THE MIGRATIONAL CITY: INVISIBLE PRACTITIONERS AND UNREADABLE TEXTS IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S "SLUMMING: A STORY BY LADY BAGLADY" AND HELENA VIRAMONTES'S "THE CARIBOO CAFÉ"[1]

I: Spatializing the double city

> To walk is to lack a place. ... The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric.
> Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life.*

> The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.
> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

"Every society produces a space, its own space," writes Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre's sentence establishes a dynamic and intimate relationship between society and the way it lives, creates and maps space. For, as he argues, space is no mere frame, nor a "form or container of a virtually neutral kind. ... Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure" (1991: 94). Furthermore, space is not neutral but can be seen as the inscription of history, power, and language. To recall Foucault's words, space "is fundamental in any exercise of power" (in Soja 1989: 19); it is political and ideological. One of the obvious consequences of this inscription of ideology is that space splits and divides itself. Society, to pluralize Lefebvre's statement, produces its own spaces, striated by divisions as well as visible and invisible boundaries. This paper is concerned precisely with the pluralization and the

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hierarchization of space and the resultant sites of interaction and containment as presented in two stories, Chuck Palahniuk's "Slumming: A Story by Lady Baglady" and Helena Viramontes's "The Cariboo Café." The two texts provide a symmetrical image of homeless characters on the brink of social invisibility. The yo-yo homeless in Palahniuk's story find their perfect counterpart in the two children who slip into homelessness in Viramontes's story. Space theory, I contend, can illuminate the texts proposed, and *vice versa*, both stories can evidence some of the gaps and loopholes of space theory, as they elicit the need to come to terms with the simultaneous visible and invisible spatial trajectories that converge in the postmetropolis.

If space is socially conditioned, the city, considered here as a "text," can be read as the emblem and microcosm of society (Keith and Cross 1993: 9). In a city that is the projection of society (Castells 1977: 115), the urban landscape has bifurcated itself into the space of the blessed and the accursed; those who prosper in their blessedness (read wealth and health), and the accursed, with their sense of transience, their wandering aimlessly, always bearing the marks of their misfortune, and thus fearful, ugly and violent (White 1987: 160). Superimposed on these demarcations exists another inflexion of space that hinges upon the visible and the invisible: one city is on the surface, the other underground or hidden; one is a realm of mastery and control, the other of mystery and turmoil (Lehan 1998: 273). Similarly, in his reading of the textualized city in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau distinguishes between the grandiose and static panorama city—what he calls a visual simulacrum—, and the ordinary practitioners of the city, the walkers who, down below, make use of spaces that cannot be seen from above. As they walk, they write an "urban" text even if they are never going to be able to read it.

These transient, evasive and indirect spatial practices are, in de Certeau's vision, "foreign" to the "geometrical" or geographical space of the visual from above, and refer to another spatiality, what he calls a "migrational" or "metaphorical" city which slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city (1984: 93).[2] Yet one of the questions I would like to address here is how these sets of cities relate to each other and what is the degree of permeability between them. If, according to de Certeau, it is possible to identify a "migrational city" as the spatiality that slips into the clear and visible text of the planned and readable city (1984: 93), I would like to recast this inflexion in the context of contemporary migrants and the homeless. Both sets of practitioners

[2] This two-fold division of the city roughly coincides with what anthropologist Manuel Delgado envisions as the city and the non-city. If the city is the stable morphology based on a stable social order, the non-city is characterized by the nomadic, by the forms, structures or intersections that cannot crystallize in the city (2003: 124). Another bifurcation hinges on the "hard" and the "soft" city, where the former refers to "the structures of the built environment" and the latter to the "interpretive, perceptual constructs present in the mind of every urban dweller" (Dear and Leclerc 2003: 6).

find in the city a limbo of sorts, yet the question is whether the term "migrational" can accommodate their exoduses and spatial trajectories. How migrational, one could ask, is this invisible city? In order to address these questions, I would like to split the possible answer into the two sets of migrants that populate Palahniuk's "Slumming"and Helena Viramontes's "The Cariboo Café."

