

# Framing the American Abroad

A Comparative Study of  
Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian* and  
Janet Frame's *The Carpathians*

It is the paradox of Columbus' perceptual moment that it cannot end. The moment of the discovery of America continues. Its reenactment becomes our terrifying test of greatness; we demand to hear again and always the cry into mystery, into an opening. We demand, of the risking eye, new geographies. And the search that was once the test of sailor and horse and canoe is now the test of the poet. KROETSCH "MOMENT," 25

**W**hen Christopher Columbus "discovered" America he was, like other explorers, acting as the agent of a higher authority that remained nominally in control from a relatively stationary position — at home on the throne, at the centre of imperial power. Once he set sail from that imperial centre, however, Columbus himself was the one really in charge: no higher human authority was present to direct or curtail his actions, or to prevent him from making one of the most significant and far-reaching errors in Western history. When Columbus began treating the Americas as Asia, he was unknowingly subverting the very project he had been authorized to undertake. His freedom to do so demonstrates an unpredictable dynamic that straddles the gaps of geography and power established by any act of imperial exploration. There is potentially a big discrepancy between the agent-explorer's actions faced with a concrete object of discovery and the authorizing mandate from home that frames his journey. As middleman, the agent-explorer subdivides the familiar colonial gap — between imperial oppressor and the peoples and places over whom it exercises its self-appointed power — into two gaps. Versions of those two gaps — between the imperial project's two locuses of power, and between the agent-explorer and what he encounters — appear as textual dislocations and narrative gulfs in two quest novels from former settler colonies: Robert

Kroetsch's *Gone Indian* (1973) and Janet Frame's *The Carpathians* (1988).

The Kroetsch novel has an explicit Columbus intertext. Its protagonist, Jeremy Sadness, is an American graduate student from Manhattan sent by his supervisor, Mark Madham, on a journey to fulfill his "deep American need to seek out the frontier" (5). Jeremy's thesis, which he is perpetually unable to begin, let alone finish, has, as one of its false starts, the following first sentence: "Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not come to the Indies, named the inhabitants of that new world—" (21). And there it ends — or doesn't. One of the titles he tries out is "The Columbus Quest: The Dream, the Journey, the Surprise" (62). Like Columbus, Jeremy has a dream — of the frontier of his imagination, and of himself as Grey Owl — he makes a journey — to the small Alberta town of Notikeewin — and is surprised — repeatedly. His quest is deconstructed in the surreal, carnivalesque world of the prairies during a winter festival, a world where social roles are exchanged and identities become so blurred that Jeremy can be unnamed — stripped of his previous identity — and renamed into a multiplicity of new identities that include buffalo, Roger Dorck the Winter King, and Indian. He can dream the dreams of a mute aboriginal woman. He can subvert his original mission, to attend a job interview arranged by his supervisor, simply by failing to show up for his appointment. Like Isabella and Ferdinand back in Spain, Madham is unable to control the activities of his agent-explorer. Or is he? Just as Columbus's voyage was framed by the imperial project of which it was a part, Jeremy's adventures as narrative are framed and ultimately controlled by Madham, who, from his fixed position in Binghamton, New York, is the stationary centre of power over this text. To Madham at the time of framing, as to us, Jeremy exists only as text, as narrative. Madham transcribes, edits and critiques the tapes on which Jeremy reports his experiences. As motivating cause of Jeremy's journey, and as intrusive framing narrator, Madham retains control over his apparently out-of-control agent by reconstituting Jeremy's actions as a U.S.-based narrative. In this late twentieth-century recasting of the Columbus quest, the neo-imperial centre of power has become what 500 years ago was the object of discovery: America.

The inclusion of a U.S.-based framing narrator is just one of many intriguing correspondences between *Gone Indian* and *The Carpathians*. Both novels follow the travels of a "child of Manhattan" (*Gone Indian*, 5) to a fictional town in, respectively, Alberta and New Zealand's North Island.

The town's names, Notikeewin and Puamahara, suggest aboriginal languages, and both Kroetsch and Frame use aboriginal history and experience as touchstones for the local, and for their explorations of such themes as the reconstitution of language, the appropriation of narrative point of view, and the destabilization of the subject. But while both novels concern quests for knowledge of the other, the unknown, generically they are cast as very different kinds of story: *Gone Indian* as a parody of the picaresque western with the roaming cowboy hero, and *The Carpathians* as suburban anti-pastoral with a female protagonist and a domestic setting.

