

*The Braided River: Migration and the personal essay*

By Diane Comer. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2019.

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Reviewed by Lydia Wevers

One of my earliest memories is sitting at the table in our rented house in Masterton with Dad and my brothers and hearing our mother crying in the loo. It was an unusual and frightening sound which is why I remember it vividly 67 years later – also Dad had cooked dinner which wasn't his forte. We'd been in New Zealand a bit over a year, migrating from the Netherlands in 1953 and perhaps Mum had just found out she was pregnant. There were already 4 kids, and years later she told me she'd only intended to have three, and the prospect of a new baby in a country where she felt deeply homesick must have precipitated her very unusual tears. It was in fact her second migration. In 1939 she went to the Netherlands from England just before the German occupation to marry her first husband who was Jewish and was murdered in 1942. My mother spent the war with her one year old, half Jewish, son, under terrible pressure, trying to ensure that her large family of in-laws, all in hiding, survived.

The second migration was Dad's idea, driven by the aftershocks of the war. He adored his stepson and wanted to remove him from any possible future danger and Mum said she'd only move somewhere 'in the Commonwealth'. They'd heard C.E.Beeby speaking to potential migrant audiences in The Hague which made it seem the most attractive of the possible options, so Dad sorted out a job in an architectural firm in Masterton and they left via England so Mum could say goodbye to her family. They both thought they'd never see their families again. Years later one of my Dutch cousins told me how grief stricken the family had been at Dad's departure.

I began this review of Diane Comer's *The Braided River* with my own migration story because as the subtitle makes clear her book interweaves the narrative of her own migratory life with those of her adult students and with the secondary literature on both migration and the personal essay. Her metaphor of a braided river comes from her first attempt to live in New Zealand which saw her in Christchurch for a number of not very happy years before the earthquakes. Like my mother, she found it hardest to adapt to the new society, culture and geography, and it wasn't until she began teaching classes for adults who wanted to write about their own migration experience that she started to shape a new home.

Comer's own story is both complicated and clarified by her history of moving as an army brat and her second migration after the Christchurch earthquakes. When Christchurch became a hard place to sustain work and family life, her husband was offered a job in a prestigious college in Sweden and the family moved to Sweden for a very unhappy year or so. Part of the stress was caused by language and culture shock, part by the realisation that roots had been put down elsewhere, so the chance to return to New Zealand felt like a homecoming. These emotional mobilities lie underneath the experience of migration, like the underground flows of a braided river, with its shifting course and hidden depths. It is an excellent metaphor.

More than a quarter of New Zealanders are born overseas yet only 3.4% of the world's population lives outside the country of their birth. As Covid 19 cases are announced it is a daily reminder of the shape of our foreign born population, coming in from all parts of the globe as returning Kiwis. Comer's book 'distils' the thoughts and experiences of part of this population, 37 migrants from 20 countries, who have written personal essays as members of her adult education class over the years. These are migrants who came by choice, unlike the recent high

profile case of Behrouz Boochani, brought here from the punishing Australian refugee centre on Manus Island to attend a literary festival. His experiences were famously smuggled out in an autobiography-by-text message, published in 2018 as *No Friend But the Mountains*, which won four major Australian literary awards. Comer's personal essays are not in this kind of category.

Her writers came here between 1940 and 2007, the youngest aged 8 and the oldest 60. Some of them have returned, most have made their lives here, and despite the variations of their experience all raise the same questions: what does it mean to belong somewhere, and where and what is home.

John Berger has said the migration is the quintessential experience of our time. Comer also notes that each migration narrative embodies two mega narratives – a stranger comes to town and a person starts a journey. Migrants necessarily inhabit both these stories, and are also aware of themselves as part of a larger shift towards a more mobile world that has accelerated over time. Comer discusses these experiences under the headings of distance, separations, belonging, identity and return across her six chapters, embedded in a very broad context of the literature and theory of migration and of the personal essay. She makes a case for the personal essay as the essential medium for writing about migration because, quoting Homi Bhabha, 'lives lived iteratively, lives lived interstitially' are foregrounded in the personal essay, offering a 'unique opportunity to contribute to the theory of narrative and identity' (38).

