

## Research Symposium Article

**Four windows into geography and imagination(s)**Robin Kearns,<sup>1</sup> Gregory O'Brien,<sup>2</sup> Ronan Foley<sup>3</sup> and Nell Regan<sup>4</sup>*<sup>1</sup>School of Environment, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland New Zealand, <sup>2</sup>Stout Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600. Wellington 6140, <sup>3</sup>Department of Geography, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland, <sup>4</sup>Dublin, Ireland*

**Abstract:** Geographical awareness and the imaginative impulse are sibling domains of human experience. We imagine the places we have yet to visit and allow ourselves to envisage differently those already familiar to us. This set of four essays extends presentations made at a Stout Research Centre (Victoria University of Wellington) seminar in 2015, at which two geographers and two artists reflected on the connections between geography and imagination. Collectively they take forward a broader conversation between geography and the humanities, contributing to the emergent field of 'geohumanities'.

**Key words:** art, geohumanities, imagination, Ireland, New Zealand, place.

**Introduction****Robin Kearns**

Geographical awareness and the imaginative impulse are sibling domains of human experience. We imagine the places we have yet to visit and allow ourselves to envisage differently those already familiar to us. Hope and aspiration are fuelled by the possibilities charted by imagined places. Within geography, everything from mental maps and sense of place studies to the development of non-representational theory speaks as much of the imagination as measurable cartographies.

What was formerly a singular way of seeing in geography is now a thoroughly plural and healthily undisciplined set of ways to see, research, and construct knowledge of places and processes. Part of the pluralism in geography has come from our collective acknowledge-

ment of the limits to objectivity and the diverse ways of imagining and knowing the world. To that extent, geography still dwells in the sciences but, at least in its human domain, is playing catch-up with the arts.

This is a considerable shift. To our geographical forebears, imagination only had a place in their toolbox when the unknown was confronted. To J. K. Wright, then President of the Association of American Geographers:

What distinguishes the true geographer from the true chemist or the true dentist would seem to be the possession of an imagination peculiarly responsive to the stimulus of *terrae incognitae* both in the literal sense and more especially in the figurative sense of all that lies hidden beyond the frontiers of geographical knowledge (Wright 1947, p. 4).

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He went on to say that:

Unfortunately, deep-seated distrust of our artistic and poetic impulses too often causes us to repress them and cover them over with incrustations of prosaic matter (Wright 1947, p. 7).

Over the decades since that presidential address, there has been much sediment of 'prosaic matter' in the name of geographical understanding. There has also been arguably too little flexing of the imagination unencumbered by the 'pressure of an array of contrapuntal concepts such as reason, experience, reality, (and) objectivity' (Daniels 2011, p. 183). But the 21st century does, mercifully, find geographers a degree less distrustful of the artistic and poetic impulses to which Wright refers. We do not wish to imply that the poetic terrain, populated as it is by memory, desire, loss and love, ought necessarily to influence the work of geography. Indeed, the business of articulating the power-laden 'imaginaries' that work to frame collective understandings of the world (Howie & Lewis 2014) is a critical and parallel endeavour necessitating different tools and mindsets. Illuminating these deep and daunting fault lines that structure the political terrain of everyday life is core to the human geographer's vocation.

Rather, what this set of essays tacitly advocates is a greater openness to alternate and kaleidoscopic ways of seeing that offer opportunities to contemplate less disciplined horizons than those typically (re)presented in social science. While the imagination has long been 'pluralised' (Howie & Lewis 2014), this has been in reference to the adjective 'geographical' (Gregory 1994). We self-consciously choose to group the present set of reflections under the banner of 'Geography *and* Imagination(s)' (rather the 'Geographical imagination' or 'Imaginative geographies'). This strategic use of the conjunction 'and' in our title signifies a meeting of vantage points rather than an exploration from within a disciplinary perspective. By extension, then, this short introduction seeks neither to preview the essays as disciplinary interventions, nor apologise for any inherent idealism or romanticism. As a collection, they speak to a conversation released from any weight of responsibility to take forward a narra-

tive of disciplinary development. To that extent, it is a conversation reflective of the goals of the Stout Research Centre itself: 'an important bridge between the University and the community' (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/stout-centre/>).

This set of essays was prompted by poet and painter Gregory O'Brien's tenure as the Stout Memorial Fellow at Victoria University. Early in his residency, in March 2015, he invited me along with an Irish colleague, Ronan Foley (at the time an Erskine Fellow at Canterbury), and poet Nell Regan, to engage in a four-way conversation on the theme of 'Geography and the Imagination'. The following essays have been developed from the ten minute talks that were offered to a fulsome and fascinated audience on the day. Collectively, to an extent, they suggest what Daniels (2011, 184) describes as 'the brighter side of the geographical imagination, shifting the emphasis from critical interpretation to creative practice'. If there is vulnerability, through such practice, in exposing oneself to critiques such as solipsism or romanticism, there is also comfort in knowing one's words are etching a visceral and largely theory-free response to the three-dimensional (ontological/spatial/temporal) yogic exhortation of 'be here now'. In that vein, each of this collection's texts considers such a presencing: O'Brien's sense of bringing multiple interpretations with him as he travels; Foley's concern for stories about water places and how a 'deep mapping' is common in both nations' post-colonial indigenous accounts; Regan's parallel interests in names, meanings and emotional responses to place and my own reflections on a visual-spoken landscape that invokes contested re-imaginings of place.

This inclusion of reflections involving poetry and art in the *New Zealand Geographer* might seem something of a departure from the journal's traditional fare. However, their appearance roughly coincides with the launch of the new *Geohumanities* journal of the same Association of American Geographers that Wright addressed in 1947. Almost seven decades later, the inaugural editors of this journal, Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon, claim a scholarly space in which:

Metaphors and core geographic concepts such as place, space, landscape, scale,

and mapping now permeate literature, philosophy, the arts, and other humanities, and the broader imaginative reinterpretation of these concepts has in turn led to a renaissance of creativity in geography (<http://news.aag.org/2015/04/call-for-papers-geohumanities/>).

The four essays that follow, then, seek to advance such a recursive relationship between geography and creativity, drawing on insights from Irish and New Zealand writers. In so doing, we connect ourselves to wider conversations across the humanities, social sciences, and popular culture that are serving, in a sense, to democratise geography.

