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Irish-Australian historian/novelist Pat Jacob’s 1998 novel, *Going Inland*,1 deals in anxious ways with settlers, dispossession and frontier violence, asking some hard questions, and being not quite able to resolve them. An ambitious road novel that belongs to a group of post-Mabo novels which dramatise issues arising out of the Reconciliation agendas of the 1990s, it deals centrally with violence on the frontier, the relationship between settler culture and missionaries on the one hand, and Aborigines on the other, land-hunger, and also with the author’s own Irish-Australian heritage, and the interlaced linkages between all of these concerns. The ritualistic north-western and Uluru circuit of Australia engaged in by increasing numbers of “grey nomads”, retirees bent on experiencing the country, raises questions for Jacobs about dispossession, and the “myth of settlement” (Jacobs 1998, 29–30). Temporary homelessness forces a renegotiation of the meaning of the beloved apple-farm in the south-west of Western Australia, owned by Zoe’s family since famine migrant ancestors took up land there. To leave the agricultural zone, to enter “unknown country”, is for the focalising consciousness of the novel, Zoe and her husband Tom, to become “lighter”, “without boundaries”, to be free of learned ways of being in the body and in the land (Jacobs 1998, 12). It takes some time for them to realise that grey nomadism is its own form of ritual and enclosure (127). But while the sense of freedom lasts, it is experienced as being caught up in the *horizontal sublime* (Ashcroft), initially experienced as exhilarating excess of space, and subsequently as overwhelmingly unhomely. The nomads expect to be changed irrevocably, and are, but in ways that suggest a transformation of European vision (Jacobs 1998, 27). At the heart of the novel an important act of translation occurs, but it is one that occurs as a result of two preconditions having been met: an experience of Top End and Outback landscapes as essentially unhomely and alienating, and the compassionate uneasy observation of Aboriginal marginalisation in their own homelands. The crux of the novel is an experience of Papunya Tula artworks which mediate, and have the potential to transform, understanding of the landscape, and lead to more intimate engagement with the land. A secondary transformation/translation occurs at the end of the novel, but that paradigm shift, although empowered by Papunya Tula, also owes something to Zoe’s Irishness.

Jacobs satirises the *ersatz* tourist economy of the Top End and Centre which underwrites a series of waterholes/tourism oases frequented by the grey nomads - towns like Broome and Mataranka/Elsey Station which replay their pearling and romantic pastoral past respectively; or the Gagadju Holiday Inn in Jabiru, near Kakadu, that

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1 *Going Inland* won the Western Australian Premier’s Fiction Award in 1998 and was nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, 2000.
embraces unwitting tourists in its own architectural totemic crocodile-shaped hotel; or the Hermannsburg mission which employs Aboriginal women to serve Devonshire tea; or Alice Springs with its galleries which exploit the artistry of desert people who honour the Country in meticulously documented dots, and of course, the ultimate oasis, Uluru, with its contested path to the summit. These stopovers, ends in themselves, swallow up, and in a sense invalidate, the unthinkable, unrepresentable distances between them, as tourists flee in fear from the (perhaps desired?) terrors of the unbroken horizon, and from the feral humans who murder or go missing in the unmapped spaces between oases (Jacobs 1998, 43, 75–6). Jacobs critiques this tourist regime, and its capacity to turn contemporary Australians into parodies of 1920s Raj colonialists (Jacobs 1998, 13), clinking their iced drinks under palm trees in enclaves separated by high walls from the locals, usually Aborigines living in the long grass, or defensively on the margins. Zoe is marked out as a different kind of tourist, a quester systematically sensitive to the violence and greed of colonialism, writ large in these destinations.

The novelist probes what impels settlers to become nomads in retirement – is it that at some unacknowledged level they know themselves to be transplanted Europeans and already carry “the dislocation of their ancestry with them?” (Jacobs 1998, 160)? Or is it an unconscious bid to become atoned with those they have displaced, since “primitivism” (74) seems to be what they have come for? Or something else? Certainly, nomadism unsettles Zoe and Tom:

Zoe awoke in the night, unsure of where she was. This is what it is like to be homeless, she thought, to wander, disconnected. Without signposts. Belonging nowhere. Afraid of emptiness. And the silence: prescient and powerful, pushing down on them. They had only the clutter of their personal histories as bulwarks against uncertainty. (47)

Nomadism forces a radical revisioning of their assumptions about the homeliness of their apple orchard in the benign south-west of Western Australia, the place they have planted with reassuring exotics – jonquils, hyacinths, roses and lemons. The enclosed valley has its certainties destabilised: their inalienable title to the land is questioned by Tom, who fears that if he does not own the land, his identity will be inevitably imperilled (“He was a man of sixty-two years who did not know if he could keep hold of his land” – 198). Leaving settled Australia enables Tom and Zoe to rediscover the facts of violent displacement of Indigenous people in a way that remaining in the settled south-west corner of Western Australia, with its dearth of evidence of Indigenous connections to country, does not. It also uncovers other ways of belonging to country for the white settlers.

