research of children's texts that is bound to create a conversation about ways of moving across borders or travelling in the borderless world.

Key words: migration, diaspora, home, refugee, homelessness, child.

In his influential reflection on the conditions of contemporary world literature and culture, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha has suggested that the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees [1, p. 5]

Migration, diaspora, displacement, exile, refugee: all of these words speak of people who are not at home, forced to cross borders, moved out of their places, reluctant travellers. There is another discourse of travelling that stands beside this literature of the unhomed. This is the triumphalist language of globalization, which celebrates the international traveller and tourist, enables the circulation of ideas and currency through multinational entities, and idealizes the nomadic elites who refuse to settle in one place as citizens of the world. And, in recent years, another, more anxious, discourse of movement has proliferated internationally, that of terrorist infiltration, homeland security and border controls.

The movement of people across borders and within national spaces, of course, has a long history, a history revealed by the cultural texts from many traditions that organize their narratives around the ideas of journeys, departures, and arrivals. But there is widespread agreement among cultural commentators that it is in the historical moment in which we are now living—an era often identified as the post-1989 period, dated from the dismantling of the Berlin Wall—in which mobility and restricted mobility, in its various forms, have become central figures through which we are exploring the world and our place in it.

I recognize that the plural pronouns in that last sentence are highly problematic. Who is the "we" who is being represented as an explorer of a world that is already, apparently, their place in some sense? Is this the sort of generalizing, universalizing rhetoric that is only available to a speaker who, as a North American scholar, is one of the travelling elite? It is no part of my intention in this paper to argue for the validity of my observations and interpretations despite my privileged location. Rather, I want to recognize, unequivocally, from the beginning of this paper that I can speak only from my specific location and that this location inevitably determines and limits what I can see and know. At the same time, I

believe that research into children's texts in an age of globalization must take seriously the imperative of international, comparative study. As far as I can see, such work must also be collaborative work among groups of researchers, exactly because of the ways in which any one of us is bound and circumscribed by our places. What I want to propose is that the multiple discourses of mobility that are in use in these times offer resonant terms for such international, comparative, collaborative work.

It is perhaps a truism to suggest that the primary function of children's literature across many national and historical contexts is to produce the subjects required by a dominant ideology to reproduce itself. A more common way of putting this would be to say that children's books typically set out to teach their readers how to be good citizens; or, to use the metaphor I have been investigating in much of my recent work, we might say that the primary function of children's literature is to "home" its child subjects, both the child subjects inside texts and the child readers of texts. "Home" is a resonant term for thinking through the implications of this proposition, both because it is such an important location in many children's texts and because it operates through a variety of discourses that link the knowledge of self with territory, the desire for belonging with the ownership of property, the rights to privacy with gendered spaces, and safety with nation, since "home" can mean any or all of these things. Moreover, disturbances to any one of these senses of home can reverberate at any or all of the other points along the chain of meaning. The homely imperatives adults direct to children through the texts designed for them entail complicated understandings of the relation of self and other, kin and stranger, here and there. Because home, arguably, has been the privileged signifier for the construction of the desired subject in children's literature, it seems likely that the many current discourses of unhoming—travel, exile, border-crossing, diaspora, homelessness—will also be registered in this literature.

In the analysis that follows, I take two texts from North America directed to young people and featuring homeless young people to suggest some ways in which such texts allow us to see more fully how home comes to be established, and what the implications and costs of such an establishment are. In my conclusion, I want to return to address the question of the construction of research projects in our field.

The first book is entitled *Erik is Homeless*, a nonfiction story by journalist Keith Elliot Greenberg, published in 1992 by Lerner Publications of Minneapolis, which identifies itself on its website as serving the retail, school, and library markets. Greenberg's account is described on the inside front cover as an attempt to "bring to life the personal side of a complex and often frightening social issue." The text borrows the conventional circular-journey structure of children's texts, beginning with a photograph of Erik waking in his bed at Prospect Interfaith Family Inn, a "transitional" housing facility in New York in which Erik lives with his lone-parent mother, Lydia, and ending with Erik going to bed at the end of the day in his life that is being depicted in this text. As the (almost) home-away-(almost) home structure implies, Erik and his mother deserve a home, and in an afterword, set six months after the events depicted in the story, they are said to be "on their way" to achieving such a home, having moved into their own apartment and with Lydia planning to be married soon [3, p. 40].

The first characteristic that identifies them as good candidates for homing, then, appears to be their commitment to a patriarchal family: they have become homeless after Erik's father dies in an accident on his way home from work and they are set to re-enter a fathered family with Lydia's marriage to her new boyfriend. In this text, the patriarchal family is a strictly bounded nuclear family, a constricted unit that is naturalized in this story. There are several incidents in which other family members appear at the edges of the story—Lydia's mother who offers Lydia and Erik a place in her house; Lydia's son and daughter from an earlier marriage, both of whom appear to be well-housed and with good jobs; and a teacher cousin. None of these family members' houses is considered by either the characters or the

narrator as possible homes for Lydia and Erik. In fact, the chance meeting with Lydia's cousin is a tense moment in the narrative, which is "happily" resolved when he leaves without Lydia "giv[ing] away her secret" [3, p. 14], i.e. her condition of homelessness.