In Janet Frame's layered metafiction, narrative frames blur ontological boundaries both from inside and outside the story, multiplying narrative points of view even more than Kroetsch's book does. Frame's questing protagonist, Mattina Brecon, is manipulated *as* text first by Dinny Wheatstone, the "imposter novelist" of Kowhai Street, who provides a typescript for Mattina to read which describes, in the past tense, Mattina's actions over the next several weeks. Because the typescript substitutes for the events it describes — because, as Susan Ash explains, "It is Mattina's process of reading the typescript which makes these events actual or 'real'" (2) — the novel here places signifier and signified in an overlapping relation that renders them indistinguishable. Another character *in* the text, Mattina's son John Henry, is revealed in opening and closing notes as the text's *Ur*-narrator, creator of "this, my second novel," in which "The characters and happenings ... are all invented and bear no relation to actual persons living or dead" (7). Claiming at the end that his mother and father died when he was seven, John Henry the framer fractures the expected correspondence to himself as a character, Mattina's son John Henry who writes *his* second novel within the pages of the framer John Henry's fictional creation. And the concluding note's teasing remark that "perhaps the town of Puamahara, which I in my turn visited, never existed" (196) is simply the final spin on a destruction of "the painful opposites and contradictions of everyday life" (114) that is Frame's procedure and her theme. Frame conflates experience and imagination, text and event, envisaging a universe in which "it seemed that lost became found, death became life, all the anguished opposites reverted to their partner in peace yet did not vanish: one united with the other" (114). And while John Henry's concluding remarks may, as Suzette Henke points out, permit a reading of 'his' novel as "a psychic strategy for coping with ... Oedipal loss" (36), the novel that Janet Frame has written

challenges, through its narratorial free play, the reader's attempt to pin down an interpretation based on the apparent dictates of any one of its multiple frames. The narrative layering creates too many ambiguous ironies and deferrals of meaning. So even though John Henry, the text's apparent framer of last recourse, is set up like Mark Madham as a U.S.-based controlling voice, the model of neo-imperial invasion and exploration seems here to be built on too destabilized a foundation to embrace without more detailed comparison of the concerns and strategies of the two novels. Not least among the destabilizing factors is, of course, the irony that while both novels posit U.S.-based framers as the controllers of discourse, both are post-colonial fictions created and controlled by their real framers of last recourse, the Canadian Robert Kroetsch and the New Zealander Janet Frame.

**K**roetsch's interest in Columbus revolves around "the perceptual moment" in which the explorer misrecognized and misnamed the "Indians" of the Americas. That moment of misnaming is paradigmatic of a process of imperial appropriation through textual authority that has become, for Kroetsch, the chief burden and challenge of the New World writer. In his essay, "Unhiding the Hidden," he writes:

At one time I considered it the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to un-name.... The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works with a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing. But just as there was in the Latin word a concealed Greek experience, so there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American. (43)

*Gone Indian* can be read as a fictional enactment of that process of unnamming. Jeremy's experience of the frontier turns him into the very opposite of the "integrated Being" that Madham struggles to remain: Jeremy's unnamming and renaming into multiple possibilities represents what Madham calls "the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self" (152). While the processes of unnamming and renaming occur throughout the novel, beginning from Jeremy's arrival at the airport, the central event is a literal stripping-down of identity symbolized by the discarding of his jacket and keys during the snowshoe race. At this point, language has also been discarded: misrecognized as an Indian after winning the race, Jeremy replies to questions and harassment with silence because "if

I had tried [speaking], it would have been a tongue I did not understand” (93). And even though as Indian, Jeremy is restricted by definition to the inauthentic imposter-status of his model, Grey Owl, this new identity nevertheless becomes an enabling condition of imagination, allowing him to enter the dreams of the silent Indian woman, Mrs. Beaver. And along with the other identities that he collects along the way, it allows him to escape quite literally from the fixity of lived experience to the realm of imagined, multiple possibilities. Defying the control of his American framing narrator, he frustrates closure by disappearing without a trace, leaving Madham to speculate on various imagined ends. As Peter Thomas explains, Jeremy uses “trickster cunning” to “escape into ficticity and story” (78). Kroetsch dramatizes the post-colonial problematic of cultural inheritance and independence by locating textual authority in the neo-imperial centre and then undercutting that authority through liberating gestures within the story.

