



Coming to a Sense of Belonging: Matariki in our Time and Place

Kate Lewis © 16 July 2023

Nō Ingarangi, Kōtirana, Tiamana me Huiturangi ōku tīpuna
I whānau mai au i Hartford, Connecticut, Ngā Whenua Tōpū o Amerika
I tupu ake au i Baltimore, Maryland, Ngā Whenua Tōpū o Amerika
I tae mai au ki Aotearoa i te tau rua mano mā waru
Ko Martha's Vineyard tōku karanga motu
Ko Tiasquam tōku karanga awa
Ko Vineyard Haven Moana tōku karanga moana
Kei Hauraki / North Shore o Tāmaki Makaurau ahau e noho ana
Ko Kate ahau

My ancestors hail from England, Scotland, Germany and Switzerland
I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, USA
I was raised in Baltimore, Maryland, USA
I arrived in New Zealand in the year 2008
Martha's Vineyard is the island that calls to me
The Tiasquam is the river that calls to me
Vineyard Haven is the harbor that calls to me
I am currently living in Hauraki on the North Shore of Auckland
I am Kate

Many of us have lost a sense of belonging in one place or another, having made a life around the world from where we were born and grew up. There is a longing for a beloved past and people, and despair when we realize that when we go back everything has changed and feel grief at what has been lost.

The Welsh have a word that describes this feeling, hiraeth. Welsh writer Lily Crossley-Baxter describes hiraeth as having elements of homesickness, nostalgia, and longing... and also “the subtle acknowledgment of an irretrievable loss – a unique blend of place, time, and people that can never be recreated. This unreachable nature adds an element of grief, but somehow it is not entirely unwelcome.”

I grew up in Baltimore and spent parts of summers on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of the state of Massachusetts, in the northeastern U.S., and it is the natural world that calls to me, the island, the stream, and the harbor. My great grandmother bought a house there in 1920; it has been in our family for more than 100 years and has seen five generations of Lewises. When I was cleaning out a closet a few years ago I found 6 different coffee pots, all different designs from over the decades. We have friends there who have known my family for three generations. Martha's Vineyard has been the place where I have felt that I belonged.

On Martha's Vineyard there is a settlement that belongs to the Native American Wampanoag tribe. These are the people who first encountered the new arrivals on the Mayflower in 1620, and some of them are still around. Of course the whole island used to belong to them, as well as larger extents of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They've lived in that area for at least 10,000 years. When Europeans came the Wampanoag were felled by disease and violence, and their lands were occupied by the newcomers.

I've been going to Martha's Vineyard for my entire life, and I knew nothing about the Wampanoag until I started looking into it for this talk. All I knew was that they were the first people there, and that they've been in court for decades trying to reclaim land. One of the wins was the official name change from Gay Head, given by the colonists in the 1800's, back to Aquinnah for the town and area of southwest Martha's Vineyard. It had never occurred to me that there might be an indigenous name for Martha's Vineyard; of course there is, Noepe, and a single tweet and a single blog on all of the internet about how to pronounce it. No-epp-ay. Does anyone know if that's correct? Does any of this sound familiar?

This year I took a course to learn awareness of New Zealand history and the effects on Māori culture. European colonists came off as looking pretty bad. The course was not about blame and guilt; it intended to teach us about the multi-generational suffering that has led to the gross inequities of our current societal landscape. The goal of the course was to empower us to make positive change. But it was hard for me not to see my own family in the narrative.

My father's ancestors went to America as some of the earliest settlers, to Virginia in the 1500's. There would have been Native Americans there, who would have been displaced. Subsequently my ancestors owned plantations and owned slaves. An uncle has found that we have African American relatives descended from that time. While we all probably have rapists and murderers somewhere in our families, it is confronting to have evidence of it, assuming that the power relationship between slave owners and slaves rarely resulted in consensual sex between them and knowing that rape was used as a method of control.

I am descended from the founding father of the nation, George Washington, and share a name with one of its greatest explorers, Meriwether Lewis. I also am related to a leader of the bloodiest rebellion in the nation's history, Robert E. Lee, in which my family had members on different sides of the Civil War. I now have a sister-in-law and nieces who are African-American, who are guaranteed to experience racism and misogyny in a country that is sliding backwards with respect to human rights thanks to a highly politicized Supreme Court. How can I help them if I'm over here? What is my role in their lives?

Coming to New Zealand was my idea; my PhD advisor brought a research group here while I was still a PhD student. The intention was to stay here until I finished and then go home. I finished in 2010. We loved Peter's primary school and the sense that children had more time and freedom to be children here. We loved that they emphasized socializing and playing outside over homework. We loved the scenic beauty of New Zealand, being able to live so close to the shore that I walked along the

water to catch a ferry to work and joined a swimming group on Sundays as my new form of spiritual practice.

And also we were ok with living half a world away from our parents and my family. Why is that? As I get older I'm not sure I would do that again. If my nieces had been born I'm pretty sure I could not have done it then. But in any case I made the choice.

When we come to a new place we need to learn the rules and decide what part we want to play. I came to New Zealand with my 4 year old son and husband because my PhD supervisor had taken a professorship at the University of Auckland. We had some colleagues from the U.S. but didn't socialize with them, so we were on our own, no family and no friends.

