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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Brutal Geographies of Yar Khan

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Abstract

This article attempts an experimental mode to ply the depths of a text's relationship with its circumstances of production. Deploying an immersive praxis, the analysis aims to activate the autonomy of the short story 'The Quest of Yar Khan' through a rich engagement with its materiality, particularly its named geography. Revealing the text's context in this way offers an opportunity to refresh the view of South Asia in peri-Federation Australia, a circumstance of which this short story is part.

Keywords

immersive praxis, cameleers, peri-Federation Australia, materiality

A Yuletide tale

Animal slaughter, murder, revenge and racial loathing open the 1894 Christmas supplement to *The Sydney Mail* in the form of John Arthur Barry's 'The Quest of Yar Khan'.¹ Yes, I did say Christmas supplement. The two-page short story 'Yar Khan' leads the yuletide supplement. It is surrounded by graphics advertising 'unclimbable' fences and poetry mourning a child's death. The crude juxtaposition in this edition of *The Sydney Mail*—violent narrative + 'unclimbable' colonial ironmongery + elegy for a lost child + religious festival marking the birth of Christ—is a textual geography that calls me to explore.

'The Quest of Yar Khan' is the story of Yar Khan's attempts at revenge on his nemesis William Connolly, which begin in outback New South Wales and traverse the Indian Ocean to the east coast of Africa. Yar Khan is a cameleer described as an 'Afghan' and an 'Indian' in the same paragraph. The gun-toting William Connolly is 'known along the Border by the whites as "Ginger", and by the blacks as "Murrigie Murrigie" (Red Man)', referring to his red hair and 'huge beard flowing in volume of silky redness breast-deep'.² Connolly describes Yar Khan on first encounter as 'a bloomin' Hafghan'.³ This encounter between Yar Khan and Connolly occurs at dusk at 'the Two Mile'—a waterhole—on the Paroo near 'the sign of the Packhorse, a far-western Border shanty'. While stalking 'three fine big bustards in a line' for the dinner table, Connolly is bitten by a camel grazing next to the waterhole. He looks up to see 'the long idiotic face of a camel' and reacts by shooting it dead. Fleeing to his horse, he also shoots and kills Yar Khan's knife-wielding brother, then rides off. Connolly has a reputation as a marksman, 'and it did not strike him as anything out of the common' when he shoots Yar Khan's brother and camel, and sees 'a dark turbaned form, writhing and pulling up tussocks of grass in his last agony'.⁴ This event begins the process of revenge by Yar Khan for his brother's death. He is instructed by 'a grey-headed Afghan':

THE SYDNEY MAIL CHRISTMAS SUPPLEMENT. 1894.



Figure 1 Detail from 'The Quest of Yar Khan', *The Sydney Mail* (Christmas Supplement), 22 December 1894. Source: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article162837468>

Follow him, thou! But return not unto thy brethren until the reproach that lieth heavy on thy soul be lifted off. What sayeth their own scripture, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?' What also sayeth the blessed Koran? 'Woe unto the shedder of innocent blood, for his end shall be hard.' Go, my son; and, for a token, thou shalt bring back with thee that great red beard dyed deep in the heart's blood of the slayer of thy brother ...

'I swear it,' he answered simply; and falling on his knees, the old man blessed him, and once more bade him set forth on his quest.⁵

This elder who instructs the young Yar Khan is the only character standing at the end of this narrative. Preceding this, across two newspaper pages, Yar Khan pursues Connolly until he becomes increasingly uneasy, finally realising his pursuer is deadly serious. Yar Khan makes several attempts to kill Connolly, who ultimately flees Australia to start a new life in Mashonaland (East Africa), with good reason: 'weak and wan and shrivelled ... Australia it was evident was no longer safe ground for him'. Although Yar Khan dies unredeemed 'with a last despairing cry "Allah!"', and Connolly survives in exile, it is the old man who endures to offer the final words of the text.⁶

Social circumstance

Between 1870 and 1920, up to four thousand people traversed the Indian Ocean from their homelands in India, Afghanistan and regions now known as Pakistan to live and work in Australia.⁷ This movement of people was subject to both support and rejection from the nascent Australian community and from government policy. The rejection discourse aimed at nineteenth-century trans-Indian ocean arrivals sought protection of workers' rights, assuming workers in Australia were European, not Asian and not Indigenous.⁸ This discourse bled into strong overtones of moral protection, and framed a European morality and economy under threat from an immoral invader.⁹

This movement of people from South Asia to Australia is an event recalled increasingly today as a piece of forgotten history, an event that was rarely included in the metanarrative of the Australian story. In recent decades, however, writers and historians have begun to recover this event,¹⁰ which has become known broadly as the story of the misnamed 'Afghan' cameleers and hawkers who came to Australia to open the outback, even though there were more ethnicities, professions, purposes and outcomes involved,¹¹ and even though 'open the outback' is an optimistic denialist phrase that constructs a fantasy of a closed, empty, left-behind place that needed opening.

