

Unearthing Love on the Central Australian Frontier

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Abstract

This story centres around a tin shed known as the Bungalow that was built in Alice Springs in 1914 to house Topsy Smith, an Indigenous *Arabana* woman, and her seven children. Topsy's husband, Welsh-born Bill Smith, had died at the mines. Topsy lived in the Bungalow for the next fifteen years, raising her own children as well as about forty other "half-caste" children, who had been taken from their families in the surrounding desert lands. I am the white Australian mother of a mixed-heritage Indigenous daughter and have lived for nearly three decades in Central Australia. My aim, through this piece, is to create a post-colonial, literary reimagining of the story of the Bungalow, using techniques of speculative biography, archival poetics, ekphrasis and auto-ethnography. Part of my doctoral research, this paper explores how I have used methodologies of practice-led research and creative non-fiction to reimagine Topsy Smith's life and come to see her, not as a shadowy and little known figure of history but as a woman full of life and love. My supervisors encourage me to interrogate my motivation for this topic. I offer intellectual, political and personal explanations, but still they prod. I dig further to arrive at my own core provocation of love.

Keywords: Central Australia, post-colonialism, history, creative non-fiction, speculative biography

History abounds with people whose contributions have gone largely unrecognized. They are people who stood up and stood out, people whose stories are reflective of the times and places in which they lived and yet who have received little public attention. You can scour the archives and find no mention of such people, or just enough of a mention to tweak your curiosity. Or you can spend time in a place where the descendants of such people laud their ancestors, through their own, alternative gaze on the past. How can we bring those quiet heroes to the foreground? How can we honour their memories and contributions and in doing so, create more complete understandings of our history? How do we move them from being shadowy outliers to people of our past, as fully fleshed as the ones with the biggest names and the most extensive archival records? A range of literary techniques of creative non-fiction hold the key.

Topsy Smith is a little-known hero of the Central Australian frontier. I first came across her whilst putting together a guided walking tour I was developing of the town of Alice Springs, my adopted home. What I learnt was that she had arrived in Alice Springs in 1914 with her seven children and a sizeable herd of goats. They had come in from Arltunga, the gold mining region one hundred kilometres to the east, upon the death of Topsy's husband Bill, the father of the children.

At that stage Alice Springs was officially named Stuart, after the explorer who had traversed the continent from south to north, in the early 1860s. The town was established in 1888, an outpost on the floodplain of a mostly dry riverbed in the heart of arid, inland Australia. It grew slowly and by 1914 boasted a smattering of shops, liquor outlets, residents and a police complex.

The town had been set up to support the various settler activities that were growing up on the desert lands in a vast surrounding radius. They were mostly mining and cattle farming, the standard economic fare of colonization, and then the missionary activity that arises as a result of the threat those colonial activities pose to the First Nations people.

To stake their claim and attend to their needs and desires, some white men behaved brutally. They killed First Nations people who stood in their way. They took First Nations women, the only women around at the time, as companions and playthings. They created the issue at the very heart of this story, the advent of the mixed heritage children.

