

ARTS, CULTURE, AND LIFESTYLE OF DUNEDIN AND OTAGO, IN THE SOUTH ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND ISSUE 18, SEPT 2019

Down in

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Magazine

CHRIS ELSE JOHN Z ROBINSON

THE VERLAINES INSIDE THE HOCKEN EMILY DUNCAN

DIANE COMER CELTIC NOIR FESTIVAL WAYNE SEYB MR RED LIGHT

RELICS RECORDS DUNEDIN'S VALLEY PROJECT FRANCISCA GRIFFIN

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Front Cover and images through to Page 10: Lindsay Creek running through Bethunes Gulley, North East Valley, Dunedin
Photography by Caroline Davies

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The Braided River

Migration and the Personal Essay

Diane Comer

“A migrant lives in the space between self and other. The personal essay expresses this sense of location – and dislocation – the way no other genre does.

The Braided River explores contemporary migration to New Zealand through an examination of 200 personal essays written by 37 migrants from 20 different countries, spanning all ages and life stages.

The first book to examine migration through the lens of the personal essay, *The Braided River* presents migration as a lifelong experience that affects everything from language, home, work, family and friendship to finances, citizenship and social benefits.

Like migrants themselves, *The Braided River* crosses boundaries, working at the intersections of literature, history, philosophy and sociology to discuss questions of identity and belonging.

Throughout, Diane Comer, both migrant and essayist herself, demonstrates the versatility of the personal essay as a means to analyse and understand migration, an issue with increasing relevance worldwide.”

Otago University Press

Front cover photography *The Braided River* by Randy Hanna ©

Do we not all have migrant roots one way or another? Pollinated from the vast garden of humanity, some ancient family trees were planted by our ancestors countless centuries ago. Transformed from nomad to settler, those early beginnings are long forgotten in contemporary times. The roots germinated along those historic routes for much of humanity, hold ancestral memories that are now contained within tightly controlled borders. And yet, for a small percentage not pressed by the trauma of war or natural disaster, their roots are voluntarily lifted or cut away as the call to live in other lands persists.

I am a migrant three times, spanning four countries. As Diane Comer addresses in her extraordinary work, "The Braided River: Migration and the Personal Essay" the most often asked question of "the stranger who comes to town" is why did you come?

When asked, the facile responses to all three of my own migrations at different ages and stages of life are:

The first time: I wasn't asked. Bundled, I was carried onto a boat with immediate family amongst thousands of others hoping for a life of greater advantage or adventure, and off we sailed. Apparently, I took my first steps as the migrant ship groaned and heaved around the Cape of Good Hope, a latitude and longitude well known for turbulent seas.

The second was: To break beyond the cultural confines imposed by society, at the time, of the countries in which I was born and subsequently raised.

The third, with three quick answers is: The dark cloud over the US was apparent, my husband wanted to live in a different culture, and my parents did not have long to live - it felt important to be closer.

The headwaters of my own story with each migration, each explantation - apparent to myself - but not to most others, travels back much further and deeper than those ready answers moored to the surface along the banks of the braided river.

Based on extensive and ground-breaking research for her PhD, Diane Comer's "The Braided River" often references the soulful, evocative works of Clarissa Pinkola Estes, John O'Donohue, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and others of a similar ilk. Heart-felt stories are voiced that would normally be contained within one's own personal vessel in this massively important work. And, as an anchorwoman, Diane has provided a literary safe harbour enabling the writer to dive below the surface and re-emerge with profound and precious gems that we can all relate to, psychologically and spiritually, through the power of the personal essay.

When A Stranger Comes to Town

An interview with Diane Comer

author of

The Braided River Migration and the Personal Essay

story and photography by
Caroline Davies

“So the essay is a braided river, migration is a braided river, and the structure of the book is braided and woven together, with themes that branch off and rejoin and ultimately reach their destination: roots, routes, distance, belonging, identity, returning, which are roughly the chapter headings. The river is one of the most ancient symbols for life, the other is the garden, and both those images run throughout the book. The river empties into the sea and the garden grows, dies back and returns.

