

“I had never seen such a
shed called a house before”
The Discourse of Home in Susanna
Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*

As one of the foundational texts in Canadian literature, Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) has received extensive scholarly attention, much of it concerned with Moodie’s sense of placement, or ill-placement, in Canada. Critics from Northrop Frye to Bina Freiwald have commented on the character of Moodie’s relationship to her surroundings and on her success or failure in making herself “at home.” My own reading of Moodie’s text focuses on the very concept of “home,” which is indeed, as Sneja Gunew notes in a recent editorial essay on women’s diasporic writing, “at the heart of debates” on expatriation and migration (8). In *Roughing It in the Bush*, Moodie constructs a complex narrative of home, which is cast as a failure of homecoming from its beginning. At the same time, she turns to a narrativity which centres on her husband and children in order to reproduce a kind of “home matrix” otherwise lost. This familial discourse¹ serves as the basis for an attempted system of self-location. “[I]sn’t ‘home’ . . . where the children are, and isn’t Moodie indeed ‘at home’ with them,” asks Freiwald in her reading of *Roughing It* (170). My analysis, however, finds that Moodie’s maternal and spousal narrativity fails her in that it is insufficient to close the gap between her self and Canada. “Home,” therefore, remains out of reach.

Specifically, *Roughing It in the Bush* relies on a narrative of home that constructs two figures—those of belonging and exile—as opposites.² This narrative is manifest in two different and competing specifications: home as house—and in the broader sense, as homeland—and home as family. The former both articulates and literalizes the very experiences that constitute

the figure of exile: dislocation, dispossession, homelessness, and the impossibility of coming home. The second—home as family—centres on Moodie's attempts to cover up the insufficiencies of home as house (and homeland) by shifting her emphasis from the material to the familial, to the very relationality—marriage and motherhood—that a narrative of home as family implicitly offers. Placement on these terms, however, inscribes a relation of obligation and "duty" (in her own words [207]), experienced by Moodie repeatedly as a form of imprisonment. To put it quite bluntly, marriage and motherhood doom Susanna Moodie to a lifetime of feeling out of place.³

The "Susanna Moodie" to whom I refer is, of course, not the author but rather a constructed persona, although to some extent "the narrated figure may also be read as a reflection of the historic" (Gerson 12). Moodie the professional writer uses certain conventions and strategies in her self-representation—including a strategy of "feminine self-effacement," which, as Misao Dean observes, highlights Susanna's conformity to gendered norms of behaviour (25)—in order to appeal to her readership. Yet no narrative, *Roughing It* included, is entirely conscious and deliberate.⁴ "Whatever Moodie's conscious intention," *Roughing It* became not just "a deeply felt personal record," nor just "a many-sided attempt to justify the failure . . . in the backwoods," as Michael Peterman astutely comments, but it is also evidence of Moodie's lasting discomfort with the notion of home in Canada: even as she was "comfortably settled in Belleville" when the book came together (*Epoch* 18, 16), her sense of the insufficiency of her earlier homes was undiminished. I suggest that the text's juxtaposition of competing discourses of home constitutes a feature in which the constructed nature of the narrative comes apart, giving access to some of the textual unconscious.

In my reading, this "dark core" of unawareness (to borrow Stephen Shapiro's phrase [436]) in Moodie's memoir centres on the house/home, a figure that represents the stronghold of colonial presence in a settler society. While the concept of "home" is necessarily a complex one in expatriate writing, because it always also involves loss, emigrants nevertheless leave behind their old homes with the intention, hope, and desire of finding a new one. Within these parameters, the sketches and anecdotes in *Roughing It in the Bush* play out as a failed-homecoming plot.⁵ The story begins with the end of a literal journey, but any thought of a quest successfully performed to gain security or freedom is immediately subverted with the first sentence, which "set[s] a Poe-like mood of impending doom" (Peterman, *Susanna* 70): "The dreadful cholera was depopulating Quebec and Montreal, when our ship

cast anchor off Grosse Isle” (*Roughing It* 12). Arrival in a time of cholera and death throws doubts on the venture from its start, and the uncertain nature of the undertaking is further emphasized by the gloomy imagery of the first few chapters. “[D]eath was everywhere,” Susanna remarks, “perhaps lurking in our very path” (46). The literal deaths and the morbidity of the opening sketches of *Roughing It* cast the Moodies’ emigration in terms of a doomed scheme. The landing sequence as the first unsuccessful arrival anticipates their later failures, most especially further failures of homecoming.⁶ What is more, through her description of the laughable encounter with the two health officers, Susanna constructs the undertaking as anti-heroic. One of these men offends Moodie as he butchers the language (Bentley 116), and both are taken in by the ship’s captain’s practical joke about births during the voyage. The oath they require of the captain is finally sworn on a copy of Voltaire’s *History of Charles XII* rather than on the Bible (*Roughing It* 14). Inasmuch as the two officers represent Canada, the arrival scene suggests a place of disorder. The book’s opening thus immediately stages a struggle with place and prefigures the narrative’s probing of the crisis of exile.