In my attempts to access the rhetoric and responses to the peri-Federation diaspora of South Asia to Australia, the short story 'The Quest of Yar Khan', published in *The Sydney Mail* in 1894, has proved a fruitful if unlikely source.¹²

Yar Khan and his brother are fictional representations of the individuals who accompanied camels to Australia—the camel handlers or cameleers—and who formed part of the peri-Federation diaspora of South Asia to Australia. Camels and their handlers have been ascribed an instrumental role, from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, in the establishment of European 'settlements' and infrastructure on Indigenous lands in non-coastal regions of Australia.¹³

Yet the cameleers also had a range of motivations beyond these, including travel for religious purposes, prosperity, entrepreneurship, family formation, community building, and potentially retreat from war.¹⁴ In particular, the people of Afghanistan and surrounding areas

in India and later Pakistan had been engaged in two recent wars with the British to retain sovereignty over their own land: the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839–1842 and the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878–1880.¹⁵ Between these conflicts the Indian Mutiny of 1857, often described as India's first war of independence, was associated with several smaller Hindu uprisings in the North-West Frontier provinces.¹⁶ Thus the men and their camels who came to this land in the late nineteenth century were steeped in struggles for self-determination, and carried with them the blood of their own peoples and of the British who had so recently been at turns enemy and employer in their homelands. Many of these travellers had experienced first hand dispossession at the hands of an invading empire, while at the same time many had also served in the British Forces addressing threats from a competitor empire, Russia, during what was known as 'The Great Game'.¹⁷

Approach

My approach to this analysis uses an immersive praxis influenced by Isabelle Stengers' description of 'co-becoming': 'the power of nonhumans to make [human] practitioners think, feel, hesitate'.¹⁸ I emphasise the interaction between me as writer/researcher and the source material, and seek to dilute critical distance. The purpose of this method is to force an awareness of the preconceptions that underpin accepted notions of 'the world', in this case, the world from which the text 'Yar Khan' emerged. The work promotes an ontological awareness, motivated by my attempts to decolonise my writing and research practice.¹⁹ In this broader project, I have sought potential co-becoming moments through engaging with text objects, non-text objects and environments that circulate a particular 'matter of concern'.²⁰ In this article, the matter of concern is the world of South Asia in peri-Federation Australia, and the 'object' of immersion is the short story 'The Quest of Yar Khan'.²¹

Exploring the relationship(s) of this text with its milieu is enriched through deep material engagement. Taking on the text's materiality, rather than viewing the text as solely a vessel in which ideology and metaphorical imaginings are transported across time, encourages a manual handling of its material traces. To this end, I also deploy object-oriented tenets to the analysis, as outlined by Graham Harman, that neither dissolve a text 'upward into its readings [n]or downward into its cultural elements' but instead test 'how it resists such dissolution'.²²

In particular, I want to avoid the pitfall of recruiting the social context of 'Yar Khan' to label this overtly racist text a product of its times, as my subjectivity would 'select' among the available social conditions to produce such a label.²³ For example, I want to avoid a dismissal like that expressed in the 2009 *Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, where Bruce Bennett describes Ernest Favenc's 1890s stories of exploration as using 'history and geography as authenticating devices for the exploration of the darker side of human nature ... [in which] attitudes towards women, Aborigines and Chinese are *of his time*' (my italics).²⁴ 'Rather than emphasise the social conditions that gave rise' to 'Yar Khan', I will 'do the contrary' and look for its ability to 'reverse or shape what might have been expected in [its] time and place'.²⁵ Deciding not to select a lens of social conditions frees space for this story to *not* be 'fully identified with its surroundings', and perhaps open to revealing its 'autonomy' from its milieu.²⁶ Following the materiality—the named objects within and surrounding this text, particularly its geography, and their web of connections—becomes an experimental mode for illuminating the text's autonomy in the belief that such illumination might refresh the view of its context. Following the materiality of the text, and not subjugating this approach beneath rhetorical and traditional literary analysis, for example, of representation, is the endeavour in this work.