II: The Back Alleys and the Ironic Edge of Postmodernity

> 'O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space'
> *Hamlet* II, 2

Hamlet's spatial musings, which Borges places at the beginning of "El Aleph," dismantle the dichotomy between limited and unlimited, finite and infinite spaces. It is that convergence that Borges unfolds in the vision of the Aleph, where one point in the universe contains all the spaces. It is also that convergence that rests at the heart of Palahniuk's "Slumming". Mrs Keyes, we read, has transformed her house into her self-contained world, into a cocoon that houses her whole universe. Like an air-tight compartment, nothing can penetrate the cocoon, no newspaper, no news. Newspapers are automatically recycled before they can bring the disturbing realization of yet another homeless murdered in an unprecedented wave of violence that is decimating the homeless population. The television has long been replaced by an aquarium with a lizard that changes color according to the decoration around it. The lizard, too, is the king of another form of infinite space. These tight (if infinite) spaces that Palahniuk features at the beginning of the narration provide the interpretive clues of the story. The idea of home is compressed and expanded—and deterritorialized—in unprecedented landscapes as a group of millionaires decides to mimic the ultimate kings and queens of infinite urban space: the homeless, the same people that, as representatives of leading corporations, they might have contributed to generate. The homeless are viewed as the ultimate revision of the medieval wild man, who has managed to escape the three securities provided by civilization; namely the securities of sex, as organized by the institution of the family; sustenance, as provided by the political, social, and economic institutions; and salvation, as provided by the church (White 1987: 166). It is this existence outside social structures and strictures yet occupying the same physical space as their peers that seduces the characters of the story. They can be and not be at the same time, and start their existence under erasure. In order to be themselves, the story reveals, the millionaires need to become "foreign" to themselves, and transform their spatial coordinates into a nocturnal and utopian (read wild) landscape, into a Baudrillardian simulation. If, as a

concept, wildness and its attendant nomadism has been dramatically opposed to "blessedness" (White 1987:160, 162), Palahniuk recasts the concept in a changing urban landscape. Homelessness-nomadism is seen in the story as a welcome sign of degeneration and a comfortable falling away from civilization; a stripping away into a form of instinctual primitivism, into innocence and desire. The neo-homeless in the story do not enjoy any of the three securities mentioned above, but they do not suffer any of the restraints imposed by the membership to these institutions either. For them, as for wild men, life becomes excitingly unpredictable and unstable.

Just as one packs clothes suitable for vacation, the multimillionaires in the story carefully prepare the crossing of the border into homelessness. Borders traditionally separate the known and inhabited territory from the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it (Eliade 1959: 29). Yet these millionaires are eager to leave their world for the fluid modality of the non-world. It is the non-being that becomes valorized as a new source of excitement, exhilaration and happiness. In turn, they are transformed into adamic figures exploring a new-found land. As in any other border crossing, there are instructions to observe as well as a standardized rituals to follow. Inky, the fashion expert and editor of *Vogue*, spells out the particulars of the new wave in the following grotesque fashion:

> Wigs are worn backwards
> Cut a hole in the center of a soiled blanket and you are ready for a night of fun on the street
> Shoes are put on the wrong feet

Homeless clothing is to be seasoned by odor, the new sign of anti-status—the new olfative boundary that will seal invisibility. Thus the metamorphosis is fully achieved: Parker (Mr. Keyes) starts limping as a result of wearing shoes on the wrong feet; Evelyn (Mrs. Keyes) keeps her mouth open, then spits. Parker stumbles, bumps into her and grabs her arm. They kiss as the city disappears before them, ready to explore the new sexuality that homelessness and invisibility can offer. They may have a full schedule ahead, rummaging through garbage, sorting out aluminum cans, or waiting at a free clinic for a dark eyed young doctor. The external, and presumably objective and "factual" homelessness is fully accomplished. Thus "represented," the neo homeless become mere images that, in turn, are indistinguishable from the real homeless. Yet the facts require a narrative that is accomplished in the form of micro-autobiographies. Scribbled on brown carton, the multimillionaires select their facts. These are Inky's: "Single Mom. Ten Kids. Breast Cancer." These are Muffy's: "Crippled War Vet. Starving. Need to get home" (2006: 77). The fabrication of indifferent facts and selves is thus successfully achieved. The narratives do not provide any information of the self, which is totally erased in

the three selected "facts" of these generic micro-narratives so often repeated in the urban landscape. They are rather the autobiographical gestures of non-selves. Further, if the telling of a story is (or can be) the starting point of inter-narrativity, these clonic narratives do not provide any verbal intersection.

