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Cover image: Deborah Clarke, After the Rain (detail) (2007), reproduced courtesy of the artist.

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Pamela Lofts is a visual artist living in Alice Springs in Central Australia where she moved to after attaining her BA at Sydney College of the Arts, in 1989. She established Watch this Space Artist-run Initiative in 1994 and the following year won the twenty-sixth Alice Prize. Pam has exhibited and participated in residencies nationally and overseas. She is represented in State and regional gallery collections including at the National Gallery of Australia, and was awarded a Master of Philosophy at the School of Art, Australian National University, in 2008. Pam’s sculpture, photographic and recent video works are grounded in the narratives, emotions and material substance of Central Australia. She also moonlights as a children’s book illustrator, which has led to a rediscovery of the joy and immediacy of drawing as another way to express her ideas within contemporary practice.

**Anthony Redmond**

Before studying anthropology, Anthony Redmond practised as a visual artist for many years, working in the fields of painting, sculpture and print making. Since 1994, he has worked in the northern Kimberley region with Ngarinyin people and their neighbours, then in Central Australia since 2002, and in Cape York Peninsula since 2005. During this time, he has conducted ethnographic research (into transformations in local economies, Indigenous relationships with pastoralists, traditional cosmology, sung traditions and bodily experiences of time and country) as well as conducting applied native title and lands rights research. His most recent work has been focused on death and grieving, the comic in everyday Ngarinyin life, the social and ritual importance of body fat, and a phenomenology of travelling in community trucks. Anthony is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research...
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Catherine Summerhayes is a lecturer at The Australian National University in Film and New Media Studies. Her doctoral thesis, ‘Film as cultural performance’ (Film Studies, ANU, 2002), focused on the concept and practice of theatrical performance in relation to film. Her major research areas are in documentary film studies and new media theory and performance. In 2004, she convened and directed AD—Art of the Documentary, a combined international conference, film competition for emerging filmmakers and film festival at the National Museum of Australia, ScreenSound and the National Gallery of Australia. Her work has recently been published in several national and international journals and anthologies, including a major piece, ‘Haunting secrets—Tracey Moffatt’s beDevil’, which was published in the Fall 2004 issue of the University of California’s film studies journal, Film Quarterly (vol. 58, no. 1). Her monograph on Moffatt’s films, The Moving Images of Tracey Moffatt, was published by Charta Edizione, Milan, in September 2007.
Jumpstarting the hearse, Mowanjum, 1997

Photograph by Patricia Vinnicombe, courtesy of Anthony Redmond
Emerging Perspectives on Automobilities in Non-Urban Australia: A context for Cruising Country

Ursula Frederick and Lisa Stefanoff

Since the early twentieth century, motor vehicles of all descriptions have been central characters in the settlement, governance and representation of Australia. They have been, and remain, objects of desire and exchange, characters in subsistence, ceremonial and market economies, sites of projective identification and spaces of distinctive social experience. Local and national spaces, time, histories and identities are reshaped in and through our car cultures. Represented in paintings, sculpture, films, literature, music, ceremony and other media, vehicles and the roads they travel communicate closely with the aesthetic spirits of modernity and its postmodern discontents. This issue of Humanities Research sets out to explore some of the key conjunctures of Australian non-urban automobility—intercultural exchange and communication, power and social transformation—from the vantage points of history, cultural studies, art history, anthropology, and visual art. The authors in this volume examine the ways in which car cultures in non-urban Australia produce social relationships between car owners, drivers, passengers, their families, and their observers through the mediating forms and forces of moving vehicles, petrol, bitumen, and the inevitable debris of car wreckages and ruins. In this respect, the analyses collected here provide fresh insights into what anthropologist Daniel Miller has called ‘the humanity of the car’.1

The idea for this volume emerged as a coda to a symposium, a photography exhibition and a screening program—Cruising Country: Automobilities in non-urban Australia—held at the ANU Centre for Cross-Cultural Research in 2005 (26–28 May).2 The symposium canvassed car-focused histories, artworks, documentary film, ethnography, cultural analysis and personal storytelling offered by researchers, artists, filmmakers, and Aboriginal elders. As the producers of that event, we conceived the term ‘cruising country’ to conjure and capture the affective experiences of being automobile on a national map where ‘country’ is a multivalent post-colonial concept of enduring Aboriginal space and place; country is overwritten by tracks, roads, highways and the

myriad ‘cruising’ journeys they have enabled, from the ‘first contact’ encounters of desert patrol officers to family trips, from rallies to ‘grey nomad’ adventures, artists’ research routes and cinematic narratives (to name only a few that were featured at the 2005 event).

Where once the analysis of car culture began in the driveways and petrol stations of cities and suburbs, the Cruising Country project has turned over the engine to confront another set of stories—those we call the ‘non-urban’. Here, motor vehicles are seen making tracks across ‘the frontier’ of the post-colonial nation and carrying research across other romantic tropes of exploration that require ongoing critical attention in the analysis of post-colonial settler societies. The non-urban focus of our theme reframes notions of distance and ‘remoteness’, and repositions the desert, the bush and suburban fringes at the centre of narratives of Australian automobility.

