

# CONTINGENCY OR REMEDY? THAT LITTLE HERB OF SELF-HEAL

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It is here that I remember Mrs Morton's speech of welcome on that day all those years ago when I took possession and wandered across the warm fragrant earth hardly daring to step one step after another, not believing that land could really belong to anyone. (Jolley, 1992, 168)

It is through the process of writing that Elizabeth Jolley hopes to quell that disbelief and recreate the feeling of celebration that opens this quotation, and so I have called my paper: "Contingency or Remedy?" 'That Little Herb of Self-Heal' (46). The latter half of this title, and my opening quotation, are taken from Elizabeth Jolley's 1992 text, *Central Mischief*. The phrase 'that little herb of self-heal' is borrowed from Kenneth Grahame's autobiography. The essay in which Jolley invokes this quotation links the professions of writing and nursing via the need to write or talk out one's difficulties. Writing or talking are invoked as actions capable of providing solace and healing. In framing this quotation as part of a question I am attempting to indicate the littleness of the herb, its fragility and its inability to heal.

In this context my paper will explore the significance of land in two of Jolley's texts: *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (1985) and *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* (1993). It is my contention that in these texts Jolley's use of land is both metaphorical and 'material', that is, land is a metaphor for states of mind and is also the basis for the desire to ascribe some kind of materiality to identity and belonging. It is the latter inscription of land that will be the subject of this analysis.

Jolley's textualisation of land is insistent and over-determined; land becomes a fetish, the locus for the displacement of the desire to belong. This fetishization of land both enacts and problematises implicit attitudes that inform the writing of the 'posts'; postmodernism, poststructuralism, post-colonialism, even post-culturalism are terms which have recently enjoyed their critical moments in the sun. What all these 'posts' have in common, apart from their prefix, is that they gesture towards a beyond or a release and imply the celebration of inauthenticity and/or hybridity as markers of identity. Both the notion of a beyond and the notion of celebration require examination.

As I have indicated, Jolley invokes the notion of writing as 'a little herb of self-heal', however, the writing project and the desire for land are linked in a manner which erases their efficacy in healing at the very moment they attempt to inscribe it. This double process is inevitable since it is linked to the nature of textuality which is, in turn, linked to the abstraction of land into property. Consequently, notions of identity and belonging which are predicated on relationship to the land are effectively deconstructed. In Jolley's work this produces a sense of loss and the desire for a return to old certainties which leaks through the narrative in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* and also appears in her *Diary of a Weekend Farmer*.

Borrowing some of Meaghan Morris's notions from her article entitled, 'At the Henry Parkes Motel' (cited by Ken Gelder), I would like to suggest that the modern Western subject, the subject of both these 'narratives' is a often a tourist or a nomad who:

paying for . . . temporary homes, . . . [is] always able to leave when they want to, [to] mov[e] on to another sacred site. (354)

But, as Ken Gelder points out in 'Aboriginal Narrative and Property', 'to recognise oneself as a tourist is also to recognise that one is excluded from those sacred sites' (361) and therefore, from the possibility of achieving that desired relationship with the land.

Gelder writes of the loss of the sacred as troubling the modern sense of identity. In his article, and as I am using it, the sacred constitutes a particular and, essentially, pragmatic, relationship with the land which the modern subject locates as primitive yet, paradoxically, seeks to retrieve. The sacred is not reducible to the inauthentic or the hybrid. It is, in fact, resistant to these categories. Roberta Sykes describes the loss of the sacred as having created an 'unbridgeable gap between belonging and ownership' (Turcotte 38). Sykes sees the dilemma of white people as the 'problematic of origins of place'. Gelder's article suggests that this problematic is inextricably linked to the sacred and presents itself as a symptom, an anxiety which underpins the modern desire for place and identity. This kind of relationship to the land is both alien and desired and the tension between alienation and desire informs Jolley's writing of the land. In *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, Weekly attempts to bring the sacred to her land in the form of hymns. However, these are decontextualised and fragmented. The songs remain alien to the place.