Indigenous people in this novel are only ever observed from a distance and their marginality to European existence is a disquieting focus. The novelist is careful not to assume their voice or even to invent a fictional character who is Aboriginal. The emphasis on European responses to Aboriginal people2 creates tension in the first half of the novel: women guiltily avoid engagement with a battered Aboriginal woman as the men refuse a begged-for lift on the grounds of “not getting involved” (Jacobs 1998,

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2 A similar strategy is in use in Jacobs’ prize-winning short fiction, “Tjamu”, “Gila” and “The Mad Metho Drinker”.

Zoe intuits a “flicker of awareness”, and would like to assert her “affinity” with Aboriginal Others in the supermarket and seeks the familiar “sodality of women: sisters, daughter, friends”, but is rejected (“warded ... off”), even by presumably innocent children (Jacobs 1998, 27). The issue is not Zoe’s willingness to be engaged, but rather the Othering endemic to the Top End habitus, and history, which breeds intercultural wariness, not to say hostility. The only signifier of Indigenous self-confidence is a cameo of what I take to be an Indigenous rouseabout in town for a night out and wearing the uniform of the European rodeo-performer:

...a young man, a boy, dressed in white moleskins stretched tight on his legs, narrow over his polished riding boots. His white shirt danced with points of light, the white broad-brimmed hat was pushed back from his face and his skin glowed with a soft light; the golden down on his cheeks and bare arms enclosed him in an aureole. His unlikely beauty captivated Zoe. She looked at him as much as she could without drawing his attention. The men he was with were affected by his beauty too. She could see the way they hung on his words, leaning in towards him, laughing when he laughed. He took them out of themselves: the heat, the dirt, their jaded women and fretful children waiting for them. Where he was, where he came from, was where they wanted to be. Youth, strength. He was life as they had dreamed it ... He was the promise of it. (Jacobs 1998, 27–8)

What this Australian cowboy seems to signify is an assertion of pride in his hybrid identity. His is an embodied performance of the frontier, one that challenges the ethnocentric Australian definitions of the pastoral jackaroo. As Aborigines take up pastoral leases (in 2005, 28% of all leases in the Kimberley – Davis 146), the omnicompetent bushman has increasingly been redefined as an alternative form of Aboriginal identity, drawing prestige from an ability to handle oneself well in a challenging terrain, and from expert horsemanship and cattle-handling. Its outer symbolism is country and western garb. Davis goes so far as to argue that the rodeo performance and role may have acquired the status of an alternative ritualised domain, a land-based alternative to initiation ceremonics (Davis 155). While the young man’s charisma may attract the narrator and may even be mildly satirised in this passage by the author as a crass American imposition on the very different bush and Indigenous cultures of Australia, his reality is not a compelling vision for the aesthetics-valorising author, who continues to be conscious of how separately the tourists and the first peoples operate even in a part of the country which trades on Aboriginal culture, dimly understood and appreciated. This image indicates the extent to which his Country, formerly a source of pride and connection, has become a degraded and unhomely place for displaced Aboriginal people, who seek identity and affirmations of manhood via alien cultural forms.

Before becoming a novelist, Jacobs wrote compelling histories of the Catholic mission at Beagle Bay (“Free Women on a Savage Frontier”; “Exiles in the Wilderness: The Pioneer Nuns of St. John of God”) and of the Moore River Settlement (Mister Neville, a Biography), and these investments are clear in the ways in which she tackles some of the mission stations on the itinerary (especially New Norcia, Beagle Bay and Hermannsburg), but what gives the novel most traction is the generative dialogue Jacobs sets up between her own Irish-Australian tradition (notorious for its land-hunger)
and what she observes of the Indigenous tradition from its art about how land is understood. She stages a series of revelatory epiphanies for the main focalising consciousness, Zoe, who is represented as estranged in her ‘own’ country and open to revising her assumptions. Not surprisingly, and in a long literary tradition, these occur at the heart of the country (Lindsay; Boer): in Alice Springs, at the Ntaria Land Trust in the Finke River Valley (one of the ‘big places’ in Arrernte country). Having registered as alien and alienating the vastness of the country traversed, enlightenment about how differently Aboriginal people experience it is mediated by the Papunya Tula canvasses:

In the quiet pure space of the gallery, lit by muted sunlight, the energy and the power of the paintings had an overwhelming force. In their austere beauty, the authority of geometric forms and subtle earth tones, the underlay of pointillist dots and overlay of ideograms, were visually stunning. She hadn’t known such master works existed. On an end wall a panel stretched across the space; an abstract depiction of a world of intimate knowledge of country. (Jacobs 1998, 91)

This venture into a deserted, air-conditioned gallery to view the Central Desert artworks and to read a catalogue recounting the history of the movement yields the pay­dirt the journey has so far not furnished:

...she read about the beginning of the movement at Papunya, Lajamanu, Yuendumu and Balgo Hills; the incandescent fire of creativity that had burned first, in the old men, discovering a way to express part of what they knew. The world around her seemed flat and without definition. The shallow hold Europe had on the continent, the lichen growth of foreign place names that covered the surface, was a temporary usurpation. (92)

Zoe responds as a painter and a Christian. She reads the Papunya/Tula artworks in terms of her own European paradigms: pointillism and abstractness function as a fulcrum enabling entry into a different paradigm; “incandescent fire” may suggest the epiphany or Pentecostal experience the paintings constitute for her. But the reality of tableaux of displacement, the despair of the Todd River “phantoms”, occurring just outside the gallery and visible from it, constitute a paradigm collision. Zoe recognises the energy that fuelled the creative “conflagration” (93) that had irrupted at Papunya as the positive pole of a continuum that also embraced the dysfunctionality of settler relations with Indigenous communities in contemporary Australia.

The translation provided by the desert art represents a paradigm shift and enables a self-critique of the second-hand art traditions deployed by artists like herself:

We only ever paint the surface ... because we can only know the surface. They they ... work ... from the inside out. I don’t understand it. They know the land and their place in it so completely they paint the idea of it. There is no separation ... They’re in it. No horizon, no perspective. (Jacobs 1998, 95)

The treatment is, like the representation of the boy, conflictual. Jacobs is painfully aware that what animates the paintings is passionate attentiveness to country and the sacredness that she reads as informing it, but she is also aware of the mismatch between
the cultural competence of the painters and the “drooping bodies” (93) of the Todd riverbed, the “stoic indifference of Indigenous faces in the mail” (93). Any of these, of course, may indeed have been responsible for the art, but their life circumstances are far from commensurate with the affluence of the art dealers who exploit them. Zoe is also aware of the mismatch between the Indigenous artwork and the travellers’ incomprenhension of the country they are moving through. One such incommensurability she foregrounds is the difference between settler fear of the land and being immersed in it, being of it: “... no separation .... No horizon, no perspective”. European philosophical paradigms struggle to make such an identification between self and self-nested-within-ecology meaningful, though feminist ecophilosophers Freya Mathews and Val Plumwood have recently written to address this very issue (Mathews 1991, 1999; Plumwood 1993, 1999). The new understanding is at first figured in Zoe’s engagement with the Indigenous art tradition, and in the differences between an Impressionist looking-at landscape and the Papunya Tula artists’ locating themselves within the very landscapes she and Tom had traversed with trepidation.

The art of the central desert may mediate Zoe’s understanding of the land she travels, but it profoundly destabilises her identity as an artist and as a settler Australian. Zoe, and probably Jacobs, characterise(s) displaced Indigenous persons as the fallout from an undeclared war for land, and Europeans as temporary usurpers. The incommensurability of two art traditions in this text becomes a metonym for a different way of valuing the land:

Her paintings of the valley – the delicate impressions, the skilful playing with light and shade, the evocations of seasonal change – were chimera, floating on her retina, presupposed elsewhere. The drifts of colour when the fruit trees were in blossom, the soft green hills, all tenderness and nurture, were landscapes of the transforming eye; nostalgia for an unknown otherworld. Other people’s exile. The generations passed it on, no longer knowing the source of their vision; no longer having the words for it. They travelled north [Jacobs’ emphasis] to find the sun, looking, looking everywhere. Unconscious of the tragic error in their internal compass they circled the continent, carrying the dislocation of their ancestry with them. (Jacobs 1998, 160)