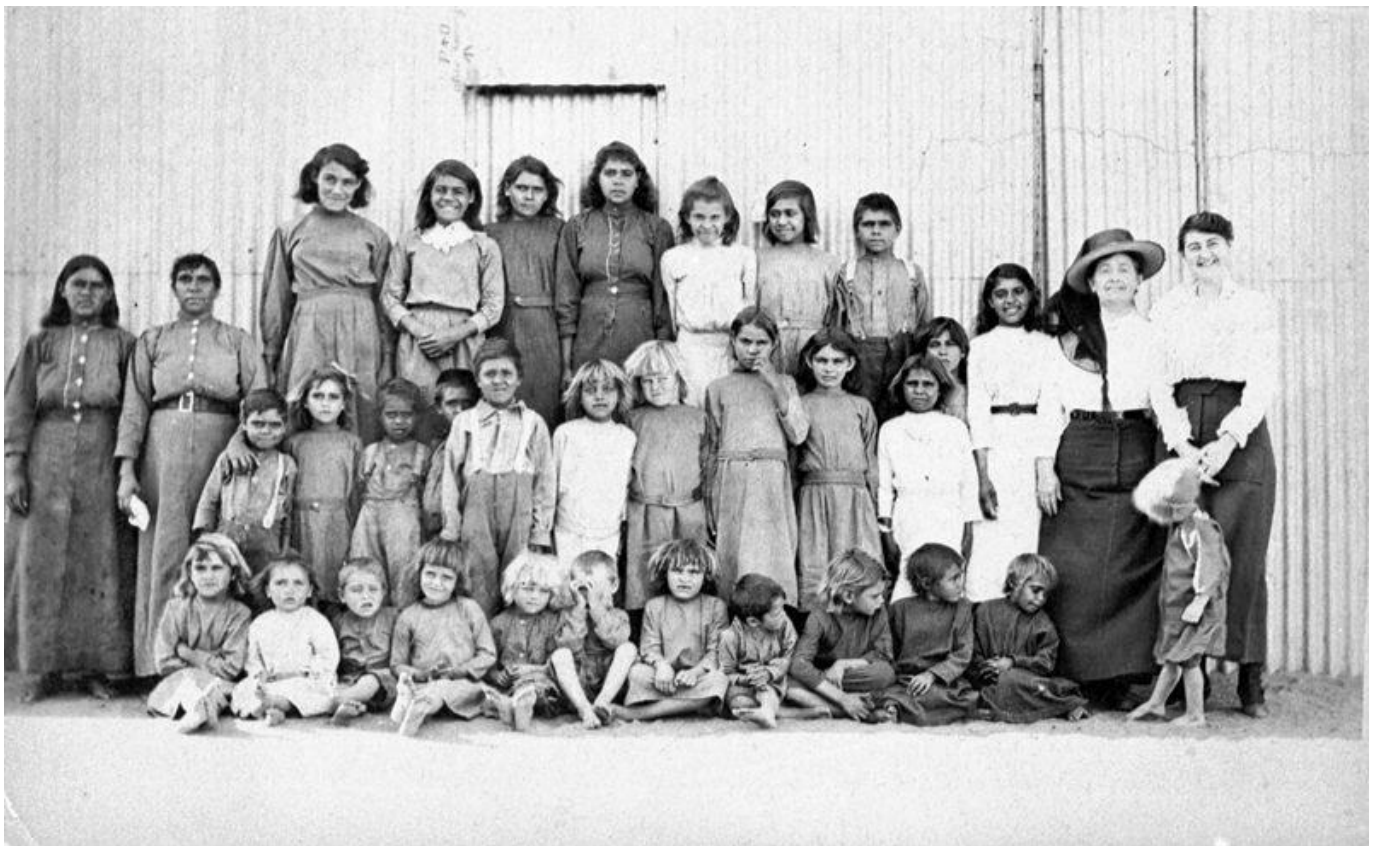
Topsy was an Arabana woman whose life partner was a white man. Their children could therefore be seen as mixed heritage, commonly known at the time as “half-caste”. Unlike many of the children of mixed heritage, the Smith children were cared for by their father who remained with his family until he died.

When Topsy and the children arrived in Alice Springs, the policeman put up a tent for them. He then sent a telegram to the Northern Territory administrator in Darwin, requesting permission to erect a tin shed for the Smith widow and her children to live in. He would provide them with rations from the Aboriginal supply. Permission was granted and the tin shed, that came to be known as the Bungalow, was built.

In that same month and year, May 1914, Ida Standley arrived in Alice Springs, recruited as the town’s first schoolteacher. Originally brought to teach the white children, when she learnt of the children at the Bungalow, Ida wanted to teach them as well. She was granted permission but only if they were taught separately. Ida held classes for the white children of the town in the morning, then the Bungalow children in the afternoon. She also soon took up an extra engagement, as Matron of the Bungalow, for an additional stipend. Although her responsibilities don’t seem to have been spelled out, it seems that Ida’s role as matron involved overseeing the day-to-day functioning of the Bungalow and the wellbeing and conduct of its residents.

Between 1914 and 1929, many more children of mixed descent from the outlying district were brought to live at the Bungalow until in the end there were about 60 children growing up in what had? expanded to three tin sheds being cared for by Topsy Smith, Ida Standley and Sergeant Stott. Of all the stories I told over and over again between 2005 and 2017 it’s the one that particularly captured my attention.

Not long after I learned the story of the Bungalow, I found a photo in the government archives that featured Topsy, Ida and about thirty of the kids, arranged in three rows, in standard school photo arrangement. Topsy is to the left of the children, with her hand resting on the shoulder of a boy who stands beside her, in the middle row. He has a cheeky face and tousled hair. It looks like he's ready to take off and she is stilling him for the photo: a representation, perhaps, of the greater role she played. Topsy is wearing a long-sleeved collared shirt, buttoned to the neck and tucked into a shapeless, ankle length skirt. A thick belt is buckled around her waist, where blouse meets skirt. Topsy is neither smiling nor scowling. To me she has the sturdy, self-contained appearance of many Central Australian First Nations' women I have come to know. There's an awkwardness and resignation I read into it too: it's not how she'd do things if it was left up to her, but she will make the most of the situation she is in.



