

‘Chatter about Harriet’: Randolph Stow’s Place-Making and *The Suburbs of Hell*

CATHERINE NOSKE
University of Western Australia

The first chapter of Randolph Stow’s last novel, *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), ostensibly written from the perspective of ‘a thief’ (5),¹ could just as easily be read as metaphorically describing the practice of a writer. Opening with deliberate consideration of the Biblical metaphor of the thief, the novel immediately draws our attention as readers to disparate possibilities in the interpretation of the figurative manoeuvre: ‘*The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night*. That always seemed so strange to me, to find talk of thieves in such a place. And not in any condemning way, but dignified, almost understanding’ (5). Reading these passages through the literal, deliberately and with a gentle irony, the narrator holds open for the reader the stages of association in metaphoric structure which normally are hidden, functioning subconsciously or subtextually. In this way, both the description of the setting (the fictional town of ‘Old Tornwich’) and the narration which follows can also be read as carrying multiple, metaphoric meanings: ‘A thief is outside. He passes in the street, peers through windows without seeming to. He wants to be in, to handle things, to know. Lonely, one might think; wistful—but not so. A thief is a student of people, knows so many that his head is full of company’ (5). To follow the internal logic of the narrative, this opening introduces the thief as the murderous antagonist of the story to come. The novel is a murder mystery, with multiple victims and no resolution. The character it comes to focus on in the final paragraph is recognisable as Paul Ramsey, the first person to be killed. But metaphorically, this passage might just as easily describe the practice of a writer in engaging with place. Or more specifically, it could be describing Stow’s writing of his English home of Harwich, the place on which Old Tornwich is based.

Suzanne Falkiner’s biography of Stow, published in 2016, opened up new avenues for reading the metafictional aspects of Stow’s oeuvre as a whole. In tracing in detail the movements of his life, and mapping out connections to his writing, Falkiner offered critics the possibility of considering Stow’s writing as a conscious response to his own experiences, and in particular a response to his status as a colonial subject. As one of his two English novels, *The Suburbs of Hell* has predominantly been read as an expatriate work, only nominally or superficially connected to Stow’s Australian novels (cf. Averill; Hassall, *Strange Country*). This paper seeks to engage with a triumvirate of metafiction, transnationalism and the connections between the novel and Stow’s own life in unpicking the place-making that Stow enacts. It is possible to read *The Suburbs of Hell* as articulating aspects of a broader subjective postcolonial anxiety common to much of Stow’s writing. Informed by Falkiner’s biographical work, this paper will discuss specifically the manner in which the novel feels out transnational movements and connections across the world as part of this. Metafictional play with the act of writing is an important element of this work, connecting the novel’s place-making to Stow’s consciousness of his own authorship. As a manoeuvre, it underpins the narrative space of ‘Old Tornwich,’ with quite specific effects. The setting as constructed features connections to both the local and the global, all within the closed narrative space of the small, quasi-fictional town. Read alongside the metafiction in the novel, this place-making negotiates with the transnational as a space of universal human questions, capable of generating connections between nation-spaces and marked by an uneasy yet powerful fluidity.

The setting described by the thief in the opening pages is a place known by the character, and one regularly inhabited. It is marked by a perception of the changing of the season: ‘Winter began this morning, with brittle light, air keen in the lungs’ (5). A sensitivity to the seasonal moment is common to Stow’s other English novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980), where Crispin Clare’s illness and recovery is marked through the movement from winter to spring. Here, though, the symbolism aligns with the deaths to come—the cold air enters through the windows of Paul’s bedroom, and ‘mist must be wreathing above that lonely bed’ (*Suburbs* 6). At the same time, the cold air offers a clarity of vision, and emphasis in the description is placed on the ability to see: ‘Across the estuary, which was calmer and had more blue in it than usually, woods and tawny stubble-fields had drawn close, showing details that at most times are blurred by haze’ (5). The act of seeing is thus enabled by the scene revealing itself to the watcher—the verbs used seat the agency with the woods and fields rather than the viewing perspective. The thief, through his description of his own activities, makes clear that he habitually watches people, and specifically Paul. It is this which he enjoys—‘ah, the thrill then, after my many studies; to find his things, his self, lying opened before me’ (5–6). This thrill of revelation again might be one shared by a writer. With it, the thief is no longer outside but ‘an insider, a master of secrets. But the waiting may be long’ (6). This latter too might have been an authorial sensation; the waiting between Stow’s novels was often long. The act of watching can be productive, then, when turned on a human subject. The place, alternately—‘this little place in the mist’ (Stow, *Suburbs* 6)—can be watched, known, familiar to sight, but clarity and revelation is beyond the watcher’s control. In these features, the opening of the novel can be read as offering a subtle contemplation of writing, perception and place. This description of the setting introduces a practice of place-making which is marked by the embedded possibility of multiplicity in meaning, by a consciousness of writing as an act, and by a sensitivity to the agency of place.

