

Extraordinary Anywhere

EDITORS

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Extraordinary Anywhere

Essays on Place from Aotearoa New Zealand

VUP



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Writing Here

Ingrid Horrocks
and Cherie Lacey

What's your story? It's all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads out in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice . . . Which means that place is a story, and stories are geography . . .

— Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*

I

Extraordinary Anywhere was first imagined on a July road trip between places. We took a break at a Paekakariki café, the breathing sea a presence just out of sight over the rise. We had only recently met and had just swapped writing for the first time.

What we realised, sitting in the warmth of that particular café in that particular place, was that despite very different styles we were in a sense trying to write the same essay. Both of us were writing, in part, about moving back to New Zealand. Ingrid's essay traversed the central North Island plateau, manoeuvring down the island to find its way back to one of the places where she grew up, a farm in the Wairarapa. Cherie was writing about the beaches west of Auckland, Pihā, French Bay and Te Henga—not places she had inhabited so much as ones that occupied her imagination when she was living in Australia. In different ways, these places called out to us and invited us to try to put words around our feelings for them; we had both reached to the essay form for what it seemed to offer—space for contradiction and exploration, and room for both yearning and critical thought. What we also realised was that we weren't really trying to figure out what it meant to be a New Zealander, and nor were we particularly interested in the abstract idea of the nation.

We were, rather, moved by what it felt like to live in particular places here in this country, and in the intensity of feeling so many of us have about our various homes. We were struck by how many other people were also writing, talking and thinking about the distinctiveness of particular places rather than the nation-state—from creative writers and journalists, to historians and cultural theorists. Alongside this, there has been a general upsurge in essay writing in recent years—and personal essay writing especially. The first-hand accounts that we can read on blogs and in fact all over the internet are perhaps partly responsible for the steep rise in interest in personal narrative. Recent essays seemed, to us, to be taking different forms from those written by the likes of Bill Pearson, Bruce Jesson or Sandra Coney in earlier decades, which tended to address themselves directly towards the public domains of politics and economics. The change involved a shift in voice and tone, and a foregrounding of the personal without necessarily relinquishing the desire to speak of, and to, the collective or public. We became curious about what these developments signalled about our current cultural moment, and wondered what would happen if we brought some of these emerging conversations together.

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The essays we solicited and have gathered in *Extraordinary Anywhere* showcase a group of New Zealand writers and thinkers not especially focused on New Zealand as such. They are interested, instead, in the obsession, fascination, wonder and often intense unease experienced in relation to particular spots in this country. They are interested in how lives are actually lived in very specific places, and how these lives—and places—have changed over time. This is, perhaps surprisingly, coupled with an interest in the wider globe to which these individual places and lives are connected—tendrils reaching out from one place to another, from one town here to an immigrant home city elsewhere, or to a location of a new diaspora. In these essays, the relationship between the local and global emerges as a fulcrum for understanding life in 21st-century Aotearoa New Zealand, superseding the imaginary, and potentially exclusionary, idea of ‘the nation’ or brand New Zealand.

One advantage of place-thinking is that it gets away from New Zealand as defined predominantly by its natural landscapes and environment. Most of us now live and work in cities and towns, and these are the places in which many of our most formative experiences occur. Landscape does not necessarily offer the key to our identities; nor is the landscape always the most useful background against which to think about what it means to live here. The commodifiable beauty of these islands, so readily packaged and exported, has sometimes acted as a screen, obscuring other possible understandings and narratives. Place-thinking opens up space for talking about our relationships with other kinds of locations—urban, bureaucratic, corporate, suburban, rural, and about the routes in between.

This in turn allows history to be reimagined, or rather goes hand in hand with a re-imagining of history that is already happening. A focus on particular locations moves us beyond New Zealand history as that very familiar narrative: a forward march towards national identity, with the Crown at the centre, along with the Treaty signing and two world wars. It invites closer attention to the layering of histories, including unofficial or excluded histories, personal

remembrance and community stories, as well as to the physical changes to specific environments, both natural and built. Over the past few decades, regions within New Zealand have become only increasingly divergent from one another, with Auckland, for instance, as a booming immigrant city needing separate narratives of its own, and stories upon stories within those. Rural Southland is distinct from the Waikato, as it is from Hawke's Bay or Wellington, making it impossible to present any one place as a microcosm of the wider nation. Place-thinking also makes way for meditations on how unevenly settler-colonialism has been experienced by different people in different places. *Extraordinary Anywhere* heeds the calls of historian Tony Ballantyne and others for the importance of specific sites and community and global connections in understanding history. Even more important, many of the stories invoked in this collection try to express how history connects with and shapes our everyday experiences. They present models for deep understandings of history working on us, and imagine ways we could use our experiences in place to think differently about our shared futures.