Northern Territory Archives Service

Text accompanying photo reads:

The Bungalow Alice Springs [Stuart], Half castes [part Aborigines] and teacher [2nd from far right, Ida Standley with hat, far Right, Ida Standley's daughter Mrs Brown. Assistants including Topsy Smith, 2nd from left], ca 1914.

Interpreting photos for research is problematic. As Penny Tinkler points out, “Professional photos are typically examples of how photographers want to present their subjects; this is particularly the case when subjects have no, or relatively little power – children, colonial subjects and those in institutional settings” (37). The interpretation of historic photos is also greatly influenced by the interpreter. “Looking is key to working productively with photos but researchers often cannot ‘see’ past their preconceived ideas, shaped by prior knowledge and experience” (Tinkler 2013, 55). Perhaps this can be applied, not only to photos, but to the stories of our history as well.

I am a white Australian woman from the south-east of the continent. I lived in Central Australia for nearly three of my adult decades where I partnered and had a child with a Central Australian man of the *Warlpiri* nation. Although I knew only the basic outline of the story of the Bungalow for quite some time, it seemed to me to contain the essence of so much of what is fundamental to Central Australia both then and now: the turbulence of intercultural relations at the Australian frontier, far removed from centralized structures of power and funding; Australia’s relationship to its colonial legacy; the embedded racism of my nation; misguided notions of miscegeny; the natural environment and the role it plays in people’s lives. It is these issues I set out to explore as doctoral research and present as creative non-fiction, in relation to the story of the Bungalow. My intention has been to engage tools of literature to sculpt a history that connects the past to the present and is a palpable representation of what I experienced during my years spent in Central Australia. For me this history is embodied. It’s personal.

The result is emerging as a ficto-critical work of autoethnography, speculative biography and micro-history. Central to the story are the three main characters, Topsy Smith, Ida Standley and Robert Stott as well as the people who grew up in that tin shed.

In this paper I will present some of the historic and literary outcomes of my research. I will also attend to the multiple roles of love in my research.

My ficto-critical treatment of the Bungalow begins:

THE POSSIBILITIES INHERENT

No one seems to know what time Topsy Smith got to town. I suppose it’s a trifling detail really, compared to so many of the others. It’s just that I want to know everything.

I want to go there and live amongst that whole fiasco that was frontier Central Australia, early last century when the town was just getting going.

“No you don’t,” my daughter insists. “Imagine the racism. Imagine the sexism.” She’s got a point there, no doubt.

But it’s more than that. It’s the simplicity of that outback life: wide open spaces, time to be. It’s the possibilities inherent at those places of cultural interface. It’s the potential for understanding how what went on then has shaped our present. I don’t want to go there because I think it’s any better. I want to go there because it disturbs me.

Imagine it now: Topsy and the younger children on the truck, the older ones with the herd of goats bringing up the rear. Jolting along rough desert tracks that were cut by wear and tear through the semi-arid landscape; of mulga bush, of spinifex grass, dry sandy riverbeds and bushflies. Crunch. Buzz. Crack.

Penetrating light.

Craggy ranges of solid, sun-baked rock.

The whole scene overlaid by that vast dome of pure blue sky.

Imagine those bush kids with their grounding and their goats. Were they wearing shoes? Did they brush their hair? Did they call the goats by name as they herded them along towards a shared and unknown future?

Their time of arrival will depend on whether they camped along the way or made the journey in one hit, from Arltunga to Stuart in a day. You can do it these days in an hour and a half, along those sleek outback highways, with the windows of your Prado firmly sealed and the air-conditioner pumping. Or you can wind your windows down, let the desert air toss your hair, some great outback rock ‘n’ roll pounding from the playlist.

*Either way, there’s a lot more choice these days than when Topsy was around. There was no state administered stipend. No compassionate leave. **Get to a town and get some help with the kids or starve.** That’s pretty much how they rolled back then.*

*Topsy wasn’t always Smith. She married a Smith, name of Bill. He was of Welsh descent: goldmining at Arltunga, providing for his wife and their kids. He appeared to be doing the right thing, Bill. Plenty of those other immigrant blokes back then used Aboriginal women for the one thing. **Gins** they called them. And **lubras**. And **black velvet**. They fucked them, made fun of them, disposed of their men, then took for the hills. It would seem by 1914 that the worst of the killing times was over.*

Bill Smith (1866 - 1914) died of mining-related illness and was buried at the crossroads at Arltunga. In its heyday, about ten years earlier, the little goldmining town with the eastern Arrernte name had supported about two hundred people. By 1914 most of them had moved on. It was dangerous and back-breakingly tough at the mines. Availability of water was one of the defining features of life and there certainly wasn't enough to spare on separating out the gold, as is the preferred method in rainier lands. In this desert version of gold mining, the ore was crushed by battery and livings were ground out.

