home

home: new writing

edited by thom conroy

MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

the art of the essay

Welcome to *Home: New Writing*. It's the debut volume of what will be an annual publication of the best of New Zealand essay writing by this country's most accomplished writers, both established and emerging.

The series marks Massey University Press's serious intention to help further an intelligent national cultural conversation, to showcase the work of New Zealand's many fine writers and thinkers, and to support the art of the essay.

The Press is indebted to Dr Thom Conroy, the editor of this volume, and to the twenty-one other writers whose essays are published within it.

Nicola Legat
Publisher

introduction

opening doors with our feet

In the last year, home has been on our minds. From the haunting sight of the three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi lying dead, face down on a Turkish beach and news of New Zealanders living in their cars, to the crashing of the Canadian immigration site following the US election and international concerns about the accelerated melting of the Antarctic ice sheets, many of us have been thinking about what it means to be at home. With 65 million people currently displaced globally, the notion of home is more relevant and yet more fragile than ever before. At the same time, home is a form of knowing that contains the reasoning for its own preservation. Home is also a necessity, one of the 'physiological needs' that forms the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as well as an essential experience in our definition of self.

For all of home's centrality, you would think we might know a bit more about it. Home seems intimate, near at hand. It suggests a place, as my daughter says, where we open the doors with our feet and close them with our elbows. And home is such a universal topic that our depictions of it are often expressed in clichés. At the same time, the experience of home is profoundly subjective. Each of us has a recollection of a home of some kind, and many writers find themselves returning to the subject over the course of their oeuvre.

In New Zealand there can be an inherent difficulty in articulating conceptions of home, especially for Pākehā writers. In 'Writing Here', the introduction to *Extraordinary Anywhere: Essays on Place from Aotearoa New Zealand*, editors Ingrid Horrocks and Cherie Lacey link Pākehā reticence about place to an underlying anxiety about 'displacing' Māori voices:

> For many Pākehā, settlers and newer migrants, the strength of emotion connected to New Zealand, to a sense of 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 can find ourselves coming up short, at times inarticulate.

One of my early worries about this collection was that a version of this inarticulateness might surface in some of the essays. If nothing else, I was concerned that many essays on the same topic might turn out to be similar — a disquieting prospect, given that my intention was to spark new dialogue about what an expanding sense of home might mean to us here and now in Aotearoa.

Those worries turned out to be groundless. As the essays began to arrive in my inbox daily, I found myself overwhelmed by both the eloquence and the diversity with which the writers had approached the topic. It wasn't long before I found myself stretched, and when this happened I understood that we were on to something. As I read, I became aware of — dare I say it? — learning something. Because the procedure was so deeply pleasurable, I didn't recognise that any edification was occurring, but by the time I had read through the essays in *Home* I understood that I had become educated on the subject.

So what did I learn? I learned, first of all, that home is primary, shaping and visceral. As Brian Turner says near the beginning of 'Southwards to the Always Talking Sea', 'the word *home* registers more powerfully than just about any other'. Home is omnipresent and nonetheless elusive, slippery. It can be embodied in a material object, as it was for Ian Wedde's great-grandmother, whose linen sampler, brought from the Danish town of Haderslev on the South Jutland peninsula, remained an enduring fragment of a faraway home. This sampler, Wedde writes in 'How Not to Be at Home', 'represented her and uttered her'.

At the same time, home is ephemeral, as we learn in Laurence Fearnley's 'Sniffing Out the Neighbourhood: A Scent Map of Home'. For all of us, home is contingent, although some of us are more aware of this contingency than others. For Bonnie Etherington, a New Zealander growing up in West Papua, home was a function of mobility. In 'Never Coming Home', Etherington remembers her mother observing that 'home is where our suitcase is'. I learned, too, that home can be a form of knowledge, such as the life-saving technique for catching turtles that Gina Cole's Fijian grandmother teaches her in 'Na Noqu Bubu'.

