

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

We Belong to No Soil

Nation and Narration in the Work of Emily
Perkins

Emily Tehrase White

2/25/2013

A thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

Emily Perkins' work exemplifies a shift in the way the nation is represented in New Zealand fiction. In place of the cultural nationalist acceptance that the writer should attend faithfully to the New Zealand referent and seek to define the nation we find doubt, uncertainty and resistance. This shift has been observed positively in some contemporary criticism, notably in Anna Jackson and Jane Stafford's *Floating Worlds* (2009). But other commentary, such as Patrick Evans' 2003 'Spectacular Babies' essay, is highly negative. There is a surprisingly small amount of critical attention dedicated to contemporary New Zealand writing. This thesis will offer some reasons for this lack of commentary and propose a framework within which Perkins' work can be analysed. It will also identify the ways in which Perkins' work refers to the nation and how this differs from the way in which the cultural nationalists referred to the nation. I argue that new critical modes are required to approach contemporary New Zealand writers like Perkins that reach behind the cultural nationalist influence. Accordingly, I position Perkins' way of representing New Zealandness alongside that of early writers Benjamin Farjeon and Katherine Mansfield, to show that a non-essentialised identity can be expressed in the text. The contemporary approach to this endeavour can be compared to what I call "pre-nationalist" writing, although early avoidances of the New Zealand referent were not as deliberate as they now are. I argue that like Katherine Mansfield, Perkins' textual relationship with New Zealand is metonymic rather than referential. Her writing conjures up New Zealand without generalising it or essentialising it. In this thesis, I address three of the primary ways that Perkins achieves this in her writing. Firstly, she addresses the meaning of place and its significance in the formation of subjectivity. Secondly, she deliberately avoids taking an overt political stance and use of the Māori referent. The absences in her work contrast with detailed attention to what is there, and so appear as a presence. In this sense her work depends largely on how the reader is able to interpret the absences and provide what is unsaid. Thirdly, her attention to New Zealandisms, linguistic idiosyncrasies and her use of taboo language refer to New Zealandness but simultaneously reveal self-consciousness. I argue that the diagnosis of New Zealand identity as 'floating', while useful, is problematic because it tends to have a

silencing effect on discussions of contemporary literature. Characterising New Zealand identity as 'floating' appears to signal the end of the conversation and to assume that because the literature cannot be categorised, it cannot be discussed either. This thesis will suggest alternative ways of addressing New Zealandness which open up, rather than close, new possible perspectives on contemporary New Zealand literature.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Mark Williams, who always made time for me and answered my questions, even when I showed up unexpectedly. Your honesty and encouragement gave me the confidence to do this. Thank you for still believing in me even when I stopped believing in myself. To Sophie and Aidan, for lending me your home, for understanding, for your extensive moral support, for your countless words of encouragement, and for making me tea and toast. I am truly blessed to have friends like you. To Milan, for telling me that you're proud, for reading on even when your eyes were sore, for wine in the graveyard, for three years in the lung, for late-night skype dates and for the laughter. To Eve, for always listening, for binge-drinking Saturdays, 90s dance-party Sundays, wine-day any-days, and for cat-day Fridays. To those whose homes I invaded over the past few months: Eve, Kirsty and Penny; Steph and Vijay; Kimaya and Donovan; and once again Aidan and Sophie: thank you. Your hospitality meant that I didn't have to sleep in my office - not even once. To Mum, thank you for always having paper and pens in the house, and for fostering my love of language. To Mum, Denny, and Sam, thank you for your encouragement, your company and for taking care of me while I reluctantly worked through the Christmas break. To my beautiful sister Jessie, thanks for looking after all of my stuff! To Dad and Alex, thank you for attending to my technology requirements. To Cookie, thank you for the stories, and to Nan, thank you for the books. Nyssa and Rachel: you are the best friends a nerdy girl like me could hope for. A special thanks to everybody else who listened to me, laughed with me, and believed in me. I truly am a fortunate individual to be surrounded by so many amazing people.

And to Dylan, your patience, unwavering love and constant support have not gone unnoticed. Thank you for making sure I took time out to love and laugh. You make it all worthwhile. This is for you.

Introduction

“The Vaseline Lens of Time”

I did not begin again I just began.

- Gertrude Stein

*

This thesis will consider what it means for an author to address nation and nationality without being nationalistic. To illustrate this phenomenon, I will discuss the ways in which Emily Perkins’ work indicates a post-national repositioning of focus in representing the nation. Her novels imply dissatisfaction with the obligation to think in terms of representations which define New Zealand culture. They suggest that value ascribed to New Zealandness, or the capacity to define New Zealanders based upon a predetermined set of criteria is out-dated and arbitrary in a contemporary context. Rather than blindly adhering to clearly delineated notions of New Zealand identity, Perkins’ work proposes that this identity is primarily characterised by doubt and uncertainty. If anything unites characters across her work it is the inescapable quality of uncertainty resulting in unsettledness. The nationalistic psyche is seen by Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort as ‘inconceivable and inexplicable without recourse to a certain measure of irrationality, emotionality, sentiment and unselfish dedication’ (xi). It is not surprising, then, that discussions about nationalism tend to revert to the intangible or the intuitive. In this thesis I will attempt to conceptualise New Zealand identity by examining what inspires a sense of nationalism for New Zealanders, and how

Perkins explores collective and individual states of uncertainty in her work while still avoiding conscription into a nationalistic enterprise.

Broadly speaking, Perkins' work can be seen to engage with a post-national subjectivity. However, she also registers the presence of a nationalist consciousness (its perceived antithesis), and in so doing collapses the binary. I refer to the post-national consciousness as one which is defined by cosmopolitanism, is globally influenced, and which rejects obligatory ties to nation. This is often set in contrast to the nationalist consciousness, which is defined by and reliant on the geographical parameters of the nation, and is often perceived as clearly delineated. These different subjectivities, both nationalist and post-national, appear in Perkins' novels. For example, Tom, an Englishman and the narrator of *Novel About My Wife* (2008), reveals the underlying nationalism of his consciousness when he tries to describe his parents but unknowingly describes himself:

[Ann] had chosen me, who for all my attempts at urbanity – here I went, collapsing time myself – was the child of this stolid respectable English couple, passing pickled walnuts around the table, so undoubting, so certain of the parameters of their universe, where normality began and ended. Anyone who lived outside of that zone was a freak, not that they would use that word. 'Different' was enough to imply distrust, contingency and doubt. (76)

The 'undoubting' certainty Tom describes here is set in contrast to his narratorial uncertainty about Ann. In this extract Tom also describes himself – he too is an individual who is 'certain of the parameters of [his] own universe, where normality began and ended'. Everything beyond those parameters is transformed into stereotypes. Tom aside (he is an Englishman and not a colonial after all), many of Perkins' characters are unsure – of themselves, of other people, and of their

purpose. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, Tom's perception of Ann as an individual who has abandoned her home country and the implications that he ascribes to this rejection suggest that he represents a nationalistic consciousness.

The distinction between a post-national and a nationalist consciousness is suggested by placing this example alongside Perkins' juxtaposition of what characterises town and city. In *The New Girl* (2001) when Hunter tells Miranda about his experience in the city, he says:

I'll tell you what surprised me. It surprised me that you can sit in some huge restaurant in the city without knowing anyone, nobody knowing you, but you don't feel out of place there. But here, say I go to the diner in town, I know everybody, and everybody knows me, and yet I don't feel I belong here, I feel I don't belong at all.'
(126)

The notion of belonging in anonymity is characteristic of city life and cosmopolitan spaces where difference is normal and it is easy to disappear amid the crowd. Hunter contrasts his city experience with the way he feels in his home town, where despite knowing everybody he feels as though he does not belong. His sense of unbelonging emerges from his notions of sameness and difference; he is unlike the other people in the town, which is a place associated in the novel with clearly defined parameters of normalcy, like the world of Tom's parents in *Novel About My Wife*.

The fact that both the nationalistic and the post-national consciousness are depicted and explored in Perkins' work indicates a departure from traditional frameworks of nation and nationhood in New Zealand literature. It is unlikely that New Zealand will ever be entirely beyond nationalism, or '[reach] the stage of dancing on the grave of nationalism itself (of *all* nationalisms)' (Newton 2003) because cultural nationalism was such a pivotal and defining part of our national consciousness. A

conceptual view of New Zealand identity in terms of contemporary literature instead necessitates the readiness to establish a position between the cultural nationalist and the post-national consciousness. It is possible to see the two not as rigid and competing opposites, but rather as permeable and colliding components of a contemporary identity. Each contributes to the others' definition: in short, New Zealand cannot be considered post-national without first having been considered a nation, and the cultural nationalists established some of the strongest images and references for that purpose. In *Novel About My Wife*, Tom's nemesis Simon says 'don't you think there's something unequivocal, to use your word, about being undead? You're neither one thing nor the other. Like a bat.' (99). The notion of being neither one thing nor the other is as pertinent in discussions about the post-national in New Zealand as it has been with regard to Katherine Mansfield as the little colonial 'discomposed' in Wellington and London.¹ While literary critics, and writers like Perkins, are gradually moving debates on from nationalism, creating a new conceptual framework does not require us to forget the cultural nationalists altogether but instead to envisage a way that they can become part, rather than the core, of a wider contemporary conversation.

As I will discuss in Chapter Two, it is impossible to conceive of identity in New Zealand literature and not consider the critical views of the cultural nationalists and the images of New Zealandness that they propagated. It is important to propose the possibility of a non-essentialised identity for Pākehā for the purposes of this discussion. James Meffan raises a valid concern when he marvels at the notion

that it is possible – sensible even – to talk of collective identity as persisting through time, even when we have no clear idea of what

¹ See Vincent O'Sullivan, 'Katherine Mansfield the New Zealand European', in Roger Robinson, ed., *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margins* (9-24).

the conditions of persistence are. Our largely unreflective use of collective identifiers – like Māori, European, Pākehā, Asian, New Zealander – any identifiers that have a history that crosses multiple generations (and, frequently, geographical locations), suggests that we generally assume the persistence of collective identity over time to be unproblematic. (14)

Meffan disagrees with the notion that a collective identity can be transmitted unchanged from generation to generation. This means that all definitions of national identity should be made with the knowledge that they will become outdated. It is important, however, to formulate those definitions as part of an ongoing dialectical process rather than as an end-point. The risk of too fixed a definition is that it can see literary trends as completely separate from one another, rather than as shaped by their oppositional relation to what came before and what will come after.

The consequence of not critically addressing the continuities of literary history as they occur in New Zealand has already been observed by Jane Stafford and Mark Williams who note ‘the critical eclipse of the colonial period’ (3) in their introduction to *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (2012). They argue that this ‘eclipse’ has resulted in a ‘general lack of knowledge of literary foundations [that presents] difficulties for late twentieth-century New Zealand novelists’ (4). Stafford and Williams’ observation suggests that it is important to understand literary trends in terms of their own period as well as through the lens of all that has happened since. As Dorothy learns in *The Forrests* (2012), ‘the older you get the more impossible it was to see through the Vaseline lens of time back into the past, your alternative lives, the ones you never now would lead’ (127). The problem with seeing each period as discrete is that any continuity is obscured, which results in forgetting. The relationship between

contemporary literature and colonial literature in New Zealand, like Dorothy's relationship with her past, necessitates that those 'alternative lives' are generated in relation to one another rather than in isolation where they might be lost in 'the Vaseline lens of time'. The on-going problems associated with this lack, not of a literary tradition, but of knowledge about it and critical attention to it, should be enough to prompt commentators to address what is happening now in our literature, but there is surprisingly little dedicated to contemporary literature in terms of commentary.² The implications of this absence will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Contemporary New Zealand authors cannot be categorised in the same way as the cultural nationalists could be. Theirs was a tradition that one was either involved with or excluded from. Now, New Zealand writers get international attention, but are not widely discussed in New Zealand's literary commentary. As Jane Stafford and Anna Jackson point out in their introduction to *Floating Worlds* (2009):

By and large, it was the cultural nationalists of the thirties that have attracted what critical discussion there is. The colonial period and the present have been largely left unexamined. The ground-breaking, distinctive fiction of the last fifteen years has not attracted critical commentary beyond initial reviews, despite its success with readers both local and international, and despite its attracting major awards both local and international.

I will discuss this notion in greater detail in Chapter Two, but it is an important point in terms of framing this thesis as a whole because it raises a number of urgent questions to do with the treatment of contemporary literature. Why is there so little written about it? Are contemporary authors nationalistic at all? Is it possible to

² See *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature Annual Bibliography* (2012). In studies on individual authors, published commentary is overwhelmingly dominated by work on Janet Frame, and there is very little attention directed towards contemporary authors.

refer to nation without being considered a cultural nationalist or a geographical determinist,³ and if so, how?

In terms of representations of identity, Perkins' work is primarily concerned with Pākehā. It is important to note the curious absence of the Māori referent in the work of a writer who tends to notice cultural specificity and who is writing at a time when New Zealand literature has been so conscious of Māori. Pākehā identity has a number of similarities to what James Clifford describes in *Diasporas* (1994). While settler culture cannot be defined as a diaspora because it does not meet all of Clifford's criteria, diaspora can contribute to an understanding of Pakeha identity. Pākehā are not a 'minority community' (Safran 1991: 83-4, cited in Clifford 304); they have come from a number of countries to New Zealand, rather than having come from one country to a number of 'peripheral' places (ibid). However, Pākehā do tend to 'maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland' (ibid), and their 'consciousness and solidarity are "importantly defined" by this continuing relationship with the homeland' (304-5). Lastly, while Pākehā do not collectively 'see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right' (304), a very common cultural experience characteristically involves a trip to Europe, often to be based in London to work and travel. The alternative Clifford offers to diaspora are 'assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the United States' (307), in which he claims 'immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only en route to a whole new home in a new place' (ibid). This is a definition which, even if true of the United States, does not seem to apply to Pākehā. Pākehā may be distinguished in part from immigrants as their ancestors

³ A term used negatively by Francis Pound in describing attention to the New Zealand landscape in painting. He says 'the land is here, the [geographical determinism] theory says, so it gets painted. The theory can easily be refuted, however, by one simple, factual observation: the Maori, before the European came, did not paint landscape.' (1983: 268)

tend to be regarded as settlers—making their role one that is formative rather than assimilationist. With regard to Māori who were already living in New Zealand, this notion has its own problems. The fact is that coming from elsewhere and settling in a new place is accompanied by on-going and complex cultural baggage. In spite of the construction of a more self-accepting Pākehā identity, Pākehā experience as it is depicted by Perkins is one of extended ‘looking back’, of perpetual longing for ‘over there’, but not frequently of looking around here. This raises the question: why are Pākehā so unsettled?

The immigrant experience of settlers is a very different one to the diasporic experience of recent immigrants. Those who are first-generation immigrants look to a ‘home’ which is a physical space well-established in their memories. Conversely, subsequent generations of settlers tend to look to Britain as a Mother Country, yet the place their ancestors left is a different place again to the necessarily changed one which occupies that same geographical space now. It is the former which tends to be established in their collective ‘memories’ as home, but in reality that home is often not a place they have been to or know the truth of. This home exists imaginatively. In *The New Girl*, one of the protagonists, Julia, displays a fixation on magical or imaginary spaces. This can be likened to the sort of diasporic or imaginary looking back explained above. Julia describes a childhood memory:

The park. In the gauzy half-light it seemed much bigger than it really was, with paths leading off behind trees and shadowed corners that might conceal another, unknown, garden. When she was younger Julia used to imagine there was a whole other park waiting to be discovered, that she had only to touch the right bit of bark at the right time and a mirror of green skies and crystal fountains would open, shimmering before her. She tried: she tapped the trees, she gave knowing looks to a certain rock, she

didn't pick the clover flowers. But the world remained hidden, locked. And as soon as the park became a place to hang out in the long after-school evenings, as soon as she had seen her first glue-bag and had her first wine-cooler headache and heard the term finger-fucking, the imaginary park vanished from her mind without even one last flare of magic light. (19)

Julia presumes that there is some sort of code involved in unlocking the 'imaginary park' that exists somewhere beyond the real park. What occurs here is the conflation of childhood imagination with that more generalised desire to go elsewhere, or the feeling of entrapment and the disappointment of realising that the place Julia had imagined does not actually exist. Instead, that same physical location takes on other, more sinister meanings. The magic of the park disintegrates alongside the loss of innocence or the gaining of new knowledge associated with the place. Julia feels the same disappointment again later in the novel when she moves to the city, a space in which she imaginatively plays out an entire reality for herself which never comes to fruition. The city she imagines before she arrives in it is not dissimilar to what one might find in a tourist brochure or in a Hollywood film:

As Julia walked home, leaving Miranda outside the old travel agent's on the way, she imagined a life in the city. Her city was made out of images from cinema and the possibilities implied by place names. First Avenue, Memorial Drive, Riverside Lane, Grand Square. The sheer scale conjured by the words dwarfed her. If only she had a passport to that world, everything would be different. She would never be stuck here in this backwater, knowing nothing and looking like she knew nothing too. She would go to poetry readings and art galleries and museums, not the Sugar 'n' Fucking Spice club. She longed for the movement, the energy in the city; the jewelled car lights and charcoal evenings, the construction sites and police sirens and the smells of coffee and hot tar. Her skin itched with it, she felt the need to get out surge within her like adrenalin, and she broke into a run. 'Do you know what you want?' Miranda had asked them, Yes, thought Julia now, in time with her pounding feet, yes I do, yes I do.' (44)

Julia's idea of the city, as the narrator points out, derives partly from familiar media images, and partly from what is 'implied by place names'. The meanings of these are entirely subjective. Places can take on meanings depending on the individual or group's experiences with them. One place might simultaneously be home to some people, an imagined utopia or new world to others, and a bleak and inescapable prison to others. New Zealand identity can be neither that of diaspora, which considers unsettlement in relation to elsewhere, nor assimilationism, which overcomes unsettlement by swallowing the other. The best way to characterise it is likely to be as unsettlement in relation to where one is. This takes into account the on-going psychological drag associated with one's ancestors having come from elsewhere to a place already inhabited.