The encouragement in the opening towards a consciousness of writing practice is arguably related to a broader phenomenon—the text’s metafictional play with the narrative tropes of the murder mystery genre, including the voyeurism of the narrator. In its structure, its lack of resolution, the novel both acknowledges and denies our readerly expectations of the murder mystery form. Michelle de Kretser, in an essay published both in the *Australian Book Review* and as an afterword to the most recent Text Classics edition, describes in detail the manner in which the text breaks with convention, setting up the ‘whodunnit’ with a cast of characters and a restricted narrative space, only to deny its fulfilment (de Kretser 206–07). The thief’s perspective is central to this. Appearing at regular intervals, he is narrated constantly in first-person, the only character to be treated so. He also remains unidentified to the end of the novel. From the descriptions which ensue, we know the thief is (or watches) the murderer, directly or indirectly responsible for eight victims: Paul Ramsey, Eddystone Ena, Commander Pryke, (indirectly in suicide) Black Sam, Linda de Vere, (possibly) Harry Ufford, (possibly) Dave Stutton and (possibly) Frank de Vere, the latter three all depending on interpretation. De Kretser suggests that the thief is actually Death. Her interpretation is congruent with the Biblical metaphor of the ‘thief in the night,’ God as holding dominion over all life and death.² The introduction of an allegorical figure, she argues through this reading, is another aspect of a deliberate metafictional play, ‘causing a familiar narrative type to turn slippery and weird’ (207). De Kretser also notes the potential of allegory to disturb narrative integrity: ‘A refracted mode, it treats the world as a sign, always gesturing beyond the tangible. While realism deals with solid projections, allegory is hollowed out, an eyeless socket’ (209–10). De Kretser’s reading of the structure of the thief’s narration in the text thus connects on a deeper lever to a consciousness of writing as an act, and its capacity to interpret and relate to the real world.

An alternate possibility would be to read the thief as the author—or perhaps rather Author, the idealised role—a perspective similarly omnipotent and omnipresent, similarly responsible for the characters' lives, similarly thrilled in gaining intimate knowledge through the act of writing, learning each character's secrets. Intruding at the moment of death, the thief's perspective offers a metaphysical consideration of existence, the voice detached and contemplative. As an approach to narrating each incident of violence, it transcends the plot structure and the conventions of the genre to reach at the philosophical. Anthony Hassall describes *The Suburbs of Hell* as 'a general meditation on the frailty, the impermanence of life' (*Strange Country* 178). But the form in which the thief is written simultaneously calls attention to the act of textual construction. The meditation enacted moves around and beyond the structure of the plot. With each narrative intervention marked by epigraphs taken from a vast range of texts, the passages taken as a whole also create a dense and active intertextuality which both undermines the generic structure of a closed setting, and situates the narrative within a broader (authorial) contemplation of the nature of existence. The epigraphs extend the field of reference well beyond the local, and introduce a sense of universal humanity. The thematic concern with death is also picked up in the third-person components of the text with the rising fear of the central characters, the increased tension of rumour-mongering, and the persistent fascination of the media. The thief-as-Author links the contemplation of life and death to the function of writing, in a social context which sets language as embedded in place. The gossiping of the locals, for instance, is distinguished by the phonetic spelling of the local accent, and continues with an insistence to the end of the novel; the final lines of the text are local newspaper headlines (a feature I will return to).