This thematic is continued when Moodie first steps ashore at Grosse Isle. The (much-analyzed) scene represents her as a figure who is out of place. The island, though it “looks a perfect paradise at [a] distance,” proves disappointing upon contact. Its physical features are literally repellent—the rocks, Susanna reports, are “so hot that I could scarcely put my foot upon them”—and there are swarms of mosquitoes everywhere (19–22). Her reaction distinguishes her clearly from the lower-class Irish figures she observes, who appropriate the space and take possession of its unique characteristics—its rocks, bushes, and tide pools—precisely according to their own needs and regardless of their effect upon others. In Moodie’s failed-homecoming narrative, this appropriation of space “becomes a disease” that infectiously spreads to other passengers and that in Moodie herself generates a disorientating dis-ease with place (MacDonald 22): “We were *literally stunned* by the strife of tongues,” she tells us about her sense of incapacitation (20; italics added). In response, Susanna undertakes an effort to code the unfamiliar through the *familial* by including her husband and child in the narrating ‘I’. It is John Moodie who finds a shelter for his family away from the disturbance, by “discover[ing] a woodland path that led to the back of the island.” The “poor baby,” meanwhile, tormented by mosquitoes, adds her voice, and, “not at all pleased with her first visit to the new world, fill[s] the air with cries” (21, 23). Susanna’s family, while here unable to mediate entry into the

new environment, makes the experience of place somewhat easier to bear by sharing, in a manner of speaking, her perspective: John recognizes the need for distance from the crowd and finds for his wife and child a separate space, and the baby, like her mother, complains about the environment's features. The scene continues the thematic thrust of the family's arrival at their new home being complicated by errors of ill-placement.

The idea of home itself, in *Roughing It in the Bush*, is set uneasily against the figure of the house—highlighting that literal dwelling and the feeling of being at home are by no means identical—for Moodie's homes in Canada stand in opposition to the left-behind home she craves: "My whole soul yielded itself up to a strong and overpowering grief," she reports. "One simple word dwelt for ever in my heart, and swelled it to bursting—'Home!' I repeated it waking a thousand times a day, and my last prayer before I sank to sleep at night was still 'Home!'" (82). Her first homecoming epitomizes the disappointing reality of the colony, literalizing in particular Susanna's perception that "home" is unrecognizable as such in Canada: while the farm the Moodies have purchased is still occupied (and their 'proper' homecoming thus effectively prevented), their interim residence turns out to be no more than "a miserable hut, at the bottom of a steep descent," which the Yankee driver who delivers Susanna ironically recommends for its "smart location." "I gazed upon the place in perfect dismay," she writes, "for I had never seen such a shed called a house before. 'You must be mistaken,' [she says to the driver]; this is not a house, but a cattle-shed, or pig-sty." The scene is again one of disorder, as the building at first appears to be on the point of collapse as well as being occupied by cattle (83-84). To make matters worse, "[t]he rain poured in at the open door, beat in at the shattered window, and dropped upon our heads from the holes in the roof. The wind blew keenly through a thousand apertures in the log walls; and nothing could exceed the uncomfortableness of our situation" (85). The figure of home in Canada as defective, as no more than a diminished version of human dwelling, is thus literalized in the Moodies' hut. What is more, "this untenable tenement" is made worse because Susanna cannot immediately fall back onto her discourse of home as family. Her husband, as we learn, "was not yet in sight with the teams," and Susanna is "terrified at being left alone in this wild, strange-looking place" (84).

When John arrives, he immediately turns his hand to fitting the door into place, thereby enclosing the family unit. It is Susanna who has found the door lying at the back of the house, and it is therefore she who allows

the family's all-important privacy to be restored. In the end, with "all busily employed" (85-86), family transforms the "hut" into a home:

Our united efforts had effected a complete transformation in our uncouth dwelling. Sleeping-berths had been partitioned off for the men; shelves had been put up for the accommodation of books and crockery, a carpet covered the floor, and the chairs and tables we had brought from—gave an air of comfort to the place, which, on the first view of it, I deemed impossible. My husband . . . had walked over to inspect the farm, and I was sitting at the table at work, the baby creeping upon the floor, and Hannah [the maid] preparing dinner. The sun shone warm and bright, and the open door admitted a current of fresh air, which tempered the heat of the fire. (88)

