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THE PLACES WE CARRY:
TŪRANGAWAEWAE, AHI KĀ,
AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

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THE PLACES WE CARRY: TŪRANGAWAEWAE, AHI KĀ, AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

Hayley Walmsley

He manu hou ahau, he pī ka rere.
I am a fledgling bird, a chick learning to fly
traditional Māori whakataukī of Ngāti Awa

“Do you even know who I am?” my father asked, leaning in across the table. I was back in Te Tai Tokerau for the first time in a couple of years. Officially, it was for research. But really, it was a pull from under the ribs. The art exhibition I was doing the research for was about second homes and migration – but if you’re going to ask what makes a second home, you should probably start with a visit back to your original home.

“Well ... no,” I said. He’d never wanted to talk about it before, and I’d never pushed – we had a deep relationship, but one marked by long absences.

My close friend and I had been on the road for days – Auckland, Kerikeri, Whatuwhiwhi – circling. Looking for something familiar, visiting whānau, and eating a lot of roast dinners. By the time we reached Matauri Bay, it was time to stop. So I sat at the same table I’d known since I was a kid, actively listening.

Kōrero with Nan had always folded into daily life. No one called it sacred; we didn’t have to. No one else had ever taken her seat. Now Dad sat there. The shift landed hard: the guard had changed. He was raised whāngai by one of my birth grandmother’s relatives, a woman I knew as Nan: full of love, sharp wit, and a critical tongue.

That afternoon, Dad talked about who we are and the landscapes that shape us: Matauri Bay, Pupuke, Whangaroa and Matangirau. For a stoic man, when these moods took him, you listened, absorbing what you could while they lasted. What began between father and daughter cracked something open – a quiet reckoning with home, a slow handover of generational knowledge.



Figure 1: Taratara, Whangaroa, 2024.
Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

I write from the in-between – between memory and motion. From the whenua that raised me, to the ones I'm still learning to understand. It didn't land all at once – but it gave me a way to hold questions. What it means to be Māori. To be Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tautahi and Ngāti Kāwau. How tūrangawaewae and tino rangatiratanga aren't distant concepts, but ways of finding direction. Markers to move with. Ahi kā, even flickering, never dies. Ahi hīrangī.

Tino rangatiratanga is about holding your own life in your hands. Decision-making. Autonomy. The right to shape the future. It's been part of our struggle, our aspiration, since Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Awatere, 1984, p. 80; Durie, 1998; Simon & Smith, 2001). Tūrangawaewae, then, collects whakapapa, mana, and the relationships that hold you there (King, 1983; Royal, 2003).

I've navigated that ground, raised equally between te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā. The whāngai of my father, and the closed adoption of my mother, shaped a whakapapa of entangled lines and long absences (Metge, 1995; Mikaere, 2011). Returning north wasn't just going home. It was political. A reclaiming. A responsibility. Tino rangatiratanga as return. Some places hold memory in their bones.

At Nan's kitchen table, I'd watched Dad take her seat – the one no one else ever took. Simple moments that carried weight. That shift, the changing of the guard, felt like a quiet transfer: kōrero, whakapapa, silence. That's tūrangawaewae: geography with presence. The right to stand. To speak. To stay. When we leave again, the memory goes with us. That's its own kind of return.

For those of us with complicated relationships to whenua, "Are you from here?" is never a simple question. Is it where I was born? Where I grew up? Where my people are buried? (Hoskins & Jones, 2017; Webber, 2008). Sometimes it lands like curiosity. Other times, it feels like an accusation, like I've said the wrong place – or not given the full story. It echoes the way Asian New Zealanders are often asked, "But where are you really from?" As if the first answer can't be trusted. As if identity needs proof. And the whole time, the person they're questioning speaks with a Kiwi accent. They might be third generation, born here and raised here, yet still somehow made to feel like a visitor. That question is about permission. About who gets to claim a place, and who's still waiting to be allowed.