Reading these various associations between the practice of writing and place in the text prompts an interest, for me, in the manner in which Stow's practice in the novel represents a conscious form of place-making, one capable of looking both ways—acting to situate and define the local but simultaneously suggesting its relation the global. As the use of the accents suggest, the textual construction of place is an active endeavour in Stow's writing 'translating' the local specificity of the real world. This leads Stow, conversely, to universal human questions. The ideas opened within the thief's passages (both internally to the text and through it in the use of allegory) are suggestive of the transnationalism at play in the text—the manner in which it opens outwards from a definitively localised setting. Hassall describes the space of Old Tornwich as 'time-layered' and 'multidimensional' (*Strange Country* 168), with the result that the town 'is both intensely and recognizably local, and a microcosm of the larger world' (*Strange Country* 168). There are subtle points of connection in the novel between different places, which expand on the seemingly contained setting of Old Tornwich and open the English space to the transnational. As an international port, the town is exposed to contact from the outside world, which more often than not in the novel comes in slightly dubious forms: sly mentions of customs and 'tax-free' purchases are a regular motif, and one of the pubs is the Smugglers' Arms. In her biography of Stow, Falkiner notes that the architecture of real-world Harwich bears in gabled buildings the mark of seventeenth-century Dutch immigrants (622). The town turns to face the sea, is built close on the estuary. In the passage immediately following the first murder, Harry walks through this landscape:

At half-past six on a black Sunday evening, with the sound of bells being blown from the high spire over sea and estuary, Harry Ufford came wandering, hands in pockets, down the street, and at last stamped his cold feet to a halt at the edge of the quay. A light, biting breeze was up, but the black water was glossy, reflecting the lights of buoys in the channel. At one point on the other shore was

a cluster of yellow-lit buildings, but otherwise a darkness of wood and field loomed unbroken against a navy-blue sky striped with ragged black cloud. (*Suburbs* 29)

Harry is, in large part, the character with which we are most strongly aligned. This is the same scene, the same woods and fields which reveal themselves in the opening to the thief. But here, they are marked by the constant repetition of darkness, and the inability to see. As a shadowy negation of the town, the sea is an anti-space, and acts as the subliminal—a space for rumours and fears. The first suspects mentioned in the novel include Black Sam, in a passage which comes shortly after the description above. Sam's motivation is assumed in his difference: as Harry describes, 'No motive. His motive is, he's black. Mau Mau in the blood, or something like that' (*Suburbs* 34). In this, the possibility of Sam as the killer is connected to the concept of his exteriority, commonly presumed by the townsfolk, but a false assumption. The child named Killer, for instance, guesses at Sam's origins on the basis of his knowledge of sea-routes: "'Uh?" said the boy, looking disbelieving. "I thought you come from somewhere near Panama"' (105). In reality, Sam was 'born and bred in Ipswich' (34) and he 'int never been out of England' (105). Sam is eventually driven to suicide by the weight of this suspicion and the confirmation of prejudice it represents. The sea is the source of other, more direct suspicions as well—a group of 'Yugoslav' sailors, stranded in the port as their ship has been arrested for debt, are watched by the locals with a degree of unease. They are described as 'pretty famous among the gossips' (64) and according to the same have been questioned by police. Despite coming off a 'Spanish ship,' they are named as Yugoslavian by Harry's protégé, Dave, another assumption based simply on his dislike (63). Their status of exteriority is marked in their behaviour, 'sitting hunched in their coats, and silent, like commuters' (65). They are segregated from both the narrative and the community. Their entry to the pub both re-defines the Englishness of the setting and simultaneously compromises it; they are a reminder of the permeability of the sea border. Harry defends them, ridiculing Dave's assumptions outside the pub, but doesn't engage with them on entering.