Through place, space, landscape, scale and mapping being on more lips than ours, we can see geography's transformative power and emancipatory possibilities – not only in the political sense but also in the realm of releasing imaginative potential to expand our worlds. This is not to give away our identity as geographers but rather to recognise that, in the words of David Lowenthal (1961, 242), 'anyone who inspects the world around him (sic) is in some measure a geographer'. This expansionary possibility comes at a time of unprecedented interdisciplinary activity and global connectedness. When the world is seemingly smaller, we can surely enlarge it again through engaging the imagination more vigorously.

### **The distance between poetry and geography: Thoughts on art and place**

#### **Gregory O'Brien**

Having lugged the weighty *Collected Poems* of James K. Baxter (1979) the length of North Piha Beach, my geographer-friend Robin Kearns, myself and a couple of others charged up Lion Rock. This was back in the early 1980s, when the rock was still climbable. Installed, in good time, on the summit, we caught our breath then read poems aloud, with the wind blowing our hair around. There were beakers of wine. More recently, the *Collected Poems* escorted me as far up the Whanganui River as Jerusalem/Hiruharama, and as far south as Dunedin. And when I finally found myself tramping up the Matukituki Valley, it was

Baxter's 'Poem of the Matukituki Valley' I was clutching in my hand, much the way a serious outdoors-type would clasp a water bottle or a Department of Conservation map.

With similar intentions, I used to brandish collections of poetry by Allen Curnow and C. K. Stead on day trips to Karekare Beach, where I might easily have bumped into either of the poets, treading the black sand. In that case, too, my reading/book-carrying amounted to an act of returning texts, albeit temporarily, to their originating locus, reacquainting them with the landscape that succoured them.

Writing is an act of inscription upon the landscape – an adding of meaning, texture, nuance and depth. This is not a new idea. But reading is also a part of that act of inscription or, to put it another way, overwriting. A heightened state of being in a place and engaging with its imaginary/artistic/literary reflection is the province of reader as well as writer.

Yet the relationship between place visited and book or poem read is not always as logical as I have just suggested. Just as often, disjunction is the order of the day. I remember carrying another impractically hefty tome – Jean Arp's *Collected French Writings* – on a two-day mid-winter tramp into the very un-French Waitakere Ranges. Earlier, I had spent over a year immersed in William Blake in the less than Blakean setting of Dargaville. Such reading matter might be at an acute angle to its location, yet somehow it still manages to wrangle for itself a sensible accommodation. More recently, there was the Parisian poet Yves Bonnefoy on Tongatapu and then the Chathams; I was with Seamus Heaney in Gore and the Syrian poet Adonis in Northland (having discovered his writing in an out-of-season vegetable stall/temporary bookstore, on the roadside near Maungatapere). As time goes by, this process of cross-referencing continues, the imprint of all these writers – their books – remains, no matter how wildly out-of-kilter they might seem, and my personal reading map of New Zealand becomes more and more convoluted and radiant with possibilities.

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When travelling, I fine-tune my reading matter in advance. I do not have a Kindle; I believe in the hard stuff. There always has to be poetry – some of which might 'speak' directly to

my destination – and then I throw in a few things that make less sense. This is to thicken the plot. Heading up to the Kermadec Islands on HMNZS Otago in May 2011, I carried on board the odes of Pablo Neruda, Derek Walcott's *In a Green Night*, Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, Elsie Morton's *Crusoes of Sunday Island* and Judith Schalansky's *Atlas of Remote Islands* – the kinds of books that not only help you get to where you are going, but also help you to get lost.

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Landscape and place are things New Zealanders cannot really get away from. Our cities are not big enough to be seriously lost in. Before long, we invariably find ourselves out in the air and space and landscape. As McKee Wright wrote in 1900, 'Our cities face the sea, and the winds are blowing free' (as cited in Bornholdt *et al.* 1996, p. 491). Geography and the elements have long been the baseline for our poetry – as they are for this country's painting tradition. It was Ralph Hotere who first set me thinking about how language – most specifically Maori waiata, but also the Catholic mass and lyrical poetry – was an elemental presence in this landscape. Such was his experience, growing up in the remote Northland community of Mitimiti during the 1930s. From his father Tangirau, who was steeped in oral tradition, Ralph learnt that the chanted or intoned word was as fundamental as rain and wind (O'Brien 1996). And so, in Hotere's mature paintings, words, phrases and poems fade in and out of the resonant dark space of his canvases.

Colin McCahon was another artist who found himself listening intently to his environment. His paintings collectively amounted to a 'chart to my country' (to borrow a phrase from his friend John Caselberg), and the act of painting itself was, in his mind, 'a potent way of talking'. As McCahon famously said, 'I will need words' – and the words in his paintings are like illuminated crumbs leading us through the dark forest of our moment in history.

Words, images and landscape find one of their most integrated territories in the realm of cartography. Certainly, Hotere and McCahon were inspired by maps, as they were by geological diagrams and coastal surveys. Importantly, maps are a multivalent place where words, numerals, signs and symbols

coexist, lending further meaning to each other and stretching across the grammar of their disparate origins.

Conveniently, maps are also a meeting place between geography and the imagination. For a non-specialist like myself, they are not only informative and useful but also intoxicating and pleurably disorientating. I date my fascination with maps back to my childhood, when many of my favourite books had one, either as a frontispiece or folded into the back: *Treasure Island*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Gulliver's Travels*, Tove Jansson's 'Moomintroll' books, *The Lord of the Rings* and many others. None of the maps in these books, as far as I knew, had any basis in a real landscape. Hence, these fictitious maps were a means of release and liberation from the world's geography; they were an invitation to, and floor plan of, new, non-existent places.

In accord with this early enthusiasm, I have often incorporated maps into the covers or early pages of my own books of poetry and non-fiction. For the endpapers of *Back and Beyond: New Zealand Painting for the Young and Curious* (O'Brien 2008), I re-charted the nation, deploying the names of artists featured in the book and signposting the public art galleries which have also become a vital feature of my mental map of New Zealand.

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It was the shape of words on a page of poetry that first drew me to verse, rather than prose. As well as appealing to my visual sense, I also remember something specifically geographic about poetic form: The sonnet resembled an irregular four-sided island, the rambling ode was a long, endless peninsula, and free verse was like the staccato coastline of New Zealand with its stops and starts, its pauses and accelerations:

*... or as a wave is  
laid gently to  
one side – such is  
the character of waves, the way  
they are  
always hurrying*

*back  
to themselves.*

I liked the space around the words – the distances the eye travels to gather up the poem’s constituent parts – as much as I did the words. Continuing in this cartographic vein, I have decorated numerous books with map-like confections and, in *Afternoon of an Evening Train*, I laid out the titles of all the book’s poems across the title spread, the drawing doubling as a contents page and also as a reader’s guide, leading the inquisitive eye into a light-infused spinet or grove which also accommodated railway tracks and various trains of thought.

