

‘Migrant Poetics’ in New Zealand Literature: Janet Frame and Riemke Ensing Unsettle the Settlers

by Isabel Haarhaus

In her memoir *Lost in Translation*, Polish-born Canadian author Eva Hoffman recalls from adolescence a conversation with a Canadian friend about love: “When Penny thinks of love,” muses the recent Polish immigrant, “she thinks of running through a sunny meadow, holding hands. But when I think of love, I think of a dark forest that you go into by a narrow path.”¹ Hoffman’s anecdote illustrates that which Gaston Bachelard argues in terms of aesthetics and sentiment in *The Poetics of Space*² and Ludwig Wittgenstein introduces in terms of basic epistemology in his philosophy of language and mind³: our most truthful and profound expressions and experiences *are* born pertinently of our formative environments. The ‘pictures’ of our origin — be they houses, relationships or ways of knowing — shape and colour fundamentally the way we know and are in the world.

While eventually we may outgrow (or transform) our formative ‘pictures’, the dark forests or sunny meadows of original experience remain to inform our imagination. And when the original ‘pictures’ are dislocated from our contemporary environment (and our contemporaries), and unable to be translated or assimilated into the *here and now*, then that distance itself takes on a formative force and renders us in a peculiar situation: a *removed* situation that applies to many in contemporary environments, and especially in the New World.

Hoffman writes that as an adult “the [remembering] place in my mind no longer has any particularity. It’s just an awareness that there is another place — another point at the base of the triangle, which renders this place relative, which locates me within that relativity itself” (*Lost in Translation*, 170). Hoffman’s notion of ‘triangulation’ is one familiar to all ‘migrants’ — a term which for the purposes of this paper applies to anyone who, as Philip Fisher argues in *Still the New World*,⁴ has been *removed* from the site of one’s inherited place, epistemology and/or language. As such, ‘triangulation’ is intrinsic structurally to the dynamics of a ‘migrant poetic’, which, according to Paul Carter, the Australian author of *Living in a New Country*, innately undermines the reality of appearances, knows by heart the rules of translation and makes everywhere the imaginative leaps required for living in a new environment — be it geographic, philosophical, linguistic or otherwise.⁵

In this paper I will examine two forms of ‘migrant poetic’ in Aotearoa New Zealand by drawing on the three part autobiography *To The Is-Land, An Angel At My Table* and *The Envoy To Mirror City* and the

¹ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language*. USA: Penguin Books, 1989, 147.

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

³ See the preface to Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, in which Casey discusses Wittgenstein’s introduction of the notion of “family resemblance”— a notion that implies (even though it does not espouse) the special pertinence of original locality and region to basic issues in epistemology and philosophy of language and mind.

⁴ Philip Fisher, *Still the New World. American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁵ Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country. History, Travelling and Language*. London: Faber & Faber, 1992, 4.

novel *The Edge of the Alphabet*⁶ by the late New Zealand (and sometimes expatriate) writer Janet Frame; and on “Topographies” and “Finding the Ancestors”,⁷ the title poems of two collections by Dutch-born New Zealand poet Riemke Ensing. Frame’s concerns can broadly be described as being with(in) the ‘word-world’ while Ensing’s have been described as marking “a significant European/Antipodean matrix.”⁸ Both writers cite movement, homelessness and linguistic dislocation as points of departure for, as Ensing has said of her early work, “an attempt to piece together both the past and the present, the *here* and the *there*, connecting history, myth and the fragmented details... on different sides of the world.”⁹