The fluidity of these connections as engendered to the wider world, (both literally in the prevalence of the ocean-space and figuratively in the constantly shifting emotional responses these connections create in the town), supports a perception of the novel's transnationalism. It also opens the possibility that the novel acts at least in part as an exploration of Stow's relationship with his own transnationalism, something inherently connected to his status as a colonial subject. The setting in itself is marked by the dual illusion of security and (or based in) self-containment. The constant opposition of the town and the sea, combined with the intrusion of others, outsiders, via the port, plays with the generic convention of the locked-room mystery—other than the 'Yugoslavs,' suspicion is exclusively focused on the locals. In this sense, the global perspective offered by the view out to sea functions as an often frightening and fluid 'Other,' to reconfirm the stasis and locatedness of the community of Old Tornwich. But this internalisation of focus isn't comfortable. Harry himself has spent a life at sea, and while he is now land-based, his current job is 'sea-defence,' shoring up the sea-cliff on which the town is built, to protect it (64; 103–04). Penetrating these defences, the violence of the murders is particularly shocking to the town. At one point, Harry discusses 'fellow-feelin' (103) with Arthur, landlord of the Moon,³ and inadvertently quotes John Donne, 'No man is an island' (103). Arthur, remembering the poem from the recitation of padres during the war, supplies the rest:

'There's more of it,' Arthur said, trying to remember. 'It goes on something like this: But each man is part of the continent, like a promontory; and if a clod of it is washed away, the whole world is less.'

Harry was looking at him wide-eyed. ‘Is that it? Thass deep, boy.’

‘... “Every man’s death diminishes me”—that I can quote you.’

‘Thass very strange,’ Harry said, ‘very strange that you tell that to me. I mean, here I am, spendin my days buildin up this sea-defence thing, to keep the clods from falling off the promontory. And feelin the way I do, about Paul and—oh Christ, poor little Ena. And you sayin that, that bring the two things together. And thass how it feels, just like that. Like clods falling off me, and I was getting smaller.’

‘It tolls for thee,’ said Arthur, quietly. (Stow, *Suburbs* 103-4)

Connecting this with the early passage describing Harry’s walk down towards the water, the bell tolling across the estuary also marks the scene of Harry’s eventual death by drowning at the hands of Dave, (possibly accidental, possibly murder, in any case consequential to the violence of the whole). Interesting in the recitation of the poem, though, is the transposition of ‘the whole world’ for ‘Europe’ in Donne’s original. Harry’s interpretation, seeing himself specifically as the promontory between the town and the sea, supports this re-writing, positions him, both local and seafarer, as the point of contact between the world and the introspective community.

Through such subtle manoeuvres, Stow undermines the completeness and containment of the setting with a consciousness of the world beyond it, even while maintaining the determined interiority of focus within the community. We are witness early in the novel to Harry’s own place-making, a description of his own creation of a home, again marked by a duality of interests land and sea: ‘It was a place full of ships and horses: of model ships in and out of bottles, china Suffolk Punches, and many horse brasses... What he felt was the comforting profusion of all those things, so lovingly chosen, which he had carried home to mark his patch’ (7–8). In describing Harry himself through a metaphor, Stow chooses a creature of the shoreline: he ‘was at home like a cockle in the mud’ (8). Harry’s position in Old Tornwich, local and yet also having come from outside, from beyond, is not that different in a sense to Stow’s position in Harwich. Aspects of Stow’s life are pertinent to this description, and suggestive of an authorial re-purposing of his own experiences of making a place for himself. Of all his English residences, the house in Harwich was the first Stow owned, and the first place where he settled permanently. Harry is based, as a character, on Charlie Mower, the man from whom Stow purchased his home in Harwich (Falkiner 640–41). In a letter to his mother, Stow describes the house in very similar terms to those used describing Harry’s, a connection Falkiner also makes, in using the same passage as an opening to the chapter on Harwich in her biography (619–21). Hardly anyone living in Harwich knew Stow was a writer, instead ‘in the Harwich winter “uniform” of blue jeans, boots, a heavy raw-wool sweater and a black pea jacket, he was often thought to be a truck driver or a seaman’ (Falkiner 622). Falkiner also records a conversation with Freda Constable, where Stow suggested that part of the attraction of Harwich was that he ‘liked the grit of a working port, reminiscent of Geraldton, the to-ing and fro-ing of ships’ (623). As author, living in Charlie’s house and taking on the appearance of a local’s life, Stow is somehow between local and outsider in Harwich; while at the same time, in writing, the English space is connected both to his experiences there, and through memory to his Australian childhood home.