Simon During describes the initial encounter between whites and Maoris in New Zealand as a site of misrecognition and misnaming. Like Columbus misnaming the Indians, the Pakeha invaders misrecognized the locals as “cannibals,” “savages”; they in turn were misrecognized by the Maori as “gnomes,” “whales,” and “floating islands.” The words of pre-colonial Maori language, adjusting to new social realities, “began to lose their meaning until no consensus remains as to what certain words ‘mean’” (41). Janet Frame, not unlike Kroetsch, centres her novel on an event that enacts “the natural destruction of known language” (Frame, 119). Portrayed as a quasi-science-fictional, Kafkaesque nightmare of unexplained and unexplainable occurrences, Frame’s apocalypse, with its alphabets raining down like nuclear fallout and its transformation of ordinary New Zealanders into non-verbal, primal-screaming victims, is a more ambiguous, far less hopeful event than Kroetsch’s liberation into possibilities. As Susan Ash points out, “*The Carpathians* narrates the collapse of language without attempting to symbolize its possible replacement” (1).

The differences between Kroetsch’s and Frame’s prospects for language are evident in their varying uses of the motif of writer’s block to represent a failure of words. Kroetsch’s Jeremy, despite years of unsuccessful attempts to write his thesis, never stops trying to begin, and his many aborted titles and first sentences become at least a catalogue of the possible. Mattina’s husband Jake, struggling for thirty years to write his second novel, appears no further ahead at the end than at the beginning; his excuses and earnest

promises are the only verbal products related to his novel that we are shown. The fact that he has been writing journalism and essays seems almost unimportant to him, to his family and to Frame's novel in the mutual preoccupation with his failure to novelize — for in Frame's world imaginative fiction is a privileged discourse.

In the aftermath of the midnight rain and the collapse of language it brings about, the forces of destruction, silence and obliteration of memory appear to have triumphed. Frame evokes totalitarian paranoia in her descriptions of anonymous, androgynous figures dressed in white removing the residents of Kowhai Street in vans and putting their houses up for sale. The only voice available to speak for the new reality is the eerily evasive real estate agent Albion Cook, whose name combines Blake's England with Blake's contemporary and the Southern Hemisphere's nearest equivalent to Columbus, James Cook. Far from Kroetsch's themes of purgation and renewed authenticity, Frame appears to suggest a regression to a colonial state where tribal memory is under siege and "strangers" (as the Kowhai Street residents call themselves) become silenced victims scarcely remembered or mourned by their successors. The Gravity Star, Frame's astrophysical metaphor for perceptual sea-change, can become a liberating phenomenon only to those who are prepared to adapt to "the demolishing of logical thought, its replacement by new concepts starting at the root of thought" (119). For those wedded to the traditional binary oppositions of self and other, "here and there" (14), that supported the imperial projects, the failure to adjust to post-colonial necessities will have tragic consequences. It is one of Frame's bitter ironies that the motivation to "preserve the memory of Kowhai Street and its people" (165) comes not from New Zealanders, but from Mattina and her family, invaders from a neo-imperial power filling a perceived void with a necessary act of appropriation — appropriating story and point of view.

Nicholas Birns says that *The Carpathians*, "with its emphasis on time, loss, and continuity, is clearly Frame's most explicit effort at confronting New Zealand's cultural inheritance" (18). Recently New Zealand has made strides towards recuperation of the losses its aboriginals suffered in colonial history, but Mark Williams points out that this "understandable cultural wish" carries the risk of self-deception. If Maori culture is embraced by the Pakeha as no more than "a decorative sign of difference," its use as a sign of distinctiveness from European culture remains ironically structured on a

European dualism that preserves “the separation of head and heart, reason and feeling” (18-19). In Puamahara, this reclamation takes place in both Pakeha and Maori communities, represented by a learning or relearning of Maori language that means different things in the two contexts. Madge McMurtrie’s Pakeha grandniece Sharon, learning Maori at school, points to an absorption of the previously denied “other” into the dominant culture; this activity can be viewed either liberally as progress or territorially as appropriation. On the other hand Hene Hanuere, the Maori shopkeeper, tells Mattina wistfully that “it’s not so easy” relearning Maori at her age because “it’s been away so long”:

“We’re all changing back now. It’s strange, you know. Like someone you turned out of your house years ago, and now they’ve come home and you’re shy, and ashamed of having turned them out and you have to get to know them all over again and you’re scared in case you make a mistake in front of the young ones, for the youngest ones know it all. You know, it’s been lonely without our language. People from overseas sometimes understand this more than those living here.” (26)

The Maori children, who are further away temporally from the suppressed past, can get psychologically closer to it because their elders have “been brought up Pakeha” (26). This generation gap creates an uneasy sense of fracture and discontinuity between past reality and whatever form its present resurrection and transformation will take, casting a shadow over the good intentions of the recuperative project.