I remember during an extremely dark time in Sweden a friend of mine said, you’re in the death phase of the life/death/rebirth cycle. She suggested I read *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, one of the seminal, feminist Jungian texts by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. I read it nightly, like the bible. And when she spoke about the river under the river, I knew this operated in all the migrant essays, the deeper truth of what happened than simply, I married a kiwi or I got a job in Auckland.”

Diane Comer

Diane, what motivated you to choose the personal essay and migration as your PhD subject?

When I came to Christchurch, NZ with my family in 2007 I didn't automatically slot into teaching in the English Department as I had in three other universities, including my first teaching experience back in 1997 in Sweden. All new hires at the University of Canterbury had to have a PhD and I only had a master's.

Not having purposeful, meaningful work, was hugely discouraging for me. I worked at one fixed term contract after another around the university: administrator, web page builder, one-on-one tutor for academic skills, and such.

Finally, I pitched a course to UC's community education branch to teach a workshop in writing the personal essay, and they ran with it.

As it happened half the class were migrants and the other half New Zealanders. The migrants wrote brilliant, moving essays about their migration experience. Each week I set a new writing prompt, and each week the whole class discovered more courage, self-expression, and insight. They didn't know what they could and couldn't do on the page, which is the beauty of the personal essay, its incredible versatility and freedom. I'd never taught such a fabulous class.

They all felt it too. They knew they were in the midst of something extraordinary, and they all bonded together, kiwi and migrant, and in a way that's the microcosm of what is best about this country, the sharing and pulling together. I saw that after the Christchurch earthquakes in a very deep and real way. Several students from that first class became friends.

However, despite my repeated efforts to find a permanent job, my husband pointed out that I was never going to be able to run with the big dogs unless I got a PhD. By then I was teaching an advanced personal essay workshop and I kept seeing the same thing, remarkable, powerful essays about the migration experience.

I thought if I got the doctoral scholarship, I would do it, but not otherwise.

My doctoral supervisor later told me when the committee was deciding who to award scholarships to someone sneered, "Where's this University of Iowa?" Never mind I graduated summa cum laude in English and had an MA in nonfiction. A committee member smacked back, "That's the oldest and best writing program in the US." This is the downside of people, even in the academy, not knowing how to value the education and skills of migrants from other countries. We see this all the time.

The Research Begins

What I discovered when I started my research is no one was looking at migration through the lens of the personal essay, and this was confirmed when I sat down with the subject librarian to search through the databases and came up with very little. I freaked out and she reassured me, saying, “No, this is an excellent sign, it means this is uncharted territory.” And it was.

This was confirmed when I got to study at the University of Oxford, thanks to the second, more devastating earthquake, when Oxford took pity on us and made some places for us to go study for a term in 2011.

Oxford has three dedicated research centers for migration, and I went to everything on offer, which was plenty. What I realized was no one was looking at migrants’ own stories, written in their own voice. That so much of the research was top down: policy, economics, history. Or when it was looking at the individuals, it was interviews, case studies, focus groups. No one was letting the individual migrant have complete agency over the narrative in the way the personal essay allows. I knew I’d hit an absolute and vital nerve, and that belief carried me throughout the long journey of the PhD, that and the amazing writing the migrants did.

The title “The Braided River” is emblematic on so many levels. For me, it spoke clearly regarding the work I was about to absorb.

The title indicated I was about to enter a work of depth with multiple layers below the surface - it pulled me in straight away, up to the headwaters and into the undercurrents that you so beautifully address. Water is held sacred in many cultures, and symbolically represents emotions, depth, and used as a ritual connection to the divine or a way to connect with our deeper selves. And, we also travel across the water to other lands. How did that title come up for you?

In the midst of writing my PhD we experienced both major earthquakes in Christchurch. My husband’s job was a casualty in the second one, which meant we ended up in Sweden, where he found another position at a university. I was writing my dissertation chapters and sending them back to my two supervisors, one at Canterbury, the other now relocated to Brisbane, thanks to the quakes.

Sometimes I felt utter despair in Sweden, living without language, connection, support, and I became deeply depressed and sought counseling. My two children were struggling too, but managing, in the local schools. My husband realized, very early on, that we could not thrive in Sweden, live yes, thrive, no, and he started to look for another position.



