

‘You Don’t Know that Country’: Mapping Space in Randolph Stow’s *To the Islands*¹

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At some point in 1959, stationed in the Trobriand Islands as a Cadet Patrol Officer, Randolph Stow drew a mud-map in the back of his diary, coloured with red and green pastel. Titled ‘Forrest River Mission from Memory,’ it shows the layout of the Mission near Wyndham in the Kimberley, where he had been based for most of 1957—the space which served as the setting for his Miles Franklin-winning novel *To the Islands* (1958). The image is out of place within the journal, which is entitled ‘Notes and Texts,’ one of three which records aspects of Biga-Kiriwina language from the Trobriands. In ‘Notes and Texts,’ Stow collects word lists and jottings as well as manuscript versions of two short stories (which Ellen Smith discussed so beautifully in the ASAL ECR 2019 keynote and in her 2019 NLA Fellowship Presentation on a related topic). The same journal also includes a map of Kiriwina Island with similar language detail, drawn within the front cover. The Forrest River map is both counterpart and an odd after-note, hidden away behind the back cover, shifting the journal into another space and time.

Stow seemingly felt some ambivalence towards his role in working for the colonial government in the Trobriands in 1959. In her biography of Stow, Suzanne Falkiner notes his unease with ‘the insensitivity forced upon them by bureaucratic tasks’ (288) and his fatigue with the tax-collecting patrols (295). This was the same year Stow’s father died, rumours of his homosexuality were potentially spread by locals, and he attempted suicide (Falkiner 294–99). Undated, it is uncertain at what point in the year Stow drew his Forrest River map, but the connection it suggests between the two spaces is significant. Its appearance in the journal invokes the possibility that the tension of his situation in the Trobriands, his distance from home and his uneasiness with the colonial politics at play, might all have been familiar sensations, connected to memories of a similar isolation at Forrest River as a space wherein, his letters home suggest, questions of colonialism tangibly arose for him, discussed below. The map offers in this a complex rendering of settler-colonial subjectivity in the process of place-making.

The map is complete with rivers and tributaries, place-names in two languages, a scale and a compass rose: Stow is no artist, but the map is far more sophisticated than it appears at first glance. It is suggestive of an aspiration to precision in the representation of the space, something unusual for the average mud-map, and not found universally in Stow’s journals. This precision enacts both pride (an idea supported by the title, ‘from Memory’) and a sense of nostalgia or longing in remembering Forrest River across time and from a distance. It may have potentially been something of a memory exercise, mimicking the Kiriwina map at the front and reasserting against that a connection to a life outside his current situation. The fact that it is by Western standards ‘upside down,’ with north to the bottom of the page, complicates this somewhat, suggesting a more complex and personal remembering than the simple parroting of a known map. But whatever the impulse which led to the drawing, I would suggest that the map enacts a desire for the place in tracing an intimate knowledge of it, through both language and spatial forms. This paper explores Stow’s map alongside his novel *To the Islands*, as a means of reflecting on Stow’s relation to Forrest River as a place. In doing so, it seeks to examine the function of his creative practice in both considering and articulating the complexities of his positionality on country.

edition, I was consciously making propaganda on behalf of Christian mission-stations for Aborigines, in particular for one Mission on which I had worked for a short time' (Stow 1958, 4). Stow's letters, collected within his archive, also confirm that he entered the space with the intent already in place to write his novel, drawing from his experiences there. Early anecdotes from among his letters appear in the work: for instance, his first letter to his mother, dated 2nd April 1957, describes the 'big black wala' in the cane grass 'outside the dining room and everyone joined in to try and get it—screams and shrieks of laughter from all the kitchen girls' (NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4), an episode recognisable in Dixon's encounter with a 'black wala' in the long grass, chased by the mission girls (Stow 1958, 13). Stow had decided on the concept for the novel during his last year at the University of Western Australia (Stow 1985, 5; Falkiner 180). As Kate Leah Rendell describes, 'The fieldwork Stow conducted with Aboriginal residents at Forrest River Mission was a means by which to gather material for a novel imaginatively conceived in his final year at university [...] Stow sought out a 'wild and grand' location to give local flavour to his King Lear-like narrative' (3). The idea of 'local flavour' and a predetermined narrative speaks to both the conceptual intent and the inherent imperialism of the project.