Chapter One will discuss the ways in which Emily Perkins' novels fit into a wider conversation about the significance of place in the formation of subjectivity, both individual and collective. The negotiations of physical and geographical space are central concerns in Perkins' novels as well as in her short story collection, *not her real name* (1996). New Zealand identity is one which has a complex relationship with land and geographical space, and this feeds into the self-representations of New Zealanders. New Zealand writing is infused with the politics of place, whether actively or passively, and in Perkins' work place or location is closely tied with the psychology of the characters. The meaning of a place is always subjective. It consists of experience and memory, which constitute narratives. Characters in Perkins' novels are able to imaginatively relocate themselves and create alternative narratives for their lives. This chapter also explores the disjunction between

Pākehā and Māori histories of the land, and the implications of these disparate and largely incompatible narratives.

Chapter Two establishes Perkins thematically and historically within New Zealand literature. When viewed together, a number of trends and recurrent themes are visible, which show continuity across generations. Further, they show the basis of attitudes which persist today but seem to have no place in a contemporary context. This chapter argues that the colonial period, which set the tone for New Zealand literature and identity, was one that was already unstable and uncertain. Early colonial attitudes are evident in the work of B.L. Farjeon, the earliest writer reviewed in this chapter, in his 1866 novel *Grif*. I will discuss the projection of his colonial attitude and its implications, as well as the relationship between himself, Katherine Mansfield, and Emily Perkins. In particular, the work of these three writers reveals an interaction between England, Australia, and New Zealand. Each embodies a type of global identity which is complicated by New Zealand's tendency to reach after a definition of itself. There are many points of difference between Mansfield and Perkins; however a comparison between the two shows the ways in which the Pākehā consciousness retains a continuous sense of displacement. This chapter will also attempt to account for the lack of commentary about contemporary literature and propose some reasons for its absence, using a comparison between the critical reception of a Perkins' work and *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones, one of her contemporaries. I suggest that the reluctance to critically address contemporary literature is also a symptom of the colonial hangover.

Chapter Three explores the metonymic function of language, accent and linguistic idiosyncrasies. The way in which individuals speak and their choice of words is inextricably linked to their subjectivities. A person's speech not only reveals

particular truths about them to others, but it also reflects the way in which they see themselves. Language and linguistic oddities are often emphasised in Perkins' work. When something is particularly 'New Zealand', if it escapes the ear of the characters in the book, it does not escape the narrator. Attention to a New Zealand readers' response to such occurrences will show that Perkins presents New Zealandness linguistically in a way that makes it recognisable to New Zealanders. Perhaps just as importantly, she depicts the way that New Zealand speech sounds to non-New Zealanders. This addresses the overwhelming sense of self-consciousness many New Zealanders feel about their own accent and the way that they speak in comparison to foreign accents.

In all three chapters, I will discuss the ways in which Perkins' work can contribute to discussions about New Zealand culture and Pākehā identity that reframe the self/other relationship between Māori and Pākehā. Stylistically, Perkins' writing tends to notice all kinds of seemingly inconsequential details, so the deliberate avoidance of the Māori component of New Zealand culture certainly deserves attention. I will consider the absence of the Māori referent in relation to all three areas of analysis.

CHAPTER I

Smoke at Anchor: The Meaning of Place

*

Part 1: Here

Three years after immigrating to Auckland from New York, the ten-year-old protagonist of Emily Perkins' 2012 novel *The Forrests* wonders:

What did Manhattan mean? She could only remember living here, now, though she and Eve at night in bed told stories of that alternative family, the ones who never left, living out their days in a sparkle of fairy lights and pine boughs, glittering ice powder spraying from their skates as they twirled and twirled around that legendary rink. (8)

Dorothy's question about the meaning of Manhattan, a place she once inhabited but can no longer remember, might be considered in light of what Stephen Turner calls '*colonial being*—a mode of being in a place which is discontinuous with its past (the past of place). Colonial being is the unstable ground of a history that can only be fantasized as a whole' (2002: 40). In the context of *The Forrests*, the notion of colonial being is updated to a postcolonial situation in which place remains disconnected from the past. Dorothy's question as to what Manhattan means acknowledges that meaning, location and memory are inextricably tied, and hints at the complex and shifting role of geographical space in the formation of individual subjectivity. As Ian Wedde points out in his introduction to the 1985

Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse, 'location [...] not just in terms of place, but in the fullest cultural sense, is the consummation of a sense of relation' (26). Turner argues that 'colonial being' highlights historical discontinuities, contributing to an individual or group's on-going sense of displacement. To Dorothy, Manhattan means its difference and distance from Auckland, but it also means that in leaving she has herself become different and must set about defining the self in contrast to changed understandings of otherness in the new place. Like the settler whose life in the new place is always parallel to the life that might have been lived in the old one, Dorothy considers not only the self in its current location but also 'the ones who never left' (8), imagining that there exists an 'alternative family' (8) occupying a space in Manhattan in the Forrests' absence. The registration, memory, and representation of space are important, but so too is the consideration of what happens to personally significant spaces when one is not in them. The former place exists in its real, changed but inaccessible present and its imaginative, frozen but accessible past. For Dorothy they exist in the guise of a memory, which freezes a particular version of that place in time that she imagines is specific to her experience.

Dorothy's conception of a marooned self who still exists in Manhattan draws attention to her mobile and uncertain subjectivity. Not only does she wonder who she might have been had she remained in the former place, she also acknowledges that the current self is different for being in the current place. The representation she gives of Manhattan is an iconic one—ice-skating at the Rockefeller Centre—which is not dependent so much upon personal or subjective memories as on collective associations of place which have been mediated by familiar imagery. While Manhattan occupies a space in Dorothy's imagination, and likewise her

alternative self occupies a space there, Dorothy's misremembering of Manhattan shows that popular imagery has imposed upon and changed her memory. Registering the uncertainty of Dorothy's subjectivity in Auckland, these constructions of place and self reveal that the shift from one place to another involves an act of creating a new self without erasing the former self. As an older woman in *The Forrests*, Dorothy muses that 'she had been told that there was no such thing as fate, and no stories other than the ones they invented. Maybe she had invented herself into this place' (201-2). Dorothy is aware that she plays an active role in the construction of her own identity, and also that this construction is created in direct response to her environment. Her identity exists in relation to two environments, and this is reflected in the sense of splitting she experiences between New Zealand and Manhattan.

The Forrest family's arrival in New Zealand inevitably recalls that of early settlers and the novel imaginatively revisits several aspects of settler experience. Even the title of the novel and its green cover depicting children playing in a field evokes an early obsession with the land and nature—characteristics of New Zealand which were thought to have set it apart from the home countries of settlers. Despite being entitled 'Home' and thereby denoting a single location, Chapter One depicts three spaces that are all significant to the family: Westmere, Auckland, where the children feel they do not fit in but to which they eventually return; Manhattan, where they have come from and where Dorothy's father Frank returns for a spell; and the 'wimmin's commune', where the girls feel most at home, but where their older brother Michael is sexually abused by one of the women. Early in the narrative, then, 'home' is constructed as a shifting concept, and the notion that it

can be associated with a number of emotional states beyond a sense of belonging is shown to be a genuine aspect of the Forrests' experience.

The Forrests recalls settler experience by way of movement to, through and away from places (Manhattan, Westmere, the 'wimmin's commune') and the way in which the characters interact with those places. Later on in the narrative Frank, Dorothy's mother Lee and her younger sister Ruth, who 'had always longed for that place she could not remember' (66), return to the United States while Dorothy, Eve and their older brother Michael remain in New Zealand. When Eve is hospitalised following a serious accident on her bicycle, her parents and Ruth return to visit. While Dorothy drives them from the airport to their hotel,

Lee murmured from the back seat in a fully American accent about the changes to the motorway, the new bridges, the buildings in the hazily approaching city that had never been there before. The rear-view mirror presented a slim rectangle of her swept-back ash-blond hair, the sensitive indents on her temples more pronounced with age. 'Oh look,' she pointed at the new Sky Tower when they reached the city. 'It's like something from the future.' (140)

Frank and Lee's move to the US has changed them, but in their absence Auckland has also been transformed. This transformation is registered in Lee's astonishment at the difference. When she says that the Sky Tower is 'like something from the future', the future she really means is the one which lay ahead of them before they left—a future that is now the present. The Forrest family's revisiting of old locations is suggestive of diasporic return to the old country, in which they are also involved in a process of remembering and forgetting. While Ruth is in Auckland she returns to the street they grew up on as children: 'Later [Ruth] borrowed Nathan's car to explore the old neighbourhood, look at the family house, a thing that Dorothy never did. 'Visiting Mars,' Dot said.' (145). Dorothy, who has

remained in Auckland while the changes that the others notice have occurred, finds the notion of visiting the old family home to be unremarkable, something that she herself never does. When Ruth returns from her tour and Dorothy asks her how it was, her one response is ‘smaller’ (147). The way that these characters see place therefore is closely related to their own experience with the place in question and their proximity to it. They are made to recognise that their notions about what certain places mean tend to rely on frozen versions of those places, but that the places themselves continue to be transformed in their absence.

Notably, the Forrests’ move takes place in the 1960s which locates their arrival in historical proximity to a time of mass migration to New Zealand. The move takes place at a time when migration had isolating consequences beyond geographical distance. The Forrest children appear to be aware of their own displacement, but it is an internalised displacement rather than one arrived at through comparison with external conditions or characters. Perkins’ focus in *The Forrests* on the family’s personal relationships and the minute details of their everyday lives suggests their discomfort with their belonging in the broader context of New Zealand. In this way they once again recall settler experience as something that continues beyond the colonial period. As Jane Stafford and Mark Williams point out in their introduction to *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (2012),

[f]or the settlers, authoring place becomes more difficult once you have unloaded your piano and your copies of Ossian and Wordsworth on the beach and you look around. The process has, from the outset, been couched in terms of difficulty and deferment. New Zealand’s first major anthology, *New Zealand Verse* (1906), edited by Christchurch journalist W.F. Alexander and lawyer A.E Currie, saw a need for a national literature but felt its production was ‘a task that would demand delicate walking’. Allen Curnow in the mid-twentieth century recognised this difficulty, and the inching progress towards the necessary

invention of place. In 1945 he wrote: “Strictly speaking, New Zealand doesn’t exist yet, though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases. It remains to be created—should I say invented—by writers, musicians, artists, architects, publishers; even a politician might help—and how many generations does that take?” National invention, then, requires a self-assurance that [...] has yet to be fully realised. (2)

They go on to emphasise that writing prior to the late nineteenth century did not tend to ‘see New Zealand as a nation or identify with New Zealand nationality’ (3). The process of inventing nationalism, as Stafford and Williams acknowledge, necessitates a confidence and strength of identity that is found to be lacking in New Zealand culture even now, not least because its absence has been reproduced from one generation to the next. In *The Forrests*, the general avoidance of external conditions in favour of the characters’ relationships, emotions and internal experiences implies their sense of displacement is an enduring aspect of their lives.

With its attention to place and the startling absence of Māori and bicultural discourse which has been so dominant in New Zealand since she first gained recognition, Perkins’ writing appears to be participating in a form of willed innocence. Perkins does not overtly politicise the Forrests’ experience as immigrants. She registers their displacement, but she does not name it or make explicit what it is symptomatic of. Rather, her texts open up access to wider discussions with what is suggested by the absence of an overt political stance. Like Ian Wedde’s 1985 description of Bill Manhire’s poetry, Perkins’ texts also operate via ‘a natural gearing together of poem [or novel], language, and context, including the ironically absent context’ (26). Any reference to biculturalism or the wider societal and political upheaval that took place in New Zealand within *The Forrests*’ timeframe is entirely absent. It is important to consider what this

avoidance could mean in Perkins' work. In their introduction to *Culturalisms*, Diana Brydon, James Meffan and Mark Williams observe that in New Zealand

the suspicion remains that current respect for Māori exemption from contemporary cultural integration may derive less from genuine respect than from the belief that their presence gives the nation a claim to a distinction it otherwise lacks. (11)

This is a familiar argument and while difficult to quantify, it is one that raises a fundamental issue which lies at the core of any discussion about New Zealand identity: the anxiety that, aside from Māori culture and cultural practices, New Zealand possesses nothing to make it truly distinct from Britain. Brydon, et al argue that this anxiety results in a tendency to intentionally freeze Māori culture, to keep it firmly planted in the past. If being of New Zealand involves an understanding and appreciation of traditional Māori culture and customs, then by association it also has a history and features that make it distinct from Britain and which precede the arrival of Pākehā.

Rather than address the presence of two distinct cultures in New Zealand, Perkins has chosen—and it is a conscious decision—to engage with New Zealand culture by registering the displacement of Pākehā. John Newton shows that even the identifiers of cultural groups within New Zealand have been largely problematic when he points out that the very word 'Pākehā' carries with it a host of associated or implied meanings not necessarily intended by the user:

To call ourselves Pākehā is to name ourselves in the Māori language: to accept an identity which defines us in terms of our difference from the Tangata Whenua. It is this recognition which our settler nationalism is determined to avoid; it defines itself instead against the otherness of Britain, and works around its otherness *here* in whatever ways it can, principally through the alibi of landscape. (12-13)

Newton highlights a significant and fundamental truth about New Zealand Pākehā identity. The history of settler culture is focused primarily on its relationship with the land, on the rendering of something within the geographical space of New Zealand that one can lay claim to. The land in this sense becomes an ‘alibi’, a way of avoiding framing an identity in relation to Māori. As Newton points out in the same article, William Pember Reeves’ poetic contention that settlers ‘stand where none before have stood/ And braving tempest, drought and flood/ fight Nature for a home’⁴ excludes Māori from the narrative of settler occupation in favour of attention to the land and the elements (9). He goes on to say that in this case, and in the minds of a later generation of cultural nationalists,

[t]he history of struggle between Māori and Pākehā is displaced by the myth of Pākehā struggle with the land, a struggle which is a ‘myth’, not because it never happened, but because of what it helps the mythologist not to see. (9)

This argument sees the task of the cultural nationalists and their attention to place as one which displaces and detracts from the true history of that place, serving to obscure the reality that there was already a group of people ‘standing upright here’.⁵ The physical space that constitutes New Zealand relates, therefore, to the identity of the people who currently populate it as well as to the different histories it evokes. Perkins’ work might be seen as implicated in the act of mythologizing settlement. The absence of bicultural discourse in her work is also consciously the absence of a history, disclosing a gap in the Pākehā narrative of settlement. In this sense it is a calculated narrative act in response to settler mythologizing and forgetting.

⁴ William Pember Reeves, ‘A Colonist in His Garden’. (Bornholdt et al, *New Zealand Poetry* p.497)

⁵ Allen Curnow, ‘The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum’. (Bornholdt et al, *New Zealand Poetry* p.400)

Returning to Stephen Turner's concept of 'colonial being', the characters in *The Forrests* embody 'colonial being' in the sense that they engage with place, and the meaning of place, only by reference to their own personal or familial histories. In part this is due to the fact that they are unable to fully know the histories of the places they inhabit, but it also requires a wilful act of innocence. Turner argues that

[t]he corrosive effect of settler irony is melancholy abjection, alternately the madness of a moral abyss. As if to say, do not look too deeply into settlement: you will lose all sense of yourself, all dignity and purpose. (49)

Frank, Lee and Ruth's return to Auckland after several years back in the US and their response to the new environment draws attention to the consequences of seeing place and meaning as a continuous thread. A place will change while one is not in it, and this change affects meaning whether it is particular to the individual or not. The change signals a break in the narrative of these three characters' relationship with the place; a discontinuity that has nothing to do with the place itself but rather the meaning which they, having been absent, ascribe to it. There are no 'alternative selves' who have remained in Auckland, just other members of the family whose presence there only serves to emphasise this discontinuity.