When he secured a job back in New Zealand, it seemed like an absolute miracle that we would return to this country, and I had this image of the oxbow river, but then I realized, that's not the image at all, this was a braided river, the river that branches off and rejoins itself. I knew the braided rivers from living in Canterbury and crossing them on bridges or flying over them, and their beautiful Māori names are like incantations: the Rakaia, the Waimakariri, the Hurunui, the Waitaki. I knew immediately this was the controlling metaphor for the book and had been all along, I just hadn't seen it. Indeed, it has been the controlling metaphor for my life. But as Kierkegaard says, we live forward but understand backward, which is something writing and especially the personal essay tap into.

So the structure of the book and of the personal essay itself is very much a braided river. Geologically the braided rivers have a much deeper and wider river running underneath than the one we see on the surface. The same is true of every migration narrative. The real story, the river under the river, you can never glean in a survey and possibly not even in an interview.

The personal essay is inherently a method of inquiry and a form of discovery. Just sitting down to write about why you came to New Zealand, how far back can you trace the roots your migration, calls up some very searching and surprising answers.

The migrant writers were continually amazed to discover things about themselves and their experience that they didn't know. The personal essay is perhaps one of the most powerful forms of self-exploration and reflection that exists, which makes it ideal to study migration, which is inherently a journey of discovery in and of itself.

So the essay is a braided river, migration is a braided river, and the structure of the book is braided and woven together, with themes that branch off and rejoin and ultimately reach their destination: roots, routes, distance, belonging, identity, returning, which are roughly the chapter headings.

The river is one of the most ancient symbols for life, the other is the garden, and both those images run throughout the book. The river empties into the sea and the garden grows, dies back and returns. I remember during an extremely dark time in Sweden a friend of mine said, you're in the death phase of the life/death/rebirth cycle. She suggested I read *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, one of the seminal, feminist Jungian texts by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. I read it nightly, like the bible. And when she spoke about the river under the river, I knew this operated in all the migrant essays, the deeper truth of what happened than simply, I married a kiwi or I got a job in Auckland.

When we spoke on the phone for the first time, I was intrigued when you mentioned you had a supervisor who was insistent this research should be solely academic. Although I do understand the parameters of working within the rigorous structure of a PhD, life, in actual fact, is not an academic journey. I found myself moved frequently as I discovered there were many others like myself.

I related to the depths and undercurrents expressed, of finding others, including yourself, who could describe and identify so many of the feelings, thoughts, emotions I too had experienced, but had not articulated. There was also a healing element in reading excerpts of other's stories wrapped so thoughtfully in your commentary. Even though most of us who choose to migrate (not from the pressure of war and humanitarian crises) understand it is a privilege and a great opportunity in the sense of self-expansion and discovery, there are other aspects, a price we are all willing to pay - sometimes it is more than we reckoned. It is a one way journey in a sense, even if one chooses to "go back", the place and the person are never the same.

Personally, I was grateful you stood your ground.

*How did you go about your research and transcend the pure academic aspects of your work, keeping the integrity of your research and yet, touching deeply on the inner lives of all you wrote about and included in *The Braided River*?*

I did my PhD in my forties and had been teaching for ten years, and been a practicing writer for twenty, so I was not a typical student. I was more headstrong, more focused, more independent, and I didn't want to do what I call dust mite scholarship. I knew these migrant stories were important and I wanted to showcase them and the genre to the best advantage.

I got excellent advice from the postgrad dean before I even embarked on my PhD. He said you must be passionate about your subject and you must have a good working relationship with your supervisors. I had the former, but not the latter, and when I returned from Oxford I replaced two of my three supervisors, keeping Lyndon Fraser, an historian who specializes in migration, and choosing a young American academic, Jennifer Clement whose specialty is early modern literature, but who has an interest in creative nonfiction.

Jenny was a stickler, and I was her first PhD student, so she really wanted to make sure I did everything right. My nickname for her was Dr Persnickety, bless her, but in hindsight I'm glad she insisted on academic rigor throughout.

