

The Braided River:

Migration and the Personal Essay

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Table of Contents

Contents	ii
Acknowledgments	v
Abstract	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction – The Braided River	1
The Headwaters of the River: “ <i>Que sçay-jè</i> ”	2
“Time, perhaps, for an essay”	6
A Stranger Comes to Town.....	9
The Shared Language of Migration.....	13
From Y to NZ: the Roots of There to Here.....	16
Strands of the Braided River.....	20
Chapter 2. Roots – The River Under the River.....	30
“Migrations Within Living Memory”	32
The Beauty of the Paua.....	39
A Stranger in My Own Town.....	45
“Make impulse one with wilfulness and enter”	49
Hero of the Family.....	56
Voyaging Toward Understanding.....	62
The Desire to Escape.....	65
To Say Yes, Go.....	72
Chapter 3. Routes – Writing Between Two Shores.....	73
Exploring the Route.....	76
The Seeds That Flourished.....	79

Between Two Shores.....	84
Jigsaw Pieces That Fit.....	95
“With no language but with hope”.....	103
Acceptance of the Other.....	107
From Experience to Meaning.....	111
A Sense of Welcome.....	114
Chapter 4. Closing the Distance.....	118
Nearness and Distance.....	119
The Price Migrants Pay.....	124
“Half a world away from my own”.....	129
“Emigration is surely a synonym for farewell”.....	136
Bridging the Gap.....	144
Migratory Birds.....	150
The Shared Narrative of Loss.....	155
Realigning the Inner Compass.....	161
Chapter 5. The Second Cup of Tea – On Belonging.....	163
A Full Migrant.....	165
Contrapuntal Awareness.....	170
Grounding the Unsayable.....	177
The Contact Zone.....	184
“I can never be a Kiwi”.....	192
The Topos of Memory.....	197
The Sense of Belonging.....	203
Migrant Poppies.....	207

Chapter 6. The Migration of Identity.....	211
Being Other.....	213
Identity: Narratives of Formation.....	217
<i>Tūrangawaewae</i>	222
Migrant Roots.....	229
Embracing the Unknown.....	235
“Migrants – borne-across humans”.....	239
“Understanding nourishes belonging”.....	242
The Wrong Road.....	246
Chapter 7. Conclusion – The Gift of Return.....	251
Bearing Witness in the Personal Essay.....	252
The Road Taken.....	256
Navigating the Route.....	258
Living with Distance.....	260
Belonging: The Deepest Current.....	261
Migrant Identity: Fluid Dynamics.....	263
Walking with the World in Newtown.....	267
Works Cited.....	270

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Abstract

The personal essay provides a vibrant method of inquiry for exploring migration. Migration tests the individual on all levels and the personal essay bears witness to that lived experience in writing. In applying Montaigne's maxim "What do I know?" to experience, the joint endeavor of trial and assessment coincide in the migrant and the personal essay. Yet to date, no study of how the personal essay and the migrant intersect and reinforce their parallel journey of discovery has been published. Emphasizing observation, reflection and synthesis, the personal essay provides a rigorous and innovative approach to investigate what migrants encounter firsthand. Both the genre and the migrant try, weigh and test experience for its value and significance in writing and in the real world. This study of the nexus between migration and the personal essay genre addresses a crucial gap in the research, a space of increasing relevance in a progressively more mobile and globalized world.

Migration is a lifelong experience, and New Zealand is a nation of migrants. This research examines personal essays written by contemporary migrants to New Zealand from twenty different countries. By probing the roots and routes of migration, migrant essays address complex questions around identity and belonging to assess the lived stakes of migration. Migrants cross geographic, linguistic and existential frontiers, and their personal essays bear witness to the contact zones between self and other, self and text. The migrant personal essay reflects and analyzes experience from the outsider perspective and testifies to the dominant culture how belonging is predicated on mutual acceptance of the other. As this study demonstrates, the personal essay is the ideal genre to explore how migrants negotiate and assess the space between inner and outer, home and journey, experience and meaning – abstractions intrinsic to our sense of self and world.

Chapter 1: Introduction – The Braided River

Migration and the personal essay form a braided river of possibility no one has explored in depth. Both the migrant and the writer set out from what they know toward what they do not, in life and on the page. Charting that voyage of discovery is an endeavor they both share in their quest for understanding. Like the braided rivers that flow across New Zealand, much of what migrants discover and learn about their new country lies well below the surface narrative and has not been studied from their own reflective and analytical perspectives. The personal essay provides a method of inquiry that can plumb the more resonant depths of individual knowledge and experience. Our lives have channels that entwine, divide and rejoin as they course toward their end, but underneath is another story: “We now understand that braided rivers consist of much more than active surface channels, and that the river flows across an alluvial gravel bed, which may be many metres deep and possibly kilometres wide” (Gray and Harding 7). Like a braided river, the forces that determine migration and how individuals write about it have both an interwoven external narrative and a deep and wide undercurrent that carries the story toward its conclusion.

We cannot see most of the river flowing across the alluvial gravel bed of our lives, but we can sense it, and if we try, we can write about it in the personal essay. For below the surface currents of our lives is another river we only grasp through writing, the river underneath the river: “Always behind the actions of writing, painting, thinking, healing, doing, cooking, talking, smiling, making is the river, the *Río Abajo Río*; the river under the river that nourishes everything we make” (Estés 304). As migrants look back in writing they perceive and understand the deeper causes and effects of their migratory experience, both the root and route of their journeys, and their essays present “the discovery of the structuring of lived time through writing” (O’Neill 74). That structure, or design, can only be perceived after the fact, not before, caught

up as we are in the current of our lives. Writing the genre of the personal essay provides the reflection and analysis for migrants to inquire into and discover the meaning of their migration, revealing the river underneath the river that brought them to New Zealand.

The Headwaters of the River: “Que sçay-je?”

My husband and I with our two children migrated from the United States to New Zealand in 2007 and like many migrants my skills went unutilized at first. It was disheartening not to be teaching on the university level as I had done for years. I worked at one temporary position after another: receptionist, learning advisor, web page builder, dogsbody. Finally I began teaching a community education course on the personal essay. By chance or choice the classes attracted adult migrants who wrote essays of remarkable depth and scope about their migration experiences. Perhaps their loss of home prompted migrants to want to write, for “It is a reality to those with the experience of exile that leaving home, creating absence, and dislocation is essential for the writing act to proceed in the first place, and to become meaningful” (Gunnars 27). I felt a frisson of recognition when Gareth, a Welsh doctor who had migrated to New Zealand in 1974, wrote, “Emigration is surely a synonym for farewell.” We had said farewell to our friends, family, house, work, dog, a lifetime of connections two years earlier, and I was still in a state of grief. This Welsh migrant’s sense of loss had been endured and shared decades later, and his personal essay radiated past the individual to touch a larger audience. I realized migrants possessed an affinity for the genre whose hallmark is to try, to weigh and to test, even as migrants have tried, weighed and tested (and been tested by) their chosen country.

The journey of migration is one of discovery, an endeavor it shares with the personal essay, as “the essayist takes the reader on a journey, defining and commenting upon a real-life experience in a detailed and insightful manner that leads to a broader understanding of life and a

greater sense of meaning and self-fulfillment” (Iversen *Shadow Boxing* 41). The joint ventures of discovery and assessment coincide in the migrant and the personal essay. Both the writer and the migrant test and weigh experience for what it means, and this shared process of inquiry and analysis makes the personal essay an effective genre for assessing the actual stakes of migration for the individual. Not only can migrants explore their own narratives, but they can also consider the meaning of them as well, for “The essay, in fact, focuses on achieved meaning to a greater extent than those other forms we typically call literature; essays foreground meaning along with represented experience” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 150). By looking past the surface narrative – who, what, where, when, facts that can be gleaned from any immigration survey – the migrant reflects on individual experience to create meaning that uncovers the deep structure beneath the braided river of life.

What the personal essay presents is the writer’s quest for meaning, digging down past the external events to uncover how and especially *why* they happened. The essay’s relentlessly inquiring nature to discover what one knows proves invaluable, for “the essay is a particularly interrogatory form. We write in order to see what we think: our own thoughts are revealed to us as we write” (Hemley 133). When I searched the critical databases with the research librarian for migration + personal essay and came up blank, she said, “No, this a good sign.” No studies in New Zealand or Australia, or even the larger host nations of the US and Great Britain, look at migration through the reflective and analytical lens of the personal essay, and yet the genre was tailor-made for the subject: “the personal essay does, after all, put one more directly in touch with the thought and feeling of its author than do other forms of literature” (Klaus 1). While anthologies of migrant personal essays exist,¹ as do personal essays collections by individual

¹ For anthologies of personal essays by migrants, see Angela Jane Fountas, ed., *Waking Up American: Coming of Age Biculturally*, (2005). Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, ed., *Becoming*

migrants,² no in-depth study of how the genre and the migrant intersect and reinforce their parallel journey of exploration has been published. This research addresses a critical gap in the study of migration and the personal essay.

As a method of inquiry, the personal essay has been used to examine questions about transnationalism, multiracial and ethnic identity, and diaspora, areas of research that intersect migration. For advancing multiracial theory, SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Spiers argue that “In particular, the essay represents an ideal model because it combines theory and personal reflection. A multiracial theory, inspired by the personal essay, can make an individual story universal, because only such a theory can show us that we are, and are not, so different” (11). The idea that the migrant narrative may have universal import is particularly relevant in a globalized world. Other scholars have recognized the personal essay’s ability to assess and test ideas across disciplines. For example, Chon Noriega and Wendy Belgher note that by “drawing upon personal experience and self-reflection, the Chicano scholar also provided an arena within which these ideas could be tested and put to use” (vi) and thereby “demonstrate the diverse ways in which personal voice and experience can inform both disciplinary and interdisciplinary research” (xi). The essay proves flexible and investigative for diaspora scholarship as well: “Many of the themes that surface throughout these essays – border crossings, authenticity, representation, ‘subjecting’ multiple selves and losing one self, agency and constituency, and questions of multiple loyalties and accountability – resonate and often parallel each other” (Hom 5). Clearly the personal essay’s method of inquiry offers the versatility and rigor necessary to study migration and to reveal the unexplored braided river between them.

American: Personal Essays by First Generation Immigrant Women, (2000); Shamita Das Dasgupta, ed., *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America* (1998).

² For personal essay collections on migration, see: Aleksander Hemon, *The Book of My Lives* (2014); Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: the Immigrant Artist at Work* (2011); Andre Aciman, *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (2011); and Julia Alvarez, *Something to Declare: Essays* (1998).

This thesis demonstrates that the nexus between migration and the personal essay provides an innovative and illuminating approach to understanding what migrants experience firsthand, and to bear witness in a genre of powerful reckoning whose first question was Michel de Montaigne's "*Que sçay-je?*" or "What do I know?" Montaigne, considered the progenitor of the personal essay some four centuries ago, understood that the process of inquiry was central to the genre. For Montaigne, the essential question was "*Que sçay-je?*" – an idea he adopted for his motto and explored in essay after essay (Hardison 620). Similarly, asking "What do I know?" is fundamental to migrants as they forge connections in their new environments, which makes the genre ideal for the study of migration. Writing as a method of inquiry drives the essay, the combination of thinking and reflecting gives the essay its form, and "what comes to light in the essay's movement of thought is the surprising character of thought itself and of the being who thinks" (Hartle 79). The essay is both product and process, noun and verb. The migrant's own thoughts shape the essay's mental and emotional journey, while the wealth of life experience provides endless subject matter to explore:

It is not sufficient to say that the essay is an explorative genre or that it is a form of meditation and discovery through discourse. We must also acknowledge that the essayist marshals rhetorical strategies with the intention of conveying to a reader the experience of personal exploration and discovery. (Hall 82)

Given its ability to convey personal exploration and discovery, the essay offers a striking parallel to migration, an experience that challenges almost every aspect of life: family, work, identity, friendship, and connection, on both the most mundane and profound of levels. Migrants writing the personal essay reflect upon the existential and emotional experience of migration, whose learning curve is initially steep and whose effects are ongoing and ultimately lifelong. Finding one's way through writing, or writing as a method of inquiry, can track both outward-

and inward-directed discovery, with clear parallels for how migrants find their way in a new country. The personal essay's synergy with migration provides an original and innovative approach to assess the real stakes of migration: those borne by the individual.

“Time, perhaps, for an essay”

This thesis is based on over two hundred personal essays written by thirty-seven migrant writers from twenty different countries, spanning all ages and arriving at different life stages, who have chosen to explore the existential ramifications of what it means to migrate in writing. The research intersects with many disciplines – including English, history, philosophy, sociology – demonstrating the essay's versatility as a method of inquiry and analysis. All the migrants in this research are self-selecting in several key aspects. First, they are contemporary migrants who came to New Zealand by choice, even if that choice was conflicted. The United Nations distinguishes voluntary migrants from forced migrants who have been displaced by conflicts, famine, development, or natural, environmental or manmade disasters. UNESCO specifies that “migrant’ does not refer to refugees, displaced or others forced or compelled to leave their homes. Migrants are people who make choices about when to leave and where to go, even though these choices are sometimes extremely constrained” (n. pag.). Given that only three percent of the world lives outside of the country of its birth (United Nations), the choice to migrate is unusual. The migrants in this profile came to New Zealand between 1940 and 2007 from twenty different countries; the youngest migrant came at age eight and the eldest at age sixty. All of them experienced firsthand how migration altered the course of their lives, and their essays speak about this profound sea change. As Rudyard Kipling once noted, “All things considered, there are only two kinds of men in the world – those that stay at home and those

that do not. The second are the most interesting” (50). Interesting or not, migrants are individuals who have embarked on a decision that will have lifelong consequences.

The migrants in this profile are self-selecting in two other important aspects. First, they have chosen to write rather than speak about their migration experience and, second, they have chosen to do so in a specific genre, the personal essay. Migration has been studied through a range of lenses, such as oral histories, interviews, letters, diaries, and journals,³ but it has rarely been examined through the lens of the personal essay. The choice to write one’s story rather than tell it in the form of an interview or oral history is critical to this research. Oral histories and interviews are widely used in migration studies, but the personal essay offers a unique contribution to the discipline: individual agency over a written medium concerning firsthand experience intended for a larger audience. In the personal essay “the writer is deliberately and artfully engaging in a dialogue with the reader and with the self. As such the personal essay can be one of the most intellectually and emotionally rigorous forms of writing” (Iversen *Shadow Boxing* 40). The combination of engaging the reader plus intellectual and emotional rigor is crucial to the finished product.

The essay is a flexible and robust method of inquiry, and it gives the writer a variety of analytical tools through which to examine experience: “both the overarching sense of the essay’s freedom – the autonomy to observe, shape, pursue, affirm, think, reflect, critique, locate, look through, take up, reveal – and the implicit conception of the essay as an active form” (Woolridge 1). The dynamic and active engagement of the essay, combined with the ability to be critical,

³ For using letters, interviews and diaries, see Angela McCarthy, ed., *A Global Clan: Scottish Migrant Networks and Identities Since the Eighteenth Century* (2014). For using oral history interviews, letters and diaries, see A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms: Australia’s Invisible Migrants* (2005). For oral history in a New Zealand context, see Brigitta Bönisch-Brednich, *Keeping a Low Profile: An Oral History of German Immigration to New Zealand* (2002).

reflective and observant in writing, make it a more incisive, deliberate and thoughtful medium than speech. Part of that reflective, meditative quality is in the nature of writing itself:

The present-day phenomenological sense of existence is richer in its conscious and articulate reflection than anything that preceded it. But it is salutatory to recognize that this sense depends on the technologies of writing and print, deeply interiorized, made part of our own psychic resources. (Ong 155)

That reflective capacity of writing, the ability to dwell deeply and thoughtfully upon things, gives a richer, more considered response to experience than speech does. Unlike the spontaneous nature of speech, the individual has far more agency and control over written language, however difficult or elusive such expression may prove to be. In the process of writing we are constantly refining, rewording, editing and clarifying what we are trying to express. From the random chaos and drift of thought and association, writing allows us to distill and create meaning that might not appear in the oral telling of our lives.

For reflection upon experience the personal essay excels as a form of writing. Not only can migrants relate the story of their experience, they can also consider what that story means, with the retrospective look back that provides understanding. The essay's grounding in reflection and contemplation adds a powerful dimension to personal narrative: "What the essay gives us, uniquely I maintain, is *reflection upon experience*" (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 149). The intersection between reflection and experience makes the personal essay a potent resource, as the story and its meaning coincide in the genre. While sharing the same subject matter as the diary or journal – the individual's own life – the personal essay engages a larger audience with refreshing directness: "The personal essay has historically sought to puncture the stiffness of formal discourse with language that is casual, everyday, demotic, direct ... The conversational dynamic – the desire for contact – is engrained in the form, and serves to establish a quick

emotional intimacy with the audience” (Lopate xxv). Opening the audience up to more than the self in the personal essay is akin to the migrant meeting other, which is at the center of the migration experience.

A Stranger Comes to Town

The story of migration encompasses two master narratives. Attributed variously to novelists from Tolstoy to John Gardner (see Byrd, 2009, and Nodelman, 2013), an adage holds that all great literature is one of two stories: a man goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town.⁴ Migration embodies both of these narratives. The migrant is someone who goes on a journey and the migrant is a stranger who comes to town. The personal essays of migrants speak directly to how these core narratives operate in their own lives, and while grounded in individual experience, they express universal themes. Even if we never leave our birthplace, the journey is an archetypal root/route metaphor for life itself, as we follow its course from birth to death. We need not migrate to feel displaced, without connection or support, for whenever we feel and are treated as other, we are the stranger who comes to town. As Salman Rushdie understands firsthand, the migrant perspective “is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity” (394). With the two master narratives informing their writing – the journey and a stranger comes to town – migrant personal

⁴ Although frequently attributed to Tolstoy, no accurate source for the commonly quoted version of “All great literature is one of two stories, a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town” can be located. Various sources (including Byrd 2009) state the American novelist and literary critic John Gardner offered a similar statement in creative writing workshops and at academic conferences. However, no transcripts, lectures notes or interviews with this quote can be located, nor does it appear in Gardner’s book-length works on writing (*The Art of Fiction*, *The Forms of Fiction*, *On Becoming a Novelist*, or *On Moral Fiction*).

essays address one of the most essential questions humans face: what does it mean to be at home in the world?

For the migrant the journey of the stranger who comes to town is a quest for meaning, and perhaps also a search for home. Both entail a process of discovery that the essay shares. Just as migrants discover their new countries while living in them, so too do “Essays discover themselves in writing” (Fakundiny 5). For migrants, their sense of place and identity has been altered irrevocably by migration, and their lives have been displaced and transformed, perhaps even translated into a new language. In the course of living in their new country, migrants learn to negotiate or re-negotiate an entire world, things both ordinary and far-reaching. The migrant looks for a way to connect, to make sense of experience, even as the writer does on the page: “the writer voyages to understanding in, through, and by means of the writing” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 139). More than simply a path to understanding, the personal essay allows us to share our own particular, individual part of history which otherwise would be forgotten. The memoirist Patricia Hampl underscores the importance of this endeavor: “in the act of remembering, the personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself, beyond its ‘subject,’ into the endless and tragic recollection that is history” (*I Could Tell You Stories* 35). These two hundred migrant personal essays radiate past their individual subjects to reflect a part of New Zealand history that might go unwitnessed. Each one of these migrants wished to write about their own experience, struck, as David, a Scottish doctor was when he wrote, “Time, perhaps, for an essay.”

The personal essay takes what is solitary and individual – the writer’s own thoughts, feelings, memories – and makes them communal, giving permanence to what is most evanescent in our lives, but more than that, sharing its relevance. With its dynamic of writing as inquiry, the genre is ideal for documenting the experience of coming into a new country as a migrant. The tests of fortitude and perseverance recounted in migrant essays mark the stages of the

journey of the stranger who comes to town. That testing of the individual is uniquely suited to the genre, for, as Atkins reminds us, “The essay is the crucible in which personal experience is tried and tested, weighed and judged for its meaning and significance” (*Tracing the Essay* 81). We will learn more about the effect of migration, its emotional costs and rewards, in the personal essay than will be revealed in the broad strokes of policy and economics. Migrants writing the personal essay have the opportunity to give voice to an experience that is both underrepresented and inadequately researched: “Personal essays quite facilely mingle the creative with the critical, the subjective with the objective, and the emotional with the analytical. For voices of the marginalized, the previously silenced, this is perhaps the most appropriate vehicle of expression” (Dasgupta 15). The recognition of being marginalized, of being treated as other, of not having a voice (or language) is familiar to migrants, and their personal essays redress how and why these experiences affect them in direct and moving prose. Their essays fill a gap in the research that does not always acknowledge the realities of life: individuals migrate, not policy, not economics, for “statistics represent people with the tears wiped off” (Hill qtd. in De Tona para. 3). Migrant essayists are the vulnerable observers of their own lives, even as I am the vulnerable observer of theirs in this thesis.

In migrant personal essays we see what the world looks like from the vantage point of the stranger who comes to town. Migrants’ awareness of simultaneous dimensions of culture, setting, and perhaps language enrich their world view, allowing (and sometimes forcing) them to see and appreciate more. Homi Bhabha has argued that “the truest eye may now belong to the migrant’s double vision” (7-8). While it may not be the truest eye, the migrant’s vision is enlarged by its multiple perspectives, and the personal essay is primed to capture this double vision, an awareness of past and present, foreign and familiar, near and distant, as it traces individual consciousness in writing. The essay becomes a braided river of what is known and

what is discovered in writing as we “locate the essay as that crossing between self and other, experience and meaning, process and product, form and formlessness” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 45). The migrant’s journey of the stranger who comes to town occurs at “that crossing between self and other,” and this makes the migrant personal essay an essential narrative to study in a globalized world. How we accept or reject others has consequences that are individual, national, and international.

All migrants experience being perceived as other. More so than native inhabitants, migrants are aware of what it means to cross frontiers of culture, landscape and language where they must adapt to the world they encounter. What migrants learn in that contact zone has consequences for them and for the host country: “To experience any form of migration is to get a lesson in the importance of tolerating others’ points of view. One might almost say that migration ought to be essential training for would-be democrats” (Rushdie 280). Everything turns upon the mutual reception of self and other, migrant and native, and migrant personal essays reflect those encounters in the contact zone. In keeping with the importance of tolerance, Huang, a Chinese woman married to a New Zealander, declares in one essay: “I want to be a good Ambassador for my culture so that more Kiwis see a multicultural society as a blessing and not a curse.” She recognizes that not all New Zealanders share her positive perception of a multicultural society. For some, the other remains unwelcome. Migrant essays charting the journey of the stranger who comes to town provide vital and important lessons in our collective humanity. They inscribe something that is both elemental and ethical in the encounter between self and other, namely, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas reminds us: “To recognize the Other is to give” (75). Just as we give meaning to what happens in the personal essay, we give recognition to the other, and thereby connect to a world much larger than ourselves.

What the self and other must give to each other is welcome and acceptance of the other's differences. The recognition of the other is what grounds and integrates migrants in their new country, and without that recognition migrants will remain the stranger no matter how long they live somewhere. As Noki, a Dutch migrant in his sixties succinctly puts it, "So who and/or what we are is defined in our relationships with others." Stranger, neighbor, colleague, friend, lover, there are infinite shades of connection along the continuum of human relationship between self and other. Migrant personal essays bear witness to Martin Buber's aphorism that "all actual life is encounter" (67). When the other is recognized, it gives the self significance in the eyes of someone who also is other to him or her – the encounter becomes meaningful, rather than meaningless. We feel this each time we forge a connection with someone or something, which is analogous to when we write and find resonance and correlation between disparate things. What the essay explores is "the intimate and mysterious connection that exists between the known and the unknown, between the telegraphic attenuations of the names we give things, the descriptions we offer – superficial, partial – and the significance that's coiled intricately within them" (Arthur 33). The significance is found in the river underneath the river, the deeper, parallel world that writing reaches. If self and other never meet but maintain their separate existence, then the chance for connection is lost, like the possibility for meaning and significance that remains unwritten.

The Shared Language of Migration

When I began this research I thought I was a veteran migrant. I had grown up in a military family and lived in Europe, the Caribbean and the US, moving every three years, if not more often. As the essayist and a fellow conscripted child Jennifer Sinor observes, "Military children pride themselves in their ability to recover from loss. They wear their relocations like badges, or

scars maybe” (6). Moreover I was in my forties when my own family migrated to New Zealand with our children, who were then five and eight. Five years later, multiple and devastating earthquakes shifted not only our city, but our lives, forcing a migration to Sweden to ensure financial stability. In Sweden I found myself voiceless, stripped of the very things that gave my life meaning: language and connection. Sweden taught me the profound lesson of being not only the vulnerable observer, but also the vulnerable participant. Suddenly I found myself submerged in a language I did not understand, facing what the twenty nonnative speakers in my research profile confronted when they came to New Zealand. These migrant writers all address the vital importance of language, something I took completely for granted when I lived in New Zealand and shared the dominant host language: English. Sweden would redress this critical oversight in my perception of what nonnative speakers face when they migrate.

When I lost language, language revealed itself to me in all its integral and essential importance. Language is the river that runs through and braids everything together, the life blood of culture and connection, contact and communication. As Alberto Manguel reminds us, “Language is our common denominator” (*The City of Words* 5), but only if that language is understood. During our year and half in Sweden, I realized I would never be able to understand Swedish the way I understand English, at home in it from the beginning. Fluency is just that, the ability to flow with and within the language, immersed and yet buoyant. Language is what would carry me through the sunless months in Sweden, often immersed in a subterranean river trying to express things which by their very nature are what the poet Rilke calls “unsayable.” Throughout this time my migrant writers upheld me on the current of their writing, giving voice to what resists articulation: belonging, identity, connection. Twenty of the thirty-seven migrant writers have chosen to write in a second or even third language, showing how language becomes

a common denominator. Thus in these narratives English becomes the shared language of migration.

For migrants the search for meaning is initially challenged by a sense of dislocation. Their sense of meaning has been disrupted from their daily landscape, affecting their relationships to people, place, and, perhaps most drastically, language. Migrants must learn what things mean, not only ordinary things in their day-to-day living, but subtle codes of behavior that inform cultural assumptions. In the course of living in their new country, migrants must learn to negotiate an entire world of language, culture, and connection, matters both obvious and obscure. As Eva Hoffman, who migrated as an adolescent from Poland to Canada notes:

Every emigrant becomes a natural anthropologist, observing, more importantly sensing such nuances, and the minute but not insignificant differences in cultural modes of being; differences, which I believe, may extend not only to the social or relational modes of expression, but to the meanings we attach to internal states; to what Michel Foucault called *the practices of the self*. (58-59)

These practices of the self are deeply ingrained and not easy to apprehend. It takes years learning to live in another country, culture and language. Migrants become familiar over time with their host country, and when things resonate and are understood, migrants no longer live on the surface of language or culture, but are immersed in the river underneath the river. The more their new country has meaning and connection for them, the more migrants feel at home in it. For some migrants this process of acclimation is straightforward and swift, while for others it is difficult and protracted. The thirty-seven migrants in this profile offer an entire spectrum of acculturation, even while their essays display a pattern for what grounds meaning: people, place, work, identity, purpose. Thus migrant personal essays chart a journey toward what it means to

belong, to have a place to stand, *tūrangawaewae* in Māori, as they reflect on these practices of self in their prose.

My initial encounter with migrant narratives alerted me to the unexplored potential of seeing migration through the lens of the personal essay. Their firsthand accounts of the contact zone between self and other confront some of our deepest and most inarticulate needs: home, family, belonging, identity, connection. Why would anyone migrate away from what was grounded, familiar and dear to them – their roots, their language, their familiar social norms? How does one cope with the ongoing repercussions of migration? My own continual uprooting and serial migrations had caused upheavals and changes for myself and my family that were fundamental and transformative. Pico Iyer states in his TED talk that “home is not just the place where you happen to be born, it’s the place where you become yourself” (*Where Is Home?* n. pag). Where do migrants become themselves – and not only where, but how, when, why, and with whom? As this thesis shows, home is not merely place-based. Home represents an entire nexus of associations, memories, thoughts and feelings from which we generate essential meaning and migration alters our context for meaning: “Emigration does not only involve leaving behind, crossing water, living amongst strangers, but, also, undoing the very meaning of the world” (Berger 56). The personal essay gives migrants a place to ground meaning in writing and to address where they become themselves.

From Y to NZ: the Roots of There to Here

As the anthropologist James Clifford observes, “To theorize, one leaves home” (“Notes on Theory and Travel” 177). When I discovered migrants had an affinity for the personal essay, I found a rich and untapped vein no one was studying. Over the course of eighteen months, I invited migrants to write about their experience in community education courses I designed

specifically for them. The course design applied Kierkegaard's maxim, we live forward but understand backward, to migration, for giving voice to what individual experience means is the personal essay's forte. I sought migrants who wished to dig past the surface narrative to what informs their migration on emotional and existential levels, who wished to explore the premise that "Emigration, forced or chosen ... is the quintessential experience of our time" (Berger 55). The course design charts the journey of the stranger who comes to town. The prompts for their essays could be used however migrants wished, or ignored entirely, as they traced their journey:

From Y to NZ: the roots of there to here

Departure and arrival: thresholds

Nearness and distance: between countries and cultures

Sense of place and displacement: where is home?

Family and familiarity: the absence or presence of both

Loss/gain: the balance sheet of migration

Fictions of nostalgia: missing X, Y and NZ

Who are you here? negotiating migrant identity

Returning: you can't go home again, or can you?

These pairings form a braided river. The first concept addresses the surface narrative, for example, "From Y to NZ" with all its entwining channels and branches of chance and circumstance that bring the individual to New Zealand. The second concept asks for a more reflective consideration of that same idea: "the roots of there to here." The personal essay can navigate the deep, wide and invisible channel of our lives, to discover what, in essence, carries the surface narrative.

All migrants have a set story they tell for why they came to New Zealand, but the personal essay elicits the root causes and meaning behind that journey. Their essays ground and

sound these very large abstractions of family, identity, home, distance, loss, and belonging. What exactly do migrants miss when they say they miss home? How do geographic and temporal distances affect migrants' connection with those they love? Where do migrants belong? Is migration more loss than gain? How does migration affect who they are? These questions demand consideration and reflection from the perspective of those living with their difficult answers. Migrant personal essays explore the hidden and turbulent riverbed of experience, articulating what is often unwitnessed, in clear, evocative prose. Hélène Cixous highlights this premise of writing as inquiry: "What interests me is what I do not know. And it leaves me first of all silent ... I know that a search, or an exploration will unfold in this direction" (71). The migrant's own path of inquiry leads to revelation and recognition in the personal essay that might not otherwise occur, and the only way to reach these is through the writing. The past becomes present and manifest when the depths below the surface of our lives resonate and are understood in writing. Suddenly *what do I know?* becomes *what I do know*, a transformation from question to answer. The river underneath the river appears.

The personal essay is a genre that invites risk and trust, and the migrants who chose to embark on this process of discovery did both. For the migrant, like the writer, sets out on the same mission: "To essay is to attempt, to test, to make a run at something without knowing whether you are going to succeed" (Lopate xlii). Migration is a life-changing phenomenon that has not been discussed with the depth and comprehension the experience deserves from the standpoint of the individual. People migrate – not history, not policy, not economics – but individual men, women, and children. Migrant personal essays demonstrate how the genre addresses the complexity, significance and transformative aspects of migration. In turn the experience of migration shows the power and versatility of the personal essay to advantage. The

very trials and explorations migrants undergo dovetail with the inquiring and assessing nature of the genre.

The migrants in this study recognize their experience is validated, not only in the essays they wrote, but in being presented to a larger audience. As Susan Sontag points out, “The influential essayist is someone with an acute sense of what has not been (properly) talked about, what should be talked about (but differently)” (xvii). These migrants share an acute sense that migration demands exploration from the perspective of those who understand the vicissitudes and rewards of the journey. Their essays stem directly from their own lives, providing the human context for what is all too often seen in abstract terms: “When we study migration rather than abstract cultural flows and representations, we see that transnational processes are located within the life experience of individuals and families, making up the warp and woof of daily activities, concerns, fears, and achievements” (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 51). The personal essays of migrants bear witness to the “daily activities, concerns, fears and achievements” that inform their lives since migrating.

Migration is a complicated and fraught experience, and the personal essay is well suited to it for “Actions or events that were inexplicable or obscure or emotionally laden in the moment become more clear, not just with time and reflection, but with the actual, physical process of writing” (Iversen “Interview” 203). The personal essay reaches the very things that hook into us most deeply. As Daisy, an Irish nurse, expresses in one of her essays: “It is as though throughout life, here and there, we put down reef anchors and these little anchors dig in ever more deeply each time their line connects directly to a real time experience.” So too do personal essays act as reef anchors, enabling their authors to dig in and hook into readers when their lines connect with our life experience. The moment when our experience connects us to the writing is always charged, for both writer and reader, for it is the moment where self meets other, as Cixous

explains: “The origin of the material in writing can only be myself. I is not I, of course, because it is I with the others, coming from the others, putting me in the place of others, giving me the other’s eyes. Which means there is something common” (87). That recognition of what is common and shared, especially when it acknowledges the other, is at the center of our humanity. This is one of the great powers of literature, and it underpins our desire for stories, both to write them and to read them.

Strands of the Braided River

When I began this research on the personal essay and migration to New Zealand I had no idea two major earthquakes would wrench apart our city and our lives. Our family had migrated to New Zealand from the United States five years earlier and I thought we were settled, but the restless tectonic plates under the Shaky Isles would provide a radical lesson in displacement. In the wake of these natural disasters we migrated from New Zealand to Sweden, where we lost roots, language, and familiar social norms, the full migrant’s triple disruption (Rushdie 277-8), but also learned what is essential to belong. The story of that journey is one many migrants share: the stranger who comes to town. Where the stranger or migrant is accepted, perhaps a new home can be made, with a new sense of meaning and purpose grounded elsewhere in the world. But that did not happen for our family in Sweden, the story continued, and we returned to New Zealand to almost step into the same river twice, a river that broke off and came back to join itself – the braided river.

From the beginning the thesis has been a braided river, although the analogy only appeared at the end of the journey, not the outset. We cannot necessarily see what has brought us to this point until we look back. Narrative is always retrospective, because time passes and understanding, even if sudden and revelatory, proceeds from what comes before. As the Italian

philosopher Adriana Cavarero notes, “Life cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life” (3). The unanticipated migrations to Sweden and back to New Zealand shifted the focus of the research in an entirely new direction. What emerged in the wake of Sweden were the deeper, more resonant currents in migrant essays, the ones with greater insistence and carrying power, yet that are more challenging to articulate.

This thesis grounds our need for understanding and meaning in language, and reflects on what my fellow migrants and I have experienced and written about concerning migration to New Zealand in the personal essay. The essential function of the personal essay – to find out what the writer does and does not know, and to share that path of inquiry in writing – parallels the migration experience. This process of discovery will be even more fraught and complicated as the migrant may be stripped of language, roots and cultural context, making the essay an invaluable resource for studying how meaning is created when the familiar markers are absent: family, landscape, language, the ten thousand things of a former life that was once radiant with connection. The essayist Phillip Lopate points out what sets this exploration in motion: “Personal essayists are adept at interrogating their ignorance. Just as often as they tell us what they know, they ask at the beginning of an exploration of a problem what it is they don’t know – and why” (xxvii). Both the migrant and the writer navigate their way, using what they do and do not know to plot a course through new territory, toward meaning and understanding. This thesis demonstrates the personal essay is a powerful and versatile tool for both analysis and reflection, ideal for studying the complicated landscape of migration.

Since its inception the personal essay has moved between the writer’s own thoughts and narrative and those of other thinkers and writers, which is the structure taken here:

“Montaigne’s *Essays* are the consequent exploration of the exchanges between sources, texts,

language and the self that inhabits them in order to explore its own dimensions” (O’Neill 35).

The sources feeding the braided river are my own migration narrative, the personal essays of my fellow migrants, and the thoughts and reflections of other writers and critics of the genre who recognize that “essays, it seems, insist on being thought about only in essays” (Fakundiny 5).

Throughout our shared exploration I inquire into how the personal essay works, why it works, what it reveals about migration, identity, genre and narration, assessing the essay for its ability to assay experience and create meaning. Moreover, I do so in the form of the personal essay, interweaving my narrative with those of my fellow migrants.

The decision to migrate reorients the migrant’s world irrevocably, affecting all aspects of his or her life: family, work, language, place, culture, and self. Given the pervasive effect of migration, the aftershocks of which may be felt decades later, why would anyone choose to make this decision? The stock answers migrants give for migration do not address these often underlying and unexplored causes. The thesis opens with a discussion of the roots of migration, inquiring into what sets such journeys in motion, for as Clifford observes “roots always precede routes” (*Routes* 3). When migrants apply Kierkegaard’s maxim of living forward but understanding backward to their migrations, their essays yield unexpected results even to themselves, for often the set answer they give for migration has much older origins than they imagined. For articulating and understanding our own past, the personal essay offers an exceptional method of inquiry: “The personal essayist looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historic circumstances, and what might be called the catastrophe of personality” (Lopate xxxvii). Staying home is the road *not* taken by the migrant. Instead the migrant takes the road that leads away from the known and familiar to the uncharted territory of the stranger and other, with lifelong repercussions.

Migrants are the exception, not the rule to how and where the rest of the world lives. Investigating their own histories, migrants disclose the real roots of their migration, those not gleaned through surveys. The exploratory nature of the essay reveals deeper causes as to why migrants voluntarily choose to live elsewhere, where they face may face a loss of identity, language, family, work and culture. Migration affects employment, housing, friendship, finances, citizenship, social benefits, an entire host of things that determine and alter one's life course. As the world becomes more global and transnational, with more movement across borders and oceans, the choice to migrate radiates past the personal to inform national and international concerns.

Roots lead to routes, and the second chapter explores the routes of migration taken by individuals. The migrant starts out one place and ends up in New Zealand – maybe twice, in my case, where the river comes back to join itself. Here the personal essay tracks who, where, when and what the migrant experienced along the way. Where the river originates is one source of knowledge, where and how it flows, above or below ground, branching or meandering is another source. When migrants retrace route of their journey in their essays, the writing leads to a much more informed understanding of what they learned along the way. The personal essay reveals and surprises writers with what they did not know they knew until they wrote it, borne as it is of reflection and insight. Writing becomes revelation, for as Patricia Hampl notes, “To write one's life is to live it twice, and the second living is both spiritual and historical, for a memoir reaches deep within the personality as it seeks narrative form and it also grasps the life-of-the-times as no political analysis can” (*I Could Tell You Stories* 37). The personal essay gives us both self and world, a world that might not be readily apparent or even visible in political or economic analyses. We (re)possess our own past through narrative and make sense of it, revealing a world each migrant encountered at different points in his or her lifetime, the Dutch migrant coming by

ship in the 1950s or our American family coming by plane in 2007. In sixty years the six-week journey from Europe to New Zealand has been shortened to twenty-four hours, but what remains universal is the stranger arriving in an unknown place far from anywhere else. The stranger must find a way to connect to work, home, everything that affects daily life, all while experiencing the loss of roots, culture, and, perhaps most difficult, language.

The route of migration plots the journey of the stranger who comes to town. Here is where self and other meet, migrant and native, rooted meeting routed. They are both other to one another, something the host country does not always recognize. Yet in actuality, “Whether in stasis or in transit, humans understand themselves by means of a detour through otherness. This is the act of travel, or in Greek, *metafora* (to carry over)” (J. Gray 3). For migrants this is not simply a detour through otherness, but a move to live among it. Migrants, as Rushdie notes, are “metaphorical beings in their very essence” (278). They are people who have crossed thresholds and frontiers, barriers between self and other, and they inscribe that route in their writing. Their essays are both the route, as in journey, but also the root, as in origin, of what led them to cross over. As such their essays present encounters between self and other central to understanding the stranger who comes to town. The writer Eudora Welty never left the American South, but she acknowledges the importance of the stranger’s perspective: “It may be the stranger within the gates whose eye is smitten by the crucial thing, the essence of life, the moment or act in our long-familiar midst that will forever define it” (130). More than ever we will need fresh eyes to see new ways of being and belonging in a globalized world, and personal essays attest to what happens at the critical threshold of self and other. Those who have crossed the distance may know how to close or at least narrow it.

How migrants cope with geographic, temporal, and emotional distance living in New Zealand is the focus of the third chapter. Given its remoteness and isolation from the rest of the

world, distance is one of the most striking aspects of life in New Zealand. Distance affects everything from the country's unique flora and fauna, to its economics and history, as well as who has migrated to its shores. Most of the world's land mass and population lies in the northern hemisphere, where it is always the opposite season and a different time of day. New Zealand's distance from where migrants originated remains constant, even though transportation and communication have improved and become more affordable since the days of shipboard passage. As one of the most geographically remote countries on earth, the effect of distance on migrants to New Zealand is considerable. Migrant personal essays demonstrate that distance attenuates and changes their relationships to people and places where they were once known and familiar. Yet many migrants make an effort to stay connected with distant family and friends, often at great emotional and financial expense, as the burden of staying connected seems to fall on the migrant. Migrant essays bear poignant testimony to the real cost of what it means to live so far from those they love.

Even as migration creates distance from the known and familiar, migrants must find a way to find meaning and purpose in their new country if they are to thrive there. Yet this, in turn, can increase their distance from the place they left behind and they may no longer belong. The tension between the distance and proximity of what they know and love is one dilemma migrants negotiate both in life and in their writing. The personal essay grounds these abstractions of longing, absence, and presence in prose that resonates between the poles of what is near and far, dear and distant, known and unknown. Writing summons what is not present onto the page, and perhaps that is why migrants who live far from what they once knew and loved are drawn to this reflective genre.

The fourth chapter explores the deepest current in the river, belonging. Migrants must find a way to connect, to understand and be understood in their new country, and their personal

essays all wrestle with this fundamental challenge posed by their migration. Sweden threw the need for understanding and belonging into startling and painful relief for me, far more so than New Zealand. Belonging is the most elemental and inarticulate of human needs and the one most severely challenged by migration: “Connection is why we’re here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering” (Brown 8). Migration ruptures or stretches the connections to what matters most to humans: people, place, language, culture, the innumerable ties that bind us to the world. Belonging is the river underneath the river, the force that gives meaning to our being here. Migrant personal essays show how belonging is concrete and essential, not an abstraction. Their writing underscores Rilke’s injunction: “*Here* is the time for the *sayable*, *here* is its homeland. / Speak and bear witness” (*The Selected Poetry* 201). Their essays testify to the fact that our need to belong, to connect with others, is fundamental, not incidental, to who we are.

Migrants must have meaningful contact and connection in the country where they live, or they remain a stranger, forever other and outside the culture. They understand firsthand what it is to perceive and be perceived as other, to feel welcome or not, and their essays provide eloquent testimony about what constitutes belonging. Migrants articulate the experience of being outsiders in their essays, for “The personal essay turns out to be one of the most useful instruments with which outsiders can reach the dominant culture quickly and forcefully and testify to the precise ambiguities of their situation as individuals and group members” (Lopate li). As the world becomes more populated and resources more scarce, the polarity between host and migrant, native and stranger, will become a greater source of tension. Migrant personal essays bear witness to what happens in the contact zone between self and other, testifying to the lived consequences of being perceived as an outsider. They provide real world lessons the globalized world would be wise to address.

Migration influences and changes who one is, and the final chapter explores the complex nexus of migration and identity. An essential question for all of us, migrant or not, is who are we? Identity and identification are at the crux of nation, migration and self. Identity is a problematic concept, yet it is rooted/routed in place and challenged by the displacement of migration. How are migrants identified, by themselves, and by others? Where, when, what and with whom do migrants themselves identify? The process of identifying is where we forge connection and find meaning. Identity constellates around whether we belong or not. This question of who we are pulses at the most inarticulate level of our being, but also causes the most conflict, both internally and externally. Here is where the current of belonging joins the current of self-understanding – indeed they are always entwined. Where does acceptance begin? With ourselves or with others? Migrants wrestle daily with problems of identity based on race, class, language, culture and any markers used to differentiate them as other. Their personal essays explore these and connected questions of acceptance and integration.

Who we are may not be congruent with who others think we are. Narrative is essential to establishing identity. For narrative is where identity coheres and is constructed, and as Cavarero asserts: “the verbal response to *who* someone is always consists in the narration of his or her life story” (73). The personal essay is one of the most effective tools available to inquire into identity, driven as it is by the self-questioning, “*Que sçay-je?*” that Montaigne infused the form with from the outset. Yet even as the genre is rooted in individual consciousness, it moves outward: “Self-conscious and self-aware, yes, but these qualities represent health, unlike self-centeredness. In more than one manner the essay moves outward, the essay and its writer connecting with the world, with otherness” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 50). Again we see the parallel endeavor of both the migrant and the writer as they move outward to connect with the world and other.

The importance of connection to our lives and in writing cannot be underestimated. Connection is where we create meaning in the world and on the page. What the personal essays of migrants reify is how those connections are formed, where, when, with whom, and why – and where they are not. The genre of the personal essay is the proving ground between migrants, their past experiences and their present selves: in both writing and life we live forward and understand backward. Migrants explore the encounter between self and other which is integral to the experience of migration and central to the journey of the stranger who comes to town. Self and other is a dominant paradigm of our world, whether we are migrants or not. Self and other is the point of contact and of conflict, on individual, national and global scales. As such, migrant essays provide examples of negotiating this fraught contact zone where questions of identity and belonging are posed, contested, and answered. By looking back on their lives in writing, migrants present a way forward in a world that will become increasingly more displaced, global, and populated. In the personal essay, perhaps more than in other genres, we see how “The core of writing requires something that is very vulnerably personal, and yet at the same time very communal” (Gunnars 80). Our willingness to be vulnerable on the page and with one another is what creates an authentic connection between individuals, both in writing and in life. Perhaps there is no more important lesson than this willingness to trust in the difficult, something writing and life have always demanded of human beings.

This is the story of the stranger who comes to town, but also of one who sets out on a journey to be tried and tested by a new country, even as the essay tries and tests experience for its meaning. The migrant’s journey both on the page and in life is a hero’s journey, an ordinary hero who leaves home to learn what it means to belong somewhere else, or fail in the undertaking. These migrant essays trace the root and route of their courage, of which migrants themselves may be unaware, the way our own blood courses through our veins unnoticed. My

goal is to show the power and purpose of that narrative journey as together my fellow migrants and I map the braided river in our texts, both the interwoven surface channels that branch off and rejoin, and the deep, wide, subterranean river that no one sees until it is written, where its meaning can be made apparent. Informing the deep structure of the narrative is “*Que sçay-je?*” or “What do I know?” and how we find and create meaning through writing. Long after the river of our lives empties into the sea, the personal essay resonates with the deeper story, the river under the river, the story only we can tell.

Chapter 2: Roots – The River Under the River

“Lucky is he who has been able to understand the causes of things.”

– Virgil, *Georgics*, Book 2

A small red postage stamp of Marco Polo is affixed to my Italian birth certificate: the mark of the traveler who returns, years later. The stamp fascinated me as a child. My parents collected stamps, but this stamp was out of place, not on an envelope or in a stamp album. Already my migrant identity appears to be manifesting, the outsider in the family, with Marco Polo and Italian documentation to prove it. I was born into the tribe of military nomads and before the age of thirteen had lived in Italy, Texas, the Dominican Republic, Belgium, Missouri, and New Mexico. I could speak Spanish and later French because I had to, but the languages fell away when they were no longer needed. Yet I feel these languages deep within my memory when I hear them spoken, and my accent is good because I learned to speak them as a child. Spanish is a language of sunlight, heat, wide Caribbean skies, our Dominican housemaid killing a tarantula with a mop. French is overcast, grey, alone on an empty playground, the school buses long gone. But that is not where the story begins, the story begins long before we have our own words for it, for as Adriana Cavarero observes, “It is necessary to go back to the narration told by others, in order for the story to begin where it really began” (39). The roots of migration always precede the route, and my roots were fiddle-footed from the beginning.

My migration began when my parents left their small Midwestern towns in the 1950s for the wider worlds of West Point and the university. Originally my father wanted to join the navy, “to see the world,” but an older high school classmate, seduced by the same dream, persuaded him to join the army instead, saying he would see his family more. My father used to sing, “I joined the navy to see the world, what did I see, I saw the sea.” Clearly he felt his more land-

based choice was the right one. Intrepid for her generation, my mother spent a semester at the University of Puerto Rico to improve her Spanish, studying abroad when young Latina women did not leave the house unchaperoned. The blonde *gringa* got whistles and catcalls from the Puerto Rican men and dated US Naval officers in blinding white uniforms on shore leave in San Juan.

My parents met by chance at a party in Georgetown, the cosmopolitan heart of the nation's capital and about as far from their working-class roots as imaginable. The Korean War intervened and they wrote letters. When my father returned from Korea, my mother's marriage to him was deliberate. She did not want to work outside the home, having worked her way through high school and university, and she wanted her children to be army brats because she believed they were at home anywhere in the world – one of the great fictions. Of my siblings, I am the only one who continues to live “anywhere in the world,” whether at home or not, and my subsequent migrations seem to have beginnings in my peripatetic upbringing. I am also the only one in my family who attended school in another language – French in my case. “[R]oots always precede routes” (Clifford *Routes* 3) and the roots of my migration originated long before my birth in Italy and my subsequent moves all over the world, and I expect this will be true for most migrants.

Given so few people voluntarily migrate, less than three percent of the world's population, something must drive the choice to leave. The obvious answers people give for why they migrate – for work, for love, for family – can be gleaned in any survey, but what initially sets migration in motion often receives little attention, in part because it is difficult to apprehend or is ignored. The personal essay, with its inherent method of inquiry, grasps the elusive, deep-seated aspects of migration and “allows glimpses into the lived interior of migration experience But it is more than this, for the individual experience is always richer, more contradictory,

more than that which we represent as the experience of a group” (Benmayor and Skotnes 14). By asking migrants to explore the root causes of their migration we get answers only they can provide, driven by “the lived interior” of their personal narrative. The answers often surprise them, as they realize that a few degrees in either direction and their entire life course could have been different. In the personal essay they can determine if “the events and accidents of life add up to a coherent story. That is every migrant’s question” (Sennett 12). Writing allows migrants to track that answer past the surface narrative to channels known only to themselves, the river underneath the river.

“Migrations Within Living Memory”

Our life’s narrative begins long before it is understood or even conceived of on paper, and has many channels, with most of its structure hidden well below the surface features. Cavarero points out that discerning one’s life design is possible through narrative: “The meaning that saves each life from being a mere sequence of events does not consist in a determined figure; but rather consists in leaving behind a figure, or something from which the unity of a design can be discerned in the telling of a story. Like the design, the story comes after the events and the actions from which it results” (2). The personal essay offers the individual a way to look back and dig down past “a mere sequence of events,” to see the design inherent in the course of life that may not be recognized. By stepping back from our lives and writing about them, it is possible to understand how chance, choice and a myriad of other factors contribute to our life stories, for “To live and understand fully, we need not only proximity, but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does” (Ong 82). Migrants writing the personal essay can explore the real reason they undertook the journey of the stranger who comes to town.