The exponential growth of Australian road construction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is intertwined with structural transformations of an economy balancing land-based primary industries (and the regional expansion that followed these developments) with domestic manufacturing and commodity importation and circulation of ever more goods beyond major metropolitan zones. Domestic and regional industrialisation of automotive manufacturing, the normalisation of car ownership, the fading of rail travel as mass experience and the development of a diversified market of road-based tourist travel have solidified automobility as contemporary Australian habitus. Given the ubiquity and normalisation of car travel as the primary everyday habit of mobility in postwar First-World countries, it is actually surprising that there has not been more humanities and social science research into the varieties of automobile experience in Australia, or elsewhere. Like the Cruising Country symposium, this collection of essays appears at an important time. Global concerns and contestations over climate change, resource depletion and the geopolitical status of automobile production, infrastructure and use make work on automobilities an increasingly relevant field of twenty-first-century research.

Over the course of the past decade, research focused on the role of the car in contemporary society and culture has intensified. Providing some attempt to encompass the disciplinary breadth of this research and the vast scope of the automobile’s impression in our lives, sociologists John Urry and Mimi Sheller spearheaded the concept of ‘a system of automobility’. Underpinning their notion of a ‘car system’ is an effort to grasp ‘how its awesome pattern

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of path dependency was established and exerted a particularly powerful and self-expanding pattern of domination across the globe'. 4 This dominance must also be considered in terms of an unevenly deployed technological force that is sometimes also violently exercised. Just as authors in this volume point to the role automobility has played in colonising Australian terrain, scholars also point to the social inequalities that car cultures have generated. 5

Although not necessarily always urban in its intent, automobilities research has tended to focus on the city, the suburban and the high-speed motorways that link these spaces. 6 Importantly, automobilities research, much of which has taken place in Europe, has been shaped by the work of cultural geographers and their attention to places and communities as well as spatial corridors, such as the autobahn and the M5. 7 In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to automobility as it occurs in less urbanised environments—clearly one distinctive area where Australian scholarship offers unique promise. 8

Our application of the term ‘automobilities’ is aimed at enfolding the car, the road and the human body into an integrated interdisciplinary field of research, in recognition of the fact that there are only intersections and overlaps and no clear boundaries between these elements. Our adoption of the term signals our recognition of the complexities of car cultures as a set of material and intangible forces, instruments and practices that shape our ways of being in the world. A central tenet of the automobilities paradigm is, after all, an acknowledgment that one need not drive or own a car to be deeply enmeshed in an automobilised world.

In 2005 we were in a position to observe the then steady, if thin, flow of humanities and social science research with analyses of motor vehicles at their centre. 9 Within Australia, cars and automobility had been examined primarily

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through the lenses of historical analysis, film studies and transport studies and through various genres of non-fiction travel writing. In many ways, the purpose of Cruising Country was to harness this distributed discourse within the context of the Australian experience. In her review of the Cruising Country symposium, Catherine Simpson noted the contemporary relevance of this approach, recognising that it ‘gave voice to a diverse range of vehicular-based knowledges, narratives and experiences which, up until now, have been given little critical attention at a scholarly level’. It is in keeping with the spirit of the 2005 event and its unfolding of a new map for research and writing that the papers assembled here provide a renewed set of perspectives on the theme of Australian automobility beyond our national urban heartlands.

While the ‘system of automobility’ has proven to be a useful framework for motivating interdisciplinary exchange on car-related research, it has not gone unchallenged. One of the shortcomings, according to cultural political economist Matthew Paterson, is ‘a tendency to fall back on a phenomenological account of automobility, to focus on automobility as a feature of individual daily lives’. Paterson is concerned that a phenomenology of automobility risks normalising an association between human freedoms and driving cars; tropes of liberty are easily naturalised through the iconicity of the basic capacities of cars and roads to carry riders into hitherto inaccessible places. Certainly, the trope of the automobile as a vehicle of individual liberty has been granted a lot


16 Paterson is certainly not alone in examining the link between the ideology of freedom and driving. For a particularly valuable contribution on this point, see Seiler, Cotton 2008, Republic of Drivers.
of mileage in popular media—from literature and cinema to broadcast, print and online advertising. The freedom trope is, moreover, dominant and instructive in the cultures of automobile modernity across multiple national contexts and in the production of tremendous consumer desire.

And yet, car trips are unquestionably key sites of contemporary social experience. In this sense, they offer temporary, if familiar, parameters for individual and social imagination. Car trips are sites for the production of individual and communal memory. They are ground, figure and eventually memory places of travel stories anchored in a range of kinaesthetic experiences: listening to radio, recorded music, or engine sounds, envisioning the world as motion and velocity through windows and mirrors, feeling and smelling the close physical presence of other bodies and objects, tasting and sharing meals and engaging in tight communication. Representations of these affective dynamics abound in the road-movie genre. In the Australian case, who can forget the tense containment of cultural, class and gender differences, the conflict, excessive behaviour and rough connectedness of the riders travelling a road to possibly nowhere in Philip Noyce’s 1977 debut Australian feature film, *Backroads*?

Without losing sight of the ideological drivers of the liberty trope, and acknowledging the importance of examining the political economies of automobilities, we believe that lived everyday experiences and affective representations of the cultural ‘systems’ of cars, roads and automobile travel remain fundamental grounds on which comparative research in this field should evolve. The 2002 volume *Car Cultures*, from Berg’s ‘Materializing Culture’ series, is pivotal in this respect insofar as it approaches and surveys the values of cars as key players in a variety of locally lived worlds. The authors collected in this text approach cars as aesthetic, utilitarian, social and cultural objects, sites and representations with meanings generated across intersecting regimes of value. Two essays in this collection describing the car cultures of Australian desert worlds introduce readers to some of the non-urban Australian automobilities context that *Cruising Country* elaborates.