It is vital in this to acknowledge that both Stow's novel and letter-writing are marked by racial prejudice and imperialist assumptions in representing the Aboriginal people of the Missions.³ Recognising this prejudice provides us with some sense of positionality on country, articulating what must have been an inherent frame to Stow's engagement with the place. But Stow did at least question some of these assumptions, and attempt to represent and advocate for Aboriginal people through his writing. It is this feature of his writing that often sees him praised by white critics as 'before his time' (Neumann 3).⁴ He also acknowledges in a paper given in 1984 (published 1985) that his experience of the place altered his approach to his work: 'I had in my head a general plan of a novel, *To the Islands*, conceived during a seminar on *King Lear* in my last student year. But every detail of the finished book came out of personal experience' (Stow 1985, 5). This shifting influence of place over practice is suggestive simultaneously of Stow's shifting subjective relation to the place, and growing consciousness of the complexities of colonialism within it. A little further within the same paper, Stow acknowledges 'When the time came for me to leave ... I felt a deep sense of loss. It seemed that I had been privileged to feel for a while, vicariously, rooted in my native land as no white man can be, in fact' (Stow 1985, 5).

This is a concept Stow works through in his novel, from various perspectives. For example, Dixon discusses the politics of colonialism and citizenship with Matthew and Gregory (Stow 1958, 68–69), and a little later, homesickness for country (Stow 1958, 128). Stow's writing of *To the Islands* can be read thus an instance of creative practice contributing to Stow's shaping and forming of his complex subjective relation to place. His process of writing—clear conceptual intent followed by immersion, experimentation and development to produce the creative artefact—is somewhat similar to contemporary scholarly creative practice. Alongside engaging with place theory, Gibson describes the process of scholarly creative practice as based in simultaneous immersion and extraction: the artist-researcher is 'inside—but also outside—but also inside—but also outside—but also inside' (2010, 10). The contradiction of the two states produces an energy of its own, inexorably shaping the knowledge produced as immersive and nervous, implicit as well as explicit, and at the very best moments, experienced as revelation:

Artist-researchers have the chance to woo two modes of knowing ... They have the chance to entwine the insider's embodied know-how with the outsider's

analytical precepts. The attraction between these two modes of knowing must be both felt and spoken. And as the world blooms in the artist's consciousness, the mutual commitment of the two modes can abide and provide. (Gibson 2010, 11)

Arguably, Stow's trajectory in moving from the conscious imperative of the planned *King Lear* novel to shaping his work according to the influence of place and his experiences at Forrest River demonstrates the rise of the subconscious or implicit within his intended work, and a new understanding of that world blooming for him.

Reading the letters in his archive, a commensurate shift can be felt in his representations of the Mission and surrounding area. In early missives, alongside his idealisation of the place and the heightened descriptions he offers his mother and sister is a growing sense of the mundane lived reality—the 'normal' life of work on the mission. The phrase 'Nothing much happens. Life goes on as usual.' appears with some minor variation in at least three letters, one to his sister (16 June 1957) and two to his mother, on 22 June 1957 and 8 July 1957 (NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4). There may have been a second imperative in this, alongside fatigue with the repetitiveness of the Mission lifestyle. Regularly the letters suggest Stow playing down his life in a place which seemed particularly remote, dangerous and exotic to a concerned mother and sister. For example, he reassures his mother: 'No, I don't run the launch all by myself, I have crew: Leonard, Stanley and Douglas on that trip. They are all good blokes ... No, Mission natives don't drink much, or at least not while they're on a launch trip. ... I know you'll say I'm a mug, giving up time to earning no money, but this is a job that is really worth doing' (undated, likely April/May 1957; NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4), and responds to his sister a month or so later: 'Sorry, no mangoes or pineapple in our jungle—in fact, no jungle. The nearest is the mangrove thickets along the river' (2 June 1957; NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4). Part of what is in negotiation here is an imaginary of the north in colonial terms as the wild, untamed frontier—dangerous, populated by Aboriginal people. Stow exhibits the same prejudice himself, describing his workmates on the mission: 'As a matter of fact, all my best mates have been to gaol. ... Yet you couldn't find a nicer bunch of blokes, and they're highly valued by Bill and the rest. They're just naturally amoral because of their race' (undated 1957; NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4).