For many migrants, the roots for leaving their country lie buried in memory and since memory is singularly our own, only the individual can trace memory back to its source and follow the wayward, discursive flow of all that happened in a given lifetime. Narrative and memory are inextricably linked: “The narratable self finds itself at home, not simply in a conscious exercise of remembering, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself” (Cavarero 34). Neuroscience has established the connection between narrative, memory and autobiographical self within the brain: “In brains endowed with abundant memory, language, and reasoning, narratives with this same simple origin and contour are enriched and allowed to display even more knowledge, thus producing a well-defined protagonist, an autobiographical self” (Damasio 204). The personal essay can bear singular witness to what happens to the individual in his or her lifetime, privy to the contents of memory. As the philosopher John O’Donohue reminds us, “You cannot de-sequence your life. The structure of your life holds together. This is the unnoticed miracle of memory; it is the intimate mirror of the continuity of your experience and presence” (*Eternal Echoes* 174).

Few genres capture “the intimate mirror” of our experience and presence better than the personal essay. The diary and letter serve a similar function, but their audience is limited. In the personal essay “The writer is acutely conscious of the reader and of having an audience that is an active part of the intellectual and emotional process” (Iversen *Shadow Boxing* 40).

Acknowledging the audience as an active part of the writing process changes the dynamic of the exchange, and opens the essay out to the other. The meaning derived from personal experience in the essay is not simply for the individual, but is influenced by an awareness of the writing’s larger import and implications, thus underscoring the importance of the genre for wider study. In an interview based on his own migration experience from India to England, Homi Bhabha addresses the significance of migrant life stories:

We're talking about migrations within living memory. And I think one cannot stress enough two things. One is the specificity of particular experiences. The other is the need to theorize narrative and identity, to try to make that theoretical work deal with the very specific configuration and conjunction of different cultural and social elements [...] because life stories display that very particular weave of elements of lives lived iteratively, lives lived interstitially, and challenge those, like myself, who are interested in a theoretical understanding of these processes; they challenge us to think beyond what our concepts enable us to do.

(Thompson 198)

By foregrounding this particular weave of “lives lived iteratively, lives lived interstitially,” migrant personal essays offer a unique opportunity to contribute to the theory of narrative and identity, particularly migrant identity.

The personal essay bears the stamp of the individual's thoughts and reflections about the migration experience and tells a story about why and how that experience unfolded. That story is uniquely the migrant's own, and the personal essay articulates things only the individual writer can. As the essayist Nancy Mairs points out, “we are each the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and no one of us can authentically tell another's story” (91). This study, which incorporates thirty-seven migrant writers and over two hundred personal essays, results in a braided river revealing the process of both the essay and migration itself – we see the surface story and the deep undercurrent driving it. This wealth of narratives makes it possible to explore what Bhabha calls “that very particular weave” of “migrations within living memory” (Thompson 198). Like the headwaters of a river, hidden underground until the river surfaces, so too do the roots of migration remain hidden until explored by the personal essay's line of inquiry. By asking migrants to trace the origin of their migration, they discover the individual and invisible

channels that brought them to New Zealand. The inextricable link between memory and narrative reveals things that elude larger drift nets of analysis, for “Memory is attention which endures, which envisions both backwards and forwards, which can shine upon deep recesses filled and perhaps half-forgotten long ago; it is made of up intuitions, as well as representations, feelings perhaps but faintly perceived, odors, sights, sounds, hesitations, judgments – all thoughts that go into the making up of mind” (Barron 236). This “making up of mind” is also the reaching towards the decision to live elsewhere.

The ability to look both forward and back in memory is also shared by narrative. Only by looking back on our past can we understand how we arrived in the present. Narrative is critical to our sense of lived time, binding memory and history. As Paul Ricoeur holds: “Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode” (45). With its ability to both remember and recognize, the personal essay allows us to grasp in writing what we did not understand at the time events occurred. In the essay the writer discovers what the experience meant, for “[i]n the essay, experience is weighed and assayed for its value and meaning, which derive from reflection, meditation, or contemplation” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 68). The personal essay uncovers how the root leads to the route, investigating and detailing how migration is set in motion long before the migrant leaves the country. Like a braided river, the surface narrative tells one story, but the depths reveal where the story began, the headwaters of the journey.

In my own migration narrative, the convergence of two people who left home for the greater world embodied by the university and the military led to a constant uprooting, instilling a restless quest for where I belong, if indeed I belong anywhere. Given this ceaseless movement over five decades, never staying more than seven years in one place, and spanning two continents, two hemispheres, five different countries, and seven different states in the USA, perhaps it is not

surprising that I would find migration a fitting subject to study, a way to ground my own sense of self and world in writing. Julia Creet argues that “migration rather than location is the condition of memory. Between times, places, generations, and media, from individuals to communities and vice versa, movement is what produces memory – and our anxieties about pinning it to a place” (9). But what if instead of pinning memory to a place, we followed its course instead? Much as we would follow a braided river, above and below ground, the channels separating and joining, flowing to a destination we cannot foresee. For this is the movement of the personal essay as well, exploring experience for its meaning, with its unexpected sparkle of revelation.

More than any other genre the personal essay addresses individual meaning and experience in narrative for a wider audience. In the essay we can ground what is fluid and moving in our lives in narrative, for “in telling the story of who we are, we tell the story of where we have stood. While place is important, it is narrative that makes place possible” (Sinor 10). For migrants place is not static, unlike those who never leave their home ground. Migrants have shifted place and landscape radically, perhaps linguistic landscape as well, but migration does not preempt the ability to have stood somewhere. Indeed, having stood somewhere else in their lives gives migrants an ability to see things rooted people do not see. This is an awareness described by the Polish social theorist Zygmunt Bauman: “Rather than homelessness, the trick is to be at home in many homes, to be in each inside and outside at the same time, to combine intimacy with the critical look of an outsider, involvement with detachment – a trick which sedentary people are unlikely to learn” (207). This inside/outside, involvement/detachment, is particularly well suited to the migrant personal essay, with its insider perspective of the stranger who came to town and perhaps made his home there.

The story of migration invokes the two master narratives: a stranger comes to town and a man goes on a journey. But something sets the stranger on his way, long before he sets foot on a boat or a plane to come to New Zealand – and that is what underlies all the surface narratives migrants tell for why they came to a country. Given roots precede routes, that who we are and where we start from will have ongoing repercussions for where we end up, migrants can inquire into how far back they can trace their coming to New Zealand, revealing the origin and shape of the journey: “What is interesting in migration studies is the stories people tell about their trajectory. Because migration is always a journey” (De Tona n. pag). By digging past their stock answers for leaving – that they came for work, for their partner, for their family – migrants realize and understand deeper currents carried them forward, the river underneath the river, the one that the form and attention of the personal essay looking back on our lives can reveal. Too often the route overlays the root, obscuring it, such that our personal past “may have been buried under a clichéd set of tag-memories or covered by a slick pattern of familiarity. The work of recovery – the cultivation of reveries – counters the dominance of sheer change, which is our shibboleth, and ultimately our bugaboo” (R. Gray 59). We cannot halt the flow of our lives, but, if we try, we can step into that river and write about it, reaching past what is familiar and readily told to what shimmers forth onto the page from the depths of our experience and gives it meaning.

Our story begins where we do, in a certain place and time. For as Cavarero observes, “The story of one’s life always begins where that life begins” (11), and for migrants their story begins elsewhere. Migrant narratives originate in another country, culture, and perhaps another language, and the essayist can trace those roots across both time and space. Where we have been informs where we are now, and in the personal essay “memories of space traversed and time spent are conflated and brought to bear on the present in a highly personal, idiosyncratic

manner” (R. Gray 55). Migrants can tell their story from different vantage points, depending upon the age they migrated and the age at which they write about their experience. Where we step in the river, early or late in our lives, determines how much time has elapsed between our past and present selves. Moreover, in each essay the writer can step into a new place in the narrative and “use the vantage point of the present to gain access to what might be called the hidden narrative of the past. Each is in its own way, a realized effort to assemble the puzzle of what happened in light of subsequent realization” (Birkerts 8). By inquiring into the roots of their own migration, migrants discover and reveal these hidden narratives of the past, the very things that slip through the larger categories of analysis applied to migration – history, politics, economics. From the Heraclitean drift of image, emotion, memory, the essayist sees the associative, nonsequential connections that do not appear in surface narratives, but in the river underneath the river where meaning manifests.

Our search for meaning is at the center of what matters most to human beings. The personal essay is the ideal genre to explore this search for meaning, for “the impulse to write essays, as to tell stories, grows consistently out of a single source: the individual confrontation with the hard facts and particularities of the world – of place, of any aspect of life – and the resulting effort of the imagination to seek meaning in what it confronts” (Ryden 216). The migrant can interpret “the hard facts and particularities of the world – of place, of any aspect of life” to reach its deeper meaning, illuminating a journey that began long before someone set out for New Zealand (Ryden 216). By inquiring into their own narratives in the essay, migrants can share their meaning with others. What we remember matters, not only to us as individuals, but to all of us collectively, for as the neuroscientist Damasio states: “Memory, tempered by human feeling, is what allows humans to imagine both individual well-being and the compounded well-being of a whole society, and to invent ways and means of achieving and magnifying that well-

being” (296-97). The intersection of narrative and memory therefore has an ethical component, and this perhaps underlies why stories have always been used as a form of instruction and illumination asking, as the Inuit do, how does the story help? The story of migration is one of the oldest ones available to us: whether a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town, what happens in the resulting contact zone has individual and global consequences for self and other.

The Beauty of the Paua

The real question behind the roots of migration, is, in essence, why are you here?, and it is the question posed to every stranger who comes to town, in one form or another. To be asked, as migrants often are, decades later, “Where are you from?” is to acknowledge, rightly or wrongly, that one is not from here, wherever here is in the world. Exploring the roots of her own migration, Amelia, an Englishwoman in her 50s who married a New Zealander, opens her essay with the following memory:

As an eight-year-old in suburban London I received a gift, a bracelet. A silver bracelet with seven paua shell hearts attached. My uncle and family had travelled to New Zealand by boat for a holiday and returned with gifts for us all. The beauty of the paua; its colour and iridescence fascinated me. Seashells from our British seaside holidays were dull in comparison. Was this the start of my journey to New Zealand where I now live? Or was it a secondhand book entitled *A Young Traveller in New Zealand* that I bought at a church fair on 10th February 1968 when I was ten that fostered the dream?

This is what the personal essay does best, wrestle with difficult questions and strive to answer them: what fostered the dream? Her older, migrated self reflects back forty years to the eight-

year-old who was given a paua shell bracelet, which in turn perhaps led to her buying the secondhand book about New Zealand two years later. Pondering the paua bracelet and the book exemplify the “realized effort to assemble the puzzle of what happened in light of subsequent realization” (Birketts 8). Would she have even connected these two images had she not asked, “How did I get here?” What is striking in this opening paragraph is the specificity of the details: seven paua shell hearts on the bracelet and the inscription of the date when she bought the book. Like the red postage stamp of Marco Polo on my birth certificate, these isolate, but distinctive details are the first images she selects that suggest her coming to New Zealand predates her arrival by decades. Only the individual would be privy to such disparate details and able to connect these stray artifacts with their origin, the souvenir bracelet from her uncle’s trip to New Zealand, and the secondhand book she bought at the church fair.

The personal essay forges connections that would otherwise be missed, and the writing is both creative and constructive, wherein specific details are not decorative but illustrative, pieces of a puzzle that make up the larger life narrative. The significance of the paua bracelet and New Zealand travel book could not occur at the time of their acquisition, but only later, because narrative is always retrospective, and perhaps understanding too. We cannot know what things will mean to us later. This is one of the perishing and marvelous qualities about life, its evanescence and strange ability to become resonant after the fact, especially in the personal essay: “The essayist thoughtfully scrutinizes the world, drawing out significances which until then may never have been clearly seen or fully understood, creating and explaining new artifacts of intelligence through the alchemy of mind and words” (Ryden 240). Amelia understands this alchemy implicitly when she writes in a later essay, “We have a love affair with memories, tastes and sensations from the past. They are the very essence of our being. They travel with us globally and edge our daily existence. The best of the past sustains us and fuels our daily life.”

Our past is elemental to who and where we are in the present, as T.S. Eliot understood, “Time past and time future / What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present” (“Burnt Norton” 1.46-48). For migrants the past leads to a future elsewhere, and the paua shell bracelet and secondhand book entitled *A Young Traveller in New Zealand* become harbingers of the journey taken, but can be understood as such only in hindsight. Amelia questions the connection herself, “Was this the start of my journey to New Zealand where I now live?” But she remembers how “the beauty of the paua; its colour and iridescence fascinated me”, which she compares to the dull seashells found on her seaside holidays in England, and thus New Zealand, by extension, looks far more alluring in her child eyes. The paua shell embodies a place very far way, whose fascination pulls her attention across decades, long before New Zealand becomes a reality.

From the paua shell bracelet Amelia segues to meeting her future Kiwi husband in London fifteen years later, a fluke she remarks on: “One in a million?” But then she quotes the well-worn statistic that 20% of New Zealanders are overseas at any one time. We cannot underestimate the effect of love upon where we end up in the world, and Russell King argues that “love migration can probably be found in all types of migration” (99). Twenty of the thirty-seven migrants whose essays inform this braided narrative migrated to New Zealand because of their choice of partner, myself included. Unlike many migrant spouses, especially those who came in the two decades following World War II, Amelia was able to visit New Zealand prior to moving there. She admits that “a trip to New Zealand in December whetted my appetite for this amazing country” and that she “was wooed by Mount Cook,” conflating the fiancé with the landscape perhaps.

In the ten years prior to migrating to New Zealand, Amelia and her husband lived in Gabon, The Netherlands, Australia, and Syria, enjoying a luxurious expatriate lifestyle thanks to

his work: “living in hotels, lounging by pools, having a driver, business class air travel round the world up to three times each year. We asked ourselves, ‘what would life be like in the real world?’ We had always agreed that we did not want the children to grow up as ‘Ex-Pats’. Friends’ children were always asking ‘where do you come from?’” And there it is, the idea of origin being essential to who we are and who we will become. For migrants the decision of where to raise their children has repercussions that extend beyond their own lives. Many New Zealanders who marry partners from overseas wish to raise their children back in New Zealand, and the collective belief, real or imagined, is New Zealand is a wonderful place to grow up. I have to admit, having gone as parent help to my daughter’s school camp and watched the kids thrive in all sorts of mad Kiwi outdoor pursuits, I would agree. What parents would not want their child to grow up in a country that teaches her how to navigate in the bush, cook on a campfire, build a bivouac, split a limb, zip down on a flying fox, shoot arrows, climb over obstacles, swim, kayak, and abseil, all in the spirit of helping others and “giving it a go”? Love-driven migration pertains not only to love of partners, but also to love of children, and many migrants choose to leave their country of origin to provide a better future for their children. As Mary, a Scottish psychotherapist, expresses it, she and her husband had “a desire for our son to live his early years in the carefree moment and learn life skills in a fine little country.”

For migrants with children, the timing of their migration can be quite sensitive. The older we are when we migrate, the more we are rooted in the language, culture and place from whence we came. Having disrupted our adolescent son by moving him to Sweden when he was thirteen, I can testify to the disastrous effect of this on all fronts. Therefore I understand why Amelia and her husband, with a newborn daughter and two young sons under the age of six, felt pressure to decide whether they were going to continue to “live all over the world,” much as I did

growing up, or settle in New Zealand. She describes the tension weighing the pros and cons of the decision:

In the dark cold nights following our daughter's birth we were challenged almost beyond human tolerance. Do we return to Damascus or accept the job we had been offered in New Zealand? My parents watched helplessly the agonies we went through. Salary, housing, medical care, annual around the world trips, job satisfaction, lifestyle, family in UK, family in New Zealand. The cries and demands of a new baby and two lively boys added to the noise in my head.

While she lists the competing claims of each job, she does not state what tipped the balance in favor of New Zealand. But then she does not need to, as the ultimate weight of the decision had been determined years earlier: "We had always agreed that we did not want the children to grow up as 'Ex-Pats'." Therefore the desire for roots for their own children was what led them across the world to plant them.

In a wonderfully serendipitous coincidence, the six-week-old baby they brought to New Zealand in 1995 to be christened with water poured from a paua shell, and she will grow up to read and enjoy the secondhand book brought by her mother which "survived the travels and cullings of possessions that have occurred with every move." But perhaps the most telling use of the extended metaphor of the paua bracelet appears at the end of the essay: "The bracelet has a missing heart. I believe it symbolically remains in the UK where part of me still resides." With the missing paua heart, the writer finds meaning in something that could have seemed inconsequential to anyone else, a child's bracelet. As Hampl observes, "We find in our details and broken, obscured images, the language of symbol" (*I Could Tell You Stories* 31). Amelia might not have understood the bracelet's symbolism until she began writing, seizing on that one

image amid her memory. She titled her essay, “Paua Power,” recognizing in retrospect the enduring power of love to determine our lives in ways we could never anticipate.

Both Amelia and her husband made sacrifices when they migrated for their children’s sake. Her husband relinquished his lucrative career as an engineer and flew in the face of his family’s disapproval in returning to New Zealand. Amelia gave up her native country and regular contact with her own family. By sacrificing his route to financial success and her roots to place they ensured their children would have both: roots and routes. As Rockwell Gray cautions: “mobile and other-directed as many of us are, we tend to confuse our identities with our itineraries or our ascent on some professional ladder of success. When the lack of deep connection to a place and its traditions forces us to ask where we actually are, we are asking who we are” (57). To offset the potential for the uprooted identity of expatriates, Amelia and her husband provided their children with a stable upbringing in New Zealand, where they flourished as a result. Neither she nor her husband could have known in 1995 how any of this would turn out. Only years later can they see the result of migrating to New Zealand, which she acknowledges: “The children are freer and their endeavours get recognized more readily.”

The story reveals its own design after the fact, as Cavarero maintains. We can discern a pattern from a mere sequence of events when we follow the deeper narrative. Amelia’s childhood fascination with other and elsewhere led to her being an *au pair* in France when she was eighteen, to her choice of a New Zealand partner at twenty-five, to following him all over the world for ten years, to finally settling in New Zealand. We can trace the trajectory of that journey through the paua shell as well: from the paua bracelet brought back as a gift from New Zealand to the paua shell christening a new life both literally and figuratively in the chosen country, to the missing paua heart she feels remains in the UK. The missing paua heart emblemizes the torn allegiance many migrants feel when they are split between countries, where some part of them remains

“back” there. Her essay reveals how seemingly random and incidental moments in her own life – a comparison between the iridescent paua and the dull English seashells – can lead to a Kierkegaardian realization that life is lived forward but understood backward. We see how the individual roots of migration are far more subtle and far-reaching than “I married a Kiwi,” and that the design inherent in life is revealed in the respective inquiry of the personal essay.

A Stranger in My Own Town

Often the roots of migration are set in motion by choices made for us, not by us, as is the case when children are sent away to boarding school. Older migrants who look back over forty or fifty years can see how these early influences of education affected their migration. What one misses when forced to leave home can inform an entire life in a search to recreate what that first loss embodied. Hugh, an Irish doctor in his sixties and the son of migrant doctors in northern Ireland, who has lived in New Zealand over a decade, recalls in his essay:

I had a very happy childhood and can still remember extraordinary details of the house and garden where I played with my younger brother and friends. In particular, I remember a colourful cherry tree, which doubled as a goalpost as well as various other sporting landmarks in the fertile imagination of a child. At the age of nine, it all changed rather unexpectedly when I was bundled off to boarding school in Belfast some forty miles away – my first forced migration. This was just another adventure at first and I went willingly, but it gradually turned into a nightmare when I realised it was a long term arrangement which was to last for eight years. Only getting home several times a year for holidays, I soon lost touch with all my friends and I ended up becoming a stranger in my own town. Apart from seeing family and enjoying home cooking, homecoming

was a mixed experience. By mid teens, I felt a bit like a displaced person with no fixed abode and roots that were withering by the year.

This initial loss of home will determine the next forty years of Hugh's life. He applies the migration metaphor to his own childhood, comparing being "bundled off to boarding school" at age nine to a "forced migration." This might seem like hyperbole, especially when the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration defines that as people "forced to migrate due to persecution, to flee war, to escape famine, or because of a major development project" (IASFM). He is none of these, and yet feels "bundled off" like a package to an unknown destination, which is not dissimilar to forced migrants and indicative of his own lack of agency or control. The distance of forty miles from home was enough to turn "just another adventure" into a "nightmare" when he realized it was a long-term arrangement about which he had no choice.

In the intervening eight years, with only occasional visits home during holidays, Hugh loses touch with all his friends and "becomes a stranger in his own town," which mirrors what migrants often feel when they arrive in a new country. What is most revealing is when he returns to the migration metaphor: "I felt a bit like a displaced person with no fixed abode and roots that were withering by the year." He feels displaced in the very location we would expect him not to be: home. We cannot underestimate how integral place is to our sense of belonging, as "One of the vital criteria of personal integrity is whether you belong in your own life or not" (O'Donohue *Eternal Echoes* 213). Eight years at boarding school eroded Hugh's feeling of belonging when he was home, and that sense of displacement sets his future migrations in motion.

Uprooting seems to lead to a strong desire for roots of one's own, or to keep moving. When this budding migrant could choose for himself and exercise agency at age seventeen, Hugh

seized the opportunity: “I was ripe for my second (voluntary) migration, and, when I was offered a place at medical school in Edinburgh, I jumped at it. An opportunity to start a new life in a new country with new friends and freedom to shape my own life for once.” What is telling is the parentheses around the word “voluntary,” highlighting how the first migration to boarding school was not. Like many migrants, the idea of a fresh start in a new place is a major draw, but “the freedom to shape my own life for once” is what gives the real impetus behind his seizing this opportunity. The Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés argues that the feeling of exile “makes us yearn that much more to free our own true nature and causes us to long for a culture to match” (184). We see how the initial loss of home sets the stranger on his way. Having been uprooted once, Hugh understands how moving elsewhere becomes not only possible, but attractive.

Hugh, now with a wife and three children, has been living in Scotland for fifteen years when he became restless again: “The path on which I had set myself was not proving as nourishing or rewarding as I had hoped or expected.” He invokes the journey motif, “the path on which I had set myself,” but the indirect and passive phrasing indicates a lack of agency. Hugh’s younger brother, also a doctor, migrated to New Zealand having, “fought his own demons and fled to furthest point on earth to escape them.” New Zealand as a place to start over is a common theme in the migrant essays. Inspired by his brother’s tales of a new life in a new country, Hugh arranged a job exchange in New Zealand for six months, and the sojourn prompted him to begin again, just as when he left boarding school for medical school. Thus in his late 40s he decided to change course and heading, moving his family to New Zealand:

I discovered that life didn’t have to be as I was living it at the time, and, if I was willing to look over the other side of the mountain, or lose sight of the land and take a bit of a risk, there was a whole other world out there which was both

exciting and stimulating again. Sure, there were new challenges and new skills to be learnt, but sometimes one needs something radical to shake you out of your comfort zone and re-awaken that spirit of adventure and self discovery that always accompanies a migrant when he starts a new life.

Reminiscent of Joseph Campbell who reminds us that the hero who resists the call spends the rest of his life in boredom and dread, Hugh urges the reader to set off on the journey of the universal migrant to “and reawaken that spirit of adventure and self discovery that always accompanies a migrant when he starts a new life.” The passage shows how the essay moves from the individual, firsthand experience to the universal with ease, for, “at the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (Lopate xxiii). Whether we are migrants or not, we all have set out on a journey of self-discovery, and “losing sight of land” and taking “a bit of a risk” are central not only to migration, but to life.

Once in New Zealand, Hugh made yet another migration eight years later, moving out of the city into the country, in a reverse of his father’s migration sixty years earlier from farm to university. The house he built facing the Southern Alps bears the name of the family farm where his father originated: Crossnacreevy. Perhaps his father’s initial migration from the family farm to medical school prefigured his son’s profession, as well as his subsequent migration (ditto his brother’s), and Hugh argues several times in his essay that migration is an inherited trait – his parents both had it, as did his brother. The journey came full circle when his parents emigrated to New Zealand in their 80s, reuniting the family. Hugh has not managed to recreate the home he lost in his childhood, but who can? He closes the essay with: “If folk ask me where I live, I tell them New Zealand. If folk ask me where home is, I tell them a garden with a cherry tree, because home is not a place but a time when life was innocent, unknowingly secure, and full of wonder.” He returns to the cherry tree that was the goalpost, both in imagination and reality for

him as a child, as a symbol of lost security, innocence and wonder, which is how he defines home. The cherry tree and garden have vanished. For him, home is not a place but a time, the time before he was forced out of the garden, like those first migrants, cast out of Eden into the world.

“Make impulse one with wilfulness and enter”

Not everyone who is cast out into the world via boarding school feels the loss of home as acutely. Where boarding school uprooted and unsettled Hugh when he returned home, making him feel like a stranger in his own town, for Mary, a Scottish woman in her early fifties, boarding school made her home even more precious:

occasionally we were released from school and permitted to go home so home took on a meaning that it would not otherwise have had were you there day in, day out. The excitement and joy of arriving home after a long car journey, turning into the driveway after months away and glimpsing the house I loved through the trees, is about as clear a memory as I have.

The verbs of confinement are noteworthy – “released” and “permitted” – in contrast with the palpable joy of seeing home again: “about as clear a memory as I have.” The personal essay gives immediate access to specific, individual memory as the prose carries the reader alongside her in the car, “turning into the driveway after months away and glimpsing the house I loved through the trees.” She tells us exactly what she feels, and shining in that last sentence is her love for a house so rooted in memory that forty years later “[i]t still occupies my dreams, such was its impact (it’s the safe haven where I shelter whilst scary things happen outside).”

Mary is a practicing psychotherapist and therefore attuned to the powerful archetype of home in her own life. That she returns to the house in her dreams reveals how “our psychic

growth keeps roots in some tangible localized ground” (R. Gray 61). Her description of this remarkable house is almost fairy-tale-like in its setting: “Home was a big old rather intimidating-looking house perched – precariously I thought, as a child – on a cliff on the south east coast of Scotland. At the back of the house, no more than 10 yards away, stone steps carved into the cliff face led steeply down into the sea.” Home perched “precariously” in her child eyes, the perspective offset by dashes, now has a stability and permanence in her adulthood. Gaston Bachelard argues that “The unconscious abides. Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (10). Memories may be motionless, but the person who remembers is not, especially if she migrates to the other side of the world. In the essay her family home becomes anchored both in narrative and in time, to endure on the page, if not in reality. When her parents sold the house and died in their late 80s, Mary decided to migrate to New Zealand. Once those powerful roots to place and family were gone, she may have felt free to re-root herself and her nine-year-old son half a world away. Like her son, she was nine when she was first uprooted to boarding school. Chance or circumstance inform these parallel departures, though perhaps as a psychologist she realized her son was still young enough to move without too much disruption.

Mary speculates that her migration might have genetic roots: “Can it be to do with genetic inheritance? Us Scots are renowned for a restlessness, a pioneering spirit, a keenness to see what else is out there ... My mother had that gene. She went to India aged 21. She joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment and spent a few years nursing overseas.” Her colloquial use of “Us Scots” separates “us” from them, the stay-at-homes, invoking a solidarity with the global clan of Scots, and perhaps it was coincidental that the class Mary joined had two other Scottish migrants and their Viking neighbors from across the North Sea, a Dane and a Swede. But while many people are lured by the far horizon trailing off in her ellipsis, not everyone migrates, and

she writes, “What I still find surprising is just how easy I found it, psychologically if you like, to ‘up sticks’ and leave.” She credits years of confinement in boarding school with instilling a sense of restlessness and adventure:

I can’t overlook the influence of boarding school. Going out into the world is surely a normal response to years of confinement. I’m not sure the intent of those venerable school mistresses was to grow restless, adventure-seeking adults (I recall we were actually groomed to be ‘young ladies’) but when you are removed at a tender age from all that is familiar, things are bound never to be the same again. Something is lost and something else takes its place.

Being “removed from a tender age from all that is familiar” has a profound effect on an individual, particularly if that individual is a child. The child may learn to cope and be resilient in the face of unfamiliarity, a characteristic well-suited to a future migrant who will encounter other countries and cultures and learn to adapt. But it comes at a cost, as she notes, “Something is lost and something else takes its place.” Neither what she lost nor its replacement is stated, but this recognition of loss is further addressed in Anne Michaels’ brilliant novel about displacement *The Winter Vault*, “We become ourselves when things are given to us and when things are taken away” (94). For migrants, often what is taken away is home and familiarity, which for Mary created a thirst for adventure and travel.

While her older siblings settled down and stayed at home, Mary “got centre stage as the adventurer,” noting that “Not being a particularly confident or extrovert child, going away from home required a certain amount of steeliness and spontaneity. Immigrant characteristics?” She could very well be right in depicting steeliness and spontaneity as immigrant characteristics, since they occur in almost every migrant narrative in some guise. While spontaneity might prompt an individual to migrate, it is steeliness that sees it through. Mary concludes that no one

contributing factor led to her migration, but rather many diverse channels all fed into the braided river, “no single origin, not one moment, not Fate or Destiny nor even a childhood dream. A random coming together of events and circumstances; of history and personality; of a desire for our son to live his early years in the carefree moment and learn life skills in a fine little country; a willingness to take a chance and live somewhere else.” Perhaps what is most revealing is the last clause in her essay: “a willingness to take a chance and live somewhere else.”

Somewhere else. The allure of somewhere else is one thing for travel, but quite another when someone chooses to live there. Mary’s essay distills a key characteristic of migrants, “a willingness to take a chance and live somewhere else.” Each of the migrant writers committed themselves to the risks of migration, and they also risked self-disclosure in the personal essay. Like the migrant who moves to a new country, the writer has no idea what she might encounter in writing. This willingness to risk and see where the writing leads is at the center of the essay as a mode of inquiry, as Lopate points out, “There is something heroic in the essayist’s gesture of striking out toward the unknown, not only without a map, but without certainty that there is anything worthy to be found. One would like to think that the personal essay represents a kind of basic research on the self, in ways that are allied with science and philosophy” (xlii). The essay’s inherent willingness to test the validity and value of personal experience makes it an ideal genre to assess the stakes and rewards of migration. The emotional and existential costs of migration are exactly what cannot be quantified, and while theory and system hold sway in academic discourse, “the lived individual experience which eludes system, and which the essay expresses and symbolizes, has an important place as well” (Good 183). The personal essay offers a way of structuring human knowledge that is most closely allied with individual, lived experience.

From its inception with Montaigne, the personal essay has been used to evaluate and understand one's place in the world, and for migrants that place has changed. Both the world and the essay become a vital contact zone the migrant encounters and what holds fast in the essay is the situation of the writer: "The essay stands apart from both poetry and prose fiction, as well as other forms of academic writing, in its emphasis upon the actual situation of the writer, and thus upon the personal nature, the 'situatedness' of all writing" (Spellmeyer 264). For migrants that "situatedness" is in another country, culture and perhaps language, and so the "actual situation of the writer" is vital for our understanding of migration and its synergistic relationship with the personal essay. The migrant and the writer must learn what the experience means, on both a daily and lifelong level, and the essay is adept at assessing that. For example, the aftershocks of migration may affect the individual decades later, as Maria, an older Dutch migrant realized when her husband was dying of cancer and she wished her family lived closer to help with his care. She lamented migrants do not think of this, but how can they? When she and her husband had arrived in New Zealand fifty years earlier by boat they were not facing the end of his life on the far side of the world. She could not know then what she knows now. For, as the poet Rilke reminds us, "the seemingly uneventful and motionless moment when our future steps into us is so much closer to life than that other loud and accidental point of time when it happens to us as if from the outside" (*Letters to a Young Poet* 84-85). At the time it occurs, we cannot always see "the seemingly uneventful and motionless moment" when our future begins, but we can trace that moment back to its origin in the essay.

Sometimes long before the migrant departs, the imagination of being other and elsewhere is already in motion. In a remarkable catalogue of her own migratory roots, Daisy, an Irish nurse who has lived in New Zealand for over thirty years, charts her journey from her forebears to poems to maps to chance:

There is something about our lot of Kellys that makes us mildly adventurous. The attribute is not necessarily a virtue; it is simply part of us – like our freckles and our love of food. I, for example, have always relished the exotic names of foreign places. At six I was captivated by an out-loud reading of “The Destruction of Sennacherib”; at twelve by reading to myself “The Golden Journey to Samarkand”; at eighteen I had a map of the world on my bedroom wall and an intention, one day, to see the South China Sea. In 1970 while preparing to live in Borneo I was diverted to Fiji. I didn’t mind in the least. An exotic, golden and immense experience in their own right, the Islands of Fiji turned into stepping stones to New Zealand.

She opens with her Irish family being “mildly adventurous,” a trait they cannot help, like their freckles and love of food, but what shines in this passage is her own zest for the exotic and her embrace of what comes her way. She marks the rising level of her interest in foreign places at ages six, twelve, eighteen, and then by 1970, when she is twenty-seven, with living abroad. She begins being captivated hearing Byron’s poem at age six, long before she could have fathomed its meaning, followed by her own choice of reading at age twelve another poem flavored with the far away and distant. Then the map of the world appears on her wall and her “intention, one day, to see the South China Sea.” Perhaps it is not surprising she will quote Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney as an epigraph to one of her essays, “Make impulse one with wilfulness and enter,” for that is exactly how she has approached her life, by uniting impulse with will, or spontaneity and steeliness. For when she is on her way to Borneo as a nurse and diverted to Fiji, she is undaunted: “I didn’t mind in the least.” We see the joyous ribbon of enthusiasm throughout, as she plots the stepping stones that lead from “The Golden Journey to Samarkand” to Fiji: “An exotic, golden and immense experience in their own right, the Islands of Fiji turned

into stepping stones to New Zealand.” Looking back over thirty years, she writes, “From the Atlantic coast of Western Europe, I came here to the South Pacific as flotsam and without significant intention. ‘Destiny hangs on a thread’, it is said and yet it now seems inconceivable that life could have turned out differently.” She may argue that she came “without significant intention,” yet her willingness to follow where impulse carried her tells another story.

Daisy’s migration has roots that exist not only in her vivid imagination and taste for exotic place names. At age twelve she was sent across the border to boarding school in Northern Ireland, “to spend the next six years migrating from dormitory to dormitory with only a bed and a locker and share of a wardrobe to call my own.” That border crossing is not simply geographic, it is also cultural and emotional when her first six years of schooling in Ireland are invalidated: “we had been taught all our lessons (except English) through the Irish language, our history stories were incorrect ... Irish history from either or indeed any point of view was not taught except as incidental to European history. It took me a year or so to find a way to clamber over this soul-high threshold.” Daisy becomes a migrant at age twelve when she suffers the triple dislocation of roots, language and social norms (Rushdie 278). Moreover, when she returns home her younger sister has been given her bedroom and Daisy is allocated the guest room, and we see how her displacement occurs in both locations, home and away.

Perhaps clambering over soul-high thresholds at age twelve enabled Daisy to take shifts in country and circumstance in her stride later, or maybe it is something more essential, a sense of the familiar when she is far away. While at nurses’ training in Belfast, she received a package:

It had an Eire stamp and a Donegal postmark. It was neatly tied with string and secured with a dab of sealing wax. I opened it layer by layer and inside found, together with a familiar saucer and under a layer of damp moss, a wild primrose plant, root and all, in pale bud. The note said, “I thought this might remind you

of home, love Mum.” Together she and I were most at peace as we worked in her gardens. To this day, half a world away, I grow pale yellow primroses in mine.

She does not say what she did with the wild primrose her mother sent her, root and all, in 1962. Yet it takes root in the essay, as it does in her New Zealand garden decades later, and we see how her mother, with whom she had a difficult relationship, extended this image of affection and connection, a memory of shared peace. The primroses of her mother’s garden in Donegal find a metaphoric and actual home again in her New Zealand one.

One evening in early spring, Daisy brought a pale yellow primrose to class. We passed it around the living room where we were gathered, as our class had been decamped by the fatal earthquake in Christchurch to meet in various homes of the participants, as we migrated through neighborhoods and lives, week after week. Our various routes had brought us from Ireland, England, Uganda, Slovakia, the Netherlands, China, and the United States to find ourselves sitting in a kindly Dutchman’s living room in New Zealand, sharing stories of migration. From the red Marco Polo stamp on my birth certificate to the package sent by Daisy’s mother in 1962 to this flower blooming in New Zealand in 2011, I touched the pale trembling petals and thought how far we had all come to be together in this room, with this flower, half a world away from where each of us was born.

Hero of the Family

In each class I offered, I experienced a sense of congruence, a rare, chance gathering of migrants from all over the world who wished to write about their experience. What struck me in each migrant was a bravery, a commitment to risk, and that very steeliness Mary wrote of, both in life

and on the page. The personal essay embodied those qualities, for writers confront not only the world, but also themselves in this genre as Leonard Kriegel argues:

few other genres commit the writer's "I" so relentlessly and few other genres are able to force the writer to confront himself so absolutely. The personal essay allows writers to discover their own complexity – and that includes their hatreds, as well as the rawness and sustainability of their wounds. Among the legacies of the personal essay is that it has been used to describe so many different kinds of pain and self-discovery. (95)

A moving example of the essay's power of self-discovery comes from Werapong, who at twenty-five was the youngest migrant in the class by two generations. and yet despite his youth held his own with modesty and grace. His narrative reveals the roots of his remarkable poise. At age fifteen Werapong was sent from Thailand to New Zealand to learn English, and his essay recalls how he felt just before touching down in the new country: "The flight to Christchurch was very full but I've never felt so empty in my heart." Werapong is not a child being sent forty miles away to boarding school, but an adolescent being sent to a completely different country, culture and language. He gives what may seem a stock response to why he migrated:

New Zealand is my chosen country to pursue my future life journey. I carry the hope of my parents and the dreams of my grandparents with me to this new country. Things that could not have been achieved in the prior generations – will be achieved in mine. Despite my inability to speak the language, lack of knowledge of the New Zealand culture and not knowing a single person in this new country, I still wanted to be here more than anything else in the world.

As a Buddhist, his awareness of ancestral pressure is very strong, borne out by the description of his father: "My dad could easily fit into one of those images of the third-world children where

neither he nor his parents had a choice about their four basic necessities – food, medicine, housing and clothes,” but his father loved learning, and “Every day he would walk for miles in bare feet on a gravel road through rice fields to attend what they called a ‘hut school’. There were only three teachers in the school; the teachers only had high school qualifications.” His father’s example of dedication amid extreme poverty sheds a different light on his son’s stock response for migration – education for self-improvement – especially if one factors in the fees for international students at high school level in New Zealand (twelve thousand dollars a year, plus room and board). Again we see how the roots of the migration begin long before the individual leaves the country, as well as how parental sacrifice enables the route itself to be possible.

Werapong describes his first night in New Zealand with absolute candor, and even though ten years have past, the emotion is immediate and concrete:

The first night in New Zealand was the longest night of my life. Homesickness seems to knock on the door as soon as I was alone. Memories come back – it’s eight thirty now – Mum and Dad must be watching our favourite TV programme. I wonder whether they miss me as much I miss them. I could hear my own heart beating clearly. This is the first time I ever heard it – Thailand must be so noisy, I thought to myself.

The memory starts out in the past tense, “The first night in New Zealand was the longest night of my life,” but instinctively he shifts into the lyrical present and personifies his homesickness knocking on his door. The prose switches into an even more immediate and interior level of address, “it’s eight thirty now – Mum and Dad must be watching our favourite TV programme.” He can see what happens thousands of miles away nightly at 8:30 in Thailand, and he does not name their favorite program as the presence of family, not the show itself, is what matters. He invokes their shared nightly ritual to console himself in his parents’ absence. Then he asks the

poignant question all migrants ask themselves: “I wonder whether they miss me as much I miss them.” This is one of the unanswerable questions migrants face. Then he acknowledges something extraordinary and visceral: “I could hear my own heart beating clearly. This is the first time I ever heard it – Thailand must be so noisy, I thought to myself.” He hears his own hammering heart because he is not at home, but frightened and alone in a bedroom in Christchurch, New Zealand. Both references to Thailand have the phrase “must be,” as though his insistence that his parents “must be watching” their shared favorite TV program and that “Thailand must be so noisy” underscores the missing familiarity of family and country. They must be there – even though he is not.

Perhaps Werapong’s youth made him so forthcoming and unguarded in his prose, but it is also the hallmark of the essay to be willing show vulnerability. We see how it is “the real possibility in the personal essay to catch oneself in the act of being human” (Dubus xiii). Werapong does this beautifully where he reveals how alone and vulnerable he is at the time of this memory:

“I miss home! I miss Mama and Papa! I shouldn’t have come here!” I
shouted inside my head.

“Go to sleep, it will be better tomorrow. You are here for a reason, you are
here because you chose to be here,” I heard a small voice inside my heart
responding to my head.

Alone and frightened, he reverts to someone much younger than age fifteen, and instead of calling his parents Mum and Dad as before, they become Mama and Papa. The exclamation marks intensify his anguish, and now the heart that was beating in fear enters into a dialogue with his head, which is shouting out in protest at being in this foreign country. He dramatizes his mental state at the time, that of a frightened child, and even though he claims his migration

was voluntary, the reality is painful. His closing image describes the emotional cost of this journey: “I drifted to sleep on a wet pillow – tired, homesick, fearful but full of hope and optimism. Things will always be better tomorrow.” His wet pillow reveals he cried himself to sleep, depicting the very thing not often not taken into account in migration studies: “the tears of migrant people are what we often overlook and/or fail to understand” (De Tona para. 3).

Werapong will graduate with honors and become the youngest chartered accountant at one of the top accounting firms in New Zealand to be seconded to their European offices in London, Dublin and Copenhagen, all before the age of twenty-five. If we follow the route of his tears we see they originate in his parents and their hope for both themselves and, in turn, for him. His essay enacts what Cixous describes: “I go back up the stream of tears. When I begin to write, it always starts from something unexplained, mysterious and concrete. Something that happens here. I could be indifferent to these phenomena; but in fact I think these are the only important phenomena. It begins to search in me” (43). The personal essay also starts from “something unexplained, mysterious, and concrete” that begins to search in the individual, and that search becomes part of the writing process, but the search originates in “Something that happens here.” This may be the here of the present, or a here in the past. For example, if we go back up Werapong’s stream of tears, as he does, we see they originate in choices his parents made, and their route leads to his root/route:

It is extraordinary to discover that two of my greatest qualities are something I derived from the things I didn’t choose and could never have chosen – they belong to my parents’ choices earlier in their lives. My father, who did not choose to be poor, chose to love his learning, and he transcended his peers by focusing on this personal characteristic throughout his life. My mother, who did not choose a broken family, chose to hope and remain optimistic about her own

life. Both my parents seem to have transferred their passions and dreams to me without me nor they realising when it began or how the process was done.

This is the moment of recognition, which the personal essay delivers by diving beneath the surface narrative. Perhaps being Buddhist accounts for Werapong's awareness that the future enters into him long before it happens, and perhaps his willingness to begin with tears, with sacrifice – his parents', his own – reflects a willingness to realize his life course begins long before his own sense of purpose manifests. At twenty-five he already understands that we become ourselves when things are given to us or taken away. Sent thousands of miles away at age fifteen, Werapong was given a path to self-actualization his parents could never have imagined for themselves, but did envision for him. Even his name, Werapong, which means "hero of the family," reveals their hopes for his future. He sees his hero's journey, which all migration narratives are to some extent, with great modesty, realizing he is part of a greater and more generous chain of being:

Love connects things – love connects what we can choose with what we can't. My parents' love for each other has remained the most powerful thing that ever happened in their lives – they used each other's strengths to build their business and lives together. But the most essential notion of all – their love acts as a connecting bridge to me – transferring what I didn't choose and made me who I am today.

As a Buddhist he understands that "Love connects things – love connects what we can choose with what we can't." We cannot choose our parents and we cannot choose the times we are born into, but we can choose what and whom we love. Aware of his own place in the chain of cause and effect, he writes, "Although I don't have a say in whatever choices my parents made in the past – I am gratefully blessed for the consequences of their choices. The challenge remains for

me on what choices I now make – so that my children and grandchildren would feel blessed for the choices that will make them who they are in the future.” His shifting verb tenses reveal how his present choices would make possible a sense of blessing for his yet unborn children and grandchildren. The future is predicated on the past. His route will become their root, even as his parents’ routes became his own.

Voyaging Toward Understanding

Sometimes the route not taken by the parent is thrust upon the next generation to undertake. While it is natural for parents to want to improve their children’s future through education, whether sending them away to boarding school or overseas in an attempt to secure this, on occasion the parents’ own thwarted desires to travel and live elsewhere prompt them to send their children away, setting the future migrant in motion. Susan, an American in her fifties, writes, “I believe the start of my forced exile from my homeland began when my mother was sixteen and her parents sent her to Stephens College for Girls, a small school in Missouri.” Her mother thrived in boarding school and later majored in geography, and “She always had trips in mind and with maps at hand she researched countries of interest, explored train trips in faraway places and questioned people where to go for adventure.” But then her mother married and projected her frustrated dream of travel onto her daughter, only it was a “forced exile” from her homeland, not her own choice:

While I was growing up she would send me to places starting with summer camps. From Girl Scout camp to church camp to girls’ camps in Minnesota, I would be packed off for part of each US summer. With each trip I wanted less and less to leave home. The separation anxiety I suffered in grade school grew

even greater. For someone who never wanted to leave home I was sent away a lot!

How sad that a child who never wanted to leave home was sent away so often. The exclamation mark punctuates her amazement in the present that this would happen so often in the past.

Susan admits, “I had trouble individuating from my mother since I was a little girl.” This loss of agency extends into her twenties, when her mother decides Susan should be an *au pair* in Copenhagen, resulting in an experience whose negativity keeps her from traveling out of the United States for a decade.

In her thirties Susan started working in Antarctica for six-month stints, and this pattern continued for eight years. Yet this time, she, not her mother, chose where and when she would go, exemplifying how, “Moving to a foreign place and international travel are archetypal situations for protecting and expressing the need for freedom and independence” (Madison 247). Susan no longer experienced a northern hemisphere winter or the binding hoopla of the family Christmas. She now lived in a perpetual summer, and what greater summer camp could there be than Antarctica with its seasonal employees, all about as far away from home as one could get:

Antarctica is the place where misfits meet like misfits while working for a common cause. We go there under the guise of supporting science in the vast tundra. Yet the truth is we are drawn there to meet other like-minded people. In a cult like society, the runaways and the travellers, the wanderers and the adventurers all converge at the end of the earth, in Antarctica.

Antarctica seems to appeal to “the runaways and the travelers, the wanderers and adventurers”, a destination for those who clearly do not want to be at home, at least for six months out of the year. Most notably Antarctica is Susan’s choice, not her mother’s, and, “The travel bug that was within her had possessed the wrong person, me. I was doing all the travelling she dreamed of

doing.” The child who had been sent away every summer, despite “If the truth is told I never wanted to go away,” now departs for each Antarctic summer. Then at the age of 42, “finally putting on my big girl shoes, shoving my separation anxiety aside, and running away from home,” she moved to New Zealand to marry a Kiwi whom she met down in Antarctica. Thus her eight-year sojourn at the ultimate out-of-the-way summer camp led to her finally leaving home. The root became the route.

The desire for freedom and independence is at the heart of what leads many migrants to leave home in a more dramatic and far-reaching fashion than other people. For them home does not exhibit as strong a hold and “[t]he centrifugal force of desire and the response to the call of the Other becomes more compelling” (J. Gray x). What gives the individual a sense of belonging in their family or country of origin is a complex subject. For example, Taegen, an Englishwoman in her early 70s, writes, “I question how much of my persona brings about the pathways my life takes – why me and not others. What is it about the sense of ‘belonging’ and staying within the corral versus stepping outside and searching and seeking?” She sees the roots of her migration as being part of her persona, an inborn desire for “searching and seeking,” which is the personal essay’s nature as well, as Atkins notes: “In such essays the writer voyages to understanding in, through, and by means of the writing – a true essay, one is tempted to say, an attempt to learn” (*Tracing the Essay* 139). The idea of voyaging to understanding in writing has clear parallels with the migrant experience. Any stranger who comes to town must make an attempt to learn to live there if he hopes to settle, and perhaps my unwillingness to learn to live in Sweden is one reason I could never belong there. Though I think the “soul-high thresholds” our family faced in Sweden – linguistically, culturally, existentially – would have taken years to surmount. Where the stranger feels welcome the voyage to understanding becomes reciprocal, in the rich exchange between migrant and native.

Sometimes our voyage toward understanding ends in the realization that we do not belong somewhere, it may be a country or it may be our own family, as in Taegen's case. For her "belonging" and "staying within the corral" are linked, and from the beginning she refused to stay put: "From an early age I was off and away, always going down to the river to play, breaking the ice in the puddles in the street, staying over at my best friend's home – especially when I was upset with my father and his dictatorial ways. My independence was learned at an early age." For her home, the original corral, is more confining than welcoming and why she does not see belonging as positive. As an adult her range became greater, "Once again as soon as I was free to choose I was off to explore all the big city of London had to offer, then my first foray to the European continent, and then further afield to South Africa to live and work." Critical here is the opening phrase, "Once again as soon as I was free to choose," and what she chose is to go elsewhere. While not all migrants are free to choose where or when to go, what is compelling are those who, given the choice, do not stay in their country of origin. In her thirties, a blind date with a Kiwi led to Taegen's second marriage and a new life in New Zealand: "Off to the antipodes, additional family, new friends and a whole new way of being. I had never been so happy in my life ... there was so much joy in the belonging I felt the balance began to tip in favour of the new life I had begun." The belonging she did not feel in her own family was finally grounded in her new, blended family, half a world away. The root that led away from home became the route to belonging in New Zealand.

The Desire to Escape

Strong ties to family and place of origin are no guarantee a migrant will remain where he or she grew up. This prompts an important question as to the nature of roots and identity, that neither concept is necessarily rooted in place. As the wily Gertrude Stein noted, "Our roots can be

anywhere and we can survive, because if you think about it, we take our roots with us” (Preston 157). What is critical, Susan Standford Friedman observes, is that “identity depends centrally upon narrative, whether it is an effect of rootedness or routedness” and for migrants “identity developed through routes involves an experience of leaving roots, of moving beyond the boundaries of ‘home’ (however that is defined or problematized)” (153-54) . Migrant experience is both rooted and routed, and personal essays offer a way to anchor that fluid identity in narrative.

Sometimes even with a strong identification with one’s home, migrants feel compelled to leave. For example, Gareth, the Welsh doctor in his seventies, grew up in large, close-knit family, the memory of which is still vivid thirty-five years later:

I can smell the sulphur from the slow burning, buried coal on the old river wharf;
I can look up at the mediaeval nave of the abbey ruins; I can feel the wind as it
blows over the tops of Hirfynydd, Mach Hywel and Druma mountains; but most
easily of all I can hear the voices of the past, of parents and sisters, and uncles,
and aunts and cousins, of preachers and teachers.

Yet he left all that and his comfortable medical practice in Wales for New Zealand. He speculates why: “Did the war time atmosphere of excitement, anxiety, restriction, deprivation and fear foster a desire for escape into a new world. The other children were all born after the war, were not exposed to the same atmosphere and never seemed to have the desire to escape.” For Gareth and his cousin both born before the war into privation, the initial escape was “from what, in prewar days, would have been the almost inevitable employment in heavy industry or coal mining.” Higher education again proves to be the route out: “We both could have gone to the University of Wales in Cardiff, forty kilometres away, but went hundreds of kilometres away

to Edinburgh and London. Today it would seem like a minor decision but we had moved into a new world and, in fact, we had emigrated.”