Australian studies scholars are well positioned to offer the growing global automobilities dialogue a set of distinctive perspectives through a focus on non-urban geographies. Geographical and social tensions between Australia’s south-eastern seaboard population concentrations and the country’s sparsely dispersed ‘regional’ and ‘remote’ cities, towns, communities and pastoral

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18 Arguably, this trope persists as the greatest populist challenge to any contemporary movement to reduce automotive carbon emissions in the twenty-first century. This is one reason Paterson has joined a growing scholarly literature that interrogates this trope. See also Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*; Bohm, et al., *Against Automobility*.
19 Young, Diana and Stotz, Gertrude in Miller, *Car Cultures*. 
settlements dramatise the textures of the national network of tracks, roads, highways and freeways as culturally connective tissue. Journeying along these conduits allows explorations of unfolding histories beyond the normative narratives of exploration and expansion that customarily move inland from the city and the coast.

Until the age of spacious mega-motorways, travelling through virgin or cleared and fenced landscapes, passing through small towns and feeling every bump in the road were familiar experiences to anyone making land transit between Australian cities. Despite the loss of this experience in seaboard zones, thousands of Australians—many of them Aboriginal—regularly travel thousands of kilometres of unsealed, unlit roads, beyond the reach of regular mobile phone signals and far from emergency services. Fatalities are all too common and their statistics intersect dreadfully with those that describe proportionally high levels of alcohol consumption, poor road maintenance, and a rough trade in second-hand vehicles.

The history of Australia’s highways, back roads and bush tracks outlines, amongst other things, a map of cross-cultural engagements. Both the walking paths of Indigenous families and the exploratory intrusions of the colonial-settler era laid the groundwork for many of the earliest routes that are today the nation’s major transit corridors. The traces of the earliest colonial incursions have been reinscribed through the naming of roadways after such identities as Hume, Sturt, Stuart, Lasseter and Gregory. Perhaps it is in the less popularly known, but no less travelled, corridors of the Gunbarrel Highway and the Birdsville, Tanami and Oodnadatta ‘tracks’ that we sense an enormity of different passages and the diverse social identities that they convey.

As a growing number of roadside memorials are erected along our roads, scholars are beginning to revisit the consequences of automobility in terms of today and tomorrow as well as with regard to our cultural heritage. Automobility is, after all, a dynamic state of dangerous practices, forces and materials. The functional purpose of a car—to transport—is most vivid when operating in the extreme, hurtling down the road at high speed or lying still, stationary or broken. When a vehicle is not running, we become acutely aware of its status, not only as an icon of technological modernity, but also as a social symbol of mobility with a capacity to traverse worlds.

Many Australian readers of this volume will be familiar with Vic Hall’s black-and-white 1956 photograph of Western Arrarnta painter Albert Namatjira

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looking out ‘somewhat bemused’\textsuperscript{21} from the driver’s side window of his ‘flash’ new Dodge truck, the crucifix atop the Hermannsburg mission church in the background of the image poking up as if affixed to the back edge of the cabin roof, and the door panel displaying the painted inscription ‘THIS VEHICLE PRESENTED BY AMPOL. Albert Namatjira. ARTIST Alice Springs’.

Namatjira’s meteoric rise as a collectable landscape water-colourist in the 1950s, Aboriginal citizen of a modern nation-state and his personal demise as a broken man struggling with the costs of his modernity are public images that have entered a national narrative, carried by this image (amongst others).\textsuperscript{22} The artist’s old truck now rests, rusting into the ground, in the Hermannsburg Historic Precinct.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{The ruined remains of Albert Namatjira’s truck}
\end{figure}

Beneath the peeling narrative surface of this ruin are personal Arrarnta family memories of the vehicle as a space of intimate family journeys on country, comprising local history with still unimaginable ‘costs’. As Namatjira’s nephew Western Arrarnta singer-songwriter Warren H. Williams explained to the author \textsuperscript{21} Croft, Brenda 2001, ‘Albert’s gift’, [Catalogue essay], \textit{Indigenous Art}, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{22} Namatjira first exhibited his art in Melbourne in 1936. In 1945 he became the first Indigenous person to attain an entry in \textit{Who’s Who in Australia}. He was awarded the Queen’s Coronation Medal in 1953 and presented to Queen Elizabeth II the following year, garnering significant media attention. Three years later, he was granted Australian citizenship. The painter died 13 years later, ‘broken-spirited, crucified between two cultures’ (ibid.) after spending time in jail in 1958 for supplying alcohol to a relation charged with an intoxicated murder. Some of these events have recently been dramatised in the Big hArt theatre piece \textit{Namatjira}, bringing the painter’s biography back into the public limelight.
(LS), the old truck is a multi-layered place of family story, animated through memorial lyric: ‘this song is about the old truck at Hermannsburg. I used to wonder where it went and how far it went. My Dad used to tell me that I used to jump on that truck and cruise around. I miss my old man.’

Figure 2 Warren H. Williams’ written lyrics ‘Uncle’s Truck’

Image courtesy Warren H. Williams, 2010

The essays collected in this special edition move from geographies of non-urban automobility to lived experiences of journeying in these spaces; and from representations of automobile worlds and the regenerative energies of car culture to a sobering analysis of the underside of petrol-powered modernity.