In this idyllic family scene, order is restored and all members are now placed precisely where expected: John Moodie, the husband and provider, is looking after the business of the farm, while Susanna is engaged in domestic work, with the baby close by, and the family's servant is occupied with the more menial task of preparing dinner.⁷

I am quoting this passage at some length to illustrate both how Moodie literalizes the figure of home and how her discourse of home as family helps to disguise the deficiency of home as house. Here it even allows for a limited engagement with the immediate surroundings, which are "admitted" through the open door. As the thrust of the narrative bears out, however, this discourse falls short of making a connection with place in the broader sense. The disjuncture between the two specifications of the discourse reveals a fracture in the narrative, a site "where 'things fall apart,' and the struggle to assemble a speaking subject remains palpable in the final text" (Whitlock 39). The gap between home as house and home as family presents itself as perhaps the main "fissure . . . of female discontinuity" in *Roughing It*, in which the work's attempt "to seal up and cover over . . . dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations, and blind spots" is unsuccessful (Benstock 152), laying bare the instability of the constructed text and consequently the implications of displacement for the authorial 'I'.

From this deficient first home, the Moodies nearly go to the experience that literalizes, for the already unhomed immigrants, the dispossession and loss associated with exile: actual homelessness. They are forced to vacate the "wretched cabin" in which they have made do for six weeks, but are prevented by Uncle Joe and his "odious" family from taking "possession of the home which for some time has been [the Moodies'] own" (*Roughing It* 109, 141). Thus dislodged, they have no choice but to pay Uncle Joe's mother a disproportionate sum for the use of the small dwelling she inhabits. This

“log hut” is an even more diminutive “home” than the one they are obliged to leave (141). The fact that the Moodies should even have to consider making their home in such an inferior residence—despite having purchased a cleared farm that includes a farmhouse—reflects poorly on John Moodie’s ability to keep his family safe. The transaction he made shows him as lacking the kind of shrewdness to deal effectively with the peculiar requirements of place, as pointedly stated by Uncle Joe’s mother (143). So disturbing is his ineffectiveness, and understandably so frightening the prospect of being without a roof over her head, that Susanna, “anxious about the result of the negotiation,” steps out of her domestic role to accompany her husband to the old woman’s hut—thus giving herself the option to intervene, should the need arise (140). (In future moments of crisis she will do more than that by assuming the lead rather than waiting for John to take action.) The displacement the Moodies have undergone is here literalized in the homelessness that threatens them—prevented only by paying “literally . . . twice over” for the dilapidated place, as Susanna points out—and that articulates the difficulty of (self-)location they confront in the colony (147).

The pattern of failed homecomings disguised by a narrative of home as family continues with the Moodies’ subsequent moves. Their taking possession of the farmhouse they purchased months earlier is first callously prevented and then sabotaged by Uncle Joe, literally denying them their rightful place in the colony and literally undermining their relocation (Susanna explains that he “undermined the brick chimney, and let all the water into the house” [176]). That this dispute revolves around the question of property highlights the economic reasons that had led to the Moodies’ emigration in the first place. Similarly, the house in the Douro woods, although “[s]uch as it was, it was a palace when compared [to their first two dwellings],” is still unfinished and thus not ready for their occupation when they arrive, and it is then accidentally set on fire and nearly destroyed before they have even had the opportunity to move in (296). In both cases, Moodie’s familial narrativity carries her through. About the farmhouse she says, “no one was better pleased with the change than little Katie, [who] . . . crept from room to room, feeling and admiring everything, and talking to it in her baby language.” Her husband, meanwhile, is able to handle the bane of disorder associated with emigration:⁸ he deals with a literal “demon of unrest . . . in the shape of a countless swarm of mice” by effectively deploying a mouse trap (178). Similarly, the environment in Douro is mediated by Susanna’s sister, Catharine Parr Trail, a resident of the area for almost a year:

When we reached the top of the ridge that overlooked our cot, my sister stopped, and pointed out a log-house among the trees. "There S—," she said, "is your home. When that black cedar swamp is cleared away that now hides the lake from us, you will have a very pretty view." My conversation with her had quite altered the aspect of the country, and predisposed me to view things in the most favourable light. (296)

While the *meaning* of home is "altered" when articulated by a member of the family, the *reality* of home is another matter altogether, for it is characterized by the hardships, poverty, and near-disasters with which readers of *Roughing It* are familiar. "[I]mmigration insists on the reality of one's relation to place," making ill-placement a matter both literal and specific (Chaudhuri 204).