Looking back fifty years, Gareth can see what now would seem a “minor decision” and a short distance, but which for him was a migration: “My departure in 1957 meant that I left behind industrial South Wales with its particular culture, its chapels, its song, its rugby, its self-righteousness, its once radical socialism and arrived in a university world of questioning, argument and freedom.” Freedom, there it is again, freedom from what “all adds up to an enormous pressure to be *Welsh*.” He began to question and feel circumscribed by his cultural identity once he could see it from the outside. Having a taste of freedom in this new world made it impossible to settle in the old one, and his cousin later emigrated to the United States to work as a priest with drug addicts. After a stint in the fens of England and believing he could still live in the old world of Wales and practice medicine, Gareth found it otherwise:

We had been in Tenby for eight years and I could look forward to another thirty years as the local GP. My family and I would be respected and we would be comfortable. The inevitability of it all, the certainty of security, the bonds of respectability, the terrors of conformity were all too great. We would be crushed between the weight of our culture and past and the granite millstones of our comfortable future.

Curiously the very things that might embody home for some – respectability, comfort, security, and culture – are what drive migration here. He writes, “Our lives seemed settled but the restlessness, the minor dissatisfactions, the searchings surfaced again,” and these prove strong enough to move his wife and young family to a rural practice in New Zealand, starting over in a new world, “which was twenty thousand kilometers in the future and twenty-five years in the past.” Again we see how, as Cixous pointed out, it is the unexplained, the mysterious, the

concrete, that goes searching in us, and “the searchings surfaced again” and what terrifies him is “the inevitability of it all,” the “terrors of conformity” and how they “would be crushed between the weight of our culture and past and the granite millstones of our comfortable future.” Gareth uses the masterful rhetoric absorbed in Welsh chapel, invoking powerful cadences that build as he piles one abstraction top of another like so many millstones, to explain his own bid for escape from these very strictures. Here the pressure of roots becomes the root of migration. Like fossils under pressure becoming coal his family mined in Wales, Gareth undergoes a metamorphosis. He becomes what Rushdie affirms all migrants are, “metaphorical beings in their very essence” (278) – which is to say transformed.

While some migrants respond to the pressure to leave, others feel the pressure to stay where they are, and their desire to travel and live elsewhere is discouraged. Sabina, a young Dutchwoman who came to New Zealand at age 36 in 2008, is quite direct about this:

The reason for moving is the hope that it will make things better. The grass is greener on the other side of the hill. This commonly used saying by the Dutch has a quite negative ring to it. It encourages you to stay put and treasure the things and the life you have, instead of wanting something else. And, so I’ve learned, the grass indeed isn’t always greener. But the longing for the other side of the hill to see for myself the colour of the grass is always alive within me.

Her longing to see the other side of the hill is strong enough after a visit to New Zealand to quit her job as journalist and sell her house, even when she has learned the grass is not always greener elsewhere. Her migration is greeted with suspicion by those left behind, who suspect her of running away and think she “must be mad.” Indeed, she titled her essay “Mad,” because unlike the wave of postwar Dutch migrants to New Zealand, the Netherlands she left was prosperous and thriving. Consequently, she should not have wanted something else but was expected “to

stay put and treasure the things and the life you have.” But she did not, she chose to migrate, and again the need for individual freedom figured prominently and she declares: “My new country has given me freedom and space.”

Sabina traces her desire to live elsewhere to her childhood, “The childhood dream of living somewhere else made me travel and just the near thought of moving and starting again, that it is possible, makes me happy.” She can even point to the exact moment when she knew she wanted to stay in New Zealand:

How I clearly remember that moment in the bus to Christchurch airport at the end of the holiday, the signs at the last roundabout: left Picton, right Timaru. I wanted to jump ship. I wanted to stay in New Zealand, where you could wander near the sea and feel perfectly alone but not lonely.

Not everyone is given such a clear sign of which direction to take in their lives. Her emphatic statement – “I wanted to jump ship. I wanted to stay in New Zealand” – declared unequivocally her desire, and in three years she made it a reality. Unlike the 28,000 Dutch migrants who came to New Zealand earlier because of the privations of World War II, Sabina gave up the very things they did not have, a job and a home of her own, to migrate toward “the thing I needed all my life: lots of space and some sort of freedom.” We see how she valued freedom more than security. Gregory Madison argues that for voluntary migrants, “Self-direction (self-creation) in life prevails over the importance of belonging and security, in fact *anything* seems worth sacrificing in order to maintain the freedom to choose for oneself” (246-47). Piet, an older Dutch migrant who migrated in 1959 with his wife sees the rewards as well as the responsibility of this freedom: “The shift to a country far removed from our parents and close family definitely made us more independent in our actions and thinking than would have been the case otherwise

... [it] gave us greater freedom from traditional constraints too, but also the responsibility to get it right by ourselves.”

Sabina recognized her place in the great Dutch chain of migration, hosting her final lunch with her parents at the historic Hotel New York, in Rotterdam: “From here many migrants left for America, my aunt left here in the fifties like so many other Dutch people for the States, Canada or Australia and New Zealand as well.” One way she differs from earlier Dutch migrants is by hyperlinking all the place names in her essay, which presumes her text will be read online, and maybe she is right, since in the future more texts will be encountered that way. Yet even with her awareness of the habits of future readers, she sees how her own migration may have older roots: “My dad left his place to travel and challenge himself when he was eighteen. My mother was born in a town where many people left for better futures and so I sometimes think my urge to go far was already written for me in some way.” The route always has roots. She realizes her own “urge to go far was already written for [her] in some way.” How often the migrant narrative begins before the individual even leaves the home country to see if it really is greener on the other side of the hill.

As a journalist, Sabina’s essays are rich in both description and investigation of why she migrated. Even as she explains why she was drawn to New Zealand, she lists the pressures pushing her away from the Netherlands, and her justification for choosing to migrate:

Not happy about my home, my job, my life, the traffic jams, the crowded beaches and malls, the rapid changing politics that paints my country sometimes as stone mad and crazy, all these thoughts and feelings drove me away. If this is my life in this country for the next forty years, it will drive me mad.

The list of everything driving her away is quite specific, for example, the crowded beaches compared to the solitary idyll she paints in New Zealand, where “you could wander near the sea

and feel perfectly alone but not lonely.” She is undeterred by the naysayers remaining in the Netherlands, stating: “I left the questions about are you sure and what will the others think far behind me.” Clearly a woman who knows her own mind, she was unafraid of pitting her decision to migrate against “my home, my job, my life, the traffic jams, the crowded beaches and malls, the rapid changing politics that paints my country sometimes as stone mad and crazy.” We see in her refreshing honesty concerning the power of the personal essay: “The attractiveness of the ‘I’ that stares out at the world is that it knows two things: the first is that it is unsheltered, the second is that it is the writer’s own eye that must measure what it sees in that world ... How that eye sees and what it chooses to look at is central to what the personal essay does” (Kriegel 93). In many respects the unsheltered “I” that must measure what it sees in the world is fundamentally the migrant’s eye, the I/eye of the stranger who comes to town. Risk taking and assessment are inherent in both the migrant and the writer, and the personal essay is a record of both.

The unsheltered I in the personal essay rests solely on the one who sees and assesses what she encounters in the world. This singular first person is all the essayist has to rely upon, and yet no one grasps firsthand experience better than the individual herself, for, “The essay stays closer to the individual’s self-experience than any other form except the diary” (Good 8). What redeems the personal essay from solipsism is its outward gaze, where the writer turns what is private and reflective, hidden or remembered, and finds meaning not just for herself, but for others. The writing shares what might otherwise never be observed, and by making the personal accessible, we also make it relational: “We, readers of personal essays, are placed in a privileged position, where we have access to the vulnerabilities, uncertainties, and processes of skepticism at work in the mind of a writer, as it is represented on the page” (Allen 892). Where self meets

other is where understanding begins. Our understanding of migration will be enriched by taking an inward turn that then reaches outward in the personal essay.

To Say Yes, Go

The roots of migration begin within the countries, cultures, families, and times we are born into, over which we have no choice. But even within these broad constraints children born into the same family do not all migrate, and something else comes into play. For voluntary migrants there is a choice – a choice to marry, to work, to stay, to move, something that says, yes, go – and yet the impulse to say yes, go, has earlier roots. Something sets the migration in motion long before the individual crosses from one place to another. Where does the story begin? The story of migration begins long before we do, even as our own narrative begins long before we do. The journey and narrative precede us. We are en route years before we migrate or write. We pick up whenever, wherever, and go, the paua shell bracelet, the cherry tree, the boarding school, the war – it does not matter, we are set in motion whether we want to be or not, and yet there are moments when we do choose: to love someone, to leave, to start over on the other side of the world, under different stars. Look at this tiny red stamp of Marco Polo on my birth certificate. Of course it is a symbol, proof I was born elsewhere to parents who left and scarcely looked or went back. Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant, my secret patron, set me on my way, and, like me, returned. Now I am telling a collective migration story, making a very particular weave out of the gift of these essays. Underneath the larger braided river of narrative is the root of why we came to New Zealand, long before any of us had words for it. These are some of them.

Chapter 3: Routes – Writing Between Two Shores

“Everything changes and nothing remains still.”

– Plato, *Cratylus*

The route contains the route, bounded by both time and space. Time is relentlessly forward, the river will empty into the sea, and our life contains our death, wholly our own, marking the end of our story. I did not know when I began writing this that the earth would sheer apart multiple times, that the sound of a freight train shrieking toward us in the middle of the night was going to alter the trajectory of our lives irrevocably. I remember thinking after the first quake struck Christchurch and no one had died that we were living in a state of grace and had been spared. But that was not the end of the story. The tectonic plates have their own narrative route that unfolds in larger planes of space and time. Six months later a different fault opened up and destroyed the downtown area, killing 181 people, changing the course and heading for an entire city. Homes, lives, livelihoods gone. Many people left, forced to, or choosing to, or were forced to choose, which was our family’s story: we could stay until my husband lost his job or go to Sweden, where work and the unshakable Baltic Shield of the Scandinavian peninsula awaited us. The route contains the route and Sweden – cold, immovable, unyielding Sweden – would provide the route back to New Zealand, but at the time I could not see that. The route had not reached this point, and this is the beauty of time and narrative, they arrive moment by moment, word by word to where they are now.

Sweden was a forced migration, impelled by tectonic plates and economic realities. I did not want to go to Sweden, but knew we had no choice. When we first left New Zealand for Sweden I was like a horse wearing blinders that shielded me from things that would make me shy and start on the road forward. I could not see what was behind or beside me, only a narrow path

ahead. As the months wore on the blinders fell away and the true emotional cost of migration was revealed. Stripped of roots, language, and culture in Sweden, I was forced me to confront migration in startling, painful reality. The result was as seismic as anything the quakes wrought. I realized where I belonged, and it was not Sweden. Not for me, nor my husband, nor our two children. The effect was revelatory and transformative – route changing – for our lives and for my research. I could never have understood how essential language is for migrants, had I not been bereft of it in Sweden. Like the air I breathed, I had taken language for granted. Cixous, herself a migrant, explains that “At some point, for someone who has lost everything, whether it be a human being or a country, it is language which becomes a country” (“Scene of the Subconscious” 91). I had not lost everything, but I had lost enough. Language became the country I now lived in.

Meanwhile I was living in Sweden, waking up to the same sunless day, over and over again, watching my children struggle in the local school, seeing my husband worn down by bureaucratic inertia and commuting, while I was writing about distance, identity, belonging, and, finally, a braided river. New Zealand’s braided rivers course across the Canterbury Plains from the Southern Alps to the Pacific Ocean, breaking off and crisscrossing for miles en route to the sea. Their Māori names are incantatory: the Rakaia, the Hurunui, the Waimakariri, the Waitaki. At the time, I thought I was writing the conclusion, but in fact I was writing the introduction, the river that comes back to join itself. The braided river gave me the analogy not only for how to see migration and the personal essay, but also how to see my own life. That spring our family decided to return to New Zealand, and here was where the river rose up from its hidden headwaters to glitter toward its destination.

We cannot know how the route will turn out, only that it leads somewhere, that chance and choice inform it. We did not know Sweden was an illuminating detour – it was where we

lived. What we encountered in Sweden made us reconsider the route we had chosen: cold, unfriendly, safe. Sweden clarified where we did want to live again: New Zealand. Not every migrant is given a second chance to get it right, to realize, yes, this is where she or he wants to live, and, as with the personal essay, this is a moment of profound recognition. Living in Sweden made us realize we belonged in New Zealand, something we could not have grasped without having lived in both places; for as Rockwell Gray observes, “we cannot know who we are without knowing where we have been; and recall of all those now absent places is necessary to a full sense of dwelling in the present. To dwell is to be embedded, and to be embedded is to belong through a history of having belonged in many places before” (53-54). We do not feel we belong everywhere we live, though where we live does teach us where we do and do not belong.

For migrants to settle and feel they can belong, there must be an affinity between the place and the individual and what engenders that is inexplicable – much like the attraction between people. Belonging is always reciprocal: we welcome and feel welcome where we live. Without a reciprocal sense of welcome the route of migration becomes even more demanding. The route has challenges enough, as migrants must come to grips with an entirely new frame of reference for work, housing, daily life, the vast array of the ordinary that has become unfamiliar. The culture and language may be entirely or subtly different from what they know. What migrants learn over time teaches them how to proceed in their new environment, as the route behind informs the route ahead; for, as Lydia Fakundiny notes about the essay, “The route is mapped in the going” (12). So too do the migrants’ routes get “mapped in the going” as they trace their experiences in writing, and what manifests itself is not nearly as straightforward or linear as one might expect. The personal essay shows how things that slip through the larger categories of analysis are pivotal to the migration route, and often are only seen after the fact. Two routes occur simultaneously, the route itself and what one learns along the route.

Moreover, the route appears differently when we look back upon it, and we realize how chance and choice affect the outcome in ways we cannot perceive at the time. If there is a design in our lives, it only emerges afterward, when we can see how things connect. Writing is a means to uncover that design, as Cavarero notes: “the pattern every human being leaves behind is nothing but their life story” (2). The personal essay is an ideal genre to apprehend our life story, finding the deep currents and interwoven channels that shape the route.

Exploring the Route

The route of our lives has both intention and accident, and while not everything is causal, it may be connected. As a method of inquiry, the personal essay enables writers “to discover the nonsequential connections that allow those experiences to make larger sense; they are about circumstance becoming meaningful when seen from a certain remove” (Birkerts 8). We realize how the root, the deeper narrative of our past, intersects with outward circumstances, and by bringing those strands together in writing a larger pattern emerges. The braided river of our lives acquires a richer meaning when we understand how the past affects the present. Friedman observes, “Routes are pathways between here and there, two points of rootedness” (151), but routes are also pathways between then and now, and that movement is ongoing and influenced by what came before. Where do we step in a river that keeps moving? We can only step in from this present moment, informed by however many years have passed and places we have been, our route mapped in the going, unwinding from what has happened along the way.

When migrants begin to explore their route, what brought them from there to here, from then to now, they see how random things – an expired visa, a bankrupt company, a chance encounter – all factored into their migration. They do not simply migrate for reasons of love or employment, and even migration scholars recognize that “No single cause is ever sufficient to

explain why people decide to leave their country and settle in another” (Castles and Miller 31). Or as Gareth, the Welsh doctor puts it, “the theory of obliquity suggests that the achieving of a complex goal is always by complicated and indirect routes.” The route we think we are on may in fact not be the route that unfolds, as Elizabeth, an Englishwoman who was the driving force behind her family’s migration, realized: “what I thought I was risking were exchange rate fluctuations, living on the beach versus in a hillside suburb, never seeing older members of my family again. A new life being better than an old life.” The route proved quite different from what she anticipated:

But looking back, I wonder if all along my subconscious really knew what the deal was. Knew there was a more fundamentally life changing purpose to New Zealand. A kind of 12,000 mile rehab. A safe, far away, beautiful place, where the people are reserved and don’t ask too many questions. Where no one I knew would watch my psyche’s planned but embarrassing surrender.

New Zealand became a place to nurse and heal herself, something she could not know when she chose to migrate there for work. The root/route overlaps and intertwines when migrants delve below the obvious narrative for why they came to the new country.

Given New Zealand’s isolation and remoteness from the rest of the world, everyone who came to its shores, from the Māori who arrived centuries ago to myself, has been a migrant. Hampl observes that “Our most ancient metaphor says life is a journey” (*I Could Tell You Stories* 37) and for migrants that journey is both literal and existential. Acknowledging the entwined nature of roots/routes, the Māori trace their ancestral lineage to the ocean-going *waka* (canoes) that brought them to New Zealand centuries ago. Like most migrants they were voyaging toward the unknown, but they brought their cultural memory forward in the form of narrative, as “Polynesians carried their stories with them, peopling each island with their own genealogy to

establish a cosmological and social order” (Mein Smith 12). Contemporary adult migrants also bring a cultural memory with them embedded in tangible and intangible things, but especially in language. Individual memory migrates too, and that root informs the route, for as the Chinese migrant writer Ha Jin observes, “no matter where we go, we cannot shed our past completely – so we must strive to use parts of our pasts to facilitate our journeys” (86). How migrants use the past to help find their way in a new country is part of the new narrative route they are charting.

The personal essay explores the movement from the known to the unknown and follows where that leads. We cannot know where the route ends, any more than how the essay will progress, for “the essay might be considered a journey into the unknown, a voyage of discovery” (Hall 86). Only later, when we look back in writing and in life, can we see how the choices we made in the world and on the page determined the outcome. Migrants arrive in a place not yet mapped or rooted in memory, where they must find a route to everything their life touches: work, home, family, language. How migrants navigate that route, both in life and in the essay, addresses how strangers learn to cope with a new environment, both immediately and long term, for migration is an ongoing dynamic, though the experience of being a stranger lessens over time. The learning curve is initially steep, and while it tapers off as the migrant becomes more familiar with a country, it cannot be hastened. As Mary, the Scottish psychotherapist, notes: “The experience of a new friendship/country must be tended, like a small seedling, if it is to put down roots and flourish. One cannot hurry, it takes time.”

The personal essay can assess what migrants learn along the migration route that enables them to put down roots and feel they belong. The testing and weighing of individual experience provides vital information about the contact zone between migrant and native, a space of increasing relevance in a progressively more mobile and globalized world. Migrants are the vulnerable participants in their own lives and their willingness to share that vulnerability on the

page is part of the genre's empathetic appeal. But, more than that, the personal essay shows how migrants have been changed by what they experienced, and that combination of self-disclosure and self-understanding is central to the form. As Leonard Kriegel points out:

the task of the writer of personal essays, is not only to tell us what happened to him but to show us how what happened was transformed by memory. The personal essay is at its most powerful when it gives us the writer realizing how he has been permanently, inextricably changed by all that he has witnessed. The eye he casts upon the world will never again see as it saw before consciousness itself was changed. (95)

Migration is by its very nature transformative, and migrants have been changed by what they have not only witnessed, but also experienced firsthand. For those who have crossed oceans, cultures, and languages the personal essay is a vitally effective genre to chart the journey of the stranger who comes to town, a means towards an active reflection that can map the route of their going.

The Seeds That Flourished

Doug, an American sculptor in his sixties, has lived in New Zealand since 1990. He recounts the arc of his migration, from stranger to friend, by opening with Constantine Cavafy's famous invocation to the journey: "As you set out for Ithaca, ask that your way be long." His memory of the poem's opening lines is looser than most translations, but seizes its essence, as Cavafy's poem celebrates the journey, not the destination, as what matters. Doug was twenty-seven when he first encountered the poem, and it unsettled him: "I'm just a vagabond kid on the road. This isn't the stuff of an Odyssey. Is this an admonition?" He crisscrossed the United States several more times, and then like Odysseus returned home, where a random date with his future wife in

a coffee shop set his migration to New Zealand in motion: “There it is. New Zealand. Like the woman in the coffee shop, waiting for you.” The magnitude of their meeting registers in hindsight, “When we reached her door I stepped over the threshold. That step was bigger than the one across the Pacific Ocean.” Here the root and route combine, something he could not know when he first met his wife, that she and New Zealand would coincide to determine the route. Doug closes his essay with the realization, “The journey was long, at last. We’ve fashioned lifetime friendships in two worlds.” Time and distance both inform that statement. Only a migrant who has lived somewhere over twenty years can vouch for having forged lifetime friendships in two worlds.

Doug recognizes, with the backward Kierkegaardian glance, what enabled him to not remain a stranger for long in New Zealand: “And yet, that silly little grin you wear out of small town America will reap rich dividends where you’re going.” When he first arrived he had no idea that he would be welcomed and make friends so easily. This is the gift of looking back and seeing what paved the way:

And when you get to Christchurch? I made friends the first day. A dozen the next week. Good heavens, being American is terrific social currency. It hangs on you like the sign that reads: “I’m from Whidbey Island...ask me.” This is the key, your admission ticket, your moveable feast. I can still freeze the gazes of shoppers in a supermarket check-out line by just opening my mouth. What fun.

The breezy ease of his bonhomie is apparent in both his prose and how readily he made friends. His openness is infectious as he describes making friends “the first day. A dozen the first week.” He realizes why this was possible so quickly: “Good heavens, being American is terrific social currency.” His shift to present tense implies the “terrific social currency” of being American does not devalue over time. Moreover, “This is the key, your admission ticket, your moveable feast.”

Doug's delight in his arrival in New Zealand shines decades later, and his use of the present tense makes it fresh and spontaneous, for "The lyrical present in nonfiction creates a sense of timeless immediacy, generates for both writer and reader the feeling the prose is being composed on the spot" (Root *Nonfictionist's Guide* 104). Unlike nonnative speakers or those of a different ethnicity, he acknowledges he has an unfair advantage, "After all, I'm white, middle class and speak English, besides being American." For migrants the route of acceptance is determined by the ground in which they arrive, and how welcoming that environment is to the concept of other.

From the beginning, when Doug first heard his wife was considering a job in New Zealand, he was enthusiastic about the idea:

I'd been hearing about Utah, Iowa, South Carolina, Los Angeles. I'd vetoed all of them.

"Here's one in a place called Christchurch, New Zealand. How do you feel about New Zealand?"

"I'd die to go to New Zealand."

Keen to live in New Zealand, it is not surprising he embraces the country and its inhabitants with such gusto. He sees the journey as both one-way and permanent, writing, "Here we go. A shipping container. The bearer of all our earthly possessions. They're crammed into a box setting sail from all of our life to the rest of our life." The rest of his life has not occurred yet. When they left they could not know this would be a one-way journey, as not all contemporary migrants stay permanently in New Zealand.

In the essay past and present overlap, and the migrant can see how the route turned out, and what was learned from it. The writer finds meaning that might not have occurred when he first experienced something, in part because now he can see how the disparate pieces of his life

seem to fit together, how the woman in the coffee shop who, like New Zealand, was waiting for him. The route of the essay unfolds from what has happened and what we make of it: “What form an essay does take on, then, is determined only by the thinking and experience of the essayist; it hews closely to the way that life and thought naturally intermingle, to the way that the mind finds pattern and meaning in memory and experience and turns its findings into words” (Ryden 217). Pattern and connection emerge when we look back, in part because we can see how they our lives have progressed and how far we have come.

The personal essay encourages the revisiting of thresholds that might now have more significance, as we live forward and understand backward. Here is where the river underneath the river appears, as Doug shows when he returns to the memory of his first glimpse of New Zealand from the air, flying in over twenty years ago:

I think it’s about 5:00 A.M., other side of the dateline. The sky is blood red. Thomas has been asleep on me for hours. I haven’t slept. My shirt is soaked. It feels wonderful. There it is in all its splendor. The green hills rise up to meet us, then fall to the sea. The distant land. Look at it, Kathleen. Our new country. Is this a fairy tale? This moment of descent carries all the seeds yet to flourish. We’ve landed. It’s September and spring again. We haven’t even suffered a winter.

He is not sure of the time, “I think it’s about 5:00 A.M., other side of the dateline,” but he recalls vividly that “The sky is blood red.” His son, aged two, has been asleep on him for hours, soaking his chest with drool, a detail both intimate and ordinary. Even though he has not slept on the twelve hour flight he says, “It feels wonderful.” New Zealand emerges below, “There it is in all its splendor,” and the image of the land welcoming them is personified by, “the green hills rise up to meet us.” He urges his wife beside him to see it as well: “Look at it, Kathleen. Our

new country.” Now the land is not distant, but identified and claimed as “Our new country,” and the possessive “Our” signals this is a shared migration experience. The image of the green hills rising up and then falling back into the sea, his first sight of “the distant land” prompts him to ask, “Is this a fairy tale?”

The answer to that question, with its implied happily ever after ending, is given twenty years later when he writes, with retrospective awareness, “This moment of descent carries all the seeds yet to flourish.” He presents the moment with the revelation that he could not have experienced at the time. Writing the essay provides the epiphany as the memory of flying into New Zealand is transformed by what he now knows: that the seeds did bear fruition. Like airborne seeds from another land, they arrived in their new landscape, swapping hemispheres and seasons, in time for a second spring, the season of hope, rebirth and renewal: “It’s September and spring again. We haven’t even suffered a winter.” They have leapt a day and two seasons ahead to a place that looks welcoming not only from the air, but on the ground as well. The next passage shows the young family disembarked and the perspective is reversed. Instead of looking down at the land from the air, they look up at the sky above them:

Then in equal parts exhaustion and elation, we’re standing on the Canterbury Plains, looking at that ever-consoling Nor’wester arch. There it is, Thomas, those quilted clouds, knitted together like a furrowed brow of heaven, winking down on you. Imagine. You’re only two years old. You get to grow up and spend your life here.

Now “the distant land” and “our new country” becomes the Canterbury Plains, named and known when this passage was written, though not on the morning of their arrival. The scene is overlaid with local knowledge he could not have possessed when he looked up at the New Zealand sky for the first time. Twenty years ago he would not have recognized the Nor’west

arch, a cloud shape unique to the Canterbury Plains, nor could it be “ever-consoling.” The consolation came later, from all the times he looked up and saw that cloud bank, for, as John O’Donohue notes, “Memory is the place where our vanished days secretly gather” (*Eternal Echoes* 335). All those vanished days and skies inform “that ever-consoling Nor’wester arch.” He depicts a past moment infused with a knowledge and emotion it did not have then, but does now. The narrative route has backtracked and seen the cloud through twenty years of sky, to uncover what did not yet have meaning for him, but would. The personal essay gives present understanding to a past memory, revealing not only the route, but what has been learned en route since living in New Zealand – the river underneath the river.

Perhaps the greatest marker on Doug’s route to New Zealand is his two-year-old son, who is now a young man. Instinctively, in a move to connect the narrative past with what it later revealed, Doug speaks directly to his toddler, pointing to the memory of this sky, “There it is, Thomas, those quilted clouds, knitted together like a furrowed brow of heaven, winking down on you.” The personified sky “winking down” on his then two-year-old son is like a benevolent deity. From the greater vantage point of their shared lives the father can address his past and present child: “You get to grow up and spend your life here.” One of the “seeds yet to flourish” is known to have done just that – with the double vantage point of the past and the present in the essay, he can place the toddler and the young man side by side, knowing that the route thus far has turned out well for his son.

Between Two Shores

Migrants understand things at different points in their migration: before they leave the country, when they are newly arrived, or days, months, years, decades later. The personal essay is the ideal vehicle for such exploration, driven by its desire to inquire and appraise experience for its

significance. Although the migration route is bound by time and space, writing allows for re-vision, to re-see or see in a new light, or even see what was overlooked. As George Orwell, a brilliant essayist, notes, “But it can also happen that one’s memories grow sharper after a long lapse of time, because one is looking at the past with fresh eyes and can isolate, as it were, notice facts which previously existed undifferentiated amid a mass of others” (334). For example, the reasons migrants habitually give for migrating might not even be the ones that drove them, or they remember things learned en route which they had forgotten or buried. As Gareth, the Welsh doctor, observes, “writing essays is a demanding, satisfying challenge that is also frustrating and emotionally charged. Frustrating when the words do not match the memories and feelings; emotionally charged when the words disturb the dust covering the memories which I had, perhaps, hidden from myself.” No matter when migrants begin writing about their experience, the personal essay explores and elicits ideas, memories and connections that might not be captured in an interview or an oral history, because one virtue of writing is that “Objectified and held at a distance from the self, the written word makes possible a considered survey of the human mind and its contents: once a thought can be looked at once, it can be looked at twice” (Hirshfield 190). Writing allows us to see what came before and what came after, where we have been and where we are now, reflecting on how we have been changed by what has happened.

Elizabeth, an Englishwoman in her forties, shows the value in looking back and understanding who she once was: “Now I know more about who I was back then, what I was trying to contain, the past I was recoiling from and the future I was hurtling towards, I see more in the photographs of that time. I see panic, denial, abstract hope, haste, pain. An inability to cope unless I was running, so that I could feel nothing but the sinews in my calves and the ache of my lungs.” Her unflinching self-examination in the essay reveals she was running away to

New Zealand, husband in tow, because he is happy to be towed and wants to surf, and she has lined up an excellent job. Three weeks before they emigrate she predicts in her journal: “It is so obvious it will end in tears.” The route did not end in tears, but it was transformed by them: “In New Zealand I lost absolutely everything – my marriage, my home, my savings, my identity and my ability to soldier on with platitudes. Yet in the rubble of my life I found myself – a self that for 42 years I only hoped might exist.” She lists everything she lost underscored by the insistent repetition of the personal pronoun: “my marriage, my home, my savings, my identity and my ability to soldier on with platitudes.” One loss leads to another in a cascade of undoing and dissolution of things both concrete and abstract, marriage, home, savings, identity, and her ability “to soldier on with platitudes.” Migrating to New Zealand was the catalyst for all that loss, but it has also given her “a self that for forty-two years I only hoped might exist.” Had she not come to New Zealand, that self might never have manifested.

For Elizabeth, the route to New Zealand becomes the route to an authentic self. Only through the loss of an identity tied to marriage, home, savings, and the ability to soldier on with platitudes does she achieve this transformation. She realizes, “it’s a story of layers. In my new land of plenty, each one was stripped back by life’s twists and turns to reveal the one beneath.” In the process of stripping back those layers in writing, she recognizes that the route contains the route:

I’ve achieved so much in six years. More than I ever could have done in England. I think if my marriage had gone wrong in the UK, I’d have been propped up by friends and irritated by family. And both would have had me looking outward, not inward for solutions. In New Zealand it was just me, bags of pain, bags of time, great resources and the most beautiful scenery on earth.

Those who knew her narrative from the past, family and friends, are not witness to the

dissolution of her marriage half a world away. Moreover, they cannot help shore up either the marriage or her self from afar. She must reconstruct her life and herself, which is exactly what she does: “I left England a sad shadow of the person I could have been. I return reflective, confident, authentic, deliberating, unafraid of disappointing others in order to remain true to myself.” Elizabeth moves back to England in the end, freely owning her part for choosing the migration route that undid her marriage, “I was the architect of the life which would unravel us.” Throughout her essays the prose is forthright and honest, in keeping with the genre, for “The personal essay has an open form and a drive toward candor and self-disclosure” (Lopate xxiv). Of course that level of candor and self-disclosure is highly variable. However, for Elizabeth everything she has achieved en route toward her authentic self is embodied in writing that is “reflective, confident, authentic, deliberating, unafraid of disappointing others in order to remain true to [it]self.” If this migration formed the route to her authentic self, her personal essay offers the clearest pathway for the recognition of this awareness, for herself and for others.

For some migrants the route of migration, instead of coalescing a sense of self, has the exact, opposite effect. The migrant experiences a sense of erasure, muteness and disappearance, a feeling I know well from my time in Sweden. Anna, a Swiss woman who married a New Zealander and migrated to his country in 1968, expresses this idea of disappearance beautifully:

Sometimes I felt as if the person I had been was fading out of existence. So many of the things that had helped to shape me into who I was had been stripped away, my country, my language, my culture, the treasured traditions, my home, my family, my friends, and even my name. English speaking people pronounce it differently.

What a catalog of loss this is, with the powerful anaphora emphasizing everything being been “stripped away” from her: “my country, my language, my culture, the treasured traditions, my

home, my family, my friends, and even my name.” If ever there was a list of what a migrant gives up to follow a foreign partner to his home country, this is it. Anna begins with the large abstractions she has lost, her country – embedded in her language, culture, and treasured traditions – and then the list deepens to more personal and grievous losses, “my home, my family, my friends, and even my name.” Perhaps the most poignant thing to have lost is also the most elemental and basic, her name. Forty years later the disbelief at her loss of name resonates, the last thing on the list, and “even” that is stripped away. Few things stand in for us as clearly as our name, and to have it pronounced differently contributes to her feeling that “the person she had been was fading out of existence.” She no longer speaks or is surrounded by her own language, which heightens the sense of erasure, for “People who move from one natural language to another are likely to undergo significant losses to their existing selves” (Besemeres 34). Since no one remembers her or shares her past narrative in the new country, her old self is in danger of fading out of existence. Here the recognition and awareness offered by the personal essay are a means to prevent the disappearance of self, an insistence through words that prevents such erasure. Her migrated self must follow a route toward understanding and being understood, where the world becomes resonant and meaningful again.

Our desire for meaning is essential to our well-being, perhaps even more so for migrants who have left behind a world that held meaning for them. Unless we migrate with someone from our past, no one knows or remembers us in the new country or shares in the very things that once interwove our life – people, places, scents, tastes, sounds. Beth, a South African migrant, gives a vivid list of what she misses in her home country: “hot tropical evenings smelling of frangipani, the voice of hadeda shrieks, of bunny chows and the smell of rain on hot tar, of the Sharks rugby team and the No Tracy Chapman beggar.” These are the rich intangibles of a world she no longer inhabits, a world existing only in memory, and “Migrants,

perhaps more than other people, are made by their memories of their birthplaces, their homeland, those left behind – interruptions in the life narratives that require resequencing, remodelling and reinterpreting as the newcomers incorporate and surpass their pasts” (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 228). Migrants must find new frames of reference for meaning in their new country if they are going to form any sort of attachment or connection, for that is the route of belonging.

Unlike those who never leave their home country, migrants have crossed a frontier into the unknown. They are stripped of the very things Anna the Swiss migrant details, in her list: country, language, culture, treasured traditions, family, friends, home. Establishing similar links in the new country takes time and it is this route that migrants are mapping over days and years. Often the sheer effort to understand things that do not yet have meaning is exhausting: language, culture, the innumerable things one encounters upon migrating to a new country. I felt this living in Sweden, hemmed in by the dense forest of everything I did not understand: why no one made eye contact, why doors to houses opened out and not in, why there was no word for please, why they did everything in groups and traveled with their own bedding when they came to visit, and why, despite taking good care of its citizenry, the country felt neither welcoming nor generous. When Cixous observes “writing forms a passageway between two shores” (“The School of the Dead” 3), this is especially true for migrants who have left one shore for another: geographic, cultural, linguistic. Every migrant has crossed a literal and existential shore, and the personal essay acts as a passageway between those two shores, a route through to where self meets world and self meets other, for, as Atkins argues, “In more than one manner the essay moves outward, the essay and its writer connecting with the world, with otherness” (*Tracing the Essay* 50). The movement outward in the essay has a parallel with the route of

migration, which is outward from what is known and familiar, toward what is unknown and other.

The passageway between two shores is even greater when the migrant must cross over into a new language and a culture very different from the one left behind. In Suk migrated from Korea to New Zealand in 1994 and was challenged by language, ethnicity, gender and marital status. Her essays show how difficult the route of migration can be as she journeys from the known toward the unknown. As a divorced Korean mother she experienced a powerful censure in her own country which helped set her migration in motion: "I was alone, with my five year old daughter. I hadn't slept a wink for a few years. All the time there were questions, 'Where will I go? What will I do?' trailed after me. The stigma of my situation burned within me." When she sees the newspaper advertisement for immigration to New Zealand she realizes an opportunity has appeared and "All I could think of was to get away, miles away from where I was to start a new beginning."

Three years later In Suk has been granted permission to immigrate, yet she hesitated. Even before she left Korea her decision was questioned by others, and she admits, "There were heaps of times I was asked how I would live with only a young nine year old daughter in a new country where I knew No One!" Her fellow Koreans' shock at her decision is underscored with the exclamation point and capital letters. Yet despite knowing the risk, she left "family, friends and an excellent job ... taking flight on wings into the air with tears, dreams, hope." She traded the emotional, concrete reality of "family, friends and an excellent job" for "tears, dreams, hope," those migrant tropes that might or might not smooth her passage to a new country. Arriving in New Zealand she confronted the reality of her decision, not only for herself, but for her daughter as well: "My daughter seemed to be excited, but my head was suddenly throbbing with anxiety with the thought of how to survive here."

In Suk rented a small flat near a shopping center, enrolled her daughter in primary school, and took courses at the polytech in English, but such immersion and her survival had an emotional cost: “I withdrew from everyone because I felt I was deaf and mute.” Alone in a foreign country, the experience of being without language was acute, and she distilled what that absence was like: “I felt I was deaf and mute.” Eva Hoffman, who migrated from Poland to Canada at age fourteen, explains that “being without language I found that when we do not have words with which to name our inner experiences, those experiences recede from us into an inner darkness; without words with which to name the world, that world becomes less vivid, less lucid” (55). In Suk could comprehend the world in Korean, but the world she now lived in was permeated with English, and in that world she was deaf and mute, an experience I remember well from Sweden. Few things are more daunting than migrating to a foreign country and facing the enormity of learning a new language. Stripped of roots, language, and culture, In Suk acknowledges New Zealand was “a world I could hardly understand except by enormous striving.” Her striving was borne out by her astute reflections within her personal essays.

In Suk’s route toward understanding her new country was not only linguistic, but also included a whole new physical and cultural landscape she had learn to interpret. She describes one of her first evenings in New Zealand when the sense of alienation and strangeness pressed upon her:

When the morning went and the evening came, the nip in the air was filled with the quietness and darkness like a dead city. Where were the people? Where were the vehicles which boomed with hideous noises and a cloud of dust? The evening approached upon me, I turned on TV. The voices were flying over me like a ghost. I shuddered at the thought of the decision I’d made. There would be other trials waiting for us.

The sense of being haunted in this passage is unmistakable. The quietness and darkness are likened to “a dead city.” In contrast, she wonders where the people, noise and clouds of dust characteristic of urban Korea are. Evening is personified, “The evening approached upon me” which could be a second language phrasing, but nevertheless gives the sense of being oppressed. She banishes the quiet and the evening: “I turned on TV.” Even with the missing definitive article, turning on the TV to provide some sense of connection with the outer world is understood and commonplace. The voices on the TV deepen her sense of being haunted and she extends the metaphor, “The voices were flying over me like a ghost.” Language becomes disembodied and spectral when it is not her own. Azade Seyhan argues that “In many stories of immigration, the loss of voice leads women to encounters with voices and visions of ghosts” (79). In Suk’s muteness is conflated with the ghostly voices on the TV. Again she realizes the ramifications of her decision, which are terrifying to contemplate: “I shuddered at the thought of the decision I’d made. There would be other trials waiting for us.” The decision was even more difficult as it involved her daughter’s welfare too, even though she was part of its motivation, as In Suk was told “[her] daughter shouldn’t be educated in Korea because of her direct personality.”

For In Suk, as for any nonnative speaker, the route to integration in the new country was through language. Language embodies culture on abstract and concrete levels and touches on every aspect of the migrant’s new life – written, spoken, heard. Language connects us, and when the migrant does not understand the host country’s language the sense of disconnection and alienation is profound. All the nonnative speakers in this braided narrative chose to live in New Zealand and agency provides a strong motivation to acquire the language. Moreover, the migrant’s command of the host country’s language is “the most significant indicator of the ability to integrate with the local indigenous community and to come to terms with the local culture”

(King et. al. 128). As Sabina the Dutch migrant notes, “The English language that I love is what made me go to all the countries where they speak it. And then I heard it one day in New Zealand where the English language suddenly has a nice ring to it.” For her the route of language is positive from the outset, having enjoyed studying English in school. For In Suk who migrated in her forties, the route to language acquisition was more difficult and she had to make a real effort to master it:

To integrate into the native society we moved to a Kiwi church. Tricky colloquial English is a forever task to be solved. Mingling with this was and is not easy. Whose problem is it? Nobody has the answer. This has made my high university’s degree and good qualification buried. However, I have tried to learn English to survive here as a useful person who contributes to this society.

She recognizes that learning “Tricky colloquial English is forever a task to be solved,” which the slightly awkward syntax tellingly reveals. The route to learning English is ongoing as she confesses that “Mingling with this was and is not easy.” Like many migrants, In Suk was deskilled when her university degree and qualifications are not recognized in the host country, or as she puts it “buried,” implying that part of her life is buried like a corpse or treasure. The migrant’s sense of worth and purpose is diminished when she is unable to work on the educational and economic level she once did, for “work provides a sense of esteem, self-coherence, identity, location in a social context, and, in Freud’s words, ‘justification for existence in society’” (Akhtar 62). As though echoing Freud, In Suk says with the humility that pervades her essays, “I have tried to learn English to survive here as a useful person.”

In Suk did more than survive, she embraced the commitment necessary to embarking on the route of migration, recognizing “This turning point ought to be undertaken as vital milestone in my life and for my daughter like pilgrims.” Even with her slightly ungrammatical

phrasing, she realizes the importance of what she undertook and the appropriate metaphor for the journey, the pilgrim. The milestone has been vital, life changing for them both, and especially beneficial for her daughter, for whom “Many circumstances surrounding my daughter led to outstanding solutions for her life.” The journey has been less rewarding for In Suk, whose language acquisition lagged behind her young daughter’s. She often felt torn by the route she had chosen and even considered returning home: “I was in conflict between returning home for my career and well-paid position or staying here for my daughter many times. My family, especially my mum, and Kiwi friends have encouraged and enforced us to keep digging the ground for us and other people by giving hope.” Her use of the word “enforced” shows how subtle and difficult language is, and, yet, she means she was given strength to remain in New Zealand thanks to family and Kiwi friends.

In Suk’s selfless commitment to staying in New Zealand for her daughter’s sake enabled her to overcome significant obstacles along her migration route, and in turn she hopes that their example as migrants might be of help to others. Her personal essays, with their modest but very real courage, embody what the genre can do, as they move from the individual to the universal, for “Creative nonfiction is rooted in reality, but it seeks the symbolic character of art; that is, it seeks to discover the universal in the particular, and asks us to consider what it is that makes us human and connects us to one another” (Iversen “Interview” 207). Both on the page and in her life In Suk’s example urges us all “to keep digging the ground for us and other people by giving hope.” Now, since migrating in 1994, her essays mark a passageway between two shores, between her formerly mute Korean self and her present day English speaking and writing self. She has given voice to the migrant who arrives in a country with nothing to connect her but “tears, dreams, hope.”

Jigsaw Pieces That Fit

Migration is a passage between two shores, the known and unknown, and charting that route is something that informs a lifetime. As Salman Rushdie observes, “Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats” (125). Forging that “new imaginative relationship” is part of mapping the route of learning to live in a new country. One of the difficulties I faced in Sweden was that my life was unimaginable even while it was painfully real. I could not bear the thought of living there permanently. Sweden taught me no amount of effort on my part was going to create a sense of connection or belonging. We cannot will acceptance, from ourselves or from others. Acceptance comes of its own accord, a gift of affinity and resonance. We know it when we feel it and when we do not. I remember being stunned when my eleven-year-old daughter, her Swedish fluent after a year in the local school, said to me, “I understand everything, but I still hate it here.” I thought language would grant her acceptance, but clearly language alone is not enough. We must accept and feel accepted where we live to feel we belong, for “True belonging is gracious receptivity” (O’Donohue *Eternal Echoes* 3). Without that feeling of receptivity, it does not matter how long one lives somewhere, or how fluent one speaks the language, one will always feel at a distance.

One essential element that allows migrants to feel they belong in the host country is love. It is far easier to forge a new imaginative relationship with the world if there is something and someone to love in that world as well. Love acts as a powerful magnet and it draws people together from different cultures, languages, and landscapes. Over half the migrants whose essays form this braided narrative came to New Zealand thanks to their choice of partner. Of these twenty-one migrant pairings, eleven have New Zealand partners, and seven had to learn English as a result of that relationship. Love, not work, determines their migration route, and as Russell

King points out, “do not underestimate the libidinal factor in migration” (100). For many migrants love creates the passageway between two shores.

Taegen, the Englishwoman in her 70s, met her future Kiwi husband on a blind date in London and states simply: “I moved to this side of the world for the love of a man. New Zealand was not a country I even thought about visiting let alone living in. I had travelled a great deal, I had even settled in another country for three years. South Africa.” Love plots the route of her migration to a country she never considered visiting, let alone living in, even having migrated once before. Furthermore, this love affects the lives of her two sons, age twelve and fourteen, whom she is bringing to the other side of the world in the hope of blending them with her new partner’s family of four teenage children. She articulates the risk of this move very clearly in her essay:

I sold my cottage, sold off or packed up our belongings, all to begin the journey to the next stage of our lives. It was a gamble. We loved where we lived, we were to leave behind many friends, new schools, a great job (a natural history photographic library), and I was making the decision for my two young boys (and my dog) based on the love for a very special person.

She gives up many things to embark on this route: her cottage, a great job, many friends, and she admits “we loved where we lived.” Her sacrifice exemplifies the gendered dimension of migration where “Women may also be more likely than men to make personal and professional sacrifices to join partners overseas” (Scott and Cartledge 70). She understands this migration involves not only her concerns, but those of her sons: “I was making the decision for my two young boys (and my dog) based on the love for a very special person.” In a startling absence of personal pronouns she bases this life changing decision “on the love for a very special person.” In both cases when she refers to the force driving her migration, with respect to its root and route,

its origin and destination, she writes not “my love” but “the love.” The absence of the personal pronoun “my” makes the power of love greater and more universal, a force strong enough to offset everything left behind. Moreover the object of this love is a generic blank: “a very special person.”

Taegen plans her route carefully, visiting New Zealand twice before deciding to migrate. Friends urge her not to sell her house, but rent it, leaving her a fallback if it does not work out, but she does the exact opposite, committing herself to the migration:

My reasoning was that if I was half hearted about anything then it would never work. I was sure of my man – less sure about New Zealand, nervous about what I was imposing on the lives of my boys, sad about leaving my parents. So yes, apprehension but also a conviction that this was a wonderful chance for a new beginning for all of us.

Here she is “sure of my man,” and in this instance she does claim him, “my man.” But then that wonderful dash against which she stacks everything she is not sure about, and the list is weighty, the new country, her two sons, and her parents. The prose is effortless and swift in its declaration of the pros and cons of her decision, “So yes, apprehension but also a conviction that this was a wonderful chance for a new beginning for all of us.” We can hear her refuting any naysayers about her chosen path in that, “So yes,” which accords with what the essayist Edward Hoagland claims, that “A personal essay is like the human voice talking, its order the mind’s natural flow” (25). Yet that flow is crafted, not random as speech often is, and, as Lopate notes about the form, “there is still a good deal of selection and art in this appearance of spontaneous process” (xliv). Taegen had an unshakeable belief in the endeavor and no doubt this helped her to realize “a new beginning for all of us.” Her two sons “never looked back,” and for herself she writes: “I had never been so happy in my life. I often used to comment: it was as though the

world was made up of jigsaw pieces and somehow Bill's and my pieces had found their way from one side of the world to the other – to fit.” Again the dash appears, but here instead of separating the clauses, what it joins are the two pieces of the puzzle that found their way across the world “to fit.” What her essay reveals is a radiant confidence and belief that this route will work. She believed it thirty years ago when she risked everything for this man, now named, and it glows on the page decades later, even though she is now a widow.

The idea of fitting together like a jigsaw puzzle, as one piece finds its way across the world to be with another, is a good analogy as to whether migrants can find a way to connect and feel they belong. How well migrants fit with their new partners, the new country, the new culture, or perhaps most challenging, the new language, will determine how smooth the route will be. Taegen's migration route was comparatively easy as she married into the New Zealand culture, spoke the dominant language, and wished to live in the chosen country, as witnessed by everything she gave up to make it possible. She adapted herself to the route and in turn made the most of it. For example, when she saw the limited produce choices in New Zealand, having come from the culinary abundance of Europe, she took immediate action: “Imagine my disappointment as I gazed at the few tired looking vegetables offering me no choice. A large vegetable and herb garden were quickly established and what I could not buy I grew.” Her proactive response serves as an excellent example for how to make the route take root: adapt. Or as Amelia, another English migrant who married a New Zealander, puts it, “Discussing with the Vicar my thoughts on marrying an International Ex-Pat he asked, ‘How was I going to cope?’ ‘Well,’ I replied, ‘adopt, adapt, adjust’. So began the next 25 years of my life.” The adaptive and flexible nature of the personal essay is readily suited to chart such route making, as “the personal essay is able to take off on any tack it wishes, building its own structure as it moves along,

rebuilding and remaking itself – and its author – each time out” (Epstein “The Personal Essay” 11). So too do migrants rebuild and remake themselves in a new country.

Not all migrants adapt and adjust as readily as others. Sometimes even when the migrant is married to a native and speaks the language, such advantages do not offset everything he gave up and left behind in the home country. David, a Scottish doctor who migrated to New Zealand at age sixty found migration problematic from the moment he first became aware of it as a possibility. He mentions passing brushes with New Zealand that included care packages as a child from an uncle who lived in Greymouth and his father’s respect for All Blacks rugby, and finally, “This warm awareness of New Zealand came into focus when I met Janet. New Zealand now had a persona which I loved. Had Janet come from, say, Latvia, I would have loved her no less but would I have been as comfortable?” We see a growing awareness of New Zealand with each thing he encountered until the country became embodied, literally and figuratively in Janet, his second wife.

By looking back, David is able to see his migration route unfolding into deeper layers of connection. Though Birkerts notes this with respect to memoir, it applies equally well to the personal essay: “the search for patterns and connections is the real point – and the glory – of the genre” (6). We can see patterns and connections when we look back in the essay that do not appear at the time they occur, as David recognizes when, “New Zealand came into even sharper focus when in 1994, this middle-aged couple had a daughter. It was then that the unimaginable – moving to New Zealand – drifted into my consciousness.” Suddenly the prose distances itself in the third person, the personal names are dropped, and they become “this middle-aged couple” with “a daughter” (not “our” daughter). It is as though the experience is happening to someone else, “this middle-aged couple.” I felt the same way when Sweden came on the horizon, a dissociative sense that this was not happening to me, even while the reality was drawing nearer.

For David migration to New Zealand was still an abstraction: “It was then that the unimaginable – moving to New Zealand – drifted into my consciousness.” Like an iceberg drifting towards him, his younger self had no idea yet that this abstraction was going to become a reality, even as the child did – that the route he was on contained this route. This drift lasted eleven years before he and his wife acted on what for him was “unimaginable”: moving to New Zealand.

In the UK their daughter was about to enter a “notoriously bad local high school” and his wife Janet, who has been living in Scotland for over twenty years, felt they would all be better off in her home country, New Zealand. Again we see how the love for partner and child determines the route of migration, and how often it entails sacrifice:

Why did we come here? Why did we not just move somewhere else in the UK with better schooling? Janet would have accepted that. How could I abandon again my older children? I did not want to. But there was the strength of Janet’s simply stated belief that life for all of us, especially our daughter, would be better in New Zealand. Her fairness in refusing to put pressure on me, her insistence that it was to be my decision and that she would accept the outcome, made her argument all the more potent.