Thus equipped to go undetected, these under-cover millionaires turn into the "generic homeless" *à la Baudrillard.* They see themselves as the new pioneers, starting out a life on a wasteland, making a loop in time and space, and creating the new soft city superimposed onto the very streets of the visible city. Unlike former pioneers, they do not have to worry about wolves, bears or wild life, but other dangers may besiege them, such as drug-dealers and drive-by shootings. They may need to watch out for botulism and frostbite. They also need to be vigilant not to give themselves away and reveal costly tooth caps or a whiff of Chanel no. 5, for those signs would automatically place them in the visible city they belong to. Their moving down into non-being and invisibility is not the linear chronicle of a helpless fall, a sudden turn of the wheel of fortune, but is self-imposed and can be reversed at will, either climbing up the stairs to their Sheraton room or returning home. Interestingly, the four characters in the story, Inky and her husband Muffy, Evelyn and Parker, make use of the hotel not as a place—or "non-place" in Marc Augé's term— to stay in temporarily. The hotel room is invested with a more transitory meaning as a changing room, where the protagonists can choose what to wear from bags full of clothes bought at army surplus stores. In the room, they try out the new wrappings of homelessness, the ones that will transform them into "free" individuals as soon as they descend the fourteen flights of stairs into the safe haven of the non-city and the non-self. Theirs is a case of hyper-mobility. Since they cannot possibly move up—not in vain, the narrative voice reminds us that Muffy is the president of Global Airlines—they move down the social ladder searching for a new source of reality, as well as for the freedom and the wilderness that the new frontier promises.

The outlook of the new frontier has changed in the postmetropolis, and it is marked by the limit below which invisibility begins. If invisibility has been traditionally associated with racial profiling and social marginalization, it now bestows on the pioneers the coveted gifts of freedom from themselves and from their immediate reality; it grants them a desired non-identity. They only need to climb down the stairs from their hotel room and step into a back alley to be totally metamorphosed into non-selves. The back alley, which in Viramontes's story is associated with spatial marginality, signals for Palahniuk's characters the threshold of a self-imposed homelessness; it is the liminal location that connects their room at The Sheraton Hotel in midtown Manhattan with the promise of a new-found land, the non-city that opens itself up in a mesh of promising streets. If in "A Berlin Chronicle" Walter Benjamin refers to how he traversed the thresholds of his social class and claims that "this was a crossing of frontiers not only social but topological, in the sense that whole networks of

streets were opened up under the auspices of prostitution" (1978b: 11), the neo homeless in Palahniuk's story cross similar social and topological boundaries. The mood that pervades this stepping into otherness is pure exhilaration at the unknown, at the sheer feeling of adventure.

For Inky, turning into a neo homeless feels like a natural step since, she explains, the wealthy were the first homeless people. We may own a dozen houses, she claims, but we still live out of a suitcase, owning the clothes we have on. This is, in fact, yo-yo (or, as Inky calls it, "commuting") homelessness, a constant crossing below and above the invisibility level that is tantamount to a total homing. For all the re-routed and improvised homes in the story are presided over by the room at the Sheraton, as well as by an indeterminate number of homes spread throughout the city. The safety of the hotel room marks the ultimate coating, protectively covering other transitory homes under the ramps of the bridge or at the entrance of a warehouse; and it hovers over the blankets wrapping their clothes and bodies at night. It is this ultimate rooting that blesses the characters' "routing," and allows them to consider their outings as a loop, as "a poverty sorbet" (72). The city and the non-city, identity and non-identity are thus totally porous, separated by flights of stairs the characters climb up or down at will, and connected by cell phones. It is precisely the ringing of a cell phone that first alerts Evelyn to the fact that the homeless couple sitting on a bench outside an art museum are their friends Inky and Whelps, totally mimeticized as homeless. Sitting there and discovering sex in the new public—turned private—space, Inky and Whelps look like a remake of Adam and Eve, voluntarily exiled from a successful paradise, and happily assuming their condition as nomads. If in the Middle Ages the notion of wildness is projected in images of desire, as Hayden White has demonstrated in his archaeology of the term (1987: 150-182), it seems possible to argue that such feelings of libidinal and erotic freedom are associated with neo homelessness in the story, as the detailed account of their public intimacy suggests. Only the ringing of the phone, with a technical conversation about the new fashionable colours, interrupts their public lovemaking.