New Zealanders, or at least Pākehā New Zealanders, are not famous for their eloquence, particularly when trying to speak of their feelings about living here. For Pākehā, this has sometimes led to a too-easy equation between loving the natural environment and a simplistic sense of belonging. This can end up effectively dodging more challenging understandings of how we can, and still do, occupy this place. This hesitation to speak in other ways, to narrate our experience outside this simple formula, however, could perhaps also signal a consciousness of what it means to live on settler-colonial islands in the South Pacific, where the right to speak about, or even for, Aotearoa New Zealand is a potentially fraught arena. For many Pākehā, settlers and newer migrants, the strength of emotion connected to New Zealand, to a sense of a home here, doesn't find easy expression. Many of us are aware that not being tangata whenua means that we don't have a natural, or prior, claim on this place, and so there can be an obstacle between emotion and language—we

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find ourselves coming up short, at times inarticulate. It can be hard to say what New Zealand means to us, to make certain claims about place, without inadvertently displacing Māori, and so, quite often, place has been a topic to be skirted around. But nor should we assume that a Māori connection to a papakāinga or ‘homeplace’ is clear or easily expressed, even as we acknowledge an often violent, enforced break in actual Māori inhabitation of particular locations.

Voice, then, as well as an awareness of the position from which one speaks or writes, becomes central. The personal essay offers the potential for expression that remains provisional, unsettled, challenged even, but which still conveys a strength of feeling for the places where we live and work, and which we sometimes leave behind. The authors in *Extraordinary Anywhere* write *on* place and *on* the personal essay form, and experiment with ways of writing with a kind of openness—both in the sense of opening up personal experience and in the sense of thoughts still in formation and reaching for that which might only ever be partially understood or expressed. There is a bravery in many of these pieces. They are essays in the most well-known and perhaps truest sense of the word ‘essai’, meaning a trial or an attempt. Our hope is that *Extraordinary Anywhere* gives a glimpse of the places we are now and how that feels, and that it will open up the range and kinds of stories we can conceive of telling about living here.

II

The collection is divided into three parts. In the first, *Any place might be extraordinary if only we knew it*, each piece focuses on a single location: Te Kūiti, Christchurch, Napier, Caversham, Brancepeth Station in the Wairarapa, and Pukeahu in central Wellington. Here place is approached as physical site, given meaning by and creating meaning from the personal and shared attachments people have to it. Poet and blogger Ashleigh Young’s Te Kūiti is overlaid with music and pop stars from other places and times, transforming an ‘ordinary place’ into something far more resonant, potent with all the romantic

longings of a teenage crush. Earthquakes can alter places beyond recognition, as explored by Sally Blundell and Cherie Lacey, where social, emotional and geographical maps are shifted in ways that make places strange, even to their long-time residents. The Christchurch earthquakes reverberate through a number of essays in the collection as a whole, both literally and as a metaphor for how place can be made and unmade, produced and erased—by geological force, by its inhabitants and by central government. Tony Ballantyne and Lydia Wevers think about archives in particular locations, and about locations themselves as archives. Their essays show what can be discovered when we pay attention to what Wevers calls, in her essay on the history of the Brancepeth farm library, the ‘languages of place—paper, buildings, objects, landscape’. Ingrid Horrocks explores how Pukeahu has and could be re-imagined, through conversations, public art works, the new Pukeahu National War Memorial Park that opened on Anzac Day 2015, and a digital anthology of writing and images.

These essays respond to a more general interest, both in this country and globally, in immersions in particular places, calling to mind experiments in the essay form such as Fiona Farrell’s *The Villa at the Edge of the Empire: One Hundred Ways to Read a City* (2015), about Christchurch; Joan Didion’s *Where I Was From* (2003), about California; Iain Sinclair’s many wandering engagements in books such as *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* (2002); Valeria Luiselli’s mapping of urban cavities and empty spaces in *Sidewalks* (2013); and Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker’s cartographically inspired *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (2013). What the essays in the collection share with works such as these is a move beyond place as part of a national project, neither making it about picturesque landscapes nor about a desire to belong or to have a place to stand. Nor, we hope, do they privilege the experiences of those who live in a place to the exclusion of those newly arrived, in transit, or outside.