**T**he aboriginal contexts provide both Frame and Kroetsch with tangible historical models for the post-colonial theme of the decimation of language and the systems of thought that rely on language. In the historical contexts of Cook and Columbus and their successors, that destruction was part of an incipient colonizing project of subjection and assimilation. In the contemporary context, a parallel process, whether it is called “unnaming” or “the natural destruction of known language,” carries the potential of liberation from colonial mentalities. And in a social climate that stresses revaluation and recuperation of aboriginal cultural losses, these narratives of deferred, slippery referentiality and unrealistic events are able to sink strong roots into the ground of real political projects. In fact, Kroetsch’s novel, if not exactly prophetic of the current Canadian climate of increased sympathy to aboriginal perspectives, certainly finds itself open to interpretations that foreground its conceptions of “Indian” and language

now more clearly than might have been possible in 1973. Jeremy is mistaken for an Indian by his fellow whites and later finds his dreams infiltrated by a Blackfoot tribal memory. In one dream he becomes Poundmaker's warrior, an Indian subject, and absorbs the memory of the other into his own through an act of imagination. As Buffalo Man making love to Buffalo Woman, he gains a stake in the land as the Indians knew it — in the ecosystem that white intervention disrupted. And his role as “listener” is, for Mrs. Beaver, a victory; he is the white man empathizing with and taking responsibility for a past in which his racial forebears were the other, the enemy. By reclaiming her lost past through *his* imagination, she helps him internalize a new point of view and a new language, an act made possible by his willingness to “uninvent” himself — to enter other identities and reject the language that articulates “the systems that threaten to define [him]” (Kroetsch “Unhiding,” 43-44).

But if there are positive transformations possible in these encounters of white with aboriginal, both authors remain conscious of the delusions enabled by insincere or inauthentic appropriation. The failure of perception that causes Kowhai Street's tragedy is demonstrated in part by the residents' isolating attitudes and the provincialism that locates quality elsewhere — in the “centres” of Auckland, England, or America. But it is symbolized by the cynicism that surrounds the town's “rediscovery” of the Maori legend of the Memory Flower. Distracted by the perceived bright lights of other places or times, residents like the Shannons, Dorothy Townsend and Hercus Millow are inclined to view the Memory Flower as of no more significance than any other “tourist promotion” (21), a clever way to give visitors “a feeling that when they're in Puamahara they've arrived somewhere” (39). And perhaps no more serious attitude is deserved by the lonely, shabbily-maintained kitsch sculpture that represents the Memory Flower. Perhaps the local cynicism is simply a reflection of the attitude behind its government-sponsored rediscovery in the first place. It is only the outsider Mattina who takes the legend's ramifications seriously; for the locals it is a missed opportunity. As she says:

“I thought ... that I'd find the Memory Flower, the land memory growing in the air, so to speak, with everyone certain as could be of the knowledge of the programme of time, learning the language of the memory, like the computer language, to include the geography, history, creating the future.... It sounds crazy, I guess. It's the idea you get about other places. But I do feel that having the memory at hand, even if it is buried in legend, is having access to a rare treasure. Such

memories are being lost rapidly and everywhere we are trying to find them, to revive them. Puamahara in the Maharawhenua could be the place for pilgrims (I guess I'm a pilgrim) to be healed of their separation from the Memory Flower." (60-1)

It is because of this failure that the destruction visited upon the Kowhai Street residents does not result in the kind of renewal that Kroetsch's novel imagines.

However, there are difficulties with Kroetsch's use of aboriginal materials, too. When Jeremy "dreamed always a far interior that he might in the flesh inhabit," his model was Grey Owl; he tells the Customs agent on arrival in Edmonton that he wants to "become" Grey Owl (5-6). As a white man perhaps his choice is unavoidable, but his desire to become an imitation of Indian rather than the thing itself becomes problematic when he later declares Grey Owl "the truest Indian of them all" (80) because he refused to kill animals. Here Jeremy seems to be using white stereotypes of Indian identity and philosophy — simplified notions based on the interconnectedness of human and animal realms — to render the inauthentic white version of Indian "truer" than the authentic Indian experience, which does involve killing. Clearly there are dangers of misrecognition and misnaming in the present-day encounter of aboriginals and whites as profound as those of Columbus and Cook. *Gone Indian* also undercuts its own optimistic themes by locating the desired unnamings and renewals in a farcical narrative acted out by an often passive, impressionable and erratic character, a renegade American trickster whose enactment of a necessary process takes place with a cavalier, self-centred individualism that uses but does not include the members of the Canadian community in which it takes place.