The italicised north prompts a double reading: not only the Top End, but northwards to Europe where Impressionists historically played with simulating light in their canonical representations of Australia, paintings that, although largely rural in focus, rarely incorporated an Indigenous presence. To be aware of the imported and imposed nature of European settlement is in Jacobs, as in Herbert’s Poor Fellow My Country and Kim Mahood’s Craft for a Dry Lake, Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria, and Kim Scott’s Benang, is to be aware of the destructive nature of pastoral and agricultural settlement – the Top End and Outback as rubbish dump – littered with machinery and buildings “gone cronk”, trash, abandoned homesteads, airfields, mines, roads, petrol stations, shotgun shell cases, cans of beer (44–5, 130). Jacobs, too, is conscious of the detritus of failed attempts to settle and construes dislocation as a legacy of migration and settlement in an ill-understood ecosystem.

When Zoe reflects on the contempt with which “Long Grass” dwellers were treated in her past and present, she confesses “ghosts on the boundaries of her childhood.
Presences. Shadows. A silent complicity” (93). Complicity with land theft? With cultural genocide? The notion of “complicity” is allowed its full force as Jacobs’ analysis of contact as a “war” over land is elaborated in Zoe’s “dark night of the soul”. Zoe’s vision of the riverbed is a via negativa: she reads the high solitary idealism of Albrecht the missionary and Leichhardt, the naturalist/explorer, as hunger for fame, “solitary compulsion” (108), and the gold hunger of Lasseter and land-hunger of subsequent colonists as more mundane compulsions “that drove the Europeans to a frenzy”:

It seemed now to Zoe that the riverbed was moving, dark shapes rose and subsided in the deep shadow of the canyon. In the space she had entered without reckoning, she saw men on horseback, and crowded bodies heaving to escape, the upraised arms of men, women and children herded like beasts. Lasseter, tormented and desperate to be saved; the skull-visage of Leichhardt, stripped of flesh. The missionaries were there, the heavy bodies sweating and ill in grim determination to render God in their own shape; the wraiths, thin as a wisp of bitter smoke twisting up in a drunken despairing anger. All of this she saw in the moving mass of shadows; a Golgotha, a chasm of horror, created out of what she knew, what she had seen, what had been done. They called, strange sounds echoing back – a sharp scream, a sudden stillness – the ravine was crowded with them. How bizarre and unfitting this convergence. How violent and unrelenting the engagement, once begun. They would never stop, she saw that. They would be lost if they did. They wanted everything – the land and its spirit and even then they would not be content. She hoped the Aranda, the Pitjantjatjara, whoever was left, understood that: that they were locked in an unending combat for the land. It had become irrelevant that it would not support those who wanted it in the way they expected. It was too old and fragile. Its age-old cycles of wind and rain and searing bleaching heat subsumed their efforts, and their endeavours were as nothing. (Jacobs 1998, 108-9)

This dramatised vision of Golgotha (Jacobs typically uses a Christian lexicon to figure forth the pathologies and their transformations) is an inclusive one – both black and white suffer. However misguided Jacobs judges Pastor Albrecht and even Lasseter to have been, they are unaware of the “dark discordances” they bring from the “pit of Europe” to “[impose] on the seamless unity of a people and their land” (110). The suffering is mutual, and incommensurable, though there is no doubt where Jacobs’ sympathies lie.

In a move that may owe something to her religious traditions, it is, however, as if confession/acknowledgement of historical wrongdoing is tantamount to absolution in Jacob’s cosmology. One of the curious and puzzling, and perhaps questionable, manoeuvres of the novel is the action Zoe takes at Finke River against a German palaeontologist designed to prevent him from removing rock samples, and questioning his guilt for the holocaust. She pretends momentarily to be an Aborigine, a move that is possible because “Black was not always black in Australia” (118). The impersonation is presented as an act of “Atonement” (120) and as being justified by Zoe’s decision to trust her “[surrender] to the place she was in” (115), her sense of being at peace with her environment, for the first time in her journeying. Is perhaps this peace won through her imagined identification with the suffering of the massacred? Is the act of mimicry an act
of appropriation? Or is it a deliberate and strategic postcolonial enunciation of a dominant culture solidarity with an oppressed subaltern culture, and the motives unimpeachable? It is not clear whether Jacobs treats her character ironically, or whether this is intended as a radical postcolonial manoeuvre with the intention of drawing parallels between the Nazis' holocaust and colonial Australia. The context makes clear that the German is the object of Zoe's displaced wrath because of the ways in which the Strehlows, Carl and Ted (German missionaries) had treated the Arrernte culture and people at Hermannsburg. The novel frequently contrasts this German missionary enterprise unfavourably with Catholic missions (in particular New Norcia and Beagle Bay), and there is good reason for doing this, given the Strehlows' (father and son) collective insistence on burying Arrernte culture (Hill). But the more obvious reason for Zoe's attack is the naming of pastoralists' exclusion of Aborigines from the Finke waterhole, and by extension from their own culture, as massacre and cultural genocide, and as nothing less than a holocaust. Waterholes in such country are life itself, and the commandeering of access for cattle, which inevitably pollute such oases, is critical to survival. The imagery of "crowded bodies heaving to escape, the upraised arms of men, women and children herded like beasts" is a powerful one, recalling the worst imaginable kinds of genocidal massacres.