His torment is evident in the rhetorical questions, why, why, as though he cannot believe the decision himself when there were other, easier choices. While it was his wife’s desire to move back to New Zealand, she insisted the decision be his, and for him the choice was painful. He had sell his medical practice and leave behind his aging father and two older children from his prior marriage. Thus what he gives up is considerable in exchange. Nor are his reflections on this proposed migration unconflicted, for “Even after two years of pondering the decision, I was still not sure the move was right for me.”

Yet he did decide to migrate to New Zealand despite his misgivings. His conclusion for why he made this decision is wonderfully self-deprecating: “Then, of course, there is me and the way I am with my tendency to try to avoid the grind of sorting out difficult personal problems, preferring sometimes to extirpate them by drastic action – like moving to the other side of the world, perhaps.” He mocks his own character, “Then, of course, there is me and the way I am” followed by a ruthless analysis of his behavior with his “tendency to try to avoid the grind of sorting out personal problems, preferring sometimes to extirpate them by drastic action.” The sentence breaks in on itself with the dash, and the drastic action “is moving to the other side of the world, perhaps.” It is hard to imagine a more extreme approach to rooting out personal problems than moving halfway across the world. Rooting out becomes his route, but with that final “perhaps” he equivocates, almost whimsically, showing he is still not convinced.

David’s wife and daughter went on ahead to New Zealand while he wrapped everything up back in Scotland. While apart, his daughter fell ill with an undiagnosed illness, adding to his anxiety, both as a father and as a doctor: “By early April and the time to leave, I was emotionally exhausted.” He was such a wreck his sister realized he could manage the journey from Lincolnshire to Heathrow Airport: “When we arrived at the station, I was barely able to get out of the car, let alone haul my bags onto the train and across London. I can still hardly believe how bad I felt. She left me in the car, walked to a cash machine and over to a taxi which she arranged to take me to Heathrow one hundred and twenty miles and one hundred and fifty pounds away.” He presents a moment of pure vulnerability in which he wins the reader’s trust, for as Lopate states, “Some vulnerability is essential to the personal essay” (xxvi). Even writing this seven years later he cannot believe how miserable he felt, revealing how fraught the actual route can be when the migrant is reluctant to leave.

Finally David is aboard the flight. He watches England recede from him through the window of the emergency exit at the back of the plane, where he queues for the lavatory “courtesy of alcohol, prostates and nerves.” In a memory riddled with ambivalence he looks back on both himself and his departure:

So, there I was, my head swimming in this mix of emotions, looking out of a little window at the back of a big plane watching England slide away. What should have been unalloyed joy at the prospect of seeing my family was tarnished by my worry about my daughter. What should have been optimism about a new life was clouded in sadness, doubt and nostalgia. And, looking at the big handle which opens the plane door, the oddest thought flashed through my mind. That journey was my threshold.

He torments himself with what he “should” feel with what he does feel. His unalloyed joy at reuniting with his family is tarnished by worry and any optimism about his new life “was clouded in sadness, doubt and nostalgia.” While New Zealand “drifted into his consciousness,” he watches England “slide away” in actuality. As he looks at the handle of the emergency exit, which maybe in imagination he felt tempted to pull, he realizes there is no going back. At this moment the epiphany strikes him and “the oddest thought flashed through my mind. That journey was my threshold.” This threshold separates the life he once had with the one he will now live. The migration is no longer an abstraction, it is real. As Heidegger notes, “The threshold bears the between” (201), and the threshold is not a stopping place. The threshold exists like an irrevocable moment outside time and space when we realize we cannot stop the flow of what is happening – and yet he stops it, right there, in the essay, to acknowledge it. Moreover in the essay, as Good argues, “This moment is not the result of applying a preconceived method, but is a spontaneous, unpredictable discovery, though often prepared by

careful attention and observation” (22). David bears witness to that threshold moment and gives it duration and permanence in writing, long after he is on the far side of the world.

“With no language but with hope”

Sometimes the migration route is not planned, but inadvertent, the result of a fork in the road where the individual chooses something that will affect the rest of his life, even though at the time he is not aware of the impact of this decision. Anton, a Russian deep sea navigator, found himself at such a crossroads: “This is it. From East to the West. My company had gone bankrupt and the captain was drunk. I knocked on the door of the captain’s cabin and asked him for my passport and then I would be off to the land of opportunities, thanks for nothing, see you later, bye bye.” The bitterness he felt at finding himself suddenly jobless in New Zealand still stings in the prose over a decade later. Only twenty-three, stranded in a country with no prospects, connections, or language, he remembers:

to escape my worries I put on my running shoes and I ran. Up the hills, through the university grounds, in the beautiful botanical gardens, anywhere, everywhere. It was like I was running from this very difficult decision I felt forced to make ... return to the uncertain life of the Russian fisherman, or should I take my New Zealand visa, and earn a living here, with no language but with hope.

He did not have a clear way forward, either path was uncertain, though hope seems to have been crucial to what he decided.

Adrift in New Zealand, Anton bumped into fellow Russians he has known since high school back on Sakhalin, an island of 450,000. He explains the coincidence as “The way the Russian community worked outside of Russia as well as in Russia was that you know a Russian who knows a Russian who knows another Russian and suddenly everybody knows everything

about everyone else.” One such chance encounter with a former schoolmate boosted his determination “to do what I really wanted, which was to try my luck with any casual labouring I could get.” Having agency proved key and he managed to find work, remaining in New Zealand despite parental pressure to return to Russia. His father, a fellow deep water navigator, travelled extensively for his job and had extolled the clean, green beauty of New Zealand to his son growing up, who remembers, “My father loved to tell these stories many times.” In turn, this led to “A thousand miles away was the beautiful island that I would dream of, and it happened, I am here. It felt exciting right from the beginning in the way that I had dreamed, so already I felt a connection to this place.” Thus his father influenced both the root and route of his maritime career and the dream of New Zealand.

While working as a fruit picker and sharing a “flat with three Russians, three Azerbaijanis, two Englishmen, two Māori, and one French guy” (a veritable pack of migrant workers with the exception of the Māori), Anton was robbed of several thousand dollars his father sent him. He felt he could not accuse anyone without causing arguments and ending friendships and is quite blunt about what this experience taught him with respect to staying in New Zealand:

At times, in my home away from home, it's all good fun, but when you are cheated and have no voice, it is an ugly reminder that you are not safe here, not until you achieve the life that is acceptable, really until you latch yourself to a New Zealander with family and a social network, and make it home. Many of my friends I heard about, those living in Dunedin and Christchurch, had begun to do this.

The passage starts out in first person “my home” and then shifts to second person, making that self universal, one who is robbed and has no voice. However, he gives voice to that migrant self

who had neither language nor agency at the time the event occurred. Even years later his tone is bitter, yet the pain of the theft itself is turned from a reminder about safety to the need for connections and the sense of belonging, since “you are not safe here, not until you achieve the life that is acceptable, really until you latch yourself to a New Zealander with family and a social network, and make it home.” The word “really” emphasizes the actual route to achieve acceptance is “you latch yourself to a New Zealander with family and a social network.” Anton condemns those of his friends who have done this too readily, “I felt that it was sacrificing your youth to just hook up with some woman you don’t love, a friend of a friend’s wife for example.” Again we see how the chain of association among Russians works, “a friend of a friend’s wife.”

Anton is correct that marrying into a host nation family gives a migrant immediate access to the culture and community, accelerating the assimilation process. Mixed nationality relationships provide “relatively rapid and direct access to host-country sociocultural networks, where access would normally take years, decades and even generations to access” (Scott and Cartledge 66). Birgitta, a Swedish woman who married a New Zealander, describes this route toward familiarization exactly:

In New Zealand, there was a large family, too, a family-in-law to stay with until we found a house. I would grow fond of the new Mum and there was no difficulty about that name as it was an English word, not used for my own mother. What was, sometimes is, *normal* in New Zealand, is still the life in that family, *what* they said, the *way* they said it, the food they ate, the plants that grew in their garden, their attitudes to everything. What would have taken years if we had lived by ourselves seeped into my conscious and unconscious minds during the first six weeks. [author’s own italics]

Birgitta received a crash course in what is “*normal* in New Zealand” by virtue of living with her in-laws for six weeks. Her education in local culture was quite comprehensive: “*what* they said, the *way* they said it, the food they ate, the plants that grew in their garden, their attitudes to everything.” Her use of italics specifies and clarifies, and even though it has been over forty years since she first came to New Zealand, the memories still resonate. The list of what she learnt exemplifies how “The extended family, especially the in-laws, assumes the role of familiarizing the newcomer with the local culture. It is also the primary agent for conveying local values and practices” (Roer-Strier and Ezra 52). From the greater vantage point of decades, she can look back and state, “What was, sometimes is, *normal* in New Zealand, is still the life in that family.”

The migrant who does not have the benefit of a family to familiarize him with “local values and practices” must look for other ways to connect, to make sense of things on his own, even as the writer does on the page. As the essayist Cynthia Ozick notes, “a genuine essay is made out of language and character and mood and temperament and pluck and chance ... An essay is reflection and insight” (178). Those same traits are exactly what aid the migrant on his journey – language, character, temperament, pluck, and chance – all of which lead to reflection and insight, not only in life, but in the essay. Both the migrant and the writer are charting a route toward understanding as they find their way.

Looking back on his own route, Anton recounts, “While I was working as a kitchen hand in Arthurs Pass village in 1997 I could not speak much of the language. I remember I was taught to say ‘Gladwrap’ by one of the waitresses. This was a very small and close community and I was the only Russian there at that time.” Building on one word, one encounter at a time, the invisible overlapping strands of chance and connection, led from Gladwrap to his eventually becoming a chef and marrying a New Zealander who also worked in Arthurs Pass. Anton can draw meaning from these disparate and seemingly random events to see the design, which comes

from looking upriver, to the past, when he was still finding his way in a new country where he had arrived “with no language but with hope.” In the essay, Atkins argues, the subject is not simply the self, “The subject is, rather, all that is undergone: it is a combination of experience, self and the meaning and significance ultimately derived and then passed along” (149). As readers we travel the route of reflection with the essayist and share in his discovery. By titling his essay “Best Decision I Ever Made” Anton sums up his view of the route taken.

Acceptance of the Other

Migrants are helped along their route by those who welcome and aid them in becoming familiar with the new country. In an effort to understand where they live, migrants must learn to negotiate the language and culture, which are accessible to those who understand them, but almost impenetrable to those who cannot. As Eva Hoffman points out for new migrants like herself, “What that first period of radical dislocation brought home to me was how much we are creatures of culture, and how much incoherence we risk when we fall out of its matrix” (58). Learning an entirely new matrix of language and culture is a lifelong effort for nonnative speakers, and even for those who share the language cultural understanding can be daunting. Often what helps migrants achieve linguistic and cultural fluency is simple kindness, such as Piet experienced when he arrived from the Netherlands over fifty years ago: “On a rainy day, when we couldn’t do much work on the farm, Doug might tell me to stay home. He would then often come over and have an extended morning tea with us and took great pleasure in teaching us new words and how to pronounce them.” The fact his boss took time and pleasure teaching Piet and his wife English shows how one individual can make another feel welcome and encouraged to speak the language. Nor was this simply one person, for Piet notes that “We found NZ people very polite and we were never ridiculed for coming out with the wrong pronunciation. All they

would do is then repeat a word unobtrusively as it should be pronounced.” The kindness to migrants is remembered decades later in his essay, inscribing what helped them feel welcome.

Noki, the Dutchman who migrated in the 1970s, experienced something rather different: “integration was a more ‘in your face’ exercise. Having to educate difficult teenagers is certainly stressful in a strange country. Accent is made fun of, purposeful misinterpretation rife and the propagation of half truths par for the course.” Yet he takes the teenagers’ ribbing in stride and notes they were interested in how things were done back in the Netherlands, and an exchange occurred. Sabina, the Dutchwoman who migrated in 2005, reveals a positive dynamic with colleagues, no doubt facilitated by her fluency in English: “Working will give you real Kiwi experience and it makes the settling down process so much easier. Colleagues will put in an effort to get to know you, they have patience to answer your questions about where to go, what to do and it helped me to check things out, to learn the general opinion and thoughts.” Again the personal essay proves invaluable for assessing the lived experience of migration, as “the essay blends perceptions of the world with thought about the significance of what is perceived” (Ryden 212). Each of these encounters between native and migrant shows how a real connection to meaning gets formed in the contact zone, where both parties come away enriched, knowing more about the other.

Accepting the other is central to the route of migration. As we cross from the known into the unknown, both in the world and on the page, we enter the place where they meet. Acceptance and resistance both occur in this contact zone. What happens in that encounter sets the route of inquiry and discovery in motion. Where there is a resonance, an exchange, the dynamic between migrant and native, writer and page, understanding and recognition occurs, as Daisy the Irish nurse shows in this vibrant passage:

I was introduced to pick-your-own strawberries, honesty boxes, pot-luck, bring-a-plate and of course, the bottling of fruit. I loved the lot; it was all so sensible; I took to the new ways of doing without hesitation. I made friends and was befriended; I picked up new words and new ways of saying words – bach, veges and shopping – ‘mawl’. I gave things a go and got on quite well – so well that we had to up sticks and go home to explain to the family that we intended to return in due course to settle.

Being a native speaker was an immense asset, but so too was her enthusiastic response to what she encountered. Everything in New Zealand from fruit to friendship appeared generous and open, striking a chord with her: “I loved the lot; it was all so sensible; I took to the new ways of doing without hesitation. I made friends and was befriended.” She shows how quickly a migrant can become acclimated when the place and individual resonate with one another. Her willingness to give things a go, a Kiwi expression, is echoed by Kornel, a young Slovakian who believes, “the clue is to embrace the good. To like the people, the air, the tastes and many particularities hidden here and there.” Migrants who are able to embrace the good, who feel a resonance between themselves and the country, have found a route toward understanding and belonging.

Not all migrants feel a sense of accord in the new country, even when they share the language, as Theresa, an Indian nurse experienced: “Here I felt like a zero.” Acceptance of the other operates on a continuum and is dynamic, dependent on when, where, and who we meet along the route. Even though Theresa felt like a zero in New Zealand, especially when others had trouble with her accent, nevertheless she made “a good friend for life. I am sure that relation helped me in my job. Since then my transition was smooth and without much helplessness, because she was there always with helping hand.” Friendship aids her in securing employment,

although she continues to meet resistance in the workplace due to her ethnicity and accent, as she notes: “There was a time (even sometimes now) I kept silent due to my accent.” The unwillingness of native New Zealanders to accommodate her accented but fluent English renders her silent by choice, even years later.

The personal essay allows Theresa to acknowledge her self-imposed silence, which might not otherwise be known or observed. We see how giving voice to her silence in writing “[t]he essay is an act of personal witness” (Good 23). She admits she does not feel entirely welcome as a migrant, that “a complete merging was impossible due to the physical differences.” Moreover she is forthright about the emotional cost of migration for their family: “It hurts to see the changed values in my kids, because they don’t feel they belong in India any more...but we do and the conflicts start there. But at the end of the day you chose it so you have to take it whether you like it or not, you pay for it.” The ellipsis, like her earlier silence, marks a breakdown in communication, only now it is within her own family, the children having adopted the values of the host country. Theresa is resigned but not happy with the choice she made, having felt ambivalent from the outset: “my husband decided on New Zealand as our dream country to migrate, for which I wasn’t really convinced.” The regret is even more painful as they migrated for the sake of their children and yet feel they have lost them to the dominant culture. The route contains the route, but the outcome is not always what the migrant would have wished, as Theresa writes with her customary bluntness, “Love the food, made many great friends around, comfortable job but something vital is missing. Tried to pretend not but didn’t work. Life is not what it was all hoped to be.” What is missing in all those sentences is the I that could join and feel welcome in the country where she is living.

From Experience to Understanding

Giving voice to experience that is reflective and understood, weighed for its value and significance, is the hallmark of the personal essay. We learn the real stakes of migration for each migrant, their particular and lived experience, the route mapped in the going, for “Each essay springs from an idiosyncratic vision, the essayist’s personal slant derived from years of life and thought and experience” (Ryden 214). The effect of migration on emotional and existential levels can be weighed and reckoned in this genre where experience and reflection intersect to create meaning. In Theresa’s essay there is no accent to prevent someone from understanding her. Likewise we see how with “no language but with hope” young Anton found his unplanned route rewarded him through perseverance, from Gladwrap to becoming a chef, married with two children. How the tears, dreams, and hopes of In Suk led to her realizing in writing that “More than fifteen years have now passed by. The trials of life have turned into treasure, bringing wisdom to me and my daughter and then to others.” Or Susan, the American, tallying up what she has learned on her migration route: “I can only sum it up one way – moving away from friends and family – minus 500 points. Moving to a great country with a wonderful husband – plus 500 points. Learning about myself, appreciating all I’ve got and changing my perspective on everything – priceless.”

What is priceless is what migrants learn from writing their own narrative in the form of the personal essay, and in turn sharing that with readers. Migrants can trace the journey of the stranger who comes to town and tell us what they learned on their way, what helped, what hindered, where was the moment of revelation or the small kindness extended, what seeds did flourish in the end. For in writing, “If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us – to write the first draft and then return for the second draft – we are doing the work of memory” (Hampl *I Could Tell You Stories* 33). What our story tells us is at the heart of

the personal essay. In the essay we can weigh and assess what happened along the way and find connection and meaning in experiences and things known only to ourselves. It is, after all, our own personal route we are mapping in the essay. Each of us has a singular river unwinding from its hidden headwaters to the sea. No one else's.

As a method of inquiry where experience is assessed and tested, both in actuality and then, again, in writing, the personal essay is the ideal genre to explore how we live forward but understand backward and share that recognition with others. Our ability to look both forward and back along our lives increases our understanding of the route taken, or not taken, which for migrants who have left an entire world behind and forged a life elsewhere has immense value.

The poet Jane Hirshfield observes:

Because we have the human fate of exile-consciousness inescapably present in our lives, we also get to look back from the perimeter and from the imagined ends, before and after our individual fates. We are able to see what isn't necessarily our own first point of view. This need not be self-dividing or coldly objective. It can be an increase of the intimate. (Kaminsky and Towler n. pag)

The personal essay can see both before and after our individual fates and share what is not necessarily our first (or only) point of view. The writer can both remember what happened and reflect on what it once meant and what it may now mean. The surface river and the river underneath both appear because only the individual knows what came before to bring about this point of recognition and revelation – that moment is the writer's to realize in the text. That moment of wonder and recognition occurs in the essay because “The doing, the writing itself, is both a path *to* knowing and a path *of* knowing” (Fakundiny 678). The route of the essay, even as it follows the route of our lives, leads us to knowing more about them. When we write we pause amid the ongoing flow of time. We can look back upriver and discover what we may have

missed in passing and follow that route from experience to meaning. We do not stop time's passage in the essay: we understand it. We can step anywhere amid the innumerable moments of our lives to look for connection and meaning in writing. Whole swaths of our lives pass unnoticed and unrecorded, but we can find meaning along the route when it occurs. The personal essay is not the only way to achieve meaning, but it is a powerful and eminently transferable way of conveying it.

Experience without meaning is valueless, as though we had learned nothing along the route of our journey. Time passing, nothing more, lives undifferentiated, anonymous, forgotten. But the moment we sit down to write we begin to remember and forge connections between our past and present selves, as Joan Didion explains in "On Keeping a Notebook": "*Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point*" (136). She remembers that point in a personal essay where the private recollection of self becomes public – and therein is a critical difference between the personal essay and diaries, journals and notebooks. The personal essay is written to be shared, and the meaning is for more than ourselves. As David Lazarus notes, "The essayist accepts the reader looking over her shoulder – or it may enlist the reader as an accomplice, an intimate, in the process of self-examination, in the processes of asking difficult questions of any subject it turns to" ("Occasional Desire" 104). When we accept that we are writing for someone in addition to ourselves, the route traveled generates more meaning, not in a didactic, pedagogic fashion, but rather the meaning resonates and corresponds with what others have thought and felt. The writer accepts the idea of other into the experience, as does the migrant, and the writing moves beyond personal significance to something that desires to connect in our shared humanity.

Acknowledging our shared humanity is central to whether the migrant finds acceptance on the individual, communal, and global level. When the stranger who comes to town accepts

and is accepted, a sense of belonging may develop and deepen over time. Charting that route of acceptance, closing the potential distance between the two shores of self and other, is critical to the migrant. When migrants and natives become known to each other, both cease to be strangers to one another, for “All our knowing in an attempt to transfigure the unknown – to complete the journey from anonymity to intimacy” (O’Donohue *Eternal Echoes* 25-26). For those migrants who find a resonance between themselves and the country and its people, the route toward understanding its culture and language becomes easier. They are able to embrace the good and see what is there, rather than what is not, to adapt where necessary, planting their garden with what is missing, interweaving their lives and narratives with others who live there.

For migrants who have a stronger resonance and identification with their home country, they may compromise because those they love are happy in the new one. This is the route David, the reluctant Scottish migrant, followed, and acknowledged, “Yet, when I clamber over all the baggage – and sometimes it is not easy – I can see that I am happy with the move, people I love are happy with it and others I love have grown to accept it.” Some migrants cannot flourish and adapt to the country, culture or language where they live. Their route toward acceptance is thwarted, by self, by other, or both, as with Theresa, the Indian nurse, who while she has tried to be accepted, does not feel wholly so. These migrants never achieve a sense of belonging and they remain a stranger, for “you are from somewhere else, where you were known, embraced, and sheltered” (O’Donohue *Eternal Echoes* 7). To even begin to feel they belong migrants must feel known, embraced and sheltered in their new country.

A Sense of Welcome

I had been known, embraced and sheltered in New Zealand, something I did not realize at the time until I felt the absence of it in Sweden. Part of this was language, for language is home to

us in ways that are deeply integrating. I had no idea how much language embedded and connected us with others until I was without it – and to communicate with the fluency and nuance I was used to would take an intense commitment that was crucial, in a country I did not want to commit to at all. But it was more than that, after my initial grief over everything we had left behind in the United States, I made a real effort to live in New Zealand. I made friends, taught wonderful students, planted gardens, lived through earthquakes, I knew and loved many people and things, and in turn my family and I were known and loved. The very things we once had in our own country, rich connections with people and place, we had made anew in New Zealand. To give that up again, to move to Sweden, we should have known would be impossible, for all of us. But sometimes the route has an unexpected turn in its unwinding – the joy of knowing where one belongs and returning.

Understanding comes in its own time, the fruit of its own ripening and occasion. Before we migrated to Sweden, the country looked safe, free from earthquakes and financially stable, but the reality was wrenching in terms of dislocation on emotional and existential levels, a crash course in what it means to not belong somewhere. What I witnessed living in Sweden is that while it accepts a percentage of migrants into the country, it does not necessarily welcome them, as the May 2013 riots across several immigrant suburbs in Stockholm demonstrated. Without a sense of welcome the route of migration becomes even more difficult, not withstanding the added challenge of learning a new language and negotiating the subtle nuances of another culture. In Sweden I would always be an outsider, no matter how long I lived there, held back as much by myself as by the chilly reserve of the culture itself. I was reminded of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges who, when old and blind, contemplated all the cities where he had lived, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Geneva, Austin, and Nara, Japan. Rejecting Nara, Borges said, “I don’t want to die in a language I cannot understand” (qtd. in Manguel *With Borges* 71). The

truth is, where we are understood, we feel at home, and for migrants part of that journey is the route toward understanding their new culture, country, and language.

I will never forget standing on the train platform in Gothenburg en route to Copenhagen and New Zealand and my fifteen-year-old son saying: “I am never returning to this country.” I realized the sense of alienation he felt that year and a half in Sweden had embittered him and was grateful it was ending. One of the great rewards of returning to New Zealand is our children can continue growing up somewhere they know and love and are known and loved. They were five and eight when we first came to New Zealand, and five years later the tectonic plates shifted and we uprooted them to Sweden. No one in the family could thrive in that cold stony ground. The route to Sweden led miraculously back to New Zealand, to a world so small and familiar we ran into the principal of our daughter’s previous school when we arrived at Wellington airport. He chided us for being traitors and moving to the North Island, but his delight in seeing us again was genuine.

How different New Zealand appeared the second time I came here, when I chose rather than resisted the route. My husband quips that Sweden made New Zealand look good, but it is more than that. What I learned about self, other, identity, and belonging has been tested and assessed in more than one country and has changed how I see migration and what allows us to flourish in some locations, but not others. I realize perception affects what we can and cannot see in the host country. In New Zealand I can embrace the good, and sharing the language is part of that embrace, but I also think the country embraces us as migrants. We feel welcome here. That welcome makes the route easier, and the stranger who comes to town does not long remain one. We cannot know where the route will end up, anymore than what word will flow next in the sentence, for “writing by definition is beyond us. True writing is always going forward” (Cixous and Calle-Guber 102). Even as the migrant is always going forward, learning

more, adding to the understanding of the route, while not knowing what lies ahead. The route contains the route and reveals itself in the going. Our route brought us back to where we could thrive and have a sense of identity, where our children could continue growing up with a place to stand, a *tūrangawaewae*, a place of empowerment and belonging, something Sweden interrupted and highlighted as being essential to well-being. For on the far side of the world a braided river was shimmering homeward to the sea.

Chapter 4: Closing the Distance

“What seems so far from you is most your own.”

– Rainer Maria Rilke *Sonnets to Orpheus*, XXXIII

The day we flew out of New Zealand for Sweden, the country was socked in by clouds. Early winter, a dreary day, not even willing to rain. New Zealand had vanished from view, as though pulling the door of clouds shut. I felt numb with saying goodbye to everyone, hollowed out, and could not believe we were headed for Sweden. Beneath the impenetrable clouds I imagined we had already crossed the Waimakariri, the first braided river on the route north. The plane kept climbing and suddenly we broke through the clouds and the snowy peaks of the Southern Alps glittered in the distance, catching the late afternoon sun. I thought of the Māori name for the country, *Aotearoa*, land of the long white cloud, and how it fits, especially when seen from above, cloud hidden, except for that sparkling spine of the mountains. I blinked back tears and my daughter said, “We can come back,” her voice rising in hope.

We did come back, the braided river rejoined itself, and the river underneath the river appeared, and we understood things again, not in snatches as in Sweden, but whole swaths of meaning and comprehension emerged again. As John Berger says, “Home is the return to where distance did not yet count” (91). The distance we felt from what we understood and what we did not in Sweden was considerable, and in time that would have lessened, as it does for all migrants, but we realized we would never feel at home living there. We needed to live somewhere we knew and loved and so we returned to New Zealand, a linguistic, cultural and emotional landscape we were familiar with and could navigate, a place resonant with meaning. In New Zealand things felt near again, friendship, connection, everything language touched. Those twelve time zones and seventeen-thousand kilometers are temporal and spatial, but the

real distance is between the known and the unknown, self and other, and how we negotiate that in life and on the page. New Zealand's remoteness from the rest of the world had always struck me, but Sweden proved far more isolating, and I realized distance was palpable when one did not understand the language.

For migrants distance is not simply geographic and temporal, it is also cultural and linguistic. Meaning closes distance. When we understand things about language and culture, when they have meaning and resonance, the world becomes enriched by our sense of connection. Things draw nearer when we understand them – people, places, language – or as Marcela, the Chilean migrant, expresses it, “Meaningful nearness, I’ve discovered, transcends time and space.” The distance between self and world, self and other, diminishes as migrants come to understand and be understood in the host country. That distance in Sweden was always going to be too great to close. We would always be strangers there. Humans need meaningful nearness, a sense of connection to people and place, and this is what gets ruptured when people migrate. Migrants have moved away from the very things that have meaning for them – roots, language, culture – and finding that again, if they ever do, is part of their journey of learning to live in a new country. Even as migrants close the distance between self and other in the host country, they have opened up a distance between themselves and where they once lived. Negotiating these different forms of distance is an ongoing challenge.

Nearness and Distance

Distance is a geographic, temporal, and existential reality for migrants, affecting how they see themselves in relation to space, time, memory and actuality. For migrants the geographic distance remains constant and fixed from their place of origin, while the temporal distance stretches with each passing year they live in the host country. Permanent distance and increasing

time apart are the consequences of migration and are difficult to bear. Migrants must make an effort to stay in touch with friends and family left behind if they wish to offset the distance between them. Some distance can be measured in kilometers and years, but the real distance is emotional, how near or far migrants feel from what has meaning for them, in the host country or where they once lived. The personal essay's method of inquiry can assess the effect of distance, be it geographic, temporal, emotional, or existential, on how well migrants adapt to living in New Zealand, a country whose remoteness has helped form its physical, cultural, and historical identity.

When we look back in writing, we bring things near that were distant in time and space in order to understand them and ourselves better. For, as Jennifer Sinor notes, "in telling the story of who we are, we tell the story of where we have stood" (10). Migrants have stood in more than one place in their lives, and in the personal essay they can locate their migrated selves in narrative. They can reflect on what has happened, when, where, with whom, and why, mapping the route of their understanding. Since the personal essay's inception, it has always mined the rich contact zone between self and other, self and world, weighing and assessing personal experience for its worth. Montaigne recognized the tension and possibility to be found in testing things in writing, and since "he sat down in 1580 to map himself, the essay has existed somewhere on a line between two sturdy poles of inner and outer, experience and meaning, 'I' and 'the world'" (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 56). Negotiating the space between inner and outer, experience and meaning, self and world, makes the personal essay an ideal genre for charting distance in all its concrete and emotional particulars.

The migrant on his journey of the stranger who comes to town is crossing the distance between "I" and "the world." Here is the contact zone. Part of the migrant's sense of estrangement and distance is living in a world removed from the very things that would help him

navigate it: roots, culture, and perhaps, most importantly, language. Closing that distance between self and other, self and world, is central to the migrant's journey toward understanding and being understood – but it comes at the expense of being distant from what held meaning for him in the past. As Gareth, the Welsh doctor, notes, “We leave everything behind, family, friends, our culture and the environment which nurtured us and travel with the luggage of memories.” Thousands of kilometers away and growing more distant over the years is a world resonant with meaning.

We want to share our lives with those we love and for migrants in New Zealand the distance from family and friends often precludes this. Amelia, the Englishwoman who married a New Zealander, catalogs what distance has cost her living half a world away:

I have lost the opportunity to care for my own parents in their old age. I have lost the chance to celebrate weddings, christenings, birthdays, anniversaries and funerals of those to whom I am related or fond of. Tapes and CDs sent to compensate for the lost experience wait for months or years before I can bring myself to listen.

The list is extensive and emotionally loaded. She has missed countless milestones in the lives of those she loves back in England, “weddings, christenings, birthdays, anniversaries and funerals.” More painful, especially as a trained nurse, she has not been able to care for her aging parents. She cannot bring herself to listen to the very things that would connect her with the lost experiences and for her, “The distance seems greater between here and England.” Perhaps distance is exacerbated when so much of a migrant's life is not seen or shared by friends and family afar. My own children are growing up unseen by my sister and brother and I wonder at what emotional cost. As the young Slovakian Kornel vents in his essay, “Oh yes, this bloody distance, it does not create any nearness, it's a myth.”

Distance in New Zealand is all too real, both in time and space, a distance that originated eighty million years ago when the New Zealand archipelago splintered off from the ancient supercontinent of Gondwana to drift in isolation. From the beginning New Zealand was its own world, as the pollen record shows almost all the native flora arrived after the land mass separated (Mein Smith 3-4). Of the world's largest islands, the unimaginatively named North and South Island of New Zealand are the most remote islands from any continent, reflected in about 82% of its native plant species being endemic (Dawson 13). Given its geographic isolation, surrounded on all sides by 2,000 kilometers of ocean, it is not surprising that New Zealand was among the last land masses to be settled by humans, roughly 800 years ago in what is argued to be the final wave of Polynesian migration (M. King 8; Mein Smith 6-12). That combination of being a remote and hitherto unpopulated land with the very recent arrival of humans makes New Zealand a remarkable microcosm on many levels: environmental, cultural, historical.

Things become changed on an island rather quickly, for good or ill. The flightless moa, native only to New Zealand and its largest source of protein, was hunted to extinction by the Māori within 150 years of their arrival (Mein Smith 5). The flip side of extinction is invasion. Here the introduction of nonnative species, both animal and vegetable, such as gorse and possum, have had disastrous consequences. The possum introduced in the 1840s for the fur trade burgeoned to between 60 and 70 million by the 1990s and is established throughout 91% of the country (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment 4), devouring native trees and birds in its wake. Without natural predators and an abundance of food, nothing stopped possum from proliferating wildly. Everything – and everyone – that migrates to New Zealand is affected both by the concentrated nearness of an island environment and the country's vast distance from anywhere else. Nearness and distance are an ongoing and informing tension for all life in New Zealand.

A nationwide mobile phone company, Two Degrees, trades on the idea that only two degrees of separation exist between any one person and anyone else in New Zealand. Two years before she became my student, Damira, a Croatian lawyer, signed our residency permit, illustrating that idea perfectly. Our lives were drawn together by chance through the immigration process. That same coincidence of two degrees occurred the summer I returned to New Zealand and met some of my former students for dinner, a mix of both migrants and Kiwis. Even though they had taken part in different classes they found they knew each other through other channels. Gareth, the Welsh doctor, had treated Damira as a patient and Gareth's wife had worked for Hugh, the Irish doctor, years earlier. As the English poet Harry Ricketts who migrated to New Zealand has noted "the country is really a village with one and a half degrees of separation" (24). Distance and nearness, migrant and native, had all been drawn together by a desire to write the personal essay. Everyone at the table was pleased to see I had finally grown to love and appreciate New Zealand, having railed about its distance, its isolation from the real world in the past. Janice, a New Zealander in her seventies, held her wineglass aloft and looked me right in the eye and said, "Welcome home." I had crossed the invisible threshold from stranger to friend in my journey to Sweden and back.

The willingness to meet stranger and other is something both the essay and the migrant share. Both cross from the known to the unknown and are willing to engage the other in order to learn. For who better understands the tension between nearness and distance than those who have experienced both in their migration, for "through their actions and decisions, migrants enter into a constant dialogue between past and present, near and far, foreign and familiar" (Papastergiadis 20). It is this constant dialogue between polarities that are spatial, temporal and cultural that migrants explore in their personal essays, grounding these abstractions in their own migration narratives. For migrants the known world of their past, which may be both

temporally and physically distant, is always running parallel to, if underneath, their present experience. As David Lazar observes, “The essay is by its nature a self-reflective form, a form through which the self’s prism considers the world” (“Interview” 55). For migrants that prism includes a culture, landscape, and perhaps language from their past. Therefore what comes through the self’s prism will be colored by their cultural and linguistic background.

Cathrine, a Danish woman in her 80s who has lived in New Zealand over fifty years, recognizes her Danish cultural awareness continues to inform her life to this day:

I never felt a stranger. To me I have always been as much part of the landscape as any New Zealander. But my whole outlook on life is that of a Dane with a background formed by the Danish educational system as well as by family and genetics. Danes can fit in with any population anywhere in the world – so we believe. They take their culture with them, fit in with the new culture and never have the sense of displacement.

Her culture is not distant, but present, embodied in her “whole outlook on life is that of a Dane,” which has not faded in the intervening decades. Yet this strong cultural identity did not prevent her from feeling she belonged in New Zealand and she declares, “I never felt a stranger. To me I have always been as much part of the landscape as any New Zealander.” She does not see these two cultures as mutually exclusive, but running in tandem, like a braided river in her life. She notes that Danes bring their culture with them and adapt to wherever they live, which in her case seems true.

The Price Migrants Pay

Past and present, near and far, can be brought together in the essay. Often what migrants miss is more real and necessary to them than what is present. Teuaneti, a migrant from Kirabati found

herself newly pregnant and alone in New Zealand, and for “The first time mother in a foreign land with no relatives around was quite upsetting and frightening.” Teuaneti always wrote her essays in Kirabati and translated them into English, and what is interesting is how she sees herself in third person in this instance, underscoring the sense of distance and alienation she feels. As soon as she expresses what she misses back home, the prose switches into first person and becomes immediate, sensual, and enriched with connection:

I could hear and smell the sea yet too far to reach and touch. I could see the ripe breadfruits hanging onto the branches yet too high to pick and the aroma of the fresh grilled milk fish in the air that could not be tasted frustrated me. I found comfort and support by ringing relatives back home. Their voices on the phone gave me the satisfaction and contentment that I was not alone and that they were nearby.

Her prose evokes the rich tropical landscape of her island home, the scent, sound, taste and beauty five thousand kilometers away. In memory this world feels immediate, all the more tantalizing for being distant and impossible to grasp: “I could hear and smell the sea yet too far to reach and touch. I could see the ripe breadfruits hanging onto the branches yet too high to pick and the aroma of the fresh grilled milk fish in the air that could not be tasted frustrated me.” She closes the distance between the place and people she loves the only way possible, by phoning them. While speaking with them in her native language, “Their voices on the phone gave me the satisfaction and contentment that I was not alone and that they were nearby.” In 1987 the calls to Kiribati were prohibitive, \$2.50 a minute, each call lasting twenty to thirty minutes, and soon it became apparent to her English husband that the young family’s budget could not sustain this even though “he noticed that not only was I radiant after talking in Kiribati on the phone but also my appetite improved!” The brief nearness of speaking with her

family in her native language on the phone is enough to perk up her spirits and appetite, but is also transient, expensive, and vanishes all too quickly.

In an effort to assuage his pregnant wife's longing for her island home, her husband invited two university students from Kiribati to dinner, and "as soon as they arrived, my craving was gone and the drowsiness vanished. They brought with them the most pleasant fragrance and warmest ambiance that I could not describe." The two women embody Kiribati literally in fragrance, presence, and language, the very things she misses. They satisfy her craving for the taste of home. One of the students noticed they had a spare room and asked to board with them and Teuaneti immediately agreed. What her English husband thought of this spontaneous decision she made at two in the morning is left unsaid, although his plan was to bring his mother-in-law for a three month visit and perhaps a postgraduate student was preferable. For the migrant who longed for the things of home, "The aroma of any dish she cooked in my kitchen was inviting to devour just like my mum's. The Kiribati homely companion and the language made me joyful and healthy and surely it did likewise to the student. It was like home away from home." Distance from home disappeared when she had a fellow countrywoman with whom to share the language and food of Kiribati again. Home is recreated in a small but real way in her kitchen and in her personal essay.

Nearness and distance are profound and powerful concepts that touch on everything from kinship, geography, time, narrative, to where and how we perceive the world. Migrants struggle to bring the distant world close, in language, on paper, on the phone, and perhaps rarest, and most expensive, in person. The old geography adage that eighty percent of all information can be tied to location is not unfounded. Where we live has a deep and abiding effect on how we think and feel, and for migrants that place has shifted radically. As Rockwell Gray points out, "Human life is always concretely circumstantial. All experience is *placed* experience. Thought

and deed, taste and judgment, occur within the constraints and enabling conditions of highly specific settings” (53). Migrants can map their placed experience in writing, reflecting on both their emotional and existential location throughout their migration, from when they first arrived to decades later. The personal essay’s ability to reflect on the cumulative and long-term effects of distance on a migrant’s life give it the Kierkegaardian dimension, whereby the migrant lives forward and understands backward.

How near or far migrants feel to New Zealand and their country of origin changes over time and circumstances. The Dutch migrants who came postwar could not begin to think of phoning the Netherlands, whereas now such calls are within financial reach. As Piet who came in 1959 writes, “Contact with our family and friends was only possible by letter. We never once talked to our parents by phone, as international calls were too expensive and we simply couldn’t afford them. Wouldn’t it have been wonderful if we had been able to use free video calls via Skype then!” The exclamation point at the end of his sentence echoes over fifty years of Piet’s life in New Zealand. In the twenty-first century it is hard to imagine the emotional consequences of migration sustained by the Dutch who came in the 1950s and 60s, but his personal essay makes them resonate again in all the pathos and longing to be near those he loved and left behind.

For many migrants, particularly those who came in the postwar wave of immigration, the ease and relative affordability of global travel did not exist. For them the distance between New Zealand and their home country was even greater, given the financial impossibility of visiting home. Here the “concretely circumstantial” aspect of migration is altogether painful. As Piet, the Dutch migrant, explains: “The gap between New Zealand and Holland seemed huge, and for a long time at least, unbridgeable. We were aware that going back would be impossible; it was beyond our financial means to afford the trip back for several years to come, even if we

wanted to.” Indeed Piet does not return with his family to the Netherlands for twenty years, cashing in the savings on his pension to do so in 1979.

Like Piet, even though my family arrived in 2007 we could not afford to send all of us back to visit family, a fact that rankled when my husband repeatedly returned to the US for work and saw my family and friends. As Kornel, the young Slovakian migrant, so observes, “Sure, absence can make hearts grow fonder, but then in the same fashion grows the frustration, that those hearts find it hard to hug whenever they want to.” En route to Sweden, we stopped off to see family and friends in the US and I felt the emotional distance acutely when my ten-year-old daughter flung herself into my sister’s arms at the Denver airport and said, “I missed you!” Too much time had passed. Half my daughter’s life had been in New Zealand, and they had not seen each other in five-and-a-half years. Living at such a remove from those they love is the price migrants pay for having left.

New Zealand’s nearest neighbor is Australia, which at three hour’s flight time is hardly close, followed by the next nearest landmass and continent, Antarctica, at six hours. For anyone who has migrated to New Zealand “the tyranny of distance” will be an ongoing and dominant feature of their lives (Blainey). Migrants will always be at a distant from whence they came, and while that distance remains constant spatially, it will stretch temporally as they age, and wax and wane emotionally depending on how each migrant negotiates that “tyranny of distance.” New Zealand’s remoteness accounts not only for its unique flora and fauna, but also attracts some who migrate here. Elizabeth, the English migrant, quipped in her first essay that one reason she migrated to New Zealand was “I can’t emigrate to the moon, so New Zealand will have to do.” In her case, the distance was actively sought, and became part of the journey toward finding her authentic self – no one back in England witnessed her emotional breakdown and reconstruction in New Zealand, though her personal essay leaves a record of it.

For European migrants New Zealand is as far away as they can go, and in their essays they frequently characterize the country as “the other side of the world,” “the end of the earth” or “the bottom of the world on an island in the Pacific.” When people choose to move such a great distance away, that distance becomes a definite factor in their lives, not an abstraction, “and the material, physical distance of those moves matter” (Favell 269). For some migrants, the distance is the whole point, as Sabina, the Dutchwoman who came to New Zealand in 2004, points out:

Can't you go any further? Well, no, I say to amazed people looking at me when I tell I will go to New Zealand to stay and live there. “If I go further I will be heading back and that is so not the idea of this move.” I like the roughly 19 thousand kilometers between the country I was born in and my new place of residence Before packing my bags for Kiwi land I did consider migrating to countries only a two, four or eight hours flight's away, but in the end the longest distance from home was part of the intention and challenge.

Sabina is a contemporary transnational migrant, jetting back and forth to the Netherlands, texting, emailing and Skyping with friends and family on the other side of the world, and not surprisingly she calculates the distance in flight time and enjoys and even seeks out the challenge of that distance. But nothing captures the reality of those 19,000 kilometers better than those who came to New Zealand via ship decades earlier.

“Half a world away from my own”

Chris was nine in 1953 when she and her family migrated from England. The journey took thirty-three days and they only stopped twice, once for the passage through the Panama Canal and once off the coast of Pitcairn Island, where islanders rowed out with souvenirs for purchase, and, “Most exciting of all, one of them gave my brother and I a bunch of bananas!” Her

youthful enthusiasm rings on the page sixty years after that gift of fruit. So caught up with high jinx, pranks and learning to swim on board, the geographic distance did not register in her child's mind until two years later when her grandmother followed the family out:

The first time our geographic distance from “the old country” became apparent to me was early in 1955 when Nana came out to join us. My father pinned a large map of the world to the dining room wall and marked out her journey in daily increments. We had a tiny *Union Jack* attached to a pin and each day my brother and I would fight over whose turn it was to move it a notch along her estimated route. I was very fond of Nana and it seemed to take forever for that pin to reach Auckland.

Even though Chris had made the exact same journey, the distance did not become real until the anticipation of her grandmother's arrival slowly inched its way toward her on the world map. Time and distance are relative, depending on how they are experienced, passing swiftly for a child on board a ship, and creeping slowly in her imagination of the same journey. In the personal essay writers “present the world's meanings not as they have researched them or reasoned them out but as they have lived them” (Ryden 215). When the journey had an abstract rather than a lived dimension, its progress “seemed to take forever.”

Maria, a Dutchwoman who made a similar journey in 1966, experienced the time and distance in a much more existential fashion. Unlike the child migrant, she was keenly aware of what she was leaving behind. Looking back almost fifty years she knows what lies ahead, and her essay speaks to both these times, time past, time future, and she understands the long term consequences of living at a distance from those she loves:

It had been a long trip, six weeks on the boat, a ship full mostly with emigrants to New Zealand and Australia. I am sure many regarded this trip as the cruise of

their lifetime. A trip of pleasure, lounging in deckchairs, dips in the pool, playing quoits and other games, dancing at night, just like the TV's *Love Boat* series.

Take the day while you can, because a new life was awaiting, a life of hard work to establish themselves. But it was also a life away from war-stricken Europe.

Most of these activities did not capture me.

Writing this essay at age seventy-six, Maria takes a very long view, and it is not surprising the words life or lifetime occur four times in as many sentences. In 1966 the journey took six weeks, which now can be accomplished in a day, and distance becomes manifestly more real when the ocean's horizon is all the migrant sees for weeks on end. She states, "It had been a long trip," and then shifts into present tense to make an acerbic comment about her fellow emigrants, "I am sure many regarded this trip as the cruise of their lifetime" and "a trip of pleasure." She distances herself from her fellow passengers, showing she did not enjoy the trip as they did, which she compares to the TV show *The Love Boat*: "Most of these activities did not capture me." An almost biblical mandate is given to those migrants enjoying the voyage, "Take the day while you can, because a new life was awaiting, a life of hard work to establish themselves." Again she distances herself from the very reality she would experience, along with all the other Dutch migrants: "a life of hard work to establish themselves." She acknowledges the push factor in their migration, hers included: "But it was also a life away from war-stricken Europe." Given that Maria saw Jews rounded up on her street in Amsterdam and everyone's cats turned into mince, their pelts hung out on the clothesline – two grim and stunning memories in her essays – the war was altogether real.

Maria did not join in with her fellow migrant passengers enjoying what the journey had to offer. Even fifty years later her chosen isolation is marked. She does not mention her new

husband, with whom she was traveling. The journey as she remembers and reflects upon it shows a solitary woman, a migrant apart:

Apart from visiting exotic ports, we were confined to the boat. Large as it was I felt enclosed and caged, even with the wide horizon around me. Though this was the part I liked most, watching the sea in all its moods from near dead-quiet to restless and wild and stormy. Fascinating too observing the dolphins which playfully accompanied the ship, the flying fish glittering in the sun and petrels weaving up and down as well as the sun's brilliant coming and going. Yes I liked that.

What is most striking in this passage is the image of confinement amid immensity, "Large as it was [the boat] I felt enclosed and caged, even with the wide horizon around me." She takes more interest and pleasure in the natural world outside the boat than the human world contained within it, perhaps because it embodies a freedom she cannot share. The writer Kristen Iversen notes that "Writing about an experience expands it and allows me to unpack and unravel the thorny knot of emotion that has kept a particular memory close over the years" ("Interview" 203). Looking back at herself almost fifty years later, Maria can see this journey marked the threshold between who she was and who she would become, and even in the midst of moving forward into her new life, she feels trapped.

Images of entrapment occur at other points in the essay. When the ship docked in Auckland her aunt showed her around briefly, "mostly window shopping, but it certainly exposed me to a different world, a world I had to live in from now on." The confinement becomes enlarged and more abstract, not simply the boat, but a world bounded, "a world I had to live in from now on." Longing to connect with something familiar she asked her aunt where the street cafes were. The answer was even more unwelcome:

“Street cafes? They have none here.”

“What no street cafes?” What a dismal picture. Not to be able to sit there and watch the world go by. It began to hit home. This is not like my homeland, not like Europe. This is an alien world. I felt adrift.

The text polarizes “a world” with “the world.” She could no longer sit “and watch the world go by,” her world, the world of street cafes in Amsterdam. She invokes the idiom “It began to hit home” just as she began to understand she no longer was home. Not only was she confined to “a world she had to live in from now on,” but that world bore no resemblance to the one she had left behind. This dawned on her in larger proportions, “not like my homeland” the Netherlands, “not like Europe,” her larger cultural and geographic context, until the realization came: “This is an alien world.” Her essay depicts the effect of distance in all its existential enormity. Not only had she come so far, but now she also felt “adrift” right when she had made landfall. She was the stranger who had come to town, only she had come to town to live. The magnitude of this decision to migrate must have preyed upon her as she gazed at the ocean in all its moods from aboard the ship, where “Large as it was I felt enclosed and caged, even with the wide horizon around me.” For Maria, as with many postwar migrants, the journey was one way. There was no going back.

Maria opens and closes her essay with an image of sitting by herself in front of a stranger’s fire, newly arrived in New Zealand. The camera of memory is in the corner of the room, looking down on her: “There I was, in the lounge of a total stranger, sitting before a small wood fire, which warmed me at the front and cooled me at the rear. Half a world away from my own ... worlds apart.” Distance and nearness both come to bear in this image, held in tension by the ellipsis, which is like a symbol of the journey and the separation it has created. She is half a world away from everything she knows and loves, in the lounge of a total stranger, another

form of distance, and she is alone with herself and this realization. Throughout the essay the word “world” appears to stand in for what Maria has lost. She can no longer sit and “watch the world go by” in a street café in Amsterdam, but instead she finds herself in “a different world, a world she had to live in” and “an alien world” which is “half a world away from my own.”

“World” implies the distance and the totality of what she has given up when she migrated – friends, family, language, the dear familiar world she once knew and which had meaning for her.

In the closing image of the essay she returns the memory of sitting alone by the fire. Now we have the backstory, her courtship and marriage to a fellow Dutchman who has lived in New Zealand for fourteen years and persuaded her to join him there. She has sailed half the world to this moment where she finds herself sitting alone at a stranger’s hearth, while her husband and his neighbor are chatting away in the kitchen, making tea: “I stayed behind, sitting alone, very much alone at that moment. It was then that I fully realized what migrating to a country, so far away, meant.” Choosing to both open and close her essay with an image of such poignant isolation shows its power almost fifty years later, for as Hampl notes, “Pain has strong arms” (*I Could Tell You Stories* 29) and clenches us long after the event. Sitting alone beside the stranger’s fire on the far side of the world she has an epiphany that will cast a long shadow on her memory: “It was then that I fully realised what migrating to a country, so far away, meant.” That realization is a moment that will effect the rest of her life, echoing for years across both time and distance.

For Maria the distance remains both temporal and geographic. Looking back she can see how this journey differed from any she had taken in the past, and with far greater consequences, more lasting, more painful, time and distance both to be endured. Her essay bears witness to that:

I thought of all the times I had been away from home in my early childhood, even for prolonged periods from extended summer holidays till three, four months and even half a year, but I always happily returned home to my people and the world I knew. This was not another “away from home” situation. There was no going back, at least not for a number of years. I would not see my relatives and friends for many years. I would miss all this. I would not be going home.