**T**he duality of individual and community is one that Kroetsch has articulated in his criticism. Explaining that "Behind the multiplying theories of Canadian literature is always the pattern of equally matched opposites," he associates "Self: Community" with "Energy: Stasis" (Kroetsch and Bessai, 215). In another essay he establishes some related dualities:

The basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy-line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be in a house is to be fixed: a centering unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. ("Fear of Women," 76)

Kroetsch's paradigms are apt to a comparison of *Gone Indian* and *The Carpathians*. Where the Kroetsch novel privileges the "masculine" principles of motion, energy and the individual quest, including sexual conquest, Frame's Mattina pursues her antipodean quest through a largely static domesticity, rarely leaving Kowhai Street, undergoing even such dislocating experiences as the reading of Dinny's typescript and the trauma of the midnight rain within the walls of her temporary home. The people Mattina observes, the Kowhai Street residents sheltered in their homes, also seem static compared to the constant motion of Kroetsch's characters. The act of observation rarely transcends the fixed binaries of observer-observed, self-other, and it is tempting to interpret the failure that Frame's novel seems to imply as related to an absent element of the carnivalesque. In his essay "Carnival and Violence," Kroetsch borrows Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to describe a liberating state of being located on the frontier, one in which normally fixed identities and hierarchical social roles are in a fluid state of becoming, of mutation, transformation and exchange. While the spirit of the carnivalesque is productive in Kroetsch's novel, it is absent from Frame's more pessimistic vision.

And while Mattina's quest is an individual one, she is not the subject of *The Carpathians* in the way that Jeremy is of *Gone Indian*. The residents of Kowhai Street — a group that fails to achieve its potential as a community — are the narrative's main interest. Mattina is important primarily as a frame: as the observer and interpreter of the community, and as preserver of its story as memory. Ultimately, of course, even these framing roles are superceded by John Henry, the largest framer within the text, just as Jeremy as subject is controlled by Madham, and his subjectivity threatened by Madham's attempts to assert himself as subject.

It is more important to the post-colonial visions of both *Gone Indian* and *The Carpathians* that their superceding narrative frame-narrators are American than it is that their central characters — the agent-explorers Jeremy and Mattina — are American. The explorers, despite their limitations, do strive for an open-minded and positive embracing of the requirements of place; they respond and adapt to their destinations rather than imposing themselves. Once the explorer has left the "centre" of neo-imperial power — New York — for the "margin" — Puamahara or Notikeewin — she or he becomes implicated in the place itself, in its stories and realities, just as Cook and Columbus did. But if the final mediating power — the

framer, Madham or John Henry — remains located at the centre, in a place with expansive global “cultural authority” (Said, 291), a gap of narrative control will be constructed that sustains the colonial tensions of speaking versus being spoken for. As long as this gap exists, there will be competing claims on authorship and authority. What power the “margin” has to tell its own stories will be overshadowed by a stronger interpretive power located elsewhere, just as the political authorization for Columbus and Cook’s journeys remained at the centre. Kroetsch, by making Madham such an articulate spokesman for his own egotism and delusions, offers more hope for dismissing the centre’s claims for authority than Frame does; her John Henry as *Ur*-narrator is so minimally presented as to be almost invisible. An important but uncomfortable post-colonial problematic emerges from these two novels: they deliberately compromise their own status as locally framed and authorized texts by deferring narrative authority *in* the text to an “other” located at the centre of global cultural imperialism.

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## Steven Heighton

### Elegy, Apollo 1

*Du mußt dein Leben ändern*

As the cockpit filled with fire it must have seemed  
the rockets were erupting backwards, as if to drive  
the ship's alloys back down into ore-crammed  
veins underground, the astronauts in their cave

of circuitry and radium, shot drifting to the north  
as atoms, ash for gravity and the draughts  
to reconcile with their home country, earth.  
Last night, that nightmare you have where jets

like reckless sons are shuttling from the skies  
skywriting this: *you have to. Change. Du mußt.*  
The dashboard's face of glowing dials and gauges

like the calm, measured mask of Apollo, fused  
to madness, melts, its data burning with the eyes  
of tigers starving in tin-can cages.