



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

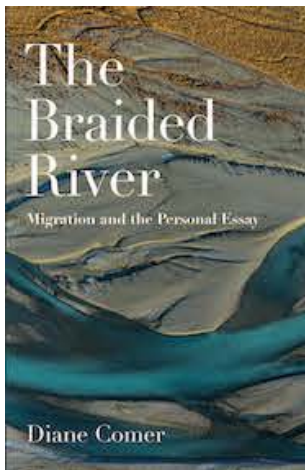
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

TEXT Review

Braiding lives and lines

review by Jessica White



Diane Comer

The Braided River: Migration and the Personal Essay

Otago University Press, Dunedin 2019

ISBN 9781988531533

Pb 304pp AUD35.00

Diane Comer describes herself as someone who had ‘always been leaving home’ (14). Born in Italy and raised in the Dominican Republic, Belgium and the United States, she grew into an adult who moved between Sweden, the United States and New Zealand. As someone who had to repeatedly adjust to new people, places and cultures, her constant uprooting, she writes, ‘instilled in me a restless quest for where I belong’ (39) and she found that ‘the one place where I could ground my sense of displacement was in writing’ (14). Drawing on her

experiences, Comer developed a community education course that invited migrants to explore and reflect on their circumstances through the form of the personal essay. The inexpensive course attracted migrants from their twenties to their eighties and ranged from doctors and lawyers to people who had left school at age sixteen. *The Braided River* is the distillation of the experiences and thoughts of 37 migrants who between them wrote over two hundred essays.

The book's great strength lies in Comer's discussion of the ways in which the personal essay lends itself to an exploration of migration. French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) inaugurated the form, using it to explore the question *Que sais-je?* Or, 'What do I know?' Comer refers to life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's definition of the personal essay as a 'mode of writing that is literally a self-trying-out ... a testing ("assay") of one's own intellectual, emotional and physiological responses to a given topic' (160), in this case, migration. The book's introduction and six chapters, while covering different facets of the migrant experience, canvas four recurring motifs that find expression in the personal essay: the braided river, the stranger who comes to town, the backward and forward nature of time, and language.

Comer uses the geographical feature of a braided river as a metaphor for an essay's style, and refers to this metaphor in her introduction, 'The Headwaters of the River,' and first two chapters. Citing *Braided River Ecology*, she defines the braided river as consisting of 'much more than active surface channels ... the river flows across an alluvial gravel bed, which may be many metres deep and possibly kilometres wide' (13). Like the braided rivers that flow across the country of Aotearoa New Zealand, Comer writes:

much of what migrants discover and learn about their new country lies well below the surface narratives and remains unstudied from their own reflective and analytical perspectives. The forces that determine migration and how individuals react to and potentially write about it have an interwoven external narrative and a deep, wide undercurrent that carries the story towards its conclusion. (13)

The genre of the personal essay, she continues, 'provides a method of enquiry well suited to plumbing the more resonant depths of migrants' knowledge and experience and gives a more nuanced understanding of the existential landscape of migration' (13). Continuing the metaphor, she explains how the braided rivers originate in New Zealand's mountains and trickle under rocks until they become visible. Similarly, 'the story of migration begins long before a migrant arrives in a new country' (28).

In Chapter One, 'Roots – The River Under the River', Comer explores what motivates migrants to leave their homes. Sometimes this is restlessness, and at other times it is an imperative to accompany partners and families. While these migrants' 'surface narrative'

might tell one story of leaving and moving to another country, ‘the depths reveal where the story – the journey – began’ (39). Comer returns to this idea of an origin and a journey in Chapter Two, ‘Routes – Writing Between Two Shores,’ when she refers to the original migrants to New Zealand, the Māori people, who voyaged to an unknown country and brought their culture with them. They named the braided rivers from which Comer takes inspiration – the Rakaia, the Hurunui, the Waimakariri, the Waitaki.

In this chapter, Comer draws on Helene Cixous’s observation that ‘writing forms a passageway between two shores’, explaining how ‘every migrant crosses both a literal and an existential shore, and the personal essay acts as a passageway between the two, a route to where self meets world and self meets other’ (90). The self also meets the reader, and this makes the personal essay a useful vehicle for documenting a life which ‘even the migrant’s own family may never see or share’ (141) as Comer explains in Chapter Three, ‘Closing the Distance’. As well as helping to bridge a physical distance, the personal essay helps migrants to work through their responses to the effect of distance, which can also include temporal or emotional distance. On a wider level, again, the personal essay can show ‘what the world looks like from the vantage point of the stranger who comes to town’ (22). In crossing from one shore to another, the stranger, in their writing of the personal essay, captures multiple perspectives: ‘an awareness of past and present, foreign and familiar, near and distant’ (22).