She knows now what she could not when gazing at the horizon line en route, that the distance stretched into years, for “time is the longest distance between two places” (Williams and Williams 75). She compares her migration to when she has been away from home in the past, the duration of which kept getting extended, but then she notes, “I always happily returned home to my people and the world I knew.” Here again “the world” stands for everything she knows and is familiar with, and the very thing she cannot happily or easily return to now, for “This was not another ‘away from home’ situation.” Half a world away, separated for years from her family and friends because “There was no going back,” the prose is spare and direct: “I would miss all this. I would not be going home.” The finality is emphasized by the repetition of what she would not experience – family, friends, going home – and what she would experience expressed in terms of absence, “I would miss all this.” She would not go home for years, except in memory: “migrants and exiles remember being home. Ultimately, it is always a memory of absence, of where one is not” (Battisti and Portelli 48). Home is where migrants are not, until they make a new one. Her personal essay bears witness to the fact migrants do not cease to miss home even after decades, as she writes with plaintive simplicity, “I would miss all this. I would not be going home.”

“Emigration is surely a synonym for farewell”

The magnitude of the separation and distance from what they love dawns on migrants at different points in their journey. Some realize it when saying goodbye at their wedding or at the airport, and for others, like Dorothy, a Scottish bride, it strikes her en route to New Zealand in 1966 with her new husband:

[I]t finally struck me what had happened. I had left the land of my birth to live at the other side of the world. I cried and cried and my husband couldn't console me, offering me beer which I didn't want. He did not seem to understand what was the matter with me. In these days when travel was expensive I wondered if I would ever see Scotland again, or my parents.

Her New Zealand born husband was returning home and could not share or understand the sense of loss she felt crossing this threshold. She was inconsolable, realizing the enormity of her decision. As the essayist Scott Russell Sanders notes, “We are slow to acknowledge the pain in yearning for one's native ground” (*Staying Put* 14), but her essay shows the pain of leaving abides across time and distance. When she met her new in-laws at the New Zealand airport, “It brought new waves of sadness that they were so different from my parents, as in-laws are. I felt sad that I had exchanged my dear parents to people I hardly knew.” Here the stranger comes to town within the family unit, and the nearness of her own kin receded even as his husband's people drew close.

Other migrants tell similar affecting stories around the time of their weddings and departures for New Zealand from Europe. The distance and angle from which the migrant chooses to narrate the event will vary, but he or she will always be present in the essay, for “the author will usually be standing foursquare in the middle of the essay or off to the side of the action (but still unmistakably there) – and of greater importance, the essay will be in large part

about him or her and the author's reaction as it is told and interpreted" (Core 215). Looking back at his wedding in 1959 in the Netherlands, Piet's prose is neutral and contained:

Our pending emigration to New Zealand, cast a bit of a shadow over our wedding day. We had a big reception but it had strained and sad overtones. It was the last time that we would see many of our relatives and friends, so we had to say "good-bye" to many of them. Not knowing when, or if, we would see each other ever again.

Writing from the vantage point of five decades he knows he never saw many of his family and friends ever again, but he does not reveal how that made him feel, then or at the time of his writing. Here the distance is between himself and the experience, almost as though he is numb, which may be how he felt at the time. He keeps an emotional distance from the event, the narration is pulled back and detached, and the pending emigration "cast a bit of a shadow" over the reception which "had strained and sad overtones," but he does not give us an actual scene. Piet has chosen not to show his reaction to the sadness that overshadowed what otherwise would have been a wholly joyful occasion.

In contrast, Anna, the Swiss migrant, depicts a searing farewell as she parted from friends and family in the airport, the memory still vivid years later:

I can still see them now, my family, my friends and my colleagues from work. They stand in a semi-circle in the airport departure hall, and I move slowly from one to the other saying good bye. When I get to my father he starts to cry. Not soundlessly like my mother, but with big loud sobs. I have never seen my father cry before. I am shaken. I didn't know he liked me so much. He hugs me tightly. "Oh Dad, don't cry." I try to comfort him. "We will come back."

Although the year was 1966, the parting scene is narrated in the present tense with all its stark and powerful immediacy, and she is right in the middle of it: “I can still see them now,” and she lists them, “my family, my friends and my colleagues from work.” She moves slowly around the semi-circle saying goodbye, but she stops when she comes to her father, who starts to cry, not silently like her mother, “but with big loud sobs. I have never seen my father cry before. I am shaken.” Then she feels a dawning of amazement, “I didn’t know he liked me so much,” which is as dear as it is touchingly naïve, and followed by, “He hugs me tightly.” She is at the center of the experience and his embrace, trying to comfort him, “Oh Dad, don’t cry. We will come back.” But there is no comfort for a father whose daughter marries and moves to the other side of the world. The scene which follows shows her own misery:

Through the blur of my tears I watch the runway rush past. Then we lift off. I am no longer on Swiss soil. I have a terrible sense of loss. I wish my husband would hold me, or take my hand, but he is looking straight ahead. His mother is on his other side. We sit in silence. We are given orange juice.

Not only is her father without comfort, so is she, as she sits beside her husband in tears as the plane lifts off: “I have a terrible sense of loss.” Her essay captures that sense of loss in all its acute and painful reality, resonating four decades later. From the embrace of her father to the husband who does not take her hand she has crossed an impossible distance that will inform the rest of her life.

Taking a more detached and abstract view, Birgitta, the Swedish migrant in her seventies, explores what she does and does not remember from that critical period in her life. She sees her distant self in the harried face of a friend about to be married:

A friend was getting married recently. A week before the wedding I tactlessly asked, was she happy? She had worry lines on her face, no obvious joy visible,

and she said she didn't have time to be happy: there were too many things to be arranged ahead. Perhaps that was my situation in October – November 1966, because I don't remember thinking much of my parents and my four siblings, nor my best friends, all of whom I was to miss aching, in fits and starts, later. It's also true that the memory of the sadness discernible behind their smiles on my parents' faces became a permanent part of me.

She is older now than her parents were when she married, and she can see their sense of loss and speak to it, knowing now what it cost them to see her migrate to the other side of the world. She recalls her own thoughtlessness towards her family and friends at the time, caught up in the arrangements for her wedding and emigration. Time becomes fused here, past, present and continuous. The months before her wedding in 1966 combine with present time and all those years in between are encompassed in “the memory of the sadness discernible behind their smiles on my parents' faces became a permanent part of me.” In the personal essay we see how “perception and understanding change with time as well. There is the girl or woman – the character on the page – who experienced the event, and then there is the older woman writer – the narrator visible or invisible – who is looking back on the event” (Iversen “Interview” 202). Looking back in writing Birgitta understands the sadness her parents felt has become part of her, a palpable and permanent consequence of living this far apart.

For migrants who have a New Zealander partner, the distance between one another's countries remains a constant in their relationship. When migrants cannot travel to see those they love, that distance becomes exacerbated and enlarged, a fact Kornel, a young Slovakian migrant in his thirties, addresses:

The distance remains permanent, especially if you couple up with a Kiwi. Both of us are constantly negotiating the geographical and personal distances. I

wonder if one can ever master this, perhaps one just needs to man up finally. Geographical distance can be conquered if there are [sic] money, time and courage to travel the long haul distance. Geographical distance grows though if one cannot do this. Then consequently grows the personal distance.

The distance remains permanent and one partner is always giving up his country and his language in this relationship. Kornel has been more flexible, as his language skills are better, for as he says in one of his essays, “you are as many times human as languages you speak.” When after two years in Slovakia his partner’s mother fell ill, they returned to New Zealand in 2005 where they have remained. Despite strong ties to his own family, Kornel gave up proximity to them, knowing full well that the personal distance would grow if he could not go back to see them periodically.

For migrants, their sense of loss applies not only to those they love who age apart from them, but also those they love whose lives keep unfolding and which they do not actively share. Beth, who migrated in her fifties from South Africa and has lived in New Zealand a decade, captures what it means to leave both her mother and her daughter behind:

But as most of my loss involves my mother and my daughter, it is through them that much of my rebuilding has taken place. I am no longer the mother that is available for all the little everyday crises, or the daughter who can visit and fetch and carry. I am the absent one. I am the lost one. And oddly enough, although I thought that this would affect me most in terms of my very old mother, it is my daughter Ingrid whose life I have most missed out on: career changes, house moves, heartbreaks and small triumphs, all lost to me. This loss has hollowed me out and defies all attempts at filling. It affects me terribly when we are apart and

in our desire to have only perfect times when we are together, it has undermined the ease and spontaneity of our pivotal relationship.

She explores the effect of distance on her two primary caregiving relationships, her elderly mother and her only child, a daughter in her twenties. The prose is beautifully balanced between the pull of her mother and the pull of her daughter. The clauses swing between the two relationships, but the loss comes down hardest on the daughter's side. Beth is unstinting in how she perceives herself, "I am the absent one. I am the lost one." Those stark sentences with their syntactic symmetry distill her distress caused by the distance between them. She no longer shares their daily world and is struck that being separated from her mother does not affect her as much as being separated from her daughter. Given her mother turned one hundred in 2012, perhaps this is not surprising. Beth's mother is at the extreme end of her life, while her daughter is at the relative beginning of hers, and "it is my daughter Ingrid whose life I have most missed out on: career changes, house moves, heartbreaks and small triumphs, all lost to me." The list is both ordinary and grievous, and there is no compensation for this loss: "This loss has hollowed me out and defies all attempts at filling." Beth returns to South Africa every year, and her daughter has visited twice but refused to migrate to New Zealand, stating, "There's no one for me to date there."

Beth knows New Zealand's distance cannot be helped, but it still contributes to the distance she feels from her daughter: "It certainly can't help being this isolated: 'The Gateway to Antarctica' the sign at the airport reads. I could weep." The loss she feels affects her not only when she is apart from her daughter, which is to be expected, but also when they are together, which is not expected: "It affects me terribly when we are apart and in our desire to have only perfect times when we are together, it has undermined the ease and spontaneity of our pivotal relationship." When reunited they try too hard, perhaps in an attempt to redress the absence and

distance, hence the “desire to have only perfect times when we are together.” The lack of dailiness in their lives “has undermined the ease and spontaneity of our pivotal relationship.” They are robbed of the easiness in each other’s presence they once shared, something their ongoing nearness fostered in the past: “I am no longer the mother that is available for all the little everyday crises.” The strained relationship shows how limbic (emotional) resonance breaks down over long distance, as neural science observes: “Letters and phone calls are a salve on the wound, but are insubstantial substitutes for the full-bandwidth sensory experience of nearness to the ones you love. To sustain a living relationship, limbic regulation demands sensory inputs that are rich, vivid, and frequent” (Lewis, Amini and Lannon 156). Living eleven time zones apart precludes “sensory inputs that are rich, vivid, and frequent,” and impairs their ability to be relaxed and spontaneous when they are together. As this is Beth’s only child the loss is concentrated in what is a “pivotal relationship.”

Ten years after Beth migrated to New Zealand, her daughter, now married, is expecting her first child. Beth lamented to me in an e-mail: “Will I even ever see her pregnant? Maybe I will get there after the baby is born. Maybe I will always be airplane granny. I have lost so much, now the loss has a terrible future progression.” Ten years is a third of her daughter’s lifetime. Having missed an entire decade with her daughter, she knows all too well that she is going to miss more: “Will I even see her pregnant?” She sees how the distance stretches temporally into the future, and now with her grandchild the loss becomes generational: “I have lost so much, now the loss has a terrible future progression.” What an anguishing thought, to know already that she will not see much of this child growing up. Even while she recognizes the transnational nature of their relationship, “Maybe I will always be airplane granny,” she realizes the limitations of that connection. Her wistful appellation “airplane granny” speaks to the fact she will always be coming and going, unlike any grandmother who lives nearby. Again distance

affects the nature of the relationship: “In their classic study of American grandparenthood, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) state that the three most important factors influencing the frequency of grandparent-grandchild contact are ‘distance, distance, and distance’” (Nesteruk and Marks 92). When a parent migrates to another part of the world, closing that distance to be near a grandchild becomes a challenge.

Loretta Baldassar has done extensive research on transnational families living in Australia and Italy, a comparable distance to migrants who came from other countries in Europe to New Zealand. She observes that “the event of migration, by causing physical separation, absence and longing, causes migrants to feel guilty about their moral obligations to be co-present” (Baldassar “The Guilt Trip”). Whether it is guilt or longing or a combination thereof, migrants make more of an effort to see their friends and family “back home” than vice versa. As David, an American who migrated in his late forties with his family, notes:

Leaving family is even harder than leaving friends. Many children have a granny down the street or an aunt across town, as I did growing up.

Leaving this behind is leaving part of one’s soul. When I told my mother we were moving to New Zealand, she said, “You bastard, I knew you would,” and she started to cry. She was right. We are “bastards” for leaving our families, and we know it. (Boyer 54)

Migrants are bastards, in that we could be seen as having rejected our family by moving away, regardless of whether or not this is the case. The point is, we left, and it may be our obligation to return, not theirs to visit, a point the Chilean migrant Marcela made to me when I was lamenting my sister not coming to visit us. She said, “It is *your* expectation that your sister come to see you. It is not necessarily hers.” I remember looking out at the rainy winter night, standing in the empty classroom together, realizing my sister might never visit us in New

Zealand. The earthquakes had not struck yet, and we did not know how they would wrench apart the landscape of all our lives. We did not know the shifting tectonic plates would bring our family closer to New Zealand, by enforcing the emotional and psychological distance of Sweden, and that we could go around the world to come back to where we belong. That distance in time and space had not been crossed yet. We live forward, and understand backward, another form of distance.

Bridging the Gap

Migrants affirm that the geographic distance is manageable if both parties make the effort to connect across the years and kilometers, but the distance becomes insurmountable and emotional when they do not. Marcela, the Chilean migrant, is particularly eloquent on this subject:

Geographical distance can be simply measured, being the same from each extreme of a line. It is the emotional distance however, that can be an insurmountable breach for those left behind. Where relations have been separated, the physical distance may become an excuse for not wanting to bridge the time difference, to dissipate distance into total absence. Within their reach, by tapping of some keyboard, the effort to create and maintain closeness was not embraced by many of those who saw us leave.

Marcela came to New Zealand with her husband who was pursuing his doctorate, and there she learned English. She characterizes herself as “a side dish to the main course,” as her own career in botany was sidelined to his studies. The density and complexity of her prose is remarkable, conveying the idea that is hardest to articulate, namely that “Geographical distance can be simply measured,” but “it is the emotional distance however, that can be an insurmountable breach for those left behind.” While Marcela tried to cross that emotional distance with family, “writing

religiously to them as others do praying,” it was not reciprocated: “Replies didn’t come; the silence became longer and more intense.” That silence and lack of response charges the distance with emotion.

The distance increases when her husband’s family comes to visit from Chile and “There is resentment from those who do not accept we now can express ourselves in more than the only language they know.” The very thing that gives Marcela and her husband nearness and access in their new country, language, creates distance between the family, and despite their efforts it has not been overcome. Her husband’s family no longer communicates with them and the distance has become “total absence.” His parents perhaps saw learning English as “an act of betrayal that alienates him from his mother tongue and directs his creative energies to another language” (Jin 31). Yet in fact their son needed English to study and work in New Zealand. Learning English has not stopped them from speaking Spanish at home and raising their son to be bilingual. In contrast, Marcela’s mother, at age seventy-nine, came to New Zealand for six months, having never left Chile her entire life, and enrolled in English classes. Not only did she cross the geographic and emotional distance, but also the linguistic one, whereas Marcela’s husband’s family “have banned us from contacting them again.” Losing all ties with one’s family is a high price to pay for migrating to a new country and learning its language.

Perhaps it is inevitable that migrants start to vanish from the former home horizon. We are no longer part of the daily landscape we left behind. We have, as Marcela once said in class, “no relevance back home.” Though if we have had relevance for years, when that diminishes it is painful. I have often thought that I am the one who writes, calls, Skypes and makes the effort to stay connected with my family and friends and that these endeavors are largely one-sided. Since I left the United States in 2007, I have visited my friends and family there three times. No family member has come to see us in either Sweden or New Zealand. The point is the exchange

must be reciprocated or the distance stretches and becomes even more difficult to bear. As Baldassar notes, “It appears that as long as family members work hard at ‘staying in touch’ by making use of all the technologies available to them, they can maintain mutually supportive relationships across time and space” (“Transnational Families” 409). Yet no number of calls, letters or care packages from home can substitute for actually seeing someone in the country where they now live. Only one friend has visited us thus far in New Zealand, and for everyone else our life here remains an abstraction. As another friend quipped when I visited her in the United States en route to Sweden, “Was it five years? It feels like you’ve been gone five minutes.” In some respects her remark devalues our living in New Zealand entirely because for her it seems to have happened in neither time nor space: she has never seen us here, she never traveled the distance, and therefore it is not real to her.

For migrants whose families do visit them the experience is deeply validating for both parties. For example, Piet’s family came to visit from the Netherlands and he notes: “The distance remained the same, but the gap between them and us seemed no longer unbridgeable and a bit closer. Our letter writing had more meaning too. They had seen things here for themselves and they were able to visualise now what we were talking about in our letters.” He felt the gap was unbridgeable and even his phrasing depicts that. He could have written “the gap between us,” but by polarizing the pronouns, “the gap between them and us,” we sense that tension and opposition, if not the actual distance between the families. The Netherlands remains just as far away, but his New Zealand life now has real meaning for his parents. He notes: “These visits have in my mind contributed to a greater bond with the family too. The family have gained a better understanding about our life here and an appreciation as to why we might like to live here rather than in Holland.” His family’s response counters that of Marcela’s in-

laws, who could not appreciate why they had chosen to live in New Zealand, and indeed rejected them on that basis.

My sister finally “saw” that we lived in New Zealand after the September earthquake in 2010. I was on Skype with her when an aftershock struck and she said, “My God, I just saw your house move behind you.” That it took a 7.1 magnitude earthquake for my sister to realize where we lived says something about the unfathomable and unknowable quality of a migrant’s life elsewhere when it is not witnessed directly. Another reason personal essays are a vital resource is that they explore individual experience firsthand, bearing witness to a life the migrant’s own family may never see or share with them. In the personal essay the writer crosses the distance between herself now and herself then: “Because it is grounded in the profusion of ordinary life, creative nonfiction is always written against loss. For both reader and writer, it provides a palpable reminder that our lives always exceed our most carefully crafted arrangements of them” (Tilden 709-10). It is this writing “against loss” that allows migrants to express such painful realities about migration, for as Gareth, the Welsh doctor, so succinctly put it, “Emigration is surely a synonym for farewell.”

Saying farewell to family and friends is a memory of permanent anguish, especially when the migrant knows he may never see that person again. Gareth remembers saying goodbye to his wife’s grandmother, “We turned and looked back once more, she waved and we never saw her again.” She vanishes, and the piercing revelation is given years later because he knows they never saw her again. She exists now only in memory and on the page, for “Writing is the moving trace of our temporality” (O’Neill 221). Gareth’s essay speaks directly to the sense of loss when one migrates:

Each visit back home to South Wales ends with fewer farewells. Neither of our mothers were alive on our last visit and there were fewer relatives and friends to

wonder if we would ever see them again. Yet the grief reaction, the sense of loss is as poignant as ever. And there is always the sense of guilt. Did we betray all those who loved us; did we turn our backs on our heritage when we landed in New Zealand thirty five years and two days ago? No, we emigrated with their blessing and time and distance have, perhaps, emphasised our Welshness and allowed us to be New Zealanders.

At the time he was writing this essay Gareth could pinpoint to the day how long he has lived in New Zealand. Even more revealing is his admission: “Yet the grief reaction, the sense of loss is as poignant as ever. And there is always the sense of guilt.” Time has not diminished his grief reaction or sense of loss, and the guilt Baldassar observes in migrants is “always” there. When he poses the rhetorical question, “Did we betray all those who loved us; did we turn our backs on our heritage?” he is asking, are we bastards? His answer is, “No, we emigrated with their blessing.” Moreover, “time and distance” from Wales have “emphasised our Welshness and allowed us to be New Zealanders.” In a tension between nearness and distance, the temporal and geographic distance from Wales both emphasizes their Welshness and allows them to be New Zealanders. The absence of Wales makes it more present, for, as John O’Donohue notes, “The opposite of presence is not absence, but vacancy; where there is absence there is still energy, engagement, and longing” (*Eternal Echoes* 313). Gareth’s personal essay is written against loss, but it also inscribes the braided river of two cultures, both Welsh and New Zealand, that do not vie with one another, but flow together.

Saying farewell does not get easier even when the migrant has parted with loved ones more than once. The obligation to stay behind for aging parents is a strong pull for younger migrants, as Kornel, who is in his thirties, attests:

I left home in Slovakia several times by now, but somehow it is always heart breaking. At the very moment of saying goodbye to my parents, it feels as if an invisible hand grabs my heart and pulls it down. Like it wants to hold it so I will not go. This is followed by a very fast movie of evaluation in my head... What am I doing? Is it really worth it? Life is too short and I am leaving my beloved ones behind.

Regardless of how often he has said goodbye, each parting “is always heart breaking.” The emotional pull of his parents makes him question why he is “leaving my beloved ones behind.” The present tense gives a fresh intensity to how he feels, an emotion that is ongoing and undiminished. He can pinpoint exactly when and what he feels: “At the very moment of saying goodbye to my parents, it feels as if an invisible hand grabs my heart and pulls it down. Like it wants to hold it so I will not go.” The feeling is visceral but he describes it metaphorically, “an invisible hand grabs my heart and pulls it down.” English is Kornel’s third language, but the image and emotion are concrete and universal. Questioning why he is leaving his beloved family yet again, “a very fast movie of evaluation” plays in his head, riddled with doubt, “What am I doing? Is it really worth it? Life is too short and I am leaving my beloved ones behind.” Here again is that sense of guilt Gareth says is permanent, “And there is always the sense of guilt.”

Gareth and Kornel, separated by thirty-five years in age and dates of arrival in New Zealand, experience and express the exact same emotion saying goodbye to their families. Migrants are marked by these farewells. How could they not be? Some migrants say goodbye to family and friends they will never see again, and that anguish is something they carry with them to the far side of the world. Atkins argues that, in the personal essay, “A genuinely unique, concrete, and particular angle of vision is manifest in all successful instances of the form. Even so, there remains the experience, *potentially* shareable by all of us, that the essayist assays, the

general that exists alongside the particular” (*Tracing the Essay* 51). Anyone who has said goodbye to someone they love, knowing they may never see them again, understands the grief of such parting. We do not have to migrate to feel such loss. But a critical difference is that migrants live with an ongoing distance and separation from what they know and love, and their personal essays bear witness to that experience throughout their lives.

Migratory Birds

The longing to be with distant family does not cease with time, though it may lessen in intensity. Daisy, the Irish nurse who has been in New Zealand since 1975, expresses this idea in an essay addressing nearness and distance:

I have no blood relation in New Zealand so when family things happen at home I expect to be overhung by that desolate too-far-away feeling. I always want to compress distance, time and cost to be there again, with my own, just for a little while. In the early days at such times I used to go looking for a good bit of bacon to boil (food is such a cultural anchor), come home disappointed and talk myself into getting on with life here. Now that both my parents are dead and casual conversation across the world has become cheaper and easier the far-away feelings come less often and seem less burdensome.

Writing from the perspective of almost forty years in New Zealand, Daisy is all too familiar with “that desolate too-far-away feeling” when “family things” happen back in Ireland. Moreover, her response is expected and is “always” the same: “I always want to compress distance, time and cost to be there again, with my own, just for a little while.” Migrants know this feeling exactly, whatever the prompt, a birth, a wedding, an illness, a death, or simply just to be near those they love and have left behind. Every migrant wants to be “with my own,” but it is not always

possible “to compress distance, time and cost to be there again.” The personal essay bears witness to this migrant longing to be with one’s own, compressing into words a universal feeling of loss and “carries a sense of consequence in the real world. Something happened. It matters. It matters that it really happened” (Iversen 201). The distance matters and is real, and its effect on migrants is ongoing and longlasting.

Distance affects how much truth is divulged between the migrant and his family and friends. This is a common stratagem migrants and their families use, as “people think carefully about whether to tell faraway kin about health concerns or other personal difficulties so as not to ‘worry’ them ... It suggests that when kin are physically absent, their ability to respond appropriately to bad news is limited by distance” (Baldassar “Missing Kin” 254). When Anton the Russian migrant was robbed, he deliberately withheld the information from his father:

I couldn’t tell my father because he had wired me that money, and he would have felt helpless and angry ... To tell him, to let him into my stress and anxiety about this money (it was a lot of money, \$2,000 American), would have crossed that line, because how could I keep up the confident attitude of being comfortable with about 80% of things here in New Zealand?

He wants to spare his father both the worry and the anger, as well as keep up the appearance that everything is going well in New Zealand. He justifies this approach, saying “I felt I was maintaining a good attitude when I spoke with my parents who were so far away from me. I didn’t want to have my mother crying on the phone, and my father telling me I had made the wrong choice.” Distance from the truth and distance from the parents both come into play, protecting both himself and them. Sometimes the migrant’s own family withholds information, as when Kornel’s parents did not tell him his father had cancer back in Slovakia, though typically it seems to be the migrant who does not divulge painful realities.

The silence surrounding what the migrant experienced can exist for decades, as Anna, the Swiss migrant, reveals: “I never told my parents about these difficult early years, and how miserable I had been. I did not want to worry them.” Her distance is twofold, distance from the family she has married into and distance from her own family back home. She wants to spare her parents and as a result was even more cut off from emotional support. Finally, decades later her personal essay gives voice to her mute suffering: “I never told my parents about these difficult early years, and how miserable I had been.” Would it have helped to have told them, or would she have only felt worse, knowing they felt helpless to support her? Anna’s answer speaks for all migrants who long for real contact from afar with those they love, “You want to be able to touch them. You want to talk to them. You want to hear their answers. You want to see their faces, their eyes and their expressions. You want to see their real smiles and not just the remembered ones.” None of that is possible across distance. My own family and friends knew how unhappy I was when I migrated, especially in Sweden, but there was little they could do to alleviate it from afar.

The truth is it is difficult to care for those we love from a distance, emotionally or physically. Limbic resonance breaks down over distance, as evolutionary biologists and neural scientists note:

Our society overlooks the drain on emotional balance that results from severing attachments. From the dawn of the species until a few hundred years ago, most human beings lived out their lives in one community ... The convenient devices that enable extensive mobility are problematic because limbic regulation operates weakly at a distance. We have the means to establish a peripatetic lifestyle, but we will never have the brains for it. (Lewis, Amini and Lannon 159)

When we migrated to Sweden it reanimated our sense of loss, severing attachments we had made over five years in New Zealand, compounding the earlier losses from the United States. Now we had left two places we knew and loved. The absence of language deepened the sense of isolation, creating a distance far outstripping the geographic isolation of New Zealand. Our children were older, eleven and fourteen, and their memories were stronger and clearer than when we went to New Zealand. They suffered from the separation of all that was familiar and dear to them, not the least of which was their native language. One morning in Sweden my daughter found a pair of drumsticks a New Zealand friend of ours had given her and she began to cry, expressing what happens to all migrants: “We left everything behind.” I could not argue. In her young life it was true. We pine when we leave those we love behind and though love stretches across time and space, it does not necessarily help us feel close to those we miss.

Living at a distance from family becomes particularly difficult when migrants’ parents start to age. Migrants feel even farther away when they most want to be near to help. As Piet the Dutchman writes, “As we matured ourselves, we became acutely aware of our parents’ ageing frailty in their old age. That was a time when we felt the need to be with them, but the distance and travel costs prevented us from making this a reality.” Piet is now the age his parents were when he thought this, and yet his essay speaks to the poignant longing to be with parents in their old age, which the vast distance and expense prevented. These emotional sacrifices migrants make will reverberate with anyone who is not present at the end of their parents’ lives.

Even migrants who have the means to travel between New Zealand and their home country to care for their parents point out the emotional toll the distance makes. Huang, the Chinese woman married to a New Zealander, writes:

Seeing family is so important because you leave a country and you leave family behind and a new life can’t completely compensate for not having your loved

ones close by. Not too long ago both of my parents passed away within six months of each other and that was a very difficult time because I spent a lot of time travelling between Christchurch and Taipei to nurse them and to attend to funeral arrangements.

Huang is forthright in stating that “a new life can’t completely compensate for not having your loved ones close by.” She is expected to look after her elderly parents regardless of distance, as “Among Chinese families, caregiving is an essential element of filial piety (*xiao*) that demands service and obedience to ancestors, parents, elders, and officials” (Spitzer et al. 269). Huang has the means to be able to return frequently to nurse both her parents and to make funeral arrangements, fulfilling not only the expectation for filial piety, but also the emotional need for closure across distance with her parents. Not every migrant is so fortunate.

Some migrants manage a caregiving role for years, despite the vast distance between them and their family. Daisy the Irish nurse, herself childless, was able to return to Ireland to see her family quite often: “For a long time after coming to New Zealand I was a migratory bird travelling between here and the British Isles almost every two years. This is the mode for a lot of people who decide to live abroad while their parents are alive.” The image of the migratory bird is apt, as she swaps seasons and hemispheres to look after her aging parents, fulfilling an expected role as “Irish migrant women are often involved in providing care and support to ageing relatives in Ireland” (Evergeti and Ryan 365) and “Close geographical proximity and cheap travel mean that there is an expectation that migrants will go home on a regular basis especially when their families need them” (L. Ryan 303). What is significant is Daisy neither lives close to her family, nor is it inexpensive for her to travel – she is not working in the UK, as many Irish migrants do. The average price of a return economy flight from New Zealand to Europe is between 1,000 to 2,000 Euros and takes a minimum of twenty-four hours (Massetot 303). Daisy’s sister was living

near their parents in Belfast, her brother lived in England, and yet she makes the longer journey “almost every two years,” banking all her holidays and staying over a month each time. Her biennial trips back home illustrate how “Migrant daughters, in particular, feel a responsibility to participate in practical ‘hands-on’ care by engaging in extended return visits, not only to perform their filial duty but also to provide respite to siblings” (Baldassar “The Mobility of Care” 281). Daisy’s nursing experience also informs her visits, as she is well able to evaluate the care her parents receive. Once her parents are no longer living, her filial duty fulfilled across the miles and years, the force that pulled her back is not as strong and the effect of distance is, in her words, “less burdensome.”

The Shared Narrative of Loss

For migrants who wish to provide a care giving role or be present when a parent dies and cannot be, the emotional cost of distance is particularly high. Longing and regret color this experience in all the migrant essays, but none is more moving than Anna, the Swiss migrant’s. Anna had just returned from her summer holidays when her sister phoned to tell her their mother had died. Stunned, she asked, “Died...Just like that...?” Her mother was in a nursing home, but not physically ill. Anna had a young family to care for and could not return for the funeral. Half a world away, she realized: “I am no use to Mum now.” Longing to be with her mother at the end, she imagined herself there in writing:

I imagine myself sitting by her bedside, lifting a spoon of chocolate pudding (Mum had a sweet tooth) from a dish on a tray and placing it between her lips. I wait patiently for her to swallow before offering the next one, the way she must have done for me when I was little. I wish I had been able to feed her like that, even just once. I wish I had kept Mum’s last letter, but I didn’t know it would be

her last, that she was losing the ability to communicate. It is six years since I've seen her. She still knew who I was then.

In the essay she is able to do in writing what she could not in real life: sit beside her aging mother and feed her chocolate pudding. The roles are reversed, she the adult, her mother the child, and the past and lyric present coincide in an imagined vignette that is as moving as it is mournful because it never occurred. The parenthetical aside – “(Mum had a sweet tooth)” – is a nod to the reader who is not privy to this information, but the rest of the passage acts as interior monologue filled with regret, “I wish I had been able to feed her like that, even just once. I wish I had kept Mum's last letter, but I didn't know it would be her last.” The terrible hindsight is even more anguished because not only is there the actual geographic distance between them, augmented by the six years since she last saw her mother, there is the cruel fact of her mother becoming distant through dementia.

Anna could know that the letter she received would be the last one, and so she did not keep it. Just as she could know that when her mother last wrote, “She still knew who I was then.” This is a painful example of the unraveling of the relational narrative Caverero observes, “At once exposable and narratable, the existent always constitutes herself in relation to another” (40). As her mother's awareness of her diminished, so too did her ability to offer any shared narrative back to her daughter, if not in person, then at least in the form of a letter. The chance for any narrative resonance between them ended with her mother's death: “Put simply, the necessary other corresponds first of all with the *you* whose language is spoken in the shared narrative scene” (Cavarero 92). The necessary other, in this case her mother, the one who “still knew who I was then” and “whose language is spoken in the shared narrative scene,” was gone. Perhaps her fictive impulse to create an imaginary co-presence with her mother as she sits feeding her chocolate pudding is an attempt to reconnect their narrative and their selves, which have

been separated first by time and distance, and later by dementia and death. For, as Maruška Svašek, a Czech/Dutch migrant living in Ireland, notes, “The multi-sensorial dimension of co-presence, the ability to see, hear, smell and touch each other, and to interact emotionally within the same time/space frame, allow for a unique form of intimacy which is irreplaceable by communication at a distance” (219). That shared intimacy of co-presence is what migrants forfeit when they move away and which she creates on the page of her essay.

Anna can travel back in imagination but not in reality to her mother’s bedside, and her essay reveals the sorrow at being so far away from her mother at this time. While each of us is stripped of a shared narrative context when our parents die, the lament in her essay is palpable:

I want to know whether it snowed when she died. It seems important. My sister doesn’t know. She lives in another town. I want to ask whether someone was with Mum when she died, but I am afraid my sister might say no. I remember when Mum’s parents died. She had nursed them both at home, right till the end. Poor Mum. I hold onto the image of snow. It is soothing. A still, white world...softly falling flakes...

Twelve time zones away, in the New Zealand summer, she wants to know if it was snowing in Switzerland, a detail so small and ordinary, but for her important. She wants to ask, but cannot bring herself to, if her mother died alone because she is afraid it might be true. This instantly recalls her mother nursing her own parents “at home, right till the end,” and the implied guilt at her own absence from her mother’s deathbed. And then, as though speaking to comfort herself and her mother, she says, “Poor Mum” alone, and her so far away. She returns to the imagined snowfall, “I hold on to the image of snow. It is soothing. A still, white world...softly falling flakes...” She cannot hold onto her mother, in imagination or reality, and she holds onto the image of snow instead. The image is peaceful, as though the snow could cover the loss and ease

her mother's passage into the next world, a passage she was not there to share. The ellipsis, like so many dots of snow falling on the far side of the world, trails off into silence.

In a telling and heartbreaking gesture, she cashed in her savings, six hundred dollars in 1992, to send as many orange roses to her mother's funeral as she could afford, for "Orange was Mum's favourite colour." The roses are transitory, but they must stand in for her at her mother's funeral. She did not have enough money to send herself, only the roses. How many people attending the funeral will know that orange was her mother's favorite color? This is the part of the shared narrative that must be held by another to be understood. The personal essay inscribes the beautiful gesture of sending the orange roses and makes them permanent. The roses become the visual equivalent of her desire to connect, to tell the story and show the meaning of the story. Such poignant and particular details, the six hundred dollars worth of orange roses, the imagined snow falling that day, show how the personal essay can bridge memory and imagination to reveal what losing one's mother feels like to a daughter who migrated half a world away.

In the closing image Anna returns to the prosaic and mundane world, where, stunned and in grief, she finished grocery shopping:

I walk past all those shoppers who don't know that my mother has died. I wish I could wear a sign of mourning that people would recognise, tie a black ribbon around my sleeve, or pin a black cloth button onto my top, like we do at home. Then people would ask me whom I am grieving for, and I could tell them that a whole chapter of my life has just come to a close, that my mum has faded out of the book as if the ink had run out. But all I can do now is wheel the supermarket trolley to my car. I put the groceries in the boot and shut the lid. Then I return the trolley.

Anyone who has lost someone they love knows this surreal and dissociative state of walking around in a state of grief of which others are completely unaware. No one knows her mother has just died, and she wishes to find some way to connect and communicate this. Again we see her bridge the distance between New Zealand and Switzerland, only this time the distance is cultural: “I wish I could wear a sign of mourning that people would recognise, tie a black ribbon around my sleeve, or pin a black cloth button onto my top, like we do at home.” She wants to be able to express her unspeakable and unwitnessed sorrow to those around her, as she would “at home.” How sad those two words are, “at home,” where her mother is no longer alive. At home, those visible tokens of grief – the black ribbon, the black cloth button – would invite others to ask her for whom she is grieving. This in turn would allow her to continue the narrative, the narrative which has been silenced by her mother’s death, for “the verbal response to *who* someone is always consists in the narration of his or her life-story” (Cavarero 73). Only the living can continue the narration about the dead, which is what she longs to be asked for: “and if someone were to ask and I could tell them that a whole chapter of my life has just come to a close, that my mum has faded out of the book as if the ink had run out.”

Anna understands that the relational narrative with her mother is finished. Intuitively she chooses the metaphor of a book which embodies their shared narrative, where “a whole chapter of my life has just come to a close, that my mum has faded out of the book as if the ink had run out.” Only the ink had not run out, it runs on in this extraordinary passage. Even if the other shoppers are unaware her mother has died, far away, possibly alone, we are aware of it through her essay. The personal essay speaks and bears witness to her acute, individual sorrow, that is not imagined, that is not fictive, and is as palpable to the writer now as it was in 1992 when her mother died – and which she shares with us, both her story, and her mother’s story. Perhaps the personal essay more than other genres has this ability to recognize “that every human

being, whatever her qualities, has her unjudgable splendor in a personal identity that *is* irrefutably her story” (Cavarero 87). Anna’s personal essay has given us the narrative of a loss no one asked her for, through no fault of their own. The pathos of the final image of her putting the groceries in the car, returning the trolley, her grief without witness or comfort, shows how unbearable it can be to live at such a distance from those we hold most dear.

Migrants are living and negotiating distance in space, time and emotion from people and places they love throughout their lives. This ongoing dynamic does not end until their life does. Some distance can be overcome, and some cannot. The geographic distance remains permanent and fixed, but how, when and if migrants can bridge that varies. Migrants who make the effort to stay connected with their family and friends by whatever means – letters, phone calls, return visits – keep the distance from becoming any greater than it already is. If friends and family reciprocate, especially if they visit, a migrant’s life achieves a deeper meaning and resonance for having been seen – something felt by both parties. For some migrants the effect of distance abates with time as the ties to the host country become deeper, stronger, more lasting. If their children and grandchildren are born and raised in New Zealand, and as their own narratives become interwoven with others – through work, through community, through friendship, through the deep familiar – what grounds and connects migrants is also now in New Zealand, not only in the place they have left behind. They have another *tūrangawaewae*, another place to stand. So too can migrants find a place to stand in the personal essay, as they ground distance in narrative, bridging their past and present selves, bringing us near to what it felt like to live so far from what was most their own.

Realigning the Inner Compass

I kept crossing the ocean, first to grow up in Belgium, then to study in Ireland, then to marry the man who first pulled me to Sweden, and finally to migrate with our two children to New Zealand, a different ocean, wider, farther, another hemisphere, where the Pacific and Indo-Australian plates meet and push up these isolated and beautiful islands. Those tectonic plates sheered apart and sent us back to Sweden, where the distance was cool, measured, and unbearable. I stood on the rocky shore and looked at the slate cold arm of the North Sea imagining the blue green water off New Zealand, half a world away. It was not the same water. It was not even an ocean. “[D]istance looks our way,” the poet says (Brasch “The Islands” 2.9), and I thought, not here. No distance looks here. No one sees us here. We have come too far. We have come to where there is not enough to hold us or make us want to put down roots in the stony soil. Not language, not culture, not the Southern Cross, not the second cup of tea, or even the first. Distance looks our way and calls to us.

We fly over the Indian Ocean from Copenhagen to Singapore. We cannot see it, but it is there, thirty thousand feet below. I have never flown this way. I feel the hidden ocean realigning my inner compass as I fly this direction and I know I’m coming around to seeing what I missed the first time I lived in New Zealand. Now I see what is here, not what isn’t. Now I feel very close to the world again, the shops in Newtown where I walk to buy groceries, the Cook Strait just over the hill with the weather whipping through, the clouds scudding by as I write about distance. My daughter’s school is a block away, my son rides the bus a mere ten minutes, and my husband cycles up the Wellington hills to campus because that is the sort of madman he is, who, time and again, has drawn me across oceans for him and with him. But now we are in New Zealand, our *tūrangawaewae* and somehow everything and everyone that once felt so far

away the first time we lived here, no longer does. We have closed the invisible distance between what we love and where we are in the world.

Chapter 5: The Second Cup of Tea – On Belonging

“Where you are understood, you are at home.”

– John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*

The poppies are deep pink with lavender centers, *Papaver somniferum*, opium poppies, gorgeous transient flowers waving on silvery green foliage. The seeds were given to me by a friend in the United States when I admired these tall poppies in her garden. The original seeds came from her Danish mother-in-law who brought them from the old country. I was thrilled the first year they flowered in my American garden, their beautiful pink petals and silvery green leaves harmonized with everything in bloom, the orange and yellow calendula, the English roses, the purple, mauve and white cosmos, the deep indigo delphinium, the sky-blue flax. They made me so happy, those pink poppies, and even though they were short-lived, I knew they would come back season after season, seeding themselves all over the terraced garden. So prolific were they, I gathered dozens of seed heads that autumn and let the stalks dry in several vases around the house. Inside the pods thousands of seeds rattled like tiny rain as they shook dry.

And then we moved from the United States to New Zealand in January of 2007. Our garden lay under a foot of snow. Two men came and packed everything up, including the dry poppy stalks in Swedish crystal vases, accidental stowaways. The seeds came unaware, as seeds often do, migrating by whatever means, from place to place. When the shipping container arrived and was unloaded, we waded through the chaos, unpacking endless boxes for what felt like a month. I still cannot fathom how Matt, the lead packer, managed to pack the entire kitchen in a day when it took me a week to put it away. Then one afternoon in late February, antipodean August, the sunlight so sparkling it looked rinsed, I unwrapped the seed stalks where dozens of tiny poppy seeds had shaken free into the paper. I sprinkled them around our rental

garden in Christchurch that afternoon. They did not come up the following spring. No permanent residency permit for these migrants. Maybe they knew they came into the country illicitly, although I had completely forgotten about that when I scattered them about the garden. I took it as a sign the poppies were not meant to be here, anymore than I was, still in the throes of my resistance to living in New Zealand.

As with many migrants, finding work that first year proved difficult because my skills went unrecognized. I worked at one temporary job after another around the university where I had hoped to be teaching, as I had done for years in both Europe and the United States. I was missing something that had defined me: “Work provides a sense of agency, purpose, and worth that is gratifying on deeper levels of the psyche” (Akhtar 62). My husband had all that plus a social milieu through work, as did my children with school, while I was freezing in an uninsulated, single-glazed house becoming more depressed. The house sunlit and lovely in summer was verging on uninhabitable in winter. “Your house is like a tomb,” Marcela my Chilean friend and future student told me. “It makes you feel *entumicida*,” and she made the gesture of holding herself for warmth. She went on to explain *entumicida* meant numb, not only physically but also emotionally, and likened it to “a mild hypothermia of the soul.”

What I was feeling was not just physical cold, which was real enough in that arctic house, but also a profound sense of displacement and loss that ensues when one migrates: loss of home, loss of culture, loss of the deep familiarity that comes with time in one place. Five years and two major earthquakes later, having migrated to Sweden, I re-experienced this, with an added and more crucial loss, loss of language. For the migrant, “above all there is the problem of language, the most powerful cultural intermediary, vehicle for thought and symbol, principal entrance portal to social relations” (Liotta 4). Nothing prepared me for how painful and integral the loss of language would be in my daily world, something as simple as phoning the school to report my

daughter was sick, reading instructions and filling out forms, or understanding what the checkout clerk said to me became difficult, if not impossible. I had lost my voice.

A Full Migrant

In retrospect, I realize migrating to New Zealand where I share the language made my transition far easier than that of nonnative speakers. I had no idea until I migrated to Sweden how language permeates everything: spoken, written, heard. I was not what Salman Rushdie calls “a full migrant” who suffers “a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by people whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own” (277-78). Migrants themselves distinguish between being “a full migrant” or not, as I discovered. On the first day of class Cathrine the Danish migrant said to her fellow Scottish participant, whom she knew, “But you’re not a migrant!” Dorothy replied, “Yes I am. I came from Scotland fifty years ago.” “But you speak English.” In the eyes of nonnative speakers if one shares the language of the host country, somehow one is “not a migrant.” In Sweden, a bona fide “full migrant,” I empathized with an enormous part of the migration experience hitherto missing: language.

Twenty of the thirty-seven migrant writers in this braided narrative are nonnative speakers, an experience that both humbled and encouraged me when I lived in Sweden. I felt if they had learned another language, perhaps so could I. Those twenty individuals come from all parts of the world: Croatia, Thailand, Russia, India, Switzerland, Denmark, China, the Netherlands, Malaysia, Kiribati, Slovakia, Germany, Chile, Korea, and even Sweden. They write about their migration experience in a second or third language, and as such “[t]hey are the voices of the transplanted and translated subjects” (Seyhan 9). Even so, their willingness and ability to write personal essays in another language reveal an adaptation to their chosen environment, both

on the page and in New Zealand. They are migrant seeds that took and flourished and, like poppy seeds that lie dormant, they must be disturbed in order to germinate – migration is, if anything, a disturbance, an unsettlement. Becoming settled requires effort, as Mary, the Scottish psychotherapist, notes: “Fresh off the boat or plane, the basics of daily living absorb an enormous amount of mental and physical energy. Unfamiliarity in a new country robs us, momentarily, of an anchor in society and is disorienting.”

To be without the anchor of language is to be adrift in the world. I experienced this firsthand when I lost my keys in the grocery store in Sweden. I knew the word for keys in Swedish, but not the word for lost, and this seems emblematic of what it means to migrate: to lose your keys. This loss of language was akin to what Cixous believes is the origin of writing: “The origin of the gesture of writing is linked to the experience of a disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, to have been thrown outside” (Conley 13). In Sweden I had been thrown outside and lost the key to the world: language. The primacy of language would never have been so blindingly apparent to me had we not migrated to Sweden. For it is language which grants us access to a new country more than any other key.

When I was out in public in Sweden, I felt the intense isolation that comes from not understanding much of what was said around me in Swedish. The phrase I grasped over and over again, was “*Vad sa du?*” What did you say? I could have replied, if I knew the words: I lost my keys. Living in Sweden, I discovered my own native language kept me company in a way I had never experienced before. It was as though English was consoling me for its absence in my dailiness. I felt English lap around my head like water. All day while the children attended school in Swedish, thrown into the deep end where I could not help them swim, and my husband was at work, semi-fluent in Swedish having been married to a Swede years before, I was alone with my language, trying to express how migrants connect to their new environment. The

irony of being a vulnerable participant in my own research was always present, informing the writing. I thought of what the exiled Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz said, “Language is our only homeland” (Umpierre 135). How true that was, and how bereft I felt of my homeland, which I realized was not just language, but all the senses of connection I had with and through language, to people, to places, to virtually every aspect of my life. I realized I was pining as much for New Zealand as for my own language, and the fact we did not have a landline, allowing me to phone friends or family in the US or New Zealand, intensified my sense of being cut off.

One day I stood on the shore of our local beach and named all the things I could in Swedish: *sten, hav, himmel, sol, jord, träd, snö*. Stone, sea, sky, sun, earth, tree, snow. I thought of my student Anton, the Russian navigator who had washed up in New Zealand when his company went bankrupt, writing in his essay, “with no language in my heart but hope.” I had to hope I would learn the language, for how else could I connect with Sweden? When the truth was much simpler, and beyond language: I did not want to connect with Sweden, nor in turn, did the country or its inhabitants want to connect with me, or my children, or my husband. And so when I stood on that shore naming the things I could, in those strange vowels spoken at the front of the mouth, the lips rounded like a fish if it could speak, I was trying to summon the world back: *sten, hav, himmel, sol, jord, träd, snö*. Stone, sea, sky, sun, earth, tree, snow. But this was not my world, and it could not be called back. My world was on the other side of the earth, in New Zealand, twelve time zones and two seasons away, where it was summer. But I did not know that then, the braided river had not reached that point, and it is only now, with this backward Kierkegaardian glance, that I can see where home is.

For migrants the key is to find what makes them feel at home in the new country, what gives them a sense of place, of belonging, of attachment. Having been uprooted to Sweden, no

longer surrounded by my native language, and then having the remarkable good fortune to return to New Zealand, I understand firsthand the enduring importance of our need to belong, to feel connected, and to be at home in the world. Rushdie, a migrant, argues that the triple loss the migrant experiences is significant “because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human” (278). How migrants find new ways to describe themselves and be human fits well with the exploratory nature of the personal essay, informed as it is by Montaigne’s motto “*Que sçay-je?*” – what do I know? – a phrase that covers everything from complete bafflement to wonder to skepticism to knowledge. Indeed, migrant experience has a powerful parallel with this “mode of writing that is literally a self-trying-out, the personal essay is a testing (‘assay’) of one’s own intellectual, emotional, and physiological responses to a given topic” (Smith and Watson 276). For migration is a dynamic process of “a self-trying-out” and a testing of one’s “intellectual, emotional and physiological responses” to living in a different country, culture and perhaps language. That connection between the migrant and the personal essay is reminiscent of Emerson’s words, “Then I dare: I will also essay to be” (98).

As migrants “essay to be” in the host country, their essays provide a perspective that is informed and inquiring, as both outsider and insider, at home and not, belonging and not belonging, a dialectical tension inherent in both the migrant and the genre. More than other genres “the essay enacts the process of accommodation between the world and the ‘I,’ and thus it is consciousness real-izing itself” (Hardison 630). This protean form has the capacity to reveal how migrants learn to accommodate and adapt themselves to their new country, or fail to, or as with many migrants, find themselves somewhere in between. The process of accommodation between the world and “I” exists both between the migrant and the host country in all its myriad

layers – linguistic, social, physical, existential – and the migrant and the text. They are parallel, analogous processes: the migrant must find a way in the new country, and the writer must find a way in the essay, sharing the voyage of trial and error, discovery and understanding. As the philosopher and essayist William Gass points out, “the hero of the essay is its author in the act of thinking things out. Feeling and finding a way” (19-20).

While the claim for author as hero might seem hyperbolic, nevertheless the migrant and writer both are in the process “of thinking things out” and “[f]eeling and finding a way.” Susan, the American who escaped to Antarctica to later marry a New Zealander, gives an apt analogy for this process of acclimation:

Moving to a new country is like having your dog hide your comfortable pair of shoes daily. Each day you get up and you have to search for them. If you can't find them you have to wear substitutes until they are found. The risk then is that each different pair of shoes may not be quite as comfortable. This is just like trying to find your place of belonging in your new home. I have tried on lots of shoes since moving here, and I'm still trying them on.