This reassurance develops in later letters to a gentle pushing back at base racist assumptions. Stow appears to have formed some close relationships with Mission people, including Daniel Evans,⁵ whose oral testimony of massacre Stow uses as an embedded narrative within *To the Islands*. In a letter to his mother dated 22 June 1957, Stow describes the people as having given him a skin-name:

They've given me a skin-name now—that is, I belong to a certain section of the tribe and knowing that can work out how I am related to all the other members. That makes Daniel [presumably Evans] my 'Daddy,' Ronnie my brother, Paddy my nephew, and everybody else around the place something else. Gran will be relieved to know that most of the eligible girls are my daughters... (NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4)

The racism implied in the last line speaks to Stow's consciousness of the society he is embedded within, and even his family's attitudes. He goes on to describe the one girl he could marry as 'more "ladylike" than any white girl I know' (Letter 22 June 1957; NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4). Stow is seemingly moving in this, if very gently, against presumed prejudices—and perhaps teasing his mother to boot. There is also herein a manoeuvre on Stow's part to position

himself within the community—he is primarily interested in the relationships the skin-name creates. As with the detail shown in the drawing of the Forrest River map in his journal two years later, this representation of his embeddedness in the place is suggestive of both a sophisticated comprehension of the intricacies of the community, and Stow’s pride in that knowledge. The offering of a skin-name doesn’t reduce the gulf between Stow’s positionality within the colonial institution and the Aboriginal people he is talking to, nor does it change the latent racism in his letters, but it does show a willingness on Stow’s part to actively engage.

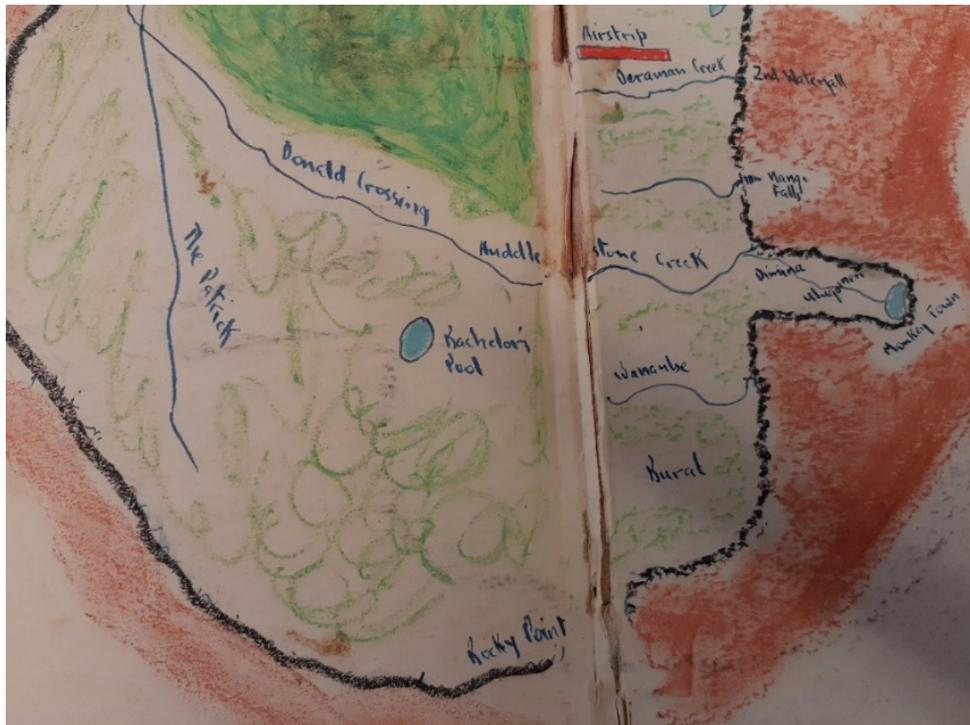


Fig. 2: Detail from ‘Forrest River Mission from Memory.’
Back cover of ‘Notes and Texts’ journal (NLA, MS Acc 10.128, Box 5, File 37).