Some recent writing about place has felt nostalgic for the mythical idea of particular places uncontaminated by human occupation or technological

development and outside influences. These hypothetical places can also be fetishised by the long-term inhabitant, who might claim a kind of authentic experience, or by the traveller, who laments the loss of an untouched landscape. However, in these essays places are formed through a layering of personal narrative and local histories, constantly and inevitably connecting with other places, here and elsewhere. Sites appear as porous and open, as contact zones where, for example, fourteen-year-old resident of Te Kūiti Ashleigh Young has an exchange with American musician Beck about the Funky Chicken, or Lydia Weavers can encounter the traces of dirt and blood left by readers more than 100 years ago. In these essays, place is always in the process of being made and re-made by what human geographer Doreen Massey calls a ‘constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus’, such as in the casual comings and goings over decades in Ballantyne’s local Caversham takeaway, run by a Chinese New Zealand family.

The essays in the second section, *You take place with you as you go on*, tell stories of mobility—of multiple places, elsewheres, non-places, dis-placements and losses of place. Here, place shows itself through personal narratives of movements between locations, both physical and mental, in which places are always constructed in relation to other places—geographic, temporal and textual. In writing about Māori connections to place, Alice Te Punga Somerville and Tina Makereti both emphasise that Māori are mobile and that ‘Māori writing and Māori writing about place extend beyond places that are understood as Māori’. Te Punga Somerville ends with a migratory image of the underground streams along which eels travel, leading always to the ocean and to other shores. This in no way signals a Māori relinquishing of place. Te Punga Somerville in particular highlights the political acts involved in place-making, arguing, for example, that a place is ‘produced’ by us every time we name it. In relation to Wellington, she writes: ‘Every time we call its name we re-place, dis-place or perhaps inadvertently mis-place Te Whanganui-a-Tara.’ She also traces the personal essay back to the 19th century, to the first Māori text written

in English when the author visited London, revealing a long history of Māori personal nonfiction writing.

Annabel Cooper, Alex Calder and Jack Ross also respond to New Zealand writers and their relationships to place and movement, alluding to Samuel Butler, Mary Lee, James Cowan, Keith Sinclair, Peter Wells, Dan Davin and some of the writers of the cultural nationalist period. Cooper reiterates the very practical observation of the painfully nomadic Lee that some places prove to be better than others—something that is no less true today than in Lee’s 19th-century Southland. The presence of food, clean water, friends, employment opportunities and housing, as well as the security to make decisions about whether one stays or leaves, make us value some places partly by virtue of comparison. Calder and Ross show that sometimes what is most unsettling about places can only be approached through such modes as melodrama and transgressions into the supernatural. Harry Ricketts and Tina Makereti use the essay form as a vehicle of discovery for writing about their experiences—as a new migrant on the one hand, and as urban Māori with relationships to multiple homeplaces on the other. It is worth acknowledging here that many migrant and settler experiences, both historical and more recent, are not represented within the collection, something that we hope will be addressed in future gatherings of writers and nonfiction writing. Newer writers such as Tze Ming Mok and Kerry Ann Lee, as well as more established ones like Selina Tusitala Marsh, come to mind as voices that could well enrich the collective experiment begun in *Extraordinary Anywhere*.

Generally speaking, some engagements with place have seen mobility as threatening, diluting the distinctiveness of particular places. This fear involves not only goods, capital, media and people arriving, but also people leaving to go elsewhere. Perceived threats to the bounded identity of places can lead to reactionary or defensive nationalisms, like those we see at times in debates about the flag or foreign ownership of land, or more broadly in response to the newly urgent claims of refugees. The essays in this section, however, tend to

imagine place through routes as well as roots, allowing for new conceptions of place that are responsive to the increasing mobility of 21st-century experiences. This is not to limit engagements with place, or to celebrate in ‘absolute terms’ mobility over immobility or over a sense of home, something anthropologist Ghassan Hage cautions against, suggesting that ‘motion and rest, travel and homeliness’ are not oppositions but ‘deeply interrelated’. It is, rather, to acknowledge the potential liberation or pain of mobility and living in a mobile society, as well as the potential pleasures or claustrophobia of locatedness.