*The Newspaper of Claremont Street* tells the tale of Margie, known to the inhabitants of Claremont Street as Weekly or Newspaper. Weekly is a cleaning lady, a woman with no place other than a small, shabby rented room. She is also a 'migrant', her other home is the Black country of England's industrial midlands. This other home is as distanced from belonging and identity as is Weekly's rented room on Claremont Street. The novel describes her painstaking acquisition of money and her acquisition of land. Land is a shifting signifier; it means variously – security, identity, belonging and power. All these meanings are related, and tenuous. They suggest the possibility of a return to a place of certainty where identity may be perceived as authentic and unitary, and also that this identity should be developed through interaction with a particular land(scape). Both of these suggestions become fraught at the very moment of their inscription because of the ambiguous nature of language, language whose contradictory meanings compete for supremacy in a single sentence, or in the narrative as a whole: 'All land is someone's land' (Jolley, 1985, 58) is indicative of this ambiguity as is the feeling of un-belonging which is the corollary of Weekly's desire to belong.

Jolley's fetishization of land is the product of a desire to re-create a 'real' relationship with the land but the displacement of her subjects which is historically, socially and economically based, continually undermines this endeavour; land becomes a synonym for possession and property; the relationship between subject and landscape becomes one of *differance*. Land is a 'text' constituted by the play of the 'identif[actory urge] and difference' (Spivak qtd. in Derrida, xii). There is, in Jolley's work an:

ineluctable nostalgia for presence that . . . [attempts] to make a unity [between the self and the land] by declaring that the sign [which is the land] brings forth the presence of the signified [which is, in this case, identity]. (Spivak, xvi)

The realm of hybridities and inauthenticities which textuality and the imagination of ten celebrate is continually disturbed by the existence of, and desire for, the real (Gelder 364). What is achieved in the act of writing is ' . . . the perennial postponement of that which is constituted only through postponement' (Spivak, xlii).

Weekly's primary connection in the present of the novel is with a Russian couple, the Torbens. Their experience of dislocation appears to have been even more intense than Weekly's own. Their 'elsewhere' (Salzman 32) has dissolved behind them in their enforced act of leaving. Their past home no longer exists:

Through Torben's descriptions Weekly saw all this destroyed. She even felt she had been present when the great staircases were torn out and burned and the bear-skin rugs, tossed on the bonfire, writhed in flames as if they were still live bears. Nastasya had known all this, possessed it all once, but her background had crumbled, disappeared completely and she had lost everything in the subsequent flight.

However, Weekly's elsewhere is even more obscure, her dispossession actually equals non-possession. She is a subject who has no elsewhere. There seems no continuity or even discontinuity recuperable for her and the sense of loss, as opposed to generation, which accompanies this feeling manifests itself in Weekly's desire for land.

The textualisation of land in the *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* and *The Newspaper* is the locus for the attempt to unstitch the opposition between nature and culture in the construction of identity. Such an operation suggests that culture is the intimately related product of nature, a product which never completely detaches itself from its producer. It suggests that: 'each term is the accomplice of the other' (Spivak, lix). The act of unstitching these oppositions is never wholly celebratory even when it is part of the preparations for a re-making of identity in that territory which is mutually occupied by the two 'accomplices'. Unstitching is the first phase in the attempt to cobble together an apparently stable self out of the piecemeal, to construct a collage whose glamour remains alien and illusory, since the first term in this coupling – nature – remains the locus of displacement.

When Jolley is able, *momentarily*, to banish the symptomatic dis-ease produced by the feeling of un-belonging from her texts, she does so via a negotiation of the local and the global (Clifford 4), by writing her characters into a relationship with their region. The centrality of the specific Western Australian landscape to her writing suggests, not a nationalist fiction of identity, but a regionalised and localised fiction as if the plight of a subject, alienated from a world where identities have been written nationally, may be assuaged by a writing of the self into smaller places, more 'homely' landscapes. This constitutes a displacement of, rather than an alternative mode for, writing identity. The local is, arguably, still inflected with the identity politics of nation. Land takes on meaning within the 'larger' term culture which is often invoked synonymously with, or is regarded as being constitutive of, nation. Jolley moves within and beyond oppositions of local and national as alternative modes for achieving identity or belonging. The displacement which still exists within the discursive space of nation, effects 'an undoing yet preserving of oppositions [and], erases in this special sense all oppositions' (Spivak, xx). The meaning of both national and local is unsettled and, for a moment, the disparate parts of the self coalesce with reference to all and, therefore, none of these meanings; the 'Tolstoy country' which she refers to in the *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* (25), is filled with Blackbutt and Western red cedar as well as a hedge of rosemary and Winter Nellis Pears – in as much as it detaches us from the real (which I am displacing onto the land), language and writing offers the only means of re-establishing contact with the land.