Diving in

Following Stengers then, what effect did this encounter with ‘Yar Khan’—this text-as-object—have on me? What was its *affect*? First, as a researcher exploring South Asia in peri-Federation Australia, I was excited to have in my reading hands what I thought would be an insight into how a writer of his 1890s world perceived, and therefore wrote about, a member of the South Asian diaspora to Australia at that time. Moreover, I hoped this text would give me insight into how the readership and newspaper editorship at that time viewed this diaspora. Such was the anticipatory ‘affect’ of this object.

Yet after reading the first words of the story, then continuing to the third newspaper column, I thought only: ‘I can’t work with this. I can’t recruit it to my research cause.’ The derogatory racist rhetoric dripped from the newsprint so heavily that I didn’t want any part of it. I was reminded of Chinua Achebe’s critique of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, ‘Image of Africa’, particularly in terms of how a ‘blind perpetuation’ of that novella as an exemplar of style also perpetuated its racist rhetoric in the name of educating contemporary youth in the craft of story.²⁷ I didn’t want to blow the dust off this language-bilge ‘Yar Khan’ for the sake of some research point. This story-object made my skin crawl.

There is a rhetoric of race that makes me want to undiscover ‘Yar Khan’, while another element of this story draws me in: a writing of location. This narrative is littered with locations—location names, more so than evocative descriptions—that ultimately reveal a brutal writing of the land, a brutal *geography*—in which fictitious imperial subjects cross continents, oceans and colonies as though they are changing napkins for Christmas dinner. The object-voice of ‘Yar Khan’ that I hear—and that I choose to follow—is its *geography*.

Here I align with scholars concerned with the ‘literary’ turn in geography, and the ‘spatial’ turn in literary and other studies—feeling dizzy now—who find this etymology of the word ‘geography’ useful.²⁸ The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* supports my preference: the French, Latin and Greek roots of ‘graphy’ all denote ‘the written’ or writing.²⁹ Yet, the ‘graphy’ in geography has evolved from its root denoting writing to now denote geography’s role as a descriptive science among others such as bibliography, lexicography, topography. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition number five for ‘geography’ offers more relevant fodder: ‘A depiction or analysis of the way the constituent parts of something interact, or of their arrangement in relation to one another.’³⁰ Here, the emphasis lies in the interaction between parts, suggesting a dynamic state.

The object-voice of ‘Yar Khan’ through its rhetoric of place within, beside and beyond the text, is one of movement. That is, the geographic imaginary expressed in the story’s rhetoric of locales is mobile. And this is not disembodied space as location, but actual named, lived, storied, walked and journeyed places. The page layout of this Christmas edition of *The Sydney Mail* newspaper, which I see as a material landscape that holds a *geography*—a writing of its own *land*—suggests further movement. By extension, the broader landscape of the newspaper—its publisher, circulation and evidence of its readership—also offers movement. Considering a text to have writing of the land inside it, and outside but adjoining it, offers an inclusive material consideration of the object more nuanced than considering either on its own. By doing this, I aim to follow questions directed at the level of the material page. For example, how does the land-that-is-the-page sit with or in contrast to the internal writing of the land-that-strings-the-narrative of this story?

More than forty locations are named in this two-page short story, and more than twenty of these are allocated proper nouns that are recognisable geographic place names—from Hergott

Springs to Cape Town, from England to The Paroo, The Diamantina to The Shangani River in Rhodesia, from Darjeeling to George Street (in Sydney). Just what impact arises from the naming of place? Is naming a place the same as going to it? Not all the locations named in 'Yar Khan' carry the main action of the story; instead they reveal a tapestry around the protagonists that renders their world large. Each naming offers an opportunity to draw the reader in. The lived geography of many readers of *The Sydney Mail*, with a largely country circulation of ten thousand per week in the 1890s, might well match that offered by the story, whereby the text of 'Yar Khan' establishes a complicit geography between text-object and reader.³¹ Acknowledging a shared geography across a turbulent colonial map may well be the place-naming work of 'Yar Khan'.