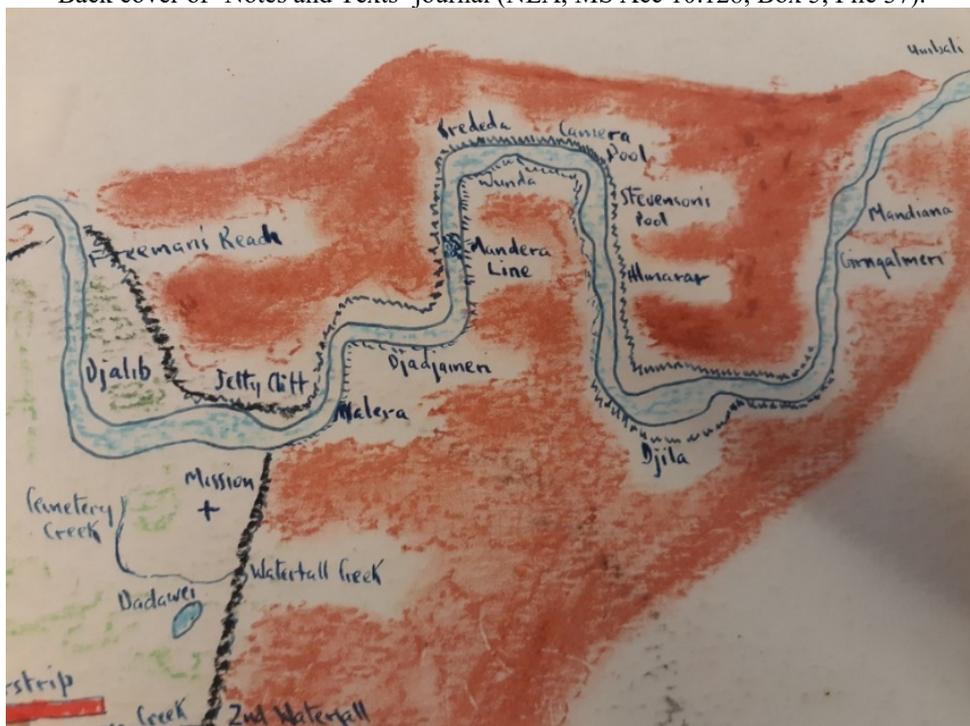


Fig. 3: Detail from ‘Forrest River Mission from Memory.’
Back cover of ‘Notes and Texts’ journal (NLA, MS Acc 10.128, Box 5, File 37).

Registering these shifts in Stow's epistolic rendering of Forrest River offers context to a reading of the Forrest River map. Stow's pride in articulating the relationships he built within the Mission community supports approaching the map as demonstrating similar emotions, including a desire for the place. Just as the letters reveal the complexity of Stow's settler-colonial subjectivity in laying bare the deep racism of his moment, the act of mapping demonstrates an externalisation of that desire, allowing it to be contemplated and possibly validated. The map proves an ongoing possession of knowledge of the place, and thus legitimises Stow's connection to it. To map is ultimately, in the colonial context, an act of acquisition. It is driven by a logic of definition which traces back to Enlightenment thinking, and the taxonomical as a scientific impulse. Elements of a similar classification can be witnessed in Stow's use of colour. A map like this contains and controls a space (or a Country) by rendering it known. This is most visible, perhaps, in the points of clear boundary around the map: the thick black line by which Stow marks the reach of his knowledge in that place. There is a tension in the image between the points of contact—points familiar, coloured in lush green or the blue of water—and the 'empty,' red space around. This distinction replicates the acquisition of colonialism in classifying and claiming resources as well as locations—rivers, streams and pools—with the (rather phallic) appendage in Fig. 2 to the pool at Monkey Town one example of this. The key points 'known' are situated in relation to each other, and set within the context of regular movement—the Wyndham River with the boat in and out, for example, and the mission centre. Other landmarks around the map (Girngalmeri, Dadawei, Djudjameri, Almara, Batchelor Pool, Camera Pool) are places Stow mentions in letters and in his journals, or which feature on the labels of his photographic slides—places Stow explored in camping trips, sometimes alone:

On Saturday I went out to Camera Pool and camped there the night, came back yesterday afternoon. Lovely out there, so beautiful scenically and so quiet. I slept in right up til eight o'clock (!) and when I woke there was a crow sitting in the tree over me calling its mates to come and see if I was dead. (8 July 1957; NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4)⁶

The map details thus the distinction between *terra nullius*, an untenable concept in the mission life, with the people and their culture so definitively present, and *terra incognita*. The latter shifts the weight of ignorance onto the settler-subject—it is Stow's knowledge of the country, established with pride in the detail of the space surrounding the mission, which is deficient in that broad emptiness of the red shading and blank space on the rest of the page. The clear boundaries around the Mission space in the map, however, and its positioning on the page, also assert an imperialist focus.

A similar demarcation of place is found in Stow's writing. Descriptions of landscape and setting in *To the Islands* contextualise the Mission against the 'wilderness' spaces beyond, with Heriot's departure enacting a rupture-point in that containing line. The established, imperialist power dynamic between black and white bodies is defined by this division. While white authority is established within the Mission, as soon as the narrative leaves the Mission space, the dynamic is inverted: it is Heriot who depends on Justin. The map's detail in denoting both containment and expanse can be read to offer us a key to the opening of the text—the detailed engagement with place-as-setting is not purely a literary strategy in Stow's writing, but suggestive of a deeper tension in positionality: a complex feeling of connection to place undercut by a perhaps subconscious or emergent recognition of the violence of the colonial history of that country, and the perpetuation of some of this in the Mission. The sequence of Heriot's morning—starting in his hut and expanding slowly outwards—moves across almost

all the mission buildings either through Heriot's viewpoint or in witnessing the directions taken by others:

... Heriot woke. His eyes, not yet broken to the light, rested on the mud-brick beside his bed, drifted slowly upwards to the grass-thatched roof. From a rafter an organ-grinder lizard peered sidelong over its pulsing throat.

Oppressed by its thatch, the hot square room had a mustiness of the tropics. On the shelves of the rough book-case Heriot's learning was mouldering away, in Oxford Books of this and that, and old-fashioned dictionaries, all showing more or less the visitations of insects and mildew.

... Outside, the crows had begun their restless crying over the settlement, tearing at his nerves. The women were coming up to the kitchen. He could hear their laughing, their rich beautiful voices. (Stow 1958, 9–10)

The reader is taught in this passage both to see detail and paradoxically expansiveness, a movement constantly drawing the eye outwards—a pattern which repeats throughout the novel. In a literal sense, this offers us the key elements of the Mission: in the pages proceeding, we follow Heriot's path to the shower, to shave and to the office (Stow 1958, 10–13); we follow Gunn through the village to the church (Stow 1958, 13–16); and then Helen from the church (via mention of the nurse's station and the boat at the landing) to the office again (Stow 1958, 16–22). But already in this opening, the Mission space is made small by Heriot's consciousness of and gaze towards the beyond:

Deep in fading grass the country stretched far away from the hut, between the rocky ridge and the far blue ranges, dotted with white gum, yellow flowering green-trees, which also harboured goats, creepers and all rustling reptiles, rose the Mission, the ramshackle hamlet of huts and houses, iron and mud-brick and thatch, quiet below the quiet sky. (Stow 1958, 10)

The tension of containment enacted in the black line of the map is felt here in the inverse as a consciousness of the expansiveness of the country. Just as Stow's letters show a desire to explore, with an implicit sense of acquisition in developing knowledge of the country around the Mission, the gaze outwards in the novel defines the Mission through its relation to spaces beyond.