The essays in *Home* are wide-ranging, heterogeneous, cacophonous forays across the globe and deep into every nook and cranny of our country. In spite of the diversity of the collection, however, there are threads that bind, hints of commonality that unite us. Writing of the distinction between home and house in her introduction to *At Home in New Zealand: History, Houses, People*, historian Barbara Brookes acknowledges that 'it is the infusion of memory that is the key ingredient that makes a house into a "home"'. Memory implies a journey, a return. Whether the essay's subject is directly about travel, as it is for Lloyd Jones in 'Proximity' or Sue Wootton in 'Homing', the idea of home always carries this notion of return — if not along the miles of the earth, then along the winding tracks of whakapapa as in Paula Morris's 'Greys Avenue'. 'Home,' Ingrid Horrocks realises in her essay 'Oscillations', 'might also contain movement — both physical and emotional. Home might contain, rather than be threatened by, yearnings, by elsewheres.'

As I read the drafts of these essays, I was reminded that home is innately political. It is, as Jones makes clear, the first site of politicisation: 'home is where all the early prejudices are seeded'. If home signifies belonging, it also contains the power to exclude. In her essay 'To Tatau or Not To Tatau — That Is the 'Afakasi Diasporic

Question', Selina Tusitala Marsh collides with the politics of home during an encounter at her PhD graduation ceremony. Although Marsh felt like she was 'beginning to be at home in a university setting that was becoming more Pasifikised', her sense of belonging is interrupted when an older Sāmoan man, who 'had an air of authority and seemed to be someone of repute', shames her for not knowing Sāmoan.

Home is a migration, albeit a tentative one, and contemporary politics has made it all too clear that any kind of migration is a profoundly partisan affair. Discussing the fate of asylum seekers to Australia under the plan of Operation Sovereign Borders, James George links this modern project of 'protecting the sanctity of white Western civilisation from the hordes' to the originating idea of home. 'It is a fight,' George writes in 'Returning Places', 'over the concept of home: who has the right to name it, to feel it, and who doesn't.'

Perhaps what most beguiles about home is its capacity to remain aloof, closed off, impervious to any final reckoning. Etymologically speaking, home is akin to *haunt*, derived from the Middle English *hom*. Haunting suggests the uncanny return, the journey that is, somehow, never completely accomplished and never completely grasped. In 'Home Without Now and Then', Elizabeth Knox sets out into the native territory of home — the enigmatic hinterland of memory — only to find herself in a distorted landscape, a fleshly presence in the shifting province of shadows. She writes, 'I'm in the wrong place. I can't call to find out where I should be.' In 'The Red in My Mind', Martin Edmond traces the unlikely migration of a circus elephant, Mollie, from Uttaradit near the Thai–Lao border to Singapore to Perth to Ohakune, where she consumes tutu and perishes. Edmond's essay is an expedition across rainforest, open sea and railway, but he also travels the strange circuits of memory — his own and that of other eye witnesses — to arrive at Mollie's final resting place. And yet this return is haunted by the

mystery of all that remains absent. ‘Some things cannot be explained. They can only be told,’ Edmond writes.

> The beach on the Mangawhero, where Mollie ate the tutu, is still there. So is the tutu. Across the other side of the road, in sight of the site of the Braileys’ house (it has been trucked away), there is a slight depression in the grass; and Celeste says that it is half here, and half under the road itself, that the bones lie. When you stand there, you hear the Mangawhero flowing over stones as it makes its way down from the mountain; but all else is quiet.

For all its familiarity, something in our conception of home remains secret, at arm’s length, irretrievably lost.

It bears noting that the essays which follow are, according to one or another definition of the word, ‘non-fiction’. From the Latin *exigere*, the word ‘essay’ conveys connotations of ‘trying out’ or ‘venturing forth’, making an attempt of one kind or another. *To essay* also suggests the act of ‘weighing’ or ‘testing’, as if to ascertain the quality of something. Essaying, then, is a tentative act, an attempt infused with the idea of understanding as a process of evaluation and discovery. In ‘A Natural Utterance for the Era’, a recent article commissioned by the Academy of New Zealand Literature, Lawrence Patchett declares ‘it’s an exhilarating time to write non-fiction in New Zealand, and to read it’. It’s my hope that readers of this volume will second Patchett’s proclamation as they frequent both the familiar and the far-flung haunts of *Home*.