WHENUA AS MIRROR

Tūrangawaewae isn't fixed but is instead held between physical ground and memory; something kept alive through connection, even across distance. Identity, like culture, travels. It doesn't vanish when we move. It waits – in the body, in memory, in the whenua that still knows your name.

When I came home, the land felt like lived-in memory, layered, in motion. Whenua is ancestor, witness, and mirror. Pupuke, Matangirau, and Whangaroa embrace those who stood before me and those still making their way back.

Some memories arrive as knowing. I don't always know what to call the part of me that listens. Some say wairua. Some say intuition.



Figure 2. St Paul's (Taratarā's lobbed-off head), view from Whangaroa Wharf, 2024. Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

I think of it as an inner landscape – a compass that bears memory and responsibility (Henare, 2001). Not speaking in isolation, it aligns with the land, to specific ridgelines and inlets; to mānuka scrub, sharp stone, and those Northland clouds shaped like bacon and eggs, rolled into soft waves, floccus pushed into pattern.

These places mirror memory like whakapapa: layered, relational, alive. We shape the land with our hands, our absences and our stories. The land shapes us with its silences, its contours, its persistence. The separation was never real. What we call “return” is sometimes just remembering that we were never apart.

For many of us, that remembering comes in fragments, through identity that hasn't come down a straight line. It's been scattered – through whāngai, adoption, and relocation. Repair takes time. It doesn't always look like healing. I kept reminding myself I wasn't there to fix anything, just to tune in, to show up and listen (Metge, 1995; Mikaere, 2011).

Long before Dad took her seat, Nan's table was a knowledge transfer station, whether you noticed it or not. Wisdom folded into tangihanga, tea towels and silence. Slipping through jokes, glances, words you weren't sure were meant for you. Milky tea. Cheeky Gingernuts. A half-played game of Solitaire. Mātauranga moves like that – quietly, sideways (Stewart, 2020a; Stewart, 2020b). You catch it in the muttered gossip of the kitchen aunties, in the tone shift when you've crossed a line, in the space between sentences.

Whakapapa doesn't always sit tidily on a page. Sometimes it's a feeling – a pull in your chest when someone says your name like they've always known it. No matter how long it's been between tangihanga, my cousins I haven't seen in years always recognise me.

“Hayley, it's been a while,” they say, followed by a familiar hug. Leaving doesn't undo the ties. It rewrites how you carry them.

Our people have lived in motion for generations, some leaving freely, others pushed. Still, tūrangawaewae keeps evolving, reminding us from places we have forgotten or never imagined. “Where are you from?” has always been a loaded question (Durie, 1998; Harris, 2004; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). When my dad started naming people and places, something clicked. Threads I didn't even know I was holding began to join together. That return wasn't just mine – I was walking a path laid long before. Maybe what I thought I was holding had been holding me (Te Awēkotuku, 1991).

This is where the questions began – and where many still lie in wait.

Whenua doesn't just receive. It takes things in, holds them, and gives something back. It alters our pace, nudges our voice, reminds us of who we are. It remembers. Answers unfurl quietly, whispered, sometimes roared beneath our feet.

TRANSITIONAL LANDSLIDES

Tūrangawaewae – the place that steadies us when change pulls at our roots – travels with us. But it's not something you can claim by affection alone. It's forged through ancestral ties, lived experience, and sustained presence. Belonging needs practice. Return. Repetition (Hoskins & Jones, 2017; Mead, 2003; Smith, 2021).

Distance sharpens the ache, and when home changes without you, it deepens again. Whenua evolves with identity. Belonging becomes rhythm – something to return to, something to remake. Sometimes we carve new space, and home becomes an echo. Culture lives in repetition. In memory. In resistance to systems that treat identity as capital (Bargh, 2018). Whakapapa becomes threads linking those before us and those yet to come.