“All writers are exiles wherever they live,” proclaimed Janet Frame toward the end of her third and final volume of autobiography *The Envoy from Mirror City*, “and their work is a lifelong journey towards the lost land.”¹⁰ For Frame, the “lost land” is the “Mirror City” — a “reflection reached only through the imagination and its various servant languages.” Her work demonstrates the necessary *variousness* of those “servant languages,” because ours can no longer, as the Modernists hoped (and as the dovetailing of certain Modernist elements with fascism fatally vilified), be a *general* ‘tale of the tribe.’¹¹ No longer do we take for granted a shared collective history, anecdote or even language in our communication with others. This is not least because by the time we have learned our tribe’s tale to tell, and have enlivened our formative ‘pictures’ with further expression and experience, we have long since left or been left by the tribe to tell it to, and to whom it makes sense — as illustrated by Hoffman’s anecdote about individual ‘pictures’ of love. Furthermore, and as postmodernism exploits, it is precisely the *subjectivity* of any *one*’s ‘tale of the tribe’ that paradoxically presents as the best possibility for any project of communication. And it is this (quite Romantic) trope of the *individual* story that gives voice to the ‘migrant poetic’. Such states are painstakingly scrutinized, revealed and reflected upon in Frame’s autobiographies and in much of her fiction, in which importantly, all the rare and crucial episodes of epiphany (or ‘homecoming’) occur strictly to the *individual alone* within an *idiosyncratic* circumstance and/or place.¹²

⁶ Janet Frame, *The Edge of the Alphabet*. Christchurch: The Pegasus Press, 1962. All references to this text will be made in the body of the essay.

⁷ Riemke Ensing, *Finding the Ancestors*. Auckland: The Pear Tree Press, 1999.

-----, *Topographies*. Auckland: Prometheus Press, 1984. All references to this poem will be made in the body of the essay.

⁸ Quoted from *The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English* on the back cover of Riemke Ensing, *Selected Poems. Talking Pictures*. Wellington: HeadworX, 2000.

⁹ Riemke Ensing, ‘Maps of the Heart,’ *Migration and New Zealand Society: Proceedings of the Stout Research Centre Sixth Annual Conference*, quoted in Lawrence Jones, “Introduction,” Riemke Ensing, *Selected Poems. Talking Pictures*. Wellington: HeadworX, 2000, 11-21, 13.

¹⁰ Janet Frame, *The Envoy from Mirror City. An Autobiography: Volume Three*. Auckland: Hutchinson, 1986, 152.

¹¹ Ezra Pound described Homer’s *Odyssey* – the model for his epic “world-poem” *The Cantos* – as “The Tale of the Tribe”. Both *The Cantos* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* were to be long poems containing all of the world’s history, underpinned by the poets’ belief that all ages are contemporaneous. Pound and Eliot’s key Modernist project of composing all-encompassing tales of the human tribe in the classical tradition of the epic poem had the unfortunate effect of reducing diversity to sameness. Even less fortunately it coincided with contemporary and prevalent European Fascism, which believed in the supremacy and validity of one national or ethnic group and their history over others, while espousing contempt for democracy and that system’s theoretical accordance of validity to a multitude of histories and voices. See Michael Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

¹² See for example Milly under the Pear tree in *Intensive Care*, Turnlung in the Central Park Zoo in *Daughter Buffalo*, Roger in the desert in *Living in the Maniototo* and Mattina in the orchard in *The Carpathians*. Moreover,

Frame's autobiographies begin by charting the child's gradual dislocation from the 'word-world' initially entrusted to her in infancy and early childhood. "[L]earning words, [she believed] from the beginning that words meant what they said," writes Frame — before the threatening contradictions of the 'real' world in which "spoken and written words assumed a special power" dawn on her (*To the Is-Land*, 13 & 22). *To the Is-Land's* concern with a child's search for 'truth', as her 'word-world' collides frighteningly with the 'real' world, exposes a great chasm of meaning in which all notions of 'truth' and sense of 'place' disintegrate. As for any migrant, the signifier is severed from the signified as Frame's child moves into the adult world where all is not as it seems, and experiences there an entirely new language set in an entirely new environment. Her seemingly inevitable and inconsolable isolation within the new place of arrival — the 'real' world — is a position and experience that is retold variously throughout Frame's fiction, much of which is a story of the 'lost people' for whom the "tools for communication have crumbled to reveal the broken teeth of language" (*The Edge of the Alphabet*, 93).