The Moodies' move to Douro—"the major tactical error" in their settlement plans (Peterman, *Susanna* 78)—is hastened by the failure of their Hamilton Township farm. This failure, in turn, is signalled by a halting of the discourse of home as family which is caused by an external threat in the form of "trials of intrusion" (Peterman, *Epoch* 59): having entered into a share-cropping agreement with another couple, the Moodies' freedom of speech within the family unit is jeopardized by the closeness of these nosy neighbours. Susanna comments:

[E]ven their roguery was more tolerable than the *irksome restraint* which their near vicinity, and constantly having to come in contact with them, imposed. We had no longer any privacy, our servants were cross-questioned, and our family affairs canvassed by these gossiping people, who spread about a thousand falsehoods regarding us. (*Roughing It* 181; italics added)

So troublesome is this threat from without—and so critical the continuation of the familial discourse—that Susanna "would gladly have given [to the other couple] all the proceeds of the farm to get rid of them." Remarkably, John Moodie fails again in his role as provider, for the Moodies are also being cheated out of their fair share of the harvest. "All the money we expended upon the farm was entirely for these people's benefit," Susanna tells us, "for by their joint contrivances very little of the crops fell to our share; and when any division was made it was always when [John] Moodie was absent from home; and there was no person present to see fair play" (181). This is as close to open criticism of her husband as Susanna comes, and, in fact, Gillian Whitlock points out about John Dunbar Moodie that in both "his African and Canadian emigrations he remained vulnerable, unable to provide as domestic man should" (*Intimate Empire* 61). John's vulnerability is in no small measure due to his being "absent from home" during certain critical junctures, absences that highlight the challenge of honouring the centrality of "home" for the settler.

In the Douro backwoods Susanna's narrative of home extends to a solidly literal system of managing the environment, aimed at increasing the functional usability of place. At first, control over her surroundings appears to be out of Moodie's reach and this lack is a major source of the gap between her and her surroundings (attempts at bread-making, washing clothes, and milking initially fail). Over time, however, she develops a range of useful skills. For instance, she devises a way to catch wild ducks, and also "practice[s] a method of painting birds and butterflies upon the white, velvety surface of the large fungi [growing on maple trees]," to earn some much-needed money. She makes excellent maple sugar—"drained . . . until it was almost as white as loaf sugar"—and uses some to enhance her now superior baking skills (443). She works on her garden, commenting that it was "as usual . . . very productive," and she is a deft hand with the canoe and paddle (495-96). In her husband's absence she even runs the farm on her own (444). These activities suggest a process of adaptation, as Moodie becomes "more able and reconciled" to her new surroundings (Peterman, *Epoch* 50). As a measure of personal agency and effective control of the environment, however, Susanna's efforts are both never enough and ultimately unsuccessful: the bush farm eventually fails disastrously, and is abandoned by the family.

The Moodies' ultimate flight from the backwoods speaks to their precarious existence in the Canadian bush, to the constant effort not just to live contentedly, but simply to live. The rawness of life for an impoverished settler family like the Moodies in a time of general economic depression and widespread illness is palpable in *Roughing It*, as Susanna struggles even to keep shoes on her children's feet. The Moodies' battle culminates in a series of crises in which the unmanageable environment encroaches upon their house, resulting in the house itself being characterized as a threat, as a potential grave for Susanna and the children. They are in danger both of freezing to death and, on two occasions, of being burned alive inside the log dwelling.⁹ By the very logic of the discourse of home as family, these near-tragedies anticipate the family's ultimate departure from the backwoods, for the Moodies' attempts "to restrain, put in order, cultivate the bush" are first and foremost efforts to make room for a growing family (Tinkler 11). While in the bush, Susanna gives birth to four children, and the arrival of each is duly recorded in *Roughing It*.¹⁰ By the same token, for John Moodie (as for Susanna), the expectation of an increasing family was precisely the driving force behind his decision to emigrate (*Roughing It* 208). John's unhappy role in the near-disasters is that of the provider who fails those who depend upon him. While

Susanna “is the active force” and single-handedly saves the children and herself (Peterman, *Epoch* 88), he is absent from the log dwelling during both fires, leaving his family unprotected in an unsafe “home,” when the demise of the children would make nonsense of the entire emigration venture.¹¹

The attempt to find a conjuncture between place and personal identity is made difficult for Susanna because the *desired* ground of her homecoming is always located in the past and elsewhere. It is England that is Moodie’s source of security and fulfillment. For Susanna “home never belongs to the present . . . ‘home’ is always and only the place that is left behind” (Thurston 156), a contrast she herself draws:

[M]y heart yearned intensely for my absent home. Home! The word had ceased to belong to my *present*—it was doomed to live forever in the *past*; for what emigrant ever regarded the country of his exile as his *home*? To the land he has left, that name belongs for ever, and in no instance does he bestow it upon another. “I have got a letter from home!” “I have seen a friend from home!” “I dreamt last night that I was at home!” are expressions of everyday occurrence, to prove that the heart acknowledges no other home than the land of its birth. (*Roughing It* 39; original italics)

In the definition of home as the land of one’s birth, *Roughing It in the Bush* counterposes Moodie’s yearning for England as the place best capable of nurturing and supporting her selfhood to the needs of her family and her spousal and maternal responsibility.