Once in town, Topsy was met by Sergeant Stott. He was a burly Scotsman with enough responsibility for ten men. He had been expressing official concern about the 'half-caste' children that were springing up in numbers around the region. In line with colonial thinking of the time, Stott believed those children needed a place to grow up, away from the influence of the full blacks where they could be taught and trained up to be half useful.

In my opinion one of the first works to be undertaken is to gather in all half caste children who are living with aborigines. The police could do most of this work. No doubt the mothers would object and there would probably be an outcry from well-meaning people about depriving the mother of her child but the future of the children should I think outweigh all other considerations. (Acting Administrator, Northern Territory, 1911, cited in Zogbaum 2003)

Topsy's arrival with her mixed-heritage kids gave Stott some live subjects to work with. He erected a tent as crisis accommodation, on a plot of land across from the police compound that had been set aside from the outset for 'government purposes.' He then wrote to the administrator in Darwin, recommending that the block be used for the 'half-castes.' Permission was granted for a permanent shelter to be built. The ensuing shed of corrugated iron came to be known as the Bungalow.

No-one seems to know what time Topsy Smith got to town. The police journal with its version of that event has gone missing. It was sometime in late May 1914. But there's a lot about what went on that we can find out.

*

As an unsung hero, Topsy hasn't been easy to get to know. She lived at the Bungalow between 1914 and 1929 and presumably was there day and night for all those fifteen years; the most consistent adult presence. Despite that, in the great plethora of archival material I have waded through from that time and place; the government memos, the telegrams, handwritten and typed letters, visitor book entries, journals and reports and newspaper articles, Topsy is mentioned by name only four times. Those mentions all come from one report that was written by biologist turned anthropologist Baldwin Spencer in 1923. He was commissioned by the Federal Government to investigate the social situation of Central Australian Aboriginal people. On the first page of his resultant, *Report on the Half Castes and Aboriginals of the Southern Division of the Northern Territory, with special reference to the Bungalow at Stuart and the Hermannsburg Mission Station*, Spencer wrote:

In 1914, after the death of a miner with whom she had been living at Arltunga, a native woman named Topsy Smith came to Stuart bringing with her seven (7) half caste children ... In 1915 the Administrator, after visiting the Bungalow, authorised the extension of the building to accommodate half castes from outside districts, Topsy Smith still remaining in charge. (Spencer 4)

Later in the report Spencer noted:

At night-time Topsy Smith takes charge, but each evening the Matron comes and sees that all the children are in. There have been occasions on which request have been made to Topsy Smith for girls, and attempts have been made at night to take them away, when she had to seek the assistance of the matron and Sergeant Stott. (Spencer 6)

Just the four mentions in one report. Otherwise Topsy exists in the shadows, quietly going about her business, doing what needs to be done without fanfare, pay nor recognition.

At other times her presence is implied in offhand and disparaging ways. For example, in 1924 a southern reporter, Malcom Ellis, ventured into Central Australia and wrote a series of scathing articles about the Bungalow that appeared in the leading newspapers of the Australian capital cities as well as in London. Although Ellis went into detail about many aspects of life at the Bungalow, his treatment of Topsy conveyed the ignorance towards First Nations' people that was prevalent in white society:

The cooking accommodation consists of a sort of sentry box affair, with an ordinary stove in it which would send the ordinary housewife on strike if she were asked to cook for a family of ten on it. The cooking hutch is open to the winds that blow; the cook and housekeeper is an old black gin. (Ellis 330)

An old black gin. Presumably that was Topsy, who worked her guts out for those kids and held it all together.

How can I write a chapter, even a paragraph about Topsy when what appears in the written accounts would barely fill the back of a standard envelope? Speculative biography, microhistory and historic fiction provide possibilities. While exact definitions of and boundaries between these genres remain in contention, what they do have in common is the provision of means for positioning at the forefront subjects who have been traditionally relegated to the margins.

Micro-historically speaking, “However singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole” (Lepore 133).

How fortunate for my study then that techniques of historical anthropology have been used to explore cultural interactions between First Nations people and Europeans on Arabana country around the time of Topsy’s birth. In an explanation of his research methods and why historic accounts on their own can only offer limited insights, Alistair Paterson says, “The surviving accounts are splinters of description over the decades normally made by a handful of literate white men...There are absolutely no historical sources from women, children or *Arabana* people” (Paterson 2008, 6). Historical anthropology considers historical as well as anthropological evidence in an attempt to “access the viewpoint of the colonized as well as the colonizers” (Paterson 2008, 13).