Georgine Clarsen’s historical essay ‘The Flip Side: Women on the Redex Around Australia Reliability trials of the 1950s’ (Chapter 2) illuminates the relatively unknown gendered geography of non-urban car culture—that of Australian women rally drivers.\(^{24}\) Clarsen offers an important insight into the desire many women felt, against the backdrop of postwar adventure travelogues written largely by men, to experience those parts of Australia lying beyond the cities and towns of their upbringing. Stating that ‘she wanted to see the country’,\(^{25}\) trial driver Winifred Conway foreshadows the fantasy and now accepted norm of Australian retiree lifestyle evidenced in the ‘grey nomad’ phenomenon. In recognising the role that women played in the Redex trials, as well as early impulses of tourism, Clarsen forges a history of Australian adventure motoring that speaks to how gendered identities are negotiated through automobility. In doing so, she addresses how certain driving practices have been shaped by specific perceptions of masculinity (men tearing through the bush) and, recursively, how a prevailing rhetoric of gender wrought stereotypes of the performance of women.

Catherine Summerhayes’ screen-studies piece ‘“Going Back”: Journeys with David MacDougall’s *Link-Up Diary*’ (Chapter 3) and Anthony Redmond’s anthropological contribution ‘Now we got truck everywhere, we don’t travel anywhere’ (Chapter 4) offer analyses from the ‘insides’ of socially charged car journeys. From the perspectives of documentary film studies and anthropology, respectively, they explore the ways in which cars define social space and experience. We see how, confined inside cars, drivers’ and passengers’ bodies enter new relationships in space and time with each other and with culturally coded swathes of country. These papers illustrate, moreover, the various roles that cars have played as place-connecting containers of continuous and broken Aboriginal kinship.

Summerhayes’ conversational reading of Peter Read’s formative work with the Stolen Generations support organisation ‘Link-Up’ and David MacDougall’s filmic documentation of complex family reunion journeys illustrate how automobility can be a mode of research. When witnessed by culturally distant viewers, this movie provides a trope for travelling back along the original research roads represented on screen with historical hindsight, adding an additional layer of value to the terrain traversed.

Drawing our attention to Kimberley community journeys, Redmond demonstrates the ways in which landscapes of country seen from a travelling car are intimately felt by local cruisers as sensory encounters with transforming traditions, knowledge and embodied ways of knowing. Redmond’s chapter

\(^{24}\) But see other writing by Georgine Clarsen.

\(^{25}\) Georgine Clarsen, this volume.
also offers a redress to Paterson (and related critiques), in that it shows how phenomenological accounts of automobility are not necessarily situated in the identity of the individual and its celebrated freedoms. Redmond’s reading of Ngarinyin automobility is instead an account of the socially extended body. A bump in the road might be felt individually, but it also might be a shared encounter: a source for performing collective identity and a way of experiencing the land culturally.

Most Australian researchers working outside or between cities have experiences of long-distance automobility as a mode of research practice. Those of us who live in non-urban contexts are acutely familiar with the challenges and perils of long-distance road travel—car and road maintenance, speed, fatigue—and the tolls exacted on our communities by often unregulated car and vehicle culture. Our bodily engagements with motorcars take on a visceral quality when we are left to contemplate a vehicle broken into a scatter of fragments. Pam Lofts’ artwork ‘Country Love, Country Love, (day 1)’ (Chapter 5) presents a graphic narrative tangle of fibre, metal and organic remains to illuminate the not-uncommon social and physical impacts of travel on remote Australian desert roads. Lofts’ evocations of an imagined relationship arrested in the dust are part of a larger installation that draws the viewer into an encounter with the artefacts and images of other people’s lives. Through her own material assemblage of photograph and word fragments, Lofts cleverly reconstitutes the fragmentary nature of this scene and the raw mystery it conveys. The fact that the country will eventually reclaim this story is an implicit assertion of this piece.

Lofts is not alone in picturing the ‘breakdown’ of material things. Another Alice Springs-based artist, Deborah Clarke, encounters car ruins as part of a local natural landscape where abandoned wrecks rust into the land, producing visual continuities with desert palettes and textures (see our cover image). Lofts and Clarke reflect something of a broader artistic sensibility that we would suggest is a thoroughly contemporary understanding of Australian landscape—a country in which ‘behind the termite mounds we might find the rusting shells of abandoned cars’. Through their visual sensitivity to an archaeology of abandonment, such artists recognise that entropy and fecundity go hand in hand. By not isolating the modernity of the car from the fabric of an ancient ground, they present a vision of country that is dynamic, enveloping the organic and inorganic, entwining what is human made with the land. Whether grounded in observation, intuition or knowledge, these artistic renderings are in keeping with a cultural conceptualisation of country as connected and living.

26 In its original presentation, this work was constructed at a larger scale, inviting viewers to encounter the assemblage of images as one might an actual car.

so that even the ruins of the twentieth century might be seen as emergent forms. Such articulations of country owe much to Australian Aboriginal thought, and a growing cross-cultural respect and dialogue around what makes up the shared ground on which Australians stand.28

In her essay ‘Roadworks: Automobility and belonging in Aboriginal art’ (Chapter 6), archaeologist, artist and art historian Ursula Frederick takes up the notion of country as a basis for locating the ‘roadworks’ of four late-twentieth-century male Aboriginal artists in relation to other Indigenous art traditions of representing place, Law, cultural knowledge, history and identity. For Frederick, artworks depicting roads are important because they tell emplaced stories about mobility, organising both narrative and visual composition. In this analysis, works by WA artists Revel Cooper and Christopher Pease respectively communicate ‘the intermittence of movement of Noongar people through country’—that is, the possibility of mobility away from the historical circumstance of containment—and ‘an effort to consolidate Aboriginal presence, over time, in place’ in the context of dispossession. In a work that nominally heads towards the urban—Redfern in Sydney—a Lin Onus work becomes ‘an image of the road as a living entity and the driving experience as awakened encounter’. Through an extended commentary on Ian Abdulla’s ‘vast road network’ of paintings, drawings, stories and installations, Frederick argues that roadworks reveal ‘the art of automobility as country’.29