Furthermore, the specific qualities Susanna associates with home as homeland shed light on her failure of homecoming in Canada. In order to understand this failure, one must remember that “[h]omecoming is an archetypally regressive act” (Chaudhuri 92). If “leaving home is a repetition of the first journey in the ‘travail’ of childbirth, an active and painful displacement from the safety and unfreedom of the ‘maternal’ home” (Curtis and Pajaczkowska 200), then homecoming is a return to a native matrix. This involves a conceptualization of one’s place of being as a nurturing “container” in which the self can flourish and grow. *Roughing It* links England as the home of the heart to two other concepts that are archetypal for women seeking authenticity of self and (self-)location: Mother and Nature, often figured as one and the same. Susanna’s original home of Reydon Hall is described (in *Flora Lyndsay*, the thinly fictionalized account of her emigration) as a place whose natural features mimic the protective and nurturing qualities of the maternal womb: “The Hall was an old-fashioned house, . . . surrounded by fine gardens and lawn-like meadows, and stood sheltered within a grove of noble old trees. . . . Every noble sentiment of [one’s] soul, . . . had

been fostered, or grown upon [one], in those pastoral solitudes" (84). The sheltered house is a cultural representation of the sheltering cave which, in turn, relates to the protecting function of the vessel as the central symbol of the Feminine (Neumann 45-46).¹² The nurturing and protective qualities of Susanna's ancestral home constitute a maternal realm in which the self has been "fostered" or "grown"; it is the originating container for identity. The same maternal and sustaining qualities also extend to home as homeland, for England's natural world, Susanna tells us, "arrayed in her green loveliness, had ever smiled upon me like an indulgent mother, holding out her loving arms to enfold to her bosom her erring but devoted child," and it is from England's "sacred bosom" that she is "torn" by emigration (*Roughing It* 65).

In Canada, the same intimate participation in Nature cannot be reproduced. Remembered scenes and sounds—"the songs of birds and the lowing of cattle"—are often more specific to Moodie than her immediate environment, which is merely "reflected" or "pictured" in the lake outside her door (325). The gap between the "unreal" of exile and the real, remembered scenes of homeland again lays bare the ungrounded 'I'; "expos[ing] a radical uncertainty about one's relation to 'home' and to the self one has been" (Kennedy 27). Even in the very chapter of *Roughing It* which is read as showing Moodie's experience in a more positive light, "A Trip to Stony Lake," the narrator's articulation of her relationship with the Canadian environment is not without ambiguity.¹³ Moodie's closer identification with place on this occasion is triggered at least in part by her discovery of the "harebell," which, as she says, "had always from a child been with me, a favourite flower; and the first sight of it in Canada . . . so flooded my soul with remembrances of the past, that, in spite of myself, the tears poured freely from my eyes." Moodie's gathering and keeping of those flowers "in [her] bosom" is not for love of Canada but, on the contrary, is "connected with sacred home recollections, and the never-dying affections of the heart" for the old home (358-59). Even as the features of backwoods Canada—the "aromatic, resinous smell" of the pine forest; the "wild and lonely" scenery—here ensure Moodie's "sense of enjoyment," her engagement with that scenery is far from unqualified: "In moments like these, I ceased to regret my separation from my native land; and, filled with the love of Nature, my heart forgot for the time the love of home" (361). The extent, therefore, to which she is able "to locate beauty and interest in . . . the rugged landscape" (Peterman, "Susanna" 85) is strictly limited ("in moments like these," "for the time"), and "home" is still located elsewhere. The narration quickly returns to crop failures and "Disappointed

Hopes.” “The pathos of exile,” notes Edward Said, “is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question” (179).