We want to be seen. Known. That doesn't fade with movement – it intensifies. The search for a place to stand isn't nostalgia. It's survival. The land pulls us back – not just through longing, but through gravity. Through obligation. Through whakapapa.

My father once travelled across the country to find obsidian, something he thought rare in Aotearoa – only to learn from the locals, once he got there, that the other main source was in our backyard. Pungaere. Puketi. He went all that way to find something that was at home all along.

Tūrangawaewae reminds us of who we are. It grounds our voice. It speaks in unfamiliar spaces. That place to stand moves with us. It's not lost – it's carried. In memory, in commitment, in return. Tūrangawaewae doesn't always mean standing still. Sometimes it means standing up.

"Are you from here?" The question is never simple. But neither are we.

IT DOESN'T BELONG THERE

I grew up about twenty minutes north of Kerikeri, on State Highway 10 – proper feral Northland natives. Mum always sped us into town, swearing at cars, constantly late. I didn't grow up in Auckland or far from my people, just down the road. Not on my marae. I didn't even know where that was for a long time. I was raised at home with my mum and stepdad in a way that wasn't really Māori but also wasn't quite Pākehā either. I was somewhere in between – neither disconnected nor fully held. Caught between knowing where I come from and never quite being named as part of it. Some of us grow up in ahi hīrangī – fires not quite cold, not yet blazing, the kind you tend because no one else sees them trying to catch.

Mum was adopted and raised Pākehā. She didn't learn she was Māori until meeting her birth mother. But even before she knew, her Māoritanga showed – in how she made us take



Figure 3. Tōtara North Wharf, 2024.
Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.



Figure 4. Somewhere between Whatuwhiwhi and Kaitiāia, 2024.
Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

our shoes off at the door. She was raising Māori kids, trying to parent us in a way that honoured that. She was an ally, before she knew it (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2023).

I spent a lot of time at Te Tapui and Wainui, my Nan's marae – my whāngai grandmother. Those places have always felt closest to home. Some would say we're whānau regardless – and I believe them. But it's home and it isn't. I'm not from those lines, although a connection is there. Still, I grew up there – helping in the kitchen, listening, learning without being told. I've always known I don't fully belong. Still, if I belong anywhere, it might be there.

It's also why I don't date Māori from Northland. You can never be quite sure how closely you might be related. It makes belonging intimately uncertain. Connections too close to trust.

Nā wai koe? Who do you belong to? What waters do you belong to? This is a taxonomy that doesn't sort by type, but by connection. It's a question I've been asked more times than I can count, usually by someone vaguely familiar, in places far from home. And I always say: "My last name's Walmsley, but I whāngai Tuari-Stewart."

"Of course you are," they say, as if that makes all the sense in the world. They recognise something in my face – whakapapa as instinct. Sometimes, though, recognition doesn't come so easily.

In the lead-up to my return north, I'd hoped to give something back – to run workshops, take family photos, exchange stories and karakia, and learn more in return. I reached out, asking who to talk to about setting something up on the marae.

The reply was brisk: "We don't do any of that other stuff – just mattresses."

I clarified. I knew what they meant (about the mattresses). But I'd been asking about something else entirely – about connection, about whakapapa, about how to return meaningfully.

They couldn't place me. They asked who I was. So, I told them: names, houses, the church by the beach.

"Oh," they said. "I know your dad."

Of course you do, I thought. With a name like Walmsley, who else could I belong to?

I've been treated like I'm from there – and not – in the same conversation. I've had to explain myself in rooms where everyone should've already known. It makes you question if memory counts, if closeness matters when you're not seen as central.



Figure 5. Inland Road, Te Hiku Ward, 2024.
Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

"You should talk to some of the old people – your Aunty June is 86, still alive, try her."

As if I had a clue who Aunty June was. But I had just claimed my belonging, hadn't I? So, I didn't question it. I paused, unsure what to say for a moment.

"Oh ... okay."