Turning to writing as a mode of representation, Katherine Bode examines the metaphor of driving and other automotive word-scapes created in Smoke Encrypted Whispers, a collection of poetry by multiple-award-winning writer Samuel Wagan Watson. While Watson’s poetry is immersed in a specific experiential and local knowledge informed by growing up ‘in Yagara country, country where there was always the smell of burnt rubber’,30 his words carry a resonance that extends far beyond the city of Brisbane. As Bode points out in ‘we’re not truckin’ around’ (Chapter 7), Watson ‘employs roads to symbolise colonialism and to explore its effects on Aboriginal people and culture’. His tales of automobility amplify the ambiguities of the car, the road, and driving as both a symbol of colonialism and a mode of resistance to it. Bode’s analysis embraces the movement and stillness in Watson’s automobility as metaphors for ‘the eruption of the past into the present’ and ‘claiming a home’, respectively.

29 See Frederick, this volume.
These sentiments of haunting and hope connect the reader with other places and other crossroads throughout Australia, and in doing so they re-imagine notions of the nation as ‘the dreaming that suddenly crawls onto the road’. In 2009 Aboriginal filmmaker Warwick Thornton brought the scourge of petrol sniffing in Central Australia to global attention with his Cannes Film Festival Camera d’Or-winning feature drama Samson and Delilah. In ‘Fuel, Cars and the Geography of Petrol Sniffing’, health anthropologist Maggie Brady (Chapter 8) examines the social costs of petrol-powered ‘remote’ Australian automobilised modernity. Brady’s ethno-historical review of petrol sniffing as a 60-year-old practice complements an emerging body of research that investigates the indirect relationship between automobility and health and safety issues. Brady cautions that despite the introduction of low-hydrocarbon aromatic ‘Opal’ fuel in some desert locations such as Alice Springs, ‘frequent Indigenous journeys and circular mobility between communities and towns within and across regions present constant opportunities for the practice of petrol sniffing to be reignited’.

In addition to the collection of essays in the present volume, the 2005 Cruising Country symposium seeded a number of other publications. These explore mobility and remote education in Maningrida, the role of trucks in mediating Kuninjku social worlds, the place of the car in contemporary culture and art, and the sonic archaeology of the Hume Highway. Creative arts collaborations and other public panels also emerged out of conversations and working partnerships elaborated at Cruising Country. As well as providing a platform for established scholars to share their research and contribute to a crucible of...
work about automobile in Australia, *Cruising Country* provided a forum for pre-doctoral students to present their work.\(^{40}\) Several emerging scholars examined histories and cultures of leisure travel in Australia, including twentieth-century overland adventures and the retiree lifestyle travel phenomenon referred to as ‘S.A.D. (See Australia and Die)’ and ‘grey nomadism’.\(^{41}\)

*Cruising Country* also encompassed a photographic exhibition at the ANU School of Art.\(^{42}\) A floor talk by Warlpiri ‘Bush Mechanic’ Francis Jupurrula Kelly and curator James Warden about the acquisition by the National Museum of Australia (NMA) of the infamous Bush Mechanics’ EJ ‘blue car’ Holden\(^{43}\) (Figure 3) accompanied a public program of film screenings and discussions held at the museum.\(^{44}\) This concentration of screen work highlighted the relatively long-established national cinematic social imaginary with non-urban automobile at its heart—a theme that dominated Australian automobile scholarship at the time.\(^{45}\)

Australian cinema has rendered the practices and experiences of cruising country most visible for broad audiences through the narratives of what Fiona Probyn-Rapsey calls ‘bitumen films’.\(^{46}\) Our road-based social dramas—from *Mad Max* (1979) and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) to *Japanese Story* (2003)—often travel out into the non-urban from the fringes of our concentrated coastal populations and cultures. Whilst there is a considerable literature identifying

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42 ‘*rust, dust… and other places*’: Deborah Clarke, Ted Deveson, Ursula Frederick, Katie Hayne, Pamela Lofts, Lisa Stefanoff, Bronwyn Wright.
43 *Bush Mechanics* (David Batty and Francis Jupurrula Kelly 1998, <http://www.rebelfilms.com.au/bush-mechanics.html>) first hit Australian television screens in 1999 on ABC TV, winning an Australian Film Institute Open Craft Award that year. It was followed by a four-part series of the same name in 2001 (Film Australia/Warlpiri Media Association/ABC TV). ‘The blue Holden used in Episode 1—Motorcar Jgutju (Good Motorcar)—belonged to Francis Kelly and was his personal favourite. Francis was adamant that the “blue car” be used in the series, and Episode 1 was written specifically with this in mind. As the episode shoot approached, the car had “gone bush”, and David and Francis spent quite a bit of time travelling around the desert looking for it. When the car was finally located it was in fairly dodgy mechanical condition, especially the gearbox. In true Bush Mechanics style, another gearbox was taken from an old wreck and fitted in the blue car, but it now only drove in third gear. When the car eventually returned to the community with the roof hacked off, it was greeted with cries of “wiyarrpa” or “poor thing!”’, followed by much discussion about how to reattach the roof. Even after all it had been through, it was still considered “motorcar ngutju” (*Bush Mechanics*, Film Australia press kit). See also Clarsen, ‘Still moving’.
45 Arguably, film and television studies continue to be a strong focus of Australian automobilities scholarship. Early examples include Morris, ‘White panic or Mad Max and the sublime’; Clarsen, ‘Still moving’.
the US road movie as a ‘liberty’ genre with its genesis in the cavalier spirit of the Hollywood western, Australian cinematic representations of the road have generated commentary equally attuned to the dystopian qualities of the road. The *Cruising Country* symposium also generated a paper exploring the contemporary gothic of Australian road movies.47