In the third section of this book, *The meshing of thought and world*, Ian Wedde, Giovanni Tiso and Tim Corballis experiment with writing about virtual and global locations, tackling subjects such as Peter Jackson, Google+ and the universe. Wedde navigates between ‘orders of reality’, using a piece of wood from the party tree in Middle Earth and his five-year-old granddaughter’s acceptance of the ‘real worlds’ within movies to explore how we inhabit and are inhabited by the words and imaginings of others. Tiso reflects on his troubling experience of Google+ impersonally telling his ‘story’ through a set of 24 photographs taken on a trip to Camogli and Genoa. Tiso’s experience with Google+ is evocative of the ways in which our experiences of place are radically altered by technologies such as mobile devices, GPS tracking systems and geotagging. As some recent textual and multimedia engagements with place have shown, digital or virtual places can have complex and enriching relationships with physical places. This is evident, for example, in projects such as Rem Koolhaas’s interactive documentary *Lagos Wide and Close*, the popular app ‘Drift’, and in the digital Māori Maps project led by Paul Tapsell, which describes itself in its English version as a ‘digital gateway’ or ‘portal to the marae of Aotearoa’. In the final essay, Tim Corballis seeks to negotiate how we might live with the complexity of new places, suggesting that we need to hold on to at least two perspectives: a local, individual view, which can look closely and subjectively and see the small things; but also a larger perspective, one that might include an image of the whole Earth, for example, and an

imagining of place adequate to confront climate change. His essay traverses an image of the galaxy, Tuki's map, digital imagery of the ocean floor and the political possibilities of the agora. Gesturing towards the collective and what it offers, Corballis asks what kind of place we think the world could be.

III

The contributions to *Extraordinary Anywhere* take many forms, from nonfiction short stories to personal histories to pieces of embodied research. However, they are all in some way a reflection on sites and situatedness—both within the essay itself and in relation to place or places. The importance of the very particular places from which each of us speaks and views the world was highlighted when the various historians, scholars, bloggers, theorists and creative writers who appear in *Extraordinary Anywhere* gathered in Wellington in late 2014 to discuss their writing practices and how they had so far gone about telling stories of place. The real challenges of that meeting of voices, and the provocation of this essay collection which now follows, have encouraged many of the authors to mutate their writing practice, either more towards the personal or more towards the conceptual, depending on their background. The result is a series of experiments in synthesis, tentatively suggesting a number of new ways in which we might begin to write and think about the places we inhabit. If, as ecologist Geoff Park said, we need to keep 'walking and talking' our places in order to work out how to live and work in them, then innovative—and moving—new writings such as these suggest some of the very many ways this activity might be reimagined.

A sense of questioning has particular weight in Makereti's piece. For her, the essay is inevitably 'a constant argument about place', involving a circling around the 'unknowable', and inviting us 'to achieve the unattainable, like being multiple things and coming from multiple places all at once'. Makereti is not alone in her attempts. An effort to evoke the feeling of inhabiting various, and sometimes contradictory, experiences of place drives many of the essays in *Extraordinary Anywhere*. This is reminiscent of what Michel de Montaigne, the

progenitor of the essay form, wrote in the 16th century: ‘If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial’. However, this is not to say that writing in essay form means we are not answerable to facts or politics, an issue that comes up in a number of the contributions. Nonetheless, the complexity of our embodied experiences of place finds a good fit with the questioning mode of the essay.

The rich potential of the ‘narrative unreliability’ (in Wedde’s words) of the personal essay is what distinguishes its kind of epistemology from that of the academic essay. Our invitation to some scholars to write in a more personal form has led to these kinds of distinctions becoming a thread that runs through the collection. Ballantyne tells us something new about how the thinking of a historian can intersect with place when he describes himself leaning against the old *Indiana Jones* pinball machines in Fairways takeaways, and how, in a key academic essay of his, he drew on both Doreen Massey (whom I openly acknowledged) and the thoughts that occurred to me in Fairways (which I didn’t mention). Wevers describes a similar kind of ‘subjective knowing’ in her encounters with Brancepeth library, which she felt compelled to build into her history, ‘to keep myself, as it were, in place’. Annabel Cooper, too, shows place at work on the historian, suggesting that we need both ‘the kinds of evidence that the social sciences deal in’ and something ‘more particular and personal’ to grasp the elusiveness of place in a more affective way. Lacey and Lynn Jenner contribute narratives of their own relinquishment of psychoanalytic and psychological world views in exchange for the complex self-positioning of first person writing.