The Forrests' relationship with place, particularly in New Zealand, is made even more complex by their movement to and from elsewhere. Yet this complexity and movement recall settler experience, and re-narrativise settlement in order to show the ways in which settler relationships with place are both personally and ideologically fraught. Explicit Māori and bicultural narratives are absent in *The Forrests*, but at the same time, the novel deals with the details of the characters' everyday lives and their relationships with, or the ways in which they are dislocated from, particular places. In this way the novel mirrors the absence of

Māori history in the settler narrative in favour of a personal struggle with the place and land. Because this involves a process of noticing details, it becomes clear that something is absent, and in this way *The Forrests* also stages the forgetting of Māori priority or presence; the acts of dispossession that made the settled world possible. This appears as an active absence: resting on the relationship between what has been forgotten and what is noticed. In this sense *The Forrests* is a story less concerned with what it means to belong in a place and rather more with the notion that the role of geographical space in the formation of individual subjectivity is a complex and changing one.

Part II: Floating Between

When Frank Sargeson in a 1948 radio broadcast described Katherine Mansfield dismissively as being ‘in a state of suspension between two hemispheres’ (1948: 32), he unknowingly expressed a fundamental truth about New Zealand literature: that the colonial legacy means that suspension between worlds is fundamental to the Pākehā condition. This state of suspension is visible in the work of Emily Perkins. Sargeson saw suspension as a negative quality of Mansfield’s subjectivity and work, arguing that writers need to attach themselves to a particular literary tradition and to a specific place. In the context of the collective motivation of the cultural nationalists of the 1930s to construct a genuine national literature in New Zealand, Sargeson found Mansfield’s state of suspension to be highly problematic. In his address, he uses the word ‘suspension’ synonymously with ‘freedom’, yet the two words have clearly different meanings. ‘Suspension’ means to be hanging above something. It denotes detachment but also indicates a stable structure which

the subject is suspended from. Alternatively to be suspended can mean to be postponed or excluded. These alternative meanings deserve recognition in respect of Sargeson's argument because it is possible to read Katherine Mansfield as being suspended between hemispheres in the sense of all three definitions. 'Freedom' could include a state of suspension but has a broader meaning of complete detachment. Oddly prescient, this slippage metaphorically indicates the position in which Pākehā New Zealanders now find themselves. It also highlights the significance of place as it applies to the cultural nationalist tradition to which Sargeson contributed and to New Zealand literature more broadly. If we are to speak of Pākehā identity as characterised by metaphorical suspension then this interpretation asks: precisely in what sense is it suspended?

While it may seem heavy-handed, Sargeson's criticism of Mansfield is not entirely unreasonable. The process of narrativising is inherently a political one precisely because of the power it has to construct and maintain particular realities. For the cultural nationalists, inventing nation occurred partly in writing nation. What made their task such an urgent one was the need to reject a sentimental connection with Britain that had sustained the colonial narrative of 'Māoriland'. This rejection of what they considered a pseudo-nationalism founded on false premises and fixed to borrowed and inauthentic markers of identity led to their own essentialised articulation of nation and nationality. As Stuart Murray argues in his study of the cultural nationalist movement, *Never a Soul at Home* (1998), this can be explained in part by the fact that 'the need for early self-definitions, the need to get culture on the page, is one that invites the use of essences' (249). Their strict attention to place and desire to break associations with Britain served ultimately to mask New

Zealand's histories, both of colonial migration and of prior Māori possession, and this has contributed to the on-going problems associated with the settler narrative.

The cultural nationalist tradition in New Zealand is one which resents writers who try to separate themselves from loyalty to a particular place and strives instead for a rootedness specific to this place. This attitude endures fiercely among New Zealanders even today. It is present in much of the criticism directed at internationally recognised artists, writers and musicians—the view that artistic success gains legitimacy and value in relation to how it reflects or represents New Zealandness. More will be said about this in specific relation to New Zealand literature in Chapter Two. Above all, the cultural nationalists are representatives of a culture set adrift. The prevalent imagery of islands, distance and sea-travel in their writing implies that for all their efforts to ground Pākehā identity, what they truly revealed was the fact of the nation's fundamental suspension. Sargeson's notion of suspension forms part of the skeleton of a conceptual framework that can be used to discuss Emily Perkins' work in the context of Pākehā identity.

In Perkins' work, the notion of suspension often manifests itself in delocalised settings or the depiction of transition between places where characters experience unsettledness or an unwillingness to interact with place on a meaningful level. Being in a state of transition between places is explored in Perkins' short story *A place where no one knows your face* (1996). The unsettlement produced by this state of transition is evident in the title—the 'place' can be neither home nor the desired destination. The only place depicted in any detail by the narrator in this story, and the place in which the characters spend most of their time, is inside a car on a family trip. Because the characters depicted in this story comprise a family, it is safe to assume that everybody in that particular 'place' knows one another's

face. While the family have come from Wellington, it is unclear where they are at any particular moment or where they are heading. The place described in the title, then, is likely to be all of the places beyond the confines of their vehicle as they move through and between spaces.

The sense of dislocation everywhere is a repeated motif in Perkins' fiction. In *The New Girl* (2001), the narrative is given no specific setting, only starkly contrasting depictions of small town and city in a deliberate effort to delocalise the setting. A seasonal clue suggests that it is set in the Northern hemisphere, but this stands out in curious singularity against a concentrated effort to avoid the specificity of place. It would be difficult to explore the difference between small towns and big cities were they given specific locations because those places have meanings of their own beyond being distinct from one another as social environments. In other words, Perkins wants them to be generic towns and cities, rather than specific ones. The delocalisation of setting in *The New Girl* is a way of universalising the experiences depicted, of making the town and city particular as types of places rather than specific locations. This absence is contrasted in Perkins' other works with detailed attention to designated place, such as to Wellington in *Not her real name* (1996) and to London in *Novel About My Wife* (2008). In these novels, specific places are figured as having the status of fictional characters, and can be seen to develop and contribute to the personalities of the protagonists in some way.

Sargeson's main point of contention with Mansfield's work was his belief that her state of suspension got in the way of her ability to invent characters (32). Yet both Mansfield and Perkins pay particular attention to the development of their characters, whose own various states of suspension link them closely to Pākehā and/or settler identity. A more detailed comparison between Perkins and Mansfield

will be made in Chapter Two. In Perkins' first novel *Leave Before You Go* (1998), many of the central characters and the people who surround them are unable to be settled, and indeed are uncomfortable with the idea of being settled. Sargeson's 'state of suspension' as a general condition of unsettlement helps us see these characters as symptomatic of that condition and thus more realistic. Kate, a New Zealander and one of two protagonists, well before describing Auckland (the place in which she currently resides) projects herself back to Indonesia (a place where she has previously travelled):

On the lumpy spare bed at Josh and Lucy's Kate dreams of Indonesia again. She's been back well over a year, nearly two, but the flowers and the animals still appear every now and then in the night, vivid as carnival masks. Indonesia. The plan had been to get away from Auckland. To get as far away as possible, possibly for ever. Kate would lie staring at her ceiling and see projected onto it a horizon, a blue sky, a flat sea. She felt her bare feet standing on bare earth. Behind her, a square white hut cast a cool shadow over her back. There was a broom in her hand. She'd wander down to the market later and buy a fish for her lunch, spend the afternoon reading and in the evening walk along the rocky path to her job serving drinks to local fishermen in the taverna. In this way she would grow peaceful, and old, and she'd get a great tan. Back home everyone would say, What happened to Kate? Has anyone heard from her? It seems she's just disappeared. The whole thing rested on the fact that her absence would be noticed, that somehow by disappearing she would remain even more present in people's minds. (21-22)

The way that Kate imaginatively projects herself back to Indonesia is similar in sentiment to Dorothy's 'alternative family' in Manhattan. However, while Dorothy and Eve are said to 'tell stories of that alternative family, the ones who never left', Kate travels to Indonesia subconsciously, while dreaming. Kate is less actively involved in her journey because it occurs on a subconscious level; in a sense it is well beyond her control. Kate's subjectivity is also distinct from Dorothy's in that hers is a suspended one, characterised by in-betweenness and liminality while

Dorothy's is split. Despite Kate's imagined idealised existence in an exotic place, however, 'the whole thing rest[s] on' her absence from New Zealand, and requires that others notice this absence. She is less concerned with being in a place than she is with her absence from a place.

Kate looks back nostalgically to Indonesia just as a recent immigrant might think about the home they have left behind. An unusual reversal occurs; she feels a greater sense of belonging in the foreign place than in New Zealand, her home. Indonesia is figured in *Leave Before You Go* to be a place of transition or transformation, in contrast to New Zealand which is seen by Kate as a space where change or transition does not occur. Indonesia is conversely imagined as a place which enables change through being associated with liminality:

Back then, before she went to Indonesia, she imagined she'd return a different person. She'd pledged to Lucy that she wasn't going to have any more casual sex. Sure, said Lucy. Yeah. Right. Then she decided she was going to take up a new activity: kick-boxing, or gardening, or swimming. Instead of any of these, she took up smoking. (26)

While New Zealand is figured as the location in the novel associated with stasis, the anti-climactic nature of Kate's resolve reveals that her idea of Indonesia as a place where she can change herself is entirely inside her head. No changes really occur; in fact when she returns, she does so in a worse state than when she left. Kate does not allow herself to be wholly present in New Zealand or Indonesia, rather she exists physically in one place and imaginatively in the other. Pākehā New Zealanders are inclined to interpret their sense of displacement as an almost diasporic longing for other places and it is this phenomenon that Kate's suspended subjectivity represents. Indonesia does not transform her, yet this fact does not alter her perception of its power. In accumulating signifiers of the meaning of

Indonesia and New Zealand, Kate removes the specificity of the places. The way that New Zealand is associated with stasis by Kate is contradicted by the experience of another character in the novel, Daniel, who arrives in New Zealand as a drug mule, and makes a pilgrimage of sorts to the South of the country. It is not the place itself, then, that has power, but the characters' interaction with it. 'The whole thing rest[s]', not on absence, but on active engagement and presence.

Regardless of what Sargeson intended by his criticism of Mansfield, his argument provides a useful context for an analysis of Emily Perkins' work. Many of her characters make sense in terms of suspension and liminality. In some cases, her characters' relationships with place are to do with their extent of physical or imaginative distance. Yet this is always figured as in-betweenness; one place is set against the other in order to show that these characters are never quite settled.

Part III: There

As I have discussed, the problems associated with Pākehā identity are complex enough when in New Zealand. The history of the land as well as the geographical isolation from the rest of the world creates an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and defining the self becomes an increasingly complex process. The representation of New Zealanders' popular reputation as travellers in the literature examined here requires the consideration of what happens to the Pākehā subjectivity when outside of New Zealand—in particular when in England, the foremost location to which New Zealanders travel. Reflecting this, Emily Perkins chose contemporary London as the setting for *Novel About My Wife*, and Daniel, one of the protagonists in *Leave Before You Go* is English. Being a New Zealander overseas involves the

sense that New Zealand has all but disappeared. Any mention of New Zealand in international media initiates a sudden rush of familiarity and nostalgia for home. Manhire's poem *Zoetropes* (1981) is about the rush of feeling experienced by expatriates when glimpsing a capital 'Z' outside of New Zealand, and the way that the letter itself refers to New Zealand even when the word that it's preceding has nothing to do with it. The subject, Manhire argues, sees that shape of the capital 'Z' and immediately thinks that it is something to do with home:

Zoetropes

A starting. Words which begin
with Z alarm the heart: the eye cuts down at once

then drifts across the page
to other disappointments.

*

Zenana: the women's apartments
in Indian or Persian houses.
Zero is naught, nothing,

nil – the quiet starting point
of any scale of measurement.

*

The land itself is only
smoke at anchor, drifting above

Antarctica's white flower,

tied by a thin red line

(5000 miles) to Valparaiso.

London 29.4.81

The strength of the reaction to the capital 'Z' described in the poem suggests that, at least in Manhire's mind, New Zealanders feel a strong affinity with their country and there is a definite sense of nation among, at the very least, expatriates. This is set in contrast to the way in which Perkins' characters tend to regard New Zealand as banal and unexciting. The way that the letter 'alarm[s] the heart' positions the subject as pleasantly startled by its familiar shape, and with their heart no less—the primary organ associated with feeling. The subject here experiences a similar sensation to that of Dorothy at the beginning of *The Forrests*, wondering about the meaning of a space when one is not in it. The disappearance of New Zealand as described by Manhire is necessary for its reappearance in a sudden rush of nostalgia.

In this poem, the description of New Zealand as 'land' which 'is only/ smoke at anchor, drifting above/ Antarctica's white flower' rearticulates a familiar image of New Zealand most popularly expressed by Katherine Mansfield in a notebook entry:

Oh, I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the old world. It must be mysterious, as though floating – it must take the breath. It must be 'one of those islands'... I shall tell everything, even of how the laundry basket

squeaked at '75' – but all must be told with a sense of mystery,
radiance, an afterglow...⁶

This notebook entry shows that New Zealand was perhaps just as obscured to Mansfield in 1916 as it was to Manhire in 1981. The persistent perception of New Zealand's disappearance in the context of larger and more dominant nations gives force to their shared image of New Zealand as a place that floats. Seen alongside Sargeson's 'suspended' subjectivity, the people, as well as the land, are floating. Yet in *Zoetropes*, the 'land' is also 'tied by a thin red line/ (5000 miles) to Valparaiso'. The line refers to the markings on a globe or atlas, and this shows a concern with geographical location and New Zealand's relativity to other places. The poem and the repeated motif of New Zealand as floating creates the sense that were it not 'tied' to Valparaiso, it might float away or disappear altogether. Perkins also draws attention to the way that New Zealanders inhabit place but are also separate from it. She negotiates the meaning of places by considering characters who are floating between them; who inhabit more than one place; or who leave an old self behind in an old place.

In addition to the concepts of colonial being and suspended subjectivity, Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort point out in *The Postnational Self* that 'people may feel that they have several belongings, several places and cultures they belong to and that determine their identity as multiple, nested, situational or fluid' (ix). Because this proposes belonging, place and culture to be interwoven, it makes sense to apply the idea of 'situational' identity to Perkins' characters. In *Novel About My Wife* and *Leave Before You Go* in particular, the physical placement of the characters in terms of geography locates them emotionally, psychologically, and narratively.

⁶ 22 January 1916, in *Notebooks*, ed. Margaret Scott, p.32.

Tom, the narrator of *Novel About My Wife*, is firmly placed in contemporary London, and it is evident that his attitudes and opinions derive at least in part from his being in, and of, this location. He frequently notices people of other races and details of other cultures, and considers the judgments he makes about them to be unproblematic. They are, after all, occupying space in his country, and to him this means that he is entitled to dictate what is normal and acceptable, and what is not.

For example, Tom depicts ‘a matted busker’ (71) who:

sat cross-legged at the foot of the escalator playing one of those long pipe things, a didgeridoo or, to give it its correct name, a didgeridon’t. The space filled with that objectionable low brewing sound, something rolling pointlessly round and round the bottom of a large bowl. A never-ending grumble from the bottom of the earth, maybe all right in the desert but not played by some smelly white boy here, it served the same purpose to my ears as the moan of bagpipes. I told Ann this theory – the revenge of the colonies, inflicting their music of complaint on the blameless English commuter. (71)

Tom’s objection is not merely to the noise of the instrument, but rather more specifically to the busker’s choice of space in which to play it. Tom sees this act as one of misplaced culture—a cultural act being performed out of context. In this, it takes on a meaning other to what it might mean in a different physical space.

Tom’s wife, Ann, has come to London from Australia. His narration confirms the suspicion that in Australia she was somebody else altogether and it seems that she has come to Australia to escape her past. Ann’s relocation as a means of self-reinvention is consistent with the way that Perkins’ characters are largely defined by where they are. Through Tom, the reader is led to conceive that Ann has two distinct sides to her character: the ‘English’ side, which she presents for the majority of time, and the Australian side which she occasionally and inadvertently reverts to, particularly in situations of stress. To Tom, Ann is no longer

recognisably Australian; she barely has a trace of an accent and Tom admits that 'she never talked about home and sometimes I wonder whether she did bloody well remember: it was as though she had been hit with the amnesia stick on landing at Heathrow' (25). Nationality is treated somewhat arbitrarily by Tom and with little attention to anything other than surface details. Tom sees immediately obvious things such as the absence of an accent as somehow indicative of the abandonment of home. He also points to memory as the primary indicator of belonging. If Ann doesn't remember home, and she doesn't speak of it, in Tom's mind she cannot have existed there. However, his description lacks anything specifically Australian. While he refers to Heathrow as a landmark and notes the absence of memory and stories he does not refer to anything particular to Australia. Tom desires culture to be recognisable and obvious, and when those of other nationalities do not perform in the way he expects, he reads this as acculturation to English norms and codes. Ann is only visible to the reader through Tom's viewing lens as narrator, and because for him she does not inhabit a particular culture, she becomes more enigmatic as the novel progresses.