This is both the tragedy and redemption in Frame's novel *The Edge of the Alphabet*, loosely based on Frame's own experiences in London. The novel's two main characters and narrators, Toby Withers and Zoe Bryce, are driven yet finally thwarted by their desire to communicate their 'tale of the tribe'. Toby's plan to write a novel called *The Lost Tribe* gives him the impetus to carry forth and experience life; however, it also proves his downfall, as he is barely literate. Meanwhile Zoe, after her triumphant moment of significance when she successfully communicates with another person (for which she has been waiting all her life), asks herself: "Is this the only word I shall ever speak and do I now retreat into silence?" — before "[getting] rid of herself" by suicide. Zoe is sacrificed in the book as evidence of the often "fatal mistake of trying to communicate from so far on the edge of the alphabet" (*The Edge of the Alphabet*, 272 & 290-291). And yet, the novel itself turns out to *be* the story of 'the lost tribe'. The text itself a 'place' or "Mirror City" where 'lost people' are lucid and heard.

Thus already in this early novel, literature and writing serve as versions of the "self-object" that Ken Bragan, in his very interesting essay "Survival after the Cold Touch of Death: The Resurrection Theme in the Writing of Janet Frame",¹³ argues enable people (and Frame in particular) to resurrect and survive their 'place' of 'displacement' in the world. Bragan worked as a doctor at Seacliff, one of several New Zealand mental hospitals in which Janet Frame was incarcerated throughout her 20s. In *The Edge of the Alphabet*, as in all Frame's novels, there are several resurrections: homeless Lawrence, who Zoe describes as having "lost [his] bearings", acquires within the novel a "special interest and skill in being a compass for others, swinging [himself], tremblingly, like a needle, this way and that"; and

and building on Ken Bragan's application of Freudian analyst Heinz Kohut's concept of 'self-object' to Frame's writing in his essay "Survival after the Cold touch of Death: The Resurrection theme in the writing of Janet Frame," *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 11 (1993) 132-143, all the key moments of epiphany and/or 'homecoming' in Frame are somehow hosted or marked by the seers' 'self-objects'; the objects that "create, and exist in, an inner space which both holds and sustains the self[.]" 134.

¹³ Ken Bragan, "Survival after the Cold Touch of Death: The Resurrection Theme in the Writing of Janet Frame," *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 11 (1993) 132-143.

Zara the prostitute “whose occupation is with boundaries, in a border country where people still carry their worn maps, trying to read them and knowing the directions are useless” (*The Edge of the Alphabet*, 198 & 201). Zara is given a role other and more complex than temptress and whore, one of friend. While beyond the pages of the book the members of ‘the lost tribe’ are reduced to silence in ways of madness, death, vagrancy and sexual oblivion, Frame provides for them throughout her work a place to tell their tale, and the book ends with a promise it has already fulfilled: “One day we who live at the edge of the alphabet will find our speech” (*The Edge of the Alphabet*, 224). In fact, Frame’s entire oeuvre concerns the telling of tales from ‘the edge of the alphabet’, where many an unsure, new ‘migrant’ otherwise falls into silence and obscurity.

In the second volume of her autobiography, *An Angel At My Table*, Frame charts just such a descent. In an increasingly panic-struck state of utter dislocation, she tries to wade her way through the confusion and deceit that is the ‘real’ world to a place where she might once again *be* — as she was in her ‘word-world’ of infancy and childhood, when “cow” simply meant the animal that produced the morning’s milk — to an *Is-Land*. This particular phase, which climaxes in bouts of deemed insanity and almost a decade of incarceration in mental asylums, is also retold in greater detail in the autobiographical novel *Faces in the Water*, in which the author writes: “I was put in hospital because a great gap opened in the ice floe between myself and the other people whom I watched.... I was not yet civilized; I traded my safety for the glass beads of fantasy.”¹⁴

