

“YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN”: READING THE SHIFTING IDEA OF “HOME” IN RUPERT ISAACSON’S *THE HEALING LAND: A KALAHARI JOURNEY*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “home” is inextricably linked with identity – be it personal, cultural, ethnic or national identity. The fact that numerous significations (notably homeland, home language, or home ground) accrue to the idea of home points to the concept’s shifting nature, particularly in a world typified by all manner of migrations, displacements and diasporas. “Home” is often associated with “a sense of place or belonging” (Sarup 1994: 94), and thus gestures towards links with one’s birth place, roots, rootedness and boundaries. Nevertheless, current conceptualisations of home have shown it be an open concept, an immensely tenuous and open category that gravitates between a centre (associated with and characterised by notions of birth, love, nourishment and security) and the margins where liminal identity may play out. This article examines the shifting notion of “home” in Rupert Isaacson’s *The healing land: a Kalahari journey*, a text in which the scattered and shifting nature of the idea of home is writ large. I argue that, over and above conventional meanings associated with “home”, the concept now references a whole range of competing meanings, including one’s memory of one’s past life or tradition, a sentimental idea of imaginary space, or a dark abyss of desire, all of which point to an abstraction which springs up from time to time to sound like truth.

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Thomas Wolfe's title of his famous novel, *You can't go home again*, is instructive and acts as the cue for this paper, which examines the fluid and ever-contested notion of "home" in a world that has always been characterised by demographic shifts, multiple diasporas and other pathways of belonging and identity. An immensely resonant novel, Wolfe's text constitutes a cosmic act of deconstruction of the notion of "home", a structuring trope of the text whose meaning he distends to dramatic effect. The text evinces the author's disposition towards an opposition to notions of truth that seem to be grounded on some finality of formulation – a formulation that seems to represent the notion of "home" as reflecting and authorising a particular approach to knowledge that has pretences to objective and unbiased reality. For Wolfe, the essence of all reality, including that which relates to the concept of "home", lies in questioning its frame and apparent certitude. Tellingly, the high point of such questioning is self-evident at the end of the novel in *Book Seven* where, in his rumination about the concept of "home", the novel's protagonist, George Webber, reaches the following realization:

You can't go back home again to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to romantic love, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile... back home to the escapes of Time and Memory. (Wolfe 1940: 644)

Thomas Wolfe realizes the extent to which the concept of "home", both as a sense of rootedness, as well as an arbitrary and free-floating signifier only located in language, is often idealised and yet remains an unattainable ideal. In the previous quote, for example, Wolfe not only evokes the notion of a remembered original home (which he left behind at various times of his life) as one that stands at a distance in time and space, but also comes to an understanding of the concept of home as a metaphor for the various ways in which we often romanticize the past, seeing it as transcendence, utopia and plenitude. Now that he understands that such notions of home reside only in memory, Webber reaches the conclusion that any hopes and dreams of a return to such a place of origin are doomed from the start. This explains why he distends the meaning of home by turning it into a rather strange concatenation of meanings. These meanings allude to varied desires coterminous with life itself, notably the metaphorical homes of fame or romantic love that Wolfe's novel evokes and that Webber is left to reflect on. By so doing, Webber is able to construct profound and liberating axioms, which, he believes, will free his spirit from society's stultifying strictures against people who express alternative views. As I will show later in this article, George Webber's reflections on the notion of home have a particular resonance for Rupert Isaacson's text, *The healing land: a Kalahari journey*, a work in which the narrator, after being subjected to displacements occasioned by colonialism, finds himself having to grapple with the idea of home, first as fragments of reality that his mother relates to him and, later on in life, as a lived experience as exemplified by his peripatetic way of life. Like George Webber in Thomas Wolfe's text, the narrator

in Isaacson's *The healing land: a Kalahari journey* realizes that his British "home", which he has irrevocably left behind through colonial dislocation, exists only as shards of memory that foreclose his dreams of any meaningful return.

First, though, it is necessary to explore the complex concept of home. At the core of basic, traditional understanding of notions of "home" is "the stable physical centre of one's universe – a safe and still place to leave and return to (whether house, village, region or nation), and a principal focus of one's concern and control" (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 6). The idea of home, understood in this way, is a synonym for a locality where space and time are configured in a seamless way as to make it a totality or whole.

Such a concept of home as rootedness finds expression in the ruminations of phenomenological philosopher, Martin Heidegger, for whom the idea of "home" has to be understood in relation to building and existence in general. Thus in his wellknown essay titled "Building dwelling thinking", Heidegger posits the theory that building is irrevocably bound up with the idea of dwelling, suggesting that human existence is space-bound, and that home or dwelling is a notion that can be located and pinpointed in time and space and has an enduring quality of finality. Having made this authoritative proposition, Heidegger goes off at a tangent by making the claim that the notion is beyond representation: He argues that "[b]uilding is really dwelling. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth" (1971: 9). The idea of home here is expressed in terms of an exclusive category that is prefigured in notions of locality and space, which a totality, such as a building, exemplifies.

