

Anne KENNEDY

The Glass Beads of Fantasy: Writing as Trade in Settler Fiction

‘I was not yet civilized. I traded my safety for the glass beads of fantasy.’
- Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water*

The idea of ‘home’ in a post-colonial situation suggests a place of rifts—not just one rift, but many, in the way an earthquake generates aftershocks and further damage. The aftermath of colonization is damage to land, community, and, among things, stories. My focus today is on how settler fiction can exist and assist in the repair of a post-colonial society. (I am not going to debate the problematic term, ‘post-colonial’ here. However, ‘settler’ could equally be ‘invader’ or ‘occupier.’)

I live in such a society, as a Pākeha, a non-indigenous New Zealander, a third-generation descendant of Irish. My residence in Aotearoa is made possible by The Treaty of Waitangi, the 1840 governance agreement between Māori and the English Crown—and, importantly, by that Treaty not being ratified, but rather, used as a tool to peddle injustice to Māori. Like millions of white settlers around the world (in formalized and non-formalized situations alike), my identity has two sides, one slippery with the past, the other enormously privileged.

If the Treaty that constructs our tiny ‘nation’ is enshrined in law, it is also possible to live without regard for it, politically, socially, and culturally, to go about pretending we Pākeha are the only ones there. We are not alone in this. In ‘Playing in the Dark,’ Toni Morrison demonstrates how white American writers commonly erase people of colour from their narratives. A similar white-out—or rift—occurs in much of New Zealand literature.

At the same time, Pākeha have long bemoaned their lack of identity in a strange land—the phenomenon of placelessness.

Pat Sneddon in *Pākeha and the Treaty* makes a case for biculturalism benefitting everybody: ‘As Pākeha we claim our belonging through being descended from the settlers who agreed to the Treaty.’

If we occupiers of contested land in the (relatively) ‘new’ place—the New World—ignore the seismic shift that was colonization as well as the history of our freedoms, the nature of our responsibilities to our country, and our subsequent dislocations in cultural identity, then we really do belong nowhere. For settlers and indigenous alike, the colonized past is the only show in town.

The quotation I began with, by New Zealand writer Janet Frame, is from the novel that fictionalizes her experiences in an oppressive, abusive psychiatric hospital. In one sentence, she raises two dichotomies that often exist in settler communities.

The first, ‘I was not yet civilized,’ suggests that the settler is undone by the apparent wildness of the new place. This attitude predisposes the divesting of responsibility.

The second, ‘I traded my safety for the glass beads of fantasy,’ refers to the supposedly frightening world the settler has inhabited, yet it is also a world of possibility (glass beads, of course, were exchanged for land in false transactions); in a double-entendre (in the way Sylvia Plath apportioned her father Jewishness in the poem, ‘Daddy’), Frame momentarily ‘becomes’ the colonized.

Of course, Janet Frame is not making these statements as fact. Rather, her character expresses the problem of the real and, arguably, the internal confusion of settlerdom.

Faces in the Water was published in 1961, before biculturalism was even a word. How does a working class, post-war Pākeha woman begin to question her whiteness? I suggest that she, incarcerated in a psychiatric ward, oppressed and abused, was forced to excavate the scars in her nation through the only medium left to her, the imagination.

Janet Frame is one of my few Pākeha models as a novelist. Her characters are driven to interior expositions of language to explain the rift between public and personal. Other models are Jean Rhys, Marguerite Duras, J.M. Coetzee—all writers who engage with their post-colonial situation. It seems that indigenous post-colonial writers cannot ignore history, while settler writers generally feel free to do so. But at what cost to their own story, and to the society they live in?

The common factor in the work of white post-colonial writers is that they trade their naive sense of safety for some kind of truth.