Of all the locations in the story, the one that holds the most subtlety for me is the lignum swamp:

And Yar Khan, with a sob, cast his rifle into the depths of a lignum swamp where frogs bellowed and bralgas [*sic*] bugled through the night, and around whose edges the yellow gidyea blooms stank in the sultry air; for, now, he knew for certain, that eye and arm were bewitched; and that, should steel prove no truer, then would he never again see his brethren.³²

Yellow gidyea is *Acacia cambagei* (with the common names gidgee, gidga, gidyea, stinking wattle, stinking gidgee).³³ It is endemic to the southwest of Queensland, the far northwest of New South Wales and the eastern areas of the Northern Territory. On a distribution map, its dots of occurrence cluster along the channel country. All along its pathways, its colour and scent will be sending messages among entities, as it has done for millennia; only in these recent centuries might it be dismissed, unheard and unread.³⁴ I wonder if this distinctive wattle wafts across any other adventuring texts of the nineteenth century. 'Species Bank' advises not to propagate *A. cambagei* near people as its phyllodes emit a foul odour after rainfall; for Yar Khan too, the 'blooms stank in the sultry air'.³⁵ Yar Khan's essential moment of faith and desperation is enacted at a place of watery respite, of life in all its night-time silence and minutiae.



Figure 2 Illustration, 'The Quest of Yar Khan', *The Sydney Mail* (Christmas Supplement), 22 December 1894, page ii. Source: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/162837468/16637488>

Of relevance is the scholarship of Haripriya Rangan and Christian Kull, who followed the trace of an exotic thorny wattle *Acacia farnesiana* across the globe and then through inland Australia. Its 'more than forty vernacular names' draw a dynamic trail across regions.³⁶ Also of relevance is the work of linguist Jane Simpson, who tracked the idea of the cameleers from South Asia acting as carriers of pidgins and creoles in inland Australia during the nineteenth century.³⁷ Is there a thoroughgoing history of Australia to be found, not by tracing texts, but by following a chosen wattle? Wattle-like, we blunder on; or even, following the camel pads and scats, the waterholes and wetlands, across time and oceans.

Naming brutality

While many geographic place names are included in 'Yar Khan', half the locations are named loosely while still retaining a potential specificity, depending on who is reading. One of particular relevance to me is Ranken's station.

An' it's not the worsht job in the world that I'm expectin' a few of the lads over from Ranken's station to-night; or, mebbe, them Afghans 'ud be for carrin' us two lone men by assault. But I think, all the same, that ye'd better slither as soon's it gets dark.³⁸

My paternal ancestry is entwined with settler Rankens of the nineteenth century; the closest to me in this surnamed-Ranken lineage is my grandmother Barbara Ranken (1905–1980)—Granny Barb. The Rankens first arrived in New South Wales from Ayreshire, Scotland, in 1821, in the form of George Ranken (1793–1860), followed in 1826 by his brother Arthur Ranken (1805–1892). Tracking the land movements of these squatting Rankens is a different story from the one I want to follow here, but suffice to say that one of their nephews W.H.L. Ranken (1839–1902) 'took up' a large landholding, Tongo Station, on the Paroo River in the 1870s: 'about 80 miles from Wilcannia ... well watered by a branch of the Paroo, numerous creeks, lakes, large dams, waterholes and springs'.³⁹ This may well be the Ranken's station of 'Yar Khan' sharing that same river, the Paroo.

W.H.L. Ranken is also the author of *The Dominion of Australia: An Account of its Foundations*.⁴⁰ An extract appears in the 2009 *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*.⁴¹ It is introduced by Elizabeth Webby as: 'An imaginative and interesting geography handbook.'⁴² Ranken laments the droughts, and '[t]he most capricious tyrant, the climate', and how its 'deadliest weapon ... the bushfire, reduces and selects the life of the country'.⁴³ The acacia moment for Ranken is his admiration of the way acacias 'cluster in thickets as if to shelter one another'—he sees that fire spares only the 'giant eucalypti' and 'those hard acacias which rise in iron-like columns beneath their thin graceful tresses'.⁴⁴ But lack of water is the limit: 'All life is thus limited', while the destruction of floods is more than countered by 'the production of all life which follows'.⁴⁵ The creeks, lakes, waterholes, swamps and rivers hold life; when the 'watercourses are drying up ... the animals struggle on from one death to another'.⁴⁶

There are many paths to follow within this text; so many that the choice feels arbitrary. I choose Mashonaland, where the rhetoric of location in 'Yar Khan' leads from one killing ground to another. In Connolly's mind, his purpose is to make a place for himself on African soil, now that he has fled Australia in fear of his life following multiple attempts by Yar Khan to kill him. On the advice of a tea planter, the red-bearded Connolly works his passage on a steamer to the Cape of Good Hope to reach new land where the farming is good: 'Better come up to Mashonaland with me. I think it'll turn out a fine country for tea.'⁴⁷