At a critical point in the Finke Riverbed encounter with the German, a very curious image acts as the narrative pivot into a more adversarial mode with him:

Where they sat was in deep shadow. The walls had turned the strange greyish-blue colour again. She remembered where she had seen it before - that colour. It was the cord. The purplish-grey membrane pulsing with blood. Exposed. Before the cut. ... (119)

Zoe's eye is ever that of the artist, but more than colour is at stake here. The context is a discussion of biological essentialism ("How much could she get away with ... her unevenly pigmented skin ... her wild tangle of red hair" - 118) and genocidal activities (these are named such as massacres, missionary activity - which in the case of Hermannsburg forbade Indigenous religious ceremonial and beliefs, disease or alcohol). What the German betrays is a momentary racism ("Ah, yes - the Lutherans ... Very dedicated I believe they would have come with a mission to convert the primitive black" - 119), not unlike in fact what one commonly finds in the work of the Strehlows. This lapse motivates Zoe's ambiguous deployment of we ("we're used to it. We grew up on it" - 119). This we may have a settler-Australian referent, but more likely it is an imaginative standing alongside Aboriginal people, a collective reconciled we, who stand in defence of their country from depredation in the name of and under the banner of science, one of the most insidious ways Aborigines were demeaned in the nineteenth century (McGregor). Is this "we", whereby Zoe speaks with and on behalf of Aboriginal people, a manoeuvre literally of atonement perhaps? One that gives voice to Zoe's conviction that "We're all in it....We're all part of it" (198)? Some may, however, argue Zoe's temporary imposture is an illegitimate act of appropriation, and certainly the violence of Zoe's rock-throwing after the man has acceded to her demands suggests a highly illegitimate, indeed criminal, exercise of power, however well motivated it may be.
Zoe and Tom act differently in relation to land appropriation issues. Zoe's implicit alignment of the Nazi holocaust and settler genocide does not square with her subsequent actions in relation to her own affairs. She does not embrace the collective guilt of her family's taking possession of the valley from Nyoongar people only two generations earlier, and returns to the farm at the end of her odyssey. Tom, on the other hand, the least likely of the two to do so, remains on the quest to resolve his own land claim dilemma (the theft of identity and money from the Englishman Drew). This appears to be an exclusively European conflict, and although parallel to a much larger act of land appropriation, the matter of Aboriginal dispossession is gone around rather than directly confronted, left outside the frame of the narrative. The novel raises moral conundrums more eloquently than it can resolve them. Perhaps to ask the questions is one step in acknowledging colonial history. It is maybe quixotic to expect more.

Jacobs writes both as an historian and as an Irish-Australian, conscious, as many are not, of her Irish heritage. Irish migrants in Australia did an efficient job of assimilating themselves, becoming ordinary Australians (Akenson 108–10). Although Akenson makes clear how close to the norm of Australian culture generally they were, and how similar the patterns of occupational mobility and economic profiles were (91–122), nonetheless the sense of being embattled, politically, religiously and culturally meant that a pathological sense of collective victimhood could be mobilised, and sometimes is in literary constructions of Irish-Australianness. Sometimes this imprisons and sometimes it liberates thinking. The sense of shared victimhood with Aboriginal people is often mobilised in diasporic Irish-Australian texts by such writers as Xavier Herbert in *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) and Thomas Keneally in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, though the Irish were as likely as others in the mainstream to victimise those even less fortunate than themselves, and to use their sense of grievance as a smokescreen for unspeakable acts, as did the Duracks (Devlin-Glass). However, other more socially just responses grow from the sense of being marginal. In some culturally marginal writers (Herbert, Malouf and Jacobs among them) transformational extension of identity grew out of a sense of shared victimhood, as writers found it possible to attempt to put themselves imaginatively in the place of the other.