Other contributors explicitly reflect on and perform ways in which ideas can emerge from places. Horrocks, Jenner and Wedde all write about how ideas evolve in the construction of an essay. Horrocks narrates how her understanding of Pukeahu developed through visits to the campus marae, discussions with those with claims to the place, and a series of walks. Walking also plays a role in Wedde’s methodology, giving us an insight into the mind of a writer alert to possibilities for new writing, and Jenner presents both an essay

and a commentary on how the ideas for her piece developed over a period of months. In all three there is the presence of ongoing conversations, notebooks filling up with, as Wedde writes, the ‘little shock of *noticing*’, and explorations of how these notes get shaped in writing.

Some of the essays more implicitly demonstrate the extent to which the intensely personal can be used for explorations that extend far beyond the self. Young and Lacey use the form to evoke the tenderness and tension of relationships between local history enthusiast fathers and their mobile daughters, invoking a dynamic, if often unspoken, intergenerational dialogue about place. Ricketts and Ross evoke friendships, showing how the place of our minds is inhabited by intimates who live—and die—elsewhere. In Blundell’s piece on Christchurch, the personal *is* collective, figured through the ‘we’ of the first person plural, which in her essay denotes the many voices of the people of Christchurch who hope, ‘in the cracks in the planning’, to shape the ‘shared space’ of their future city.

These essays evoke what Jenner calls, quoting one person quoting another about another, ‘the metaphysical feeling of the strangeness of existence’. All are characterised by openness and are animated by a search, allowing for a subjective investment and even, at times, a vulnerability. Makereti writes of her own writing practice, ‘there is a tension from the first line—this is how I know I should keep writing. Even now I feel it, the impossibility of making what I’m trying to say clear, transparent, sensible, straightforward even’. It is this sense of tension, of trial and attempt—detectable in all of the essays here in various ways—that we hope will keep people reading *Extraordinary Anywhere*.

Wellington, February 2016

Notes on Sources:

References in this introduction come from Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 154; Ghassan Hage, 'In conversation with Dimitri Papadopoulos: Migration, Hope and the Making of Subjectivity in Transnational Capital', *International Journal for Critical Psychology* 12 (2004), 115; Māori Maps: <http://www.maorimaps.com/>; Rem Koolhaas, *Lagos Wide and Close*: <http://lagos.submarinechannel.com/>; Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Repentance', *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 611; and Geoff Park, 'Looking for Signs of Life—Nature and the Genius Loci in the Austral City' (1997), *Theatre Country: Essays on Landscape and Whenua* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), 45.

Recent writing and thinking about place in New Zealand includes Tony Ballantyne's ongoing historical work, discussed in his essay in this collection; Steve Braunias, *Civilisation: Twenty Places on the Edge of the World* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2012); Alex Calder, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011); Martin Edmond's nonfiction writings over two decades, most recently *The Dreaming Land* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2015); the developing work of Gregory O'Brien on the ways in which paintings and poems can speak to, for and of, a place, including the ongoing Kermadec art project; Joan Metge, *Tuamaka: The Challenge of Difference in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010); Janet Stephenson, Mick Abbott and Jacinta Ruru (eds.), *Beyond the Scene: Landscape and Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2010); Alice Te Punga Somerville's *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), which considers indigenous writing in relation to diaspora and migrations rather than to the bounded place of the nation state; and Stephen Turner, 'Settler Dreaming', *Memory Connection* 1.1 (2011): 115–26.

There has also been a general upsurge in the publishing of (creative) nonfiction writing in recent years, some of which involves engagements with particular locations, as in the 'My Auckland' issue of *Landfall* (2012), or in Anna Sanderson's 'A Red Brick Church' in her collection *Brainpark* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006); or, with changing New Zealand identity more generally, as exemplified in Julianne Schultz and Lloyd Jones's introduction to the *Pacific Highways* issue of *Griffith Review* (2013). More widely, there is the Bridget Williams Books Texts series of long essays launched in 2014; and *Tell You What: Great New Zealand Nonfiction*, the annual also started in 2014, which draws extensively on blog publications, itself one of the foremost modes for the creation and dissemination of personal forms of nonfiction writing.

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