Tom's difficulty, evident above, is Ann's lack of Australianness. It makes him uneasy that he is often fooled by how well she performs Englishness. The difficulty he faces in trying to read Ann is due in part to her incarnation of what Hedetoft and Hjort call a 'situational' identity, which in this case results in a general sense that she lacks a past. The reader is aware that there is more to Ann than an assimilation of Englishness, but is unable to see beyond Tom's almost diagnostic depiction of her as un-Australian. Nor are they able to see her situationally, because his ideas about her and his language get in the way of who she might have been in Australia. In this way, Perkins refuses to freeze a sense of

belonging, but rather explores the disjunction within settler identity. It is easy to assume that a New Zealander or Australian can be acculturated to Englishness, but in *Novel About My Wife* the reader is repeatedly made aware of precisely how insufficient such a stance is. By not parading Ann's difference but allowing it instead to simmer below the surface, always present but never making itself completely known, Perkins suggests the way that the settler experience has set the colonies apart from Britain.

The question of performing nationalism or culture when overseas is a highly relevant one, especially when the conversation is about identity. *Zoetropes* contains the suggestion that culture and nationalism are more frequently performed when overseas, as a result of a heightened sense of New Zealandness coupled with the anxiety that being away from New Zealand might cause one to lose the culture altogether. This is due, in part, to a combination of New Zealanders' ideas about themselves and what they believe other people consider their culture consists of. What emerges on the other side of the globe is a strange kind of cultural performativity, where New Zealanders become unbridled parodies of themselves in order to produce an exaggerated version of what New Zealand still means.

Biculturalism has dominated the arena of New Zealand political discourse since the beginning of Perkins' career, but she pointedly fails to offer it any recognition. The 'suspended' and 'situational' narrative to which Perkins might be considered a contributor has, in critical commentary at least, been overwhelmed by larger and more dominant, specific and essentialised narratives which produced strong articulations of what New Zealand identity might be, how it started and what it

needed to expel. Perkins' texts portray Pākehā displacement without reference to the problem of colonial history or the larger displacement of Māori. In this sense her depiction of Pākehā displacement embodies what Stephen Turner calls 'colonial being', a mode of being in a place when the past of that place is irreconcilable with one's subjectivity because it is a past that one cannot fully know. This foundational sense of displaced identity that originates 'here' feeds into Perkins' characters' relationships with the physical spaces of New Zealand and elsewhere, and those relationships can be categorised as suspended and situational.

CHAPTER II

Rickety Foundations: Emily Perkins and New Zealand's Literary History

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Katherine Mansfield's ambivalence towards nationalism is an attitude which reappears among contemporary writers. Mansfield has always been difficult to categorise: she was born in New Zealand, yet she longed for Britain; she went to Britain to write, yet a number of her early short stories were published in the Australian journal *The Native Companion*; she begins her writing in a colonial context around the same time that New Zealand ceased to officially be a colony, yet her writing tends to disregard early nationalistic notions in favour of style and technique. The inability to attach Mansfield to a definite and clearly delineated literary tradition conflicts with an enduring understanding of nationalism.⁷ This problem can be overcome to some extent by observing Mansfield's treatment of nation alongside contemporary literary trends. The relationship between Mansfield's writing and New Zealand is not one which depends upon the specific depiction of one place in contrast to another, but rather the way in which it metaphorically gestures toward the anxieties of the settler consciousness. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these anxieties are present in the work of Emily Perkins as well. As in Perkins' work, Mansfield's stories refer to nation without

⁷ Linda Hardy considers Katherine Mansfield's function as a founding figure of canonical New Zealand literature in her essay 'The Ghost of Katherine Mansfield' when she notes: 'Kathleen Beauchamp will mutate into Katherine Mansfield, will acquire, in 1988, a 'birthplace' of her own, and will perhaps assume a position, in relation to the literature of New Zealand, not unlike Shakespeare's for 'English' in general: a position of priority and pre-eminence. *If* it is possible to tell such a story, it is because the conception of 'national' literatures in English is articulated through two primary tropes: the figure of the rupture, and the scheme of repetition.' (417: 1989).

being nationalistic. If there is a sympathetic source for Perkins' approach to nation, it is to be found in Mansfield's work rather than in the writing of the cultural nationalists.

In this chapter I will show that a disinclination to essentialise New Zealand culture existed long before contemporary writers averted their gaze from cultural nationalism. I will also consider the relationship between some New Zealand texts that are positioned on either side of the unavoidable cultural nationalist divide. In order to do this, it is necessary to identify the attitudes that have contributed to such a viewpoint, from where they might have originated and the ways in which they recur. It is also necessary to outline some of the arguments that have been made in recent years in response to the contemporary disengagement from cultural nationalism. Perkins' writing, as I have shown, is in conversation with a tradition of writing in New Zealand that can be characterised as situational and fluid. Her stories emphasise the various ways in which people respond to being categorised according to a particular nationality or culture, the slippages within that categorisation and what they could mean. Confirming Stafford and Jackson's claim that there is little commentary available on contemporary writers, at the time of writing this thesis aside from book reviews and the occasional blog entry there is no developed critical discussion on Perkins' work.⁸

By way of framing this argument, it is worth revisiting Stafford and Jackson's observation in their introduction to *Floating Worlds*:

By and large, it was the cultural nationalists of the thirties that have attracted what critical discussion there is. The colonial period and the present have been largely left unexamined. The ground-breaking, distinctive fiction of the last fifteen years has

⁸ See *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature Annual Bibliography*, available online.

not attracted critical commentary beyond initial reviews, despite its success with readers both local and international, and despite its attracting major awards both local and international. (21)

Conversely, the frequently cited writing of the cultural nationalists rarely elicits critical attention beyond the shores of New Zealand. When it is not directly about cultural nationalism, what commentary there is on New Zealand literature still has a tendency to recall the ideas and motivations of the cultural nationalists, even if negatively. Arguably, New Zealanders have come to see theirs as a type of default perspective. As Stuart Murray puts it, ‘for the New Zealand critic of the 1940s, the yardsticks of quality were those of an essentialised notion of place—of landscape, of language use and of history’ (1998: 249). He argues that critical interest in the period continues because ‘the wider paradigm [is] the expression of the settler state. The manifestations of communal identity in nineteenth-century New Zealand thus form the background to the 1930s drive for exceptionalism, for the special nature of the local’ (248). In contrast, post-national literature could be seen as tending to have an ambivalent and non-essentialised relationship with nation, sometimes registered by what is left unsaid rather than by stern attention to the local. As Stafford and Jackson attest, ‘contemporary writers inhabit a culture that is willing to engage with the popular as well as the complex, to play one against the other’ (12). They do not see their task as one of collectively and strenuously defining the nation. Rather, ‘[contemporary] novels are at ease with place because place is not as pressing or real a notion as it has hitherto been’ (11). They also point out that ‘writers in the 2000s are more likely to see [retrieval of a pre-colonial past by way of literature] in terms of re-enactment, consciously false, noticeably different from the original’ (12). As Stephen Turner explains, ‘the role of reenactment is to convert the idea of a new country that exists in the collective

mind of second settlers into a country that has always existed as such' (2009: 245). Of course, this endeavour involves the reenactment in the present of settler arrival in the past, like the arrival of the Forrest family as discussed in Chapter One. Perkins' work can be seen to deliberately fictionalise the past.

Perhaps the absence of an essentialised notion of place is part of what deters commentators and critics from engaging in extended dialogue about contemporary literature. Where it exists, it usually revolves around postcolonial and indigenous discourse and is heavily theorised, often more concerned with postcolonial or post-national theory than with the writing itself.⁹ This sort of commentary will sometimes engage with particular literary trends but the primary focus is often cultural or political.

The response to the perceived loss of the New Zealand referent has often been negative. In 2003 an article appeared by Patrick Evans criticising new writing as flattened out and homogenised (9), particularly that which emerged out of Bill Manhire's creative writing course at Victoria University of Wellington. Evans observed that

[t]he gravitational pull of our writing towards prize-winning celebrity and the chimera of internationalism has also changed the way we read fiction. Reviewers seem increasingly to judge in terms of prizes and awards and the unexamined value systems writers need to express to win them. (9)

⁹ The essays in the recent publication *Culturalisms: New Literatures Review* generally focus more upon theorising social or cultural occurrences and trends than the application of such theories to contemporary literature. In the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, many articles that are to do with contemporary literature are the same as above, as is Simon During's *Landfall* essay 'Postmodernism or Postcolonialism'. Similarly, the titles listed under 'General Studies' in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature Annual Bibliography* (2012) reveal a strong inclination to focus on social theories and ethnographic studies. While extremely relevant, the problem here is that when it comes to contemporary literature, so much time is spent constructing frameworks for analysis that the analysis itself often does not seem to happen.

He argues that alongside a globalised publishing market, writing and reviewing is turned ‘into a strange kind of mating dance, in which the Artist writes a Novel which has the attributes the culture most valorises, and the reviewer writes a review which certifies that, indeed, those values are there’ (10). How this is in any way different to previous practices of publication and distribution Evans does not make clear, but he presents this argument as one of the drawbacks of contemporary authorship. This sort of argument doesn’t leave much room for debate: Evans makes an obvious observation, arguing for an alternative that doesn’t exist. Ultimately this has a silencing effect on what commentary could emerge about contemporary writing, because it surreptitiously supposes that there is nothing much to say about literature that is simply participating in a symbiotic ‘mating dance’ between authors and reviewers. Evans’ difficulty is mainly with the authors who come out of Bill Manhire’s creative writing course at the International Institute of Modern Letters and who have been published. He sees this as an elitist coup or takeover in New Zealand literature, and believes that the writing itself doesn’t seem to be about anything important. What he seems to consider is missing from this work is an overt engagement with the problems of postcoloniality. Arguably, however, Perkins registers such problems in a far more complex manner than Evans is prepared to allow. Far from a refusal of the political, the absence of such overt references in Perkins’ work indicates a shifting of gears, a way of drawing attention to what is absent by providing a context void of obvious bicultural gestures and political controversy.

Despite the evident shortfalls of his argument, Evans raises a question in this article which has become increasingly pertinent over the last several years when he asks: ‘if a novel is [...] set and populated, and it is published in, say, New York or

London, is it still a New Zealand novel?’ (11). Given this anxiety, perhaps the absence of commentary about contemporary novels has to do with the fact that many New Zealand writers now choose to set their fiction elsewhere, blurring the category of New Zealand fiction. How can one discuss ‘New Zealand novels’ if what constitutes one is so unclear? To contend with this, commentators tend to formulate their own criteria for inclusion and exclusion. At the beginning of her 1961 book *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1960*, Joan Stevens writes:

It was necessary to define what was to be considered, for my purpose, as a New Zealand novel. A decision on this matter is not as easy as it may seem, as will be obvious from the discussion in the opening chapter. Reluctantly I decided that the non-New Zealand fiction of New Zealand authors would be excluded. (7)

Based on this criterion, Emily Perkins’ *Novel About My Wife* would not have been counted as a ‘New Zealand novel’ in 1961 because it is set in London. The primary difficulty of critically discussing texts which are impossible to categorise is illustrated by the fact that Stevens actually declared it necessary to formulate a method of inclusion and exclusion ‘for [her] purpose’. Certainly many of the observations she makes in her book could employ evidence from ‘the non-New Zealand fiction of New Zealand authors’, but their inclusion in her study would only have blurred the distinction between New Zealand writing and non-New Zealand writing that she claimed was necessary. Literature that pre-dates the cultural nationalist movement, which I will call ‘pre-nationalist’ literature, and post-national literature, share this confusion. It is the main quality that distinguishes them from the writing of the cultural nationalists. There was no mistaking the place of cultural nationalist writing because it was so determinedly rooted in New Zealand—in the landscape, the language, and Pākehā sensibility.

The difficulty of pinpointing a stable attitude towards New Zealand identity is well articulated on the back cover of the *1985 Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* edited by Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen, when they assert: ‘we are not anywhere, but somewhere’. Instead of desperate reaching after identity and essentialising culture through a sense of obligation to write the nation, Wedde proposes that language ‘grow[s] ... into its location’ (23). It is important to also keep in mind Stuart Murray’s assertion that nation and nationality are concepts which are ‘easy to identify but difficult to analyse’ (1998: 9) because of their fundamental fluidity: as soon as a satisfactory definition is established, they have already moved beyond it. He explains that because ‘the nation is both physical and abstract, the boundaries that mark its limits also necessarily imply the existence of other nations. So the singularity of the national is never absolute, it is always part and parcel of a dialogue’ (9). The idea of the nation as both physical (a geographical space with a physical border, defined in New Zealand by oceans) and abstract (in the sense of Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities) expresses why writing the nation is such a contestable endeavour. In one sense its existence is physical, but in another subjective. These two constructions of place are fundamentally at odds with one another. When Murray mentions the ‘dialogue’ of the national, he is referring to an on-going dialogue between generations of voices that both contest and affirm a definition of New Zealand.

The primary link between pre- and post-nationalist writing is that they both in their own ways avoid conscription into a nationalistic enterprise. These writers do not avoid the New Zealand referent altogether, but unlike the cultural nationalists they

do not fetishise it.¹⁰ Pre-nationalist writing tends to revert to or import particular modes of writing (such as Victorian or Modernist) that are not chiefly concerned with nationalism, and post-national writing prompts a return to this approach. The difference is that contemporary writers are highly conscious of what they are omitting.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Stafford and Williams describe a ‘general lack of knowledge [among New Zealanders] of literary foundations [which] presented difficulties for late twentieth-century New Zealand novelists’ (4). This, they argue, is due to a ‘critical eclipse of the colonial period’ (3) peculiar to New Zealand. They point out that ‘in New Zealand, although amply attended to by historians, the colonial period was long avoided by literary scholars and anthologists, with the result that full knowledge of our literary past remains partial’ (3). As I discussed in Chapter One, these kinds of missing pieces have a powerful effect upon individual and groups’ sense of belonging and sense of themselves. The lack of critical commentary on contemporary fiction seems thus to be a case of history repeating; another ‘critical eclipse’ occurring in the present. This chapter sees contemporary novelists as emerging out of a rickety pre-nationalist foundation which generated little critical discussion to begin with.

Setting the Tone: Benjamin Farjeon and Katherine Mansfield

The work of Benjamin Farjeon (1838-1903) exemplifies early attitudes toward the purpose, publication and distribution of literary texts in New Zealand. In many

¹⁰ I refer to the comparison between Katherine Mansfield and Emily Perkins. ‘Māoriland’ writing was pre-cultural nationalist and tended to fetishise signs of New Zealandness but it is this type of incipient nationalism that was despised by the cultural nationalists.

ways, although much of what occurred in this respect was unavoidable owing to the time in which he was writing, his ambivalent attitude towards the nation, in particular, has survived. Farjeon arrived in New Zealand in 1861 and settled in Dunedin after having spent several years in Australia working in the goldfields.¹¹ He was involved as a journalist and later editor for the *Otago Daily Times*, New Zealand's first daily newspaper. Farjeon published *The Life and Times of Christopher Cogleton* in New Zealand in 1862-3, and three years later he wrote *Grif: A Story of Colonial Life*,¹² and the novel, set in Melbourne, was first published in Dunedin in 1866. Grif is a street urchin whose character embodies the collision between colonial Melbourne's marginalised lower class and its affluent upper-middle class. The novel observes class distinctions at the same time that it describes relationships between people from different social classes, their concerns, preoccupations and interactions. Because of its setting, *Grif* would have been excluded from Joan Stevens' study of the New Zealand novel, although she does mention it in passing (20). I have included it in my analysis because it was published in New Zealand and is an example of an author who can live in New Zealand and write about it without feeling the pressure to identify himself or his characters as New Zealanders. While this was of course an attitude specific to the time and the context in which Farjeon was writing, it bears a likeness to contemporary trends in New Zealand literature.

¹¹ All biographical information is from the article "Farjeon, Benjamin Leopold (1838-1903), *novelist and playwright*" in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004-12.

¹² *Grif* has been called both *A Story of Colonial Life* and *A Story of Australian Life*, almost interchangeably. Commentators tend to employ whichever title best suits their purpose. At the time of publication, it is likely that the two titles existed for packaging and marketing purposes. In Australia, it was published in 1870 as *A Story of Australian Life* despite the title of its Dunedin publication being *A Story of Colonial Life*. The interchangeable use of these two titles shows that the distinction between 'Australian' and 'Colonial' was not seen as particularly important, and further confirms the conflation of New Zealand and Australia in the minds of colonials.