Yet just as Moodie’s discourse of home as family has sustained her all along, so it is deployed in the task of replicating the presence of the Mother in Canada. Nancy Chodorow argues that “women seek to reproduce their preoedipal relation to their mothers . . . [by] bearing children” (23), and Margaret Homans, in considering the implications of Chodorow’s formulation for women’s self-representation, posits, “when the daughter attempts to recreate her symbiotic closeness with her mother, she is also attempting to recreate that presymbolic language. The reproduction of mothering will also be the reproduction of a presymbolic communicativeness” (25). The “mother” in Moodie’s narrative being her mother country, or Nature/England, the reproduction of a “pre-emigration relationship of connection,” observes Veronica Thompson, basing herself on Chodorow’s theorizing, relies on Moodie’s children as “the source of this connection” (91). Susanna’s daughter Katie, in particular, and the nonsymbolic language they share, appear to help to replicate a closeness to Nature/Canada. A closer scrutiny of Moodie’s familial narrativity, however, reveals that it does *not* engender a sense of feeling at home. Katie’s “baby lingo” and “charming infant graces” recall, first and foremost, the mother country: “Was [Katie] not purely British? Did not her soft blue eyes, and sunny curls, and bright rosy cheeks for ever remind me of her Saxon origin, and bring before me dear forms and faces I could never hope to behold again?” (*Roughing It* 178). Rather than establishing sustained contact with the new home, therefore, the association between mother, child, and “mother tongue” supports the specificity of the original home to which Susanna is drawn.¹⁴ The nonsymbolic language of contact shared between mother and daughter is what binds Susanna to her true “mother” (country) in that mother’s absence, without, however, replicating the same kind of relationship with her new “adopted” mother.¹⁵ For Moodie, identity is always a question of origins, of “where she is from.”

In Canada, the figure of the “Divine Mother” (147) is replaced more and more by God, the Father. “Father and Mother” not so much “merge in the all-encompassing, ever-expansive force of Nature,” as Freiwald argues (168), as that Nature is cast increasingly in male terms. In *Roughing It*, the last prose reference to Nature as maternal occurs approximately halfway through the book, fittingly during the Moodies’ journey into the backwoods. Here, Nature is seen to have “suspended her operation” and to be “sleeping in her winding sheet, upon the bier of death” (279). More frequently, Nature

is associated with the “Great Father” or with “God” (a link that may well have gained in strength through Moodie’s retrospective treatment of her material and as a result of her trust in providence as having guided her into the bush) (178, 313, 361). “Nature the Divine Mother,” comments Margaret Atwood about *Roughing It*, “hardly functions at all” (*Survival* 51).¹⁶ Contrary, therefore, to the conclusion Freiwald reaches (168), Mother Nature does ultimately fail Moodie, a failure that both confirms and contributes to the failure of homecoming and that is nowhere more apparent than in the final sequence of *Roughing It in the Bush*. The chapter “A Change in Our Prospects” starts off a closing narrative that on the surface revolves around themes of renewal, rebirth, and restoration, but which, upon closer examination, reveals the continuation of feelings of loss, displacement, and even existential privation. The chapter’s poetic epigraph does “introduce . . . at its very structural and thematic centre ‘the embryo blossom,’” as Freiwald notes (167), but it suggests the “maternal idiom,” an idiom of protective containment (“The future flower lies enfolded in the bud”), only if the poem’s last three lines are ignored: “But if the canker worm lies coil’d around / The heart o’ the bud, the summer sun and dew / Visit in vain the sear’d and blighted flower” (*Roughing It* 491).¹⁷

In the chapter itself we learn that due to Susanna’s illness, her daughter Agnes (Addie) has been cared for by a “kind neighbour.” “During that winter, and through the ensuing summer,” Moodie recalls with painful intensity, “I only received occasional visits from my little girl, who, fairly established with her new friends, looked upon their house as her home.” The grief Susanna experiences at the separation from her daughter and at the “growing coldness of [Addie’s] manner towards [her]” (*Roughing It* 491-92), obliquely references the abduction of Persephone from Demeter, and the resulting aridity and lack of life on earth. In the myth, the grieving Demeter will reanimate the barren earth only if Persephone is restored to her. The mother’s search for her daughter is always also a search for “a part of herself in her daughter,” and thematically the refinding of the daughter by the mother articulates the healing of a “duality” or “scission” (Kerényi 145, 147). In *Roughing It*, Addie is indeed returned to her mother when Susanna and the children depart from the bush. Yet the theme of restoration (of self/daughter), along with the notion of a renewal of hope for happier prospects, is considerably undermined by Susanna’s unexpected, and apparently incongruous, reluctance “to be dragged” from the bush (*Roughing It* 501):

Every object had become endeared to me during my long exile from civilised life. I loved the lonely lake, with its magnificent belt of dark pines sighing in the breeze; the cedar-swamp, the summer home of my dark Indian friends; my own dear little garden, with its rugged snake-fence which I had helped [the maid] to place with my own hands. . . . Even the cows, that had given a breakfast for the last time to my children, were now regarded with mournful affection. (507-508)

Just as on the earlier occasion of the Moodies' departure from Hamilton Township, which was also, as she told us, "much against my wish" (277), Susanna's departure from the woods fails to remedy her sense of ill-placement.