Comer makes a lot of claims about the 'personal essay' sometimes as if it is an agent on its own accord. Talking about an essay by Werapong, sent by his parents from Thailand to New Zealand aged 15 to attend high school, Comer observes that there is a 'moment of recognition' in which Werapong understands that his parents transferred their passions and dreams to him as a young boy. Comer seems to transfer this moment from the writer to the essay. She writes of a 'moment of recognition, which the personal essay discovers through its route of inquiry and inclination'. (63) Earlier she writes that the migrant writer must learn what the experience means 'and the essay is adept at transferring that'. (56) I found myself resisting this presentation of 'the personal essay' as if it is a tool which can turn on its own capacities. Yes, the first person essay requires the writer to reflect on experience and meaning-making practices, but they do this in the process of writing—all writing requires choices, negotiations, distinctions, invites questioning about the self and the world, the self as writer and the self as participant. Even genres which don't seem to do that, like science writing, require writers to locate themselves in their expertise and methodologies. The personal essay as a genre performs certain kinds of disclosure and self analysis but is always a textual product and self representation of the person writing. I don't think Comer is arguing anything other than this but the book uncomfortably talks about the personal essay as if it is not a genre choice but a self determining agency.

I wondered if the book is a rewritten thesis. Some of its unwieldy characteristics have the air of thesis writing. Two examples are enough. I really enjoyed and was glad of the huge range of reference Comer brings to her study, but the predominance of what is really a literature review (well chosen and apt though it is) comes to dominate too much in the chapters which focus on the personal essays by her students. Their often insightful and well written accounts of their experiences and their reflections on them get a bit swamped in a sea of references to migration, to essay writing, to otherness. My second example is related to this impression of a PhD candidate writing for her examiners. Comer quotes well and often from her students' work. The examples she chooses are illustrative of broader points and touching and interesting

on their own account. However each long quote is invariably followed by an authorial gloss which in effect just repeats, often by direct quote, what has already been said. I would have liked her to trust her students' voices, or perhaps trust the reader, more than this. Her students can and do speak for themselves. Their observations are acute and highly individualised. They are frank and perceptive. The pleasure of the book resides in these essays and in Comer's own frank, perceptive and touching narrative of her two migrations to Aotearoa New Zealand. Her arrival here and subsequent unsettled disappointment followed by a really unhappy time in Sweden, allows her to reflect on her own character as well as the huge difference it makes to migrate to a country where you speak the language. The isolation and alienation she felt as a speechless person in Sweden is familiar to me because of the many Dutch friends of my parents who experienced the same thing. Almost a third of the huge postwar Dutch migrations to Australia and New Zealand returned home because the cultural and linguistic isolation was too hard to bear. We were lucky because my mother was English. She went to the Anglican church, joined the bridge club and made friends fairly easily, though for the rest of her life she missed both England and Holland and always barracked for any visiting English team. She said to me once you never stop missing the landscapes of your childhood, something also demonstrated in the writing of Comer's students. The essays in *The Braided River* convey these emotions well, as does Comer in her lyrical description of returning to the familiar New Zealand landscape with its bright colour and crashing seas, from grey cold Sweden.

*The Braided River* is a thoughtful book, and packed full of perceptive commentary on migration and on the practise of the personal essay. But why, by the way, does it have to be called the 'personal' essay? This seems to me to narrow the category of an elegant and alluring genre which ranges so fluently from Barthes to Montaigne. It is also interesting about the evolving nature of our country. It would also have been very interesting to have a section on how these writers interacted with Māori, and also whether migration to different cities (Comer first settled in Christchurch and then in Wellington) or to rural towns or farms changed their experience of 'New Zealand', but maybe that's for another time.