One of the challenges with the British model for a PhD is you have to come to terms with all the research and methodology yourself. You're not taking classes or sitting field exams, learning all

this material over the course of years of study, as you would in the US. It's pure research and you have to cotton on to a lot of material right away, which is overwhelming, especially when you are a writer first, and coming back to university twenty years later, having taught at university for ten years already. You have to write your research proposal in the first six months, before you even know what you're doing. It's highly theoretical at this point. But the funny thing is, the chapters I envisioned even then, are the chapters I wrote, with the notable exception of the last one, which is called "The Gift of Return", because I had no idea we would be displaced to Sweden and then return to New Zealand.

To do my research I designed a course in the personal essay for migrants to take, with eight writing prompts that they were free to use or ignore, and University of Canterbury continuing education kindly let me run the course that first year, never mind it got overthrown by two earthquakes and ultimately cancelled the second time when the February quake struck. But that was amazing in its own right because the migrants wanted to continue writing even when they were refunded their course fees. The class migrated through their homes, and when I had the opportunity to study at Oxford University, they said, 'go, we'll continue when you come back'.

What I saw with all the five classes I taught were self-selecting migrants who wanted to write about their experience and were brave and willing enough to come to a class to do so. I had 37 migrants in the end who were part of the profile, from twenty different countries, ranging from age 25 to 80, and representing a vast array of life stages and experiences. They were remarkable individuals from all over the world, from all walks of life, and they gave me such wonderful writing to work with, a gift, truly. They wrote with such eloquence about the pain and challenge of coming to a new country, what they gave up, and what they gained in return. Whenever I felt despair writing the dissertation, their essays always buoyed me. My sister Lisa Zimmerman is a poet in the US, and she said this work is so much bigger than you, and she's right. It's not just my story or even the migrant story I'm telling, I'm telling a very universal and ancient story: the stranger who comes to town.

My late mentor Sherman Paul, one of the great American scholars and often considered the father of eco-criticism, said your PhD is your first book, and so I always wrote the PhD as a book. I resisted the academic jargon. There isn't a shred of theory in that book. Or the theory is much deeper than something like poststructuralism or feminism. I'm asking what does it mean to be at home in the world, where, why, how, when and with whom

does that happen, or not happen? The book is actually quite philosophical and that surprised me because I didn't anticipate that at all, but the moment you ask someone where they belong, who they are, you are in the big medicine country of ethics and humanism. And I love that my migrants ask and answer these deep questions in such specific terms. I couldn't have asked for richer or more resonant source material if I tried and my gratitude for that is past words.

I wrote *The Braided River* always seeing it as a book with a much larger audience than academics. I saw the audience as global and local. Ordinary mortals, migrants and non-migrants. Yes, there is scholarship in the work, but it's discursive, the way Michel de Montaigne, the great progenitor of the personal essay uses his vast reading.

I weave between the critical discourse, my own migration narrative and that of the other migrants who gifted me their work.

I'll never forget when I read the brilliant and sublime Hélène Cixous. I got so excited to see someone who managed to be both intellectual and lyrical at the same time. She gave me permission to write this in the voice and in the manner in which I did, which is highly unorthodox in the academy, crossing all sorts of borders between disciplines and discourses.

One of my supervisors, the historian, said I should have been an anthropologist and the other wanted more scaffolding, afraid that I wouldn't be seen as 'academic'. She didn't recognize that the beautiful argument is the most difficult one to make. Ironically it's the very whalebone of academic discourse that the outside readers wanted stripped out when the book got published by Otago University Press. And that's what we did when we edited it, stripped out as much whalebone as we could while still leaving the critical rigor in the argument.

I was really pleased when Harry Ricketts, the English poet and scholar who reviewed the book for Radio New Zealand recognized that each chapter is a personal essay, saying the book comes with 'a fantastic range of reference' and has 'a very cosmopolitan literary gene pool'. That he recognized the hybrid nature of work, cross pollinated from many different sources is exactly what gives the book its richness, depth, and breadth.

A priest who's a friend of mine is writing a memoir called it a book of prompts. Well the best writing should prompt you to think about your life and the world you live in, and migration will become a more pressing issue as climate change and economic and political shifts force people to move, willingly or unwillingly. We are seeing the greatest

refugee crisis since WWII, what will that be like if we have the predicted sea level rises?