I have drawn on Paterson’s results, my own historic research and personal experience of Arabana country and people, to craft a chapter about Topsy’s early life. It begins with the land and the stars and the birth of Topsy’s mother. It traces the First Nations’ people of that region and considers their experience as the colonizers moved in. It presents the settlers’ experience too, of establishing pastoral stations in what was to them an alien environment. It ponders early sexual encounters across the great cultural divide. Topsy doesn’t appear until late in the chapter. This is consistent with the micro-historical approach, in which the environmental, social and political contexts into which she was born are of immense value in the interpretation of her life:

TOPSY – THE EARLY YEARS

*Amidst the dust and stars that had swirled for aeons, on the land that the **Arabana** knew, a baby slipped into the world. For those of us whose arrivals are hailed on birth certificates and increasingly captured on film or pixel, it was rather a different approach to life. You can bet your bottom dollar she was graced with a name that came from the dust and the stars but she scored another name too, which she shared with the new order that was moving in: Mary, the holy mother and Mary, daughter on the cusp of a brave new world.*

*The **Arabana** Lands cover an area across what is also known, these days, as north-central South Australia. Features include **Kati Thanda** (Lake Eyre), which at 10,000 square kilometres is the largest lake on the continent; and **Pangki Warruna** (Strangways Springs), a series of artesian springs that support an outburst of desert life. Beyond that, the **Arabana** lands are a pastiche of the stone plains, shrublands, grass plains, dune fields, salt lakes, riverbeds and oases that are the mainspring of inland Australia.*

It's a land of solitude, defined by unexpected treasures and the distances between things. Indigenous people have called this place home for at least 35 thousand years, and been sustained by the birds and mammals, reptiles, fish, foliage, roots, berries, seeds, nectar and water of the region; plentiful if you know where and when to look.

If you don't know where and when to look you might run the risk of considering these lands "perfectly worthless" and "incapable of feeding even a bandicoot" as did 29-year-old Alfred Howitt, explorer and natural scientist of some sort who was sent up from Melbourne in 1859 to examine the pastoral potential of the region.

*There was land. There were seasons. There was day and sky and star-filled nights and fires and sacred bodies of water that held the key to life. There was food and shelter. There were trade routes across the whole broad continent that criss-crossed Arabana country. There were the neighbouring **Diyari** and **Thirrari** and **Kuyani** and **Wangkangurru** peoples with whom the **Arabana** came together to worship and socialize. And at the heart of the **Arabana** lands were its own people; getting on with it.*

There were no boutiques then, no Best and Less, or online catalogues from which you ordered your garments. There was little in the way of garments. People generally went naked. Then along came the curious white men; clothed, armed and on horseback.

The frontier is the zone at which Indigenous people and colonisers come face-to-face. It is a place where morality is suspended, or at least new rules of engagement emerge.

*Mary was born of an **Arabana** woman and one of the first white men in the district, George Benfield. What language did they use to communicate in that zone in which they stood so close and yet so very far apart? A look? A gesture? An ultimatum?*

Perhaps the young mother-to-be spoke some words of faltering English.

Yes.

No.

If you like.

Although at that stage, so early in the piece, perhaps not.

Did they do it on the comfort of a bed roll or up against a tree?

Did it happen more than once?

Did they snuggle together afterwards and savour that feeling of flesh against flesh?

Or did he buckle up and jump back on his horse, still dripping?

Intimate details aside, it would appear that, from one of the first parties of white men to ever stamp their footprints on that dusty inland floor, came intercultural relations resulting in Mary, one of the first, perhaps the first child of mixed-descent in inland Australia.

Once born, let's assume Mary was embraced by her mother's mob, curiously lighter of skin and with slightly more chiselled facial features, but in all other ways one of them, just the same.

*Mary grew up as a child of the **Arabana**, learning the ways of her family which included, as they always had, watching, listening and artfully adapting.*

*In 1862 white men erected their first buildings near the great water source, **Pangki Warruna**. In the next year they brought their first herd of strange animals (3000 ewes, 300 rams, 40 cattle and 20 horses), the likes of which the **Arabana** had never encountered.*

From the perspective of the settlers, they had laid claim to 500 square miles of pastoral land and named it Strangways Station. Throughout the 1860s, half a dozen other stations were set up across that region too, thus commencing the great mutual projects of occupation and economic exploitation of the inland.

They introduced stock, along with dogs, cats, foxes, rabbits and goats, ran riot over the landscape. They trampled the native vegetation; reduced native animal populations, some to extinction; and damaged the water sources, crushing some, turning some putrid, causing others to stop flowing.