As is familiar to many of us, New Zealanders are superficially friendly – tourists rave about how open and friendly they are when we visit the country. By contrast many of us have found that Kiwis are insular when it comes to reaching out to newcomers, which I suspect is typical in other places too. I had many afternoons waiting to pick up my son at school when I would sidle up to a group of other mothers and be ignored. When we have family and friend supports in place we are not in need of making new friends. As a result my closest friends have always been other immigrants, mothers of sons my son's age and swimmers from England, Finland, Germany, Taiwan, and the Czech Republic. I have one close Kiwi friend, and that took years to develop. It's hard to start a new life; I felt strongly that I didn't belong then.

What if we hadn't chosen this life? What if our suffering had been imposed on us by others? What if our lack of belonging occurred in the land of our birth, because the land was taken from us and we were displaced and disempowered by force? And forced to watch as our children and grandchildren lost our language, our culture, our sense of self and identity? Most of us cannot imagine what this is like.

I have been scared of approaching Māori culture and interacting beyond the superficial with Māori people. I have been terrified of saying the wrong thing and showing that I am part of the dominant and oblivious culture that drops affronts and insults without thinking. I have the experience of being a woman, repeatedly receiving slights and interruptions and snide condescension, and I dread being the perpetrator of such slights towards another.

I have been confused by my fear; I have always been good at learning languages and interested in different cultures. I was an anthropology major first and fascinated by the wonders of how culture, language, and belief have developed around the world. But it's been different as I've gotten older, felt less sure of myself in this new land. Taking te reo Māori courses as well as trying to learn more about culture and history has helped.

Here I am new, more than 1/4 of my life, but only 15 years in the grand scheme of a place. I've raised a son here and experienced loss and love. My marriage ended, my mother died, I changed careers, and have lived through COVID here. I've just been to my first memorial service and mourned with people I worked with 10 years ago, a family of sorts, when families only see each other at weddings and funerals. Much of

the ceremony was in te reo Māori, and that seems normal now, and joyful. But I still sound different from most people, still learn new words and phrases regularly, “spit the dummy” and “munted” are my personal favourites. I am aware all the time that I don’t fully belong here; the architecture is different, the plants, the rocks.

One way that I find my bearings in a place is by looking for the rocks; in that way I am always connected to the land. With rocks I pretty much know where I stand; I figure out their origins, and I have a big picture of thousands or millions of years of history. Continents have drifted, mountains and valleys have formed, coastlines have shifted. Sometimes rocks tell us what lived in the past through fossils of shells or bones. In Auckland we know that 200,000 years ago the landscape was dominated by kauri forests because we can see ring-shaped moulds of where lava engulfed kauri tree trunks at what is now Takapuna Beach.

Brené Brown is a social science researcher who has focused her career on shame, vulnerability, and courage. She writes, “A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible human need from the moment we’re born until the day we die.” She defines belonging as, “the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”

I am still struggling to figure out where I belong, and perhaps that is associated with my own level of self-acceptance. I have found that it has helped me more to learn more about Māori history than European Kiwi history and to embrace an identity as a Māori ally. This gives me a sense of purpose here, perhaps coloured by the ambivalence I carry from my family’s history in the U.S.

On Friday we celebrated the second Matariki holiday, the nation’s first Indigenous public holiday and “believed to be one of the first Indigenous celebrations to be recognized as a public holiday in a settler colonial state.” (The Guardian, 23 June 2022). I went to Bastion Point, or Takaparawhau, outside the Ōrākei Marae, with hundreds of others, to see the crescent moon and the stars and the Umu Kohukohu Whetū, the earth oven and foods cooked and offered to the Matariki star cluster. Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei welcomed us and went through the official Matariki ceremony with karakia around the themes of remembrance – remembering those who have died during the year, celebrating the present with feasting and joy, and looking to the future and reflecting on our hopes and desires.

My mother’s birthday was yesterday; she died in 2018. I will honour her by saying that she would be so pleased that I have found you people and am starting to feel like I belong here. I wish I had asked her where she felt she belonged; I have wondered if maybe she would prefer to be buried with her parents on a grassy hill in Jeromesville, Ohio, than with former President Grover Cleveland, Vice President Aaron Burr, and four generations of my father’s family in the Princeton, New Jersey, cemetery. I hope I’m wrong and that they are enjoying a mighty party and that she has learned to kick back and relax with the rich and famous.

When I go to the U.S. I can't wait to see my family and the familiar haunts. And it is like visiting a foreign country. I relax when I know I sound like everyone else; here I'm feeling like part of fabric and then someone surprises me and asks me where my accent is from. There's a lot of unconscious busy-ness, not realizing I'm aware of being different until suddenly I'm the same. I relax when I get there, ahhh home, and cry when I'm leaving. And then relax when I get back, ahhh home. Friends. Green hills and the sea.

While I feel like I struggle to belong in either place, I am also grateful that I belong in both places. It is a special kind of life that has gathered the richness and wonders of multiple histories and cultures and languages. In honour of Matariki I'm looking forward to the next year and what will unfold. Mānawatia a Matariki!

Meditation / Conversation starter

- What makes you feel like you belong somewhere?