Increasingly for Frame, the distance between her ‘pictures’ of origin and the *here and now* positioned her, relatively, in the ‘place’ of madness. But in the third book of autobiography, *An Envoy to Mirror City*, Frame triumphantly conjures the currency and power of her “glass beads of fantasy” in order to reposition herself in the ‘place’ of writing; in the ‘self-object’ of literature. Frame’s recovery from her entrapment within ‘triangulation’ and from the triple estrangement from language — her own sense of a ‘real’ self and the ‘real’ world, and the accompanying crisis of signification — is eventually and neatly enabled only in self-imposed triple exile: linguistic, cultural and geographic. For it is while living first in Ibiza and later Les Escaldes, where her hosts speak only Spanish, that the author starts to feel for the first time in her adult life that she is making sense: “Language that had betrayed, changed, influenced, could still befriend the isolated, could help when human beings had withdrawn their help.... I rejoiced that I was alone on a Mediterranean island, speaking no English, with my Spanish welcomed as my English never had been” (*The Envoy from Mirror City*, 56). It is in London, however, on the opposite of the world from New Zealand, that Frame fully implements the writing routine that she adopted for the rest of her writing life, and which saw the creation of *Faces in the Water*, *The Edge of the Alphabet* and *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. Each of these books is concerned with characters trying to find their way back to an ‘*Is-Land*.’ In keeping with the books she wrote there, Frame described her time in England as a period “...of healing and preparation for my life as myself in the ‘real’ world.” Writing for Frame thus became the establishment of her “‘place’ at a deeper level than

¹⁴ Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water*. London: The Women’s Press, 1993, 10-11.

any landscape of any country would provide” (*The Envoy from Mirror City*, 114 & 153). And in turn, the demarcation of ‘place’ was a sort of writing.

And so it is for Dutch-born New Zealand poet Riemke Ensing, who in the title poem of the collection *Finding the Ancestors*, writes of Northland, a remote part of rural New Zealand, that: “...It was hard / country and only the shape is there /Only the freesias give something / away. A woman perhaps writing a tale / in the planting of bulbs....” The voice and perspective in the poem evidently belong to a new arrival, judging by the signs in the land, looked for by the poem, to “[give] something away.” Indigenous Maori or the long-settled may already see more than “only the shape”, but the Dutch immigrant sees initially only the *outline* of ‘place’ and searches for the flowers she knows — freesias — and for the familiar shape of a woman, also “perhaps writing a tale”. As the title of the poem “Finding the Ancestors” suggests, the poet is searching for her kin, and in the woman planting bulbs she finds a kindred spirit — not least because of the tentativeness of the woman’s project. Whether the woman succeeds in “writing a tale” is as unsure as the poet’s project of “finding the ancestors”. Like Frame’s commitment to tell the tale of ‘the lost tribe’ from a location at ‘the edge of the alphabet’, Ensing seeks to describe those wishing to tell their tale in a strange land. The image of the woman bent over the “hard / country” in her effort to communicate her presence there embodies the migrant’s experience of ‘arrival’ — or of never really arriving — and as such it reflects precisely the image of the poet, straining her gaze into the distance of the new country, trying to locate there her ancestors. Like Frame’s tribe, Ensing’s woman is an unsettled settler whose risk of oblivion is conveyed in the incongruity of the bulbs she plants in a foreign soil and the precariousness of her project — even as she succeeds in changing the landscape in which she works, and even as she communicates successfully the migrant’s experience of cultivation and feelings of loss, yearning and desire for communion. Ensing’s solitary figure of the woman personifies the subjectivity of the poet’s search while also offering the reader a way to ‘enter’ the scene of the journey, much like the Romantic trope of a figure in the foreground of a landscape painting, or indeed, the genre of autobiography. Yet what we are offered is less a chance for our own subjective contemplation, as invited by the figure who contemplates an image of the Sublime ‘place’, but rather — and as in the case of Frame — the experience of unsettlement itself; of being *out* of place. This is because Ensing’s narrative is often unsettled in its revelations, moving sideways and into the margins to give room to distant ‘pictures’ (such as a map of the Dutch city Groningen where the poet grew up) and eccentric citations (such as complete dictionary definitions for words the poet has used).