The city and the non-city, the being and the non-being, are constantly mixed and combined in the story through a logic of inversion that recasts old values into a new creed *à la Inky* that is readily accepted by the neophytes:

> Anonymity is the new fame
> poverty is the new nobility
> homelessness is the new way to be home
> Nobodies are the new celebrities
> public is the new private
> looking bad is the new looking good
> dressing down is the new dressing up
> being absent is the new being present

nothing to lose is the new richness
insanity is the new sanity
the real identity is the non identity
the real place is the non place
the real is the non real
homelessness is the real vacation

The list could be easily continued: non homes are the only homes, public love-making is the new sense of intimacy, etc., provided that one side of the predicate structure contains the opposite of the other. The spectacle, the self-representation, to go back to Debord, is a concrete inversion of life. At the same time, the creed stands as an eulogy of nomadism and neo wildness, the ABC of a utopian state based on the repudiation of the accumulated values of civilization; the same civilization the characters have contributed to create. The nomad, the neo homeless turned wild man is here recast as the pursuer of the elixir of the postmodern, the cult figure of contemporary ideological dislocation. This dislocation is, in fact, premised on an exercise on duplication. The non-city doubles the city and vice versa. Similarly, the non-real doubles the real. In this logic of inversion the real—the immediate—takes the place of the other and the other takes the place of the real (Cf. Rosset 1993: 52). The millionaires in the story develop a "metaphysical thinking" whereby their immediate reality, relations and ways of life are temporarily rejected as the acme of mediocrity and banality; just an exhausted paradise that yields no more excitement. The understanding being that the immediate is rejected under the suspicion that the immediate is the other of itself—or the double of reality (Rosset 1993: 56). Reality as-it-is is considered totally passé, outdated and outmoded, and is hence discarded and repudiated in favor of the exotic below and beyond the new frontier where invisibility begins. If immediate reality—what comes first in terms of space—is also associated in temporal terms with the first, for these characters this "first" original is displaced by another source of immediacy and "firstness." It is the prefix "non" that secures and anchors real meaning in a society where everything is *déjà vu*. The reality that has not been modified by its very negation is thus discarded as if it were a secondary elaboration. It is the "non" place, the "non" self, the "non" real that fashions a new original, a new source of time, selfhood and reality, a theme park stemming from the same parameters of the real. Hence the crossing of the border, the traveling into truthness and "firstness."

The result of this inversion and doubling does not create an "urban fabric," for there is no interconnection with "original" homeless. The simulated homeless stick to one another, drunk and horsing around as they enjoy the perfect vacation in the very nocturnal geography of the city. At some point Packer asks: "Is there anyone under this bridge *not* worth at least forty million dollars?" (2006: 75). And of course, no one answers, for the non-city becomes

self-contained; it becomes another form of what Lawrence Herzog calls tourist enclavism. This vacation, like many other kinds of tourism, breeds "the creation of isolated zones for visitors, buffered from the everyday city" (Herlog 2003: 128). Yet this tight city is not sealed, and the vacation turns out to be more than a loop in time and space. Since the copying and the cloning of the homeless have been so satisfactory, these neo homeless cannot be distinguished from the "real" ones. Consequently, they are tracked down as "real" by a serial killer that feels they have witnessed the kidnapping of a young woman. As at the beginning of the story, another call from a cell phone connects the two cities, the real and non-real, the hard and soft. Evelyn, temporarily located in the visible city, is at a charity dinner dance when her cell-phone rings and she answers Inky's call. Her friend is calling from an underpass or a tunnel; that is, below the visibility level. Released from their respective spouses, Inky and Packer are together on a night out, and are being chased. The police offer no help. Originals and copies become undistinguishable in the liminal locations—dark alleys, tunnels and underpasses—of the non-city. The confusion with the homeless, so the ironic denouement runs, has been fully satisfactory; Inky and Packer are the invisible homeless they always wanted to be and are treated accordingly. Their peculiar doubling is, in turn, replicated in the series of killings of the "real" homeless that may have witnessed the kidnapping of the young woman. When the originally real is not available and when the characters cannot make their way back into the visible city, the non-real turns out to be the "only" real. "In a *world* that is *really upside down*, the true is a moment of the false" (n.d.: 7), writes Debord. Actual death is just a moment of a represented—and hence—false life. The outcome of the story allows a revision of Inky's creed. One can say that for her and for Packer, as real victims of a serial murderer, their real identity turns out to be the non-identity; the real place is the non-place; the real is the non-real; homelessness becomes the threshold of wildness, especially so when the first part of the predicative becomes separated from the second, and a gap opens between both cities. That is why Mrs. Keys, Evelyn, needs to be totally homed, totally cocooned, so that there is no blurriness any more, so that the inversion of terms—and partners—stops.