This same manoeuvre in the novel is repeated with each new perspective; the detail of the Mission is constantly placed in the larger context of country.

Behind the church, in his cassock, smoking a last cigarette before the service, Father Way gazed absently at the new sun overhanging the distant blue hills. He looked round as Gunn came up.

... Together they looked at the high cliff across the river and found it burning red with the morning light, rising above the green of gums and baobabs on its banks. 'Now, and at sunset,' Way said, 'you can see that for miles.' (Stow 1958, 14)

The characters' names, Way and Gunn, tie in symbolically to the ideological and physical violence of colonisation. And for Gunn, shortly after, the distinction between mission and country takes on an element of cultural identity:

[T]he country had taken him in. There was first of all the easy affection of the children, brought up to expect from an adult nothing else but affection. And from them his feeling had extended to their parents and older siblings, the bush nomads, the rock and waters of the land itself. The phrase '*gre ngaianangga*, my country,' so often in their mouths, would keep recurring to his mind. (Stow 1958, 21)

Beneath the paternalistic and imperialistic categorisation and representation of the people here is an acknowledgement of an alternate cultural perspective, perhaps even a subtle or subconscious distinction between who does and does not have the right to speak of (capital C) Country. The use of language and the pronoun 'my' suggests an awareness and an acceptance of sovereignty. While there is still an undertone of appropriation to the pronoun 'my,' this is made more complex by the manner in which Gunn himself does not speak but can only recall the phrase. Gunn's feeling is centred within the Mission, expanding outwards, in the same way Heriot's gaze sets the Mission as small in the expanse of Country, and quiet beneath the expanse of sky.

But at the same time, both these examples are marked by the underestimation of the white characters (and, I suspect, Stow) as to what Country actually signifies for the Aboriginal people of the Mission. Gunn, in this passage, assimilates 'my country' with the physical land—it is the rock and waters which bring this phrase to his mind. As Noongar writer Dougie Nelson describes, in contrast:

It is of paramount importance not to misinterpret the meaning and the powerful essence of the word 'Country' as it is used by Aboriginal people. Country is not a differentiation between urban and rural or remote areas. It does not simply consist of an open area or location of land. It is not an inanimate, tangible object to be seen as picturesque for its natural beauty or a wilderness for admiration of its landscape. Country is not a product for economic utilisation as a commodity to be sectioned off as pieces of land ... Country is the embodiment of all living entities situated within Country. This includes people, land, sky, wind, tree, rock, kangaroo, honey ants, rivers, and everything else. All that Country contains is alive, and to speak of Country, is to speak of all that Country involves. (84)

This idea of Country is clearly incompatible with that offered in Gunn's perspective, and that demonstrated in the dividing black line between known and unknown in Stow's map. The map ultimately dismisses unknown country in containing its idea of place within that boundary and focus. In the same way, Heriot dismisses Country and is corrected by Justin at the point of his first running away:

'Go back, Justin. I'm going on alone.'
 Justin asked stubbornly: 'Where you going?'
 'You know, I told you.'
 'You don't really go to those islands.'
 'I'm going to a place no one comes home from. You understand an order, Justin. I don't want you here.'
 Justin said, with perfect deference: 'I got to come, brother.'

‘Go back to Ella and your children. It’s your duty, you understand that.’
 ‘Stephen look after Ella and the little kids, brother.’
 ‘I’m going nowhere,’ Heriot said. ‘Nowhere,’ a desperate anger in his frozen eyes.
 ‘You don’t know that country.’ (Stow 1958, 89)

For this brief moment in the dialogue, Justin’s response marks sovereignty in that space and the ignorance of the colonial assumption of emptiness—it is not nowhere. But at the point that Heriot relents, and allows Justin to join him, Stow’s narratorial response undoes this again, in working through Gothic stereotypes and reasserting the colonial assumption of *terra nullius*: ‘Behind the uneasy trees rose the hills, and beyond them again the country of the lost, huge wilderness between this last haunt of civilisation and the unpeopled sea’ (Stow 1958, 89). Heriot’s journey, as it follows from this point, holds parallels likewise to colonial exploration, and follows through with the intertextual connections to the *King Lear* narrative originally planned for the work.