There are several aspects of the construction of the novel which, outside the narrative logic, also connect it to a world beyond, and specifically to Australia. The first, (quite literally in a textual sense), is the dedication of the novel to a Western Australian friend: ‘for William Grono—twenty years after “The Nedlands Monster”’ (4). The Nedlands killer, Eric Edgar Cooke, had terrorised Perth in 1963, while Stow was lecturing at the University of Western Australia (close to Nedlands), using a modus operandum very similar to that of the murderer in the novel (Falkiner 640). In Falkiner’s words, the death of a friend’s younger brother had ‘brought the events rather too close to home’ (640). Transplanting the killer and his methods to England at a distance of twenty years perhaps offered Stow a space with which to contemplate more measuredly the impact of these events, in ways less specific but more focused on the universal—on a contemplation of death itself. This is marked in the second direct allusion to Australia in the text: the last page of the novel describes Frank De Vere’s death through two sentences in a newspaper, ‘The Tornwich and Stourford Packet,’ and opens into a series of headlines, also describing deaths from across the world. The lines, which include ‘1000 Bengalis Massacred in Assam,’ ‘Headless Corpses in El Salvador,’ and notably ‘72 Die in Australia’s Ash Wednesday Bush-Arson,’ are all marked by violence. But they also sit incongruously against their supposed publication—it is unusual to imagine a local paper with such an international focus of reportage. The use of ‘Stourford’ in the name seats Old Tornwich directly within the context of real-world Harwich, which is positioned at the mouth of the Stour river, linking the fictional and the real versions of the place. Likewise, the headlines can be connected to real-world events, some distinct events, others more extended situations of violence and death over a period of many years—‘Death at John Vorster Square,’ for instance, connects to another postcolonial scene, and could refer to any one of a number of deaths in detention in the Johannesburg Central Police Station during the political violence of apartheid.⁴ Temporally removed from the moment of the text’s publication, the headlines extend the relevance of the story into a broader history and out into the transnational global space.

These two features of the novel—the dedication at the opening, and the headlines at the close—function to book-end the narrative within direct allusions to the Australian space. Stow’s situation as an expatriate and the links in the work to Australia suggest the possibility of his reconsidering Australian place through the transnational. This is to suggest, the place-making enacted in the novel connects the (colonial) world as a whole in his metaphysical contemplation of life and death. Australia’s history of postcolonial violence, a key anxiety in the place-making of his Australian novels, is configured as symptomatic of a universal violence. The alienation of the characters, their lonely lives and lonely deaths, despite each individually being embedded in a tight-knit community, becomes a universal human response. Hassall’s *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow* (1986), still the only major critical monograph on Stow’s work, opens with a reading of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* which is used to suggest that all Stow’s work, expatriate and Australian, is peopled by characters ‘who are strangers and afraid, in landscapes which are alien, and yet which reflect the strangeness they find when they look inwards, seeking an inner home’ (*Strange Country* 1). In doing so, Hassall highlights Stow’s sensitivity to the ‘post-colonial alienation of settlers’ (*Strange Country* 2). But the fact that Hassall introduces this consciousness of disorientation and alienation through a reading of one of Stow’s English novels suggests the manner in which the postcolonial in Stow’s work can be read as extending well beyond his writing of Australia. Similarly, several critics have commented on Stow’s expatriation as a process of reversing colonial movement in returning to his ancestral homeland, connecting both spaces with a consciousness of colonial subjectivity. Roger Averill, for instance, describes Stow’s doing so in terms of his awareness of family lineage, and the manner in which this emerges in several

of his Australian novels, including *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965). The latter, Averill argues, in opening with a family tree ‘only superficially fictionalised’ (134), alerts the reader ‘to the fact that the small boy they are about to read of is an individual member of a much larger collective’ (134). In his move (‘return’) to England, Averill suggests, ‘Stow left the haunted land of his immediate family and returned to the ancestral land of his forebears... Stow was repeating the older family pattern of leaving kith and kin to venture forth, to migrate, but in doing so, he inverted the colonial impulse’ (140). The landscapes of Stow’s English novels are not, however, made simple and easy in this reversal of colonial movement. Hassall argues that the spaces of both works are complicated by ‘psychic divisions and conflicts’ (*Strange Country* 150), and likewise by the heavy themes Stow plays on—dichotomies of home and exile, love and grief, connection and estrangement; all ideas similarly redolent in his Australian works.