Everyone knows what a comfortable pair of shoes feels like. What the reader might not have experienced is losing the ordinary sense of comfort as it applies to where one lives. Not only did she lose this sense of comfort daily and have to search for it anew, or failing that, try substitutes, these substitutes “may not be quite as comfortable.” This search for what fits, for what is comfortable, “is just like trying to find your place of belonging in your new home.” As a migrant Susan is still looking for what will give her this “place of belonging,” and her extended metaphor describes this process of accommodation between the world and “I.” Even though she has lived and worked in New Zealand over a decade, is married to a New Zealander and is a native speaker, she has not yet found what fits: “I have tried on lots of shoes since moving here, and

I'm still trying them on." As Gass's phrase indicates, "Feeling and finding a way" is an ongoing process, not only in the essay, but in a migrant's life too.

How migrants find a sense of belonging, if indeed they do, is, to borrow from Montaigne, "*ondoyant et divers*" (undulating and diverse), like the flow of individual rivers. The desire to belong is central to humans, and, however we define it, we know belonging when we experience it and when we do not. Like the word 'home', a concept often associated with belonging, the feeling of belonging sets up a resonance within us which we recognize as much by its absence as by its presence. Belonging is the resonance between the self and the world. Individuals do not belong just in any place in the world, as our year and a half in Sweden made immediately apparent to us. As with any abstraction that is difficult to define, impossible to quantify, and highly individual, belonging seems to operate on a spectrum or continuum for each migrant. Some migrants feel they belong in their new country without doubt, others may never feel this, no matter how long they live there, while other migrants fall somewhere in between, continuing to search for and discover the resonance between themselves and their world.

Contrapuntal Awareness

The personal essays considered here cover a span of sixty years, written by men and women, both native and nonnative speakers of English. They represent an array of ages and countries of origin, and they reveal a richness of expression and perception about what it means to belong. Gregory Madison, a Canadian migrant who studies the existential and psychological aspects of migration, notes that "the lived experience of migration has been largely neglected," and the literature which does exist tends to focus on those forced into exile or pressed to migrate rather than choosing to do so (239). This makes the personal essays of voluntary migrants even more

vital to explore, as they bear witness to “the lived experience of migration.” For, as Lopate observes, “The personal essay turns out to be one of the most useful instruments with which outsiders can reach the dominant culture quickly and forcefully and testify to the precise ambiguities of their situation as individuals and group members” (li). As outsiders, strangers who have come to town, migrants can speak to what it means to belong and to feel at home, among the central questions for humans, and the answer to which they do not take for granted.

Migrant personal essays challenge the idea that “When we are home, we don’t need to talk about it” (Boym 251). Perhaps those who have been uprooted, even by choice, have a greater need to talk and write about home than those who have never left. Migrants face a dilemma those who remain at home may never experience, as Richard, the American who came in his forties with his family to New Zealand, writes: “A person who leaves home and finds a new place that feels like home has created a lifelong dilemma. In truth, that person will never be completely ‘home’ again. The longing for the other ‘home’ will never end and it is nothing if it is not emotional” (Boyer 52). For many migrants, this dilemma both creates and informs a dialogical discourse in the personal essay, for underneath the braided river of their lives is another, older, deeper current: the current of belonging somewhere else.

Few concepts can be more charged than belonging and home, because unlike those who may never leave home, migrants know what it means to live elsewhere. As Edward Said notes, “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles [and I would argue migrants] are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness – to borrow a phrase from music – that is *contrapuntal*” (55). The migrant “plurality of vision” is informed by an original frame of reference that is linguistic, cultural, and environmental, and which now is overlaid with a new frame of reference. Those simultaneous dimensions – one absent, one present – and that contrapuntal awareness, are

what make migrant experience challenging. How migrants negotiate that awareness determines whether they feel discord, harmony, or something in between, living in their adopted country.

Anna, who came as a bride from Switzerland to New Zealand in 1968, describes this contrapuntal awareness beautifully. The lack of resonance between herself and the new environment was immediately apparent to her:

The strangest thing was the nearness of those far away, and the distance of those present. The people I had lost seemed almost part of myself, while the people I was with seemed as remote as the moon. They spoke differently, dressed differently, behaved differently, cooked differently, spent their time differently, and treated me differently. I was a stranger, an intruder who had stolen an only son. As far as they were concerned I need not have come here, but since I was here, I had better do as they said. Even my husband was different. This was home for him and he settled comfortably back into his routine. Several times a day, it seemed, I did something wrong. I should have said that, or not said that, or done that, or not done that, or even not seen that. I tried hard to conform. I could not bear the isolation. I needed to be accepted, and seemingly, the only way to acceptance was complete integration.

This is an eloquent and painful account of one migrant who has lost roots, her native language (and Swiss is only a spoken language), and social norms but must find a way to adapt. Her contrapuntal awareness is both distilled and embodied: “The people I had lost seemed almost part of myself, while the people I was with seemed as remote as the moon.” Presence and absence reverse themselves. What is distant becomes present, and what is present becomes, if not absent, far away. Notice her people are termed “lost,” not left behind, yet they became internalized and “almost part of myself,” whereas the people she found herself with are alien and

distant, “as remote as the moon.” They did not welcome her as the new bride, she was the stranger in their midst, and consequently her introduction to the new country was fraught: “I was a stranger, an intruder who had stolen an only son.” Contrapuntal awareness reveals that every aspect of their lives differed from hers: their speech, dress, behavior, food, leisure time, and their treatment of her as a new family member. Though clearly unwelcome, “As far as they were concerned I need not have come here,” nevertheless as the daughter-in-law she was forced to accept that “I had better do as they said.” The phrase is parental and disciplinary. Finally, her one point of contact and familiarity, her new husband, was also different. She had to adapt not only to a new country, culture and family, but to a partner who had changed too, “Even my husband was different” as he reverted to who he was at home: “This was home for him and he settled comfortably back into his routine.” What was home for him was displacement for her.

Anna’s husband was literally and figuratively back home, fluent in the language, the social codes, the innumerable little things that enable settling “comfortably back into his routine.” Anna was not at home in the language, culture or setting, and no one around her made an effort to make her feel at home, including her husband. What followed was a daily stream of criticism, “Several times a day, it seemed, I did something wrong. I should have said that, or not said that, or done that, or not done that, or even not seen that.” Moreover, as noted earlier, she shielded her own family from her suffering, “I never told my parents about these difficult early years, and how miserable I had been. I did not want to worry them. All I could do was trying to survive in this foreign environment, which was so unlike the one I had come from.” Her silence must have intensified her sense of being alone and cut off – no one knew she suffered, not even her own husband apparently. Small wonder she writes, “I could not bear the isolation.” Her adaptive response is: “I tried hard to conform. I needed to be accepted, and seemingly, the only way to acceptance was complete integration.” What her essay addresses directly, the need for

acceptance, is grounded in the fact that “human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by the need to belong, that is, a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister and Leary 522). Newly married and half a world away from “the people [she] had lost,” her need to form “enduring personal relationships” in her new family and country would have been crucial.

For migrants the need to belong is intensified by their separation from what constituted belonging hitherto: family, friends, community, sense of place, and perhaps language. Those who have been uprooted seek to be regrounded, to have a sense of belonging. Cut off from everything she knew and loved, Anna’s accommodation between the world she lived in and her own identity meant “the only way to acceptance was complete integration.” Integration has many levels and for her as the foreign partner “[t]his initiation, and the need to commit almost from day one to life as a migrant, is another important factor in the ‘extreme’ assimilation process” (Scott and Cartledge 67). Not sharing the same language or cultural background with her husband Anna found herself internally and externally dislocated: “Not only was I between two countries, in a place I could not call home, and between two families, one I had lost and one I did not yet belong to, but now I was also between two languages, neither of which I could manage efficiently.” She articulates exactly the plight of the full migrant who has lost roots and place, and is living among people with a different social code. She found herself between countries, “in a place I could not call home,” which is all the more striking as she realizes “My mother tongue was slipping away.” Her home had disappeared both literally and linguistically. She had no place, neither Switzerland nor New Zealand. Her family was lost, the word recurs, and its repetition is not accidental, polarized by a family “I did not yet belong to.” The binary for many migrants is loss/belonging. While she was willing to adapt and accept her husband’s family, the acceptance was not yet reciprocated.

Finally Anna found herself between languages, “neither of which I could manage efficiently.” To be between languages is a transitional, liminal state, a place without words or means of connection to either her present situation or her past. Seyhan argues that diasporic texts address “spaces of untranslatability between languages, cultures, and texts, that these spaces define and mark the silences and pathos of exile” (157-58). With the notable exception of perhaps being able to return to their country of origin, unlike some exiles, migrants share these spaces of untranslatability marked by “silences and pathos.” Anna experienced this silence quite literally in “that horrifying moment when I met another Swiss and discovered that I could no longer converse in Swiss.” The silence extended to her inability to share her language and cultural memory with her New Zealand husband. She laments that if she had been married to someone Swiss, “We would have spoken the same language. I would not have lacked the vocabulary to express how I felt. Above all, we would have had shared memories and been able to reminisce together.” Not being able to communicate so much of who she was and how she felt intensified her isolation. As Anton, the Russian migrant writes, “Not having language keeps everything inside you.” He too married a New Zealander who did not share his language.

Anna’s loss of connection was further aggravated as she could not practice as a midwife, which she had done for three years in Switzerland, delivering over six hundred babies. In New Zealand she could only work as student, sidelined both in terms of salary and responsibility. Here we see her contrapuntal awareness applied to the workplace: “I found it incredibly frustrating not being able to deliver babies anymore. I had much more experience in midwifery than the average GP here, and they often did things that horrified me. That did not exactly help me with my settling in this country.” Not being able to practice as a midwife had an adverse affect upon her settling, because “If the vocational shift is sharply downward, the resulting psychic turmoil can be great indeed” (Akhtar 68). Stripped of so many contexts for connection

and belonging – roots, place, family, language, meaningful work – no wonder she felt complete integration was her only choice.

Looking back almost forty years, Anna's personal essays reveal that her sense of self was not completely subsumed by the family and culture she joined. As she became more familiar with her environment, able to negotiate between herself and this new world, she discovered something small but remarkable:

Years later I realised that I had not, as I thought, adjusted to New Zealand customs, but to the customs of my in-law-family. I had no means of telling the difference. All I knew was what they told me. These were often quite trivial things, but in my endeavour to get it right, I accepted them as the New Zealand way. I remember the astonishment I felt one day, to find that in other New Zealand families you did not have to wait till everyone had finished their first cup of tea before you were given a second one.

In her effort to adapt and belong in her new family, she accepted what she was told by her in-laws as “the New Zealand way.” What a revelation that second cup of tea must have been, casting all those earlier and future cups of tea in a new light. Here we see how the essay “can present its story *and* consider the meaning of the story” (Hampl *I Could Tell You Stories* 33). Her writing delivers this moment of understanding that transformed how she sees New Zealand. The personal essay allows the writer to look back and discover the river under the river, revealing that the surface of her daily life in her new family was not actually the cultural truth. She understands in the present what she could not in the past, thanks to the reflective power of the genre.

What fosters a sense of belonging is understanding, the migrant understanding and being understood on multiple levels, linguistic, existential, emotional, and cultural. As the philosopher

and poet John O'Donohue reminds us: "Understanding nourishes belonging" (*Anam Cara* 14). Migrants may not understand they can have a second cup of tea initially, or any of the myriad ways of navigating custom, landscape, or language. That process takes time, even years, and leads Anna to conclude, "I now feel thoroughly at home in this country. My language problems have sorted themselves out too and I can switch easily from one to the other." Her personal essays reveal how deeply at home she is in a language she once could not "manage efficiently."

Grounding the Unsayable

The personal essay offers the second cup of tea, a recognition of something that was not realized until later, which is akin to how migrants learn to live in their new country. Just as the world offers ongoing lessons to the migrant, "The essay is trying to teach you something about how to live your life" (Atkins *Reading Essays* 263), and the migrant writer only realizes that by being attentive to both the world and the page. That nexus between migrant and world and migrant and text is what makes the personal essay such a rewarding form to write and to read, as "the essay's payoff is recognition, which is different from knowledge or mere understanding in that it arises in felt or shared experience. To recognize something is to be affected by what we already know but didn't realize, an insight that leads us back to what is both familiar and strange" (Porter xi). Here we see the Kierkegaardian orientation of the genre, in that the essayist lives forward, but understands backward, recognizing things only in the present that were not possible in the past. The essay, like a braided river, reveals far more over the course of its flow than the mere surface facts of a migration narrative. The essay, more than any other genre, has this ability to flow forward into recognition while looking backward at the past:

The essayist thoughtfully scrutinizes the world, drawing out significances which until then may have never been clearly seen or fully understood, creating and

explaining new artifacts of intelligence through the alchemy of mind and words. Essays wander, wonder, and make connections; they meander among and sift through the bewildering array of the world's physical, social, and cultural phenomena, creating meaning and structure in life which may never have been evident before. (Ryden 240)

Moreover the personal essay makes evident the meaning and structure in an individual's life, not only for the writer, but also for those who read her work, and therefore the recognition is twofold.

The frisson of recognition was shared by migrant writers in each class I taught, struck by each other's narratives, both in life and on the page, as they "essay to be." They recognized something both "familiar and strange" (Porter xi) in each other's prose, that is also unique, which is what Cavarero argues is the relational nature of narrative: "This ethic desires a you that is truly an other, in her uniqueness and distinction. No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story ... [and] your uniqueness is exposed to my gaze and consists in an unrepeatable story whose tale you desire" (92). Since migrants are often perceived as other, they recognize and value this quality, where the familiar and the strange coincide, which echoes their own contrapuntal awareness. They understand the relational dynamic is always in play in the contact zone where self meets other.

The recognition of being other informed all the migrant classes. From the moment they saw the course title – "Writing the Personal Essay: Migration and Identity" – they were making a choice based on that link between "migration" and "identity" and their desire to write about it. Even if they knew nothing about the genre, they had an inkling about what the word "personal" meant. Underpinning the design for the course was the idea that "other migrants are already known as not known; they are already assigned a place as strangers before the identifications can

take place. In other words, it is through an uncommon estrangement that the possibility of such a migrant community comes to be lived” (Ahmed 344). This study redresses the “known as not known,” recognizing that migrants themselves understood this idea firsthand. Moreover they were well acquainted with being “assigned a place as strangers,” as the stranger who comes to town, but what if that “place” was acknowledged in writing? In their essays they were free to explore the questions around migration and identity however they chose, driven by their own concerns and narratives. Each migrant writer was wrestling with this central question, in one way or another:

[C]an the events and accidents of life add up to a coherent story? That is every migrant’s question. And since these events and accidents are beyond an uprooted person’s control, the unity of a life-story has to reside in the person telling it; unity, we would say, lies in the quality of the narrator’s voice. The narrator, following Pico [della Mirandola’s] precept, must learn how to tell about disorder and displacement in his or her own life in such a way that he or she does not become confused or deranged by the telling. (Sennett 22)

In five different classes, two of them disrupted for multiple weeks by major earthquakes, migrant writers met to talk about their personal essays. The richness of that exchange, the combined elements of risk and trust disclosed in their writing, the moments of recognition and vulnerability from “an uncommon estrangement” created a migrant community of writers. Both their essays and the class provided a space where they could voice what it means to belong or not. They developed and shared an understanding that sometimes even those closest to them may not provide space for, a fact David the Scottish doctor acknowledged in his final essay: “So I think, where do I turn? Why not to this happy band of ex-pats who have been brave enough to bare their souls to me and have indulged me in the same?”

Regardless of age, gender, language or point of origin, migrants share one thing: they all left their home country. Home. The word alone implies a range of emotion, meaning, and resonance, as personal as it is universal, as abstract as it is visceral. Home is where we connect to what matters most to us, however that is defined: “One’s conception of home is simultaneously imagined and real, nostalgic and concrete, clear, yet contradictory. Its perception is influenced by personal emotions as well as social-cultural memories, symbols, and traditions. It is not one clearly defined spatial or emotional notion but a multiple construct in individuals’ lives” (Chaitin, Linstroth and Hiller para. 29). For the migrant the concept of home is particularly freighted and ineluctable, as much by absence as presence. We know what home is even if it remains rooted in what remains unsayable, as Rilke reminds us: “Things are not nearly so comprehensible and sayable as we are generally made to believe. Most experiences are unsayable; they come to fullness in a realm that words do not inhabit” (*A Year with Rilke* 37). Of course the challenge for the writer and for the migrant is to ground that unsayable experience of home in their lives and their texts.

In Suk, who left Korea in her forties, grasps this unsayable quality of home: “The taste of our homeland life is alive all the time in our minds. It transcends time and space which impacts nostalgia. It is difficult to ensure a deep inner satisfaction with life in this country. Happiness will in part create a home where one is planted, but our roots are always deep within the motherland.” Here we see how disembodied and yet pervasive the concept of home is: “The taste of our homeland life is alive all the time in our minds.” She signals this “taste” is universal to all migrants with “our minds,” and states that “It transcends time and space.” This presence/absence of home in the mind makes it “difficult to ensure a deep inner satisfaction in this country.” Home remains on the level of abstraction and happiness: “happiness will in part create a home where one is planted.” The distancing effect of “one” and the I absorbed into the

collective “our” indicates just how ungrounded she remains, not only in the text, but “in this country.”

Migrants have left their roots, their social norms, and perhaps their language when they come to a new country. When In Suk migrated in 1994 with her nine-year-old daughter, she knew no one, she had neither a place to live nor a job, and she scarcely knew English. Yet she recognized what was required of her to make this transition successful: “I started to see this new life as different, as a beginning, as a time requiring profound change.” Moreover she embraced this change from the outset, “Looking back to the beginning of my migrant life I found myself utterly captivated by the Kiwis, Māoris and Polynesians I met. I have chosen New Zealand, the small islands, as my second home and love the people.” Critical to her sense of belonging was her acceptance of those she met and the active choice of New Zealand as her “second home.” That In Suk was “utterly captivated by the Kiwis, Māoris and Polynesians” dovetails with what the essayist and serial migrant Pico Iyer advises, “My first rule is to look for the distinctive good in any place and try to learn from it” (“Somewhere Man” 74). Yet despite embracing New Zealand as her “second home,” the experience has been neither straightforward nor easy, as acceptance must be reciprocal, a point she makes in an essay with the revealing title, “Where Is My Real Home?”:

I felt like I wanted to be born again into this country. Physically I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was accepted here, but there were still many others who treated us as gentile intruders. To venture out into the new environment, I have learnt English and taken new cultural norms. I didn’t isolate myself, but I was often pushed into isolation.

In Suk is a devout Christian, and it is not surprising she invokes the metaphor of wanting “to be born again into this country.” This desire for a rebirth is not without complications. She writes

that “Physically I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt I was accepted here,” which reflects her status as a legal migrant, but this is offset by “many others who treat us as gentile intruders.” The religious analogy of “gentile intruders” again underscores the sense that she is both other and unwelcome in her new country.

At the time In Suk immigrated in 1994, migration from Asian countries had increased because of a significant change in New Zealand’s immigration policy in 1986, whereby the country was no longer focusing on ethnicity alone (Trlin 4). Anti-Asian sentiment became rife. In Suk experienced the racism firsthand, “A few naughty youths, ‘Go back to your land, yellow Asians’, bawled to us behind our backs. They even threw some eggs onto my car when I got out of my car in town.” Despite making an effort to adapt to New Zealand, “I have learnt English and taken new cultural norms,” the results are not necessarily forthcoming: “I didn’t isolate myself, but I was often pushed into isolation.” In this balanced sentence everything pivots on the comma, and the very thing she strives to avoid – “I didn’t isolate myself” – meets with a negative response, “but I was often pushed into isolation.” The verb becomes the noun in a rather telling enactment of how integration is thwarted by some in the host country. Unless the host country helps facilitate integration, it does not matter how willing migrants are to adapt: they may never feel at home.

Fortunately In Suk also met New Zealanders who helped her to feel accepted in her chosen “second home.” Their acceptance was particularly important as some members of the Korean community shunned her as a divorced mother. This runs counter to what one would expect as, “Within the familiar surroundings of the ethnic group, the immigrant or minority group member will usually find acceptance, common interests, opportunities to give and receive and a sense of belonging” (Cox 147). However, the stigma against divorce was so strong in the Korean community, both natively and locally, that she did not find that acceptance: “Whereas

in NZ, most people here have accepted me as who I am. I could get out of this Korean snail shell with the support of Kiwi friends.” In Suk is a very shy and modest woman and thanks to her Kiwi friends she has been coaxed out of “this Korean snail shell” that circumscribed her existence, both in her own country and in the Korean community in New Zealand. In her final essay, in which she weighs the pros and cons of her migration, she writes: “With regard to different societal values and norms, I have encountered a new world, in some ways this is freeing, but also daunting. There was an inner conflict between the host country and the home country, but I seem to be set free from the chains of my cultural and religious practices.” Again she experiences the polarization between the cultures and countries, this time as an inner conflict, a contrapuntal awareness, but it resolves itself in what is ultimately freeing from “the chains of my cultural and religious practices.” These images of confinement and constriction, snail shells and chains, are shed in “a new world.”

Perhaps it is not surprising that a woman who continually weighs things and appears to be both open and fair-minded should work as a Justice of the Peace where “I challenge each situation from my experience. My diplomacy has yielded good results within the community. That means, I continue to pass *Jung* onto Kiwis with a big smile and explain that is a Korean way. It then becomes the reciprocal relationship.” *Jung* represents one of the most important attributes of Korean culture, and she translates it as affection, humanity, warm-heartedness, paternal love, friendship, becoming attached and thoughts of one’s beloved homeland. *Jung* also exists in its negative form, in the absence of all the aforementioned traits. Clearly for Koreans *Jung* underpins what it means to belong.

The Contact Zone

The idea of reciprocity, of sharing, of becoming attached and belonging is vital for migrants to offset the losses entailed with leaving their home country. They must reconnect with a sense of community, the very thing that is ruptured by migration:

immigration forced or unforced, is accompanied by factors such as the severing of community ties, the loss of social networks and familiar bonds, and the loss of resources and meaning systems. One of the ways in which immigrants cope with these losses is through adaptation to their new experiences, through a process called community making. (Chaitin, Linstroth and Hiller para. 34)

Some migrants find community through work, school, or church, through neighbors, their children, or volunteering, or through sports or joining groups that interest them, any way they manage to connect with others to feel less like “other” themselves. Other migrants may be welcomed outright if they fulfill a vital community role, as happened to Gareth, the Welsh doctor, who became the local GP: “They were excited on our arrival and wanted us to feel wanted and at home. If anything they tried, at times, too hard. Our celebrity had spread through the district and wherever we went men and women asked how we were settling in and what did we think of New Zealand.”

Still other migrants actively seek out community, as Elizabeth, the Englishwoman whose marriage became a casualty of migration, does. Indeed her experience could serve as a textbook example for how to find and build community as a single parent:

With no family or local friends I made a real effort to become a member of the community. However flat or lacking in confidence I felt, I made a daily effort to embrace the life here. I went to church and suspended my agnosticism to enjoy the truly uplifting and friendly sermons. I took Poppy to the Monday playgroup,

the Tuesday and Friday toddler music classes, and started my own single mothers' coffee group. This is now a thriving Thursday morning salon of 10 delightful, intelligent Sumner mums and their little ones.

Not only did Elizabeth join in everywhere, to include church, playgroups, and toddler music classes, she also created a group for single mothers like herself who were juggling work and family. The idea of suspending agnosticism in order to enjoy something one otherwise might not seem instructive. If the migrant neither believes nor disbelieves in community, but instead decides to participate in it, other possibilities and opportunities arise. The embrace of community must be mutual, and she was fortunate in where she chose to live: "I was astonished at how friendly and open the people were after my experience of living in Southshore, renowned among the locals for being a backstabbing unfriendly commune of unwilling neighbours." Comparing her two different neighborhoods, she realized the friendly and open acceptance of her was what makes all the difference.

Both mutual respect and understanding are at stake for migrants and their host country. Migrants' willingness and ability to adapt are no guarantee they will necessarily be accepted by the people they live among: "The relational nature of belonging is important here. Belonging is about the formal and informal *experience* of belonging" (Anthias "Belonging in a Globalising and Unequal World" 21). A migrant may be formally accepted with permanent residency, even citizenship, and still not feel she or he belongs, but remains the stranger who has come to town. Belonging, the experience of being accepted or rejected, works both ways, and that resonance between self and world must be in some accord. Both migrants and hosts can accept or reject the other. Thus belonging occurs literally and figuratively in a contact zone, "social spaces where cultures meet, grasp, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 34). Those "asymmetrical relations of power" may be based on roots in the

community, language, or familiarity with social codes, the keys that give access to feeling at home somewhere.

The migrant who learns to adapt to the new culture finds this is an ongoing process worked out and through the contact zone. These asymmetrical relations of power abate as the migrant becomes more conversant with the new country, yet some of these continue to be in place/play, particularly when it comes to the question of belonging. In an essay exploring familiarity and sense of place, tellingly entitled “Lost in a Twilight Zone,” Theresa the Indian nurse illustrates the tension in the contact zone quite effectively:

When your social system has a way of looking at its citizens differently you are not eligible to criticize a country that at least legally tries to treat its citizens equally. New Zealand is a country of my imaginations. People really try to make you feel at home. (Don't count the small minority). Friends make you feel welcomed, forget about the few who ask you why did you come here? Love the landscapes (keeping in mind some part of India has great landscapes, which no one finds time to enjoy).

Aware of the inequality of the Indian caste system, Theresa feels she is not “eligible to criticize a country that at least legally tries to treat its citizens equally.” Her disenfranchisement is not offset by the fact her skilled profession grants her permanent residency, nor by her fluency in English. Feeling she has no right to criticize New Zealand exemplifies the asymmetrical balance of power migrants may feel in their chosen country. The absence of the pronoun I throughout the passage underscores her lack of individual agency. Instead, she identifies with the universal and migrant “you” who is not eligible to offer criticism of the adopted country. However, this “you” voices a critique in writing of what occurs in the contact zone and might otherwise be silenced. While New Zealand “at least legally tries to treat its citizens equally,” the implication

that what is mandated by law may not be concurrent with reality is further substantiated by her next sentence, “New Zealand is a country of my imaginations.” Whether “imaginations” (vs. imagination) is a typo or deliberate, either way New Zealand becomes fictive. The one slip into first person occurs here – “my imaginations” – and even then it is not tied to reality.

The reality is Theresa has lived in New Zealand for over seven years with her husband and two daughters, and what follows is her argument for what makes for a sense of belonging, and what undermines this sense in the contact zone. Despite writing, “People really try to make you feel at home,” the telling parenthesis which follows inscribes the minority who do not, “(Don’t count the small minority).” From generic “people” the relationship moves to friends, and again we see how the experience of belonging is undercut: “Friends make you feel welcomed, forget about the few who ask you why did you come here?” Here the counter argument is spliced together with a comma, showing an even closer connection in the contact zone. Again the tension between a sense of belonging or not hinges on that one comma, and the supposed welcome being made is questioned by “the few who ask you why did you come here.” The imperative “Forget about the few who ask” is paradoxically denied even while it is enjoined. Finally, the most truncated of points “Love the landscapes” is immediately followed by an embedded parenthesis: “(keeping in mind some part of India has great landscapes, which no one finds time to enjoy).” Here the argument is thrown back perhaps on the very people, including friends, who might not realize that India, like New Zealand, has beautiful landscapes, however with a distinct difference: “which no one finds time to enjoy.”

The contact zone need not be negatively charged or contentious. The point where people meet and connect, migrant meeting local, can be positively valorized if it includes “identifying with the ideas, interests, histories and attitudes of others” and allows for “communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain

mutual respect” (Pratt 40). Theresa addresses the issue of mutual respect and does not shy away from use of the first person, but speaks directly from it: “Many a time I tried to explain to people that there is nothing I can compare in New Zealand with India. It is unique. I was brought up in that culture but prepared to accept and respect the values and customs of my new adopted country. And I do hope that I wasn’t a complete failure in that.” She engages in dialogue within the contact zone, trying to explain there is no comparison between the two countries – they are too dissimilar. Moreover she is prepared to accept and respect the culture of her adopted country. But without the reciprocal acceptance and respect no amount of effort to belong will be rewarded, and she notes at the opening of her essay that “a complete merging was impossible due to the physical differences.” In New Zealand her ethnicity remained an issue for some.

Theresa was often told by New Zealand co-workers to “speak English,” as they were unwilling to try to understand her accent: “The language or so-called accent was my main or rather only hurdle. There are still times I find it hard after nearly seven years. I was always proud of my English and was the only one who could speak fluent English when I worked in Saudi Arabia. But here I felt like a zero.” Even possessing fluent English, her experience shows how for migrants “his or her accent might call attention, rendering him vulnerable to undue self-consciousness and shame” (Akhtar 74). By virtue of how she looks and speaks, she remains outside the dominant culture, no matter how hard she tries. When migrants are perceived as other, “a strong sense of *difference* is the most notable aspect found in the narratives in relation to ‘belongingness’ references. This is generally not accompanied by a strong sense of identity if that is seen as a coherent notion of who and where a person belongs” (Anthias “Where Do I Belong” 510). The wistfulness and longing behind her effort to belong are captured in her admission “And I do hope that I wasn’t a complete failure in that.” “And,” one tiny word at the beginning

of that sentence and everything turns on it, migrant *and* native, self *and* other. She has tried to connect, made herself vulnerable and open to becoming part of the New Zealand culture, yet she has been, if not rebuffed, only partially accepted.

No amount of effort to be part of a culture can necessarily create a sense of acceptance within the contact zone. Theresa addresses the reasons she might have failed in her endeavor to belong:

Too keen to establish in the new chosen society, didn't care much about the troubles. Made myself believe that everything is for good and all are good. Worked well for a period of time. When we slowed down, recent chain of thoughts always leads to the same old question. Where do I belong? I neither belong here nor there, as a case of lost identity. So we are somewhere in between?

She realizes that despite being “Too keen to establish in the new chosen society,” this approach has not worked. Even if she initially did not care about “the troubles”, the troubles were still present. She cannot continue to make herself believe “that everything is good and all are good.” The concept of New Zealand as “a country of my imaginations” cannot be maintained. Nonexistent in all those sentences is the I, completely absorbed in both the prose and the experience of trying to establish herself. When the first person is introduced, it is “we,” and then only briefly, one sentence, which prompts a “recent chain of thoughts always leads to the same old question.” Confronting what she has been seeking and not finding, she poses the most pressing and fundamental question a migrant can ask, “Where do I belong?” The answer is unsettling, as it is for many migrants: “I neither belong here nor there, as a case of lost identity.” Now the missing I throughout her essays is accounted for, the I that has been swallowed and subsumed in the text as she depicts her own “case of lost identity.” She belongs in neither India nor New Zealand, and she elaborates why: “Love the food, made many great friends around,

comfortable job but something vital is missing. Tried to pretend not but didn't work." Again we see the eclipsed I and her attempt to pretend "something vital" is not missing. She does not detail what "something vital" is. It too, like the I, is missing from the text, but its absence is enough to disrupt both her identity and sense of belonging.

Identity and belonging are the resonance between self and world, which cannot be forced or imagined. Theresa finally admits to this lack of resonance in the essay's conclusion: "Life is not what it was all hoped to be. In other words despite all the struggles to get along we don't belong here...or can never belong here." Now we see the fallout from the contact zone, and any pretense that it was otherwise, "In other words," drops away. She acknowledges what happened: "despite all the struggles to get along we don't belong here...or can never belong here." The first clause where the cultures meet, grasp and grapple with each other in the contact zone results in "we don't belong here," a conclusion met by both parties. The ellipsis following shows the charged place where that idea is recast and clarified, "or can never belong here." Which is it, "we don't belong here...or can never belong here"? Her answer in the next sentence only reframes this conflict as another question: "So we are somewhere in between?" Caught in the ellipsis, the dots that mark the omission, the space between belonging and not, is where some migrants remain, occupying a place of ambiguity that her essay explores with all its tensions and hopes. Her own experience bears eloquent testimony to the fact that "Migrant stories are linked with the experiences of adjustment, settlement, nostalgia, a shattered sense of belonging, renewal, loss, discrimination, abrupt endings, new beginnings and new opportunities – all potent sources of emotions" (Skrbis 236). Speaking as an outsider within the dominant culture, Theresa has experienced discrimination and "a shattered sense of belonging." Her closing sentence is all the more poignant knowing she does not feel fully welcome in New Zealand: "As time goes it gets better or worse, hope for the best..." and the ellipsis trails off in longing ...

Migrants' essays have the ability to address what makes the contact zone productive, to speak as an outsider to the dominant culture, noting that despite cultural and linguistic differences people are in core aspects similar. Cathrine, the eighty year old Danish woman looking back over sixty years at her arrival in the antipodes, writes, "But there was no distance between the people in outlook, interests, humor and all the other qualities that bring people close. The distance between countries and customs does not mean distance between people. It may in fact have brought us nearer to each other." Mary, the Scottish psychotherapist, concurs: "I lived in Brazil for a few years. The culture, language, food, climate and geography were nothing like I'd encountered before. People are people the world over, however. We laugh and cry and strive for the same things." Recognizing our common humanity is central to acceptance despite perceived differences, or as the Māori proverb holds: "*He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.*" What is the most important thing in the world? It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

The celebration and honoring of difference can be an adaptive strategy for migrants. Barbara, who became a refugee in her native Germany during the war when the communists threw her family off their farm, has been a migrant in four different countries, England, Canada, the United States and New Zealand. Now in her seventies, Barbara teaches English to migrants in New Zealand and acknowledges how her own experience aids in this endeavor:

I gradually began to see my "being different" as an asset not only for myself but possibly for people who were surprised or troubled by it. By presenting my own case, I could help with integration. I could show that a willingness to be seen and assessed as being different coupled with a positive attitude could be an asset to this new country which after all was actually made up of immigrants, going all the way back to the Māori people.

The example of her life and writing present their own case quite well. Her “willingness to be seen and assessed as being different” becomes a positive attribute, a means to connect rather than separate. The essayist Scott Russell Sanders holds that “writing essays allows me to gather what is essential in my life, and by pondering these things perhaps to discover something essential to the lives of others” (*The Force of Spirit* 3). By reflecting on her difference from others being an asset rather than a hindrance to integration, Barbara’s essay presents an example that could be essential to the lives of migrants, and to the globalized world as well.

“I can never be a Kiwi”

Whether migrants form a connection to the people they live among will be fundamental to their sense of belonging, well-being, and home, if indeed they feel any of those things. As Beth from South Africa writes, “I realise that my connections to New Zealand all take place through people – my husband, my friends and colleagues, visitors, students and customers – all wonderful people. If I was a plant, in New Zealand I would be an epiphyte, lifted heavenwards by other plants and feebly flapping my aerial roots in the breeze.” Despite her many attachments to people in New Zealand she remains an epiphyte, “feebly flapping my aerial roots in the breeze.” For Beth, who migrated in her fifties, the image of the epiphyte is apt. As long as she remains in New Zealand her roots are up in the air, because she longs to be in South Africa. Yet she also longs to be with those she loves in her adopted country and is unable to reconcile the two places. Beth, who has lived in New Zealand for twelve years, depicts this oscillation between these two poles of longing: “When I am in New Zealand, I yearn for South Africa. When I am in South Africa, I long for my husband, my little Scotty dog, my friends and my home, but not New Zealand – yet.” Notice that with South Africa the place name alone stands for everything she yearns for, whereas what she longs for in New Zealand is quite specific, “my husband, my little

Scotty dog, my friends and my home” but does not include “New Zealand – yet.” While those very real things may be in New Zealand, she does not equate them with New Zealand itself.

Our attachment to place is seminal and for migrants that place has changed. As Yi Fi Tuan notes “[t]he sense of place is perhaps never more acute than when one is homesick” (“Space and Place” 419). For migrants who came later in life and whose frames of reference are more strongly placed and marked, their contrapuntal awareness can set up a dissonance. Having migrated in her fifties, Beth describes this discord between her two landscapes:

It’s really not New Zealand’s fault and in my heart of hearts I know this. How could it help being too small? There are still seagulls in the sky when you are in the middle of the country for heaven’s sake. How can it help being so beautiful? Like a Swiss chocolate box lid, when what I yearn for is great swathes of Karoo bush and colours that are warm and dry. It certainly can’t help being this isolated: “The Gateway to Antarctica” the sign at the airport reads. I could weep.

She recognizes from the beginning it is not New Zealand’s fault that it does not measure up to her preferred and dominant frame of reference, South Africa. She sets up the comparison with a series of rhetorical questions and her answers to them. The first one is New Zealand’s small size, which she dismisses handily: “There are still seagulls in the sky when you are in the middle of the country for heaven’s sake.” Should there be any doubt how she feel about this, “for heaven’s sake” gives it away. The country which was “too small” geographically, she renders even smaller, if not trivial, in terms of its majestic beauty, likening it to “a Swiss chocolate box lid” something portable, decorative, with the connotation of tourism. How easily New Zealand is diminished and shrinks then when compared to “great swathes of Karoo bush and colours that are warm and dry.” The vast South African bush overwhelms the New Zealand landscape, and even if it did

resonate with her, she yearns for somewhere else. Finally the country's isolation, which "it certainly can't help," is driven home by the sign at the airport reading, "The Gateway to Antarctica." Not only is New Zealand isolated, it boasts its proximity to a continent that is scarcely habitable. Her response is: "I could weep," as any migrant who longs to be somewhere else might. After living fifty years in the South African landscape Beth has formed "a lifelong, bone-deep attachment to place" that is not easily supplanted (Sanders *Staying Put* 14).

As a migrant, Beth is well aware of the lack of accord between herself and New Zealand. She even characterizes it in terms of music: "In New Zealand I am annoyingly just slightly out of step. I move through this country to the beat of a drum so subtly different that at times it almost looks as if I belong. My Scottish roots, my English language and my education – ever a great leveller, all conspire to make it appear as if I fit." She looks at herself from a detached, abstracted viewpoint – this is not a scene, so much as it is an existential condition, being "annoyingly just slightly out of step." But annoyed in whose eyes, her own or others'? She describes her almost near resonance, "I move through this country to the beat of a drum so subtly different that at times it almost looks as if I belong." The very things that should help her harmonize, roots, language and education, "all conspire to make it appear as if I fit."

Yet appearance is just that, appearance. Despite what "appears," "looks," and "conspires" to make her fit, belonging may also be determined by the individual, as her essay reveals: "But at some almost chromosomal level, I can never be a Kiwi. I can never use pronouns like 'we' and 'us' to mean New Zealander. I can never relinquish my South African passport even though I gritted my teeth through the New Zealand citizenship ceremony." She refutes her ability to "be a Kiwi" first on "some almost chromosomal level," arguing it is hereditary, innate and unchanging, and therefore predetermined. Next she moves up to the pronomial level, "I can never use pronouns like 'we' and 'us' to mean New Zealander," indicating she will not ally

herself even in language with the host population. This corresponds with the relational aspect of narrative recognizing the distinctiveness of the individual existence Caverero stresses, “No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself *in* you, and, even less, in the collective *we*. I do not dissolve both into a common identity, nor do I digest your tale in order to construct the meaning of mine” (92). Finally she goes to the level of citizenship, declaring with respect to national allegiance, “I can never relinquish my South African passport,” never mind that she “gritted [her] teeth through the New Zealand citizenship ceremony.” The emphatic repetition of “I can never” makes it clear that she will not undertake the effort to belong because she does not want to, on the cellular, linguistic or national level. Perhaps it is this very opinionated and refreshing sensibility that keeps her from being “a Kiwi.”

Readily apparent in Beth’s migration narratives is a very strong sense of self-awareness, related in a voice that is direct, abrasive, witty, uncompromising. Voice is one of the hallmarks of the personal essay, and indeed it gives each of the migrant narratives a very distinct flavor, “a palpable sense of *a particular person, with a distinctive voice*” (Atkins *Reading Essays* 12). All of the migrant essays are marked by a distinctive voice, a presentation and sense of self that cannot be exchanged for another, as Caverero reminds us. And it is this singular first person which the personal essay celebrates, for “the essay is a haven for the private, idiosyncratic voice in an era of anonymous babble” (Sanders “The Singular First Person” 660). Not wanting to be identified with the anonymous babble, or in her case, New Zealand, Beth nevertheless is not afraid of laughing at herself, as when she describes waiting to board the plane to New Zealand from Australia:

I yearn to be getting on any other flight. I feel sorry for all the people waiting to board the plane to Christchurch. On my really bad days those people look dull, badly dressed and ugly; all the women look fat and have dyed their hair the same

red brown. I want to take tourists aside and say “Don’t Go There”. In short I am temporarily nuts. They shouldn’t even let me into the country. But they do, without any problem at all. It is only when my suitcases trundle into sight, the only ones incarcerated in plastic wrap to foil theft and sporting snap-lock belts in the colours of the South African flag that I become marked as not quite belonging.

Even when she makes disparaging albeit humorous comments about her fellow travelers, she applies the same scrutiny to herself, winning the reader’s trust with the refreshing candor of her prose. As E. B. White, a brilliant essayist himself, warns, “There is one thing the essayist cannot do, though – he cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time” because candor “is the basic ingredient” in the essay (viii). Beth is disarmingly candid about her fellow travelers, “On my really bad days those people look dull, badly dressed and ugly,” and she is equally unsparing with herself, “I am temporarily nuts. They shouldn’t even allow me into the country.” She recognizes that anyone who is this uncharitable and unkind in her thoughts about both New Zealand and its inhabitants really ought not be let into the country, which is both funny and telling.

Equally telling is the description of her luggage, which also signals her sense of difference: “It is only when my suitcases trundle into sight, the only ones incarcerated in plastic wrap to foil theft and sporting snap-lock belts in the colours of the South African flag that I become marked as not quite belonging.” Again, just as she notes being slightly out of step with the rest of the country, Beth’s luggage sets her apart: “I become marked as not quite belonging.” Like her suitcases, Beth has actively chosen a means of self-identification to prevent theft, on both literal and figurative levels. She is South African, first and foremost, in a classic example of “how an individual reinforces his or her self-identity in a physical environment to represent that part of

their identity that is not shared with others” (Sigmon, Whitcomb and Snyder 26). Even in transit she marks herself with the “snap-lock belts in the colours of the South African flag.” What is remarkable about this image is the transparency and accuracy of it. She herself becomes “incarcerated” in plastic wrap to foil theft, held together by the snap-lock belts of her native flag, and portable, like a piece of luggage. Her essays make it clear she does not quite belong in New Zealand because her attachment to South Africa overrides it.

The Topos of Memory

Migrants who come later in life are more deeply marked by where they have lived through “the steady accretion of sentiment over the years” (Tuan *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* 33) and may be less able to form attachments to their new country. They may feel displaced, as David the Scottish doctor, who came with his second family at age sixty, describes, “the truth is that my displacement here is total because I am not from here and I came here late in life full of somewhere else.” He recognizes his state of being other, “I am not from here,” which is true of most migrants, and presumes those who are “from” a place have a prior, stronger claim upon it (like his New Zealand-born wife). As with many older migrants the ties he left behind were longstanding, including his aging father, grown children from his first marriage, siblings, lifelong friendships, and the medical practice he established over decades. Truly he did come to New Zealand “late in life and full of somewhere else.” These are the very real and important human attachments migrants have, but they also have attachments to things that are inanimate and equally charged with meaning.

David witnessed the disappearance of these nonhuman elements that enriched his life as his plane departed from England: “I peered through the little window in the emergency door. The Thames curled out to sea flanked by the lights of Kent and Essex. Colchester oysters,

Estuary English, chavs, oast houses, Cox's Orange Pippins, Magwitch's marshes all floating away and, seemingly, out of my life." He literally mapped his world from above in terms of landscape, food, dialect, culture, architecture, and literature, and he saw these landmarks, both real and abstract, like the Thames flowing out to sea, are "all floating away and, seemingly, out of my life." Migrants leave an entire matrix of identifications behind that gave their lives meaning, and as David notes, "I have jettisoned my own for the here and now and that is good." He may have jettisoned "my own," but his essay remembers and anchors them in vivid, concrete detail as "Association and accumulation have always been major ways of knowing in the personal essay" (*Root Nonfictionist's Guide* 79). Perhaps for migrants who arrive "late in life full of somewhere else" the personal essay offers a way to capture those rich associations and accumulations which informed that life, offering the means to re-home them in language and to save them from erasure.

David acknowledges "there is bound to be a sense of displacement in moving away from things imbued in you." This feeling of being imbued echoes the idea that "The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable" (Ahmed 341). Many of the migrant essays attest to how permeable that boundary may be, even if what they experience is quite intangible, as In Suk the Korean migrant writes: "The smell and taste of the origin soil is the ingredient which is absent in the minds of migrants rather than food itself. Climate differs in each country. Therefore, the familiar taste, texture and smell are as varied as weather causes the nostalgia for our homeland life." The origin soil, as she aptly calls it, where she was rooted in Korea for over forty years, leaves an indelible trace. Migrants all over the world can taste what she is saying in their own mind – the flavor of what is missing.

What is missing resonates against what is present for migrants, in the ongoing comparison between here and there, then and now. As Gareth, the Welsh doctor, so eloquently

puts it, “living on a plain cannot replace the feelings and emotions of the mountains of your homeland; fresh air cannot bring back the memories and thoughts associated with the tang of industrial pollution; a Christchurch street does not evoke the feelings of a bus ride along narrow country lanes to visit an aunt.” Migrants remember landscapes, smells, the feel of the familiar route unwinding, even if only in memory. For some the longing for what is left behind may be too strong to appreciate where they now live. Moreover the memory of that place and time may be unreliable, as David, who pines for Britain, is well aware:

My feelings of communion with Britain in the hills of the Lake District, the cloisters of Lincoln Cathedral or the conviviality of The Morning Star are profound. Arriving to the surly disorder of Heathrow engenders in me a feeling of being at home I shall never experience in the arrival hall at Christchurch. But the memory of these things British is unreliable. It gilds the remembered with a kind of unreality. It can never be as intense as the actuality but it can be more intense for the longing. And longing, perhaps, should be the eighth deadly sin – a ruinous and imperfect desire for something you do not have. Neither lust nor envy, it hangs in between, gnawing at the present with its tenacious hold on the past.

Here he evokes what resonates most with him: “My feelings of communion with Britain in the hills of the Lake District, the cloisters of Lincoln Cathedral or the conviviality of The Morning Star are profound.” He juxtaposes those places with how he feels in two different airports, one in England, one in New Zealand, the literal threshold, the transit place between the two locations: “Arriving to the surly disorder of Heathrow engenders in me a feeling of being at home I shall never experience in the arrival hall at Christchurch.” The sentence declares where he feels at home upon arrival, and it is not New Zealand.

Memory is problematic for all migrants, as memory migrates in its own fashion. This colors what migrants remember as “migration has an effect on how and what we remember and that displacement intensifies our investments in memory, illuminating the *topos* of memory itself” (Creet 10). David questions his memory “of these things British,” claiming memory is unreliable and “gilds the remembered with a kind of unreality.” Thus his nostalgia may affect what he recalls. Ha Jin argues that his fellow migrant writer Milan Kundera “believes nostalgia actually impairs one’s memory” (72). David recognizes that even if his memory is unreliable and can never be as intense in actuality, it can be more intense for the longing. Here is the crux, how longing affects both the past and present for the migrant: “And longing, perhaps, should be the eighth deadly sin – a ruinous and imperfect desire for something you do not have. Neither lust nor envy, it hangs in between, gnawing at the present with its tenacious hold on the past.” The religious imagery that began with feelings of communion for Britain invoked by the cloisters of Lincoln Cathedral now reaches the arresting conclusion of longing being the eighth deadly sin, hanging between lust and envy. The very things he misses provoke “a ruinous and imperfect desire for something you cannot have.” The extent to which longing “gnawing at the present with its tenacious hold on the past” impairs the migrant’s ability to belong or be long in the present is open to question. He raises this very idea in the essay’s closing sentence, “What will be interesting will be to see if, when I am really old, I shall miss too much the stuff of home.” He may claim, “I have jettisoned my own for the here and now,” but, like the native Colchester oysters he visualized upon departing from England, they taste of the water from where they came. For migrants whose original home resonates most deeply, they may always “miss too much the stuff of home” and be unable to truly settle in the chosen country.

Some migrants miss the stuff of home long before they reach their later years. They are unable to establish a resonance between themselves and the new country and return, perhaps

because the pull of the home was too strong. Marcela migrated from Chile in 1996 and notes that of those who left with their partners when she did, “all the rest went back, not forward to the departure point. There were those invisible links calling them back that they could not resist: the warmth of the familiar embrace, the whisper of the known music, the comfort of the narrow taste and the smell of their cherished segment of the world.” She defines “those invisible links” that bind one to a place – touch, sound, taste, smell, which embody “warmth,” “comfort” and are “known” – but the text judges those who return to the “familiar embrace.” The taste is “narrow” and the smell but a “cherished segment,” while she “dared to stay away in an alien environment without the support of the obvious sameness.”

Marcela sees the contact zone as combative: “I was going to be hurt in many blind battles but feel victorious at the end of the war. That was it; I believed it was never going to be easy; I had to find the strength to fight one battle at the time, go for the unknown.” She recognizes that she does not wholly belong: “It worked out being a mismatch, like trying to like smaller shoes that I had to fit in. In the long term the shoes wear off and your toes or heels show up how they really are or what they have become.” Indeed, if we neither like nor fit in smaller shoes, eventually the shoes are worn away and who we are and whom we have become in the new country manifest themselves. We do not need to fit in to belong. When I worried to Marcela about my children being friendless in their Swedish school, she wrote, “We cannot change the fact that we are outsiders so let’s use it to our advantage. Everyone has to do their homework and discover the advantages that best suit them. Lastly, when we find people who really accept us as outsiders, we have found a real friend.” Marcela addressed something essential about how we felt in New Zealand: we were accepted as outsiders and had made real friends, both with fellow migrants and New Zealanders. The acceptance of difference is what makes migrants feel welcome in their new country, but in deeply conforming Sweden this acceptance was neither

forthcoming nor likely to occur. Without acceptance we would never feel we belonged, no matter how long we lived there or how fluent our Swedish became. We would remain strangers who came to town.

For migrants who have moved away from the people and places they love, memory may be a form of consolation for what is absent, the imaginative present. This is analogous to what happens when migrants write about their experience of migration. They explore the very things that were absent, missing, and unaddressed, things they may not have known or felt become manifest and are shared on the page. The connection migrants feel to everything they left behind – people, places, culture – has the power to resonate when shared and acknowledged by others in their personal essays and “an essay that works is similar; it gives back to the reader a thought, a memory, an emotion made richer by the experience of another ... and in glorious, mysterious ways that the author cannot control, it begins to belong to the reader” (Norris xvi). Certainly for migrants who have given up so much and in turn have to recreate so much, memory is going to inform their writing and their lives. If the desire to connect is at the heart of the desire to write, such connection with readers will have to be forged through memories, both true and unreliable, of what has been lost and what has been found. As Gareth, the Welsh doctor, reveals: “Without memory there is no nostalgia, no regret, no sense of loss, no sense of achievement, no happiness and no mourning. Memory may not always be truthful but it is all we have to link our present to the past and even those memories which distort and disguise help us understand what and why we are.” The tone is more melancholy than not. Now in his seventies, Gareth has most of his life to look back upon, and he is right, memory does help us understand “what and why we are,” even as writing the personal essay does, driven always by Montaigne’s motto, “*Que sçay-je?*” Similarly, migrants’ ability “to link our present to our past” is essential to how they reground themselves in their new country.