III: On the Bad Edge of Post-Modernity: "The Cariboo Café"

It is a different slippage of the migrational city into the visible and "legal" one that Viramontes encrypts in "The Cariboo Café." In the story, the migrational city has its own practitioners, its own temporality, and is played out in restrictive and (in)different spaces, as we read in the first paragraph of the story:

> They arrived in the secrecy of night, as displaced people often do, stopping over for a week, a month, eventually staying a lifetime. The plan was simple. Mother would work, too, until they saved

> enough to move into a finer future where the toilet was one's own and the children needn't be frightened. In the meantime, they played in the back alleys, among the broken glass, wise to the ways of the streets. (1995: 65)

The migrants in the story do not use the accepted geography of immigration—and hence, displacement—through Ellis Island. They do not come as hopeful immigrants but as displaced people (Franco 2002: 122). Their spatial practices are meant to go undetected—and are protected by the secrecy of night as opposed to the openly readable day of de Certeau's migrant or the flâneur. They are also restricted to certain spaces as opposed to the open streets or avenues that de Certeau identifies as the markers of the urban text. As in Haunted, the night and the back alleys mark the other "down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (de Certeau 1984: 93), where this other city infiltrates the legal, visible one. As opposed to the grandiose panorama city and the invisible migrational city in de Certeau's words, Viramontes's migrational city actualizes itself in this down below, in the back alleys and among the broken glass, the very place the millionaires in Palahniuk's story exoticized as the new real. Places, as Walter Benjamin claims in *Reflections*, teach a language (1978b: 30), and the back alleys where the children become street wise teach the language of spatial discrimination and invisibility; they are located "on the bad edge of postmodernity" (cf. Davis 1988: 224).

Sonya and Macky thus find themselves among the broken glass of back alleys, where they are faced with an indecipherable spatial text they struggle to read and interpret. These two coordinates, the secrecy of the night as well as the back alleys, are the temporal and spatial referents of a temporal stasis, of a limbo, or a "meanwhile" Viramontes examines in the tense prose of "The Cariboo Cafe." If the "meanwhile" of invisibility was equated with a newly discovered sense of originality and happiness in "Slumming: A Story by Lady Baglady," for Viramontes's characters it is pervaded by the mood of displacement. Every city creates a state of mind, as we read in Lehan's *The City in Literature*, and the migrational city operates in a similar way. Exhilaration pervaded night adventures in "Slumming," but fear and insecurity permeate the migrant-city mood, as we can read in the set of rules the children have been inculcated with: "Rule one: never talk to strangers, not even the neighbor who paced up and down the hallways talking to himself. Rule two: the police ... was La Migra in disguise and thus should always be avoided. Rule three: keep your key with you at all times—the four walls of the apartment were the only protection against the streets until Popi returned home" (1995: 65). Summing up in one: isolation goes hand in hand with distrust. If the city is premised on the external and the internal crossing, the interchange with other cultures, languages

and mores,[3] displacement goes hand in hand with isolation within the four private walls of the apartment, the only safety against being sent to Tijuana.[4] The home as evoked here does not provide the kind of shelter Gaston Bachelard talks about in *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard claims that "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (1994: 6); the apartment in the story, however, is seen rather as the ring of protection against chaos and deportation, against invisibility and the threat of the non-city.

The home as shelter and center is lost when Sonya loses the key; literally, the girl loses the key to the apartment but she also misplaces the key to the interpretation and recognition of space. The children start their search for Miss Avila's home, where they hope to find shelter. As they are thrown into another stasis, into an unreadable city with labyrinthic streets they enter the "non-home." Inadvertently and inevitably, they become part of the nomadic as they slip into a farther level of invisibility. Their spatial practices do not follow any pre-ordained (read safe) trajectory, like those of the people piling in and spilling out of the buses, whose ritualized daily movements—their migrations—deportations or displacements can be calculated by the hour, and are part of the flow of the city. The two children are closer to the homeless man Sonya immediately notices, the "old man asleep on the bus bench across the street" (1995: 65). This homeless man is the representative of another kind of migrational city who appropriates space in a different way. His inhabiting the street provides an instance of a peculiar transformation of public spaces into intimate ones, the kind that provides shelter, and substitutes for the comforts of the home *à la Bachelard*. If de Certeau argues that the act of walking is the equivalent to a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrians (1984: 97), this man's walking into the alley—which he transforms into his personal bathroom—like his drinking from a paper bag and his disappearance around the corner, point at a different, or rather in-different trajectory marked by invisibility. As opposed to the leisurely *flâneur* and the neo homeless in Palahniuk's story it is hard to say that the homeless man is "as much at home among the façades of houses as the citizen is in his four walls" (Benjamin 1978a: 37), and that for him public spaces are the new intimate spaces. For once the centre—be a home or a room at the Sheraton—is lost, street signs cannot be converted into metonyms of domesticity. Inky's creed, the set of