That *kōrero* stayed with me – not because it was harsh, but because it was familiar. That quiet falter. That moment when your face isn't recognised and you're left stitching together your *whakapapa*, hoping it'll land. Hoping it's enough for someone to place you. It's a kind of test. A subtle challenge: prove you belong.

Lineage is carried like receipts: ready to show when asked (Mahuika, 2019). That's the politics of belonging: quiet negotiations inside our own communities, where amnesia rubs against the need to be placed correctly (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2022).

That need to explain my existence has followed me for years. I've always been too brown to be white, too white to be brown. In winter, my skin glows with a ghostly, purplish tint – but my face mirrors my brown aunts more than my *Pākehā* cousins. People used to assume Mum was a friend of the *whānau*, not my mother. Even my belonging showed up confusingly.

I told my dad how hard it was growing up *Māori* and how I never fully belonged. How I was embarrassed or felt less-than. Like it was physically visible. At ten, I was called "half caste, dirty ass." I told him I'd grown up with that sense of being an intruder in my own skin, of constantly having to situate myself so people would understand where I came from.

"But you're white," he blinked, confused. I folded in on myself – small and separated once again.

"Yeah," I said. "But I'm yours."

And without missing a beat, he replied with a little chortle, "When I was a little boy, I was the whitest *Māori* at *Matauri*."

And that was it. The wound and the balm. That push-pull didn't start – or end – with me. These are the waters I come from.

I remember going to visit my dad in Nelson when I was about ten. We hadn't seen him in a while. Mum had to get the police involved because he had just ... disappeared. Then he heard "missing person" on the radio – his own name – and got in touch. Years later he said he didn't realise he was missing – he knew where he was. I wasn't sure what to say to that. I'm of the view that Dad doesn't have object permanence – and that extends to people. Even people he cares about deeply.

That was my first time on a plane. He took us driving around lakes, hills, Farewell Spit. Red Hot Chili Peppers on loop. Near the end, he woke me early and asked questions. About school. About life. Jamming it in before I was gone again.

Somewhere on that trip we stopped at a tiny museum. What I remember is the whale vertebra used as a doorstop. Dad stared at it for a long time, his grumpy *Māori* face on full display – the one *Pākehā* always read as dangerous, but that just meant he was thinking. Then he picked it up and walked out with it.

"It doesn't belong there," he said. "Shouldn't be used like that."

No drama. Just certainty – the kind that needs no permission.

SACRED RESISTANCE

These places aren't just where I grew up. They're breath, inheritance, story. Matauri Bay, Whangaroa Harbour, Pupuke, Matangirau, and Kerikeri shaped me. They're not just coordinates on a map – they're bloodlines and bones. Places where resistance has always lived.

In 2023, hapū in Whangaroa stood against a proposed rare-earth mining operation near Puketi Forest (Forest & Bird, 2023). The plan threatened ancient kauri and sacred waters, including Manginangina Scenic Reserve. Alongside environmental groups, whānau resisted – and won. The permit was stopped. Not by luck, but by kaitiakitanga, ancestral duty made action (Dinsdale, 2025).

In Whangaroa and Matauri, development has disturbed kōiwi, privatised shared spaces, and turned sacred land into spectacle. These aren't new acts – but they continue. And they ignore the truth: whenua is not a resource. It's a relation.

The Matauri porcelain clay pits are quarried and exported – still under foreign ownership (Brathwaite et al., 2014; Pātete, 2016). Whenua taken remains locked in commercial deeds. The promised development never outweighed the damage. Resistance hasn't stopped. It lives in planting, teaching, and projects that return hands to soil and memory to place (Horsley, 2016; Pātete, 2016).

Further south, Ngāti Hau and other hapū continue to oppose the reopening of Puhipuhi's mercury mines. The poisoned waterways flow toward Whangaroa and the Bay of Islands. This opposition is ancestral. It says: not again (Wai 1040, 2013).