In these renderings of place, and of the division of known and unknown (to the white Australian gaze) in *To the Islands*, the place-making of the work offers a sense of the settler-colonial subjectivity and perspective from which it emerges. Both the novel and the map articulate simultaneously connection to place and a subtle, perhaps growing consciousness of subjective implication within Australia’s continued colonisation, as well as the legacy of colonial violence within that place. One of the most remarkable and well discussed (cf. Brennan; Neumann; Rendell) aspects of the novel is the inclusion in the narrative of Daniel Evans’s oral testimony regarding the Forrest River massacres—a history potentially made visible likewise on the map in the inclusion of a cross below the Mission (see Fig. 3). A cross is mentioned in Evans’s oral testimony (included in the novel) as the place the massacre remains were eventually interred, and the site was photographed by Stow while there (NLA MS Acc 10.128, Box 3, File 21). Assuming the cross on the map is indeed the same cross (and the positioning of it just beyond the label for the Mission would support this), Stow’s overlaying of that history on his map is suggestive of a desire to acknowledge Aboriginal truth-telling. It replicates the footnote added in the novel, making clear the origin of the testimony:

This narrative was taken down verbatim from an account by Daniel Evans of a notorious massacre. Here the names of the people concerned and most place names have been altered.

Once again, there is an uneasy relationship in this note between the recognition of Aboriginal truth-telling, and the appropriation of Aboriginal narrative for use in fiction. Kate Leah Rendell recognises the footnote as making a ‘remarkable intervention in to the fictional genre of [the] text’ (5), but also notes the manner in which the footnote seals the narrative off as a slippage in the text, the story reverting after the fact to ‘Stow’s otherwise limited representations of Aboriginality’ (4). In fictionalising the names of places and people when including the testimony, Stow also elides some of the reality of the events—it becomes a single massacre, for instance, as opposed to the reality that there were several. This reading of the testimony as narrative slippage is persuasive in suggesting Stow’s inability to assimilate the recognition of trauma and colonial violence with his own settler-colonial presence in the space. As Rendell argues: ‘In this way the massacre account, as an anomalous scene that unsettles the rhythm of Stow’s prose and the fictional nature of his text, is read as an instance of authorial unease’ (4). Through both the novel and the presence of the cross on the map, Stow’s creative practice arguably offered a scene for him to negotiate his growing consciousness of the violence of colonialism and its legacy.

I have, in this paper, essentially read Stow's map as a text—read it alongside *To the Islands* as supporting a complex and multivalent set of meanings, which cannot be reduced to fixed interpretation. I have taken it as reflecting (some of) Stow's subjective consciousness. This approach is essentially to ignore the sense that a map would usually function denotatively, and undermines the assumption of direct and concrete representation inherent in geospatial information systems as a whole. But it suggests that, while they operate as different technologies for making place, both the novel and the map are functions of a larger creative practice negotiating the experience of Forrest River over time. In this sense, it makes an argument for the manner in which the archive can offer insights into the novel as the product of a process of broader emotions and contemplation. As a contemporary white reader, exploring Stow's rendering of settler-colonial subjectivity highlights the need to question my own approach to the novel, and acknowledge the broader history of the massacre. I have a responsibility not only to understand the perspectives inherent to the settler-colonial positionality, but how it emerged in social consciousness, and what lies outside, speaking back. The map makes it harder to ignore both the problematic elements in Stow's representation of place and the limitations in his representations of Aboriginality. It reminds me to avoid conflating Evans's testimony with the work as fiction. Rendell points to the oral testimony of Doris Morgan as supplementing Evans's account of the massacre, and highlights in particular her description of the cross being erected:

That cross up there? We all went up there. We had a service and when we finished service we all walked around and got stones, half the people getting stones and half the people keep it up at the cross where the cross standing now. Put it around the cross so the cross can stand firm, strong. We done that—see that cross there standing firm. (Morgan in Green n.p.)