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[3] The city, whose earliest representation is a circle and a cross, is the site of two contradictory urges, the conjunction, the intersection and the mixing of directions implied in the cross, and the countering wall, the protection against difference and the outside (Lehan 1998: 13).

[4] Interestingly, Bachelard and René Guénon, as Gilbert Durand points out, attribute a defensive quality to the quadrangular construction, as if to ward off an attack. Conversely, circular structures resonated with protective structures, such as the maternal womb. Very fittingly, the Garden of Eden was a circular structure (Durand 1992: 175).

inversions that underpinned the millionaire's spatial trajectories, does not hold for this man; for him there is no ultimate wrapping, no luxury home, no Sheraton room presiding over his re-routed homes. Once one side of the inversion is not existent, the other is left dangling in a precarious position: there are only non-homes and non-cities. Streets become part of a new psycho-geography that radically differentiates the *flâneur* and the neo homeless from "original" homeless. Even if the trajectories coincide and both the homeless and the *flâneur* are "drifting" in an urban simultaneity, they are not part of the same city.

Locked out of a precarious and defensive paradise, Sonya and Macky become accidental homeless,[5] another refashioning of the Adam and Eve pair. Like Palahniuk, Viramontes enters the long-extant discourse of homelessness in American literature. However, there is no trace of glamour or irony to the condition of homelessness in the story. Nor is the text an expression of a "transcendental homelessness" which refers a metaphysical loss of home and hence, of the epistemological center (Allen 2004: 11). What Viramontes emphasizes is the tenuous line that separates the homeless and the precariously homed; that is, how easy it is to transit from one to the other, how permeable is the threshold separating both states or cities. In "A Berlin Chronicle" Benjamin traversed the thresholds of his social class. Similarly, Palahniuk's characters crossed the brims of their spatial practices towards the social bottom. But what happens when the displaced or invisible others are willing to cross boundaries of class and move upwards? Thresholds become barriers that seem to allow traffic in only one direction. The permeable city becomes the fortress city, the corporate citadel that behaves like a sealed classical body (Bakhtin 1984: 26).

As accidental homeless, and as representatives of the migrational city, whole networks of streets open before Sonya and Macky's eyes. Yet there is hardly any fascination at this standing "on the edge of the void," and not a trace of pleasure at "hovering on the brink" (1978b: 11) that Benjamin describes in his chronicle; there is rather a feeling of suspension, of falling into a menacing emptiness. For the two children those networks of streets are not mapped out through images of domesticity or through the desire for the unknown; street signs are not like pictures in a dining room; they are simply what they are, outposts of a middle world. The familiar spatial practices are erased and the landscape reveals itself anew. The spatial text becomes threatening and undecipherable as Sonya and Macky move into transitional locations, mazes of alleys and dead ends that never look the same; it is the spatial version of the "meanwhile."

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[5] In *Homelessness in American Literature* Robert Allen explains that the literary criticism on the theme of homelessness in America can be divided into four categories: metaphorical homelessness, related themes, literary romanticism, and literary realism/naturalism" (2004: 11). However, it is hard to place Viramontes's story in any of these categories.