The map, then, has considerable subjective as well as objective potentials. It can set things in flux, just as it can put things in their ‘rightful’ place. It can complicate as much as it can clarify.

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Having claimed maps on behalf of The Imagination, another territory I would wrestle from the arms of Geography is the expedition/excursion/fact-finding mission. In December 2012, I had the good fortune of joining Robin Kearns on a week-long ‘field trip’ to the Chatham Islands. It was an ideal, unhurried opportunity to muse further on the relationship between poetry and that evolving discipline, geography. In hindsight, I note a naïve tendency on my part to reduce or simplify our disparate pursuits, polarising them in the matter that follows.

Poetry delights in a shambles; geography desires fixed co-ordinates. Poetry craves a sense of wonder; geography wants to make sense of it all. Poetry is the pursuit of the unseen; geography the pursuit of the seen. Poetry might seek the flavour of a place, geography a set of co-ordinates or accurate descriptions.

During the course of our time on the Chathams, however, it was the commonalities that became apparent and, I believe, most useful to us. Through conversations with Robin, I realised that geography could, relievedly, accommodate the imaginative maps of my childhood as it could any number of exemplary Cartesian charts. And, equally, poetry could claim some of geography’s accustomed turf (I recall the titles of two influential books in my writing life: C. K. Stead’s (1982) *Geographies* and Riemke Ensing’s *Topographies* (1984). Both disciplines could be of some metaphoric use to the other. Essentially, poetry and geography are both acts of excavation and extrapo-

lation. The distance between them is no distance at all – it might best be described as a shared wall or common on which both can play.

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*The length of the voyage*

*As measured by buckets of salt water*  
*As measured by the shadow of a pohutukawa,*  
*variations thereof*  
*As measured by the pollen remaining in the*  
*seams of a jacket*  
*As measured by flying fishes landed on the deck*  
*As measured by the names of seamounts laid in*  
*an unstraight line*  
*As measured by everything in the rope room*  
*that is not rope*  
*As was once measured in crayfish*  
*As measured by rocks brought from a far island*  
*As measured by every previous voyage and*  
*every subsequent voyage*  
*from now*  
*until the end of time.*

‘The length of the voyage’ is an inventory poem, a set of measurements, written on the HMNZS Otago, as we approached Tongatapu in May 2011. I was sitting on the aft deck, just outside the ship’s Rope Room, joining together what threads I could lay my hands on. From there, I set to working on a series of short poems which could function as further co-ordinates on my subjective map of the Pacific. This would evolve into the title sequence of *Whale Years* (O’Brien, 2015), a book which spans four years of oceanic voyaging.

*Easy on the oar*  
*Steady the sail*  
*Hold the thought*  
*Let go the hand*

The short poems are Xs on my map of the South Pacific. They are notations, inscriptions, fragments of overheard prayers, songs or utterances.

*Arms and legs of*  
*the plundered sea, for whom is it*  
*you dance?*

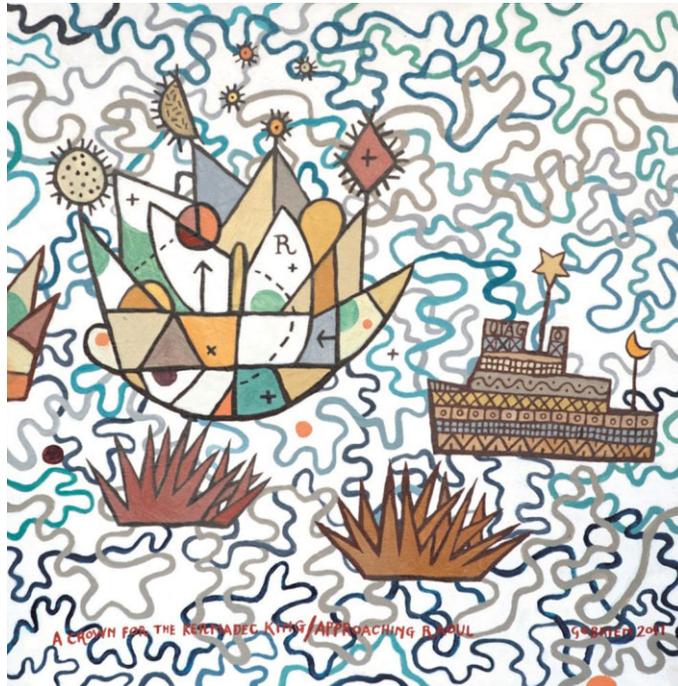


Figure 1 Gregory O'Brien, *A crown for the Kermadec King*, 2011, acrylic on hardboard.



Figure 2 (a and b): Gregory O'Brien, *Back and Beyond I & II*, 2008, ink and acrylic on paper.

The stanzas resemble luggage tags, stamps on a non-existent passport. Or they could be annotations scrawled in the margins of earlier oceanic maps . . .

*Unbreaking rocks*

*Broken sea*

*Unbroken sea*

*Breaking rocks*

During my 'whale years', I visited islands across the South Pacific, from New Caledonia to Rapanui/Easter Island. Particularly on Raoul Island and the Chathams, I was struck by how these vulnerable yet powerful places contained some quintessence of Aotearoa/New Zealand. On these islands there is a heightened sense of both life and death, of the spatial and temporal limits of existence. One feels the edges of things, an aloneness and also a primal energy, be it in the sky or sea or the sinuous, gritty physicality of the land.

Yet Raoul Island also presented an inversion of New Zealand. Here was a place with neither money nor industry; and from which rats and wild cats had been eradicated. It was being left to become again the bird-land that mainland New Zealand had once been. In this curiously inverted world, flying fish could be seen a short distance offshore, and, on a clay track to the summit, we could hear the twittering of petrel chicks beneath the ground we walked upon. (In the absence of vermin, the petrel population had now resumed its subterranean nesting habits.) It was a dream and it was the most real of places. It was a poem and it was a piece of geography.

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Upon first arriving in the calmer waters south of Raoul, having come through a force five storm, I inscribed one page of my journal, 'Raoul Island imagined as an endangered plant species' and made a sketch which later became the painting above (Fig. 1). The island was a reprieve: a lotus flower of calmness and equilibrium – it opened out before us. Maybe the painting captures something of the profuse energies and curvilinear forms of the ocean across which our ship, HMNZS Otago, had wended its way, traversing layers and multidirectional currents of air and water.