That their homelessness is a matter of shame for both Lydia and Erik is reiterated several times during their story, and the narrator never suggests that it should not be so. The first meaning of "shame" given in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary is "a feeling of distress or humiliation caused by consciousness of the guilt or foolishness of oneself or an associate." Thus, it appears that this text assumes that homelessness is a condition of which individuals can be said to be guilty, and for which individuals must take responsibility. Lydia and Erik are candidates for home exactly because they do take such responsibility, and set out to relieve their distress and humiliation by adopting what Andrew O'Malley has called the "investment mentality" of the middle classes [3, p. 46], imagining and planning for a "normal" housed future. Lydia "attends a class that helps her develop the skills she need to find an apartment and a job" [3, p. 37] and Erik "concentrates on improving his basic abilities, figuring out multiplication tables and trying to raise his reading level" [3, p. 35], and thinking "about becoming a math teacher" [3, p. 23].

As both Lydia and Erik's conscientious attention to their homework suggests, their suitability for being homed subjects is evident in their willingness to subject themselves to the surveillance of institutions and institutional representatives. And there are layers upon layers of surveillance evident in this text: from the "other residents" who "peek in" to their room to the workers at the Prospect who are "very strict" about not "letting outsiders into the building" [3, p. 11], to the Board of Education worker to whom Erik must report before he leaves for school [3, p. 12], the schoolchildren who watch to see which of their classmates walk in the direction of the Prospect, the counselors at Homes for the Homeless, Erik's "homework helper" [3, p. 29], and the doctors at the free mobile clinic, among others. Moreover, their safety depends on their crossing few borders: Erik's father was killed crossing a street and Erik and his mother wisely navigate the streets of the South Bronx with great care, looking both ways before they enter the street from the Prospect, crossing streets at the designated places, and walking together hand in hand.

In short, the achievement of home in *Erik is Homeless* appears to depend on keeping one's condition of homelessness a secret, from family members and perhaps even from oneself, but at the same time agreeing to surveillance by the authorities; projecting oneself imaginatively into a "normal" future but also staying within bounds.

The second book I want to consider briefly is *Tom FINDER*, a novel by Martine Leavitt about a homeless teenager living on the streets of Calgary, published by a mid-size Canadian press in 2003. Described on the back cover as being a "story about a boy's hunger for a place in the world," Tom's story sounds like another version of Erik's story. There are, in fact, many shared thematic elements between the two books, but the novel appears to enlarge and, sometimes, to invert these images. For example, like Erik and Lydia, Tom's relation to family and to self-knowledge is a perplexed one. In fact, the novel opens with Tom running and, as he runs, forgetting who he is, where he lives, what he has experienced, everything about his family or school; everything, in fact, except his first name. Much of the novel is occupied by Tom's attempt to figure out where home is—something he does by disciplining himself to do a version of homework, writing down in the notebook he finds in his backpack everything he observes and believes to be true about himself and the world around him, and that might help him to find the parents he fantasizes are wild with grief at his unexplained disappearance. Thus like Erik Tom's story is shaped by his relation to an imagined futurity.

But Tom's projected future, in which he is re-united with the powerful, successful figures he has dreamed his parents are, unravels as he eventually recalls the squalid

apartment in which he lived with his mother and her boyfriend, the beatings from his mother's boyfriend and his mother's passive acceptance of the abuse, which sent him running from home at the start of the story: "Home. H-O-A-M. Was that how it was spelled? It started with a huh-huh-huh sound, like maybe you were going to cry. It started with an *h*. The rest sounded sad, like a groan. H-O-A-M. That must be it" [4, p. 125]. This book begins and ends with Tom running away from home, choosing at the end the possibility of safety on the streets to the certainty of danger at home.

Borders appear everywhere in the story—in the border between what Tom codes as the core and the periphery of his city, the dark alleyways and tangled walks down which he moves looking for a young aboriginal man whose father has asked him to bring his son home, the thresholds of the derelict houses where he finds some community, the bridge to the island in the park on which Tom has made a rudimentary shelter. Borders can be dangerous, but they must be, and are, crossed repeatedly. For most of the story Tom also finds ways of evading institutional surveillance and maintaining his invisibility—not making himself known to police, escaping from the hospital after he is beaten by a gang, refusing to register with the homeless shelter.

At the end of his story, he decides to make himself visible, selectively, and to solicit the attention of a wealthy newspaper man he has met in the park by writing his story and the stories of his street friends who have died in a squat fire, making them real by making them up. Here is the last paragraph of the novel:

He would write their stories. Everyone of them had a story. The newspaper man would buy it, Tom was sure. And maybe take him home to meet his wife. He wrote their names. Not their real names, but their street names, the ones they had died in. He had no trouble finding the words [4, p. 141].