In the past decade, Indigenous filmmakers—in particular, those based in the Northern Territory—have created bitumen tales that provide post-colonial cultural and class commentary on the dramas of nihilistic masculine flights into oblivion.48 Others have used the road to document the journey to recover identity and family,49 or as a space for culturally identified comedy.50 The study of Australian screen culture continues to be a fruitful area of inquiry.51 As a rich site for the representation of non-urban automobility, film complements other sources and stories concerned with interrogating automobility’s role in narratives of national identity. This volume goes some way towards understanding the cultural capital of automobility in Australia, and its representation in poetry, visual art, film, print media and oral history. Other directions emerging in contemporary Australian automobility research include a greater attention to health and safety,52 tourism and recreation studies53 and the environmental consequences of automobile use.54

By no means a synthesis, this volume nevertheless marks a significant beginning. It contributes an important new voice to twenty-first-century scholarship of car cultures and automobility—one that explicitly engages with the non-urban experience. The scholars who have contributed to this edition of *Humanities Research* have begun the task of examining how non-urban automobility is lived and represented as a key dynamic of contemporary Australian social and cultural life. This research promises further travel. We look forward to seeing the horizon broadening as the journey continues.

48 See, for example, McGregor, *Cold Turkey*; Thornton, *Samson and Delilah*.
49 *Yellow Fella* (Ivan Sen, 2005).
50 *Stone Bros.* (Richard Frankland, 2009).
52 For example, Dixon, et al., ‘Car-centred diets, social distinction and cultural mobility’.
53 For example, Taylor, Andrew and Carson, Dean 2011, ‘Four-wheel-drive tourism in desert Australia: the charge of the “might” brigade?’, in Bruce Prideaux and Dean Carson (eds), *Drive Tourism: Trends and emerging markets*, Advances in Tourism, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, pp. 224–45.
Figure 3 Contact sheet of images taken by National Museum of Australia’s photographer, George Serras, in 2003 during the acquisition of Francis Jupurrurla Kelly’s EJ Holden station wagon for the museum’s exhibition Extremes: Survival in the Great Deserts of the Southern Hemisphere

Image courtesy George Serras and the National Museum of Australia
We would like to thank the contributing writers and reviewers for their work in bringing this volume together. Our deep appreciation to Karen May, Jan Borrie, the Humanities Research Board and staff at ANU E Press for shepherding this process over a long time. Special thanks goes to Deborah Clarke for allowing us to reproduce her artwork ‘After the Rain’, on the cover of the journal. As mentioned, this volume was seeded by a symposium, film-screening series and art exhibition held at The Australian National University and National Museum of Australia in May 2005. The event was sponsored by the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU, with additional funding assistance for speakers provided by the ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and Arts NT.

We would like to acknowledge, in addition to the many attendees who provided stimulating questions and conversation, the many individual speakers, artists, filmmakers and musicians who contributed to making *Cruising Country 2005* a successful program of events: Jon Altman, Diane Austin-Broos, Ros Bandt, Peter Bartlett, Jennifer Biddle, Deborah Clarke, Georgine Clarsen, Sharon Condren, Ann Curthoys, Ted Deveson, Bill Fogarty, Alison French, Glen Fuller, Laina Hall, Katie Hayne, Melinda Hinkson, Donnell Holloway, Matilda House, Graeme Issac, Vivien Johnson, Francis Jupurrula Kelly, Kiera Lindsey, Pamela Lofts, Jeremy Long, Susan Luckman, David MacDougall, Steven MacGregor, Charles Merewether, Hamish Morgan, Howard Morphy, David Nash, Frances Peters-Little, Nicolas Peterson, Noah Pleshet, Peter Read, Anthony Redmond, Catherine Summerhayes, James Warden, Katharina Willis, Bart Willoughby, Bronwyn Wright, and Louise Yabsley. We are grateful to the filmmakers Richard Frankland, David MacDougall, Graeme Issac, Steven MacGregor, Rachel Perkins, Frances Peters-Little and the artists Deborah Clarke, Ted Deveson, Ursula Frederick, Katie Hayne, Pamela Lofts, Lisa Stefanoff and Bronwyn Wright for exhibiting their work. James Henry Little and his band produced some great sounds during the symposium dinner. Thanks also go to staff at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, in particular Celia Bridgewater, Suzanne Groves, Howard Morphy and Anne-Marie O’Brien.
The Flip Side: Women on the Redex Around Australia Reliability trials of the 1950s

Georgine Clarsen

In August 1953 almost 200 cars set off from the Sydney Showgrounds in what popular motoring histories have called the biggest, toughest, most ambitious, demanding, ‘no-holds-barred’ race, which ‘caught the public imagination’ and ‘fuelled the nation with excitement’. It was the first Redex Around Australia Reliability Trial and organisers claimed it would be more testing than the famous Monte Carlo Rally through Europe and was the longest and most challenging motoring event since the New York-to-Paris race of 1908. That 1953 field circuited the eastern half of the continent, travelling north via Brisbane, Mt Isa and Darwin, passing through Alice Springs to Adelaide and returning to the start point in Sydney via Melbourne. Two Redex trials followed, in 1954 and 1955, and each was longer and more demanding than the one before. The last two trials circled the entire continent to include Western Australia, returning to Sydney via Perth and the Nullarbor Plain.