Then, all of a sudden, the children arrive at an intersection, a spatial X which, very appropriately, coincides with an emotional one. They see the neon sign of the café as their spatial trajectories intersect with those of a woman who is roaming the streets. Viramontes confronts the reader with two simultaneous urban narratives which become intertwined at a spatial crossing. Rather than unfolding the story sequentially, Viramontes chooses to emphasize simultaneity. Instead of developing a story line marching forward in plot and denouement, Viramontes extends the tale laterally or contiguously and thus favours simultaneity over sequence, spatiality versus historicity, geography versus biography (Soja 1989: 22). Biography does intervene, if only obliquely, in the last installment of the story, as the reader learns that the unnamed woman is grieving the loss of her son, Geraldo, missing under a dictatorial regime in Central America. Yet those bits of information are brushed aside in the encounter and only simultaneities intervene. The homeless children meet the homeless woman. Simultaneities radiate out interpersonal plights. Yet homelessness has different nuances, for if the children have turned into accidental homeless locked out of a precarious paradise, for this woman home has turned into a place of violence based on selective exclusions. The woman has sought sanctuary in the United States after her five-year-old son, Geraldo, has "disappeared" under a regime that presumably has been partially funded and supported by the Reagan and Bush administrations. The regime has transformed her home into a membership maintained by bonds of terror. Those who resist or are indifferent to that tight sense of kinship are simply eliminated—even if that implies getting rid of potential spies, cunning criminals and tricksters who happen to be five year olds. Home thus turns into a place made of exclusions that separates those who belong from the undesirable. Not surprisingly, the four walls of her house do not feel like a protective home (1995: 75). But where is home? Home, the text suggests, is where her son is. The woman turns into a deterritorialized Llorona as she roams the night streets and contributes with her wail to the new urban aural text. For her, home has been re-routed, and mobilized (Cf Marangoly 1996: 1). No longer anchored to stable spatial, emotional and ideological coordinates, home is simply on the way.

IV: Café as re-routed home and urban border

The beacon light Sonya sees with relief, the "zero-zero PLACE" (1995: 68), is not the kind of shiny, enameled sign that for the *flâneur* is at least as good as a wall ornament (Benjamin 1978a: 37), but rather the sanctuary against non-city, against the nomadic, against the threatening dark sea where no marks are recognizable. The café becomes the re-routed home, a semi private sphere that momentarily offers shelter, comfort, nurture and protection. Both the café and the hotel, where the accidental family spends the night, can be described as non-places according to Marc Augé's conceptualization, since both are transitional

spaces that do not provide a relational and historical identity (1992: 112). They are purely liminal spaces *per se*; they do not precede or follow a home or a centre to return to; they do not localize whoever transits them in time and space. Small wonder that the café as a non-place is initially perceived as the "zero-zero place," as a location that negates itself in its very formulation. This notion of self-deconstruction underlies Emmanuel Lévinas' description of the café as a non-place for a-non society, for a society without solidarity bonds and common interests (in Delgado 2003: 123). Yet I would like to argue that this re-routed home where spatial trajectories converge in the story becomes the place of negotiation, the site where strange connections and crossings are made, the point where the city and the non-city meet and edge against each other. For the café marks the site where migrants rapidly assemble cities—however fragile—, but also represents the space of separation where a postmodern urban border is reinforced.[6]

As a place of transit, the café can be considered as a spatial palimpsest that registers previous crossings and reinforcements of the border. Every frontier or separation requires a gate keeper, a border patroller, and the owner of the café entirely fits the role. He is the ideological patroller, the guardian of legality and the status quo that constantly boasts of his honesty and fairness against the abuses of the "others." That legality, however, is constantly threatened by the recurrent presence and transit of what he calls "scum:" the illegal workers at the garment store—whom he calls "roaches"—scurrying into his bathroom; Paulie, the drug-addict, passing out in the bathroom; and finally the two children led by the woman he immediately qualifies as illegal. These trespassers are the representatives of the migrational—the non-city—which illegally slips into the visible city; a slippage that is systematically subdued and policed within the orthodox ideology of the Cariboo Cafe. Upon seeing the woman, the cafe owner effects a paradigmatic mobilization of difference that immediately translates as the imposition of inferiority. His business, as an extension of his home, cleaves and separates the self versus the "other." For him, this separation is crystal clear: "a round face, burnt toast color [and] black hair that hangs like straight ropes" (1995: 69), always hides the same essence, the potentially criminal identity of the illegal. Further, it can be argued that being an illegal immigrant does not yield any identity, but rather the absence of it, the non-identity, the larval modality of the non-world. For as you pass through a border or a border zone, changes happen. If identity becomes non-identity (Polkinhorn 1993: 25), languages undergo a similar transformation: "I hear the lady saying something in Spanish. Right off I know she is illegal, which explains she looks like a weirdo" (1995: 70). Spanish as a language is transformed into an illegal language, into a form of non-language; it is automatically spatialized south of the border, the

[6] See Manzanas and Benito (2003).

location of the non-home, but also the non-reality, the incomprehensible, and the unbearable.