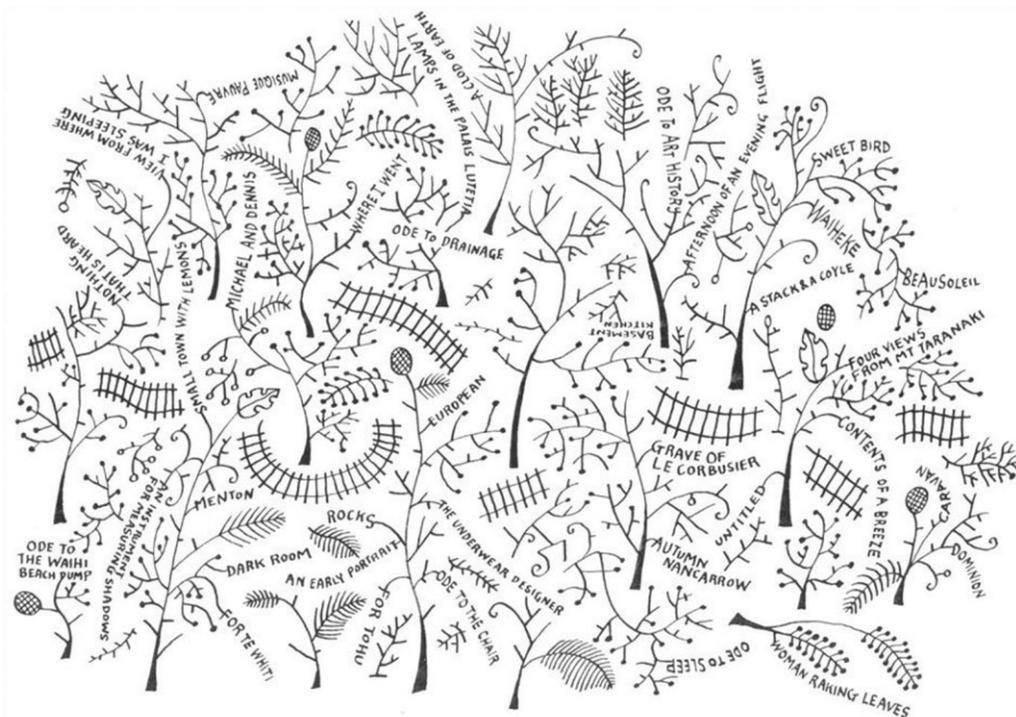
Mid-ocean and, literally, at the mercy of the elements, prepossessions and certainties fall away. Until you have been beyond the sight of land, wrote Goethe, 'you have no conception of the world or of your place in it' (Conrad 2009, 9). During the May 2011 voyage, we found ourselves in a world manifestly destabilised and in flux – an environment that presented a huge challenge to any visual or verbal artist, as it would to any geographer.

No matter what personal imperatives there are for exploring the oceanic reality further – and it is an exhilarating and largely uncharted zone – there are global environmental issues that underline and necessitate further attention (Fig. 2), whether working within the fields of geography or artistic expression, or in the endlessly productive space that is opening between them (Fig. 3).

## Swimming and imaginative landscapes

### Ronan Foley

When I told colleagues in Ireland I was coming to New Zealand, they all said, 'oh that must be great, all those mountains and volcanoes and rivers to study'. Great though they are, my standard reply was, 'I'm not that kind of geographer', and indeed the material descriptions of geographical objects have always interested me less than those more immaterial and elusive aspects of place. Doreen Massey (2005) defines place as consisting of three elements: location, locale and sense of place. For me, the relationships between geography and the imagination are always about senses of and in place, and about the imaginative connections between ourselves and rippling connections of communities around us. In contemporary geography, there are new appreciations of the impacts of emotion and imagination on spatial behaviours and the production of place and how narrative and performative mappings of place also emerge (Davidson *et al.* 2007). For my own research, most of those things coalesce into an interest in what we might term 'healthy blue space' and especially the locations and practices of outdoor swimming. My wider writing on therapeutic landscapes started out with a focus on healing waters in



**Figure 3** Gregory O'Brien, *Afternoon of an evening train, title-spread, 2005*, ink on paper (O'Brien 2005).

settings such as holy wells, Turkish Baths, historic spas and sweat houses (Foley 2010). Yet I have become more and more entranced by the seaside and in particular, social and cultural narratives of swimming and the associated historical, lived and imaginative connections between people and place, something common to both New Zealand and Ireland (Parr 2011).

I think we always begin to trace our encounters with the sea in autobiographical and imaginative ways through ourselves, our original families, our new families, or new communities of friendship and belonging; all acting as human markers on the way. Yet there are also place markers, the rock pools of our childhood, the hidden beaches of our teenage years, and the re-discoveries of both old and new swimming spots in our adult lives. All of those place histories intermingle with the personal to form a lifetime of imagination, attachment, memory and at times, loss. Much recent writing on the beach, the sea and wild swimming, all attest to the power of these phenomenological, auto-ethnographic, life-long person-place encoun-

ters that move the mind, body and spirit (Gesler 1992; Deakin 2000; Hoare 2013).

I also draw from David Seamon's (1979) exploration of lifeworlds, in which our everyday acts and practices routinely frame our day-to-day existence. While for many swimming may not be an everyday encounter, it can still be an everyfewdays, everyweek, everymonth, everyyear event. I am trying to develop those ideas by suggesting a greater attention to the active body-subject in terms of specific place immersions, practices and performances (Duff 2011). I am currently carrying out an oral histories project and interviewing swimmers in cold Irish waters, coastal and inland, on their own swimming lives and the places in which they swim or swam. The value for me in taking such an oral histories approach is in part that link to the older Irish *dinnseanchas* or place lore (also a key feature of Māori *waiata* and *whakapapa*) – but that it also opens up space for people to talk about an aspect of their life that can be hugely important, but may never have really thought about before. Yet what is

and remains important to me, and which some of the recent writing on the sea and swimming *gets*, is how three elements, movement, rest and encounter, each have their own characteristics and value in framing blue space imaginations (Seamon 1979).