Māori resistance wears many faces. Sometimes it's protest. Sometimes a submission, a waiata, a quiet karakia before replanting a kauri. In Wainui and Pupuke, marae are being revitalised. In Kerikeri, native trees are being restored. These actions aren't separate from politics – they are politics. Ahi kā roa lives in each act.

This isn't just local but is part of a wider whakapapa of resistance: Dame Whina Cooper's march. The calls raised at Waitangi. The stands at Puhipuhi. The guardianship at Puketi and Waipoua. Each one says the same thing: we are still here. And so is our fire (Harmsworth & Awatere, 2013; Walker, 2004). When I stand at Whangaroa Harbour or feel the tide at Matauri Bay, I don't just see landscape. I see the faces of those who stood before me. I hear karakia in the trees.

Resistance isn't separate from life – it is life. A daily reaffirmation that the land remembers us, and we remember it.

I think about that every time I drive north. All those signs: "Keep out," "No mining," "Dotterels nesting here." Nailed to fences, painted on driftwood, sprayed on the cliff-face at the Whangaroa-Kaeo bridge. They're declarations. Ahi kā by roadside.



Figure 6. Near Whatuwhiwhi, heading down the coast, 2024.
Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

When the pandemic came, we didn't wait. We built our own checkpoints (de Graaf, 2021; Newstalk ZB, 2020). We already knew help wasn't coming. Up north, we're used to being isolated – abandoned, double-crossed, left to figure it out ourselves (RNZ, 2017). We don't wait for solutions. We make them. We know how it goes.

In Kaeo, where the river floods again and again, whānau just keep rebuilding (RNZ, 2008). At Matangirau, the flood barriers finally hold (Inside Government, 2023). At Taahawai, families still stay. The mud is familiar – and so is the resolve (de Graaf, 2025).

All of these practices of transition, resistance, of standing firm; they're not always loud. But they are ahi kā roa – held, repeated, endured. This is the kind of persistence I found myself stepping into, without even knowing it.



Figure 7. Taipa Beach, 2024.
Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

Even from a distance, I was still trying to carry the fire – upholding ahi kā in forms that made sense where I was. That recent trip north – circling, listening, eating too many roast dinners – was part of something I didn't yet have the words for. Later, I called it research. It became *Migratory Patterns*, an exhibition that gathered artists tracing whakapapa, whenua, and memory across distance (Toi Moroki Centre of Contemporary Art, 2025). People whose ties weren't always visible but still tugged. Who knew what it was to carry place in fragments. The show wasn't just about movement – it moved like whakapapa. Sideways. Inherited. Reclaimed.

At the moment, I'm working on *Provocation Station*. It's a platform, a publishing project, and a testing ground for practices that don't always sit comfortably inside institutions (Provocation Station, 2025). It's Indigenous-led, kaupapa-driven, grounded in conceptual and decolonial thinking – but never too precious. Some days it's an exhibition. Other days it's a letter, a box in the post, a potluck with too much pudding.

It came from a simple truth: the spaces I needed didn't always exist. Not for me, or for so many others. So, I started building one. A place where artists can try things, rest things and speak what needs to be said without having to translate. Somewhere to be held without being explained (Provocation Station, 2025). These projects quietly carry the fire forward – acts of persistence that trace whakapapa beyond geography.

It's slow work, held together by instinct, spreadsheets, and hope. I want it to grow. A dedicated whare, a publishing stream. One day, an Indigenous Art Biennial – rooted here, connected across waters, shaped by artists themselves. But mostly, I want it to feel familiar. A place where you're allowed to bring your full self. Ahi kā, by other means.

TŪRANGAWAEWAE REIMAGINED

Mā te huruhuru, ka rere te manu.
Adorn the bird with feathers so it may fly.
Traditional Māori whakataukī.