The Sense of Belonging

Sometimes what forms the link between the past and present is inexplicable, and yet the migrant recognizes it from the outset, as Sabina, who came from the Netherlands, claims: “Although the country looks so different from my homeland there must have been something familiar, it felt good, so good that when going home I was homesick for New Zealand.” She liked the ring English had to it in New Zealand, “no stiff upper lip here,” and was homesick enough to make a country she had only visited home. Planning her migration for three years shows her level of commitment was high, which factored into how eager she was to settle:

I was so happy with the household effects container because all the things felt like home. I could start to root here. My own things are familiar and I needed that at that point so much. With no family or friends here, with a totally different job and with the realisation that my residence was going to be granted a permanent status I suddenly wanted to feel at home, be rooted and be familiar with this new life. The cupboards with my books, the photos and the paintings on the wall gave me just enough familiarity to start to enjoy this unfamiliar land and its people.

The shipping container arrived, got unpacked, and “all the things felt like home.” As Gaston Bachelard notes, “An entire past comes to dwell in a new house ... we bring our *lares* with us” (5), and nothing proves that so much as the familiarity of having “her own things.” Like the household protective gods of ancient Rome, the *lares*, her own things helped her to feel rooted in a country where she had neither family nor friends. Realizing she had been granted permanent residency, she “suddenly wanted to feel at home, be rooted and be familiar with this new life.” The dear familiar, her books, photos, and paintings, gave her “just enough familiarity to start to enjoy this unfamiliar land and its people.” That familiarity, which enabled her to explore the

new country, has parallels in the essay: the writer moves from the known and begins “to see the essay as a way of discovery ... to take risks on the page, to venture out from familiar territory into the blank places on their maps” (Root “Interview with Scott Russell Sanders” 129).

Learning to become familiar in a new country takes time, as migrants venture into the blank places on their maps, and the process never really ends. Daisy, the Irish nurse who came to New Zealand in 1974, addresses this point: “the more one becomes bedded down in a place, the more one deals with the nitty gritty, the more there is to learn and to adjust to. The nuances of Kiwi English even after all these years still catch me out.” Perhaps an awareness of difference encourages migrants, even decades later, to deepen their learning, to not be caught up in superficial differences, but deal with “the nitty gritty.” With increased understanding comes increased awareness of nuance, in culture and language, an idea the Polish migrant writer Eva Hoffman explains:

I think every immigrant becomes a kind of amateur anthropologist – you do notice things about the culture or the world that you come into that people who grow up in it, who are very embedded in it, simply don’t notice. And at first you notice the surface things, the surface differences. And gradually you start noticing the deeper differences. And very gradually you start with understanding the inner life of the culture, the life of those both large and very intimate values.

It was a surprisingly long process. (Kreisler)

Migrants never cease being amateur anthropologists. Their contrapuntal awareness continues to operate decades later, as Dorothy, the Scot who has lived in New Zealand fifty years, writes: “Sometimes I still feel an outsider and I am aware that I am the only non New Zealand born person among my family. But this has a positivity as I can bring a differing perspective to them.

So, most of the time I feel I belong.” Fifty years is still not long enough to lose the sense of being an outsider or to feel she belongs more than most of the time.

Migrants negotiate between the familiar and strange, the known frame of reference resonating against the new and unfamiliar one. Noki, who migrated from the Netherlands in 1974, recognizes that adjusting to a country is a work in progress:

Becoming familiar was a long, and still ongoing process. Although we “knew” what to expect on our arrival [they had traveled in New Zealand prior to migrating] it was still a big adjustment to settle ... Slowly, but surely we got to know the area and its people. Became part of it, because basically there was no choice. And we loved it. All the picture postcard facilities on our doorstep, a satisfying job, part of the community.

Noki has spent over half his life in New Zealand and recognizes that “[b]ecoming familiar was a long, and still ongoing process.” Migrants continue to discover things as “the sense of belonging is a dynamic process continuing throughout a person’s lifespan, and not only tied to the individuals’ home of origin” (Chaitin, Linstroth and Hiller par. 20). Noki mocks the idea that as migrants “we ‘knew’ what to expect,” as clearly they did not entirely, any more than the writer knows what to expect when writing the essay, with its elements of “self-discovery, self-exploration, and surprise” (Root and Steinberg xxv). He describes a process of assimilation, “Slowly, but surely we got to know the area and its people. Became part of it, because basically there was no choice. And we loved it.” The we becomes absorbed literally in “Became part of it, because basically there was no choice.” Yet on either side of having no choice but to become “part of it,” the collective “we” gets to know the area and the people and declares, “And we loved it.”

For Noki landscape, work, and community all come together but still do not add up to a sense of belonging: “Do I belong here? I do not know. I feel extremely comfortable here, but I would not call it belonging. My roots are on the other side. The Waitaki valley is a good substitute though. Our children regard it as home. They grew up there and keep fond memories of the area.” He is adamant about where he does not belong: “Do I belong in Holland? No, definitely not.” This claim is backed by his never once visiting since he left in 1974. Yet with respect to New Zealand he still feels his “roots are on the other side” and while “extremely comfortable here,” he “would not call it belonging,” an idea echoed by the poet Harry Ricketts who writes “The thing about being an immigrant is that you will only ever fit in up to a point. But if the conditions and the people suit you, and you seem to suit them, that can be enough” (33). For Noki, the Waitaki valley is “a good substitute though” but still, a substitute, though his children regard it as home. Unlike their father his children have no sense of ambivalence about where they belong, but then they have never migrated.

What allows migrants to feel a sense of belonging or home is as varied as they are themselves. Rather than perceiving discord between their landscapes, past and present, or between themselves and New Zealanders, some migrants perceive an accord. Daisy, the Irish nurse, describes a feeling of congruence between the New Zealand landscape and that of Donegal in Ireland: “When I stand on the little hillock there and look out over the native bush and across the broken waters along the shore to the ocean beyond I could be facing the Atlantic and I feel utterly at home.” The two landscapes half a world apart, on two different oceans, and facing in the opposite directions nevertheless contribute to her feeling “utterly at home.” She admits, “It took me years to learn to love fair tussock and brown landscape. When at last I did, I think that’s when I fell in love with here.” An active decision to settle may incline migrants to see the country in a more positive light – they see what is there, rather than what is not. Daisy is able to

“love fair tussock and brown landscape” and not just the saturated green of her native Ireland. She might have been even more predisposed to love it as the unrest in Northern Ireland had accelerated and “So at that time, no longer belonging, it seemed easier to stay away than to go home.” Here might be the real root of deciding to settle – no longer belonging at home. Daisy describes a sense of homecoming four years after settling in New Zealand:

One time (I can't remember exactly when – perhaps four years after we decided to settle here) I was returning from Ireland and flying back into Auckland alone. Below me the complicated outline of the land was very strongly drawn and around it the water was sparkling. It was a captivating sight and I suddenly thought, “I'm coming home.” It seems to me that I had no control over this cheerful idea; it just bubbled up on its own.

The sudden thought “I'm coming home” was prompted by the sight of New Zealand from the air. She immediately shifts into present tense, realizing “It seems to me that I had no control over this cheerful idea.” Where that sense of homecoming originates she admits is a mystery, “it just bubbled up on its own.” She acknowledges this epiphany is not common to migrants: “I'm grateful to have had that experience which doesn't seem to come to everyone. For me it had a very settling effect.” To see the country from above and know you are home is a gift.

Migrant Poppies

Growing up, the military moved my family every three years, and I believed I was immune to mobility and displacement, vaccinated against typhoid, small pox, and homesickness, free to cross borders and oceans easily and unthinkingly. Having made four hemispheric shifts in the past fifteen years, including moves between the United States, New Zealand, and Sweden, I now know this is not true. I realize my own constant uprooting in childhood and adulthood colors

how I perceive things. I see not fitting in, not feeling at home, as what is to be expected, when clearly that is not true for many who migrate. “We left everything behind!” my eleven-year-old daughter wailed to me in Sweden, her eyes full of tears. How that phrase undoes me still and bears repeating. Not everything, but the very things that make migration painful. When we left New Zealand for Sweden, once again we left who and what we love behind. Friendships, landscapes, the taste of the world’s best water, the impossible clarity of the southern stars, knowing and being known. Sammy from Syria at the Sunday market always remembering my falafel order, asking, “And how are you, my dear?” Where to get free dog bones, what wind brings what weather, and how long is a piece of string. Language. Kiwi as, but still recognizable. Sitting with friends having the second cup of tea.

We gave all that up when we migrated to Sweden. No wonder we felt bereft. But that was not the end of the story. The story continues, the story continues until we are dead. But where does the story begin? Where it wants, much as a seed germinating does, in a particular place and time. One morning back in New Zealand I saw the silvery green leaves of the heirloom poppies in the garden, making their way among the established perennials. They had come up, not the first spring, but the second spring we lived there, as though their inner residency permit had been granted and they allowed themselves to take root. I was delighted to see them appear on the other side of the world, in another hemisphere, having come from my garden in the United States. They bloomed among the roses, freesia, calla lilies, fitting in and then dying back, seeding themselves. I gathered the first seedpods and dried them, and put the seeds in a bag labeled “NZ grown poppy” and forgot about them. I found them in my desk drawer the autumn I was writing this chapter on belonging while living in Sweden. Before winter set its jaws, I scratched the New Zealand grown poppy seeds into the Swedish soil in the beds around the house, the soil more granite than earth. I planted a dozen tulips named

“Hemisphere,” which promised to change color as they bloomed. Later my Swedish neighbor told me the deer would eat them, the only conversation I ever had with her the entire year and half we lived there, despite her fluent English and our sharing a long garden boundary.

That spring arrived six weeks late and everything leafed and bloomed at once, unlike the slow unfurling of the season in New Zealand, which lasts and lasts. Two yearling bucks mowed the tulips down before they were six inches out of the reluctant ground. Tiny white *vitsippor*, wood anemone, harbinger of spring and the symbol for the Swedish cancer foundation, waited until May to carpet the forest floor. The forsythia’s glowing yellow, usually the first to ignite in the garden, overlapped with the white froth of pear and apple blossom. The trees leafed out overnight into luminous green, hallucinogenic in its intensity, a green more vivid than any I have ever seen, or else I was winter-starved for color. The air had not lost its edge when our landlady, wearing a sable coat to her ankles, discussed the advent of ants, for which the area is famous. The April showers came a month late and the long daylight accelerated weeds and plants alike. I noticed with alarm that twitch grass was rampant among the perennials, outpacing them even. Between rains I went out to weed, knowing twitch grass is almost hopeless to eradicate by hand, as it spreads by a mat of rhizomes under the soil, entangling itself in the roots of established plants.

The soil was soft and pliable, perfect for weeding. I checked the beds around the house where I had seeded the pink poppies among the catmint, black-eyed Susans and globe thistle but saw nothing, not even many weeds, the soil dry with white ant powder dusted along the stone foundation of the house. I walked over to the main perennial bed in the middle of the lawn where the twitch grass waved madly at me and the neighbors, screaming, rental yard! Knowing I was leaving Sweden, that this was not my garden, I pulled indiscriminately, yanking out handfuls of twitch that broke off underneath the soil with its invasive snaking root system to reappear

somewhere else. And then suddenly among the weeds, were the silvery green leaves of the heirloom poppies, newly sprouted. I had forgotten I had seeded them in this bed too. I started to weed more carefully, finding more and more seedlings. Clever migrant upstarts. They had come all the way around the world to where they began decades ago flowering in a Danish garden just across the Kattegat, the sea stretching between Sweden and Denmark.

That summer, the long northern summer, the pink poppies bloomed in Swedish soil, half a world away from where they had gone to seed in New Zealand. Migrant annuals thriving amid old perennials. They would go to seed that autumn, shaking hundreds of seeds all over the garden, while we packed and loaded to move back to New Zealand, shedding twenty cubic feet of belongings in the process. Maybe the poppies' rogue, irreverent presence would flourish alongside the blue delphinium and white Shasta daisies, year after year, long after we were living on the far side of the world, or maybe not. For what stirs belonging in anything, in any of us, is at root, a mystery.

Chapter 6: The Migration of Identity

“Our roots can be anywhere and we can survive,
because if you think about it, we take our roots with us.”

– Gertrude Stein, “A Conversation with Gertrude Stein”

My teenage son and I were returning to Sweden from a brief trip to Dublin. What a pleasure to share with him everything I loved about the city from my student days and later visits. The Long Room at Trinity College and the illuminated *Book of Kells*, the Stag’s Head pub, the exquisite tiny golden boat in the National Museum, fish and chips in the old fishing village of Howth, and best of all introducing him to dear friends I’d known for decades. In Hogges Figges Bookshop my son sighed, “All the books are in English,” his dark eyes shining with joy. I bought him several for his birthday, which we had celebrated the night before. Now we were walking through the deserted Stockholm airport to passport control. I pushed our black and silver New Zealand passports through the slot. The officer opened to the photo page, looking at each of us in turn, and asked in the excellent English of the Swedes, “How long do you intend to stay in Sweden?”

“We live here.”

She flipped through the pages. “You don’t have a stamp.”

“I didn’t know we needed a stamp. We just moved here only a few months ago.”

She frowned. I fished in my wallet and showed her my Swedish ID card that took weeks and weeks to obtain and required registering with the tax authorities, followed by registering with the immigration authorities, before being issued the card Swedes use for everything. It is even called *identitetskort*, identity card.

“Where is your migration ID card?”

“I didn’t know we had to carry that with us.” She frowned some more. Fine, send us back to Ireland.

“What are you doing in Sweden?”

Excellent question. Do I mention earthquakes, job security, or fate? “My husband teaches at Chalmers.” I pronounced it as she would, the *ch* softened to *sh*. The Valkyrie thawed. Drop the right name of the right school. She flicked her blue eyes at me, still not pleased we were traveling without the proper credentials, but she stamped our passports and slid them back through the slot.

As we walked through the gate, I realized how easy it is to bar someone’s entry, anywhere in the world, for whatever reason, at these checkpoints. My migrant identity is what matters here – that is the snag – and my passport bears no indication of that identity. I appear to be and am a New Zealand citizen. I looked at my son, now taller than his father, born in this very country, although not a citizen. He had no idea what threshold we had just crossed based solely on one official’s discretion, or that neutral Sweden along with Switzerland asked Germany to distinguish its Jewish refugees at the beginning of the war to control the flow of immigration. This led to Jewish passports being stamped with a red letter J from 1939 onward (Renginbogin 93-94). We were missing a stamp that distinguished us as migrants in our passports, although even without it a person could be seen as other and unwelcome, with subtle or terrible consequences. Sweden prides itself on being an egalitarian society, and for the most part it is. I looked at the illuminated sign ahead of us: *välkommen*, welcome, *bienvenido*, 환영, 欢迎, ترحيب. Every major airport in the world bids you welcome in their native language and others, but that welcome is conditional upon permission of entry.

My brief interrogation at passport control encompasses issues of migration, identity, and nation – who gets to cross the border, and why. These powerful abstractions have a visceral

equivalent: the heat rising in my body, my pulse accelerating, a feeling between anger and humiliation as to whether we were entitled to live in Sweden. More revealing was my immediate desire to return to a country where I spoke the language and felt welcome even though I was not legally entitled to reside there. The exchange with the immigration officer encapsulates the disjunction between self-identification and the external identification of others in the modern state, with its “power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who” (Brubaker and Cooper 15). The state, embodied in the form of the immigration officer, identified us as non-EU citizens with no right to reside in Sweden. However, the officer took me at my word, though even then our admittance was granted on the basis of my husband’s employment. No doubt our reception at passport control would have been different had we presented the proper identification proving we had residency. Instead, we were treated as foreign and other, admitted on sufferance. The experience of being treated as other rankled. Yet when I thought of migrants worldwide discriminated against on the basis of skin color, accent, or any other reason, I felt a sense of solidarity.

Being Other

Migrants are all other, for as Rushdie points out, migrants are “people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness” (124). Migrants are strangers who have come to town. Anna, the Swiss migrant, describes the literal experience of being identified as other en route to New Zealand in 1964: “My husband Nigel and his mother walk through the passport control reserved for the Commonwealth. I have to join a long queue where it says ‘Others’. A week ago I had been special. Not everybody married a New Zealander and followed him to the other side of the world.” As a new bride she was transformed from being special to being “Other,” not realizing the very thing that made her special, marrying

a foreigner, would differentiate her for the rest of her life. I, too, as a migrant am marked visibly and invisibly by this choice to live elsewhere, and bear witness to Jacques Derrida's claim that "All national rootedness, for example, is rooted first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced – or displaceable – population" (83). I am not a displaced population, but an individual, and yet at passport control my own sense of identity was challenged, revealing the power of the nation-state to define me in ways I myself did not, like a scene from Kafka. As Castles and Davidson explain, "the nation-state has an inbuilt tendency to create difference and to racialize minorities" and through its "discursive and material practices create Other, and then take Otherness as a justification for the differential treatment" (82). For everyone, migrant or not, being defined as other is contingent upon how one is identified and by whom – or more importantly, how the other is perceived.

The idea of other can be positively valorized, not as a point of discrimination, but for illuminating who we are and how we perceive ourselves. Cixous understands how the other constructs our own sense of I :

The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*. It is on the occasion of the other that *I* catch sight of *me*; or that *I* catch *me* at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. It is the other who makes my portrait. Always. And luckily. The other of all sorts is also of all diverse richness. The more the other is rich, the more I am rich. The other, rich, will make all his or her richness resonate in me and will enrich me. This is what people do not know, in general, and it's too bad. (13)

Here the other is not perceived as threatening and unwelcome, but as a source of enrichment.

Creating the I through the resonance of the encounter with the other echoes Martin Buber,

"Man becomes an I through a You" (80). An example of how the other confers and deepens our

own self-understanding occurs in a different exchange at passport control. Here Daisy, the Irish nurse, is returning to New Zealand after visiting her aging parents in Ireland:

Then, after yet another visit, and by this time travelling as a New Zealander, my sense of belonging was greatly boosted when a broadly smiling immigration officer of Polynesian ethnicity looked me in the eye, bang-stamped my Kiwi passport and handing it back to me (the pale, tired, freckled one) said warmly, “Welcome home.”

Unlike our reception in Sweden, Daisy arrives in a country where she is now a citizen. The text reveals several layers of identification, both internal and external. First she notes “by this time travelling as a New Zealander,” which implies this is a recent persona, not necessarily how she would identify herself. However, upon presenting her New Zealand passport to the immigration officer something happens to change “travelling as a New Zealander” to a “greatly boosted” “sense of belonging.” She describes the actual moment of exchange in the contact zone where “a broadly smiling immigration officer of Polynesian ethnicity” emphatically stamps her passport and warmly welcomes her home. She is seen through the immigration officer’s eyes, both through her passport denoting citizenship and his looking her in the eye, where she shows what he literally sees, which she cannot, herself, parenthetically noted “(the pale, tired, freckled one).” They both recognize each other’s ethnicity, but that is no barrier to his friendliness, exhibited by his “broadly smiling” and “warmly” greeting her with “Welcome home.” The passport grants her right of admittance, but the immigration officer grants her something deeper and more intangible, “a sense of belonging,” an acknowledgement that in his eyes and now her own, she is home. The acceptance of the other here is mutual, and gives her a stronger sense of who she is because of where she is – home.

What gives one a sense of identity is an extremely complicated and often conflicted subject, particularly for migrants. While identity remains an elusive, overburdened and ill-defined concept, nevertheless it “can suggest ways in which people conceive of themselves and are characterised by others” (Vertovec 577). Migration affects our identity, both externally in terms of how we are categorized, but also in our own sense of who we are, reaching past national borders to more permeable and existential ones. My own migrant status was what called my identity into question at passport control and whether I “belonged” in Sweden. The link between migration, belonging and identity is fraught, for “migration comes with a vengeance in terms of identity, belonging and homeness, since old identities and memories of the places they come from, or have been told about, or are constantly reminded of by people and institutions in their new homes, stick in their minds and keep (co)defining their sense of belonging” (Hedetoft 36). Just as our sense of belonging may be tied to more than one location, so too may our sense of identity be defined by experiences of what came before. In Sweden I asked my then eleven-year-old daughter who she thinks she is and she immediately answered, “A Kiwi,” and then added “but I’m American underneath that.” Her youthful perception revealed something elemental about our sense of identity, that while we might identify and consider ourselves one thing, in her case, “a Kiwi,” other identities inform and contribute to that sense of self.

When I was studying Swedish at the *Folkuniversitetet* (People’s University) in Gothenburg, the European students in my class told me I did not seem American to them. What was American that I did not “seem” to be in their eyes? I wondered. My sense of identity, who I am, is more than my name, my language, my nationality – those are signifiers. However, we cannot disregard certain categories either, as James Clifford notes: “I do not accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her ‘identity’; but neither can one shed specific structures of race and class, culture and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history” (*Routes* 12).

I cannot dismiss the fact I am female, white, heterosexual, English speaking, privileged, educated, born in the latter half of the twentieth century. But so are millions and millions of other people like me, and what differentiates each of us is our life story, which does not fall into specific structures, but into narrative. As Cavarero argues, what matters for personal identity is the story:

Personal identity, which – in the gaze of the other or in the momentary encounter – cannot be exchanged for another, thus finds in his or her life-story a temporal extension; or, the continual dynamism of his or her persistence. In other words, the verbal response to *who* someone is always consists in the narration of his or her life-story. (73)

For example, the Swedish immigration authority assumed from my New Zealand passport that I was traveling, but the moment I admitted we lived in Sweden everything changed. Suddenly my migrant identity came into play. Only my narrative and her acceptance of it clarified my personal identity, providing what was missing in the passport: my right to live in the country. Likewise an entire narrative was assumed between the Polynesian immigration officer and the Irish migrant Daisy when she presented her New Zealand passport and he said, “Welcome home.” What her essay reveals is how his greeting boosted her sense of belonging. His recognition mattered more to her self-understanding than the external passport upon which it was based, an acceptance of otherness that fosters the sense of self.

Identities: Narratives of Formation

The personal essay has the power to address the gaps between the external identification of migrants and their own self-understanding, and it does so in the migrant’s own words, forcing a rethinking of what we mean by identity and belonging. Homi Bhabha recognizes the need for self-representation for “new communities of interest, such as a refugees, underclasses, diasporic,”

stating: “their experiences, and their voices must be heard in their own words in order to make us rethink what we understand by nation, national belonging, or national culture: to question nation, to question citizenship, to question community” (Thompson 199). Certainly the fact that 214 million people, or three percent of the world’s population, are migrants constitutes a community of interest (United Nations). The personal essay allows us to hear in migrants’ own reflective narratives what they think about the complex relationship between identity, nation and belonging. How migrants wrestle with these abstractions in their essays is wholly up to them, but the importance of their life story to personal identity and belonging is critical.

Audrey, a retired English psychiatrist, was evacuated to New Zealand as a child during World War II. In her final essay she recognizes the connection between identity and life story: “In the whole world families are the most important thing most of us have. And holding it all together is our essential core. Each of us leaves behind our life story. So, at eighty-two I still feel like a global citizen.” Taking the long view of eight decades, as well as over forty years as a practicing psychiatrist, she writes with some authority about what constitutes identity: “And holding it all together is our essential core,” which is immediately followed by what gives a sense of personal identity, “Each of us leaves behind our life story.” This corresponds with Cavarero’s emphasis on the connection between identity and narrative, “the verbal response to *who* someone is always consists in the narration of his or her life-story” (73). Finally she meshes the internal and external identifications, the past and present selves, “So, at eighty-two I still feel like a global citizen.” She acknowledges the continuity of identity from the eleven-year-old sent halfway across the world to New Zealand with her eighty-two-year-old self. Moreover this is the final sentence, in her final essay, summing up who she still feels she is: a global citizen. She does not identify herself with the nation state, but with the global community.

The personal essay is an ideal method of inquiry with respect to identity, asking always, “*Que sçay-je?*” what do I know? Who better to explore migrant identity than migrants themselves, for, as Thoreau writes, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anyone else whom I knew as well” (199). The personal essay’s inquiry into identity offers insights that are rich, idiosyncratic, and various, the very things not captured in the census categories or immigration statistics. Individuality distinguishes the essay, in that “Every essayist deals with the same general ingredients – self and experience and idea – but everyone deals with them differently” (Kidder and Todd 79). These migrants all share coming to New Zealand, but that experience and its impact on how they perceive themselves or are perceived by others varies considerably, as will its expression in the personal essay. Part of one’s sense of identity is based on self-understanding: “one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (Brubaker and Cooper 17). The interaction between the self and world, between the writer and the page, provides the place for recognition, exchange and resonance, and the essay becomes the matrix.

The migrant mines personal experience, as well as anything else that strikes him or her, for, as Lopate notes, “[t]he essayist must be a good storyteller” even while “the glory of the essayist is to tell, once and for all, everything that he or she thinks, knows, or understands” (xxxviii). The combination of narrative and reflection makes the essay well-suited to exploring questions of identity, because few genres are as devoted to self-examination, which has been its hallmark since Montaigne retired to his estate in 1571 to write, and indeed, invent the genre. As Montaigne prefaces his intention in the second edition of his essays in 1580, “I want to be seen here in my simple, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray,” and in case there is any doubt as to the subject matter: “I am myself the matter of my book” (3). Clearly questions of identity – who we are – have been central to the essay since its inception.

Centuries later Virginia Woolf claimed the same ground for the essay as Montaigne: “what we take to be the chief stock-in-trade of the essayist – himself” (31). Given the self as subject, the personal essay often deals directly with the problem of identity, particularly as it is expressed through narrative. Cavarero argues that our unique and unrepeatable existence is best captured in story: “the identity of a unique being has its only tangible unity – the *unity* that he/she seeks because it is *unique* – in the tale of his/her story” (39-40). For, as the poet Galway Kinnell reminds us, “but an incarnation is in particular flesh” (8).

Thus are identities and understanding entwined and exchanged through stories, through the “particular flesh” of individual narratives. Echoing Cavarero and the relational quality of narrative and identity, Friedman argues that “identity is literally unthinkable without narrative. People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others....

[I]dentities themselves are narratives of formation, sequences moving through space and time as they undergo development, evolution, and revolution” (8). For migrants the awareness of who they are occurs in part because of where they are, what country, culture, and sometimes language they inhabit. Migrants are constantly asked, “Where are you from?” and, in response, a narrative unfolds. When answering this question, Damira, the Croatian migrant who is a lawyer for the ministry of immigration, replies in her Slavic accent, “Wellington,” the W pronounced as a V. Her answer trumps the assumption that migrants self-identify with their country of origin, even while her accent anticipates further questions. To understand “Wellington” we must spool back to the Yugoslav Wars, her migration while pregnant to New Zealand, her husband’s return to Croatia two years later, her single parenthood, an entire narrative leading to this particular city – twenty years and many stories, in fact. My own narrative intersects hers, first coincidentally, and then familiarly. By chance, she signed our immigration paperwork to New Zealand, and later she became my student, writing extraordinary prose in a second language: “I have no name for

my baby. There is no sound, no recognition, it is nameless and safe as it cannot be called upon. With a name it will belong to everyone who calls, without it, it belongs to me only.” Having come from a war-torn country, she sees the act of naming as dangerous, since how one is identified and by whom have consequences in wartime. She deliberately gave her daughter a straightforward English first name, Sara, to go with her Croatian surname, Novak, and that blended identification is itself a narrative of formation.

We see identity form on the page of the essay as well, for essayists discover who they are and what they know in the process of writing. The essay becomes a narrative of formation and an epistemology, for “the essay is a particularly interrogatory form. We write in order to see what we think: our own thoughts are revealed to us as we write” (Hemley 133). Identity’s narrative embodiment has particular relevance when those narratives are personal essays whose ethos is to explore what one knows, how and why one understands. As Gareth the Welsh doctor describes his work: “They are personal essays in that they are written from my point of view with little or no regard for the views of others. They then become a strange collection and at times the mixture of truth, family myth, imagination, memory and even lies is hard to disentangle; or perhaps they are all just my truth.” Everything becomes grist for him as an essayist, to make of what he will, but Gareth recognizes that his truth is subjective. Epstein, one of the personal essay’s great champions and practitioners, considers the essay “an invention for discovery” and “what the essayist seeks to discover is himself” (“Introduction” xv). Lest this genre seem wholly solipsistic, the essay’s method is reciprocal, studying both self and world and exploring the ongoing interaction between them. For, as Adorno states, “All levels of the mediated are immediate to the essay, before its reflection begins” (159). This process of reciprocity and mediation within the essay has clear parallels with migrant identity construction, whereby the contact zone exists not only in the text, but also in the world.

Tūrangawaewae

Migrant narratives provide vital insight into how migrants understand and identify themselves. We see migrants mediate between the world and their text through essays which offer “Personal testimony [that] speaks precisely to how im/migrant subjects constantly build, reinvent, synthesize, or even collage identities from multiple sources and resources” (Benmayor and Skotnes 15). Consider Gareth the Welsh doctor – first name, male, followed by nationality and profession – several identifications can be based on that appellation, and indeed Gareth himself strongly identifies with at least two of them, his nationality and his profession. Gareth is passionately Welsh. Perhaps it is not possible to be dispassionately Welsh, because as he states in one of his essays the Welsh are “nurtured on a diet flavoured by the conviction that all would be perfect if it wasn’t for the English.” All of Gareth’s essays are marked by the combined power of rhetoric and lyricism. Maybe his formative years of going to chapel, two or sometimes three times each Sunday, instilled him with both. He describes this early influence while at his father’s funeral service when he was twenty-one:

The minister took a worn copy of the Gospel of St John, held it up and spoke, as only Welsh Non-conformist ministers can speak, of how my father had carried it through the War, of how important his family was to him and I struggled to choke back the tears. His voice was quiet with an almost palpable quality of restrained emotion and the slow pace quickened with each sentence, and the English and Welsh merged into a special language of grief.

Clause after clause, the prose rolls off the page, building on itself to a swell of emotion able to contain “a special language of grief.”

Now compare that with the opening of his essay on identity:

We emigrated from the land of our fathers, our childhood, adolescence and early adulthood and were excited at the thoughts of a new life in a new land. But no matter how far the Welsh travel they always remain Welsh and, perhaps, the further they travel the more Welsh they become. We pay New Zealand taxes, have New Zealand passports and our children have New Zealand accents but our upbringing has branded us with our Welshness.

The passage unfolds with the triple clause at the beginning and closes with the powerful anaphora invoking New Zealand three times in the final sentence, exactly the sort of rhetorical device the Non-conformist ministers might have used, and it is not surprising to learn Gareth wrote his drafts out longhand, revising them several times, before typing them up. His essays are eloquent and exemplary of the genre, poised and at ease, intelligent and heartfelt. I often asked him to read aloud in class for the pleasure of his accent and his prose marked by his inimitable Welsh self. As one of his migrant classmates joked, if he came upon an essay in the middle of Cathedral Square in downtown Christchurch, he would recognize Gareth's writing, for like all successful essays his prose is marked by "a strong sense of personal presence" (Epstein "Introduction" xv).

Gareth's essay opens with the collective "we" and an almost biblical invocation: "We emigrated from the land of our fathers, our childhood, adolescence and early adulthood and were excited at the thoughts of a new life in a new land." He progresses from the ancestral link of "the land of our fathers" through his own lifetime up to the point of migration at "early adulthood." Then, as though distrusting or perhaps mocking the universalizing promise of the new land, his own national identity immediately asserts itself, "But no matter how far the Welsh travel they always remain Welsh and, perhaps, the further they travel the more Welsh they become." Here the triple use of "Welsh" in one sentence insists on a collective Welsh identity as much as the

sentence itself does. He has no doubt about the Welsh having an enduring sense of who they are: “they always remain Welsh,” an identity that is concentrated not diluted by the distance from Wales. He states his connection to New Zealand, “We pay New Zealand taxes, have New Zealand passports and our children have New Zealand accents” but despite those three ties, including citizenship, “our upbringing has branded us with our Welshness.” That branding is more than in name, as he explains: “it is the sum total of upbringing, culture, an ancient history, attitudes, tolerances and intolerances.” But what is curious is the very things he treasures about “Being Welsh in Wales,” where he is “bolstered by the past, sheltered by the sacrifices of the Rebecca rioters, the Chartists, the unions and the Labour Party, conformed by the Non Conformist chapels,” in turn leads to “an enormous pressure to be *Welsh*” [italics the author’s]. To escape that pressure his family “took a leap into the dark and came to Aotearoa. And having come twenty thousand kilometres we have, strangely, become even more Welsh.” Again we see how distance from the place of origin concentrates his sense of identification of being Welsh.

Perhaps we cannot escape our life-story in some core fashion, and we are, as Gareth notes, “branded” by our upbringing. He returns to this image of branding in the close of his essay:

I am a New Zealander and am proud to be so but I will always, always be filled with an unquenchable *hiraeth* [longing, yearning] which brands me indelibly as Welsh. I am incredibly fortunate that I now have two *tūrangawaewae* and have a *whakapapa* that is Welsh but has Pākehā and Rangitane branches. If I did not love Wales who would I be? A castaway afloat on a sea of uncertainty constantly searching for a cultural identity and the security of ancestry.

Now in his seventies, Gareth has lived in New Zealand half his life and declares both his cultural identifications here: “I am a New Zealander and am proud to be so but I will always, always be

filled with an unquenchable *hiraeth* which brands me indelibly as Welsh.” He does not see being a New Zealander or being Welsh as mutually exclusive. His sense of self is not fragmented, hybrid, negotiated, or any of those critical terms used “to construct” post-structural identity. On the contrary, he identifies with both in the same sentence, because, as a migrant, “To live ‘elsewhere’ means to continually find yourself in a conversation in which different identities are recognized, exchanged and mixed, but do not vanish” (Chambers 18). Gareth considers himself and is proud to be a New Zealander, while avowing “I will always, always be filled with an unquenchable *hiraeth* which brands me indelibly as Welsh.” The use of future tense and the repetition in “I will always, always” emphasizes the “unquenchable *hiraeth*” of his enduring sense of Welsh identity. Choosing *hiraeth*, Welsh for yearning, longing to describe both what fills him and what brands him seems entirely appropriate. His identification is both internal and unquenchable, as well external and indelible. For Gareth the ability to identify simultaneously with New Zealand and Wales is not contradictory but coexistent. Migration enriches his sense of self, instead of disrupting it, which echoes Cixous’ idea that our identity is enriched and confirmed by the experience of other, “The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*” (13). For migration is clearly an encounter with other – other landscapes, languages, cultures, to say nothing of other people who are unlike ourselves.

Gareth sees his migration in a very positive light: “I am incredibly fortunate that I now have two *tūrangawaewae* and have a *whakapapa* that is Welsh but has Pākehā and Rangitane branches.” He enriches his sense of Welsh and New Zealand identity by invoking two important and interrelated Māori concepts, *tūrangawaewae* and *whakapapa*. *Whakapapa* means genealogy and cultural identity (P. M. Ryan), and *tūrangawaewae* is often translated as a place to stand, but also encompasses home, foundation and a “place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and *whakapapa*” (Moorfield). Gareth recognizes that Wales and New Zealand

are both his *tūrangawaewae*, and with the birth of his grandchildren, his Welsh *whakapapa* is interwoven with “Pākehā [European] and Rangitane [Māori] branches.” His embrace of these core Māori concepts exemplifies how “Rather than movement from one place to another uprooting or deterritorialising migrants’ identities – as has been intimated – what scholars witness among contemporary migrants is a strengthening and deepening of ties to multiple places” (Ralph and Staeheli 521). Gareth acknowledges the deepening of those ties through the rooting of his *whakapapa* in New Zealand and feeling “incredibly fortunate” to have two *tūrangawaewae*. The use of Welsh and Māori terms inscribes his sense of identification in the language of each place. The essay’s final sentences address the idea of cultural identity directly: “If I did not love Wales who would I be? A castaway afloat on a sea of uncertainty constantly searching for a cultural identity and the security of ancestry.” Here his original *tūrangawaewae* and *whakapapa* embodied by his love for Wales anchors his sense of who he is, half a world and half a lifetime away, and he remains Welsh while still declaring “I am a New Zealander.”

An inclusive sense of belonging and the reconciliation of dual nationalities is not shared by all migrants. Instead of feeling their identities blend, other migrants are torn by their far-flung attachments to people and place. Amelia, the Englishwoman married to a New Zealander and who migrated in 1995, writes, “The disengagement from my UK family and heritage comes at a personal cost. Of late I feel a foreigner in this land. I had given up the closeness with my extended family and had taken on the responsibilities of my New Zealand relatives as if they were my own.” While she does not mind the caregiving she provides her in-laws, “I ask myself should I have given up so much?” Even though she has lived almost twenty years in New Zealand she writes, “Of late I feel a foreigner in this land.” Separated from what she loves, especially her aging parents far away in England, we see the emotional cost of distance on her sense of well-being and belonging, and yet she recognizes, “Leaving the traditional square of upbringing freed

me physically and mentally to create a new path in life.” But stepping outside the square has a cost, which she notes: “I do not have the supporting nest of my upbringing living here in New Zealand.”

The ability to entertain contradiction is central to the essay and perhaps the human mind. Migrants are particularly aware of contradiction in their lives, having left places and people they love to live elsewhere. Since “the essay lives in tension, pulled formally and historically in contrary directions: paradox abounding” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 114), the genre’s penchant for holding contrary and conflicting emotions and thoughts is ideally suited to what migrants themselves experience in their divided loyalties between people and place. Amelia’s closing image in her last essay depicts that divided self perfectly: “I do not feel like a New Zealander! Rather the image of a person standing in outsized black shiny wellington boots with one foot on the South Island of New Zealand and the other foot planted in the UK. Because truly, I still feel outside the square.” She declares, adamantly, who she is not: “I do not feel like a New Zealander!” Then the focus shifts outside of herself, suspended above the globe where she straddles her two islands, New Zealand and the British Isles. She remains outside the square of home and upbringing, yet envisions herself from an external perspective wearing the outsized shiny black wellington boots of her homeland, which are called gumboots in New Zealand, thus showing her English sense of identification even there.

For some migrants the identification with where they originated prevents them from forming any connection with New Zealand. Elizabeth, another Englishwoman, expresses this perfectly: “I missed, and still miss, England terribly. There I knew what to expect in every which way and I long to navigate my life again by familiar landmarks. Radio 4, stately homes, Bath streets, Cotswold hills, Marks and Spencer food, and a snobbery that is explicit and doesn’t pretend to be an egalitarian hero.” She lists what she misses about England in concrete detail,

from the radio station to landscape, from food to class snobbery, but what is even more important is “There I knew what to expect in every which way and I long to navigate my life again by familiar landmarks.” She both recognizes and identifies with these landmarks, the dear familiar, revealing how “Narratives and strategies of identity and belonging are constructs which are produced relationally” (Anthias “Intersectionality” 244). We form relationships to people, places, and customs, and the context for these connections is disrupted and dislocated by migration.

One of the reasons we miss familiar things we know and love when we migrate is our brain is mapped with them: “The *sine qua non* of a neural network is its penchant for strengthening neuronal patterns in direct proportion to their use. The more often you do or think or imagine a thing, the more probable it is that your mind will revisit its prior stopping point” (Lewis, Amini and Lannon 143). What we miss is something both rooted and routed in the brain. Thus our sense of identity and belonging becomes engrained over years of association. Elizabeth recognized this on a visit back to England: “When I returned to England for a holiday in August 2009, I walked Bath streets with eager knowing. Streets I have walked time and again since I was a child. Forty years of walking pathways that are the same, but with a slightly different me each time.” Her identification with the Bath streets remains constant even while her self ages as it walks along them. For Elizabeth, identification and identity, England and being English, are entwined: “I am not Pākehā. Neither am I New Zealand European, which I take to mean a second generation European migrant, rather than a European wanting to be a New Zealander. I am neither. I am English.” Perhaps it is not surprising when her marriage ended she returned to England, where she had such a strong sense of connection and self-understanding. I visited Elizabeth when I was England, my studies relocated courtesy of the earthquakes and Oxford University, and we walked in the Cotswold Hills, toured the stately

home of Dyrham Park near Bath, drank countless cups of tea, and it was just as she wrote, “I love home, I love stability, I love routine.” And there it is: “I love home.” Home concretizes our identity.

Migrant Roots

Our sense of where and with whom we belong is central to who we are. Belonging constellates around our most profound and enduring connections to people, culture, language, landscape, and self. As such, our past informs our present. All of the migrants in this braided narrative speak of their original roots contributing significantly to their sense of self, for “when one begins to explore one’s identity it is both surprising and shocking to learn how the roots of one’s personality inevitably lead back to the unsuspecting home” (O’Donohue *Eternal Echoes* 44).

Theresa, the Indian nurse, concurs, noting that “the truth is we are just the reflection of our old meanest parents. The involuntary actions and words can be clearly traced back to those days. There is a saying, which translates as what is written on your forehead by your birth cannot be erased by hand or covered by makeup.” Birgitta, the Swedish migrant, sums up how much the past shaped who she is: “To wish for another past than the one we have, wish for another family than the one that gave us the genes and the home atmosphere that shaped us and set us up for the lives we were to lead, is to wish to *be* somebody else. It was the family that made me feel I had a rightful place in life.” She credits her sense of identity and belonging to her genetics, her family and her home atmosphere. In two separate essays, In Suk from Korea writes, “my daily life practices remain deeply rooted in Korea,” and “the foundation of my thinking is deeply rooted in my culture.” The neuronal patterns formed by her daily life in Korea remain, keeping her “deeply rooted” and culturally bound in thought and practice.

Roots are such a universal and essential metaphor that when we speak of them we do not feel the need to explain. As Cixous notes, “They have always been there. I have never looked at them. I ‘know’ they are there. Their presence. Roots. Mine? My so strange roots” (179). The idea that we “know” our roots are there, even after migration (as Cixous herself did from Algeria to France), is critical. Roots give a sense of continuity amid the radical displacement of migration. Pull hard on any taproot and it breaks off in the ground of our being: first language, first landscape, the first people who have known and loved us. The original frame of reference, a combination of emotion, culture, family, and language, becomes internalized when one migrates. What was rooted becomes uprooted, and comes with us as part of our identity. As Mary, the Scottish psychologist, writes, “I was leaving the place but that land is always home – in my inner landscape if not under my feet. I was leaving people but taking them with me in that I can conjure them up in my head and have imaginary conversations – if not real ones.” Here both the people and the place are carried within her. As Clifford notes, “To know who you are means knowing where you are. Your world has a center you carry with you” (“Notes on Theory and Travel” 187). Even if we move across the world, we are bringing our language, our memories, and our roots with us.

Gertrude Stein lived in France for thirty years before going back to the US to visit. She elaborates on the concept of the enduring and portable nature of one’s roots in an interview she gave before returning to France:

Our roots can be anywhere and we can survive, because if you think about it, we take our roots with us. I always knew that a little and now I know it wholly. I know because you can go back to where they are and they can be less real to you than they were three thousand, six thousand miles away. Don’t worry about your roots so long as you worry about them. The essential thing is to have the feeling

that they exist, that they are somewhere. They will take care of themselves, and they will take care of you, too, though you may never know how it has happened.

(Preston 157)

In keeping with what Stein says, “we take our roots with our roots with us” the migrant essays bear this out: roots migrate, if only metaphorically. Yet that makes perfect sense as metaphor “in its classical usage, means being at home in a strange place” (Bromley 108). The migrant, as the stranger who comes to town, must learn to be at home in a strange place if she wishes to feel welcome and have a sense of belonging.

The idea that roots migrate seems contradictory, as we tend to see roots as settled, fixed, permanent, rooted in a place, both a noun and a verb, but migrant essays address this seemingly contradictory phenomenon. Noki, who has never returned to the Netherlands in over thirty years, acknowledges, “My background is as Dutch as can be, but I feel no current connections to the low countries.” He may not feel any current connection to the Netherlands, nevertheless he states his “background is as Dutch as can be.” His self-understanding as Dutch endures. Nor does time diminish a migrant’s identification with roots, as Cathrine, the elderly Dane, attests, in a passage noted earlier: “I never felt a stranger. To me I have always been as much part of the landscape as any New Zealander. But my whole outlook on life is that of a Dane with a background formed by the Danish educational system as well as by family and genetics.” She has a strong sense of both a New Zealand and a Danish identity, neither canceling the other out, for “Identity is a confluence, not a simple matter of subjectivity” (Bromley 78). Embedding herself in the landscape, she identifies completely with her second country, “I have always been as much part of the landscape as any New Zealander.” Yet, in her perception, her self-understanding remains that of a Dane: “But my whole outlook on life is that of a Dane with a background

formed by the Danish educational system as well as by family and genetics.” Clearly Cathrine does not have to be native to feel she belongs in the landscape of her chosen country.

Other migrants speak of their roots still being part of their sense of self, much as Gertrude Stein claims: “The essential thing is to have the feeling that they [roots] exist, that they are somewhere” (Preston 157). As Piet, the Dutch migrant who has been in New Zealand fifty years, observes: “Even if we put down firm roots in a new country, there will always be something that we leave behind in our country of origin. I think we are untrue to ourselves if we are denying our original roots altogether. As emigrants we will never be quite 100% New Zealanders, even though we are happy to be in New Zealand and have a real sense of belonging here.” He does not name the “something” migrants always leave behind. But in the next sentence he claims, “we are untrue to ourselves if we are denying our original roots altogether.” Even if roots, metaphorically, are left behind in the country of origin, they continue to inform a sense of self, and to deny them is to be “untrue to ourselves.” Perhaps the idea “there will always be something that we leave behind in our country of origin” is why “[as] emigrants we will never be quite 100% New Zealanders,” and yet this does not prevent Piet from being happy in New Zealand or having “a real sense of belonging here.”

Piet returns to the roots metaphor in his final essay on identity, declaring, “So who am I here? How do I see myself? I am someone who had his original roots in a far off land, with still some sentimental feelings for that place. But I am also someone who has put down firm roots in New Zealand now and is happy to be here.” Piet’s declaration as to where his original roots and current roots are bears the weight of long experience and reflection: “Kiwis, some perhaps only a fraction of my age, might still perceive me as a foreigner, even though I have lived in this country for over 52 years now ... My perception of my own identity is of an immigrant who feels at home in New Zealand and who has integrated well.” He balances his own self-understanding

with how he is identified by Kiwis. He does not perceive himself as other, “as a foreigner,” though some still do, but instead he feels “at home in New Zealand.”

Migrant identity is closely bound to what and who migrants identify with: people, place, culture, landscape, things resonant with meaning and attachment for them. For some migrants these prior attachments may far outweigh anything found in the new country, and as a result a sense of belonging or feeling at home never takes hold. Their earlier sense of identity is strong enough to make the acceptance of other identities difficult, even as it pertains to citizenship. For example, Theresa, the Indian nurse, had to forfeit her Indian citizenship when she became a New Zealand citizen. The decision to do so filled her with regret. Her email to me, unedited, bears witness to her sense of loss:

i am 100% indian...all the indians are my brothers and sisters i love my culture...i love my country with all its problems...with all its poverty. i don't know why i chose this but this is the reality knowing that i won't be buried with all the traditional mourning, among my family members...it hurts, it hurts deep down, especially when i know i don't really belong here.

Given her core identification with her own country and culture, why she chose to forfeit her citizenship can seem inexplicable. Her anguish is palpable in her frantic, broken prose, all the more grievous when she admits, “it hurts, it hurts deep down, especially when i know i don't really belong here.” Eva Hoffman experienced firsthand what nonnative speakers undergo, having migrated from Poland to Canada at age fourteen. She warns that when we privilege “uncertainty, displacement, marginality, the decentered identity” this “underestimates the deep costs of uprootedness and transculturation, a process that involves not a willful positioning of ourselves between cultures or ‘on the borders,’ but a deep upheaval in the very fabric of self” (65). Theresa’s external identification of citizenship runs counter to who she believes she is:

“100% indian.” Although possibly resulting from the looser conventions in email, both the country and the pronoun have a small “i” throughout her note, as though reflecting a diminished sense of identity and importance, one not strong enough to assert itself with respect to choice of citizenship.

The passport is an external symbol of identity, an official recognition of citizenship in a nation. I have two passports, one American, one New Zealand. I am fortunate to be allowed citizenship in two countries. Unlike Theresa, I did not have to forfeit my first citizenship, and I am not torn by a sense of disloyalty to the United States. When I swore the oath of allegiance to a monarch on the other side of the world to become a New Zealand citizen, I realized I had never sworn an oath before and that I took my own citizenship for granted, because I could. I did not give up anything to become a New Zealand citizen, and indeed one of the best things we could have given our children is the right to live in a country they feel is their *tūrangawaewae*.

For Theresa her *tūrangawaewae* is clearly in India, as her passionate identification with her country and culture attests: “all the indians are my brothers and sisters i love my culture...i love my country with all its problems.” These claims offset and perhaps contribute to her sense of not belonging in New Zealand. Edward Said argues that “Nationalism is an assertion of belonging to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and by doing so it fends off the ravages of exile” (51). Theresa’s sense of loss is not unfounded, as one of her essays reveals: “life is happy and comfortable here at a price of our rich culture and traditions. Family gatherings and celebrations are unknown here. There are times I long for some loved ones company. I do miss the warmth of that extended family and the closeness of the village community where everyone knew each other and cared for each other.” For Theresa, New Zealand offers none of that, and it is not surprising she refers to herself as “a case of lost identity.” She has lost the very things she identifies with: language,

culture, traditions, extended family, and “the closeness of the village community where everyone knew and cared for each other.” I felt a similar sense of lost identity in Sweden, stripped of language, connection, knowing and being known. Her essay mirrored my own sense of displacement, providing the moment of recognition between text and reader. Her self-understanding grounded my own, although such recognition is not dependent upon one having migrated.

Embracing the Unknown

The personal essays written by migrants address their own self-understanding, as well as how they are identified and perceived by others. Perhaps no genre is better suited to wrestling with questions of identity than one where the writer “becomes the crucible in which experience is tried and tested and meaning extracted. The essay’s subject is not then, the self, contrary to popular opinion, although the essayist’s soil, or laboratory, is nothing but the self” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 6). In the essay the individual’s consciousness mediates whatever it dwells upon or within through the writing. The text reflects the writer’s habit of attention, what arrests and emerges from that, rooting out what is essential. The text reveals the very things that are unexpected, unknown, and otherwise undiscovered until the writer sets out to sift through and pursue where thought leads. Aldous Huxley points out that the essay exists in three possible worlds, the personal, the universal, and the abstract, and the best essays inhabit all three (vii). The essayist discovers what she thinks and knows in the midst of writing, reflecting upon it simultaneously, even as the migrant discovers the new country moment by moment and over time. The premise that the unknown manifests in writing seems inherent when regarding the essay as a method of inquiry, a genre capable of both revelation and recognition. As Cixous describes this process, “When one has faith in what is not knowable: in the unknown in

ourselves that will manifest. This is something so strange that to speak about it always seems to me almost illegal. It is the secret of the *ability-to-write*" (39). The unknown is the appearance of the other within ourselves and on the page, made welcome, resonant, and manifest, like the migrant who feels at home, no longer estranged in the new country.