I have been carrying out research at a number of established swimming spots in Ireland including the 40 Foot in Dublin, the Guillemene near Tramore and the Pollock Holes in Kilkee (Fig. 4); as well as some inland river and lake sites. In each location, the idea of a history of bodies moving in, out, across, up and down that space is central (Gatrell 2013). Each site can be viewed throughout the day or seasons as a succession of *movements*, fluxes and flows that in turn are shaped by weather, season, tide, mood and inclination. At such sites, a natural community emerges, in which the regular finds a place, the visitor can choose to engage, the lone swimmer can still do their own thing, safe in the knowledge that there are always bodies at *rest* that may look out for them. Conversations, repeated and ephemeral, emerge in those resting places as bodies are toweled down, pants are put on, enflasked cups of tea are sipped. We leave our clothes in little piles, as if we are leaving off our skin to become more like the other mammals in the water, and then put our human skin back on again once we leave the water. Bodies *encounter* each other out of the water, but some encounters take place in the water, from where a specific view, or re-encounter with the land can emerge (Ryan 2012). Much traditional landscape research, for example, focused on the idea of the detached 'view' or 'gaze', but swimming forces a genuine immersion in the water instead, from which it is



**Figure 4** The Pollock Holes, Kilkee (photo, author).

almost impossible to remain neutral or detached (Wylie 2007). The particular immersive encounter in Irish or British waters, unlike in New Zealand, is a chilling one, in that turning blue becomes a literally embodied outcome of the swimming act. Swimming in New Zealand, at the incomparably beautiful Hahei Beach or in the St Clair Hot Pools of Dunedin, where surfers literally swell up behind you, is a warmer but equally enriching experience. Yet there is a literal and metaphorical sense of crossing a threshold whenever we enter the water and our bodies and imaginations are somehow never the same again (Fig. 4).

There is a life-course history to these engagements that scales up swimming from a single encounter to multiple encounters across the life course in multiple locations and where the imagination most fully emerges and becomes emplaced (Lea *et al.* 2015). While there are many people who like to swim in the same place all the time, it is rare to find someone who remains entirely faithful. Indeed a swimming promiscuity is common to most of us, doing it in different places with different people at different times. Our swimming memories reflect these multiple encounters, from where we swam as children, to the discovery, for us Northern Europeans at least, that one could swim in actual warm blue water, in the Mediterranean, followed by a return to the grey-blue in our later lives. We do have a swimming DNA, a mixture of body and place-memory that follows us across our lives and mixes the present and the past, and even includes a form of imagined future swim, such as the delight in a freezing Irish January to know that next week we would be swimming on Little Oneroa Beach, Waiheke. The memories of past swims and the thoughts of future ones bind us together in an interlocking assemblage that moves beyond our heads to lift our bodies and sprits as well (Foley 2011).

In doing oral history work, the feelings and memories that people have of the places they first swam, and whom they first swam with, run very deep into the imagination and a very personal mapping of self-in-place. This extends to a contemplation of current swimming actions. A woman who started swimming at the end of the summer and just carried on across the winter created a habit and routine in which

missing a single day's swimming felt like an immense loss. Another considers the thought of dying at sea as just 'swapping one paradise for another' while a third notes the intermingling of regulars and occasionals at the 40 Foot, where all ages, sizes and shapes meet in this neutral intergenerational 'third space'. Photographer Gary Coyle (2009) records his swim every morning at the 40 Foot and has turned his documentation into a set of images from and in the water, in which the view of self, others and place is altered and becomes, both literally and metaphorically, liquid and sub-aqual. For many swimmers that affective 'zen' moment, where body, mind and water flow together in an almost transcendental way, is occasionally but regularly mentioned. Here, too, place-imagination, memory and personal histories shape that momentary mapping.

In looking back, we remember the differential joys, and indeed occasional traumas, of swimming encounters in different places in our lives (Collins & Kearns 2007). Such memories also become imagined anticipations of future encounters that in turn become productive. Great literature has been inspired by such lifeworlds and indeed the whole of the opening section of Joyce's *Ulysses* is set at the 40 Foot from which the protagonists plunge into the 'snot-green' Irish Sea (Joyce 2008 [1922]). Tom Paulin noted how central water was to *Ulysses* and Joyce himself noted that the Anna Livia section was, 'an attempt to subordinate words to the rhythm of water' (as cited in Wheatley 2002, X). Alice Oswald's exquisite long poem, *Dart* – it, too, a form of oral history of water – also gives poetic voice to the river swimmer who creates the shapes of the letters S, W, M with his body in the water (Oswald 2002). That space between the sensed and the felt, or in emotional geography terms, the space between affect and emotion, is hard to articulate for geographers, though the poet knows exactly where to find it. Yet there is much potential in research with swimmers and their encounters with water where their own embodied knowledge and personal testimonies provide rich material for studies of healthy blue space.

The sea and the act of swimming can also be seen creatively as a set of liminal activities, exploring the in-between of public and private, special and everyday, wet and dry, real and

imagined places and more specifically remembered and imagined space, looking onto, being in, looking backwards or forwards to shore (Shields 1991). All of these activities are part of a lifeworld that we might associate with a blue mind, an orientation to and an inhabitation of water in our everyday experience (Nichols 2014). It is true that this does not and should not apply to all, and there are many people and even cultures in the world who cannot swim, who are hydrophobic, who have had bad experiences and who turn away from water (Collins & Kearns 2007). Indeed, recent anecdotal evidence suggests that many Pasifika residents of Auckland no longer swim in the sea, a real departure from their sea-centric cultures. Yet for people with disabilities or injuries, for example, swimming ironically has the capacity to transform, activate and make fuller and richer their lifeworlds, empowering and opening up a place encounter not easily accessible on dry land (Throsby 2013). Perhaps it is this idea of transformation that best encapsulates the swimmer's lifeworld – it changes us, becomes a part of us, soothes and excites us in little and large ways and remains an encounter that is repeated and shared in space by everyone from the 2-year-old infant to the 90-year-old great-grandmother.

### Thoughts from a poet on geography and imagination

Nell Regan

#### *I Orakei Korako and dinnseanchas*

Orakei Korako, the Place of Glittering Adornment, has imprinted itself on my imagination. The words have a magic to them and the place has a surreal magic to it and I get caught up in its incantatory sound and its translation – the Place of Glittering Adornment ... then I go and double check (recalling I have made this mistake before) and yes, it is the Glittering Place of Adornment and that adds to its allure. The silica, the sinter deposits, the pinks, the blues and yellows; the terraces, the thermal springs, the geysers; the Ruatapu, the twice blessed cave with its Waiwhakaata or Pool of Mirrors at the bottom, that jade pool of exquisite beauty and a geological rarity which until the early 1900s was a ceremonial place for Māori women of the

area. And so on to tourism, to hydroelectric power and the flooding of the area for the dam, (18 metres the river rose) and the displacement of the few remaining families to a new and difficult life in nearby Taupō. This place has entered my imagination and will not be satisfied until I have made something out of an inchoate but immediate response – it, or I responding to it – know something that I do not know now and can only work out through a poem.