Mashonaland is a place-name my twenty-first-century reading eyes don't recognise. It is named in the story without explanation. It is named as if the reader will know. And, guided by newspaper reports during 1893 and 1894—the latter being the publication year of 'Yar Khan'—the readership of December's *Sydney Mail* Christmas supplement is likely to know all about the version of Mashonaland that the protagonist encounters. Not only does he farm tea but he 'fights Loben's impis'.⁴⁸ The *Maitland Mercury* explains in a full-column story in October 1893 the reasons for the 'impending war' between Lobengula and the British South Africa Company over access and protection for British gold mining and other enterprises in Mashonaland. It predicts that a likely outcome will be 'the dethronement of Lobengula and the annexation of this territory'.⁴⁹ In January 1894, the *Maitland Mercury* informed readers that King Lobengula had agreed to terms laid down by the British. In February 1894, his death was announced: Lobengula had died of small pox. Numerous regional New South Wales newspapers also carried regular news of Lobengula, the Matabele and the Shangani River. Even further, to Glasgow and London, knowledge of the bloodshed in Mashonaland among newspaper readers in the early 1890s would have been commonplace.

So Connelly went; and the pair found other matters to think of besides on the banks of the Shangani. And they joined the Company's forces and starved, and fought Loben's impis over and over again. And participating in the plunder, such as it was, got a farm each, and are there still.⁵⁰

Here, a barely visible horror in the geography of this story is within the new geography of the protagonist Connolly: Mashonaland, in present-day Zimbabwe. The Shangani River and the 'plunder' mentioned in passing is referred to in history texts as the Shangani River Massacre or the First Matabele War (depending on who's saying it) in December 1893, and 'Loben' is Lobengula Khumalo (1845–1894), the second and last king of the Ndebele people, whose death was reported in February 1894 in the colonial newspapers as him succumbing to small pox.⁵¹ Later these reports were questioned, with rumours that he had fled and later resurged appearing in the colonial press in 1896.⁵² Recent Ndebele narratives state that Lobengula was neither killed by the British, nor a victim of small pox, and was certainly not poisoned by his own hand, as had also been suggested.⁵³ Instead he escaped and thus, according to the Ndebele, without capture of their king, the Ndebele were never defeated by the British.⁵⁴ Yet here in this Christmas story 'Yar Khan', it's all about tea farming, and the *location* is incidental, and the fighting is expressed as an irritation ('over and over') that's imbued with the glee of a prize: the farm.

In 2010, UK-based global publisher Headline published a 'gripping new military adventure' titled *The Shangani Patrol* by John Wilcox in which the protagonists 'ex-captain and one-time subaltern Simon Fonthill and his wife Alice find themselves on tribal land and at the mercy of Matabele warriors'. Here 'subaltern' is used with its original military meaning. More paths open as I follow Connelly from one killing ground to another. The place-naming in the text of 'Yar Khan' equates with place-making, and in the place-naming, the horror of the place-making slips by, barely noticed at all. And with these mechanics of colonial invasion, the coloniser's view of pre-existing places—named and known and enacted—is replaced *on arrival* through the decisive action to name. The action is not acknowledged as a re-naming, and a plastering over begins.

Landscape of the page

Sticky tendrils of time emerge from 'Yar Khan'. They reach me today and dislodge the 'of its time' label that could be applied to this 1890s text object. Three pages of advertisements precede the Christmas supplement: many medicaments and toiletries including 'Rowland's Macassar Oil: sold in a golden colour for fair haired ladies and gentlemen'; 'Rowland's Kayldor emollient milk for the face ... produces a soft, fair skin'; 'Schweppes table waters as supplied to the Queen: sold ... throughout the colonies'.⁵⁵

On the page following the Schweppes advertisement, a path to 'Yar Khan' is framed in an advertisement for weaponry: 'Guns! Guns! Guns! Oliver Saunders Gunmaker ... Parramatta ... It is no use talking ... shoot close and hit hard.' Framing the right-hand column of 'Yar Khan' on the second page of the Christmas supplement is a large, vertical, full-column advertisement for cast-iron fencing of various types, including the 'Patent self-adjusting unclimbable steel railing' that is 'specially adapted for shipping and conveyance inland' (see Figure 3). The fencing business Bayliss, Jones & Bayliss is located in Cannon Street, London, and its 'manufactory' located in Wolverhampton, square in England's middle. That's a very long way for a fence to travel—the geography of a fence. This 'manufactory' began forging fences and other steel products in 1825 and continued in Wolverhampton into the 1980s.