Read in this way, the transnationalism of the novel is in part based in the metaphysical consideration of violence as universal, the specific violence of the plot transposed from Western Australia to Suffolk without losing relevance or impact. The thief offers a position in the novel from which this violence can be contemplated, necessarily one of alienation. In a community of lonely characters, the thief’s perspective is doubly isolated, characterised internally by his voyeurism, and textually by the shifting personage in which he is written. Stow connected the novel to Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* (Baker 293), a morality tale, and the thief in the opening describes his motivation in terms which make the violence seem inevitable, part of a larger reckoning: ‘It is not envy or anything of hatred which brings me to this little place in the mist which I have known so long and never wished any harm to. I have no quarrel with the figures ... No; it is never hostility or malice. Simply a correction, or chastising’ (*Suburbs* 6). Remembering that it is directly preceded by the thief’s description of Old Tornwich, this passage situates the violence as a deliberate process originating and transpiring from the place itself. But the thief’s description also returns to the metaphor of sight: the place is once again shrouded in the mist, suggesting the impossibility of ever understanding this. Instead the impression is of something uneasy, inexplicable but also unstoppable, emerging from the existence of the place itself. Stow rebuffed suggestions from the publisher that it should include more of the police (Falkiner 642). His justification was drawn from his Australian experience: Falkiner cites a letter to Tom Rosenthal, describing the atmosphere in Perth at the time the ‘Nedlands Monster’ was active, ‘When everyone was expecting to be shot, out of the blue, the police were rather eerily absent from our lives’ (Stow in Falkiner 642). The plot doesn’t touch on legal justice, but asks questions more in the realm of the social and metaphysical. Describing the locals as ‘the figures,’ (somewhat like a *dramatis personae*), the thief also describes the way their ‘sleep throughout childhood is agreeably troubled by foghorns and exploding maroons and the haunting sea’ (6). Across the reach of entire lives, this potential for violence in the place is simmering—just as Stow’s Australian novels struggle with a haunted land (a phrase which was the title for his very first novel). The omnipotent narration and the multiple perspectives in *The Suburbs of Hell* suggest that the story is not about any one of the community. Instead, it is about an irruption in the place, and the aftermath.

These separate aspects of Stow’s place-making in the novel—a consideration of violence on the metaphysical plane; an overt and metafictional play with textual structures; the connection to Australia from a distance, made manifest in a setting open to the transnational; and the combination of fictional and real worlds in two places, Harwich and Old Tornwich, both looking seawards as Perth and Geraldton do—are all associated in creating place in a context of instability, even uneasiness. Stow’s own experiences are seemingly actively explored

through the textual self-consciousness of the writing practice. (It is hard to resist reading the phrasing of the locals' childhood sleep as 'agreeably troubled,' even 'haunted' by the sea, as something felt by Stow himself, when part of the appeal of Harwich is the manner in which it reminds him of Geraldton.) The use of metafiction creates a philosophical vehicle of the place-making. It is possible to suggest that the textual layering of Australian experiences over an English setting allowed Stow a way of re-examining memories and sensations from a position of externalisation. Falkiner notes that this was a novel he had tried to write before, and abandoned (640). Stow himself told Hassall, before beginning the writing of the novel, that if he did write something he wanted it to be 'a necessary book' (Hassall, 'Interview' 325). In this sense, the novel represents a deliberate act of contemplation, both in its interest in the metaphysical, and in the manner in which it refuses to offer a solid conclusion. The contemplation and construction of place in the novel differs from that enacted in Stow's other English novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower*. Connections to Australia there function primarily through the perspective of the protagonist. Crispin Clare's life follows a similar path to Stow's own.⁵ Clare has grown up in Australia, and worked for the colonial government. This history is marked by trauma: that of Clare's illness and mental fatigue, a failed suicide attempt connected to the transnational baggage of colonisation. Conversely, that the connections to Australia in *The Suburbs of Hell* are not narrative-based but textually enacted marks a deep and conscious connection in the novel's composition. At the same time, that both English novels offer these ties to Australia within their different (and differently transnational) structures of place-making, each marked by a specific trauma, suggests Stow's relationship with Australia was complex—not necessarily negative, but not all positive.