My life is a statement of intent: to stand across fractured landscapes and redefine home. I was born in Auckland, raised in Kerikeri, and spiritually anchored in Matauri Bay. My whakapapa runs through Pupuke, Matangirau, and the tides of Whangaroa. Nan taught me that belonging lives in the body as much as the land. Identity is shaped through motion – it breathes through ritual, story, and survival.

Reclaiming tūrangawaewae enacts tino rangatiratanga – the right to define our standing. Ahi kā isn't just a fire left burning – it's one we carry, tend, and sometimes reignite. We might begin with ahi hīrangi – fires barely visible, not yet caught. But through return and repetition, those flickers move through ahi kā to become ahi kā roa – steady, enduring, ours.

In tracing these threads of land, identity, memory and movement, I return to this: belonging is not fixed. It's remade in action and relationship. Tūrangawaewae, in all its forms, draws us back – to ourselves, to what holds us. It survives through showing up, staying close, and keeping warm what remains.

I grew up just down the road from Waitangi. The Treaty (Te Tiriti o Waitangi, or the Treaty of Waitangi) has always been ambient – in schoolbooks, on pānui boards; everywhere. And perhaps because of that, I don't feel the need to rehearse it here. Tino rangatiratanga doesn't begin or end with the Treaty. It runs through whakapapa. Through whenua. Through quiet acts.

Do I have to explain? In a climate where Māori are constantly asked to explain, to educate, to justify – I reserve the right not to.

I think too of my father. Staunch. Proud. Unmoved by doubt. He told me once, "If I wanted land at Pupuke, I'd just go down there and get it." Not as provocation – but as fact. Because in his mind, it's already his.

Who are you to tell me who I am? My whakapapa has already spoken. That's the kind of certainty I carry now. Tūrangawaewae doesn't always need to be declared. Sometimes it can simply be known. I might not always belong in ways others recognise. But I know where I come from. And I stand anyway.



Figure 8. View from Whatuwhiwhi looking out past Parakerake Bay, 2024. Photograph: Hayley Walmsley.

KOINEI TAKU TŪRANGA

So when the questions come – Nā wai au? Ko wai au? – my answer is not uncertain. It is steady. It is proud. It is a bird with its feathers on. Ready.

Tēnā tātou katoa, Ko Emiemi tōku maunga,
Ko Whangaroa tōku awa,
Nō Kerikeri ahau,
Ko Walmsley tōku whānau,
Ko Hayley tōku ingoa.
He uri tēnei nō Ngāti Kawanu, Ngāti Tautahi, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou me Ngāti Pākehā hoki.

E ai ki te kōrero tuku iho, i takoto kē ētahi o aku tūpuna i konei mai i te tīmatanga mai o Whangaroa.
Kāore he waka e herea ai – ko te whenua tonu te pūtake. Engari anō hoki, e hono ana ētahi atu rārangi ki a Ngātōkima-tawhāorua me Te Māmaru.

Ki aku nei whakairo: ko te whānau te mea nunui.
Ehara i te kupu anake, engari mā ngā mahi hoki.
Ko Giles rāua ko Tuari-Stewart ētahi o ngā whānau i āwhina mai ki ahau i te wā tupua.
Ka tū au ki konei, mai rā anō – he mea whakau anō i te ahi kā.
E rau ake ngā ingoa kei ahau, kāore anō kia maumaharatia katoatia.
Ko ētahi i kōrerotia kotahi anake te wā, ā, kua ngaro.
Ko ētahi kei te tatari tonu kia ako anōhia.
Nō reira, ko wai au?
Ko au tēnei. Koinēi taku e tū nei.
Koinēi taku tūranga.

Hayley Walmsley (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Pākehā) is a visual artist, curator, and writer based in Ōtautahi Christchurch. She holds a Master of Visual Arts from Dunedin School of Art and works in a professional role at the University of Canterbury. Her upcoming platform, Provocation Station, supports critical and Indigenous art practices.

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