Instead, Susanna's reluctance to leave demonstrates her blurring of the concepts of containment and confinement, which retrospectively alters her earlier perception of having been trapped in the bush during the preceding years. By mistaking confinement for containment Moodie expresses, through what is otherwise critically unexplained behaviour, a primal fear of separation: whenever an "old situation of containment ends or is ended, the ego experiences this revolution . . . as rejection by the mother." Any "crucial transition to a new sphere of existence" brings a new sense of rejection, a "birth trauma" (Neumann 67). For Moodie, her departure from the woods recalls the earlier separation from her mother country and makes her cling, against better reason, to an environment which has not nurtured and contained but imprisoned her. The departure, furthermore, lacks closure, because any sense of self-actualization is stalled by Susanna's lengthy "secrets of the prison-house" passage, which ends the prose text on a note of bitterness and regret. If the gesture of departure symbolizes fulfilled personal identity (Chaudhuri 175), then fulfillment is just what is signally lacking from the final departure enacted in *Roughing It in the Bush*.¹⁸ Despite the muted Demeter/Persephone plot that is appropriated in the thematics of displacement and homecoming in the story's conclusion, the book ultimately signals the failure of maternal narrativity. In a sense, place itself is the dominant "other" for Moodie; its difference from her fails to be overcome with the help of other relationships.

While the image of departure is present also in other characters, those with whom Moodie most strongly identifies—Phoebe for her fragility and sensitivity, and Brian the still-hunter for the terror of being "bushed" (Buss 91)—are ones who escape through death, and death is also Susanna's preferred trope. Looking back on her early years in the colony, for instance, she recalls that she "longed to die, that death might effectively separate [Canada and her] forever" (30). Yearning for her home country, she wishes she were "permitted to return and die upon [England's] wave-encircled shores" (65), her "only hope of escape [from Canada] being through the portals of the

grave" (147). "[D]eath as liberation," comments Chaudhuri, is the "favourite conclusion" to scenarios of ill-placement (250). In the conflation of "tomb" and "womb," death also promises a form of reunion with the Mother. The "[a]rchetypal Feminine not only bears and directs life as a whole, and the ego in particular, but it also takes everything that is born of it back into its womb of origination and death" (Neumann 30).

The painful split in Susanna Moodie's discourse of home, and particularly the insufficiency of her familial narrativity, highlight that "exile is a decidedly individualistic figure" (Chaudhuri 12). The suffering it inflicts is not easily abated even by those with whom the experience is shared. In the contradiction between her own desire for a stable and specific home matrix and the need to displace the self for her family's sake, Susanna Moodie prefigures much later accounts of psychological fragmentation and alienation.¹⁹ If exile is the loss of the ability to relate to place with any degree of "insiderness," the figure of home-as-house as deficient, for Moodie, becomes the sign of this loss. Through this figure she articulates key aspects of her sense of dislocation: the transience, instability, insufficiency, and often precarious nature of Moodie's "homes" in Canada also describe her experience of exile as a state of rarely, if ever, "being satisfied, placid, or secure" (Said 186). Perhaps one reason why we cannot get Susanna out of our collective imagination is that her experience anticipates that of modern times, in which "exile is certainly the most fully theorized and poeticized concept, having become nothing short of a symbol for modern culture itself" (Chaudhuri 14). Susanna Moodie's narrative locates the figure of home at the core of this concept, much as contemporary observers of women's expatriate writing (such as Sneja Gunew, with whose words I began) do a hundred and sixty years later.

NOTES

- 1 Bella Brodzki observes that "[o]f all literary genres, autobiography is the most precariously poised between narrative and discourse or history and rhetoric" ("Mothers" 244). For lack of a single, more definitive term, I use both "narrative" and "discourse" in analyzing *Roughing It*.
- 2 See Una Chaudhuri's remarks, made in the context of the theatre (12). Much of my argument in this essay relies on theorizing formulated by Chaudhuri in *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (1995), including the notion of a failed homecoming and the dual definition of the narrative of home.
- 3 Susanna is careful to emphasize that the sacrifice involved in immigration to Canada was her husband's as much as her own (*Roughing It* 208).
- 4 In addition, its publication history marks *Roughing It in the Bush* as a collaborative effort. See John Thurston and Michael Peterman (*Epoch*), among others. Susanna nevertheless stood by the final version, as her correspondence and 1871 introduction demonstrate.