I would like to say a little more about the *Diary* and then to personify the texts, to elaborate on the kind of dialogue that they enact between them. The *Diary* is an odd and intriguing text which contradicts its own definition. A diary, whether it is associated with

work or home, is generally thought of as one person's document and the blurb on the dust jacket confirms this, telling us that Jolley's text is:

A delightful, humorous and moving mixture of personal observation and poetry, *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* is based upon Elizabeth Jolley's own record of life on the land.

But Jolley's diary is the work of three people (that is without taking the interventions necessary for publication into account, interventions which are signalled by the contradictions between the words *based* and *own* in the aforementioned quotation). Her husband, Leonard Jolley and her daughter Ruth also contribute to the text. We are assured of the 'authenticity' of their contributions by a phrase, in parentheses, which states that this is: 'Leonard's' (33), or this is 'Ruth's handwriting' (31). Therefore, the story or events recounted in the diary already belong to others. The notion of diary becomes a fiction.

The two texts *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* and *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* 'speak' to one another. They 'borrow' each other's words— for fiction writing, in the case of the former, and for the recording of 'fact', as regards the latter. Leonard Jolley's words; 'All land is someone's land you said and this land is our land' (11) are given to Elizabeth Jolley and set in her diary. They also appear in *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* in the form: 'All Land is Someone's Land' (58); ownership of the word(s) and the land is problematised. Yet, simultaneously, Jolley is attempting to create a sense of security, by invoking this phrase which appears in insistent italics on the opening page of the diary proper. However in this instance writing, 'the little herb of self-heal' is not completely efficacious, it can only provide what Paul and Keryl Kavanagh term 'a contingent reality' (193) which is ephemeral and self-erasing. The security of ownership is also undone by the title of the book; the word 'Weekend' suggests part-time, holidays— Jolley can belong to her farm on weekends only. It is not home even though it is hers.

The diary is overburdened with names, lists and figures as it attempts to inscribe materiality into paper ownership. At times it suggests: 'the desire for a non-figurative language— for paradise, the illusion of language devoid of the figurative, the nostalgia for a utopia . . .' (Gunew 41) for a lost plenitude. Juxtaposed against the solidity of produce, prices and botanical names is the ephemerality of home which 'even as an elsewhere, dissolves' (Salzman 32). Jolley says:

People like us have no land behind them, even the place where I was born 'The Beeches', Gravelly Hill, Birmingham, no longer exists. How can I buy land! (14)

These lines link in the *Diary* and in *The Newspaper* in a narrative of never-belonging:

For Weekly the thought of possessing land seemed more of an impertinence than a possibility. Back home in the Black country where it was all coal—mines, brick kilns and iron foundries her family had never owned a house or a garden. Weekly had nothing behind her, not even the place where she was born. It no longer existed. (58)

The *Diary* spans a three year period, yet even after three years of ownership, uncertainty continues. Jolley laments that:

Sometimes it is easy to lose the way in the seasons. Not to know what is the next thing to be done. It is then that I can feel aimless and the place, the orchard quickly seems an alien place to be eaten up by the bush. It is an alien place resisting or is it retreating from all our human endeavour. (83)

Jolley's desire to write out her 'strange land hunger' (12) is also unsettled through the intersections between textuality and capitalism, intersections which indicate that the apparent materiality of figures and names are abstractions, thereby increasing the distance from, and the desire for, that 'lost plenitude' (Gunew 42). Figures appear in print which is significantly larger than that used for the words. Numerals leap from the page, signalling their potency. Money is an inescapable part of the text. *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* is framed by the commercial, by an advertisement at the beginning of the book and by the proof, statistically signified, of produce from the land, which includes the strange request to: 'Please add up the totals in this book' (95), at the end. These are totals which show the produce and financial gain achieved from crops. They provide 'material' evidence which, if one reads the *Diary* and *The Newspaper* in tandem, as I have done, attempts to legitimate ownership through productivity. Yet the smallness of the crop totals seems to laugh at this legitimacy and re-inscribe the weekend nature of the farming.