This is not a work that could have been written so beautifully and with such understanding, compassion and clarity unless you had your own experience of migration, multiple times and at different ages. I felt it was no accident that you would also experience the challenge of living in Sweden in your own hero's journey in order to write such a profound work - you came to fully understand the importance of language, even though most Swedes speak English, but you felt first hand how it is to have that additional cultural barrier.

Even when languages are similar, cultural influences can affect the meaning of words and how they are expressed. I appreciated that you "walked a mile in someone else's shoes" in Sweden and completely comprehended how that can affect a migrant. "Language carries culture like nothing else" - can you address that a little here?

Sweden was seismic for the book, even more so than the actual earthquakes in Christchurch. Suddenly everything about migration became startlingly real. I was now what Salman Rushdie calls 'a full migrant'. I had lost roots, culture, and now, most profoundly, language. I would never have understood how important language was for the migrant until I was living without language.

Swedes all speak terrific English, and that's not the point really, because even with the language you can be outside and not welcome in any given culture. We see this exhibited all over the world whenever someone is treated as other.

The Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, can say the fifty people killed in the mosque shootings are us, but do we actually feel and act as though migrants are us, are migrants welcome, not just here in New Zealand, but anywhere? I've lived in the US, Sweden, Belgium, the Dominican Republic, and briefly in England and Ireland when I was studying.

I have a fairly broad frame of reference for feeling and being treated as other. In Belgium I was buffered by being in a military enclave of NATO, also I was a child and later an adolescent, so my experience was limited. But I felt my sense of otherness most keenly in Sweden.

I felt it the first time I moved there in 1997 to join my partner who's also American and was teaching there. He was surrounded by his students and they all were chattering away at him in Swedish and I felt the exclusion of language immediately. But since I was thrown into the world of teaching for the first time, new love, motherhood, Sweden itself registered pretty far down on the scale of what had changed in my life.

The second time we lived in Sweden in 2012, my kids were ten and thirteen, we lived in the country so we could have our German shepherd, the place was later described by my Swedish counsellor as 'the Beverly Hills of Gothenburg' and our Swedish friends whistled in amazement when they heard where we were living. So a place of wealth, privilege, exclusion, in a country that prides itself on social equality—so very contrary to the idea of Sweden as the socialist worker's paradise.

But I felt the exclusion in ordinary places too, like the grocery store and on the bus. I knew being able to speak and understand Swedish with the fluency I had in English would take dedication and years, but it would also take something else, which I did not have, which was a desire to live there. I didn't feel accepted in Sweden, and moreover I couldn't accept I lived there either. Acceptance is twofold and operates on a continuum and no amount of language fluency was going to offset that lack of acceptance on my part.

All of my migrant writers who were non-native speakers urged me to come to grips with the language when I moved to Sweden. And my admiration for what they accomplished not only on the page but in their lives, learning a second language, was and is profound. What you see with migrants who are living in a different language is a deep rooted change in who they are.

They are translated and transformed beings. You become someone else in a different language, you can say and not say different things. For me, English gives me the broadest possible form of expression, and I've been swimming in it for a long time. I imagine there are other languages and cultures that I might have also been at home in and felt a strong desire to speak and hear and be in that language. I could see that happening in a Mediterranean culture and languages like Italian or Spanish.

It sounds obvious, but it's also true, if you love where you live and/or who you live with, you become more willing to speak that language, which is why love drives a lot of migration. People move to other countries because of their choice of partner or because they love that culture. Pico Iyer is ethnically Indian, raised in England, but living in Japan. He is a classic example of transnational identity. He says in his TED talk that home isn't a piece of soil but a piece of soul. And that strikes me as true. My soul is at home in New Zealand.

So why the written essay? How does it work as a tool? How can it benefit both the writer and the reader?

I have been writing personal essays for a long time. I fell into the essay almost by chance, but in retrospect, not by chance at all. I began as a poet and I still feel my original roots as a writer are in

image and the lyric, which the personal essay shares, but when I didn't get accepted into the undergraduate poetry workshop at Iowa, but instead got accepted in the fiction one, I found myself writing fiction. But my fiction was always autobiographical in nature and I am not a fiction writer at heart, though I love reading fiction. I almost did a PhD in English when I was 25, but I really wanted to write my own material and my mentor suggested I do what later became the MFA in creative nonfiction.