Several things stand out as immediately significant about this book. Firstly, it is prefaced by a forward-looking statement from Farjeon, in which he anticipates the formation of national literatures and positions his own text as a contribution to that project:

The author leaves his book in the hands of his readers. In years to come, when the colonies have a literature of their own—a literature worthy of their material advancement—he will be glad to think that he has taken a humble part in its development.

While certainly this was a very common view of colonial writing—material progress has been achieved; it will take some time for cultural advancement to follow—echoes of this sentiment remain audible in audience response and critical attitudes to New Zealand literary endeavours. The assumption that the development of a literature inflected with the local would be a natural evolutionary progression over time is somewhat at odds with the cultural nationalists' position that it was to be a difficult task, strenuously achieved. Regardless, Farjeon acknowledges the formation of a national literature as a process of development, and seems to have believed in the seminal contribution of his own work towards such an endeavour. The words he has chosen (material advancement, development) form a language of progress that denotes the colonial attitude towards society more broadly, and which has persisted in various guises up to the present.

In terms of writing and publication, this attitude determines that literature should reflect not only the society of its author, but also the material advancement of that society. This narrative of progress is part of what Patrick Evans was condemning in his aforementioned essay. He sees the linking of literary production to other successful economic activities of the nation as somehow branded by deceptive and superficial imagery of nation. Farjeon's statement also insists that New Zealand

having 'a literature of [its] own' is important because it gauges the extent of the colony's success. However, given the Victorian style of *Grif*, Farjeon is still anticipating the literature to develop out of Britain's like a little colonial offshoot, rather than in and of itself. As will be seen further on in this chapter, the development of a New Zealand identity reflected in a literature distinct from Britain's would take significantly more time.

The second feature worth noting is that like many people of his time, Farjeon did not see the significant distance between New Zealand and Australia as a mark of 'national' difference, but saw the two separate land masses as components of a common colonial world. In 1866, the colonial connection between the two countries overwhelmed geographical distance. While *Grif* was indeed first published in Dunedin where Farjeon lived, the setting of the novel is colonial Melbourne, 'where poverty and vice struggle for breathing space, and where narrow lanes and filthy thoroughfares jostle each other, savagely' (*Grif* 1). Farjeon was perhaps not to know that the colony from which he was writing would later be part of a quite separate nation to the one in which his novel is set. *Grif* went on to be reprinted in London in 1870 and 1885, and was also published in New York. The novel is thus only a New Zealand novel in the sense that Farjeon was in New Zealand when he wrote it. He receives mention in Stevens' book, when she calls his writing 'goldfields fiction' (20) which is probably a most apt description because it resists national categories. She sees him as 'a disciple of Dickens, both in his Christmas sentimentality and his tendency to caricature' (20).

Arguably this illustrates early the difficulties of writing New Zealand, showing a preference or perhaps a predisposition to set fiction elsewhere, as well as a tendency to transplant Victorian or European sensibilities into a colonial setting.

The latter is perfectly understandable in terms of colonial values and the former reflects the pre-national closeness of the Australasian colonies, so these characteristics were not necessarily active or deliberate, they naturally appeared. The same trends that involve a refusal to represent New Zealandness in contemporary literature cannot be explained in this way; they continue without necessity because they are consciously employed by contemporary authors. The fact of the wide, global publication of *Grif* (in New Zealand, Australia, London and New York) also suggests the universality of its themes despite Farjeon's own isolated location and the novel's distant setting. There was no such criticism facing Farjeon and his colonial contemporaries as there is today of writers who choose to locate their fiction elsewhere. The colonies were relatively newly discovered and he was writing in a time of increased mobility, when migration and travel to New Zealand and Australia were gaining in frequency, and his writing reflected those very trends. It seems curious that now, in an era of rapid global movement, there is still a prejudice against New Zealand writers who choose to set their fiction elsewhere.

Farjeon's easy internationalism was typical of someone of his time and position, but it is also not dissimilar to that of Katherine Mansfield and Emily Perkins. All three authors represent, to some extent, the complex relationship between New Zealand, Australia and Britain. Farjeon's 1868 return to England was owing to his desire to further his writing career, as encouraged by Charles Dickens. As mentioned before, some of Mansfield's work was published in *The Native Companion*, an Australian journal, and the well-known trajectory of her life took her from New Zealand to Britain where she too believed she would be more successful as a writer. However, she later wrote in a letter to her father, '... the

longer I live, the more I return to New Zealand. A young country is a real heritage, though it takes one time to remember it. But New Zealand is in my very bones'.¹³ Perkins wrote and published *Novel About My Wife* in Great Britain, and the character in it who most embodies the colonial psyche is Australian. There is also a distinction between the ways in which these authors think about England: while Perkins is deliberately critical of Englishness in such a way that it becomes satirical, Mansfield conversely thought of England as a relief from the stifling simplicity of New Zealand. She wrote:

I should like to write [...] about a girl in Wellington; the singular charm and barrenness of that place—with climatic effects—wind, rain, night—the sea, the cloud pageantry. And then to leave the place and go to Europe—to live there a dual existence—to go back and be utterly disillusioned, to find out the truth of it all—to return to London—to live there an existence so full and strange that life itself seemed to greet her.¹⁴

Here Mansfield describes a character that is unaware of what is meant by each place until she leaves it. An understanding of what these places mean depends on seeing one place in contrast to another, and rests on the idea that a place can only be recognisably itself in the ways that it is different from somewhere else. This does not apply to Farjeon, however, who was really a British novelist travelling and writing in the colonies. Not distinguishing between Australia and New Zealand in the nineteenth century is not the same as being unconscious of national distinctions. For Mansfield, such distinctions were only just becoming clear. Finally, for Emily Perkins, the extent to which she can be seen to conflate the New Zealand and Australian psyche in *Novel About My Wife* is simply in the sense of coming from a young country with a colonial past. In this case, national

¹³ John Middleton Murry (ed) *Letters* p.199.

¹⁴ Scott *Notebooks* p.111-112.

distinctions are blurred between New Zealand and Australia in order to show a stronger contrast between those places and Britain.

Pakeha New Zealand identity, as discussed in Chapter One, is characterised by anxiety about a colonial past and the notion of coming from elsewhere. The irony of the term ‘settler narrative’ rests in the fact that settlers and subsequent generations are unsettled, and as it is represented in Perkins’ writing, frequently exhibit signs of dissatisfaction with being in New Zealand. The anxieties of the early twentieth-century settler consciousness are evident in Mansfield’s story *The Woman at the Store* (1912), in which the depiction of a woman who appears to have been inhabited by a strange and untameable wilderness suggests a darker side to the settler resolve to work on and inhabit the land. This representation recalls Mansfield’s description of New Zealand as ‘mysterious, as though floating’ (and to Manhire’s as ‘smoke at anchor, drifting’). There is an implication of uncertainty at play here, in the face of which the physical space of New Zealand itself becomes abstracted because of a prevailing sense of disconnection on the part of the individual. This disconnection is also evident in the subjectivities of Perkins’ characters, such as in a woman whom Daniel meets at an Auckland pub in *Leave Before You Go* who, when asked what she is planning for the evening, says ‘Oh, we’re just hanging out, you know, whatever happens. We’re aimless’ (43). Similarly, in *The New Girl*, Julia has a sudden realisation about what has happened to the relationship between herself and her two best friends as they have become older:

It seemed the three girls never had time to themselves anymore ... They didn’t talk about anything, either. Julia couldn’t understand it – she had spent so much of her life wanting to grow up, but now that she was older she missed the way things used to be. When

they were fourteen they had believed in telepathy and ghosts; at fifteen they'd discovered boys; at sixteen she had been sure the old, girlish, clumsy her was falling away and a new being was emerging from the skin. But now it looked as though this might have been all she was waiting for, this uncertainty. This doubt. (148)

Julia then leaves the town in which she and her friends grew up and moves to a city. What appears in the work of Mansfield as the colonial fear of an untameable wilderness is in the work of Perkins transformed into uncertainty and aimless nonchalance where, faced with the seemingly impossible task of defining the self, characters deliberately disconnect themselves from place. In this they admit their own ultimate uncertainty. Julia realises that what has been awaiting her in adulthood was not freedom, but doubt.

As New Zealand ceased to officially be a colony in 1907, there was a type of imperial nationalism (not in conflict with imperial sentiment) present at the time of Mansfield's writing, but if she was aware of it when she started writing and publishing it was with determination not to be a part of it. Mansfield was not chiefly concerned with the representation of New Zealand, although New Zealand is represented in her work. In the aforementioned notebook entry, Mansfield wrote: 'Oh, I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the old world. It must be mysterious, as though floating' (1916: 94). While Mansfield indicates affection for New Zealand and a literary purpose fixed on the country in her use of the adjective 'our', her primary loyalty appears to be to 'the old world'; the point of her endeavour in this case is to gain recognition for New Zealand from England. This desire for recognition from Britain is registered in Perkins' work as well. When Daniel in *Leave Before You Go* meets Kate's sister Nina in Wellington, she asks him, 'does everyone ask you what you think of New

Zealand? We're supposed to be famous for that. You know, Oh great European, please pass judgement on our little country' (191-2). Nina not only articulates a common fixation, but she acknowledges that it is a fixation which has earned New Zealanders a particular reputation as people who are characteristically concerned with how visitors from other places, particularly Britain, view the country. In a sense, this harks back to Farjeon's sentiment in the preface to *Grif*, the suggestion that the 'material advancement' or success of the colonies that he anticipates might be somehow quantifiable. In order to understand the country's relative success, New Zealanders habitually look to travelling Britons to reassure them that the colony has not failed in some respect. Whether the ideal is that it lives up to Britain, or that Britons should admire the ways in which it is different, is not clear. Nina simply wants Daniel's approval.

Mansfield and Perkins both attend to New Zealandness in non-essentialising ways. Lydia Wevers identifies Mansfield's New Zealand as 'a cultural space articulated by the boundary of exile which characterises it as a space of incomplete knowledge but also a possible location of truth' (35). Wevers explains that Mansfield's New Zealand stories such as *At the Bay* and *Prelude*

attempt to represent a strangeness not of landscape [...] but of and for the imagination [...] turning loss into the language of metaphor, the metaphoricity of a signifying space whose quality of transience [...] speaks with historical, cultural and personal resonance. (39)

According to Wevers' description, in Mansfield's work the specificity of place is not to do with the land but with personal and subjective experience. In this sense we might accept her distinctness from the cultural nationalists. As I pointed out at

the beginning of this chapter, the relationship between Mansfield's writing and New Zealand is not one which depends upon the specific depiction of one place in contrast to the other, but rather the way in which it metaphorically gestures toward the anxieties of the settler consciousness. In Mansfield's writing, Wevers points out that

from a historicist point of view [...] there is no clear *narrative* of nationhood in the New Zealand stories; rather the stories' method of proceeding in glimpses or bites, which emphasise temporal depth rather than linearity, insists on narration as metaphor, on leaving the reader to supply what is unsaid within the larger boundary and to recognise plurality within commonality. (42)

Both authors depend on 'narration as metaphor' in their stories but allow that metaphor is not always sufficient to get at the object of representation. The attention to the power, or indeed, the powerlessness of metaphor in more modern work such as Perkins', reflects the difficulty of settling upon a particular essentialised definition of New Zealand identity and what it means to be from or of New Zealand.

The worlds that Perkins suspends her characters between aren't always physical. Her earlier novels, *The New Girl* and *Leave Before You Go* express a familiar obsession with elsewhere, that somehow, like Mansfield's unwritten Wellington girl, the characters must leave the place that they are in, in order to truly understand themselves. In this sense, geographical location or dislocation is closely related to the psychology of the character. As discussed in Chapter One, in the way that Kate physically inhabits New Zealand but psychologically remains in Indonesia, the desire to be elsewhere can divide the characters' subjectivity to the extent that they don't fully exist in either place. Ann's situation in *Novel About My Wife* is different from Kate's in that it is not a psychological distancing so much as

it is a narrative decision not to ‘New Zealandise’, not to be burdened as a novelist by the responsibility of national identifiers in the fiction. Perkins is able to make the point about the enduring settler consciousness without referring to New Zealand.

Perkins and Mansfield also appear to share a similar attitude toward the Māori referent. Mansfield registers Māori presence in *How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped* (1912) without overt admission that the characters depicted are Māori. Angela Smith notes that ‘[the] canvas is left bare in the sense that the reader is not told that the women [who ‘kidnap’ Pearl] are Māori, as the perceiving consciousness of the child is innocent of racial categorisation’ (113). The absence of the racial identifier in Mansfield’s work is attributed to Pearl’s naiveté. This same absence is used by Perkins but she removes Māori entirely from the frame. The effect is the same: in both instances, this fastidious avoidance reads more like a presence.

Wevers points out that national significance in Mansfield’s New Zealand stories is established by

their metonymic function in writing the nation, not as the pictured and picturesque scenery of difference but as a sequence of exposures whose gaps in time hint at boundaries and complex structures momentarily lit up. (39)

In much the same way, *The Forrests* reads somewhat like a photo album, or a ‘sequence of exposures’, focusing in astute detail on single moments, the trivialities of which are accentuated by the fact that significant moments in Dorothy’s life, such as her wedding and the death of her parents, are not directly represented. Readers are witness to the consequences of such events, but are not with Dorothy or any other member of the family when they occur. This concern with isolated details is treated by Perkins as a profusion of metaphors and similes

employed to describe, but which fail to do much else other than cause confusion. An example of this appears in the description of the high dependency unit when Eve is in hospital, which

smelled like an old folks' home, which smelled like stale flower water, which smelled stagnant, like unmoving curtains onto a double-glazed aluminium-framed window through which there was a manicured rock garden, koi carp drifting in a pool. (131)

Despite the amount of description here, these similes still don't seem to get at what they really mean, and this draws attention to the insufficiency of these devices to evoke real-life events, particularly ones that are difficult for the characters to understand. The image of the 'koi carp drifting in a pool' works in much the same way as the description itself—aimless, floating, and further away from the object of representation than it was at the beginning. Later, when Dorothy is talking to a man who is looking for mechanic work, we hear that 'the word *surgeon* sat on the table between them like a fish' (155). These unusual, unexpected and seemingly inadequate similes indicate a linguistic self-consciousness, and evoke the sense that some things simply cannot be described. They are examples of language not behaving as it ought to or of its being unable to formulate any significant meaning. While Perkins' writing is sharply observational, in this case it refuses to behave in an accurately referential way.

It is evident through comparison between Perkins, Mansfield and Farjeon that some aspects of post-national literature refer back to the New Zealand literary scene long ago. The meaning that can be ascribed to these recurring phenomena, however, must be different according to the time in which they occur, because they are altered repetitions. We cannot treat the colonial period as though it was like our own. Nonetheless these parallels indicate that pre- and post-national literature have

more in common than might have been initially observable, and they also offer some possible reasons for the lack of critical commentary about contemporary writing now.

Emily Perkins, Lloyd Jones and the Curse of the Prize-Winning Colonial

Popular literature blogger Lisa Hill rearticulates Patrick Evans' familiar objection when she writes of Perkins that

Novel About My Wife won the New Zealand Montana literary award so I was a bit disconcerted when it turned out to be so firmly placed in contemporary London and seemed so authentically British in its style and preoccupations.¹⁵

This sense of betrayal or abandonment is not uncommon among reviews of texts by New Zealand authors that do not adequately refer to the country. The New Zealand Montana literary award was also won by Lloyd Jones in 2007 for *Mister Pip*, a novel set almost entirely in Bougainville and which barely refers to New Zealand until the very end, when the protagonist comes to her teacher's home-town of Wellington. *Mister Pip* also won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, making it a fine example of what Stafford and Jackson spoke of in their introduction: a novel which has had 'success with readers both local and international' and 'attract[ed] major awards both local and international'. Set in war-time Bougainville in 1990, *Mister Pip* can by no means be accused of nationalistic obligation to New Zealand, and yet the novel has managed to attract a very small amount of critical interest here. Unlike Perkins, Jones tends to adopt an ethical stance with regard to the content of his

¹⁵ Lisa Hill. *Review of Novel About My Wife by Emily Perkins*. July 8, 2010.

novels. Conversely, Perkins' work, like Mansfield's, insists 'on allowing the reader to supply what is unsaid' (Wevers 42). In the absence of ethical posturing, the sense that there isn't much to say is strong because it gives the impression that there is nothing to respond to.