People who embrace the unknown and other live in a larger world, a world not circumscribed by their own national or cultural identities. The contact zone becomes fruitful and engaging, not contentious. For migrants, as well as for the host country inhabitants, the awareness of identity occurs in the contact zone. Where the other meets, identity coalesces: "Discovery or recognition of identity lives not so much in cultures as in the meeting of cultures" (J. Gray 12-13). Amama, a doctor in her sixties who has lived in New Zealand half her life, describes this meeting of cultures:

A frequent conversation when I meet someone new goes as follows: "Where do you come from, you look Greek or Turkish, but you speak English very well." I sigh inwardly and think, here we go again. I tell them of my African origin, Indian genes, Scottish education, English husband, Kiwi children and residence in Christchurch for thirty years. "You are international and that must be wonderful." Or others will say, "You are now one of us."

This anecdote relating a repeated experience in her life – "here we go again" – shows how closely identity is linked to life story, as Cavarero points out, but also how migrant identity is mapped in multiple places and connections. Her narrative reveals how roots and routes are "two sides of the same coin: roots, signifying identity based on stable cores and continuities; routes suggesting identity based on travel, change, and disruption" (Friedman 153). Her identity is rooted in genetics and routed in movement, from Uganda where she was born to Indian parents who migrated there, to Edinburgh where she studied medicine, to her marriage to an English doctor

and their joint migration to New Zealand. Small wonder that with her Indian ethnicity, fluent English, albeit slightly different to a Kiwi ear, native New Zealanders cannot “place” her.

In turn the migrant is identified by others, and Amama offers two possible responses: “You are international and that must be wonderful” implies she does not belong in New Zealand but is part of some larger world which is “international.” Alternatively she is greeted with, “You are now one of us,” which accepts her as one who belongs in New Zealand. These differing responses reveal more about the interlocutor than Amama, who has, after all, identified herself in terms of ethnicity, place of origin, education, profession, marital status, children, and thirty years in New Zealand. Perhaps the statement “You are now one of us” reflects the individual who recognizes New Zealand is a country of migrants, whose roots/routes differ and converge, whether they arrived on waka from the Pacific islands or ships and planes from everywhere else in centuries since. Every encounter occurs in the contact zone, which corresponds with Cixous’ premise that the experience of other confirms our own sense of I. Resonating in any encounter are prior connections to people, place, language, and culture, as well as who migrants become in response to the new country.

While a sense of one’s roots remains within migrants, even long after they leave, the individual will be changed by migration. As Birgitta, the migrant from Sweden, writes, “The ‘I’ goes through changes, though. Changing language, culture and climate all in one foul swoop was a bit of a thump on the head for the normal ‘I.’” Even as fell swoop is changed to foul, as much by chance or choice, so the migrant sense of self will be altered. Moreover that change is ongoing, as Taegen, the Englishwoman in her seventies who migrated in 1980, writes: “But I had underestimated my sense of belonging to an ancient culture and the ‘newness’ that New Zealand was to offer me. It took time to adapt and it still does after all the years.” Allowing for that adaptation is vital to the migrant’s sense of identity: “It is crucial that the migrant should be

able to find a space to construct an identity that can accommodate what he or she once was and is now supposed to be” (Bromley 66). For migrants the roots inform the routes, as a core frame of reference. But migrants have also been changed by the routes they have taken and what they have learned and adopted in their new frame of reference.

Sabina, who came alone to New Zealand in her thirties from the Netherlands in 2004, describes a positive interaction between these two frames of reference:

After five years I no longer feel like an alien, I've learned to love both worlds and how rich am I to know and enjoy those two. I'm glad that I wasn't born here, my youth would have been boring and I think I definitely gained a better education and a sense of history, I've enjoyed the easy opportunity to travel to other countries by car and train and to have roots in two very distinctive places in Holland. That I can enjoy reading Dutch books but also sing along to the latest Kiwi band. That I have improved my English and Kiwi accent and that I've changed for the better.

Notice how she no longer feels like an “alien” after five years in the new country. Feelings of alienation, dislocation and displacement are common to migrants when they arrive, and some never adapt. Sabina has “learned to enjoy both worlds,” rather than pining for one left behind or forgetting it completely with an over identification with her adopted homeland. She realizes “how rich am I to know and enjoy those two” worlds. However, she remains enthusiastic about her origins, smacking New Zealand roundly when she comments, “I'm glad that I wasn't born here, my youth would have been boring and I think I definitely gained a better education and a sense of history.” She claims roots in two parts of Holland, with a nod to her own *tūrangawaewae* and *whakapapa*, “I myself am a mix of two different people from different places but very, very Dutch/Frisian. I'm very much the product of my parents, one born in Dokkum

and the other in Rotterdam, two different cultures in themselves.” She revelled in the proximity and ease of travel growing up and living in Europe – something not possible in New Zealand without getting on a plane. Then in a telling move she fuses her two senses of self and achieves harmony: “That I can enjoy reading Dutch books but also sing along to the latest Kiwi band. That I have improved my English and Kiwi accent and that I’ve changed for the better.” Shining throughout the passage is her joy in both worlds, the roots/routes reinforcing her sense of who she is and fostering the belief that she has “changed for the better.” In the final sentence of this essay, which is entitled “Alien,” she writes, “This new country of mine is not yet in my blood but surely familiar enough to be under my skin.” The sense of connection is “not yet” in her blood, but close enough to be under her skin, and she claims the country as her own, “This new country of mine.”

“Migrants – borne-across humans”

We often see a sense of blended identity in the migrant narratives. Chris, who migrated at age eight from England, explains her identity in terms of food: “I see my life today as a blend of my heritage and the modern New Zealand lifestyle, typified by the Christmas pudding and white sauce sitting alongside the pavlova on the Christmas dinner table.” Here two classic desserts served at Christmas, one very English, Christmas pudding, and pavlova, which Australians like to claim as their concoction but which New Zealanders vehemently insist is their own, embody the braided strand of her life. The very traditions she celebrates she learned from her mother, who migrated in her forties and did not settle well in New Zealand: “Spending hours over a hot stove making Christmas dinner in the middle of summer was unnatural and uncomfortable, but not celebrating this special day in a traditional way was unthinkable.” As a child she might not have been aware of her mother’s unhappiness and pining for home, but in one of Chris’s most moving

essays she imagines how her mother felt, writing in her mother's voice: "Most of all I missed my friends, those people who had shared my joys and sorrows over the decades. I did not transplant well and even though the soil was richer and the climate milder in my new home, I did not flourish."

Now in her sixth decade Chris can look back not only on her life, but also that of her mother's, and see what the long-term effects of the migration were. As Hampl notes, to write our lives is to live them twice, "and the second living is both spiritual and historical" (*I Could Tell You Stories* 37). For Chris, coming as a child to New Zealand she adapted readily and easily, was teased briefly for her Lancashire accent but then quickly made friends with the local children. She noted the same ease with locals was not possible for her mother and that "almost all my parents' friends came from 'somewhere else', not just England but Scotland, Rhodesia, and Czechoslovakia. Looking back I think this didn't help my mother to assimilate into the New Zealand way of life and she never really became a 'Kiwi.'" For her mother the identification with both fellow migrants and the country left behind may have prevented her from acquiring a New Zealand identity.

Sometimes a sense of blended identity originates even prior to the individual's migration to New Zealand, thus showing an inclination to embrace other. An excellent example of this is offered by Kornel, the young Slovakian, who came to New Zealand to improve his English and fell in love right before he left. He migrated to be with his Kiwi partner and has lived in New Zealand for ten years. In his essay on identity he writes:

So who am I? A bastard. A European bastard and this is a compliment, because bastard is what we call back at home a mongrel. A street-mix dog, which in comparison to a pure breed has the qualities of all the inherited breeds and therefore is strong and resistant. I am all of these: a Hungarian Slovak, a

Hungarian, a Slovak or a Czechoslovak; although, here in New Zealand the first guess is that I am German or Scandinavian due to the blue-eye-blond combination. Well, all this is in my blood thanks to my ancestors and many of the true Kiwi blokes are just as mixed up. I have got multiple identities and one saying has it: you are as many times human as many languages you speak.

He uses the analogy of the bastard, a European bastard, and this mongrel metaphor, rather than being disparaging, is seen in a positive light compared to purebreds, with “the qualities of all the inherited breeds and therefore is strong and resistant.” He then lists all the possible combinations of his nationalities that make up his mongrel identity: “a Hungarian Slovak, a Hungarian, a Slovak or a Czechoslovak.” In New Zealand he is misidentified as German or Scandinavian by virtue of his blonde hair and blue eyes. Here the mistaken external identification does not coincide with either his national affiliation or his sense of mongrel identity. He states “all this is in my blood thanks to my ancestors and many of the true Kiwi blokes are just as mixed up.” Now he identifies and draws parallels with “true Kiwi blokes” who are “just as mixed up” and therefore, by extension, also mongrels. Finally he sums himself up: “I have got multiple identities and one saying has it: you are as many times human as many languages you speak.” He affirms not only hybrid vigor, but linguistic and emotional breadth as well. He does not see his mongrel self as inferior, but enriched, even as his humanity is broadened by the fact he speaks five languages.

Kornel’s personal essay reveals something even more compelling than the multi-lingual mongrel identity he ascribes to himself. We see how his self-understanding is mediated both through metaphor and language. He uses the Slovakian expression for bastard translated into English, but glosses its original meaning, again in English, as mongrel. Not only is his identity cast in metaphor, it is translated into another language. His identity migrates literally,

figuratively and linguistically. Indeed, migration and metaphor share something essential, as Rushdie explains: “The very word *metaphor*, with its roots in the Greek words for *bearing across*, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants – borne-across humans – are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us” (278-79). Migrants as borne-across humans applies not only to language, identity, and location, but also to the transformative nature of migration upon the individual. Metaphor draws upon the similar and the different simultaneously, and the sudden recognition and surprise when they resonate together. At its most essential level, the recognition of what is similar and different informs the entire migration experience. Migrants must look past surface differences and similarities to find a deeper correspondence between self and the new country if they are to achieve any sense of resonance and belonging.

“Understanding nourishes belonging”

The one constant apparent to all migrants is they have been changed by their migration. As Theresa, the Indian nurse, distills it: “Change was inevitable for survival.” A pervasive and potent example of this change is encountered with older migrants from the Netherlands who came to New Zealand in the 1950s and often quit speaking Dutch in favor of English, even within their homes. As Piet recalls, “The school discouraged us from speaking Dutch at home, as their thinking at the time was that it would confuse the children too much, having to cope with two languages.” Having lived in New Zealand fifty years, he adds, “The interesting thing is that we easily revert back to Dutch when we discuss someone or something Dutch.” It makes sense that he associates his native language with people and things Dutch. Even Noki, who came twenty years later, notes, “Living with Kiwi-kids day and night certainly gets the language up to speed!” His children’s rapid acquisition of English shapes the parent’s language usage.

In Suk has observed that Korean parents risk losing their children to the host culture because “Even though the children have an English language barrier at the beginning, they quickly and easily adjust at school, where they learn the dominant NZ values and beliefs through education. They go through their lives independently like their New Zealand peers, while most of their mothers expect to care for their children a lot longer than New Zealand parents.” Here the children identify more closely with New Zealand culture and less with their parents’. As a single parent alone in New Zealand, the loss of her daughter to the dominant culture would be grievous, and In Suk took strides to ensure this did not happen: “Learning English and supporting my daughter to keep the mother tongue were a spirit of despair. I have bestowed on my daughter a crown of bilingualism.” What is striking is the gap between “a spirit of despair” in learning both English and keeping the mother tongue alive, followed by the wonderful metaphor of bestowing upon her daughter “a crown of bilingualism.” It is as though all the years of struggle are skipped over, the awkwardness in the first sentence recalls the early years and “a crown of bilingualism” is the reward of those efforts. Yet she does not claim the crown of bilingualism for herself, only for her daughter, who was nine when she migrated.

In Suk feels limited in her self-expression in a second language, even twenty years later, as she poignantly describes: “The few sisterly Kiwi friends who I have gained here are precious, but I think the rest of life would not suffice to master English like being able to share my deep emotion and intimacy to them.” Perhaps she is right, and “the rest of life” is not enough to master English, as the awkward phrasing unintentionally reveals. The absent pronoun in “the rest of [my] life” seems symbolic of the very thing she cannot express fully, herself. With her dearest friends she is unable “to share my deep emotion and intimacy to them.” Even that slight error in preposition, “to” instead of “with,” which implies a closer connection, seems emblematic of the gap that remains between her and her “sisterly Kiwi friends.” Yet despite her perceived

shortcomings in a second language she raises something essential which Freud stressed: “the one point which the emigrant experiences so particularly painfully: It is – one can only say: the loss of the language in which one lived and thought and which one will never be able to replace with another, for all one’s efforts at empathy” (xvi). I knew I would never be able to express a fraction of what I felt in Swedish, just as In Suk felt she could not express herself fully in English to her closest friends even after twenty years in New Zealand. No wonder I felt voiceless and unhappy at the prospect of living in Sweden, bereft of my native language, despite English being a compulsory subject in schools, with nearly all Swedes speaking some English. I remember my disbelief when I learned that alone and lonely were the same word in Swedish: *ensam*. They are not the same state or emotion for the English speaking migrant who experiences them.

Our ability to understand and be understood is crucial to our sense of well-being wherever we are in the world. As the Irish philosopher O’Donohue underscores, “Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging” (O’Donohue *Anam Cara* 14). For nonnative speakers language is critical to having a sense of identity in their chosen country outside of being a migrant. Language gives migrants access to work, friendship, the daily interactions involving language – in short, the country and culture in which they live. I understood this intrinsically when I lived in Sweden. I felt I had no identity outside of English and my own ability to understand Swedish was so limited and limiting it was crushing to my sense of self and world. The effect of understanding the language on the migrant’s identification with the new country cannot be underestimated, and in this regard migrants “are defined by and through the other place” (J. Gray 13). Huang, who is Chinese, married an Englishman and emigrated to New Zealand in 2004, gives nonnative speakers sound advice: “Language is important in getting to know the culture in which you find yourself living and if you do not

make an effort to learn the language then it is difficult to get an appreciation of the people you live with.”

One rainy winter evening all the migrant writers in my class concluded that language embodied culture more than any other aspect of their lives. Moreover, they discussed this in a language most of them had to learn, crossing the incredible distance from incomprehension to understanding, having come to New Zealand from Chile, China, Korea, Kiribati, the Netherlands and India. I remember feeling great humility in the face of their fluency, both around the table and on the page, realizing for all nonnative speakers who migrate “an essential part of survival was language” (Jaksić 20). Barbara, the elderly German who teaches English as a volunteer to migrants, understands firsthand language’s importance: “Basic communication is no real problem to any of them, but it is to speak with fluency and articulately. Finding work for people who are new here in a climate of high unemployment is crucial and for most a question of survival. Language is so often the key.” Without that key in Sweden, I went from fluency to silence, as I wrote about the very thing that would help employ me.

My loss of identity became even more symbolic when I left my wallet on the bus one night returning from my Swedish class in Gothenburg and had to replace all my forms of identification. I spent half an hour on hold, slowly advancing in the phone queue to speak with the police. The woman took my statement in English, making jokes while we spoke, and explained she had to translate everything back into Swedish in the police report. She had the immense advantage of being bilingual, and I realized to achieve this level of fluency in Swedish would take years and a strong commitment to learn its tricky vowels and pileup words, like *Rättshjälpsmyndigheten* (legal aid). Along with my wallet, my identity seemed to have disappeared with language. The move to Sweden was the real migration, not the previous one to New Zealand, as Rushdie attests: “To migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be

defined by others, to become invisible, or even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul” (210). The feeling of invisibility is trope for nonnative speakers, and Damira, the Croatian migrant, captures this feeling accurately, writing “I felt as invisible as I did when learning rudimentary English amongst those who were using it since birth. It was their language, not mine.” In twenty years Damira has gone from feeling invisible to working as a lawyer for the Ministry of Immigration and writing a blog in English where she observes: “In my years of learning English out of necessity, I often asked myself whether it is indeed possible to have any feelings, any thoughts at all if one cannot name them, cannot describe them. How does one recognize its world, and find one’s place in it if one cannot name it, ask for it, call for it, curse for it?” And yet in twenty years she has found words to express that idea, and herself, in English.

The Wrong Road

How our identity is transformed and transmitted by language is subtle and profound. In Sweden my identity seemed to contract because I did not understand much of the language, thus limiting my ability to interact on myriad and mundane levels. Amelia, the English migrant, lived in the Netherlands, and captures this feeling perfectly: “The sense of loss was acute. It was as though I was deaf. For what I heard I could not understand.” This diminished sense of self and world is not surprising since “Empathy, connectedness, is a function of language itself, because a function of human subjectivity, but not always acknowledged as such” (Borossa 34). Bereft of language and connection, I became depressed and sought counseling at our local clinic. My counselor was Swedish, although his father was English and I felt a sense of kinship with him, split at the root as he was. Even his name was not Swedish: Thomas Wright. After our first appointment I

asked him if he saw many migrants, and he nodded, saying there were so many he thought of making a support group for them.

Thomas listened with the deep attention of someone trained to focus on stories, what they tell and do not tell. We talked for months, or rather, I talked and he listened, and now and then he pointed things out to me in my narrative, a parallel process to my own thesis in some respects. One morning, in a moment of rare disclosure, he told me he could not think of a single country where I belonged less than in Sweden. I asked him where he would place me, and he said, "I don't know, but not here." I knew he was right. No part of me wanted to be in Sweden, and yet this was where we lived. *Ensam*, alone and lonely. That same morning he explained if words are missing to describe colors or flavors in a language, it is as though those colors and flavors do not exist for the individual. I thought about the word *ensam*, which means lonely, alone, sole, desolate, lonesome, lone, one word for six very different states of being in English, and I wondered what else was missing here. Aside from my family and a handful of Swedish friends, I realized there was not enough for me to love in Sweden, and would never be. Not words, not landscape, not warm-hearted people, not sunlight. Who and what we love is an elemental part of identity and grounds our being in ways that are ineffable and irreplaceable, which is why migration is such a rupture. Only the migrants who form strong and lasting attachments to the new country thrive and have a sense of identity that fuses who they were before with who they are now. The root meeting the route.

As someone who swims in language, living in Sweden was like losing my habitat. I knew I would never have in Swedish what I had in English, "an inexplicable grace that makes one not be condemned and chained to the linear, univocal, reduced use of language; but rather, right away, one is in this milieu: one is in the middle of language" (Cixous and Calle-Guber 38). I would never be in the middle of Swedish. Maybe if my husband had been Swedish, maybe if my

children had been younger and chattered away to me all the time in Swedish, I could have learned to be somewhat fluent. Instead, in public I felt both mute and invisible, and I understood I had lost what Eva Hoffman calls “our psychic home,” the intangible elements that give us a sense of identity: “for the first vivid lessons of my uprooting were in the essential importance of language and of culture, and in the inseparability of these large and supra-personal entities from our most inward and intimate selves” (Hoffman 55). But it was not only myself, it was the entire family who had lost their psychic home.

In New Zealand our children’s lives had been unfurling like the silver fern from its spiral coil, and they were flourishing when we uprooted them to Sweden. Stripped of language and friendship, they were placed in the local school. Our son told me he now understood how the Korean and Chinese students in his New Zealand school felt. I thought a crash course in empathy was no bad thing for him, but an adolescence riddled with exclusion is. Unlike New Zealand, our children were the only migrants in their Swedish school. They were outside and other in a culture that is subtly and quietly conforming. Our daughter, outgoing and buoyant, had only one friend, a girl who had lived in England for five years and been bullied at her former school in our area. At eleven and fourteen our children were independent and direct, unafraid of the contact zone which was scrupulously avoided in the land of the ombudsman. Meanwhile my husband navigated the academy in Swedish, with its pileup words and underlying desire for consensus and stasis at all costs. He realized he would never possess the cultural and linguistic ability to effect positive changes amid the bureaucratic inertia.

In Sweden our family was like one of the small uninhabited islands near the coast where we lived. The culture lapped round us and yet we were isolated in the midst of it. When I looked out at the water I had the same thought over and over again: leave. I thought of my Swedish teacher, a cheerful and effervescent Hungarian woman fluent in Swedish, who has lived

in Sweden five years and had only one Swedish friend. I remembered the first thing Thomas ever said to me, that migrants from Mediterranean cultures could not adjust to living in Sweden because they found the people too closed off and the weather too overcast. For our fifteenth anniversary my husband gave me a beautiful silk scarf made in India. The shop owner had been living in Sweden twenty-five years and never liked it. She longed to retire in India. I could not fathom living half my life somewhere I did not like – it seemed soul-destroying, and perhaps it is no accident that *sol*, Swedish for sun, echoes soul in English. Spring came cold and reluctant, a month late, the Baltic choked with more ice than it had seen in seventy years. The deer drifted into the yard and ate the hemisphere tulips right down to the ground when they were still in bud. I looked at the trees still leafless in May and thought: “Say this when you return, ‘I came by the wrong road and saw the starved woods burn.’” (Church qtd. in Humphreys n. pag).

We came by the wrong road. Suddenly an essential piece of the migration equation fell into place. Migrants must want to live where they migrate if they are to adapt and settle. Everything else is secondary. If they want to live in the chosen country, they can learn the language, they can find work, they can forge the friendships and connections that bind them and make their lives meaningful somewhere else. Many of the migrant essays attest to just this resilience and pluck in the face of difficulty, uncertainty, and radical adjustment. For them New Zealand had not been the wrong road. One spring morning, when class finally resumed after the first earthquake, one of the migrants mused, “Lately I have been wondering where I want to die.” The room became absolutely silent. I could feel all of us thinking: where do I want to die. It was an arresting question for migrants to ask, but the more important question, for any of us, is where do we want to live?

Language was the key that broke off in the lock of Sweden. Perhaps my husband and I came there too late in life to make the transition, perhaps the exhausted faces of our two

children reproached us when they came home from school, but we soon realized we did not belong in Sweden. We could survive yes, live no. No matter how fluent our Swedish became, we would remain outsiders in ways we never felt in New Zealand, a country of migrants and the most recently settled land in the world. We could not identify with Sweden, and that too seems to be a key to identity, not simply how the country identifies you as citizen, migrant, or illegal alien, but whether you identify with the country – its culture, its language, its people. Within four weeks of moving to Sweden my husband began looking at the job listings and within six months he had an interview. When asked why he wanted to accept a position back in New Zealand, my husband said simply, “I want my family to be able to speak English again.” Where you are understood, you are at home. We realized we had been uprooted from our *tūrangawaewae* of choice, if not birth. In Sweden, the cultural and linguistic distances far outweighed the geographical isolation of New Zealand, and were more difficult to bear. Unlike migrants who are forced to leave the place they love, we could choose friendship, landscape, the taste of the world’s best water, the impossible clarity of the southern skies, knowing and being known. We could return to New Zealand where we belonged, to live under brighter more numerable stars, facing the other half of the universe.

Chapter 7: Conclusion – The Gift of Return

“Chaque homme porte la forme, entière de l’humaine condition.”

– Montaigne, *Essais* (Book 3, Chapter 2)

When I think of the headwaters of the braided river of migration and the personal essay, I know an infinite number of drops melted, fell and were collected unseen beneath stones to form a trickle that only later appeared in the first glimmering of an idea. I think of all the different channels and tributaries that have carried me here, entwining my narrative with others, and how could I know, except by looking back, to see what design emerged? That the braided rivers which arise in the Southern Alps of New Zealand and snake and twine their way across the plains to the Pacific told a deeper story than their interwoven pattern revealed. Underneath the crisscrossing of oceans, the ongoing migrations, the sojourns in other countries that have made up my life until now, there has always been the search for home. We live forward but understand backward, and only by tracing the route of our migration can we discover the root of it, as T. S. Eliot understood: “And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time” (“Little Gidding” 5.27-29). I had to leave New Zealand and migrate to Sweden where I was truly foreign and other to grasp how essential it is to belong, to feel connected, to have meaning and give meaning to others. But when we left that winter afternoon, flying away from a city devastated by earthquakes, I had no idea we would come back to the country where I first realized I was a migrant, and had been a migrant all my life, when all I ever longed for was home.

We cannot know how the journey will unfold or where it will end, as the river of our lives is still flowing, but in the personal essay we can chart a version of its course thus far. When we stop and look back in writing we can see the river was shimmering in this direction all along,

that the bends it made, the eddies, the branching off and rejoining, the movement underground, were all part of its journey to this moment in time. All of the migrants in this braided narrative shared a journey of both migration and writing, for “writing opens up a space that invites movement, migration, a journey” (Chambers 78). Tracing that journey in the personal essay has allowed the migrants in this study to explore how they live forward and understand backward, and to reveal how underneath the surface features of their lives a deeper narrative can emerge in writing, the river under the river. The genre’s method of inquiry discovered this deeper narrative through writing, for “[i]n the essay, experience is weighed and assayed for its value and meaning, which derive from reflection, meditation, or contemplation” (Atkins *Tracing the Essay* 68). The essay can take a reflective and insightful measure of individual experience, capture things that slip through the larger categories of analysis, and explore abstractions that resist articulation – home, belonging, identity, connection – abstractions intrinsic to our sense of self and world.

Bearing Witness in the Personal Essay

The personal essay bears direct witness to the migrant experience and it does so in a genre dedicated to writing as inquiry. While other critical lenses have been used to explore migration, the personal essay is uniquely poised to access individual experience in ways those forms do not. Oral histories and interviews do not provide the drive toward reflective self-inquiry of the personal essay, for “few other genres commit the writer’s ‘I’ so relentlessly and few other genres are able to force the writer to confront himself so absolutely.... Among the legacies of the personal essay is that it has been used to describe so many different kinds of pain and self-discovery” (Kriegel 95). Rigorous inquiry combined with reflection make this genre a powerful tool for assessment of what migrants actually experience. Moreover, the personal essay resonates on more than the individual level, since it purposely reaches outward to readers. Unlike the

diary, journal or letter, the personal essay is written for a larger audience, even while it preserves the sense of intimacy of these forms: “It’s an intimate journey of self-examination and self-reflection undertaken with a reader on your shoulder. But it is more than that. It seeks to reveal the self in relation to the world; to broader, social, cultural, or political themes or issues; to an event or series of events; to a person, government, culture” (Iversen “Interview” 201). Given the essay’s dynamic between the self and the world, exploring the many connections that self makes – social, cultural, emotional – the personal essay provides a rich matrix for studying how migrants negotiate that contact zone both in the world and on the page.

In the personal essay the power of language forges connection and meaning in ways that bind us to people, to places, and to the stories we tell. This is a migrant’s story, mine, and thirty-seven others, braided together to reveal the emotional and existential landscape of migration we have traveled through in our lives. For migrants the two archetypal narratives of a man going on a journey and a stranger coming to town are central to the migration experience. Hence, embodying those two master narratives, this is also an archetypal story, as universal as it is individual. Migrants arrive in a country not yet known or familiar to them, where they must come to grips with everything their life touches: work, home, family, language. How migrants navigate that journey, both in life and in the essay, bears witness to how strangers experience a new environment, both at first and over the long term, for migration has a lifelong effect, though ideally the feeling of being a stranger diminishes over time. Migrant essays reveal that mutual acceptance and a willingness to try to understand the new culture and country lead to a sense of connection and familiarity, whereby they are no longer the stranger who came to town.

As we journey toward understanding our own lives, each other, and our world, we embark on a life that is unique and unrepeatable, and that is both the beauty and pathos of human existence. As John O’Donohue notes, “Your life is a totally unique story and only you

really know it from within. No one knows what your experience is like” (*Eternal Echoes* xxiii). The personal essay is designed to access and share what is known only to the individual, asking Montaigne’s constant question, “*Que sçay-je?*” or “What do I know?” Migrants can reflect on their own story as they strive to answer that question in the personal essay. In a genre dedicated to discovery, especially self-discovery, the writer weighs and tests experience for its value to reveal the true cost and effect of migration on the individual. The idea of finding one’s way through writing as a method of inquiry has a long tradition of both outward and inward directed discovery from Montaigne to the present, with clear parallels for how migrants navigate a new country and culture. As Lopate observes, “the personal essay represents a kind of basic research on the self, in ways that are allied with science and philosophy” (xlii), thus making it an ideal genre to study the complicated emotional and existential experience of migration. The personal essay explores what the writer does and does not know and shares that path of inquiry through writing.

The migrant and the personal essay both set out on a journey of discovery as they move from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and what they both find, if and where possible, are meaning and understanding. The synergy between the migrant and the personal essay comes from their shared endeavor to inquire into and assess what things mean, for in the personal essay, “The doing, the writing itself, is both a path *to* knowing and a path *of* knowing” (Fakundiny 678). The migrant comes to understand where she lives, and the writer comes to understand what she has experienced. Both the world and the essay test and are tested by the individual migrant, and these strands are brought together in the essay, not just the experience, but the meaning derived from the experience. The contact zone between self and other, self and world, and self and writing is where things resonate, connect, and acquire meaning, and the personal essay bears witness to that exchange. Studying personal essays such as

these is elemental to developing our sense of shared humanity, as Kwame Anthony Appiah observes, “evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And the alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships” (29). As the earth becomes more crowded, aligning our responses to the world will become an even more pressing concern on all fronts. Migrants have crossed frontiers that are geographic, cultural, linguistic, existential and emotional, and their experience in these contact zones of self and other are vital to our understanding of what is essential to and what maintains the social fabric.

The real journey of the migrant, both in life and in the essay, is one of understanding, for it is only by understanding and finding meaning that migrants are able to connect and feel at home in the world. As they journey toward understanding their individual migrations in writing, the personal essay yields unexpected moments of recognition and revelation about lived experience that might not otherwise have manifested themselves in larger categories of analysis. For writing forms, as Cixous notes, a passageway between two shores (“The School of the Dead” 3), even as migration acts as a passageway between countries, languages, and cultures. The personal essay explores the migrant passage between two or more shores, in writing and in life, as the migrant moves from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to unfamiliar, and in an important and essential reversal, from stranger to friend. The experience of self meeting other, the importance of reciprocal acceptance, and the role of understanding in all forms of exchange have implications with ethical, real world applications. As Montaigne understood, “Every man has within himself the entire human condition” (Lopate xxiii). The migrant personal essay bears witness to our shared humanity in a world becoming increasingly global and mobile, where contact with the other is where we find connection and meaning.

The Road Taken

Most of the world's seven billion inhabitants never leave the country of their birth. Others, that rare three percent, prove "Migration is the exception, not the rule" (Castles and Miller 9). Given how migration disrupts and dislocates people from everything that is known and familiar to them – roots, culture, perhaps language – why individuals choose to migrate, to take the road *not* taken by the rest of the world, is an elemental question. The first strand in this braided narrative explored the roots of why migrants left their home country. As James Clifford observes "roots always precede routes" (*Routes* 3), and the stock answers migrants give for why they migrated can be gleaned from any survey, but the real reasons are often unexplored and less straightforward, for, as the exiled Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz, notes, "reality is more complex than that and a given person has usually been pushed to migrate by a tangle of reasons" (n. pag). The personal essay's method of inquiry untangles the reasons migrants left, some long buried, to find the headwaters of a river that leapt oceans to course elsewhere in the world.

The story of our lives is not predetermined but unfolds from everything that happens, both chosen and accidental. A migrant's route is rarely straightforward and defies the ready narrative of the conventional novel, for, as Cavarero observes, "Life cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life" (3). No one foresees becoming a migrant, and yet what the personal essay reveals is that volunteer migration begins long before the individual arrives in New Zealand. Early disruptions and displacements feature in the migrant narratives, as though loosening the soil around their roots. Migrants often possess a curious and risk-taking attitude. As Hugh, the Irish doctor, writes, "if I was willing to look over the other side of the mountain, or lose sight of the land and take a bit of a risk, there was a whole other world out there which was both exciting and stimulating again." Pondering her own migration, Taegen the Englishwoman asks, "What is it

about the sense of ‘belonging’ and staying within the corral versus stepping outside and searching and seeking?” Migrants step outside the corral and often have a desire for freedom, as Noki the Dutchman recalls, “And why emigrate, while life has never been better here!? In short we were told what to do.” Volunteer migrants display an affinity for what is foreign and other, as Teuaneti from Kiribati notes, “I preferred somewhere far away with no Kiribati face in sight,” or as Marcela from Chile observes, “And every time I found myself most comfortable among the aliens.”

What emerged in the personal essays is the choice to migrate does not happen passively, but is an active decision, often years in the making. Or, if the decision happened more spontaneously, as with Anton, the Russian who found himself washed up in New Zealand when his shipping company went bankrupt, there is still a choice made, a decision to stay and give it a go. Even the most reluctant and conflicted of migrants still opted to leave known roots, not stay. Migrants move from the known and familiar to a world that is unknown and other, and in this regard migration mirrors the personal essay, for “In more than one manner the essay moves outward, the essay and its writer connecting with the world, with otherness” (Atkins 50). When migrants set out on their journey of the stranger who comes to town, they are moving outward, connecting with the world and otherness. The migrant’s willingness to risk and explore parallels the writer as well; as Lopate observes, “there is something heroic in the essayist’s gesture of striking out toward the unknown, not only without a map but without certainty that there is anything worthy to be found” (xlii). The migrant and the writer will both discover something, though it may not be what they wanted, expected or found worthy.

Navigating the Route

Most migrants do not consider themselves in a heroic light, and yet they have all crossed frontiers those who remain at home may have not: linguistic, cultural, existential. Salman Rushdie argues that “To see things plainly you have to cross a frontier” (125), which all migrants have done. Moreover they bear witness to what it takes to cross that frontier in their personal essays. The importance of the frontier cannot be underestimated, for here is where the self meets other, routed meets rooted, and where the stranger who comes to town may encounter resistance. Navigating the route of migration is the second strand in this braided narrative. How migrants learn to live in and understand their new country, culture and perhaps language becomes part of their journey providing a lifelong and ongoing lesson in what has meaning for them. In the course of both their lives and again, when writing, migrants realize, “The route is mapped in the going” (Fakundiny 12). What migrants learned en route is how to adapt and adjust to their new environment, and their personal essays document and detail that process. No lesson may be more pressing in a world increasingly overpopulated and mobile than how to adapt and adjust to where we live and those we live among. Since Montaigne’s question “What do I know?” is always driving the essay, no genre maps that route of inquiry and assessment better than the personal essay, making firsthand, tested knowledge available to others in a form that is personal, accessible, and reflective.

The personal essay has remained resilient and versatile for four centuries (or longer if one dates its roots back to Seneca and Plutarch). Part of the genre’s ongoing appeal and versatility is “the personal essay is a form of discovery” and “[w]hat one discovers in writing such essays is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. In writing the essay, one tests one’s feelings, instincts, thoughts, in the crucible of composition” (Epstein “The Personal Essay” 15). The genre allows writers to choose any subject, chart any course, reveal things both

incidental and elemental to their experience, what is known, what is not, driven by the desire to inquire and understand, weigh and assess. In the personal essay migrants can step into the river anywhere they choose, from the hidden headwaters where their migration begins, to the route of its unwinding and what they learned, to any segment of the river they wish to explore, thus giving the form range and depth. Yet amid this freedom to choose, the essay has a powerful motivation, for “the impulse to write essays, as to tell stories, grows consistently out of a single source: the individual confrontation with the hard facts and particularities of the world – of place, of any aspect of life – and the resulting effort of the imagination to seek meaning in what it confronts” (Ryden 216). In their essays migrants confront the hard facts of migration, documenting the challenges posed by the particularities of their new and different world: language, culture, new social mores, a world that touches every aspect of their migrated lives. Therefore the migrant’s journey toward understanding a new country, culture and language has relevance that radiates beyond the personal to embrace larger concerns relative to our increasingly globalized world.

In my study, migrants of all ages and nationalities took to the personal essay readily, and the genre proved invaluable for mining their experience for its worth and significance. For as Daisy, the Irish nurse writes, “It is as though throughout life, here and there, we put down reef anchors and these little anchors dig in ever more deeply each time their line connects directly to a real time experience.” Migrants hook into their own reef anchors as they write, and their “real time experience” resonates past their own lives to one that is shared and communal in the personal essay. The importance of this endeavor is not just individual, for “to write one’s life enables the world to preserve its history” (Hampl “The Dark Art of Description” 81). As a nation of migrants, from the earliest Māori to subsequent waves of immigrants, New Zealand history is rooted/routed in migration. Contemporary migration to New Zealand is given a

reflective, concrete treatment in the personal essay, illuminating what otherwise might never be given such considered and thoughtful expression. More than just a route to individual understanding, the personal essay preserves and shares the migrant's particular, individual part of history, making it available and lasting.

Living with Distance

Migrants to New Zealand live in one of the most remote and beautiful parts of the world, among the last places on earth to be settled, surrounded by thousands of kilometers of ocean, and at a considerable distance from friends, family and places they love. Distance remains permanent spatially and grows temporally with each passing year migrants live in New Zealand. The third strand in our braided narrative is distance, perhaps the most painful consequence of migration. Distance attenuates and stretches migrants' emotional connection to those they know and love and have left behind. How migrants negotiate and compensate for the geographic, temporal and emotional distance is an ongoing dynamic throughout their lives. Here is where the root, route and the effect of migrating and perhaps belonging in New Zealand are most keenly felt. Closing the distance is an ongoing challenge for migrants, and the personal essay bears witness to its impact on their prior, now distant, relationships: the need to stay in touch; the fallout from adopting a new language; and, most importantly, how migrants never cease to long for and miss what they left behind.

Migrant personal essays all attest to the painful fact of distance in their lives. They have missed significant life events, the celebrations of weddings and births, the aging and death of their parents, and the simple, daily nearness of being with those they know and love. The burden to stay connected seems to fall on those who left, and the migrants in this study make considerable effort to call, write, and visit when possible, and thereby close the distance between

them. Migrants also find it validating when family visits, for their lives now have context and meaning, affirming why they chose to live in New Zealand. The distance is permanent, but it does seem to be easier to bear over time, as each return visit ends with fewer farewells, a cruel fact of time's inexorable passage. As Gareth writes so poignantly, "my Wales no longer exists." He left it over thirty-five years ago. The personal essay is able to bring near what is distant and remembered onto the page, to summon presence from absence, and to conjure up a world left behind. Anna can imagine herself at her dying mother's bedside, the snow falling, even though it is summer in New Zealand and she cannot attend the funeral half a world away in Switzerland. The essay works against the separation and distance all migrants feel, for "The essay," Atkins argues, "functions as one agent of the holy tension that works against separation" (ix). What greater gift could a genre give to those who live at such a remove from what they know and love?

Belonging: The Deepest Current

The deepest current in the braided river of migration and the personal essay is the need to belong. Belonging is an elemental human need and the one most severely challenged by migration. Migrants leave an entire world behind that held meaning for them: family, friends, language, culture, place, the ties to what matters most to humans. How migrants cope with such loss and establish a sense of connection and meaning in their new country is fundamental to whether they will remain a stranger or not. Each migrant narrative is a braided river, with the surface channels tracing a journey from one country to the other, and a much deeper current of learning to live and perhaps belong in the new country. Migrant personal essays reveal belonging is predicated on mutual acceptance of the other. If migrants do not feel welcome in the new country, nor in turn welcome what that country has to offer, they will never have a sense of belonging. Their personal essays attest to the dynamic nature of belonging, and migration

theories gain new resonance when “the very subjects these theories are built upon and around are allowed to speak, interrupt, deny, forget, forge and remember their multiple modes of belonging and dislocation” (Dutt-Ballerstadt ix). The personal essay grounds the abstraction of belonging in firsthand experience, addressing its fundamental importance to whether a migrant settles and feels at home in the host country.

How the other perceives and is perceived is at the center of cultural exchange and resilience, reflecting an effort to impart and understand what has meaning for one another. Migrant personal essays bear witness to the essential reciprocity of this encounter, and their narratives document very different levels of acceptance in New Zealand. At one end of the spectrum, Theresa, from India, whose accent and ethnicity were perceived as a barrier states, “here I felt like a zero,” whereas Cathrine who migrated from Denmark over fifty years ago claims, “I never felt a stranger. To me I have always been as much part of the landscape as any New Zealander.” Theresa remains alienated, unacknowledged and unaccepted in the host country. Cathrine, however, feels she was never a stranger.

For migrants to cease feeling like strangers they must both adapt *and* be accepted. While it is understood that migration requires adaptability, for “[g]oing away teaches the lability of the subject, precisely because the object world poses new contexts and models” (J. Gray 13), acceptance is what allows migrants to feel they belong. Even as the migrant perspective is potentially enlarged and enriched by the journey of being a stranger coming to town, much depends upon how the migrant perceives and is received by the host country. For some migrants, being perceived as the stranger, as other, persists despite their efforts to integrate. In Suk from Korea experienced racism in her apartment complex, in the schools, and on the streets, but it is a testament to her fair-minded nature that she serves as a Justice of the Peace in the community. Her tolerance and willingness to accept the other is continually put into practice in

her life and work: “I am involved in the lives of others by supporting many people through my duties as a Justice of Peace. I must go to the extra mile and make a concerted effort to integrate into the Kiwis which are being formed in the midst of this soaring ethnic diversity.” She recognizes that “the soaring ethnic diversity” of which she is part does not necessarily wish to include her and that she must “make a concerted effort” to integrate. The Polish migrant writer Eva Hoffman emphasizes that “The effort to understand an unfamiliar world happens against resistance, but it is also fueled by curiosity and desire to know, by the attempt to imagine, and to enter into other subjectivities, and the subjectivity of another language and culture” (64). In Suk has worked patiently against that resistance, entering into other subjectivities of language and culture as illustrated by her life and her essays.

Migrant Identity: Fluid Dynamics

Identity is the final strand of the braided narrative of migration. Here roots, routes, distance and belonging come together to form the nexus where the migrant sense of self constellates. As migrants change and adapt to live in their new country, their sense of identity changes as well. Their identity is both rooted, as in placed in a past landscape, culture, and perhaps language, and routed, as in transitioned through and to another place. The personal essay, given its thirst to discover what one knows, is particularly adept at wrestling with the problematic concept of identity. What migrant essays reveal is the fluid nature of identity, depending not only on how migrants are identified by others, but how they identify themselves. Moreover, identity is not simply passive, a category marker, like race or gender, but is intrinsic to what the migrant identifies with: people, places, language, culture, an entire array of connection and meaning. The personal essay can address this multi-stable and dynamic sense of identity and identification

– the very things that cannot be checked off easily in an immigration application. Who we are is a question central to our lives, and the answer is often a story, not a category.

The migrant's own sense of self-understanding is integral to personal identity, and that may change with time and place, even as the story of our life changes. As Cavarero notes, "the verbal response to *who* someone is always consists in the narration of his or her life-story" (73). I was very conscious of being a migrant in Sweden, outside of the culture and language, a stranger in their midst. My migrant identity is not as keenly felt this second time in New Zealand, perhaps because the migrant's triple disruption is no longer in place. Sweden forced our family to confront what mattered to us and to return to a place where we have roots, language and are familiar with the social norms. We can identify with New Zealand, which is an important and vital consideration for a sense of connection and belonging. What has changed is I now accept rather than resist New Zealand. When people ask me where I am from, I tell them I live here, since "Placedness can be most certainly found in staying put, but it can also be found in migrating" (Sinor 15). I have found my place by migrating back to it and choosing to stay.

Migrant personal essays show that with a sense of belonging comes a sense of identification with the host country that does not preempt a migrant's attachment or love for the place left behind. For as Gertrude Stein noted, "Our roots can be anywhere and we can survive, because if you think about it, we take our roots with us" (Preston 157). Our roots come with us in our language, memories and cultural affiliations, and their portability is what allows migrants to remain connected with their past while bringing an enriched frame of reference and perspective to the host country. Roots may travel, but whether the migrant transplant will thrive is a more open-ended question. Some migrants continue to identify with their place of origin to the exclusion of all else. They may, like the Englishwoman Elizabeth, even return there, for she realized while living in New Zealand that she both longed for and belonged in England. Other

migrants remain strongly tied to their country and culture of origin, particularly if they migrated later in life or felt conflicted about their choice to leave, like David the Scottish doctor, Theresa the Indian nurse or Beth the South African. Their identity and identification remains grounded where they no longer live. They remain displaced because they never feel they belong, and had we stayed in Sweden this would have been our family's fate. Forever the outsider, the stranger. I will never forget my Swedish friend Inger, whom I have known for over fifteen years, saying to me, "I knew eventually you would leave. I just didn't think it would be this soon." And what I failed to say was, why would we stay when we did not feel welcome?

Where migrants embrace living in New Zealand but still maintain a sense of connection with their country of origin, they are able to reconcile their identification with more than one landscape, culture, and perhaps language. For example, Gareth considers himself both Welsh and a New Zealander, with two *tūrangawaewae*, for which he feels "incredibly fortunate." Contrapuntal understanding does not prevent migrants from feeling like part of their new country and culture. Many migrants feel a sense of connection with both countries and cultures, and their personal essays express this enriched sense of identity, as Sabina the Dutchwoman writes, "I've learned to love both worlds and how rich am I to know and enjoy those two." Or In Suk, who observes, "We will carry Korean culture on our shoulders and bring NZ culture in our arms," or our daughter saying she is a Kiwi but American underneath that. What the personal essay reveals is that identity is not a fixed or rigid concept, but like migrants themselves, it is adaptable and fluid, that who migrants are depends on their self-understanding and where and what they identify with, both in the host country and in the country of origin. As serial migrant Pico Iyer said in his TED talk, "And home has really less to do with a piece of soil, than you could say, with a piece of soul" (*Where Is Home?* n. pag.)

These thirty-seven migrants have weighed and tested and been tested by the experience of living in a new country. They bear witness to that experience in their personal essays, whether they came to New Zealand fifty years ago by ship or five years ago by plane, whether they spoke the language fluently or came with “no language in [their] heart but hope.” The personal essay charts what migrants have learned en route, and their journey toward understanding a new country, culture and perhaps language is lifelong. What the migrant and the writer share is the realization that “One must seek out the world one inhabits. This is the only obligation the essayist cannot get beyond” (Kriegel 98). All of the migrant writers in this braided narrative sought out the world they inhabited, some more willingly than others, some more accepted by others, but all of them tried.

The willingness to try is at the center of migration experience and of the personal essay. These twin endeavors of trial and assessment in order to achieve understanding are critical not only to individual well-being, but also to a larger and more collective sense of what matters, for “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (Lopate xxiii). Finding that unity in human experience is at the root of what it means to try to understand the other, which is the journey of every migrant as the stranger who comes to town. The acceptance of the other is the braided river that flows past surface differences to reveal our deep and abiding common humanity, the river underneath the river that feeds all our lives. Migrants come to understand that “The world is mistaken. It imagines that the other takes something from us whereas the other only brings to us, all the time” (Cixous and Calle-Guber 13). The personal essays of these thirty-seven migrants bear witness to what they learned on their journey, showing the lived consequences of what it means to migrate, not across categories, but across days, years, and lifetimes. Montaigne’s genre for weighing and testing personal experience for its value proves vital for assessing the actual stakes of migration.

Walking with the World in Newtown

Home for the first four decades of my life kept shifting and moving like the restless channels of a braided river coursing across shingle toward the sea. From the red Marco Polo stamp on my Italian birth certificate to my life in two continents, two hemispheres, five different countries, I kept crossing the ocean, never staying more than seven years in one place. When I look back at everywhere I have lived in this world, I can see how the search for home has been the underlying current, the river under the river that has carried me from one place to the next. The braided river of my life has a branching, interwoven pattern of circumstance, accident, and choice, but it is carried forward by a deeper and more resonant current, the need to belong. For a child who grew up in the military, constantly uprooted and thrown into a new environment, I knew movement, not permanence, upheaval, not stability, and while my siblings settled and never moved again as adults, I kept moving: Iowa, Ireland, Colorado, Sweden, Nebraska, Idaho, and then, a leap across the ocean, to New Zealand with my husband and two children. I hated New Zealand at first, lonely, bereft, grief-stricken for everything we had given up to migrate: our family, our friends, our house, our garden, our jobs, our dog, the ten thousand radiant connections of a known world.

I resisted New Zealand, its sparkling sunlight shining on everything, its delicious water, its many more stars, the kind and curious interest of its people who wanted me to like their country as much as they did. I wanted insulation, double glazing, central heat, canned green chiles, drive-thru Mexican food, a proper job, and was whingeing and complaining like the worst of spoiled Americans living overseas. But then, slowly, small webs of connection were formed. A second cup of tea blossomed into friendship, a community education course turned into a braided river exploring migration and the personal essay, and I began to understand that belonging, like meaning, did not happen without an effort to understand and appreciate where I

was in the world. I could cease being the stranger who came to town and start to live in that town: rooted, connected, engaged. I could voyage from what I knew toward what I did not, no longer a sojourner or a grown-up Army brat, always expecting to leave, but learn to stay, to settle, to belong. I could choose to see what is in New Zealand, not what isn't. Instead of loss being the defining paradigm of a migratory life, I could see the immeasurable gain of having lived in more than one country in the world.

Throughout my life I arrived as a stranger in each new place I lived, and I know from my varied and informed frame of reference what makes the world a diverse, rich and welcoming place. I understand how being a stranger who accepts the other changes the dynamic through contact and exchange. Slowly I wove my way into the lives of the people around me, and the two degrees of separation in New Zealand helped foster those connections. Lois, the grower at the Sunday market where I got my potted herbs, sourced Anaheim green chile seeds and grew an entire flat of them for me in spring. Migrants from all over gathered to write and talk about their journey in my classes and I had a purpose again. Friendship, barbecues, birthday parties, bumping into people we knew in the grocery store, the world had meaning, resonance, a density of connection and affection, and our family started to feel we belonged. And then as though to test our resolve to live in New Zealand, the ground wrenched apart, not once, but twice, destroying the town we had come to know and love in those five years.

The earthquakes displaced many people living in Christchurch and its environs, ruining homes and eliminating jobs, and in one of the unseen bends in the river, our family headed to Sweden where we became full migrants, stripped of roots, language, and familiar social norms (Rushdie 277-278). In Sweden I realized there are countries far colder that have triple glazing, central heat, even canned green chiles, but will never accept my family as anything but strangers who came to town. True, I came too late in life, too full of somewhere else, as the good Scottish

doctor wrote, but I also know having lived in different parts of the world that we cannot thrive everywhere, that some places suit us better than others, and there was not enough for us to love or identify with in Sweden. The unlooked for gift in the braided river of our lives was the return to New Zealand, as unexpected as it was welcome. The afternoon we flew out of Christchurch for Sweden I looked back at the snow-capped spine of the Southern Alps glittering above the clouds, never imagining we would return. I thought New Zealand would remain cloud-hidden and lost to me, like so many other places in my past. But the route did not end there, our journey was not over, and we had one more ocean to cross before we were home.

All braided rivers reach the sea and our family lives on the far side of the world again, under the brightest, clearest stars. We have been graced with the gift of return, given a second chance to live in the land of the long white cloud, Aotearoa. Our lives unfurl like a koru frond in the warmth of a people, a language, and place we know and love, our chosen *tūrangawaewae*. The yellow city buses celebrate where we live as they roll past: “Go walk with the world in Newtown.” I am walking with the world in Newtown, where more migrants live than any other part of the capital city. We have come from all over the world to New Zealand, the Somalis at Peoples Coffee, the Cambodian checkout clerk, the Malaysian librarian, the Italian weighing out the kalamata olives, the Indian grocer with the fragrant barrels of spice. No wonder I feel so welcome among the rich, vibrant texture of this place. All my life I wanted to be home and it seems at long last, I am. Here is the place to stand, here is its homeland, write and bear witness.

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