*The **Arabana** continued on as best they could. They built shelters according to the seasons and lived in camps, spread out across the land. With the environment changing rapidly around them, locals soon started working on the stations, in exchange for flour, sugar, tea, tobacco, blankets and later cloth. Their employment included sheep and goat herding, controlling horses and bullocks, cooking, lambing, washing the freshly shorn wool, construction, translation, tracking and delivery of messages. Each station was a network of sites over the massive area of the pastoral lease. Station work was generally seasonal and sporadic. The **Arabana** who chose to get involved could continue on with their own ways of living on the land and graft the requirements of station life onto that.*

A few local people scored a personal mention in the station records, as workers of the 1860s. They include Tilbrook, Camp Oven Jacky, Winkie, Kalli Kalli, Sambo, Annie, Mary Ann, Judy, Lucy and Billy Rowdy (Paterson 2008, 136).

Other Arabana people avoided contact with the settlers and their ways. “Wild blacks,” was how the settlers referred to native people that they either viewed as a threat or who were simply not engaging with the pastoral system.

Wild blacks came to Strangways and disrupted the work of wool washing to conduct a ceremony including the Arabana boy Kalli Kalli (Oastler 1865 qtd. in Paterson 2008, 138).

The Emu is dead. I think it was stolen by some wild blacks (Jeffreys 1866 qtd. in Paterson 2008, 138).

A wild black came to Francis Springs and guided me to water (Jeffreys 1866 qtd. in Paterson 2008, 138).

Between 1863 and 1866 everyone, wild or not, struggled through the worst drought on record. Large amounts of stock were lost, as illustrated by station manager Julius Jeffreys in his letter of November 1865:

My dear Warren (one of Jeffrey’s fellow station owners)

I am sorry to have to tell you very bad news... we had no deaths amongst the sheep until a few days after we commenced shearing. The weather suddenly changes to a most intense heat; for days the thermometer was 102 in the store and 135 upon a post and rail fence that I put around the front of the store to keep the horses from eating the thatch. 500 sheep died in a few days, principally out of one flock, the first shorn.

The horses are dying as well. Matheson has totally abandoned [the station] and the families Duncan and Lockhart are living in his deserted huts. The Duncans and the Lockharts are going to leave next week – they say they will never return. The whole of the cattle at Chambers Creek and Finniss Stations that numbered 8500 will be dead in one month – about 8000 are dead. [Ferguson’s] cattle are dying twenty and thirty a day...after the end of next week there will be no occupied stations except Ferguson’s... (Qtd. in Paterson 2008, 138).

Flooding rains followed.

The next significant flurry of activity in Arabana country began in 1870 with the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line. This strand of galvanized wire traversed the continent from south to north, held up on telegraph

poles and connected by a series of repeater stations, about 100 miles apart. At Port Darwin the cable connected with cable that crossed the seafloor to London. The Overland Telegraph Line was a major feat of civil engineering that facilitated communication across the continent and also with the motherland.

The site for one of the twelve repeater stations fell in the proximity of Strangways Springs. This brought a new wave of workers, many who passed through during the construction phase and a handful who stayed on to keep the messages flowing up and down the line. Known as the Angle Pole Telegraph Station because of the sharp turn to the north the line took at this point, this settlement also became a stop-off point and refuge for travellers.

*By 1874 when young Mary gave birth to her own daughter Topsy, all of the shepherds on Strangways Station were Aboriginal and, in the opinion of Telegraph Station operator turned ethnographer Francis Gillen, they did just as well as the whites (Gillen 1995, 8). Mary had been sired by Police Trooper White in circumstances we know nothing about. How did he and Mary come together? What common language did they speak? Presumably in the fifteen or so years since Mary's conception, the English language had spread, like other introduced species, across the arid lands. Mary must have been about fifteen years of age when she conceived Topsy. Again, how did that come to be? On his bed roll or up against a tree? Once or on several occasions? How many other **Arabana** girls did Police Trooper White have on his card and how many little Whites did he leave behind?*

*Mary gave birth to Topsy at **Algebuckina**, where a river system complete with seemingly permanent water supports another outburst of inland life. Perhaps Mary had been born there too, and a whole lot of generations before, at that place of lush fertility in the heart of **Arabana** country. With its seemingly permanent freshwater lake surrounded by stands of coolabah, acacia, and associated understory species, it seems like a perfect birthing site.*

*There is a steel bridge at **Algebuckina** that dates back to 1892. Other recent cultural markers in the immediate vicinity include the graves of three young men who died building the bridge, a rusting 1948 FJ Holden that was hit by a train half way across and a surveyed site from 1858 of the proposed **Algebuckina** township.*