Both Frame’s and Ensing’s texts demonstrate that in a ‘migrant poetic’, experience and ‘being’ are even beyond Derrida’s “doubleness”¹⁵ and are instead a multiplicity, a collage of sorts. Like Paul

¹⁵ See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, 278-293. As Martin Kavka elaborates in his essay “The Rationality of Derrida’s ‘Religion without Religion’: A Phenomenological Gift for John D. Caputo” (<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.1/kavka.html>), the theme of “doubleness” stretches throughout the body of Derrida’s written work. In essence, Derrida’s notion of “doubleness” concerns the undecidability between “two interpretations of interpretations” and expresses itself in the “rhetoric of doubleness” that characterises his writings: “Let me summarize: there would be two hypotheses” (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait*

Carter's "post colonial collage", the text informed by a 'migrant poetic' thus "lets languages cross-fertilize, deform and reform each other, not with the object of imposing a new language... but in order to focus interest on the occasions of speech."¹⁶ For each encounter — no matter how subtle — harbours the possibility for the 'speakers' of an *engagement* of sorts and thereby a redress of values and positions. (Thus for a 'migrant poetic' we might read a '*minute poetic*'.) If the 'tale of the tribe' is to be heard in all its comprehensive manifestations, and in order for the 'migrant poetic' to remain vital both within and without other discourses, it is imperative to focus on the subjective occasion of 'speech' and one's engagement with/in the world. Being *removed* from one's environment into a state of constantly suspended arrival is too often the death of voice, as Frame's years of incarceration threatened, and as Ensing reminds us throughout her poems: "Always the coming / is being a spectator / at your own funeral", she declares at the end of "Topographies" (39), a poem clattering with the sound of doors opening and closing — the coming and going of a searching poetic, a migrant poetic.

In its epic tone and style (and like Pound's *Cantos*), "Topographies" begins not at the beginning, but somewhere much farther down the line, already on the move and in the wake of much experience. It begins: "In the meantime ashes / grow cold at my back and rain / closes the sky"(7). Arguably like all of Frame's writing, "Topographies" is a poem in the tradition of *quest*, with all its allegorical implications. Ensing's quest is for comprehension of 'place', for the moments when description of what is underfoot *here and now* becomes possible — be it in the form of fiction or memory or someone's "occasion of speech" — and can effect a triumphant (Homeric) 'homecoming'. Towards the end of the poem, Ensing presents us with the 'migrant poetic': "This then is your four season window / through which fragmented scenes / make up their minds about detail / as though memory were signals / the sea picks up in its roaring / silence / and throws to the wind / under the door" (43). And in 'conclusion', Ensing tells us that: "The chart I have mapped is / by no means finished" (43). Coupled with the fact that throughout " they may typically historically represent, such lines undermine the quest's attainment of 'conclusion' and an alleged attempt to completely close the gap between origin and *here and now*. "Topographies" is full of shipwrecks, misdeeds and misadventures; "Finding the Ancestors" depicts a landscape almost bereft; *The Edge of the Alphabet* is the tale of 'the lost tribe'; and Frame's autobiography is a triptych chart of the journey to an *is-land*. These works all become occasions of 'speech' that bubble up in the 'place' that is 'triangulated' between the 'pictures' (or words) of origin, and the *here and now*, to ask: "How did I get here?" and "Why?". In doing so they expose ruptures in the perceived text of *here and now*, and give voice to that which unsettles the settlers.

and Other Ruins, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 1, quoted in Caputo, 1). Derrida claims that there can be no "question of choosing" between any two interpretations; rather, there is an irreducible and ineluctable relationship of *différance* — a concept that contains both notions of difference and deference, as well as a separation of identity and a separation of time — between them that would render such a choice phenomenologically ignorant. As a result, Derrida proposes we deconstruct all texts, using the "rhetoric of doubleness" in an attempt to dismantle the binary oppositions that govern them by focussing on the impasses of meaning and examining their traces, supplements and "invaginations".

BIO: Isabel Haarhaus is a New Zealand Bright Futures Scholar, currently in the second year of her PhD in English at Auckland University. Her doctoral thesis is about 'displacement' and 'estrangement' in Modern New Zealand fiction, with special attention to the novels of Janet Frame. She completed a Masters Degree with First Class Honours at Auckland University in 1997, with a thesis that read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in light of the post-modern British and American art that it foreshadowed. Since then she has tutored New Zealand, Romantic and Children's Literature at Auckland University, worked as a journalist in London and a freelance arts writer and arts editor in Auckland. She lives in Auckland with her husband and son.