It is unreasonable to assume that contemporary authors share the same tenets as the cultural nationalists, yet they continue to be judged in criticism and by their readers in terms of how well they uphold nationalistic values. In his introduction to *The NeXt Wave* (1998), Mark Pirie attempts to 'define the indefinable "Generation X"' (1), writers born between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s who have been raised in a tech-savvy age among dominant counter-cultures. He explains that

[s]ome major new distinctions and changes have been occurring in our literature. But until now they have gone unnoticed. This may be partly due to the reluctance of current 'establishment' critics, writers and academics to recognise the legitimacy and literary merits or even the literary influences of these recent directions. (1)

This claim is not entirely unfounded. Based on the current lack of commentary on contemporary fiction it seems in the fifteen years since Pirie's collection was published that not much has changed. There seems to be a lot of talk about this deficiency, but few successful attempts at finding the language with which to fill the gap. The overwhelming consensus seems to be that there simply isn't much to say. Perhaps this explains the way critical attention tends to gravitate back towards discussions of nationalism. Or perhaps the problem, once again, is that the writing is too difficult to critically position. Pirie points out that

[a]t present, young writers are not as easy to pin down as they were in the past. Once writers were considered Modernist, traditional or open-form in their persuasions. Now there are so many genres and styles to choose from that writers are difficult to label accurately. In this respect, a number of our young writers

can be seen mixing and recycling a multitude of styles together: minimalist, realist, open-form, performance, found, collaborative and prose. [...] They incline towards being end-users and consumers of art in order to innovatively reproduce that art in a different form, rather than the old myth of the 'great' artist as original producer and creator of art. (14)

It appears to be the absence of the latter that Evans laments in a contemporary writing scene. Pirie shows here that the less stylistically specific a writer is, the more difficult it becomes to comment on their work.

Zoë Norridge acknowledges the lack of critical attention that Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* has received, which she claims is associated with 'the difficulty of placing the text within a generic or indeed geographical context' (58), although as the presence of her own essay would indicate, the novel has generated some commentary. For the writers of "Generation X", Pirie points out a number of common characteristics such as Perkins' use of 'simple, fast-paced sentence structures and [a tendency] to focus on young, slightly neurotic twenty-somethings' (3) in her short story collection. However, Pirie does not go on to explore the function or meaning of such characteristics. He has discussed what writers are doing, but not what it means. Positioning these writers as being in conversation with a literary past that pre-dates nationalism is one way to overcome the silencing effect that their eclectic styles induce.

Norridge meditates on the ethical implications of Jones' inhabiting the subjectivity of a young Bougainvillean female. While she doesn't find it entirely unproblematic she does identify that he has exchanged an emphasis on place for one on character, albeit within a postcolonial context. She points out that 'this discovery of self through the inhabitation of fictional others is not ideologically neutral. It involves

gestures of identification and empathy which are in many ways appropriative' (69).

She argues however that the *Mister Pip* is

less a narrative about the specifics of life on the island and more a story about other stories and their potential to allow us into the lives of others, even when that invitation is politically complex and fraught with ideological complications. (57)

In this way *Mister Pip* resembles *Novel About My Wife* and expands upon Lydia Wevers' assertion that a text's relationship to place can be metonymic rather than overt. Like *Mister Pip*, the narration in Perkins' novel is first person, yet the author inhabits a sensibility quite apart from her own. She speaks as an English male who is close to middle-age. Perkins and Jones perform this spectacle with strikingly different attitudes. While Perkins' authorial presence is noticeable in the prose as an ironic and satirical undertone, Jones' handling of his narrator is considerably more earnest. The idea of inhabiting a fictional other for the purposes of storytelling is addressed in *Mister Pip* most clearly at the end, when Matilda tells the reader:

People sometimes ask me 'Why Dickens?' which I always take to be a gentle rebuke. I point to the one book that supplied me with another world at a time when it was desperately needed. It gave me a friend in Pip. It taught me that you can slip under the skin of another just as easily as your own, even when that skin is white and belongs to a boy alive in Dickens' England. Now if that isn't an act of magic I don't know what is. (200)

This positions Matilda's imaginative entry into the 'skin' of Pip as not unlike Jones' own inhabiting of Matilda's consciousness. Her teacher Mr Watts also takes the stories of the villagers and weaves them into the fabric of his own life. They affect his understanding of the world in much the same way as his reading of *Great Expectations* affects Matilda's. Perhaps one reason for what critical response *Mister Pip* has generated is that it raises a number of issues to do with

ethnographic studies, identity politics, and who has the right to speak. Commentators are able to contextualise it in a way that they cannot with Perkins' work because hers compulsively avoids such references.

Norridge points out that the entire novel is narrated through Matilda's eyes, but on occasion even she is reporting somebody else's memory, such as in the retelling of her mother's murder. In these instances, she makes it clear that what she recounts is not first-hand experience. In this way the reader is made aware of Matilda's limitations as narrator. In *Novel About My Wife*, Tom imagines that he is similarly aware of his own narratorial limitations and attempts to express them to his reader in saying:

Some facts are known. We met. Fell in love. Went to Fiji. [...] Other things I can only take a stab at. What Ann thought. What Ann felt. What happened to her when I was not around. For this I need fiction, the *grrrt* of paper rolling into the old typewriter I've hung on to since my student days. I like this arrangement, the computer for what I know, the typewriter for everything I'm not sure of. (19-20)

This is an admission of present, and partial, fictionalisation. Tom proposes that he will separate what he knows to be true and what he speculates into two different mediums, represented by a change in font, to enable the reader to decipher what is true and what isn't. Perhaps Tom does not realise that a number of times throughout the narrative, his 'computer' narration slips into guesswork too. Due in part to this slippage, the reader is unable to find the true pattern of his narration. The typewritten sections seem to reveal more about Ann than the computer written sections, suggesting that Tom doesn't really know Ann at all. While the novel is supposed to be 'about' Ann, the character that is evoked most strongly is Tom.

The notion of adequate representation is raised in *Mister Pip* when Mr Watts provides Matilda with a definition of the word ‘gist’. He says ‘if I say tree, I will think English oak, you will think palm tree. They are both trees. A palm and an oak both successfully describe what a tree is, but they are different trees’ (114). In this way Mr Watts suggests, as the novel itself does, that sometimes the ‘gist’ of something will suffice, and that the drive for perfect clarity takes something away from the story. Quite simply, with two such starkly different world views, Mr Watts and Matilda will never be able to see things in the same way, and the narrative acknowledges this limitation. As we find in *Novel About My Wife*, however, in the case of Ann, the ‘gist’ of her character is not enough. Getting close-enough-but-not-quite to the object of representation might work if the object in question has a universally recognisable meaning, but it doesn’t work with individuals because their meanings are complex and layered.

A major area of interest in terms of *Mister Pip* is the way in which, unlike Perkins’ novels, it is so clearly in conversation with the past. *Mister Pip* draws primarily on a Victorian text, as does this chapter. The odd placement of *Great Expectations* in war-time Bougainville suggests awareness of the displacement of Mr Watts, but also that the chief focus of the narrative is the place and purpose of stories in the lives of the characters. Monica Latham points out that ‘rewriting classics [as Lloyd Jones has], implies various phenomena of transposition, transformation and hybridization’ (22). She explains that

[o]riginal texts are updated to incorporate other experiences; they are uprooted from their cultural context and re-anchored in other literary traditions. On Dickens’s original story, numerous variations have been grafted by different characters and authors who integrate their own material and adorn the Victorian classic with fragments from their personal stories. Thus, the hypotext

survives in and through the new story. In Jones's novel, the different levels of hypertexts, more or less faithful to the original, are combinations of personal and mythical stories, new and ancestral, written and oral. They make *Mister Pip* an intricate postmodernist and postcolonial piece of fiction. (29)

There is a connection evident between Matilda in *Mister Pip* and Dorothy in *The Forrests* to do with the expression of a palimpsestic identity. While *Mister Pip* engages with Dickens' classic text in a palimpsestic manner, both Dorothy and Matilda project and enact other versions of themselves, with new selves layered on top of the old ones who persist as memories. For Matilda and her classmates who identify with Pip, gender and race boundaries are abolished in the same way that is suggested in Jones' inhabiting of Matilda's subjectivity. In this way, *Mister Pip* suggests the universality of a particular Dickens story regardless of the fact that the children are unable to specifically or correctly imagine the world that Pip inhabits. This is diluted by their awareness that Mr Watts cannot relate entirely to the story either, as like them he is from a different place and time to Pip. The world described in Dickens' novel is therefore one which exists purely in the imaginations of the children, yet this doesn't prevent their identification with Pip; his world is as real to them as their own. Likewise, Dorothy's imaginative placement of herself into another time and place leads to the projection of alternative selves rather than a heightened awareness of her own singularity. The process of layering the new over the old does not reject the old, but rather allows it to influence the way that the new story or character is interpreted.

Finally, Norridge concludes that

Mister Pip, rather than encouraging a dichotomy between island life and British literature, emphasises the fluidity of all great storytelling traditions by stressing narrative's potential to give rise to a multiplicity of meanings, the plurality of possibilities. In

doing this, Jones shows that stories may offer the promise of knowledge, but are ultimately accompanied by the dawning realization of uncertainty. (68)

This is the same conclusion reached by Perkins' characters: an awareness of uncertainty, an acknowledgement of doubt. While Jones' novel universalises this notion in broader terms of stories and storytelling, Perkins' characters experience doubt as part of the settler condition. In both cases, the closer they look at themselves the more they come to realise that there is not a conclusion to whom they are, but rather they come to see the endless and complex layers out of which they are constructed.

The consideration of contemporary writing as having emerged out of a pre-nationalist past creates a suitable context for its analysis. Rather than being repeatedly characterised as 'floating' or ungrounded, this critical framework proposes that contemporary literature is secured to something. It also suggests that there are reasons for these recent trends that go deeper than a symbiosis between authors and reviewers. Yet, as I have outlined, the history of a coherent concept of nationalism in New Zealand literature is itself a shaky and uncertain one. The early trends and attitudes that I have linked to Perkins' work are not widely examined or acknowledged because of a 'critical eclipse of the colonial period'. The act of bypassing the cultural nationalist movement for the purposes of this discussion and examining the links that can be made between contemporary writing and colonial writing has meant that pre- and post-nationalist literature can, like the work collected in Stafford and Williams' anthology, 'be seen on its own terms, without [Curnow's] withering disapproval [...] or Glover's satire' (5). The overwhelming sense of uncertainty that emerges, far from mystifying ideas about the nation, can

be seen as positive acknowledgement that the essentialising of identity and culture is a largely inadequate approach for getting at the truth of nation. Uncertainty is thus the antithesis of essentialism.

CHAPTER III

“Francis, Francis, There’s No Answers”: What Speech Says

“The worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them.”

- George Orwell

*

Attention to language is a defining feature of Perkins’ work and the primary means by which she registers culture and nationality. Her narrators and protagonists are often intently engaged with their own use of language as well as the way that other characters speak. They also frequently register the metaphorical or connotative meanings of linguistic idiosyncrasies or oddities. Thus, the reader is always made aware of when language is behaving in a culturally or nationally specific way. In the last chapter I proposed that the current lack of commentary on contemporary writing has to do with the difficulty of attaching it to a particular context or category, and that even the category that constitutes New Zealand writing could only be defined in terms of individual purposes. In this chapter I will show that it is possible to see Perkins’ work as definable in terms of her attention to language. In order to show this, I will discuss the ways in which Perkins’ fiction registers a national identity through speech patterns. As Ian Wedde points out, ‘the history of a literature with colonial origins is involuntarily written *by* the language, not just in it’ (23). It is essential to see the work of contemporary writers on their own terms, and not repeatedly to glance back to the cultural nationalists as a basis for comparison. As I showed in the last chapter, this backwards-looking approach will

invariably fail because they engage with nation in very different ways. By registering speech and language patterns, Perkins attends to how New Zealanders see themselves, as well as how they are viewed by non-New Zealanders. Like many of Perkins' other methods of observing nation, her attention to language could easily be overlooked because it appears unapologetically and does not demand attention. Rather, it depends upon the readers' own knowledge of and response to the sorts of linguistic idiosyncrasies that she presents. New Zealanders will have a different reaction to the language she uses than non-New Zealanders, but as I will show both responses are of equal importance.

New Zealandisms

One feature that Perkins uses in this way is New Zealand-specific language, or New Zealandisms. In order to discuss her use of them, it is first necessary to identify what New Zealandisms are and why they are specific to New Zealand speech. Quite simply, they are words or phrases which have particular relevance in New Zealand. Tony Deverson explains in his essay *Handling the New Zealand English Lexis* that many words that are assumed to be New Zealandisms originated elsewhere and eventually stopped being used everywhere except for New Zealand, but also that some are still in use elsewhere. He provides a useful discussion on where they stand in relation to other variations of English:

There can be no sharp distinction between New Zealandisms in the narrow sense and the rest of the NZE lexis. The boundary is blurred both because some words associated with New Zealand use are also distinctive in one or more other varieties (often unbeknown to most New Zealanders) and because some words in 'full' international English use will have some special, perhaps temporary local currency or frequency here. Since the latter kind

of word is plainly New Zealand usage, at least in the broader sense, there can be no theoretical objection to its adoptive status as New Zealandism. The question of what constitutes a New Zealand word must be dealt with pragmatically and flexibly, and *DNZE*'s policy produces as near to definitive listing of New Zealandisms as could reasonably be expected. Distinctive does not always mean exclusive in the context of a regional lexis. (29-30)

The identification of aspects of New Zealand English that make it distinct from other varieties in Perkins' work can be seen as a registration of geographical and metaphorical distance. To a New Zealand reader, Perkins presents an exaggerated and stylised version of New Zealandness that is mediated largely through language. Her emphasis on New Zealandisms is particularly palpable in her early work, especially in her short story collection. As her fiction has become more internationally recognised, the distance between the referent and the representation of it has increased. New Zealand-specific language and ways of speaking are still discernable in *The Forrests* yet they appear almost objectively. Dorothy is aware of when she is speaking like a New Zealander because New Zealand language is distinct from the way that her American parents speak. Because of this distance Dorothy is able to hear herself as she performs New Zealandness linguistically.

In *a place where no one knows your face* (1996), a sudden cluster of New Zealandisms appears in the same paragraph. Although some of the words certainly have currency elsewhere, the sense of them as New Zealand-specific is intensified by having them appear together:

Are we there? you say, stretching your neck. It's cooler now and the sun's not so bright. Soon, says your mum. Dad's getting fish and chips. Can I have L&P? you say. Go in and ask him. You open the door and almost fall out. Your feet feel strange on the ground. Put your jandals on, says mother. (187)

To a non-New Zealand reader, this extract might prove puzzling were they unaware that ‘L&P’ is a soft-drink and ‘jandals’ are summer footwear. These words have particular meaning in New Zealand and not elsewhere. More subtly, stopping for fish and chips and the phrase ‘are we there yet’ are iconic aspects of a New Zealand family holiday, even though they may have meaning in other places as well. The fact that they are grouped with two other very New Zealand-specific references suggests that they have been deliberately employed to strengthen the New Zealand association in this story. While this appears as a nod to the ‘Kiwi summer family holiday’, it could also be read as lightly satirical, intended perhaps to make foreign the ordinary, familiar language and references routinely tossed around in everyday New Zealand discourse. By grouping them together as she has, Perkins makes it impossible for readers to miss their presence: New Zealand readers are able to hear themselves speak which in turn allows them to recognise distinctiveness in their own dialect, and non-New Zealand readers are granted a view into NZE.

The attention to the local reception of Perkins’ work by a New Zealand audience is significant when considering the registration of language in her work, as well as the differences between this reception and a non-New Zealand one. Perkins’ treatment of the New Zealand accent and linguistic idiosyncrasies creates a simultaneous sense of familiarity and self-consciousness for New Zealand readers, who are thrust abruptly outside of their own perspectives and are able to see themselves reflected back. In much the same way that one might react to hearing their own speaking voice recorded (“but I don’t sound like that!”), the depiction of somebody else who speaks like them is sometimes initially unrecognisable until they realise that it is also how they sound. More is suggested in Perkins’ use of

New Zealandisms, however, than a surface-level reference to New Zealand speech. She employs these idiosyncrasies to register Pākehā identity as well as to show the ways in which New Zealanders appear to non-New Zealanders. This is important because it addresses nation without being nationalistic in the way that the writers of the 1930s were. Perkins also refuses to justify the presence of New Zealandisms or explain their meanings.

What It Means To Us

Certainly Perkins' use of New Zealand-specific language and linguistic idiosyncrasies also registers the self-consciousness frequently felt by New Zealanders about the way that they speak. Donn Bayard (2000) argues that increased exposure to foreign broadcast material has altered New Zealanders' evaluations of other accents as well as their perception of their own accent. He claims research strongly suggests that New Zealanders are

still uneasy about their own voices, and clearly prefer overseas accents not only in terms of the power dimension – which is certainly understandable given the widespread tendency to award prestige to a non-local acrolect in most speech communities – but also in terms of solidarity and mateship. (321)

Likewise, Allan Bell posits that 'perhaps a speech community as small and homogenous as New Zealand will regularly look beyond itself for a prestige speech standard' (1982: 255). In their introduction to *New Zealand English*, Bell and Koenraad Kuiper note that until the 1980s, New Zealand English was routinely lumped in the same category as Australian English.¹⁶ Until then, the focus was on

¹⁶ After comparing the content of the *New Zealand Pocket Oxford* with that of the *Australian Pocket Oxford*, Tony Deverson concludes that 'there is clear evidence in the dictionaries that more divides the distinctive NZE and AusE lexicons than unites them' (1999: 27).