As Rendell notes, in this testimony 'the cairn not only memorialises the dead but also affirms the survival and resilience of Oombulgurri peoples at Forrest River' (2). The function of the archive in documenting creative practice can offer similar affirmation. Layering the map over the novel, I would suggest, helps white readers likewise remember and recognise the history around the story.

NOTES

¹ This paper was written on Whadjuk Noongar boodjar, and I pay my respect to Noongar Elders past, present and emerging. I thank the Noongar community as a whole for their continued custodianship of this beautiful boodjar. Given the subject matter of this paper, I also wish to acknowledge the Oombulguri people, recognising the victims of the Forrest River Massacres, including those killed at Oombali, and the trauma and suffering these events have caused. I offer my respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and to all the sovereign peoples of Balangarra country. Please be advised that this paper touches on the events of these massacres, which may cause distress. I have attempted to approach these events in a spirit of respect towards Aboriginal truth-telling in this history.

² For a broader discussion of place theorisation in Australian literature, see for example the special issue of *JASAL* 'Australian Literature and Place-Making' 18.1 (2018), which includes work from Emily Potter, Brigid Magner and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth. This work offers a broad context for the definition of place adopted through this essay. The collection also includes previous work of my own on Stow's place-making, offering a deeper theoretical context to Stow's writing of place.

³ My understanding of the trauma of such representation is limited by my standpoint as a white reader—I can only imagine; I do not have to live with this. I have not been able to find any published critical response to Stow's novel from an Indigenous scholar. But I do note Munanjahli and South Sea Islander academic Chelsea Bond's 2020 Randolph Stow Memorial Lecture: she critiqued the Australian history of white writers representing black bodies and described the social and cultural impacts of that literary heritage in Australia. She also said that she found *To the Islands* 'impossible to read' (Perth Festival Literature and Ideas Weekend, February 23, 2020). Beyond

scholarly criticism, Marcia Langton writes about the dissonance between the lived experience of mining, the glorification of a history of mining in popular cultural narrative, and modernist artistic responses to mining in her article 'Intimate places and terrifying spaces' (*Australian*, 17 September 2006). In doing so, she cites Stow's *Tourmaline* as an example, making clear the resonance of his opening line, and the 'bitter heritage' the novel depicts. Langton's response to Stow's work is more positive than Bond's, but nonetheless likewise points to a romanticisation of mining, situating Stow within 'a rich vein of our artistic and literary heritage [which] consists of a search for beauty and meaning amid the ruins of the industry' (Langton, n.p.), and emphasising simultaneously in her article the despoliation of Aboriginal land and the risks mining poses to culture.

⁴ As broader examples of this, Bernadette Brennan suggests in her introduction to the Text Classics edition of the novel that 'Stow was one of only a handful of white writers who sought to portray Aboriginal characters with depth and complexity' (ix), something she celebrates in his work, along with the manner in which he 'brought this concern to the literary mainstream' (ix). Klaus Neumann similarly applauds Stow's representation of the Forrest River massacres' continuing effects in the novel, with the massacre positioned in narrative terms as an historical context to the contemporary tension of the plot. Neumann takes the novel up as a means of historicising contemporary responses to the massacre—including Rod Moran's shocking denial that it occurred, published in the *West Australian* as late as 1994 (1–3). The disparity between these readings and that suggested by Bond, while unsettling in comparison, should not be seen as mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible to see Stow as before his time, and better than many mid-century writers in his representation, but to acknowledge simultaneously that this is ultimately a low bar to set. This does not likewise diminish our responsibility as literary critics to listen to voices such as Bond's, and call out the problematic elements of his work.

⁵ Evans gave Stow two gifts, which he describes in a letter and took with him when he left (See letter 22 June 1957; NLA MS Acc 10.195, Box 1, File 4).

⁶ This anecdote is reminiscent of Heriot waking at the start of chapter six: 'Heriot woke to the harsh outcry of crows, it was a crow his eyes saw first as they opened unwillingly on the light of day. A shining bird, it clung in the tree close above his head and broadcast its discovery to the air. ... "You think I'm dead," he said' (Stow 1958, 124).

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