Thom Conroy
Editor

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selina tusitala marsh

to tatau or not to tatau? that is the ‘afakasi diasporic question

For two decades I've wanted a taulima, a Sāmoan tatau (tattoo) marking the wrist or lima (arm). On the scale of Sāmoan body adornment, this is a littlie. With a 2000-year history, tatau are traditionally gender specific, surrounded in ceremony, and mark the initiate's coming of age in terms of responsibilities to ʻāiga (extended family), village affairs and nation. Tatau may or may not be accompanied by the receiving of a matai title, a chiefly rank of responsibility, authority and service passed down through family lines, enabling representation in political and social affairs. Men receive the mālōfie (if titled) or peʻa, which begins from below the knees and rises up to the lower back; women receive the malu, which begins from below the knees and ends on the upper thigh. The tatau is applied by the tufuga ta tatau (master tattooist) and his helpers, who position and stretch the skin in readiness to receive what was once the tap tap tapping of razor shark or boar's teeth dipped in the soot of burnt candlenut. (Relatives talk of how in the 'old days', when a woman became pregnant, her partner would collect and prepare the nut used for the dye. By the time the child was due, the dye would also be ready. The woman's birthing pains would be symbolically shared by her partner receiving his peʻa dipped in this nut — a striking example of ancient gender complementarity.)

Tatau design and symbology is passed down through Sāmoan songs, chants, proverbs, architecture, arts and crafts, and of course family lines of practising tufuga. Tatau patterns have been captured by early Western anthropologists; adopted and adapted by Pacific artists and writers; and have been tap tap tapped on living bodies ever since. Albert Wendt's landmark 1996 essay 'Tatauing the Postcolonial Body' explains some of the designs in peʻa and malu before using it as a metaphor for Pacific literature in the postcolonial era. Wendt's final emphasis is on the unavoidably syncretic nature of culture — a position which raises many an essentialist eyebrow. What about

cultural ‘authenticity’? If culture is ever-changing, how can we protect the integrity of tatau in an era of vapid global appropriation and consumerism, courtesy of Disney or Nike? Who has the right to get a tatau? These have been pressing issues for artists, academics and cultural and intellectual property activists alike. They are also key questions for the majority of Sāmoans who are now born and/or raised in diaspora. Behind the Hamlet-esque question, ‘To tatau or not to tatau?’, are its multifarious manifestations as expressed in the last twenty years of Sāmoan writing: Am I Sāmoan if I wasn’t born there / didn’t grow up there / don’t speak the language / can’t dance or siva / don’t look Sāmoan? The answer, as well as why it’s taken me twenty years to decide, lies under my own skin and beneath epidermal layers of ‘afakasi identity politics in the diaspora.

When ‘accused’ of being ‘afakasi (with its connotations of not being ‘authentically’ Sāmoan or of acting above one’s cultural station) or of being fiapapālagi (with its derogative implications of acting like a papālagi or a white person), I have experienced the full spectrum of reaction: from stunned and shamed silence, to angry and vigorous defence and justification, to simply laughing. Such cultural confrontations are all too common in what anthropologist Melani Anae first referred to as the ‘identity journeys’ of New Zealand-born Sāmoans. According to *Selina Tusitala Marsh’s Encyclopaedia Sāmoannica*, the early period of conscious political and cultural identity formation occurred at university. In 1994, I embarked on a PhD, supervised by Albert Wendt, celebrated forefather of Pacific literature. The following are variations on the core statement / belief / insult for and against receiving a tatau: I’m not Sāmoan enough to get a tatau; I’m ‘afakasi (Sāmoan mother, English father); I was born and raised in New Zealand; I don’t speak Sāmoan fluently; I don’t siva; we never grew up attending a Sāmoan church. Common sayings: ‘You’re just a