The different aspects and the names resound – The Devil’s Throat – Te Koro Koro o-te Taipo or the throat of the demon. How could this belching, broiling hole, *not* stir the imagination and anyway is that not where poetry began and begins? With the fact or act of naming which is such a visceral, necessary, deep rooted one. For to make stories and songs from these physical features and about them is to understand ourselves in them and through them. The early Irish bards were seers but also kept and told the place stories of the tribe – just as Homer was and did and later the Māori songs and proverb or whakatauki would be (Fig. 5).

But the poem that may come is not a description . . . not a *geo graphia* but the product of

making and something else – akin to alchemy or photosynthesis perhaps. Looking, imagining and incanting become part of the dough of the poem, you knead it and knead it and then put it aside to let it prove or rise. These details become more than just snippets of information . . . some chemical transformation takes place and the words and images start speaking to each other, begin to say more than you realised you knew yourself and hopefully, hot out of the oven (you never actually know beforehand) you have a poem.

Orakei Korako, the Place of Glittering Adornment between Taupō and Rotorua. I have again mistranslated it so I self-correct, Orakai Korako, The Glittering Place of Adorning and now I am wondering why the first version draws me in, is it the sound, the altered meaning? Maybe it is also the interplay or tension between the two languages and cultures which is also part of the fascination given where I come from. The Irish language was systematically replaced by English in the 19th century and so the linguistic and cultural displacement of the Māori resonates as does the translating of place names to find out something of the history of the people and features of an area . . . *Dinnseanachas* is the word in Irish for this lore of place but it also means topography. The very act or process of translating is a revealing of a history and a geography.

In English, I live on the outskirts of Dublin in a place called Shankill near the suburbs of Dalkey and Glenageary. Dublin comes from the Irish *dubh linn* or black pool – Difyln in Norse. Here the Poddle stream met the Liffey river and formed a harbour used by Viking longships. Now the Irish language version of Dublin is Baile Átha Cliath or the town at the ford of the hurdles. Shankill is Seanchill in Irish which translates as *sean chill* or old church. Nearby are wealthy suburbs of Dalkey, Delginis or the island of thorns *dealg inis* and Glenageary, Gleann na gCaorach or the glen of sheep – with all this to keep one’s imagination occupied on a journey, it was no wonder that when I moved to London, I thought that without this duality the place names were so boring. It took me a while, and plenty of walking, to realise they had their own *dinnseanachas*, perhaps more hidden because it was more obvious.



**Figure 5** The Devil’s Throat (photo, author).

### Topographies

i

*My feet walk the lost topography  
of a South London suburb;  
through Burnt Ash Copse and St John's Wood  
where tower blocks squat and lorries  
kick up dust, down Verdant Hill to  
Loampit Vale where buses whine to a halt.*

ii

*Days when I am dumb, it is all I can do  
to collect names, which, strung together  
make a necklace of this city that might yet  
ease the braced musculature of my throat –  
Friendly Street and Stillness Lane  
Silver Road and Nightingale Walk.*

iii

*Beyond the Matalan and the MFI  
the Tesco and the KFC, between  
the caf and the car park runs Silk  
Mills Path. Listen! Under the noise  
of the traffic on the busy interchange  
is the whirr of a loom, under the trundle  
of the train is the clack of a shuttle  
and that dust in my mouth as I walk  
under the junction, that dust is lint.  
(Regan 2007)*

A postscript to this occurs and I think of Barney's Rock and Taylor's Leap, two more recent New Zealand place names, both South Island, both of pākeha origin and each containing their own *dinnseanchas*. The first is the great white rock in Kaikoura – the only place in the world from which you can see sperm whales from land and which is named after Barney Riley. With local Māori permission, he established the first European whaling station there in 1857. Barney (and earlier the Māori whalers who called it Toka Anua) would stand and alert his boats that the sperm whales had spouted and so, would be up again in the same spot in 40 minutes. The second comes from the Banks Peninsula, around by Cathedral Cave, where a name is being sought for the newly sanctioned national park reserve. Locals want to call it Taylor's Leap after a local petty criminal who was on the run. Legend has it he was cornered by the police at the cliff edge of the Cathedral, jump or face jail they challenged him, so he jumped. No one knows if he

is sunning himself in some part of the world or if he perished there, but the leap has captured the imagination of those from the area. So, local gossip or a subject for great literature? Maybe there is no difference – Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote 'Epic' about a fight over a half a rood of land in rural Monaghan in 1938. 'That was the year of the Munich bother', and the poets' faith in what he is writing about is only restored by Homer's ghost whispering: 'I made the Iliad from such / A local row. Gods make their own importance'.

### II Thirty-six Views of the Sugarloaf

From early on as a writer I have loved and been influenced by Japanese poetic forms which are themselves meditation on place. Some years ago I began to collaborate with the painter and printmaker Cathy Henderson, on a project loosely based on Hokusai's 'Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji'. It would be about the Sugarloaf, whose unmistakable and iconic cone appears all over the Dublin and Wicklow regions (Fig. 6).

Over the next three years we picked it up when we were not too busy with other deadlines, with teaching and freelance work and it became more central to both of us than we could have known it would be. I gathered bits of local history, scraps of *dinnseanchas* and geological information but struggled to find a way into a sequence of poetry – there was the series of haiku-ish poems and one which drew inspiration from Wallace Stevens' poem 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', but I



**Figure 6** The Sugarloaf from Sandymount (photo, Cathy Henderson).

was never happy with these. I did, however, have some individual poems, from very early on in the project, which seemed to sing – both of which had come from a mid-winter walk I did with another friend, who was brought up on the slopes of the Sugarloaf, in Kilmacanogue.

**Sown**

The hills are buttered with gorse wrote  
Eileen's Uncle Johnny, before a freak wind  
took, tossed to the sky the whole body

of his shed. Lucky for me, he thought,  
it wasn't nailed to the floor, or that  
would have been that. He sat as overhead

a flock of pages, caught in an updraft  
of dispersal, rose over Djouce, Kippure,  
Three Rock, then dropped – a lifetime's work

mulched under. The year sped read  
its seasons, till gorse was at it again  
and from each hill a crop of words spread.