Current notions of home as cultural identity have superseded Heidegger's understanding, which is grounded on space-time coordinates. For Emmanuel Levinas, for example, the idea of the home cannot be concretised. He argues forcefully that:

Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwellingThe event of dwelling exceeds the knowing, the thought, and the idea in which, after the event, the subject will want to contain what is incommensurable with a knowing. (1969: 153)

In Levinas's thinking, the meaning of home overflows traditional concepts that point to "home" as relating explicitly to notions of origins, including one's place of birth and family, ethnicity and nation, to mention a few examples. Thus, for Levinas, a home entails "a becoming" (1969: 153). This understanding of the concept reflects current thinking in postcolonial and postmodern discourses, which show the term "home" to be loaded with several connotations. In other words, the term is a construct. For example, one can find home in ethnic belonging, in religious affiliation, in culture or in nationality.

Such resonance is reflected in the work of Sigmund Freud, who has provided probably the most telling and striking exemplar of the shifting nature of the word "home". In his 1919 essay titled "The uncanny" (from the German *unheimlich*), Freud

introduces a level of uncertainty surrounding the notion of home, arguing that the “word “*unheimlich*’ is ... the opposite of ‘*heimlich*’ [‘homely’] *heimisch* [‘native’] – the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar” (Freud 1919: 220). In other words, the concept of *unheimlich*, literally meaning “unhomely”, is expressive of that which is at once familiar and strange. Both *heimlich* and *unheimlich* can refer to uncanniness, since *heimisch* is an archaic meaning of *heimlich*, which means “uncanny”. But Freud cautions that the relation is not one of transposition, as other contrary shades of meanings associated with the word *unheimlich* do invoke feelings and emotions whose range of meaning goes beyond the above definition, notably secrecy, foreignness and gloom, to mention only a few. In short, the word “home” accretes various meanings and becomes a master-trope, whose range of meanings becomes a blending and blurring of locality, rootedness and comfort, with rarefied notions of commemoration and nostalgic feelings about the past. As I argue in this paper, the narrator of *The healing land: a Kalahari journey* is a depiction of the narrator’s search or quest for his own identity in the wake of colonial displacement. To that end, he grapples with the notion of *unheimlich*, or what Lawson and Jacobs, referring to the tendency of *unheimlich* to inhabit its own opposite, or *heimlich*, have termed the *postcolonial uncanny*, a sense “of being in place and ‘out of place’, simultaneously” (2000: 1214). In other words, colonial dislocation has left people like him racked with anxieties, either of complete loss or of being completely lost in the space of the other. Similarly, the narrator realizes that the Khoisan have suffered the fate surrounding the idea of *unheimlich* through evictions from their ancestral land. As the former hunting and gathering tribe (of the Kalahari) who are widely regarded as indigenous to southern Africa before the arrival of the Europeans and Bantu tribes, the Khoisan’s claim to indigeneity is denied, and so they find out that the idea of “home” becomes *unheimlich*, unfamiliar.

Partly history, partly travel writing, and partly journalism, Rupert Isaacson’s *The healing land: a Kalahari journey* comprises a series of fragments, ranging from little portraits to fully-fledged and well-dramatised episodes, which intervene in the consciousness of the author, who tries to probe and understand the entire import of his African journey, sojourn and experiences. In telling his story, Isaacson is impelled to juxtapose fragmentary memories and historical fact in order to fully understand the workings of culture and, in doing so, to highlight the core issues of “unhomeliness” or displacement, the transitionality as well as the transnationality of identities as major preoccupations in his writing. By trying to establish what “home” means, Isaacson’s text demonstrates the elusiveness of the idea as the narrator finds himself betwixt and between worlds – worlds in which he finds himself thrust into real thresholds and becomes a figure torn between continents – Africa and Europe. In such a world, notions of home are nothing but “fluid reconstructions set against

the backdrop of the remembering subject's current positions and conceptualizations of home" (Stock 2010: 24).

Rupert Isaacson writes with gritty realism and a self-reflexive take on the rather uncomfortable subject of "race" and identity. For instance, the narrator reflects on who has the exclusive right of calling Africa their home, and also challenges the reductionism that has framed the discourse from the heyday of colonialism. This reductionism manifests itself in the thinking and imagination of most black people in perceiving themselves as the indigenes of southern Africa, a perception that is perhaps a far cry from historiography and documented reality. As I shall demonstrate later, Isaacson's text foregrounds certain postcolonial anxieties emanating from land ownership in southern Africa, thereby bringing into sharp relief the problematic nature of the concept of "home". These issues are played out in his life at two levels. First, as a fearless journalist, environmentalist and travel writer, he relates the story of growing up in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe (before going to attend school in London), and the way in which he tries to come to terms with his supposedly African identity. Secondly, and most vividly, he comes to report on events in the postcolonial country of Botswana where, from 2002–2006, the government was rocked by a landmark court case, with the Khoisan peoples of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve winning their land claim against the government. In this case, the idea of the *unheimlich* comes to haunt a postcolonial nation with full sovereignty. In other words, Botswana seems suddenly to have become unfamiliar with itself as it grapples with the issues of the land rights of its minorities who are made to leave their ancestral home to pave the way for mineral exploration.