The Finke River episode climaxes with another act of translation which, like the paintings, escapes from the limitations of language: Zoe performs a ritualistic dance, a woman's dance of atonement, the origins of which are identified as Irish, but the droning words that accompany it may owe as much to the friendship forged between her Irish grandmother and a displaced Aboriginal woman as they do to the Irish musical tradition:

> She began to move – the steps of a dance. It was ancient. She needed the sway and rhythm of it; to get back. Her grandmother had taught her. Sometimes her mother would join them, and her sisters. Swaying and bending, they would drone the words, not knowing where they came from, just knowing them, secure and close in their circle. It was from the cold country, a women’s dance. The simple movements warmed and soothed her body. (Jacobs 1998, 121)

Such unlikely but essentially simple acts of atonement exist in the narratives of Zoe's and Tom's grandparents, the Irish Ellen Madden and the Pole, Tomas Dubrovic,
and also in Ellen's relationship with a lone Aboriginal grandmother, who has lost not only her land but all her kin in the land wars of the south-west. Displaced from Ireland, and subsequently Liverpool, by hunger and poverty and a refusal to be treated as lower-class, or less than human and losing her child to starvation and her husband to gold-fever, Ellen is represented as a suffering, needy, prematurely knowing and angry person. However, she finds and gives comfort to the other woman in extremis, the unnamed Nyoongar woman. Lack of a mutual language does not prevent them becoming “steadfast to each other” (196). If genes have memory, then perhaps these affiliations may be intended to explain Zoe's heightened sensitivity to land and race issues.

If Aboriginal claims to settler land are too hard to contemplate in the world outside the novel, that of realpolitik, then something lesser but nonetheless important is successfully negotiated, a changed apprehension of land itself. When Jacobs images the landscape, it is in terms of a woman's body, and in terms perhaps more suggestive of European paradigms than Indigenous ones: Uluru has a 'delicate pink skin, fine as silk under her fingers' (169); she is represented as expecting nothing, waiting and outlasting the generations of men and women, even those who abuse her by seeking 'mastery' over her. This sentient being gives and takes, very much in the tradition of the Irish sovereignty, the ancient mythic tradition whereby the land succours the king and the people in a process of mutual exchange of fertility and sacrifice:

She witnessed the timeless act of transfer; the taking in of moisture, the giving out of heat; the cycle of nurture and renewal. ... The land spoke in metaphors, brief and subtle, but she had caught it. (169)

However equivocal Zoe's encounter with the German may be, her experience of the land is transformed utterly as a result of the exposure to Aboriginal art and her decision to stay close to where life is and was lived by Aboriginal people at Uluru. The vision she sees from the plane is one that is inconceivable without Papunya-Tula:

She saw the patterns of the earth reduced to their essential geometry: the shadow and angle of a declivity, the exquisite shading of red to pink of bare ground pockmarked by mines. She craned to see as much as she could. The sensate body of the land displayed itself for her: the fluid play of undulating contours, the minimalist beauty of burnt country, a cicatrice pattern of ebony on red, breathtaking in its symmetry. It flexed and moved under the influence of sun and cloud, shapes forming and dissolving; a land mass alive and potent within itself. Very briefly she understood how an intimate and profound knowledge of the land could be encoded into an abstraction and remain locked in the mind; the idea of it absorbed forever. (205-6)

Again, what the text offers is land as a sexualised Aboriginal body, sensate, ritually (and properly) scarified by its traditional burning-off practices (in Aboriginal terms a signifier of care and kinship). More so, it offers a version of the land that is internalised, inalienable, once known, never forgotten. Jacobs hints at aspects of the Irish sovereignty mythos in its suggestion of a two-way contractual understanding between humans and land, in its insistence on sexualising the goddess, though the aerial
perspective owes much more to the dot paintings of desert art than to Irish mythic
paradigms.

In conclusion, Jacobs uses the trope of the quest narrative, a journey into the heart of
Australian darkness, into Zoe’s vision of unspeakable frontier violence at the Finke
River site, to explore the dislocation of settlers. The European love/hatred of the
horizontal finds its counterpoint and ‘Other’ in Aboriginal art, which enables a
collaborative transformation of vision, though the text remains unresolved, indeed
equivocal, about land rights issues. In her vision, the hunger for homeland of European
and Indigene is the same, but the ways of valuing country radically different and
dissonant, incommensurable. Zoe is the romantic quester who learns the differences and
to respect difference, and whose knowledge of history and ‘frontier skirmishes’ of a
grave kind translate into moral disquietude about European land rights in the settled
south-west.

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