(Regan 2014)

The first completed Sugarloaf piece we did together was 'Mist at Dusk', the carved block and the pig's presence powerful in the limited edition print which Cathy and retired printer Conrad Devlin produced in the National Print Museum (Fig. 7).

We kept working away individually and talking – Cathy wanted to work on huge wood prints and we agreed not to limit ourselves to the original idea of an A3 letterpress series. We would go our own ways with Thirty-six Views for a time, knowing that there was an exciting and fruitful intersection ahead. One day in November, after a phone conversation about Hokusai, Cathy mentioned that her doctor was concerned about her persistent cough and wanted her to get a lung x-ray – just to 'rule anything out'. Things changed that day as she received diagnoses of lung, brain and bone cancer.

Over the next two years, Thirty-six Views become a touchstone and the Sugarloaf a balm for both of us. Jump forward and a part of the sequence was to be in my new collection. My editor was concerned; felt that this section of the manuscript was not quite working. As the book

**Mist at Dusk**

*Pig's Hollow, Sugarloaf*



Maybe it's the breath  
of the giant pig  
that lay then rose  
and moved off  
down the lea of the hill  
crump swaying, steam  
rising as it sets off  
down snuggerly lane  
or maybe it's the breath  
light leaves; having pitched  
up and settled on the slope  
it shrugs and moves off  
down the mountain side,  
as night's grasses spring back.

NELL REGAN

wood engraving: CATHY HENDERSON

From *Thirty-six Views of the Sugarloaf* by Cathy Henderson and Nell Regan  
Hand-printed letterpress by Conrad Devlin in a limited edition of 40 copies.

**Ballycorus Press :: National Print Museum :: August 2011**

**Figure 7** Mist at Dusk, Nell Regan and Cathy Henderson, Conrad Devlin.

neared its publication date, the working and thinking relationship that myself and Cathy had, became a part of the poems and suddenly the sequence came together. I wrote one new 36-line poem and put together others into six

12-lined poems. The symmetry of all this satisfied and allowed me to finish it. I named the book 'One Still Thing' and received final proofs the week Cathy died. There will be a Thirty-six Views of the Sugarloaf retrospective.

***Thirty Six Views of the Sugarloaf***

*Think waves that peel back the skin  
of the sea by Shankill, a re-assemblage  
of its aspect from IKEA, the sipping  
of Earl Grey at Avoca, or how it sets*

*off the first fag of the day, in a balcony  
scene, hunched against the sky  
while a mobile mast scores its every  
angled line deep into the print.*

*Or something seen, in the foreground,  
a gesture and the eye is lead beyond  
the camber of the sparrow hawk,  
that lends its name to the meadow slope*

*because His Fuji wasn't the focal  
point, you, delighted, called  
and when we look at the (admittedly  
poor) repro's of 36 Views, it's true;*

*it's the cresting of that wave  
as it pitches fishermen through spume;  
bowed backs on the highway; blossom  
sifting before it (think May and snowy*

*falls of hawthorn here) figures  
as steam on the teahouse terrace,  
rises from miso soup; all those  
lives lived on and about the peak*

*that take centre stage. Now I know  
its also the workhouse, set in off  
the roundabout of the day to day,  
reborn as hospital. The mountain*

*is dumb as x-rays are pulled. There  
where light should be (picture  
cherry wood carved) through  
each alveoli branch, shadow scatters.*

*Nearby, the M50 bridges Brides Glen,  
in a rapid slipstream of metal, a truck  
whips up a backwash, a rising falling  
screen or caul and above it, one still thing.  
(Regan, 2014)*

***III Affect and emotion***

Maybe the very title of these papers, 'Geography and Imagination', assumes a duality and feeds into a false or exaggerated dichotomy between the sciences (empirical, fact, statistic, reason) on the one hand and imagination (creativity, intuition, emotion) on the other hand. Perhaps it is an old dichotomy that ignores the fact that neither works without the other. None other than Albert Einstein wrote:

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.

So there are people who use geography to feed their imagination . . . imaginative geographers . . . there are geographies of imagination . . . imaginative geographies . . . imaginations of geography and on and on. . . . On a side note, it seems to me there is a lot of cheating involved in geography as it is practised today (I say this with confidence as I live with a geographer). After all, what *doesn't* fall under the categories of space and place? What *can't* be subsumed under its title? As I myself have been accused of being a psycho-geographer (on the basis of my second collection of poetry 'Bound for Home' (Regan, 2011), a commission that drew its inspiration from a disused military fort on the south west coast of Ireland) and I now find myself writing for *New Zealand Geographer*, I began to wonder then where the disciplines of art, specifically poetry in this instance, and geography, as a practised academic field begin to part ways. Or perhaps it is where their most fertile meeting point/intersection is.

While at the University of Canterbury, I found myself in conversation with a health geographer who had done research on tourist experiences in New Zealand. He was intrigued at the vagueness of language used by people after going on whale-watching trips or bungee jumping. He and his students tried to get them to put into words how they felt and became frustrated at how difficult this was. I wonder, is this where poetry begins and belongs?

Poetry is always working towards something that cannot be paraphrased – it is in itself an event in language but also it acknowledges that

there is something beyond language, continually just out of our reach, and it moves towards this. The Hungarian poet Agnes Nemes Nagy wrote that ‘The poet is the specialist of emotions . . . I think it is the duty of the poet to obtain citizenship for an increasing horde of nameless emotions’. Apt then that these thoughts would end on the poem and with a geographical analogy: ‘Reconnoitring the roadless terrain is its speciality. Let us allow the poem to take the leap forward’.

### Flying to Wellington for the Stout Research Centre seminar

Robin Kearns

#### *Departure lounge*

I have made it to the airport. Phew. Deep breath. Through security. Neil Finn’s lyric washes through my mind ‘Lying on the floor of the transit lounge/There’ll be no announcements made’. Keep an eye on the time, Robin. I idly look at the *Guardian* online, forestalling further thought as what I will say at the lunch-time seminar. There will be time on the flight. Do not over-prepare, I tell myself. Especially given the theme. Just imagine your way into the words. As a flight takes off behind me, a story about a different type of aircraft catches my eye. ‘The technology is already there,’ the article says. ‘The next step is to incorporate drones into smart cities, where they will fly in swarms like starlings to conserve energy, delivering mail, bouncing Wi-Fi signals, cleaning windows or monitoring traffic; and, of course, watching us’ (Blincoe 2015). Are there geographies left to imagine, I wonder, in a world in which everything is remotely seen? What *terra incognita* remain? Will drones join all the dots within this wondrous world so that everything can be watched on the Discovery Channel? Boarding time. Thoughts curtailed.