*The Newspaper of Claremont Street* also links money, the imagination, ownership and ethics. The inconsistencies of capitalism are foregrounded. The work ethic to which Weekly adheres and which appears to underpin capitalism is both evoked and erased:

It seemed that, as well as what she added by her hard work to help the total grow for what she wanted, the money itself helped. Fancy money helping money, what an idea! (18)

Alongside the celebration of the self-begetting power of money, a stoicism, a protestant work ethic, (which is one of capitalism's narratives of success and which is rewarded by money's auto-reproduction) competes with a condemnation of the conditions under which Weekly works for supremacy and signals yet another inconsistency in the romanticisation of capitalism in the myth of the self-made (wo)man. Weekly works long and hard. Her labour is menial and dirty. The women who employ her are condemned for their abuse of her time and her labour. Admiration for Weekly is apparent in the lines:

No-one could wait for what they wanted as Weekly could and did. She was patient as the earth when waiting for the earth. (57)

Exploitation and the work ethic emerge as, both, competing narratives and obverse signs of the same coin in the capitalist scenario.

This partially self-generating money, becomes translated into land, both literally and figuratively:

It was a daily vision, and took the form of an exquisite cone shaped mountain made entirely of money, with a silver scree of coins on its steeped sides. (40)

However, despite this restorative vision, Weekly can only take possession of the land by turning her back on the past, by rejecting its meanings and her connection with them. Weekly's connection to the land is both falsified by, and conditional on, Nastasya's death. Weekly turns away from Nastasya, a move which is necessary if Weekly is to 'truly' possess her land and which is also essential to the invention of a unitary sense of self. This desire for a unitary sense of self, constructed in relation to the land, is made explicit at the end of the text. Weekly is at 'home' when she meets her new neighbour, they drink tea together and the years of solitude which have passed since Nastasya's death seem about to end. But Weekly does not desire connection, she is not interested in naming and therefore, in recognising her neighbour. To do so would be to open herself up to the kinds

of demands she has rejected. Relationship to her land seems conditional, not only on a rejection of the past, but also on the rejection of the future – acceptance or inclusion of an ‘other’ seems to promise fragmentation of Weekly’s sense of identity and belonging. Her security seems dependent on exclusion.

I would like to turn again to the quotation that haunts both of these texts and which also haunts mine, it is: ‘All land is someone’s land you said and this land is our land’. Its presence in both of these texts signals the existence of language as a commodity which can be transferred, re-used and re-owned – the words belong to no-one. This mimics the translation or commodification of land into a product which is also ultimately textual. These words may imply security and possession but they also admit a paradox which her writing struggles to resolve, or cover over. The word ‘land’ is repeated four times; it is over-determined and anxious. There is an obvious tension in this phrase which is not resolved by punctuation or a change in tense. Therefore, what we have is a contradiction between the present sense of the land as always already belonging to someone else and the desire for ownership in this same present. It is possible to paraphrase Jolley, thus – [if] all land is someone’s land, [how then can] this land [be] our land? The answer in modern terms is simple: land becomes ours through purchase, through the acquisition of a title which bears our name. In *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, certainty is removed by the absence of the last seven words which, paradoxically, attempt to stress the possibility of having land to belong to.

The dis/ease between ownership and belonging, the longing for place that haunts Jolley’s writings cannot be settled by capitalist notions of property and possession, deed and title. These words attempt to elide the crucial differences between belonging and ownership which are encapsulated in the gap between the first and second propositions of the Jolleys’ statement.

Textuality can only provide provisional security and belonging. It opens up more than it covers over. It is, to remain with agricultural, land-oriented metaphors and to quote Derrida:

A sowing that does not produce plants, but is infinitely repeated. A sowing that is not *in*semination but *dis*semination, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin . . . Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings. (Derrida, lxv)

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