- 5 With regard to the complexity of the definition of home in expatriate writing, D.M.R. Bentley notes in a related point that “at the archetypal or mythic level” emigration is inconsistent with most voyage patterns and therefore difficult to classify. “It is not a journey of excursion and return, but . . . a process of frequently reluctant removal from a cherished home and usually arduous relocation in an unfamiliar place” (“‘Cake of Custom’” 94-95). Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose of emigration generally is resettlement and Moodie herself refers to it as “seek[ing] a new home amid the western wilds” (*Roughing It* 207).
- 6 Janet Giltrow, who reads *Roughing It* as a travel narrative, is one of a number of critics who finds the morbidity in the text systemic. Giltrow sees the distance between the work’s two poles, that of the “travel esthetic and the settler’s destiny,” as sometimes bridged by morbidity and “the idea of death” (“Painful Experience” 133).
- 7 Also see Helen M. Buss (*Mapping Our Selves* 46-47) and Gillian Whitlock on the importance of domestic order and household management for settler women (*Intimate Empire* 50).
- 8 Whitlock notes that, because of the absence of the older generation in the emigration scheme, and “with them a sense of continuity, precedent, and tradition,” Moodie “sees disorder” from the moment she first steps ashore at Grosse Isle, including “closest to the bone, middle-class genteel men and women who are reduced to abject poverty and destitution” (47). The image of disorder is likewise carried through to each of the Moodies’ homes.
- 9 In addition, Moodie struggled with a series of illnesses, both her own and her children’s, during the later period of her residence in the backwoods while John Moodie was away on account of the rebellion (see in particular Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman, *Letters of Love* 114, 152, 158-59). Carl Ballstadt’s reading of these letters vis-à-vis *Roughing It* demonstrates that Susanna’s depiction of her trials in the bush, far from being exaggerated to gain her readers’ sympathy, is “restrained” compared to the account she gives in her private correspondence (“‘Embryo Blossom’” 144).
- 10 The Moodies had five children when they left the bush, and Susanna was pregnant with their sixth (born in July of 1840).
- 11 I am by no means suggesting that John Moodie was ever neglectful of his family in his behaviour. My reading does, however, take into consideration the fact that Susanna persistently draws attention to his absences. Whitlock goes further: she finds the “trajectory of emigration in *Roughing It* . . . ‘unintelligible’ because it contradicts all those expectations of settlement, and for this the husband and father is called to account” (61).
- 12 Freud similarly argues, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, that the home operates as an alternative mother, as “a substitute for the mother’s womb” (38). From a Freudian perspective, Susanna Moodie’s deficient homes may suggest a link with the macabre and threatening homes of Gothic fiction.
- 13 This point may be extended to Moodie’s introduction to the 1871 edition of *Roughing It*, in which she both upholds the “truth” of her story and restates her perception of Canada’s unsuitability for immigrants of her own class (672-73), as well as praises the “new” (my term) Canada extensively (674-78). Furthermore, Moodie’s statement that she cannot imagine leaving “the colony, where, as a wife and mother, some of the happiest years of my life have been spent,” corroborates my argument inasmuch as she resorts to familial narrativity, even nearly twenty years after the first publication of *Roughing It*, to render her experience in Canada acceptable (674).
- 14 Moodie also reports about her son Donald: “Emilia had called him Cedric the Saxon, and he well suited the name, with his frank, honest disposition, and large, loving blue eyes” (*Roughing It* 445).
- 15 For a full analysis of Moodie’s ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis Canada as both adopting

parent and adopted child see Veronica Thompson, "The Return to 'Mother' in Australian and Canadian Settler-Invader Women's Writing."

- 16 This shift is yet more pronounced in *Life in the Clearings*, which contains few references (in either prose or verse) to Nature as feminine (for instance 15, 163), but multiple ones to a male "Creator" (20, 138, 177, 298, 299, 300).

Margaret Atwood's extended engagement with Susanna Moodie also includes a re-writing, of sorts, of *Roughing It*: Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing* might be read as revisioning the bush as a healing and restorative space for woman. Atwood herself feels a strong connection to Moodie; she comments in her introduction to the Virago edition of *Roughing It*, "in some ways, we were each other's obverse" (ix).

- 17 Ballstadt, who uses the poem as the starting point for his discussion of Moodie's letters to her husband, observes that it "embraces notions of such opposites as growth and blight, hope and uncertainty" ("The Embryo Blossom" 137).
- 18 As her later correspondence bears out, even in the 1840s and into the 1850s "a sense of bitterness lingered on in Susanna's writing about [her then residence of Belleville]" (Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman, *Lifetime* 89).
- 19 Whitlock reaches a somewhat similar conclusion. See *Intimate Empire* (72).

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