Yet, there is more to this illegal slippage. As a re-routed home the café provides the meeting ground of the city and the non-city, and hence an intersection occurs. If the owner had cleaved a line of separation against the unnamed woman during their first visit to the café, her return (together with the children) the next morning after a restful night at the hotel calls for a different perception: "She looks so different, so young ... almost beautiful" (1995: 77), he has to admit to himself. Further, the owner's preconceptions collapse in the face of Macky's big eyes, and his happy practicing of his only word in English, Coke. The legal and the illegal, the hard and the soft cities, the visible and the invisible practitioners, the Spanish and the English languages meet at an unexpected intersection that highlights the similarities between the two sides. A sense of *comunitas* is activated, and hence there is a sharing of common values and a regard for one another. For Victor Turner "Comunitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority" (1969: 128). *Comunitas* has several strands here. I would argue that it may stem naturally from the sense of displacement. For, As Carlos Mosiváis contends, "In foreign lands, no matter how one prefers to see it, the family is more family, the fellow countrymen more countrymen, the reconstruction of the familiar more devotional" (2003: 36). This sense of "upgraded" family breaks in through the interstices of the border the owner of the café had erected around himself. For there is a common and simultaneous marginality bonding the re-routed family. He has also lost his son in Vietnam as a result of US imperialistic practices. He is a grieving father, a male revision of La Llorona who takes an immediate liking to Macky, a "real sweet heart like JoJo," his son. He is, to put it differently, "El Llorón" without a son. That is what the migrational city represents in the story, the dissolution of the stable parameters of the legal, visible city, and a re-routed reconstruction, a new constellation gathered in improvised intersections. Macky and Geraldo become two superimposed images of the lost son. If for the woman he is her recovered son, Geraldo, in the owner's eyes Macky's presence marks his solitude and the absence of his own son. Yet, the question is what becomes of this fragile intersection, this *comunitas* that was totally absent in Palahniuk's story

If in Palahniuk's writing the new pioneers have to worry about the inhabitants verging on the rim of invisibility, the pushers and the people shooting from their cars, the implacable representatives of the border erupt into the newly forged *comunitas* of the café. When the flashlights of the police come into the cafe in the deceptive fashion of a colorful carousel, the space of reunion becomes the site of separation. The woman who escaped the violence of Central America cannot escape the violence of the displaced border. If, in its indifference for particular locations, the story had spared us the intimidating

verticality of the border the washer-woman probably crossed, Viramontes climaxes the story with the arrogant and phallic vision of separation—with new versions of bars, "guns taut and cold like steel erections"—confronting the woman and the children. If we assume with Henri Lefebvre that "verticality and great height have ever been the spatial expression of potentially violent power" meant to convey an impression of authority (1991: 98), it seems accurate to state that the guns finally and violently carve apart the city from the non-city, and the legal from the illegal. The false sanctuary reveals its true face: the Cariboo Cafe proves to be the non-place, or the zero zero place, where the representatives of the migrational city are reminded of their identities and their status. Yet there is a sense of lingering provisionality in the communal intersection. The restricted space of the cafe is literally unbound as ideological boundaries collapse between the two sets of characters. The migrational and the legal cities create a peculiar intersection where boundaries, confines and limits no longer separate and delimit, but become porous, thus allowing the dyad (inside/outside, the private/the public) to collapse. If Palahniuk's characters are "haunted," Viramontes's narrative becomes haunting because it works through the simultaneity and extension of events. Simultaneities, Edward Soja reminds us, work by extending our point of view outward in an infinite number of lines connecting the subject to a whole world of comparable instances (1989: 23). Simultaneity refracts and splits multiple movements in the city. It allows us to see the different layers of the border of invisibility and the ways they work for different—if contiguous—spatial practitioners. It also allows us glimpses into the violence stemming from both narratives against those perceived as nomads from within or from without. Situating both narratives side by side with each other contributes to reassessing spatiality, as well as the myriads of exoduses and spatial practices of the migrants that inhabit or make use of space. For concepts such as invisibility, border, and migrational city split and refract endlessly in the postmetropolis. The two-fold division of the city between the blessed and the accursed, the landscapes of belonging and exclusion, as well as the visible and invisible cities, as the analysis of these two stories demonstrates, does not totally hold anymore, for the invisible unfolds itself and becomes impossible to pin down in a spatial palimpsest. At the crossing of multiple refractions, the invisible and migrational city is not a monolithic entity; there are conflicts and silences within it, and it is traversed by simulacra.

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ANA MARÍA MANZANAS CALVO