*Topsy's daughter, Ada, used to travel on the Ghan with her own children. As they passed over the **Algebuckina** Bridge she would tell them, "This is where your grandmother was born" (Donnellan 2018). I envisage another*

cultural marker, a sign somewhere near the water, where travellers pull up to camp these days, on their way up the Oodnadatta Track:

BIRTHPLACE OF TOPSY SMITH
1875 - 1960
Central Australian Pioneer and bridge-builder
of a different kind
Who loved and nurtured her own and so
many other children

*Topsy grew up on the threshold of two or more cultures colliding. She would have learnt about station life as well as the more traditional **Arabana** ways. She would have been exposed to increasing numbers of outsiders who came to stay and those who were passing through; pastoralists, surveyors, telegraph workers, builders, bush workers, middle-eastern cameleers and then, from 1887, prospectors heading up to the Central Australian gold rush.*

Presumably Welsh born Bill Smith, of a similar age to Topsy, was one of those prospectors passing through. Or perhaps he'd been working in the region before deciding to head north for gold. Either way, Bill and Topsy met, somewhere in the vicinity of her birthplace, around 1890, and decided to make a go of it together.

Said their eldest son Walter, when telling the story of his life, "Bill and Topsy fell in love."

Said their granddaughter Christine, when telling the story of their lives, "Bill and Topsy fell in love."

*They married. Then just as the railway line licked its way into **Arabana** country and Oodnadatta began forming at its head, Topsy bade farewell to all she'd ever known and set off with her new husband, as they followed the track to Artunga.*

*

“Bill and Topsy fell in love.” When their granddaughter Christine (Donnellan) told me that, during an interview in Alice Springs, it was a research moment in which my understanding shifted. These two people weren’t pieces of data. They weren’t vehicles that provided the basis for a story or an interpretation of an era. They were flesh, blood, laughter, young lovers in love, a man on his death bed, a widow at the Bungalow, an old woman who went back to Oodnadatta to visit her mother, a mother, a father, a young gold miner, an older gold miner and a whole lot more. Being told that they had fallen in love shifted my comprehension of them to a new level.

“The term ‘speculative biography’ [...] describes biographical writing which openly includes a level of conjecture and speculation [...]. This results in a work that is still recognisably non-fiction [...] rather than words that can be more correctly described as biographically based fiction or historic fiction” (Brien 2018, 14). I have drawn on the occasional published account of the Track from around that time (Bucknall 2016, Young 1991), recollections from Bill and Topsy’s descendants, my own encounters in the country they traversed and the knowledge of them having fallen in love, to write a speculative piece about the initial journey of the young couple:

UP THE TRACK

They headed north, up the track.

My wife, Bill called her proudly. She was strong and skilled and sweet.

My husband, Topsy called him. He was kind and determined with a song in his voice.

There were things that mattered and the colour of one’s skin wasn’t one of them; except that Bill’s easily turned to red in the sun.

They knew about The Track; what to look and look out for.

It was the path that Topsy’s ancestors on the Arabana side had set as a trading route.

The track trod by Stuart with his horses and men.

The Track that the Overland Telegraph Line ran followed.

The obvious route, that sourced the water.

There was traffic enough. With the gold rush going on, it was never long before someone else passed by. More of them heading north than south. Most of them with just what they could carry or push in a wooden barrow. Some of them whistling under the desert sky. Others trudging so hard you wondered if you’d have to bury their bones around the bend. The occasional train of camels trekking, north or south. A few, like themselves, with horse and buggy.

Crunching over stony plains.

The sun beating down.

Flies and prickles. Glare and wind. The heat throwing mirages in the distance. Bill and Topsy had some supplies they'd brought with them; flour, tea and the like. They supplemented that with food they found along the track – a goanna roasted in the coals of the campfire, some berries Topsy picked from a bush.

On day three, with the sun dropping low in the western sky, they arrived at the river bed they'd had in their line of vision all afternoon. It was a sprawling expanse of sand dotted with River Gums.

'Two big waterholes,' Bill nodded. 'This must be Bloods Creek.'

Topsy grinned and dropped into the cool sand. 'Let's camp here the night.'

*On Day 4 the track converged briefly with the Telegraph Line at the Charlotte Waters Telegraph Station. Topsy had only seen a few such constructions in her life and this, along with its twin at **Pangki Warruna**, were the largest. Bill had seen many, grown up looking into them, in his home land of Wales and then in Adelaide.*

"White fella building," Topsy announced, which made Bill laugh. He liked the world from her perspective. They passed it on their left.

The stony plains gave way to soft, sandy floor as the Track entered the floodplains of the vast Finke River system. It brought welcome relief for horse and humans. More food, more shade, another welcome camping spot.

At night they heard the dingoes howl.