NZE's 'similarity and generalisability to other varieties [of English rather] than its distinctiveness' (15). When NZE is seen in Perkins' work it is used in such a way as to make it immediately recognisable and show the ways in which it breaks away from an expected standard of speech or language. While this occurs to varying degrees across all of Perkins' work, it is particularly evident in *The Forrests* because Dorothy recognises the strangeness of the dialect, even when she is using it herself. Like a number of Perkins' protagonists, Dorothy consciously notices such instances. An earlier example of this phenomenon is when the narrator of *local girl goes missing* (1996), a story in Perkins' short story collection, notices the way that her mother pronounces the words 'dwarf' and 'darling' as *duh-warf* (125) and *dahlink* (126). Attention to the way in which characters speak serves to strengthen their national, regional or cultural particularity because conveying such idiosyncrasies reveals much about who they are and the way that they are viewed by others.

The attention dedicated to New Zealand-specific language is always in terms of how it deviates from expected words or pronunciations. One early comparison of NZE to British English is quoted in Elizabeth Gordon and Marcia Abell's essay. It is an inspector's report from 1887 analysing the New Zealand dialect:

It is satisfactory to note that the Queen's English is well or better spoken in the colonies than in the Old Country where it had its birth. [...] In the main the colonial speech flows tolerably pure from the 'well of English undefiled'. It is nearer the standard of classical English than 'English as she is spoke' in Yorkshire, Lancashire, or Somersetshire; the astonishment of untravelled Britishers at the purity of the New Zealand accent is proverbial, and if there is merit in correct pronunciation, to a large extent we have it.¹⁷

¹⁷ The Press, 8 October 1887. Cited in Gordon and Abell (22).

While given the period in which this report was written it was normal and perhaps expected to compare NZE with British English, these comparisons still persist today. The instance from *Leave Before You Go* that I discussed in the previous chapter between Nina and Daniel when Nina says ‘Oh great European, please pass judgement on our little country’ (192), suggests that to a great extent New Zealanders regularly compare themselves, and expect others to compare them, with Britain. Furthermore, as the above inspector points out, the Standard English pronunciation anticipated in the new world states was not and still is not spoken widely in Britain, making its basis for comparison an already unstable one. At the time of this report, the inspectors were focussed primarily on whether NZE measured up to British English and other varieties. It is difficult not to see this as somehow seminal to the habit of New Zealanders in terms of defining their own culture, in that they tend to find similarities or ways of comparing it with other cultures rather than identifying what makes it distinct. Of course, what is distinct will always come to be regarded as such through a method of comparison, however this is vastly more complex a process than a simple deduction via ‘I am not *a*, therefore I am *b*.’

As I have discussed in the previous two chapters, there is a conspicuous absence of Māori language and culture in Perkins’ work. This continues in her attention to language: despite her alert and accurate portrayal of New Zealand-specific language and pronunciation, she omits that part of NZE which makes it most distinct from all other dialects: te reo Māori (Bayard 323). Before I discuss the implications of this absence, I believe it is important to provide some context by outlining some of the ways in which Pākehā have engaged with the Māori

language and how it relates to Pākehā identity. In *Styling the other to define the self*, Allan Bell asserts that

[t]he notion of ‘styling the other’ presupposes that each variety has a distinguishable and rather stable core of linguistic features in order for it to be modelled at all. For me to be able to ‘sound American’ or ‘sound RP’ requires that there are some features (or cluster of features) of those varieties which are distinctive. The distinctive core consists of those features that set the variety off from the majority of other dialects. (526)

The most distinctive feature of NZE, as mentioned above, is the incorporation of the Māori language. Bell argues that the main problem associated with this is that in appropriating the Māori language to English usage, the original meaning of the Māori word or phrase becomes lost. It is overshadowed by the new meaning ascribed to it by its position in NZE,¹⁸ which may or may not bear relation to its meaning in Māori, but which will at the very least be a simplified one. Keeping in mind that language is a key component in the construction of identity, this phenomenon has some largely problematic consequences in terms of New Zealand national identity. Jane Stafford and Mark Williams identify that

[a]bove all, New Zealand literature and English in New Zealand literature have long interacted with te reo Māori. John Macalister’s 2005 *Dictionary of Māori Words in New Zealand English* demonstrates the range and magnitude of the Māori gift words to New Zealand English, and we note the changing ways in which those words have been accepted in literary practice, from the now stilted glossing of Noel Hilliard’s *Māori Girl* (1960) or the spiritually charged self-consciousness of Māori words in James K. Baxter’s late poetry to the everyday familiarity of Anne Kennedy’s 2003 poem ‘Whenua (1)’. In the literature of the first half of the twentieth century, Māori words are passive, detached from the living world they come from, and thus in need of glossing; in the twenty-first century they are available to be used as an active part of the lexicon of ordinary life. (7-8)

¹⁸ Arguably there could be at least two distinct types of NZE – English as it is used by Pākehā and English as it is used by Maori. Maori NZE contains significantly more te reo Maori words and phraseology than Pākehā, regardless of fluency in te reo, and sometimes involves an accompanying accent. I refer to the Pākehā dialect of NZE.

In addition, Māori words are no longer as frequently glossed because they tend to be used unapologetically; the presence of a glossary denotes the need to explain something foreign and for New Zealanders at least, Māori words should require no more glossing than the New Zealandisms mentioned earlier. What Stafford and Williams do not discuss here is the way in which this cultural appropriation is able to change the meaning of the words. Bell uses the example of a 1997 Air New Zealand television advertisement which features Dame Kiri Te Kanawa singing *Pokarekare Ana* (Bell 1999). He argues that the waiata was used with the express purpose of arousing a feeling of familiarity among an affluent Pākehā audience, not because they understand the meaning of the song, but simply because they are likely to recognise and have nostalgic feelings about it (1999). This is an example of ‘styling the other to define the self’: the Māori language is used to provide Pākehā with a sense of belonging to a culture. The fact that NZE has enveloped parts of te reo Māori so that those words comprise part of a variation of English rather than being only Māori is a testament to the colonising power of language.

Of course, language cannot be expected to, nor has it ever, retained singular meanings throughout time. Words are always being appropriated for new purposes and used in new ways. The complicating factor in this particular case is that aspects of te reo Māori (the language of a colonised people) have been stylised and appropriated with the purpose of defining and eliciting a response from the dominant and inherited culture. The use of Māori in NZE is evidence of what Melissa Kennedy calls ‘the wish to “stride both worlds”, an image of bestriding Māori and Pākehā cultures’ (x), which she explains ‘implies a dualistic perspective of Māori and Pākehā as culturally, socially and economically divided’ (x). She goes on to point out that

[t]he concept of striding both worlds is not about crossing over from one pole to another but, rather, about how Māori culture is always already part of and caught up in a web of historical and contemporary local, national and global interactions. (xii-xiii)

Māori culture and language has become an integral part of Pākehā culture and NZE. Therefore it is curious to once again note the conspicuous absence of Māori culture, language and references in the work of Emily Perkins. The fact that she manages to register Pākehā identity without making any reference to Māori or even biculturalism has two consequences. The first is that she is not engaged with ‘styling’ Māori in order to define Pākehā, as seems to be a recurrent trend in New Zealand culture. Yet her avoidance of the Māori referent removes something essential from Pākehā expressions of identity because the Māori presence in New Zealand is a large and unavoidable part of what it means to be Pākehā. This omission is not unique to Perkins. Other notable contemporary New Zealand writers opt to exclude or avoid the Māori referent as well.¹⁹ It is possible that they feel its inclusion might be too politically charged; once employed in a text, Māori language opens the author up to a whole other world of potential criticism. Yet as discussed above, the inclusion of Māori language and culture is the main feature that makes NZE and New Zealand culture distinctive. This makes it likely that this omission is a very deliberate one.

While Māori language and Māoriness are not registered in Perkins’ work, she still directs attention towards other distinctive characteristics of the New Zealand dialect. In this way, she registers the cultural situation in which Pākehā now find themselves. This situation is characterised by being unsettled, and Perkins uses language to metonymically gesture towards various states of uncertainty and unbelonging.

¹⁹ Some examples are Elizabeth Knox, Catherine Chidgey and Lloyd Jones.

What it Means to Others

While Perkins displays the particularity of New Zealand language to the New Zealand reader, she also defamiliarises it. One of the main methods she uses to achieve this is to show speech from the perspective of somebody from elsewhere. In *Leave Before You Go*, Daniel (the Englishman) encounters the receptionist of a courier company. In this brief exchange, the New Zealand reader is made conscious of a particular linguistic idiosyncrasies—ending sentences with an upward inflection—by being positioned narratively as a foreigner. In this instance, it is conveyed with the use of a question mark at the end of sentences that should read as statements rather than questions: ‘Ray’s out the back? First door on your right?’ (84). Every sentence that the receptionist utters ends with an upward inflection. Because this part of the novel is narrated in free indirect discourse and filtered through Daniel’s viewpoint, the upward inflection appears unfamiliar. The New Zealand reader thus effectively hears their own accent through the ears of a foreigner. The same linguistic feature is noticed by Tom in *Novel About My Wife* when he perceives ‘the upward inflection of Australian accents, everything an uncertainty, a question’ (75). In this way the language itself becomes the question. The speaker sounds uncertain, and subsequently so does the accent. Of course, in *Novel About My Wife* it is the Australian accent that is under Tom’s scrutiny, but arguably given that the same observation has already been made about the New Zealand accent in *Leave Before You Go*, this characteristic of the colonial dialect is something that is of interest to Perkins. Its placement in *Novel About My Wife* also echoes the common complaint that those in the Northern hemisphere frequently cannot differentiate between the New Zealand and Australian accents.

In both cases, the individual noticing this idiosyncrasy is British, and in both novels it is presented in such a way as to make the reader sharply aware of its peculiarity. In each case the speaker appears to be asking a question at the same time that they are answering one or making a statement. There is a parallel to be seen between this observation and the cultural situation in which Pākehā New Zealanders find themselves in contemporary society. As indicated earlier in this chapter, at the same time that New Zealanders seem to be defining themselves, they are also locked in a political stalemate between two incompatible cultures. In this, the dominant culture's claims to sympathise with the other overlook the necessary areas of difference that require more than bicultural 'styling' to meet. Perkins also draws attention to the notion that New Zealanders seem largely unaware that such a quality exists in their accent, because it is only the British characters who seem to notice it. By placing a question mark at the end of the dialogue, she highlights the difference in the sound of the New Zealand accent to that of an English accent and something uncertain still present in the postcolonial consciousness.

When put together, the references to New Zealand English made by Perkins' characters indicate both an interest in language and awareness of its metonymic power. In some cases this is indicated even in the titles of her work. The title *Leave Before You Go* evokes the linguistically playful and paradoxical situation which inspired it. Kate remembers the note on the back of her visitors' pass to the Tip Top factory when she was a young girl which said "please leave before you go". She recalls:

They'd been given visitor cards to wear safety-pinned on their cardigans. She remembers turning hers over before she put it on. On the back of the card was typed PLEASE LEAVE BEFORE

YOU GO. It took a few seconds for the phrase to make sense to her, and when she understood it she felt almost disappointed, as if some mystery, something secret and potent, had evaporated. Now she wonders if she really had lost that initial, paradoxical meaning, or if leaving a place before she was gone was the thing she had been doing ever since. (158)

Of course, taken out of its original context and put in a titular position the phrase regains some of 'that initial, paradoxical meaning' for the reader. Language momentarily becomes unfamiliar to Kate in this instance, much as it does to the reader when they see the title. Like her divided consciousness that exists between the dream-space of Indonesia and New Zealand, Kate's understanding of the phrase is split between the physical and the abstract. She sees herself as the subject that must 'leave before [she's gone]' rather than the visitors' pass, and this implies a psychological leaving rather than a physical one. In the same way that many other instances of emphasised language in Perkins' work can be interpreted, the idea of mentally leaving a place before physically leaving it indicates that Kate is unsettled and does not feel that she belongs anywhere. In this way Kate comes to stand for the average twenty-something New Zealander who composes their identity from found or snatched relics, words and scraps of culture, but who never quite feels as though this identity is fully formed.

Naming and Power

Names are one aspect of language which always denote or signify something specific. Although discourse on the power to name in terms of identity politics is usually directed towards ethnographic studies, it can be employed here to show the different power relations and meanings at play in Perkins' fiction. Perkins' characters show an interest in names and naming, particularly in *not her real name*,

Novel About My Wife and *The Forrests*. Each of these texts places a different emphasis on names and treats the attention to names differently. In *not her real name*, Cody's interest in names shows her to be a stronger character than might be initially apparent, while in *Novel About My Wife* Tom's inability to name the man who is following Ann shows a kind of weakness. In *The Forrests*, a marginal character's interest in linguistic precision serves to highlight the insufficiencies of labels.

The title *not her real name* indicates an interest in the power of naming. Cody, the occasional narrator and protagonist of the story, exhibits playfulness with language in general, but in particular and as suggested by the title, with people's names:

You always thought, Francis, rhymes with answers. Which it doesn't, really. But you'd change the s of answers to be soft like his name. Francis, Francis, there's no answers. It was a walking rhyme. A home from the bus-stop rhyme. The rhyme of a fifteen-year-old girl who could feel very sad every time she thought of that soft s. (1)

Cody deliberately changes the pronunciation of the word 'answers' in order to make it fit her insistence that it rhymes with the name 'Francis'. While these words actually form a slant rhyme—the repeated *an* sound is the same before the ending of each word takes a slightly different direction—Cody's insistence on the ending rhyme shows that if a word doesn't behave in the way that she wants it to, she has no qualms about altering the word itself so that it does. In this way, despite the general unstable and uncertain nature of her as a character, she asserts her control over language. To a far greater extent than most other linguistic features, names are closely tied to an individual's identity and subjectivity, and those who have the power to name are also theoretically able to gain power over that which they name.

Cody's habit of renaming people is represented once again later in the story with the name of Francis' friend Marc:

Marc. Marc. There's something disturbing about the name. Like Jon without an h. Or Shayne with a y. Spelt backwards, it makes cram. A real word. That makes it seem like a code. Code for what? Cram, cram. Trying to break the code. OK, her own name is enough of a liability. She shouldn't laugh at other people's. But *Marc* – it's like biting tinfoil. (37)

Cody sees language as inherently coded. She reads into names meanings that have little or nothing to do with the name or the individual themselves, but rather other things that they evoke in her mind. She acknowledges the likeness of her own name to the word 'code', but she also sees Marc's name as being a code for something else. Above all, Cody appears concerned with what is missing. She believes that the absence of a letter which she thinks should be there, or which might be in a more traditional spelling of the name, denotes something untrustworthy about the individual.

The New Zealand accent is one which has always tended to omit particular syllables and the aspirate. Cody's conclusion that odd absences make words disturbing, or make them seem like a code, is even more pertinent when we consider historical analyses of NZE. Records of these omissions go back as far as 1880, when reports about the New Zealand accent from inspectors first emerged (Abell and Gordon, 1990: 22). As well as the absence of particular letters, Cody is concerned with the way in which this absence affects meaning. She sees a code in the fact that 'Marc' spelled backwards forms another English word. This suggests that Cody is in the unique position of being aware of the signifying power of words, yet at the same time she is fully susceptible to their impact. Cody is so uncomfortable with this spelling, in fact, that she refuses to register it following

her initial encounter with it. When Francis later discovers a note left by Cody, Marc's name is spelled with a k (40). Cody's discomfort with words which seem somehow incomplete and her refusal to accept the unusual spelling of 'Marc' can be linked to New Zealanders' unease about their own speaking voices as indicated by Bayard. Even though Cody is powerless over the way that Marc's name is spelled, she still insists on a more traditional spelling when she writes the name down.

This interest in names and naming is also revealed in *Novel About My Wife*, where the difference between English and Australian culture is exaggerated when Tom notes that 'to me, my mother was Stella, had been ever since I went to school, but Ann, in her colonial over-familiarity, called her Mum. We saw them maybe three times a year at most' (70). According to Tom, this 'colonial over-familiarity' is part of what separates Australia from England culturally. The contrast suggests that Ann is used to a culture in which any excuse to make someone family is encouraged, even somebody that they only see a few times per year. Tom's use of his mother's first name is indicative of familial distance. Towards the end of the novel, Tom refers to the man who Ann believes is following her, saying that 'I was sick of calling him 'the man'. He needed a name, Bob or Bill or Randy or something' (181). Tom recognises that he has lost control of the situation, and feels that if he is able to name the man he will be able to regain that control. Yet he seems reluctant to make a final decision about what to call him, and this is the only instance in which the subject of naming the man is raised. In contrast to Cody, who is only too willing to rename people, Tom lacks the ability to command control of the situation. His inability to name the man indicates the level of power he possesses.