PATENT SELF-ADJUSTING UNCLIMBABLE STEEL RAILING.
NO. 2765.



The Horizontals are of Channel Steel.

This railing will adapt itself to the rise and fall of the ground. It can be fixed close up to the purchaser's boundary, thus saving 8 or 9 inches of land. It is despatched in Bundles and put together on the site of erection, which considerably reduces the cost and effects a great saving in freight:

VERTICAL BARS AND HORIZONTALS



BUNDLED FOR SHIPMENT.
200 yards Railing 4½ft. high above ground, with 4in. square Bars, will pack for shipment in a space about 9ft x 4½ft. x 16in. Approximate weight, 5 tons 14 cwt.
N.B.—This Railing is specially adapted for shipment and conveyance inland.

Figure 3 Fencing advertisement (detail), 'The Quest of Yar Khan', The Sydney Mail (Christmas Supplement), 22 December 1894, page ii. Source: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article162837468>

This fencing looks ornamental, suited to surrounding a dwelling rather than enclosing stock. To be bundled for easy transport ‘to the inland’ is a tagline directed at the colonial readership of Australia, not the midlands of England. Was the Wolverhampton ‘works’ familiar with what kind of being might climb a house-fence of ‘the inland’? The Paroo River is the traditional home of the *Budjiti*, and further south, the *Paakantji*. This land at this time might have had climbers like foxes and cats. Given that the dingo fence was completed in 1885, dingoes would have been less likely climbers in the Paroo in the 1890s. Lots of walkers, wanderers, flyers and diggers: sheep, cattle, camels, roos, wombats, ducks, chickens, emus. Did the unclimbable fence also aim to exclude the *Budjiti* and *Paakantji*, keeping in settler children and keeping out the people who might want to climb in and take back the land that was taken (up)?

After the story’s final line, the newspaper column is filled with a poem by Viva titled ‘A Christmas Rose’, and mourning the death of a child (see Figure 4). Abutting ‘Yar Khan’, these lines signal a hierarchy of acceptable death. Loss that is appropriate to mourn, that of a child, is inside this poem, in contrast to the murders of adults and animals that are wallpaper in the Christmas supplement’s lead story. Viva’s heaven is influenced by the brightness of the child: ‘Sweeter for the face of our Christmas Rose’.⁵⁶ The joining of elegy and revenge on this newspaper page is a cruel placement that elevates one death and diminishes the others.

If I were to draw a map driven by this story, it would have lines joining all the places named in ‘Yar Khan’ from the northwest of New South Wales to Sydney, the Paroo and the Diamantina, The Gulf, the Overland Telegraph, Darjeeling, England, Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope, the Shangani River, and two expanses—the wet salty ocean and the apparently dry salty riverlands of the Paroo; those dispossessed and those in possession; the excluded and the included. And in this place, there is a writing in the land, a perpetual energetic tremor that isn’t accessible to my hand-drawn map, but I recognise its presence. On my map I would draw in detail the lignum swamp, the visceral heart of the story, where Yar Khan gives up his rifle, and seeks revenge with his hands and blade, at close quarters and at high risk. And I would make the rivers large and let the rest fade.

Neither dissolved nor absolved

Located within a Christmas supplement for general reading, ‘The Quest of Yar Khan’ is a text-object that surprises its ‘location’ through its overt anti-Christmas sentiment of violence and revenge. Perhaps perceptions of the Christmas festival and its celebratory moments have changed since 1894, and perhaps in the 1890s the yuletide festival reflected a readership in flux, moving from blind confidence in the violent actions of colonial land acquisition toward an unsettlement that is reflected in the ambivalent position of the object-voice that emanates from this narrative.

The characters in this narrative do not necessarily espouse the religion with which they are aligned. Red bearded Connolly is cast as irreligious, while he casts his opponent Yar Khan as the devil incarnate. The narrator, and by implication the editor/author, is often fence-sitting. The narrator frames red-beard as a caricature of irreligious recklessness: a violent, gun-slinging, alcohol-fuelled frontiersman who takes human (non-white) life like he is brushing away a fly. Yet Connolly’s actions are subtly questioned by the events of the narrative. While his nemesis Yar Khan dies in the throes of attempting to kill red-beard, it is Connolly who must flee: “Never go back to Australia while there’s an Afghan left in the land”, said the tea-planter to Connolly’.⁵⁷

A Christmas Rose.