At the beginning of *The healing land*, the narrator observes:

In the beginning, so my mother told me, were the Bushmen – peaceful, golden-skinned hunters whom people also called Khoisan or San. They had lived in Africa longer than anyone else. Africa was also where we were from; my South African mother and Rhodesian father were very clear on that. Though we lived in London, my sister ... and I inhabited a childhood world filled with images and objects from the vast southern sub-continent. (2003: 3)

Isaacson's reflection is instructive in two paradoxical ways; firstly, it points to the fact that Africa, a continent where the majority of its people are black, is also home to certain minority groups of people who, though largely regarded as indigenes of the land, are treated with scorn and denigration; and secondly, because Isaacson's story demonstrates the global alienation of minority groups from their "homes" and thus calls attention to the complex nature of the notion of home. But at the same time, when his mother tells him "Africa was also where we were from", the narrator begins to interrogate notions of home and belonging.

Through narrating his life, the narrator begins to examine his own identity as well as that of many white populations on the continent of Africa, who, because of colonialism, were dispersed all over the continent. Born to Jewish immigrant parents

who were Southern Rhodesians, and growing up in London, where he went to school following his parents' relocation from Southern Rhodesia due to the independence war, the narrator finds himself caught up in cultural liminality, especially on being told that Africa is "the land of my fathers" (Isaacson 2003: 23). Further, his mother and grandfather – two members of his family who are more reverent towards Africa – remind the narrator of the continent as "our origins, about the dynastic lines going down the generations" (2003: 10). As a grown man, he reflects that the need to identify with the land of his forebears is "less pressing" (2003: 24) and yet that need is always a "constant presence" (2003: 24), prompting him to wonder whether he "would return to the land of my fathers" (2003: 30). He reflects:

As childhood turned to adolescence, it became less comfortable to be caught between cultures, to be part English, part African. The stories, artifacts, white African friends and relatives that constituted my life at home began to clash more and more with the reality of living and going to school in England. I didn't fit in. Was our family English or African, I would be asked? Neither and both, it seemed. (2003: 19)

At present, this feeling of displacement is evident in sentiments of perceiving England as his home, sentiments that consign Africa to memories of a receding past where, as the narrator puts it, "[t]he need to identify with the land of my fathers seemed to diminish" (2003: 24). At the same time, this happens despite his being "restless in London" and feeling "like an outsider" (2003: 19), making him long for Africa. Upon arriving on the continent a few days later, Isaacson is jubilant as he greets "the land of my fathers" (2003: 23). He realizes he cannot find an irreducible form of identity that transcends diasporas, displacements and dislocations. Try as he might to invoke and entertain mythic notions about Britain as an organic whole where he could return to, he notes it is a country to which he can relate only vicariously. Even as he is given to continually appeal to Africa where his home (as a physical locality) is, he still remains conflicted by his origins, as the product of many generations of migration. Hence Britain as his home remains a distant memory; home in Africa seems within reach and yet is always receding into the past, particularly in the face of the Zimbabwean war of independence that foreshadows the imminent expulsion of white Rhodesians from that country. Thus home becomes an ever-shifting notion, which conforms to what Iain Chambers call "leaky habitats" (1994: 247).

Rupert Isaacson's experience is common to most postcolonials in the modern era, and it resonates with Edward Said's description of "the exilic, the marginal, subjective, migratory energies of modern life" (1994: 334). To expand on Said's insights using Homi Bhabha, Rupert Isaacson has become a subject of cultural difference and occupies the space of cultural translation, which is connected with exigencies of movement and migration. Bhabha writes:

This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transnational phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently

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enjoined in the ‘survival’ of migrant life. Living in the interstices ..., caught in-between a ‘nativist’, even nationalist, atavism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation, the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem ... the irresolution, or liminality, of ‘translation’, the element of resistance in the process of transformation. (2004: 321)

It is hardly surprising that this feeling of “at-homeness” and “not-at-homeness” is a recurrent staple of postcolonial literature.