In *The Forrests*, one of the women at the wimmin's commune has changed her name to 'Name' by deed poll. Certainly this indicates that Name prioritises literal meaning over connotative meaning. In this way she represents the insufficiency of language. This notion is further strengthened when we read that:

Name had got her face tattooed. She had a heart-shaped face and the tattoo was a love-heart outline framing all her features, tapering to a point at her chin, making it clear that the phrase 'heart-shaped face' was inexact. (12)

Name's concern with the literal meanings of words and phrases leads her to turn herself into a walking example of the way in which language fails to convey accurate meanings. This is an idea that I discussed in the previous chapter and one which pervades the entire novel.

I have suggested three different way in which naming in Perkins' work shows meaning and power relations. These characters do not simply accept names passively. They interact with names; they treat them as though they are permeable and have alternatives. They also seem largely aware of the effect they are producing by questioning names or renaming people.

Bad Language

Perkins uses taboo and unnerving words in a way that draws attention to their placement. In *The Forrests*, a teenaged Dorothy explains:

There was an advertisement for bedding that used the word *Manchester*. Daniel would like that. Creepy language was their joke after visiting his mother in her unit: *doily, shunt, fecund*. She could slide a shuddery sort of word into every exchange. *Martin's recovering from surgery but he's going to need a bag. Gina's youngest has phlegm on the lung. Cut a section from his bowel. Ganglia. Aorta.* (39)

The ‘shuddery sort[s] of word[s]’ that Dorothy offers as examples of the joke between herself and Daniel do not necessarily have taboo meanings, they simply sound ‘creepy’. Many of them, like swear words, relate to the body or describe body parts. In some cases what makes them sound as such has to do with their likeness to actual swear words. Beyond accents and linguistic idiosyncrasies, a further aspect of language which relates to identity is the use of taboo language. Timothy Jay and Kristin Janschewitz argue that ‘our use of and reaction to swear words tells us who we are and where we fit in a culture; in short, our identities are marked by our use of swear words’ (275). This is because the employment of swear words often denotes particular situations in which the individual deems the language appropriate (or appropriately inappropriate, as the case may be). Dorothy and Daniel give ordinary words the same sort of status as swear words in their ‘joke’. They use them like they might use swear words in an effort to be humorous. Jay and Janschewitz further point out that

swearing is not necessarily impolite, inasmuch as offensive language is often used within the boundaries of what is considered situationally appropriate in discourse; further, some instances of swearing are neither polite nor impolite’ (268).

Politeness is a learned behaviour, and is based upon one’s culture and influences. Therefore the way in which one swears, the situations in which one finds swearing to be an appropriate response and to what purpose the individual directs the swear word is bound up with their subjectivity. Meaning depends upon who is speaking, who is being spoken to, their respective backgrounds, the context in which the conversation occurs, the relationship between the people, and any number of other variables. Swear words can be interpreted as positive or negative, offensive or comforting, depending upon the context of their delivery. Dorothy uses taboo

language in a number of ways. As shown above, she is amused by the way that non-taboo words can sound ‘shuddery’. A swear word also redefines her relationship with her father when they come back to New Zealand after Eve’s accident. She says: “‘I can’t worry about that shit now.’” A small satisfaction, watching him flinch at the language’ (143-4). In this way Dorothy asserts her role in her relationship with her father as an adult. Jay and Janschewitz point out that ‘in contrast to most other speech, swearing is primarily meant to convey connotative meaning; the meanings of the words themselves are primarily construed as connotative’ (268). A speaker may therefore employ a swear word to convey several possible meanings, and the intended meaning can generally be deduced by considering which is the most situationally appropriate. In the above scenario, the fact that Dorothy uses a swear word when speaking to an authority figure indicates that in some way she is claiming authority herself. The view of swear words as situational language with connotative meanings can also be applied to Perkins’ use of New Zealandisms more generally. In this sense, on any occasion when the language chosen diverges from the expected speech standard, it is being used in a primarily metaphorical way.

We can see Dorothy and Eve’s sense of themselves highlighted alongside their use of swear words in *The Forrests*. Somehow their awareness of their language and accent is heightened with the employment of a swear word in their everyday discourse:

‘You’re shitting me.’

‘Mate, I shit you not.’

Sometimes they talked like people they were not. Language just came out of their mouths, it didn’t belong to them. (105)

Language appears to have been acquired by the sisters. This harks back to the previous discussion about styling the other to define the self, in that a dominant language will always overshadow and appropriate the other language, regardless of how artificial the outcome. Dorothy's position as the child of American parents is likely to be linked to her recognition that the language she uses does not belong to her. She speaks like the people around her do, not who she sees herself as. Their own sense of belonging in New Zealand is called into question here, because the implication is that the 'people they [are] not' are New Zealanders and this is where they have acquired the language from.

Swearing can also indicate culture, as we see in *Novel About My Wife* when Tom finally recognises Ann's Australianness after she swears in anger at another woman. Swear words and the way people use them indicate therefore not only their own subjectivity, but also other people's perceptions of them. The reader once again perceives Tom's limited perspective of culture as essentialised when he observes Ann's outburst as a 'low Australian litany' (164). Ann also uses taboo language to describe Tom:

Suddenly, we were fighting. I had made a joke or a comment or something that was only meant as light teasing about her compatriots – look, we were in a café called Gallipoli, there were some backpacker types at the next table, I mean, come on. It was not a big deal. And she suddenly went nuts. She hissed in my face, called me a fucking English cunt, and stormed out. (49)

When swear words occur in Perkins' work, they are frequently linked with culture and identity. Ann's cultural sensitivity collides in this scene with Tom's privileged English perspective resulting in her use of two swear words often considered more

offensive than others.²⁰ Ann's reaction comes across as hysterical given Tom's constant representation of her as un-Australian; lacking an accent, never talking about home. Yet the fact that she reacts so strongly to his comment indicates that what she feels for Australia is not complete disregard, but potentially something that Tom could never fully understand: she shows signs of feeling a sense of nationalism or at least defensiveness about nation. This particular situation highlights the difference between the subjectivities of those from the 'colonies' and those from the 'Old Country'—Ann, the Australian, reacts defensively to Tom's dismissive cultural comment. Tom, conversely, believes that given the situation, his comment was completely appropriate. However he is unable to understand the tentative cultural identity that Ann clearly battles with, and reads her reaction as somehow unfair to him. He appears unaware of his own ignorance when it comes to real difference from Englishness. He gloats:

She had chosen me, who for all my attempts at urbanity – here I went, collapsing time myself – was the child of this stolid respectable English couple, passing pickled walnuts around the table, so undoubting, so certain of the parameters of their universe, where normality began and ended. Anyone who lived outside of that zone was a freak, not that they would use that word. 'Different' was enough to imply distrust, contingency and doubt. I was different. Ann's love for me proved it. (76)

Tom equates difference with non-Englishness and with coming from elsewhere. Yet he doesn't understand what difference really means, other than it means unlike his parents. He also doesn't realise that he is just as trapped in his ideas of normalcy and sameness as his parents are, because when he is confronted with difference, particularly cultural difference, he is unable to respond with anything but the language of an imperial hangover, even though he does not intend his

²⁰ Taboo words have varying degrees of offensiveness; as Jay and Janschewitz point out, 'all taboo words are not equal' (283).

comments to be racist. The problem is, as explained in my Introduction, that he sees nationality in a clearly delineated way, when really, as the character of Ann shows, it is a complex web of belonging, nationalism, difference and subjectivity that is constructed in part through language. The absence of references to New Zealand in this novel, and the absence of references to Māori in Perkins' other novels, could be to do with this particular difficulty.

Mixing Identifiers

There is a lot of satirical criticism of Englishness in *Novel About My Wife*, but when Australianness is mentioned, it is treated with dismissive stereotyping. Of course, because the stereotyping comes from the English narrator, it is simultaneously a poke at Englishness, but there is more going on. Ann's Australianness, according to Tom, is indicated metonymically through her language, namely her use of swear words, in the absence of a satisfactorily Australian accent. Tom's perspective on culture is revealed later to be even more random, as he explains:

Around Ann it was easy to live in the present because she made life seem naturally lifted. In this way she was very English, attentive to the surface, reluctant to, in the language of Americans, get heavy. (156)

Here Tom describes Ann, the Australian expatriate, using the 'language of Americans', as 'very English'. There is an unusual clustering of different cultures here which, while all Western, are not necessarily compatible in the sense Tom uses them. It seems an odd choice to use 'the language of Americans' for this particular purpose, but the extract draws attention to the ultimate insufficiency of

characterising someone linguistically within a cultural framework. Later, Tom admits that

[r]eally there are few conversations that are easy to remember, even fewer actual statements. When I put words into Ann's mouth, on these pages, it's made up, of course, another way to get her to speak again. The way she talked, I can be faithful to that , and the occasional line. But mostly Ann and I, like everybody else, just asked each other to please pass the salt, and what we really meant was 'please pass the salt.' (158)

Tom seems to contradict himself a number of times. By making this statement he acknowledges that language is important, that it means something in terms of representing an individual, and in getting it wrong he may take something essential away from her character. He says that when he writes what Ann said, that it is made up, but that he can be faithful to the way she speaks. He doesn't acknowledge that the language somebody uses is the only way of conveying the way that they speak on the page: the reader cannot hear Ann. Finally, at the end of this extract, he suggests that the things she said, at least to him, have no meaning beyond the literal. Yet Ann's statements in the novel can be interpreted figuratively, as I have done above, suggesting that Tom is at least partially aware of their metonymic power, because he narrates the novel, and when Ann speaks the words that we read are, as he admits, truly his own.

When language, speech, linguistic oddities, and swear words are emphasised in Emily Perkins' work, it is evident that it always has to do with identity, culture, or nationality. These moments are always emphasised in the context of some cultural realisation that a character reaches, or otherwise they indicate nationality, whether optimistically or adversely, whether in a way that takes into account other things

that characterise the individual or are simply based on stereotypes and essentialised notions of culture. *Novel About My Wife* is a novel that is really about difference: between Tom and Ann, and between England and the colonies. It metaphorically gestures toward the inability of the British to understand the cultural and nationalistic predicament faced by those living in the colonies. At the same time, the novel highlights cultural differences through language and satire. The fact that similar observations are made and similar characteristics highlighted in *Novel About My Wife* that are made about New Zealandness in Perkins' other novels and short stories does not so much suggest that New Zealand and Australia are the same or indistinct, as it solidifies the notion that the two are different to Britain in similar ways.

Conclusion

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At the beginning of this thesis, I asked what it means for authors to address nation without being nationalistic, and whether it was possible to do so without reverting to cultural nationalism or geographical determinism. Emily Perkins' work is evidence that, indeed, this is possible. Her writing employs external factors like geographical location and New Zealand-specific language in order to refer to New Zealand while avoiding conscription into a nationalistic enterprise. Her references to New Zealand depend upon the combination of her texts, the context, and the language she chooses, as well as the reception of these cues by the reader. Perkins does not fetishise or essentialise New Zealand culture, nor does she congratulate New Zealanders for enacting a preconceived identity. What is absent from her texts is of equal importance to what is included. In the process of noticing and the close attention paid to details, the missing Māori referent appears as a significant absence.

Emily Perkins' novels fit into a wider conversation about the significance of place in the formation of subjectivity, both individual and collective. The Forrest family's movement between places and their relationships to those places recalls the experience of early settlers and can be seen as an imaginative act of settler re-enactment. The novel also shows the ways in which an individual's relationship with a place is a complex and shifting one, and this notion often manifests in 'suspended' subjectivities. Perkins shows the different ways in which New

Zealand can be figured by offering perspectives from inside it, from outside it and from 'a state of suspension'.

Positioning Perkins thematically and historically within New Zealand literature reveals the ways in which colonial attitudes are repeated and revisited in the present. Chapter Two reconfigured the position and significance of the cultural nationalists by expanding the parameters of their influence in contemporary literature, thereby revealing them as an important part of contemporary discussions, but not the core of them. It is possible to view contemporary literature as having emerged out of a pre-nationalist past, but with the knowledge acquired from the cultural nationalists.

Perkins' attention to language is the primary means by which culture and nationality are registered. Her writing reveals an awareness of language, particularly when it is behaving in a culturally specific way. In some cases, language reveals the displacement of culture by being presented out of the correct cultural context, and Perkins' characters tend to register and respond to this sort of cultural transplantation. Her use of New Zealandisms, taboo language, and her attention to names and naming functions to develop her characters at the same time as it represents a Pākehā sensibility.

To conclude, I refer to an individual from New Zealand's history who has been largely ignored in order to illustrate a final point. In *Culturalisms*, Simon During tells the story of a man named Jackie Marmon, who vehemently opposed the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. During concedes that Marmon has been left out of historical accounts of the Treaty signing because his presence tends to

complicate understandings of the cultural division which existed between Māori and Pākehā. Marmon was a criminal who came to New Zealand and prospered prior to 1940. He claimed to identify as Māori, reportedly saying that “I am a Māori in thought, word and deed, since among the savages I have found more true faithfulness man to man, than in the boasted Europeans: there is no honour in them.” (cited in Bentley 1999, 43). According to During, Marmon was largely responsible for Māori hostility towards the Treaty, although he notes that Māori would have been suspicious regardless of Marmon’s influence (31). Because of his loyalty to Māori, he was seen by Pākehā as very dangerous. During suggests that anxiety towards Marmon was due to an important distinction between two opposing types of ‘bi/multiculturalism’: liberal and ethical. He explains ‘liberal state bi/multiculturalism implies that each citizen is fixed in his or her own culture or cultural identity; ethical bi/multiculturalism implies that individuals can live in many cultures at once’ (32). Marmon, proposes During, was enacting a radical type of the latter, which threatened more clearly delineated parameters of culture. However, the notion of individuals living ‘in many cultures at once’ has some currency in contemporary society, particularly with the consideration of globalisation. During notes that

[p]erhaps that conjecture – where biculturalism meets globalization – can increase our imaginative alliance with figures [...] who stand outside the limits of culture. At least it might do so to the degree that being a New Zealander (Māori or Pākehā) becomes less determined by one’s relation to the history of colonialism and the rigidity of cultural difference that history demanded, and instead being a New Zealander becomes a more permeable, floating identity which passes easily into the cultural flows of the larger world. (37-8)

This is not a new idea—the notion of New Zealand as a ‘floating world’ and New Zealand identity as floating and permeable is a recurring suggestion in much

literature and commentary. Indeed, I have discussed this characterisation extensively throughout this thesis. It is often employed in a way that suggests it is a relatively unproblematic answer to the stilted position of contemporary literature and commentary. The lack of critical response, as I discussed in Chapter Two, has much to do with the difficulty of categorising the literature which has emerged in the last fifteen years in the same way that it was possible to categorise the Māoriland writers, the settlers, the colonials and the cultural nationalists.

The diagnosis of New Zealand as ‘floating’ raises at least one major issue: once New Zealand identity has been established as such, what else can be said? The floating identity diagnosis signals the end of the conversation, when really it is only just beginning. If an identity is floating, it is impermanent; it cannot be categorised or defined. It sounds a lot like a conclusion designed to excuse a general unwillingness to push pause and take a good look around. Arguably, the ‘floating identity’ diagnosis is largely responsible for the hesitation among commentators to say anything extensive about contemporary New Zealand literature. New Zealand society now finds itself in a time and space well beyond radical post-war political and social activism. The difficulty is that what remains is not a new utopia, but rather the scraps of various movements—feminism, gay rights, Māori sovereignty, none of which are entirely resolved—as leftover activism collides with uncertainty. As Alex Calder and Stephen Turner point out in their introduction to *JNZL*,²¹

[a]lthough history in any proper or authoritative sense might seem strictly impossible under the conditions of settlement—which includes settler designs, settler narratives, settler forgetting—writing the place remains unavoidable, at once an existential necessity (who am I, where am I) and a responsibility, in the sense

²¹ *JNZL* Special Issue (2002).

of responsiveness, to the indigene [...] Perhaps the strongest legacy of settlement is the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of writing the history of settlement. (13)

Or, put differently, we will write ourselves regardless of the certain impossibility of getting ourselves right. This seems a more hopeful prognosis than the 'floating' identity theory. Calder and Turner suggest that rather than having a stifling effect, the permeable, floating identity theory should mean that discussions continue. The ultimate goal is not to find the answer, it is to keep the conversation alive.

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