She came on warm wings of December,
 And we called her our Christmas rose.
 Too well her sweet ways we remember,
 When the last of the roses blows.
 Heaven gave her eyes clear and starry,
 Hair bright as her mother-mouth's glows,
 And earth, of good birth-gifts, not chary
 Gave her cheeks the blush of the rose.

For sunlight she lived, and for pleasure,
 To gladden our hearts and rejoice,
 The summer's bright gold was her treasure.
 Like a summer stream was her voice.
 But winter's storms shook our sweet flower,
 She was chilled by harsh winds of spring.
 She shuddered and paled for an hour,
 And then her loved spirit took wing.

Can it be that little ones alter
 When gathered within Heaven's fold,
 Their feet no more childishly falter,
 And their heads lose their childish gold?
 Are all Heaven's bright angel-faces
 The faces of women and men?
 Shall our rose lose her baby graces,
 And shall we not know her again?

Ah, no! as the flowerets of Heaven
 Every bright child-soul blooms and grows,
 And brightest of seventy times seven
 Is the soul of our Christmas Rose.
 When welcome Death calls us to meet her,
 And when our grief-laden breath goes
 We think sweet Heaven will be sweeter
 For the face of our Christmas Rose

Melbourne.

VIVA.

Figure 4 Newspaper detail, 'The Quest of Yar Khan', The Sydney Mail (Christmas Supplement), 22 December 1894, page ii. Source: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/nla.news-article162837468>

Significantly, Connolly's mode of action is not questioned by his white, European allies, but by the 'alien'. The object-voice of 'Yar Khan' transmits a heritage of Islam quietly assessing the land, above all the chaos, through its closing scene in which the Imam sits by his campfire and the earth settles into night:

And from the Paroo to Hergott Springs the camp fires of the alien still light up the drear Australian plains; and an old man strokes a long white beard as he watches the camels cropping the spiky spinifex, and mutters often under his breath, 'There is but one God, and Mahomet is His Prophet. His will be done.'⁵⁸

It is this final scene that targets a failed Christian ethos, embodied in the life and actions of red-beard. The narrative suggests a Christian ethos that has failed the colonial enterprise in

Australia, and the inclusion of the Shangani River massacre in eastern Africa, just across the Indian Ocean, suggests its failure for humanity on another continent.

Ambivalence and autonomy

As a lead story in a popular newspaper, for a general readership that was Christian emphatically—yet arguably recognised in large part as ‘practically heathen’⁵⁹—‘Yar Khan’ appears to wield a peculiar stick, both shaping and shaped by its world.

It can be cast as an example of end-of-empire questioning of imperialism—in other words, a counter-discourse reflecting the same anxieties expressed in, for example, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. If nothing else, the ambivalent voice emanating from ‘Yar Khan’ sits in opposition to a view of 1890s colonies that upholds white European workers’ rights at the expense of others; it is also at odds with the idea that Islam was inferior to Christianity; and is at odds with the idea that a white European author, editor and readership would not tolerate any suggestion that Christian values were not the heart and strength of the burgeoning nation. On the contrary, this narrative suggests a readership, an author and an editor open to questioning the centrality of imperialism’s brutality as it played out on the frontier, away from the city, beyond view.

This ambivalent object-voice at moments holds an active disdain for core Christian values through which the empire was self-reportedly cleansing the world. The story leaves a lingering uncertainty, a doubt about who has been victorious. It produces questions—When will it end? When will this jumped up façade of goodness be recognised for what it is?

Author John Arthur Barry’s stance in ‘The Quest of Yar Khan’ is ambiguous. His tone of detached observer is at times mocking, often foregrounding the scenario of the irreligious Connolly’s comeuppance. At other moments his imperialist vocabulary denigrates the South Asian characters in the story, while reserving language of extreme subjugation for backgrounded Indigenous characters, who are regularly shot. Barry affirms a hierarchy of being: himself at the top, fine imperialists next, followed by dodgy imperialists such as red-bearded Connolly; next comes Yar Khan and his brothers, the Indigenous characters, horses and bustards, with the camel on the lowest rung. Yet the way Barry places the Imam at key moments in the narrative floats this character and the concept of Islam loose from its position in the hierarchy. This manoeuvre is central to creating ambiguity in Barry’s stance as author; in destabilising, at least for a moment, a morally assured Christian empire; and in actively questioning the putative pillars of that empire.