In the interview with Hassall, when asked how he sees himself as a writer, and what sort of things are especially important to him in his writing, Stow replies that these 'are awfully difficult questions' (Hassall, 'Interview' 323). His answer to both questions comes to be combined in the idea of being

perhaps a bit of an explorer, in that most often I have written about places that have not been written about before, and I am dealing usually with landscapes, with vegetation, with birds and animals which won't be familiar to very many people, and aren't familiar as the raw material of fiction. Those are the sorts of things that are especially important to me. It's reality which is my thing—it's what I respond to. (Stow in Hassall, 'Interview' 323)

That writing place was specifically interesting to Stow is thus easily assumed—an idea supported by his drawing of setting and narrative from within his own experiences. Writing a place in this description is a way of thinking about it, coming to know it. The interview followed the publication of both *Visitants* (1980) and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, and conversation regarding the Suffolk place of the latter takes up a significant proportion of the discussion. That the English countryside is not unfamiliar in fiction does not seem to change Stow's emphasis on capturing the place as important work, 'trying to be as exact as possible about what things look and sound and smell like, and how people actually talk, and what they look like when they talk' ('Interview' 323). Hassall also discusses with Stow his connections to that space, asking whether it has become his spiritual home, which Stow allows: 'As I was not born in the country I am not, and can't be, an Englishman, or a Suffolk man. But I do feel very comfortable in Suffolk' ('Interview' 319). This concept of comfort in the position of the outsider suggests in Stow a dual consciousness of place—he has not shifted from a self-definition as Australian, but layers that over his English existence in a way which is quite easy.

In other interviews, though, Stow's relationship with Australia as a place is less resolved. Falkiner points to several interviews in which Stow is asked questions about his expatriate status. In one, with Peter Cole-Adams from the *Age*, Stow describes his expatriation as 'accidental' (12), associating Australia with his childhood and England with his adult life, both places equally important: 'I suffer from a sort of double nostalgia' (12). But at the same time, he also points to 'the stupidity of some of our [Australia's] foreign policies' (12), and as Falkiner describes, while he seems 'still very attached to Australia, some aspects of the country made him raging mad' (536). His social consciousness is recognisable in his uneasiness with the treatment of Indigenous peoples in particular. In reference to another interview, Falkiner cites Stow's description of himself as 'preferring the company of "Aborigines, Islanders, Navajos, Eskimos, Maltese peasants, highland crofters"' (556). His letters suggest he took pride in and enjoyed his relationships with the Aboriginal people of Oombulgurri (Forrest River Mission) during his time there. In his work, he learnt the local Aboriginal language to a level of being able to converse, as he did that of the Trobriand Islands. He spent time in Scourie in Scotland in 1962–63, Malta in 1963, and travelled extensively in America in 1964–65. There is mention of Navajo women of New Mexico in a poem published in *Westerly* ('Country & Western' 108), and he wrote to his mother of friends in Anchorage in 1965, 'one of them a sweet little Eskimo called Cecilia' (Stow in Falkiner 449). This list of peoples whose company he enjoys is not facetious, then, but from his experience of connection with each group. In his letters from Alaska, at the same time, he also recognises the impact of social diseases like alcoholism on the Inuit people (Falkiner 449–50). So Stow was sensitive to the effects of colonisation playing out in Indigenous societies across the colonial transnational space. 'Accidental' expatriate or not, he didn't return to Australia after 1974.

In these ways, his relationship with the Australian nation-space is markedly complicated. The continual emergence of connections to Australia in his English novels suggests that Australian place intrigues him, even if it produces uneasy sensations. Contemplating the layering of his personal life over the narratives reduplicates these connections. Turning this reading back onto practice, though, begs the question: what does this all suggest about transnational forms of place-making as a means for negotiating a consciousness of colonial subjectivity? Falkiner closes her biography with 'A Note,' a beautiful and subtle invocation of her own connection to Stow—a relationship which took place only through letters, recordings and research, never in person, and something which has been carefully excised from the body of the text. In this final chapter, Falkiner touches on an interview in 1976, where Stow says:

'I think one does need to know a great deal—well, a certain amount—about an author's life, and not only what he chooses to have known ... All the same, I would hope that this sort of thing could be kept down to a minimum, because it does become, in the English phrase, "chatter about Harriet" ... we don't want too much chatter about Harriet in criticism. It can distract attention from the work.' (Stow in Falkiner 720)