In an earlier article, I examined those Redex trials as a popular celebration of coming industrialisation and material prosperity, which articulated a range of possibilities for what it meant to be Australian in that postwar era. The trials offered a performative affirmation of the capacity of settler Australians to fully possess the continent through the power of modern technologies and provided a locus for popular debate about some of the meanings of Australian modernisation in those postwar years. This article focuses more closely on one element of that larger national conversation about how a modern automobile culture would find a particularly Australian expression by exploring women’s engagements with the Redex trials. Women’s unexpected and enthusiastic participation in the trials, their tremendous popularity with spectators, as well as their high profile


3 Countless newspaper reports of the trials can be found on the dates surrounding each trial: 30 August – 12 September 1953; 3–20 July 1954; and 21 August – 11 September 1955.

in media reports, provide new perspectives on the ways that automobiles were enmeshed in contestations over masculinity and femininity in Australia at that historical moment.

An around-Australia car race had been mooted since the 1930s, particularly to celebrate the sesquicentenary of British settlement in 1938, but it was not until 1953 that anything as ambitious was attempted. By then it was an idea whose time had arrived. As soon as the first trial was announced, the enthusiastic response from the public and the broad range of people who registered to enter the events caught even the organisers quite by surprise. That intense national fervour for around-Australia races was brief. By the end of the third trial, public interest in the events was evaporating and subsequent around-Australia reliability trials, such as the Ampol Trial of 1956 or the Mobilgas trials that followed, attracted much less national attention, barely registering beyond a circle of dedicated motorsport enthusiasts.

For those three years, however, the Redex trials attracted extensive press coverage, as a burgeoning media network operating across multiple modes vied to bring stories and images to audiences across the country. Daily newspapers, motoring magazines, cinema newsreels, women’s magazines such as the Australian Women’s Weekly, popular publications such as Pix and Australasian Post, as well as near-real-time reporting via hundreds of radio stations across Australia, reported in minute detail on the convoys of cars moving around the continent. Some media outlets, such as Sydney’s Daily Telegraph, Brisbane’s The Courier-Mail and the Women’s Weekly, entered their own crews, while others followed the field in airplanes. Ken Hall of the Australian newsreel company Cinesound pre-sold film footage to trial entrants to help finance the documentaries he later distributed to national and international audiences. Media images showed battered cars covered in advertising slogans as dots on a vast landscape. Film footage featured cars careering around corners on two wheels, with funnels of dust suspended behind them, or surging across swollen creek beds, spectators standing by ready to push them through if they stalled. Photographs recorded wrecked and burnt-out cars strewn along desert tracks and exhausted crews in greasy overalls collapsed beside their vehicles in country showgrounds trying to snatch a few hours’ sleep. Magazine covers featured competitors being hauled out of axle-

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5 Hatfield, William 1937, Australia Through the Windscreen, Angus & Robertson, Sydney; Argus, 11 July 1936, p. 25.
8 The National Film and Sound Archive holds extensive newsreel footage of the Redex trials and has produced a compilation DVD: Redex Round Australia Car Trials (2004), # 424021.
deep mud by tractors or human muscle power, and there were countless images of the hundreds of thousands of spectators around the continent who lined roads all along the route to cheer the contestants on their way.\textsuperscript{9}

Ostensibly, the Redex trials were about pitting family cars that were substantially the same as those available in dealers’ showrooms against what were stated to be the worst road conditions in the world. Trial organisers, automobile manufacturers and their agents, as well as a plethora of spare-parts distributors, billed the trials as part of a rational project of technological advancement, a necessary element in producing tough cars especially suited to the harsh Australian conditions. Motoring associations, such as the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA) of New South Wales and the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria, used the trials to lobby for a greater proportion of petrol taxes to be allocated to road building.\textsuperscript{10} Newspaper editorials and petrol companies employed them to announce the arrival of the era of automobile tourism.\textsuperscript{11} The exuberance that surrounded the events, however, suggests that much more than rational considerations was at stake in these massed circuits of the continent.

Organisers had little experience in administering an event of that size and were forced to invent much of it as they went along. They worked hard to hold together the disparate elements of the contest and tried to keep a lid on some of the excesses.\textsuperscript{12} One of their main problems was to strike a balance between the interests of two very different types of competitors. On the one hand were private motorists who had entered in the ‘spirit of adventure’ and were driving their precious family car on a strictly limited budget. They wanted to return with their cars undamaged. On the other hand were manufacturers’ teams with major commercial interests at stake, who were determined to win at any cost. Unlike private entrants who were forced to take their chances with finding fuel and mechanical help along the way, manufacturers’ sponsored cars each year were given more technical support and detailed information about the route by dealerships around the continent. ‘Serious’ trial drivers complained that the ‘inexperienced amateurs’ turned the events into a mere ‘tourist trip’.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to catering to the diversity of entrants, officials also needed to negotiate the conflicting demands of mounting a wild, exuberant event that would capture public attention—but one in which nobody would be killed, where the future of motoring in Australia would attract favourable press, and


\textsuperscript{11} Daily Telegraph, 14 September 1953, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{12} ‘Redex review’, Australian Motor Sports, August 1954, pp. 76–81.

\textsuperscript{13} Barrier Miner [Broken Hill], 14 July 1954, p. 3.
where the traffic police would not close them down. Organisers optimistically declared that everyone who entered had a good chance of winning, or at least picking up some valuable prizes to help pay for the trip, but the tensions of the events were not easily resolved.