Conclusion

Mining the named geography in this text as real-world material to leverage insight into the circumstances that produced ‘Yar Khan’, and placed it with prominence in a Christmas supplement, has been fruitful. Seeking closeness with and following iron fences, swamps, acacias, camels, bustards and tea-farms—in a mode that mimics reading a geo-graphed map—has revealed textual acts and connections within and beyond this short story that can deftly hide massacre across time, and relegate violence to wallpaper. Adding a deliberate material engagement to elements of a more traditional textual analysis offers potential to complicate, if not alter, the view of how a text is configured within, and also configures, the context that gave rise to it.

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Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, p. i.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. ii.
7. Hanifa Deen, 'Excavating the Past: Australian Muslims', *The La Trobe Journal*, vol. 89, May 2012, p. 63.
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10. See, in particular, H.M. Barker, *Camels and the Outback*, Pitman, Melbourne, 1964; Pamela Rajkowski, *In the Tracks of the Camelmen: Outback Australia's Most Exotic Pioneers*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1987; Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989; and Philip Jones and Anna Kenny, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s–1930s*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2007. Recent fiction includes Nicholas Shakespeare, *Oddfellows*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 2015; and Christine McCourt, *The Cleansing of Mahommed*, Fourth Estate, Sydney, 2012.
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12. This article has been developed from my PhD thesis 'Split River Novella and Essays: South Asia in Peri-Federation Australia (1890–1915)', University of Newcastle, 2016; available for viewing and download at <http://nova.newcastle.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository>.
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17. Baker, p. 22.
18. Isabelle Stengers, 'Including Nonhumans in Political Theory: Opening Pandora's Box?', in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. B. Braun and S. Whatmore, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2010, p. 15, quoted in Paul Hodge, Sarah Wright and Fee Mozeley, 'More-Than-Human Theorising—Inclusive Communities of Practice in Student Practice-Based Learning', *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research II—International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, vol. 10, 2014, p. 85.
19. I view this attempt at a personal and research-practice decolonisation to be ongoing; it is neither a finite nor an assured process, and is not limited to this article or the associated research project.
20. See Stephen Muecke, 'Motorcycles, Snails, Latour: Criticism Without Judgement', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, March 2012, p. 56; and Bruno Latour, 'Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, Winter 2004, pp. 232–3.
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31. *The Sydney Mail* was started in 1860 by John Fairfax & Sons as a weekly eight-page summary of the daily *Sydney Morning Herald* for country readers. It was printed on a Friday in time for the weekly mail coaches delivering to the country. From 1871 it increased from eight pages to thirty-two pages, included illustrations, and changed from a news summary to a magazine with 'serials, stories, articles and essays'. It cost sixpence and attracted a lower-income metropolitan readership as a once-weekly rather than a daily purchase. See Gavin Souter, *Company of Heralds*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1981, p. 113.
32. Barry, p. ii.
33. Australian Government, Department of Environment, 'Acacia Cambagei', *Species Bank*, <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/species-bank/sbank-treatment.pl?id=9945>; see also <http://www.worldwidewattle.com/speciesgallery/cambagei.php>.
34. *Species Bank*, <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/species-bank/sbank-treatment.pl?id=9945>; see also *World Wide Wattle*, <http://www.worldwidewattle.com/speciesgallery/cambagei.php>. Here, the idea of 'entities' is as components of an Indigenous relational ontology described by Karen Martin in 'Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Research', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 76, 2003, p. 207.
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37. See Deen, 'Excavating the Past', p. 63; Jane Simpson, 'Camels as Pidgin-carriers: Afghan Cameleers as a Vector for the Spread of Features of Australian Aboriginal Pidgins and Creoles', in *Processes of Language Contact: Studies from Australia and the South Pacific*, ed. J. Siegel, Collections Champs Linguistiques, Fides, Saint-Laurent, Quebec, 2000, pp. 195–244.
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44. Ibid., p. 152.
45. Ibid., p. 151.
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47. Barry, p. ii.
48. Barry, 'p. ii.
49. *The Maitland Mercury*, 19 October 1893, p. 4.
50. Barry, p. ii.
51. *The Queenslander*, 24 February 1894, p. 378: 'Death of Lobengula, London, February 16: A telegram from Capetown confirms a report previously received that Lobengula, King of the Matabeles, died from small pox.'
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54. Ibid.
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