Isaacson draws on his own experience of his rootedness in Africa to reflect on the events that he relates in *The healing land: a Kalahari journey*, a text that is, at once, an autobiography, a history of the Khoisan, and a specially written piece of reportage, commissioned by the BBC’s special assignment radio programme, detailing the “unhomely/*unheimlich*” condition of the Khoisan people in southern Africa. It is a matter of tragic irony, for example, that although regarded as the “first people of southern Africa” (generally untainted by warrior traditions), the Khoisan have always been subjected to colonisation and marginalisation, and always have been typecast as the “Other”, the underclass or second class citizens (2003: 111). Often, they experience *unheimlich* moments of being displayed in national parks for the amusement of tourists (2003: 85, 86) and by being described in official Botswana circles as RADs or Rural Area Dwellers.

By placing in the spotlight the Khoisan land claims in southern Africa at the end of the twentieth century, Isaacson’s text brings into relief the hubris of the Botswana government, especially in its decision to expel the Botswana Khoisan people from the Kalahari Game Reserve in the late 1990s, a case settled at the end of 2006. The Botswana government’s attempts to relocate the San people from their home of many centuries’ standing, and force them into urban areas, demonstrates Freud’s idea of the *unheimlich* nature of modern society. In July 2004, the San people tried to regain their ancestral land, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, from which they were facing eviction by the government. The government’s basis for trying to remove them from their ancestral home was the need to integrate them into mainstream Botswana communities where modern facilities were available. But the San people viewed the government’s logic and apparent gesture of goodwill with suspicion, arguing that, despite material benefits, any abrupt act of relocation would have destabilised their way of life, a life they had lived for centuries.

Broadly speaking, Isaacson’s text provides an insightful examination of the *unheimlich* conditions experienced by southern African peoples by providing three perspectives, namely that of the minority Khoisan, the majority black populations, and the white settlers. In other words, through representations of the Khoisan and others, Isaacson’s text casts into relief the vexed subject of place and identity within colonial discourse. In southern Africa, the Khoisan, a people supposed to be the indigenous heirs to the land, have been colonised, portrayed as the “other” and subjected to all forms of displacement.

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (1973: 217), writes Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the philosophy of history*. Benjamin’s remark is instructive in light of the current discussion, which pivots on the strained relations between the Khoisan in Botswana and the (ir) Botswana government, and calls attention to Homi Bhabha’s idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism and its importance for shedding light on the nature of minority identities in the modern world. Isaacson remarks:

Larger than Belgium or Switzerland, the 52800 square kilometre Central Kalahari Game Reserve, which was set up in 1961, is the largest game reserve in the world The people commonly known throughout the world as the Bushmen, but more properly referred to as Basarwa, have been resident in and around the area for probably thousands of years. Originally nomadic hunters and gatherers, the lifestyle of the Basarwa has gradually changed with the times as they live in settlements, some of which are situated within the Southern half of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Government is now encouraging these people to move to areas outside the reserve in order that they may be provided with modern facilities, schools, clinics etc. and integrate them into modern society. (2001: 68)

This quotation demonstrates how notions of identity linked to categories of space and time may have been superseded by related discourses, such as the vagaries of colonialism. In other words, the Khoisan are not allowed to use space as an anchor for their identity. This is in contradistinction with traditional analyses of identity that relied heavily on the spatial-temporal schema – a schema that tended to homogenise and fossilise identities and, by extension, the notion of home, seeing these notions as self-sufficient categories and entities.

Notions of home that are linked to origins and related spatial-temporal coordinates seem to be deeply fractured and ambivalent in our time. As I have demonstrated in this paper, the concept of “home” conjures up notions of totality, wholeness, plenitude, harmony, an Edenic idyll – notions of a space to which humans aspire and hope to return – and yet these ideals of wholeness and plenitude are never fully realized. In Rupert Isaacson’s *The healing land: a Kalahari journey*, all notions of home predicated on origins are thrown overboard in favour of a process of cultural becoming (at the core of “home”), which simultaneously disarticulates and rearticulates ideas about origins. The idea of “home” understood in the light of Derrida’s deferral of meaning is a site that is ever-shifting, a state of becoming, that gestures to an illusive and unattainable ideal. As Iain Chambers puts it,

We cannot go home again but neither can we simply cancel that past, or eradicate the desire for the myth of homecoming, from our sense of being and becoming. But in the throw of the dice it is to choose to cast that heritage into the game and to oppose the close teleology of identity and authenticity with the interrogations that emerge from the radical historicity of language and existence, with that excess of transitivity in which we encounter not only the grammar of being but the fact that it speaks in many accents. In these encounters, in the transit and travel of languages, what we refer to as our cultural, historical and individual identity is continually constituted and performed. (1994: 248–249)

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For Chambers, the idea of “home” is not just about locations, places and spaces, which are often imbued with specific meanings, significations and significance, but rather as an expressive concept that gestures towards the various ways in which we tend to memorialise, romanticise and even try to recoup the past in its diverse and fluid manifestations.

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