The next morning they came across a simple homestead and a couple of shepherds tending a flock.

"You gotta walk along creek, riiiiight along, big walls too much," one of them said, pursing his lips to indicate the great red gorge up ahead. "Come up on bank, other side...You be right," he added, perhaps at their apprehension. Looking towards this young woman on the move but without making eye-contact he asked, "Who your mob?"

"Arabana," she replied. "Mary my mum."

He raised his eyebrows knowingly then indicated Bill. "Dis your wati?"

"Yeah, he my husband."

The man smiled. "Good luck to you," and went back to what he was doing.

The thick river sand was hard going so they stopped half-way to boil the billy and rest the horse, rock walls towering on either side.

Ghost gums and wild figs grew on the slopes of the ranges. A soft breeze blew. A flock of red-tailed black cockatoos screeched overhead.

Topsy, sitting on the sand and gazing up, watched til they were out of sight. “We’re on the right track,” she told Bill.

He smiled and leaned over to wipe the strands of hair from her face.

It was a relief when they finally got out of the thick sand and walked on firm ground for a while.

At the base of a sandhill, there was a grave with no name.

“Perished,” Topsy said. “He didn’t know about the water up ahead.” Sure enough, just a few hundred metres around the sandhills from the grave, was a small gorge shaped like a horseshoe with a waterhole at its base. The horse had gulped it up and Bill and Topsy filled their bags. The cattle station was up to the left.

They wound their way up through the gorge, where the river gums made a rim of green along the creek. Then it was back onto river flats until they reached the Depot Sandhills.

A sea of shifting dunes of powdery red sand. It felt like it would never end. The wind howled through relentlessly, erasing the prints of those who’d gone before. They made it up, step by step, guided by the Telegraph Line. The horse needed coaxing and in places Bill and Topsy laid down a mat of spinifex grass, to ease the buggy wheels over.

Finally they looked out and down to riverbed again; a snaking path of white sand lined with trees. They tumbled down into its shade to stretch and rub each other’s aching muscles. Rest over they continued, through one river crossing after the next; stopping to eat, camp and dig for water.

Beyond the Ooraminna Range they reached a fork in the road: Alice Springs or Arltunga? More of the same stretched each way but they knew their destination was almost within range, just beyond the far horizon. Bill hooted and Topsy laughed.

On day fifteen they passed through the hilly outskirts of the settlement and pulled up in the village that had grown up on Eastern Arrernte country. It was abuzz with hope from recent finds.

The rhythms Bill and Topsy had developed on their journey became the refrain of the life they went on to build together at Arltunga.

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Further valuable insights into Topsy’s life come from interviews with two of Topsy and Bill’s children, in the later years of their lives. The voice recordings and transcriptions, held in the government archives in Alice

Springs, are of Ada Wade (nee Smith), their second daughter born in 1910, and Clarence Smith, born in 1914 after his father had died. From those accounts come the following extracts which are suggestive of Topsy's hard work as well as the love and support she provided for the children:

Six o'clock in the morning. They used to scrub us with a scrubbing brush. Mum had to scrub them up and Ida Standley used to be standing there watching her. The kids had to have a bath before they'd go to school, comb their hair and everything.

She wasn't employed. She only done it for goodwill, dear, because she was brought in with the children; so therefore she had to stay there with her children. And then she had to put up with the other kids then as well. Never got a penny out of it.

Set it up and fed all the kids with her goats.

She used to make clothes for all the children. Gallateer trousers, she used to make. Gallateer - its black, [with] a little white stripe.

There was trousers for the boys made out of that, and the shirts. And we used to wear the red turkey twill. Cotton material. Government supplied her with [a] sewing machine - Singer sewing machine. By jeez she worked hard for us, dear. I feel sorry for her now. [She] cooked for us, worked for us, do the sewing for us, dress us, look after us when we were sick. Everybody's kids. Brought one child in when the mother died - about a fortnight old - and fed her with her own breast, as well as her own little son. Anyone'd think she had twins.

When you go to old Milton Liddle's, he'll tell you all about [her]. He always said [she raised him like a son] (Wade Tape 1)

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I love my doctoral project and the story of the Bungalow that it is centred around. I love the potential of this research to shed light on foundational aspects of Central Australia and some of the little known stories and heroes. I acknowledge, with love, the opportunities that First Nations people of Central Australia have offered me over many years to work with and learn from them. I love the country they have cared for across millennia and the ways they perceive it and are prepared to share that with newcomers like myself. I love to write and use my writing as a form of resistance and a vehicle for deeper understandings and social progress. This love underpins my research project. As such, as well as being a knowledge that informs my work, love becomes a method of history making.

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