The last image of the book has Tom occupying the border between the sidewalk and the street, sitting on a curb writing in his notebook. Hence in this novel the possibility of being a homed subject seems to turn on the ability to put oneself into language, to allow oneself to circulate in discourse, to produce a subjectivity complicated and interesting enough to attract the attention of the powerful. This seems to me a version of the "communicative capitalism" which commentators have suggested is the form of production now governing the globalized world, in which "the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow, or circulation of content" [2, p. 274].

I said at the beginning of this paper that I was interested in exploring the question of what research into children's texts might look like in this putatively globalizing world. My thinking about the texts of *Erik is Homeless* and *Tom Finder* has led me to several propositions, which I would be interested in discussing with any of you further during this conference.

Firstly, the times in which we find ourselves call for systematic research. Too often, I think, we tend as scholars in the field of children's literature to begin and to end with close readings of individual texts. I am increasingly convinced that what we need to consider is how texts function within a system of meaning and what place they occupy within that system. The texts I have considered here, for example, both address the idea of homelessness and, as English-language, North American texts can be seen to be operating within a shared system of narrative meaning, even while, as a nonfiction and fiction, they operate within different valences of that system. Both also are exemplary texts: *Erik is Homeless* is one of a group of at least fifteen nonfiction texts I have found on the topic of homelessness directed to young people and published since 1990, many of them using the model of a debate to discuss the topic, and all of them marketed as suitable for classroom study; and *Tom Finder* is one of seven or eight novels for young people which use homeless children or adolescents as their central characters published since 1999, most of them nominees for or winners of major literary prizes. Are the thematic concerns of border crossings, invisibility,

secrets and surveillance, and the hinges between institutional and family structures shared terms in all of these books? What other configurations of these themes are available?

Secondly, the times in which we live, I believe, require us to use all of the skills we have learned through working with theories of deconstruction, ideology, and genealogy to read texts against themselves, to alter the order of their workings, in order to understand *how* they make their meanings. Too often, I think, critics of children's literature attempt to repair the failures of texts and amplify and, therefore, extend the work of texts rather than critique them. If I am right to suspect that contemporary children's literature is working to create the new subjects required by the ideologies of globalization—subjects defined in the texts I look at in this paper by their conditions of homelessness—then it seems important for us as critics to consider carefully whether we want to confirm or interrupt the processes of this interpellation.

Thirdly, as I have already said, we need to be doing more comparative research, studying texts from different nations beside one another, transposing texts from the national contexts in which they are produced to other contexts. For example, all of the nonfiction texts I have found to date were published in the United States, and all of the novels with which I have been working were published in Canada, yet, when they are set beside each other, they speak to one another of the assumptions and silences of one another. If even the differences between the American and Canadian texts appear significant, how might these texts appear if they are set beside texts from Europe, from nations of the former Soviet bloc, from Asia. What values, ideas, and effects are joined in the different languages of home? How is homelessness understood? What are its links to other forms of mobility?

And finally, we need to be undertaking more collaborative research. While scholars have learned much about the ways in which any one of us is bound by our locations and circumscribed by our training and prejudices, we too often continue to work as though acknowledging this fact is the most that we can do. Rather, I think, it should be the beginning of what we do as we attempt to find ways to communicate what we know across the borders of language, nation, and discipline. At its best, collaborative research does not mimic what I think of as "talk show" discourse, in which each speaker contributes stories that sit side by side without addressing the claims of the other. What I would hope for, rather, is research in which collaborators would read one another's texts, and speak to the claims each makes about texts; research in which collaborators would model dialogical discourse.

Can we construct such research projects? How might we go about doing so? While I do not want to minimize the challenges of such work, I believe that it is also possible that, through systematic, deconstructive, comparative, and collaborative research, we might create a conversation about ways of moving across borders or of travelling in the borderless world they tell us is here, or is coming, with the knowledge that we are not wandering alone, but with and beside others to whom we can speak.

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СВІДЧЕННЯ ПРО БЕЗПРИТУЛЬНІСТЬ ТА ГЛОБАЛІЗАЦІЮ У ЛІТЕРАТУРІ ДЛЯ ЮНАЦТВА

Мейвіс Раймер

Автор статті зацікавлена у проблемах дослідження дитячої літератури в сучасному глобалізованому світі. Аналіз творів “Безпритульний Ерік” Кіта Еліота Грінберга і “Том у пошуках” Мартіна Левіта, центральні персонажі яких – безпритульні, дозволяє читачеві побачити, яким чином відбувається становлення “дому”. Оскільки основна тема обох текстів – вигнання – автор визначає для них певну нішу в сучасній дитячій літературі. Водночас, сучасність надає усі загальновідомі форми пізнання, наприклад, теорії деконструкції, ідеологічні та генеалогічні теорії для глибинного прочитання текстів. В статті наголошено на потребі систематичної міжнародної наукової співпраці задля повноцінного дослідження текстів дитячої літератури і міжнаціонального діалогу щодо проблеми вигнання в сучасному світі.

Ключові слова: міграція; діаспора; заміщення; вигнання; біженець; без притульності; дитина.