I am completely at home in the personal essay. You can do anything with this form, it is the freest and most generous and adaptable genre imaginable. It can be as lyrical and confessional as you want, as driven by narrative as the best fiction, as incisive as the best argument, or all of that in the same piece. I love this form.

I've had a lyric essay I wrote on the letter L appear on Poetry Daily's website. It is very, very rare for them to have an extended prose piece on their site. I was awarded grants very early in my writing career on both the state and national level writing this form. Sometimes early success can be problematic. I kept writing and publishing essays, but wasn't able to land the actual collection, though it was accepted twice for publication. But I remain faithful. I believe good work will always be recognized, sooner or later.

The beauty of the personal essay is it follows the writer's own habit of attention, so whatever you want to write about, and however you want to write about it, are possible. Joseph Epstein, one of the great champions of the personal essay says it's the freest form and a happy accident. It is both.

What I find when I teach the personal essay is it adapts itself readily to whoever writes it. Curiously, no one sets out to become an essayist, in the same way they do to become a novelist or a poet or a playwright, and it's exactly that accidental quality, the happenstance-ness of the form, that makes it so versatile. Many great writers would rather be known for their fiction but are in fact better as essayists, Joan Didion, George Orwell, Annie Dillard, Anne Lamott.

The personal essay is a deeply reflective medium, and the moment the writer sits down with their own experience they begin to find meaning in it. I cannot think of a more transformative genre to write, except possibly memoir, which is kin to the essay anyway.

I often don't know what I think or feel until I write about it, especially in the form of the essay. Other pieces come through and I know I am in the presence of a poem, the movement and the intention are different. Though for me everything unspools from the first line.

Why do you think that migration is going to increase?

Climate change will drive migration worldwide. Political and economic uncertainty will also force people to move, who can afford to. Some people will be forced to move for other reasons, witness Syria. It's important to recognize many more people would migrate but cannot afford to do so. My brother is conservative, has lived in the same house in New Jersey for over 20 years, but even he said he would consider leaving the US. Americans don't typically migrate, unlike New Zealanders who tend to be fiddle-footed, going overseas to travel and work and then pairing off and living abroad. A half million kiwis live in Australia. It will be interesting as that continent heats up literally if they come flooding back to NZ.

What are you up to now in Wellington? And do you have another book in mind?

I often joke that sooner or later I will have taught everyone in New Zealand. I teach academic writing and writing for media for Victoria University, in addition to teaching memoir and personal essay workshops for Vic's continuing education program. Teaching is how I give back to all the teachers and mentors in my own life. I cannot think of anything more empowering than to teach someone to think, read and write critically, or to give voice to their own experience. Teaching is work of joy and

purpose for me.

The obvious next book is a collection of personal essays written by migrants. I have over two hundred essays to draw upon for that work. I also have my own essay collection I would like to publish, though I'm not sure if that audience is here or in the US. I'm working on new pieces right now, but you don't want to talk about them at this point. Writers can talk their work right out of them if they're not careful. I learned early on the real writers sit in the chair and write. Everything else is beside the point.

Writing to bear witness to personal experience has been my calling for decades, and it's always good to remember unlike music and mathematics, there are no child prodigies in literature. The work gets better with time because you bring more to the page. I knew things in my twenties that I only now understand, so the level of integration and articulation is much richer and more resonant at this point in my life. Now I am able to bring more of the unsayable into words.

Diane Comer was born in Italy and grew up in the Dominican Republic, Belgium and the United States. She studied non-fiction writing at the University of Iowa and received her PhD from the University of Canterbury. Her essays have been published in AGNI, The Georgia Review, Fourth Genre and elsewhere, and were noted in the Best American Essays series. Diane lived in the US and Sweden before migrating with her husband and two children to New Zealand in 2007. She teaches at Victoria University of Wellington.

Diane's website is:

<https://literarynonfiction.nz>

and

Diane is at the Verb Festival in
Wellington, 9th November

[https://www.verbwellington.nz/
festival-2019/by-the-stars](https://www.verbwellington.nz/festival-2019/by-the-stars)

Diane Comer - Photo by Ebony Lamb ©

