

Essay by Emily Parr

I am manuhiri in Ōtautahi. I have no obvious connections here—at least I didn't think I did. In the lead up to a research trip, I woke at five in the morning with a thought: “The whales connect you, duh!”

I am going to meet the humpback whales, paikea, on their journey back to their birthing waters. As this part of the world settles into winter, they migrate north from Antarctica, along the coastline of Te Wai Pounamu, crossing Te Moananui-a-Kiwa for the warmer waters of Vava'u, Tonga. The whales I hold a growing affinity with have been making this journey since time beyond memory. I do have another ancient connection with Te Wai Pounamu—it's people, Ngāi Tahu, and I descend from Paikea.

In a few days time I will travel to Kaikōura: a feeding ground for the whales made abundant by a canyon holding nutrients from the deep sea, just offshore. The sun is descending as I fly over Kā Tiritiri-o-te-moana, the Alps, but I face the east—towards Tauranga Moana, towards the islands of Sāmoa and Tonga. I face my own ancestral waters, too.

Before heading to Kaikōura, I need to come to know Ōtautahi. I gravitate to where I would in any unfamiliar place: its waters. The awa Ōtākaro flows through the city's parks, under its bridges, becoming swampy again on its way to the coast. This river was once full of pātiki, tuna, and other kai for Ngāi Tahu to gather seasonally; it was part of a network of trails that provided Māori with a safe access route through the swampy marshlands of Ōtautahi. I decide I will meet the Ōtākaro by following its path on hīkoi.

The hīkoi begins with my fingertips in the river and ends with my feet in the sea. A dip below the surface, the mirror of coming up for air.

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My first hīkoi is on one of those crisp blue and orange days, and pīwakawaka follow me along the route. I start at the intersection of Cambridge Terrace and Hereford Street, where the old public library and police station were. I read that they were built on the urupā for Puari Pā. As I walk, upstream, I pause at all of the plaques to see what they are commemorating. The river seems to have become a place for remembrance. Perhaps this is unsurprising for a city that has seen so much death in the past decade.

I read plaques about captains, the Christchurch Beautifying Association, a flour mill, European towns I've never heard of, influenza, sergeants, military services, the end of wars (some I know of, others I don't). One plaque explains that a kōhatu pounamu gifted by Te Rūnanga o Makaawhio was placed here, at an important threshold, and that touching the greenstone connects you back to the land and all those who have been before. The kōhatu pounamu throws rainbows in the mist rising from it. I read notes left by loved ones at Oi Manawa, the Canterbury Earthquake National Memorial. Once I'm in the botanic gardens I read a plaque about a brown trout hatchery and check my direction against signposts. At this point I take a break—a lot can be said about a city that has to plant a “New Zealand garden”.

I enter the museum in search of a bathroom, but clearly I look lost so a guide hands me a map. She talks me through all the current exhibitions, pointing me to Edmund Hillary's boots and Kate Shephard's dress. I ask about galleries one and two; the ones she didn't mention. "Oh, the Māori exhibitions." I head there first, only to find I already know these galleries from *Treasures Left by Our Ancestors* (2016) by Ana Iti (Te Rarawa). I read the signs in the museum, too, about whalers and how Christchurch "was seen as the most English of all New Zealand cities". This was after the swamps were drained for a city to be built. I don't last long in the museum.

I follow the Ōtākaro all the way to its source. Past Waipapa, a place set aside by the Crown for Māori to meet and rest while travelling through Ōtautahi, such as in 1868 when 150 tangata whenua camped while making (ultimately unsuccessful) claims in the Native Land Court.¹ I read all the plaques, the information boards about colonial architecture—but I am interested in what these waters remember, too.

While spending several days following the Ōtākaro through the city on foot, I think about how to make art in places where you're manuhiri.

As well as the many plaques, I come across Ngā Whāriki Manaaki, the woven mats of welcome alongside the river. The thirteen whāriki are stone pavers arranged into weaving patterns by Morehu Flutey-Henare (Ngāi Tahu, Rangitāne, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāpuhi Nui Tonu, Tainui, Ngāti Porou) and Reihana Tau Keith Parata (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Māmoe, Waitaha, Scottish). The signs read: "in sequence, they reference the whakamanuhiri process of welcome for all peoples visiting Christchurch and support the guiding principle of the rebuild for Ngāi Tahu, 'Kia atawhai ki te iwi', Care for your people." Unaware of the Whāriki Manaaki when I started my hīkoi along the river, I did not follow them sequentially. On my last day in Ōtautahi I return to the first whāriki to begin the process properly, as it had been set out for manuhiri.

My final hīkoi along the Ōtākaro is deep purples, greens, and auburn. The cloud will not lift today. Only thirteen potential photographs remain on my roll of film: one for each whāriki. At each of these woven-with-stone mats, I read the sign to understand which part of the whakamanuhiri process is being acknowledged and which patterns are used; I stay by the river awhile and I make one photograph.

To traverse whenua that holds as many layers as these islands do means I am constantly apprehensive about a 'misplaced foot'.² The more I learn the stories of my own whenua (and what I can of the places I visit), the more apprehensive I become. A misplaced foot is inevitable in a settler-colony that builds over bones and drains stories from the land in the hopes that we all forget their wrongdoings here.

It is with gratitude that I follow Ngā Whāriki Manaaki, the pathway laid out by Ngāi Tahu.

¹ 'Hagley Park', Christchurch City Libraries website, 2021: <https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/hagley-park/>

² A term recently used by my PhD supervisor, Layne Waerea. I use it in the context of stepping where one shouldn't, not with an intentional disregard for wāhi tapu or tikanga, but through being unaware.