#### *(Re)imagining another flight*

Karioitahi Beach, Port Waikato, Raglan Harbour . . . the flight path is familiar, but the novelty of being Wellington-bound never wears off. The contrast between the gentle green folds of farmland and the relentless west coast surf. The early start, gentle motion



**Figure 8** Iceland seascape/Sigur Ros Soundscape (photo, author).

and liminal space see my eyes closing, taking me to a different flight, another land. Stockholm to Reykjavik.

I had long-dreamt of going to Iceland and finally was en route, imagination fuelled by images sourced in a childhood stamp collection. The Icelandair Boeing 777 had the usual audio channels – classical, pop, jazz . . . but then to my surprise, Sigur Ros. An entire channel! This was no contest. I was hooked.

This Icelandic ‘post-rock’ band’s ethereal sound filled the distance between my ears all the way until touchdown. I was lost in imagined sites within the land of not-quite-there, taken by their music into place; re-placed into the sonic space of anticipation. I was there before I arrived, immersed in sweeping coastal vistas while still somewhere high above the coast of Norway. Their imaginative art had taken me into the geography I had yet to enter. A soundscape of well-being (Andrews *et al.* 2014). Once there, Sigur Ros were my sonic wallpaper, the tracks of *Valtari* playing like some welcome and melodic tinnitus as I walked over volcanic slopes and felt the spray of waterfalls (Fig. 8).

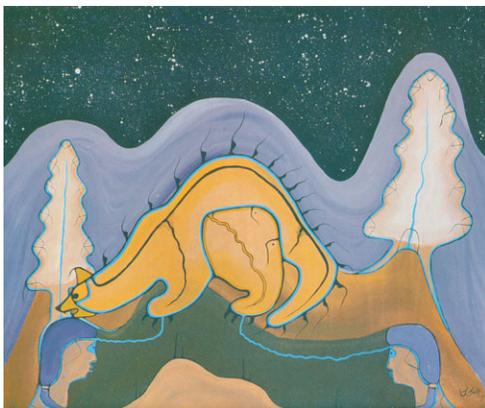
#### *The land from on high*

I look down on Taranaki as if a compass needle had been inserted into its crater and a radius traced in geometric accuracy, separating pasture from forest. The sight leads me to recall a compelling image offered by Peter Holland at the first New Zealand Geographical Society conference I attended in 1983. In

his keynote address, he remarked on a resemblance between the Canterbury Plains from the air and the paintings of Piet Mondrian (Holland 1984). Did Mondrian ever see farmers' fields from on high? Did farmers ever imagine their cropping units were like a Dutch painter's art? Neither, but Peter's observation grasped me up such that I can never see that landscape without invisible connective tissue linking Mondrian paintings and a cubist land in my imagination.

#### *Down to earth, mid-air*

I close my eyes again, resisting the stark morning sun and the in-flight trivia quiz on the screen before me. I am taken back to other flights and landscapes – to the Ontario of my graduate student years and days spent on First Nation reserves learning of the Ojibway worldview. I always return to one painting when I open Mary Beth Southcott's *The Sound of the Drum*. It is titled 'Bear Dance' by James Jacko 16 year old (Fig. 9). Here we see the artist acknowledging the energy fields that radiate halo-like around the depicted bear, and filaments of connectivity joining people and animal. Connection is everything; this ecology of spiritual presence suggests that nothing is quarantined from the sacredness of immanence and being. Jacko's painting is art and art rolls out of the imagination. But these visions made visible bring a fourth dimension of spirit into the two dimen-



**Figure 9** Bear Walk by James Jacko (Southcott 1984).

sions of painting. The land is not imagined. It is there, always will be. As with that surface below this flight. Solid. Unimaginably hard. Is to speak of the fruits of imagination to risk perceptions of fantasy?

#### *Arrival through Middle Earth*

We descend into Wellington on a day so clear I can almost see Pukemaumau towering in the distance beyond the Hutt Valley. I sat on that peak in the Tararuas two weeks prior – with views to Kapiti, Wairarapa and down towards Wellington Harbour. West, east, south. I have imagined that place in sharp photographic focus most days since. The visceral effort-filled hours of ascent now lost in the way that sedation softens the trauma of surgery. I have been left with the purity of a place attained and savoured. Imagination as a rear-vision windscreen-wiper, sluicing away the sweaty dirt of ascent.

Suddenly it is the thud of tarmac, then clamour of the airport terminal. The safety video declaring me to be flying the 'airline of Middle Earth' was suddenly back to haunt me in the form of an effigy occupying much of the terminal's airspace (Fig. 10). As in the 'placial icons' of shopping malls (Hopkins 1990), this supersized Gollum seemed complicit in re-crafting everyone's arrival. Wellington is, we are pleased to announce, not a rugged and wind-sculpted city but rather a Tolkein-scape.

What strikes me is that airport-goers are being led into an imaginative landscape.



**Figure 10** Middle Earth, Wellington (photo, author).

But the imagining is being done on our collective behalves. In this case no simile is involved; we are not asked to think of Aotearoa as *like* Middle Earth. No matter how many ‘likes’ there are on Facebook or in youthful vernacular, Middle Earth is metaphor writ-large.

A Wellington taxi driver once told me he picked up an American visitor who asked him to take her to Middle Earth. He replied ‘which part? It is everywhere’. Who would have imagined that?

### *Art and geographies of resistance*

I do not live in Middle Earth. I never have. There is nothing middling about this land. As attempts to homogenise, brand and market ‘our place’ gain further traction (myths like ‘100% Pure’ etc.), we need closer alliances with the arts and artists to develop counter-readings of 21st Century Aotearoa. A poem or painting can help decolonise our imaginations and challenge received readings of the way our world is or should be.

Neoliberal politics and the commodification of place are leading us to become a nation whose image is being imagined for, not by, us. Our freedom is, arguably, at stake. A commodified and compliant society devalues the freedom to dream and be truly imaginative. To be fully human is to imagine not only what places can be but also the possibilities for our place within them. A liberating geography will write not just of the earth and the human processes upon it, but also reach into the heart of being human. Connecting geography and imagination allows for ludic moments and flights of fancy, but can also come into land with renewed sense of where we stand.

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