Not only does the capacious form of the personal essay allow the writer to capture these various strands, it also offers them a vantage point from which they can reflect on what has happened in their past, and where they are heading. As Comer explains, ‘the moment we sit down to write, we begin to remember and to forge connections between our past and present selves’ (111). For migrants, this helps them to contemplate routes taken or not taken, and such reflection ‘has immense value for migrants who have left an entire world behind and forged a life elsewhere’ (110).

Language plays a significant role in learning about and accessing a new culture. It is ‘the river that runs through and braids everything together, the life blood of culture and connection, contact and communication’ (25). Without language, as Comer discovers when her family moved to Sweden from New Zealand following the Christchurch earthquake, it is very difficult to communicate and feel accepted. This explains why writing – both in the personal essay and in Comer’s classes – was so important to her and her students. As she describes in Chapter Four, ‘The Second Cup of Tea – On Belonging’, in their essays and writing classes, her students ‘developed and shared an understanding, a space that sometimes even those closes to them had been unable to provide’ (170).

Migration was difficult for Comer and many of her students not just in terms of accessing new languages and customs, but also in terms of a longing for what was left behind. This is

another reason why, as Comer outlines in Chapter Five, ‘The Migration of Identity’, the personal essay’s ‘penchant for holding contrary and conflicted emotions and thoughts is ideally suited to what migrants themselves experience in their divided loyalties between people and place’ (214). It is clear that the form can be matched to the migrant experience in numerous, valuable ways.

This book is an engaging and enjoyable read, with a vast range of examples of how migration to New Zealand is encountered and expressed, and the personal essay is clearly shown to be a beneficial technique for narrating various facets of migration. The book progresses according to these facets, rather than the different elements of the personal essay itself, reflecting its emphasis on writing as a tool of reflection and support, rather than craft. The references to the braided river as a metaphor are not sustained after Chapter Two, and Comer’s mentions of the personal essay itself also taper off in the latter chapters. When she does refer to the mode, it is to reiterate earlier information and motifs. For this reason, the work might have been crisper and more concise. I also query Comer’s references to the ‘contact zone’, a term coined by postcolonial studies scholar Mary Louise Pratt (whom Comer cites), in the context of migrants who grapple with unequal power relations in a new place, but without contemplating the ongoing effects of colonisation on the Māori people.

These qualms aside, *The Braided River* has undeniable sociological insights. As Comer notes in her final chapter, ‘The Gift of Return’, other critical lenses such as oral histories and interviews (and, I assume, data collection such as the New Zealand census), do not provide ‘the drive toward the reflective self-inquiry of the personal essay’ (238), and as such they cannot capture the emotional labour of relocation and adjustment. The essay, by contrast, represents stories of cultural movement not only in the form itself, but also in its etymological root: *assay*, or ‘to try’. As Comer writes, ‘migrants possess an affinity for the genre whose hallmark is to try, to weigh and to test, even as migrants have been tried, weighed tested and been tested by their chosen country’ (12).

I began this review on the other side of the world in Munich, Germany, with Covid-19 closing in. I finished it in Brisbane after a fraught journey home, relieved to be back with my partner in a familiar environment. My experiences are a timely reminder to me of Comer’s observations that, when all is uncertain, writing can ground us in the world.

Jessica White is the author of the award-winning A Curious Intimacy (Penguin 2007) and Entitlement (Penguin 2012), and a hybrid memoir about deafness, Hearing Maud (UWA Publishing, 2019), which won the 2020 Michael Crouch Award for a debut work of biography. Jessica’s short stories and essays have appeared widely in Australian and international literary journals and have been shortlisted or longlisted for major prizes. Jessica is the recipient of funding from Arts Queensland and the Australia Council for the Arts and has undertaken residencies and fellowships in Hobart, Rome and Munich. She currently lectures at the University of Queensland where she is

writing an ecobiography of Western Australia's first non-Indigenous female scientist, 19th century botanist Georgiana Molloy. Jessica can be found at www.jessicawhite.com.au