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The first time I saw a whale was off the coast of Nova Scotia, lands of the Mi'kmaq overlaid with names carried from Scotland. I had travelled 28 hours on a train to reach the ocean from my temporary home of Toronto. I was awestruck by these unfamiliar cliffs, trees, and creatures, but beneath the delight remained a well of sadness.

This wasn't *my* ocean. As we looked out to a sea so expansive the horizon curved, something in the great stillness caught my partner's eye. Maybe it's incorrect to say I saw a whale, rather, I heard it. There was no spectacle, no majestic breach—just a few whales coming up for air, like stones skipping with vast intervals.

I wonder now if they had come to collect me. My return home was imminent, but around this time I became ready to *really* return home: to finally begin the journey to understand who I am and where I come from; to acknowledge and honour my ancestors of the moana. You see, it is not just the whales who, for generations upon generations, have followed these ancient oceanic pathways and formed webs of relations between fixed points. These are my ancestral legacies, too.

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Kaikōura is a long way from Nova Scotia. I travel by aeroplane and rental car this time. I was especially hoping I might get to meet a humpback on their way to Vava'u, their birthplace and that of my great-grandparents. It isn't long after setting out on *Te Ao Mārama*, a whale watching vessel owned by Ngāti Kurī, that we are sailing towards the first sperm whale, or parāoa. His name is Tiaki. We also meet Lazarus, Tiaki again, and Manu. They have all known these waters for at least as long as I've been alive. My fellow whale watchers and I are told you can tell who the whale is by the trailing edge of their tail: it starts off nearly straight, but acquires notches over the years. Tiaki, Lazarus, and Manu had been feeding on deep sea creatures in the Kaikōura canyon. They remain in the depths for around forty-five minutes at a time before surfacing to breathe. Most of their bodies stay beneath the swells as they inhale, exhale, inhale again for ten or so minutes. Then, more slowly than I expected, their tails lift. Water pours off the trailing edge, it flicks upwards, and they are gone.

Most people turn away from the railing now. But if you wait, you will see a smooth circle of water appear on the surface—a trace the parāoa left behind. I wish I could leap into the water, where I feel most at home, and follow them down the portal; I wish we could be eye to eye.

We didn't see any humpbacks that day, but that doesn't mean they weren't there—and it's not just the paikea I am interested in anyway. I hadn't seen a parāoa before, a great living and breathing body diving a thousand metres undersea, but I do know their bones. My great-great-grandfather, a Jewish man who eloped with my Sāmoan great-great-grandmother, collected several hundred taonga and measina across forty years while trading general goods around the South Pacific and Aotearoa. For a time, many of these taonga and measina adorned the walls of their family home, 'Oli Ula—big enough for ten children and visitors from the islands—in downtown Auckland. Shortly before my great-great-grandmother's death, most of the collection was gifted to the Dominion Museum. Some of the taonga and measina remained with the family or were returned to the Māori queen, Te Arikinui Dame Te Atairangikaahu, at Ngāruawāhia. My great-

grandfather, Samuel, was attempting to honour the spirit in which many of the taonga were gifted to his father by rangatira.

One of the taonga now held by Te Papa Tongarewa is a hoe parāoa, a paddle carved from the jawbone of a sperm whale. My family's story about the hoe is long and uncomfortable. This is not the place for that story, but part of my interest in whales emerges from a desire (or responsibility) to reconnect the taonga with its people. The legacies I have inherited through descending from settler-indigenous relationships are full of such responsibilities. I suspect this might be my life's work: feeling for tears in the fabric of historical relationships and finding ways to mend them.

Before I leave Kaikōura I drive out to the site of a former whaling station, Waiopuka. I had been told of a house built from whales. The pink house atop a hill is not what I had imagined: you wouldn't know its foundations were bone. Fyffe House is closed today, but I still look past the fence to scattered fragments of skeletons. I don't stay here very long either. After the wonder of seeing the parāoa that morning, I don't want to think of their oil lighting up Europe, or their vertebrae put together wrong and wearing the wrong flesh—the house of a Scotsman.

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I return to Ōtautahi, and to the Ōtākaro. I have already walked along the banks to where the awa rises—this time I drive out to where it becomes marshland once more. If you frame your eyes so that no buildings or cars peek through the grasses and trees, you can imagine Ōtautahi in the Before.

In truth, I am not all that familiar or comfortable with rivers. All of *my* rivers are on the other side of the world, and I am yet to meet them. But at some point the freshwater of the Ōtākaro merges with salt. It is when the pathway turns to sand, winding between tī kōuka and harakeke, and the smell of the ocean reaches me, that I know how to orient myself again.

The hīkoi begins with my fingertips in the river and ends with my feet in the sea.

Emily Parr (Ngāi Te Rangi, Moana, Pākehā) is an artist living in Tāmaki Makaurau. Her practice explores relationships between people, political frameworks, whenua, and moana. Her recent Master's research, on settler-indigenous relationships of Te Moananui-a-Kiwa, travels oceans and centuries, seeking stories in archives and waters on haerenga to three of her ancestral homelands, Tauranga Moana, Sāmoa, and Tonga. Emily works mostly in moving image. Alongside of this she has been making film photographs over the past seven years. Emily was the recipient of the 2019 Iris Fisher Scholarship and 2016 Tāmaki Estuary Art Award. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons) from Elam School of Fine Arts, a Master of Visual Arts, and is currently working towards a PhD, both through Auckland University of Technology.