It might be that my approach here is chatter about Harriet. But considering Stow's life and its re-emergence in his work is an attempt to understand not simply what is at play within the text, but how the textual practice involved might operate within the world, for Stow and for others. The place-making in the novel does not occur within the textual descriptions of Harwich, but rather within the *act* of describing, of rendering in textual form. This practice, in its acute, metafictional awareness of textual manoeuvre, is a means for probing at universally

human questions, opening fluid lines of connection between the personal, the local and the global. As such, it becomes a vehicle too for exploring subjective anxieties of place, and Australian place as globally implicated. When read alongside his biography, Stow's place-making can be seen as productive, generating the universal from within the local. In her final chapter, Falkiner also mentions her visit to Stow's hometown of Geraldton, where 'talking with older people in Geraldton, I found that their memories had become almost interchangeable with passages from *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.' (719). The writing of the place, layering real-world with fictional, contributes to the place's continued existence. The connections with Australian place in *The Suburbs of Hell* are not so specific as the fictionalisation of Geraldton in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), but extend from the locatedness of Harwich out towards a broader conceptualisation of Australia within the transnational space. If this is, as I would argue in my chattering, a practice which actively contemplates Australia through the transnational, perhaps it is one which might be read as articulating the feelings of all alienated colonial subjects. Engaging with these sensations, and mapping the practice which allows for them, offers a means of thinking through such anxieties which shifts it gently towards the metaphysical, without losing sight of local and political implications.

NOTES

¹ All page references to Stow's *The Suburbs of Hell* are taken from the most recent release of the novel in the Text Classics series, as the introduction/afterword published in this edition (de Kretser), combined with the re-release of others of his titles, is illuminating in suggesting the current reconsideration and renewed appreciation of Stow's work.

² With thanks to the very helpful feedback of reviewers, pointing this connection out.

³ Stow himself worked behind the bar in local pubs from time to time in England, and frequented the Stingray in Harwich (see Falkiner 623). Pubs feature in both English novels as a microcosm (microclimate?) of the community and in some senses stand in for a point of local centre. The landlord of the Moon is a particularly humorous title in this sense.

⁴ This reference in the novel is possibly a nod to Stow's friend Aubrey Davis, who, as Falkiner describes, spent much happy time with Stow in Harwich, particularly from 1982–83, shortly before Stow commenced writing. Davis was a student in Pretoria in the late 1950s, deeply involved in the anti-Apartheid movement. After fleeing to London as a political refugee, Davis worked as editorial assistant to Barley Alison, Stow's editor, through whom they met. He had moved on and edited André Brink by the time Stow became his friend. (See Falkiner 637–39.)

⁵ I have written elsewhere specifically about the place-making enacted in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, exploring in particular the manner in which the transnationalism in the novel is structured through a use of deep time, drawing a colonial past into a fragmented present.

WORKS CITED

- Averill, Roger. 'The Story of a (Post)Colonial Boy,' *Westerly*, 55.2 (2010): 126–42.
- Baker, Candida. 'Interview with Randolph Stow.' *Yacker 3: Australian Writers Talk about their Work*. Sydney: Picador, 1989: 284–300.
- Cole-Adams, Peter. 'The divided affections of a restless novelist,' in 'The Expatriates,' *Age*, 12 August 1972: 12.
- De Kretser, Michelle. 'Like a Thief in the Night.' in Randolph Stow. *The Suburbs of Hell*. [1984] Melbourne: Text n Classics, 2015.
- Falkiner, Suzanne. *Mick: A life of Randolph Stow*. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2016.

- Hassall, Anthony. *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow*. St Lucia, Qld: U of Queensland P, 1986.
- . 'Interview with Randolph Stow.' *Australian Literary Studies* 10 (1982): 311–25.
- Stow, Randolph. *The Suburbs of Hell*. [1984]. Melbourne: Text Classics, 2015.
- . 'Country & Western.' [1964]. *Westerly* 55.2 (Nov 2010): 108.
- . *The Girl Green as Elderflower*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1980.
- . *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. London: McDonald and Co., 1965.