In hopeful words before the first trial, organisers outlined their conception:

A reliability trial is not a race and it is not an endurance test. The cars are such as can be bought at any showroom dealer. It is a sporting event in which the reliability of each competitor’s car is the only consideration. Its point is in showing which car is more suitable for handling common road conditions than another.

Each section must be done in a set time, and fast driving is no guarantee that a competitor will do a section within a set time. Generally speaking, the earlier a competitor falls out the faster he has been speeding. Drivers must obey traffic regulations.

Much closer to the truth, however, was motoring writer Evan Green’s description. In his 1990 novel, *Dust and Glory*, he imagined what might have happened had there been a fourth Redex Trial in 1956. His hero, the much-loved larrikin rally driver ‘Gelignite’ Jack Murray, explains the event to an American rally driver, apparently used to a much tamer form of competition:

‘What is a reliability trial?’

‘A reliability trial is a mad bash over the roughest road you can find.’

‘A mad bash?’

‘Yeah. Flat out like a lizard down a drainpipe...It is a mad race. A wild event for the incurably insane.’

That description, rather than the official view, is largely how the events were represented at the time and how they continue to be remembered today. It was precisely the barely controlled anarchy of the original events that has resulted in the failure of successive re-enactments, regularly organised by car club enthusiasts, to reproduce the excitement of the original trials. In 1975, for example, two ‘surviving veterans’ of the first trial tried to revive the glory, but the motoring press of the day deemed it an abject failure:

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14 ‘How to win the Redex Trial’, *Wheels*, August 1955, pp. 6–9, 70; ‘Redex trials’, *Open Road*, 1 June 1955, p. 7.
15 *Australian Motorist*, August 1953, p. 16.
Australia has changed...Instead of re-creating a rousing saga of tough, skilled men and hard-driven machines they merely made a sentimental journey backwards in time...Falling asleep from boredom was the major hazard...and the 67 km/h required by the Redex between Alice and Adelaide is now almost too slow for old ladies...Their Peugeots returned undamaged; no part had been replaced. The drivers wore disappointment on their faces instead of battle-scars on their bodies.17

As such tame re-enactments suggest, what made the Redex trials so briefly successful as a national event that spoke to a mass audience was not just the fact of circling Australia in an automobile—that had first been accomplished in the mid-1920s and many times since—but rather the broader historical context that surrounded the events.18 It was the Redex trials' saturation in a particular historical moment that made them so memorable and loaded with significance for postwar Australians. These were not simply motorsports events, but were much more besides, and many of the themes that emerged in the press reports were only tangentially related to the challenge of racing a convoy of cars around Australia, three years in a row. This article argues that the Redex trials provided a vehicle for the expression of a disparate bundle of hopes and aspirations in those postwar years. As a touchstone for the mood of the nation, they offer a productive framework for a popular history of Australia in the mid-1950s that goes beyond the narrow concerns of standard motorsports histories.

Among the key non-motoring themes woven throughout media reports of the trials were images of a coming national life in which material prosperity promised to efface memories of the scarcities and restrictions that had characterised the two previous decades of economic depression and war. The trials unfolded as a coming-of-age story, a narrative of postwar optimism and abundance, in which Australia was finally to inherit its own (mini) industrial revolution. After 20 years of stagnation in car ownership, car registrations had returned to the rate of increase experienced in the boom years of the 1920s (Figure 1).19 Notably, by 1953 the first Australian production cars were beginning to enter the market in numbers and the trials demonstrated that they compared favourably with imported American, European and British cars.20 Images of ‘Australia’s own’ Holden sedans careering along outback tracks generated enormous interest and

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national pride. They indicated a new industrial maturity for the nation, marking the moment when Australia climbed off the sheep’s back and onto the grey motor of those early Holdens, thereby joining the rest of the industrialised world.

![Figure 1 Motorcars and station wagons registered in Australia per 10 of population, 1921–55](image)

The pleasure taken in the trials was not only about rising car ownership or the successful production of Australian automobiles, but was more broadly represented as a celebration of growing material abundance and conspicuous consumption. The events constituted a moment of excess in which, for the first time, Australians could enjoy watching (other people’s) cars being destroyed. Automobiles no longer needed to be carefully hoarded and preserved, as they had been throughout the Depression and war, but in an expression of security about the solidity of postwar prosperity, they could be cheerfully and publicly wasted. Dramatic photographs in the print media and newsreel footage gleefully highlighted the destruction of and damage to competitors’ cars.21 In the jocular spirit that characterised the reporting, teams at the rear of the field declared

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they did not need any official maps for navigation—all they needed to do was to follow the trail of hub caps, shattered windscreen glass, dropped luggage and the litter of wrecked cars along the route.22

Though the trials were billed as a celebration of coming Australian modernity, much of the imagery paradoxically promoted the kind of rough-and-ready masculinity that characterised the late nineteenth-century ‘bush legend’, as it was soon to be articulated by Russell Ward.23 The dominant narratives of the Redex trials worked towards defining Australian motoring as a hyper-masculine enterprise in which physical endurance, strength and a bush mechanic’s prowess were highly valued qualities. Far from projecting the smooth, sophisticated modernity that more often characterised European, British or American motoring in the postwar era, the Redex trials generated images of pre-modern masculinity.24 For three years, the graphic illustration used to represent the trials in the official Redex publicity showed a muscular, whip-cracking Roman gladiator astride a stripped-back automobile chassis.25 The persistence of such a pre-industrial, anti-modern image of modern Australian masculinity suggested some of the tensions and contradictions that accompanied the ‘civilising’ promises of technological developments, which threatened to erode traditional notions of the bodily foundations of male privilege.26 One of the best-loved and remembered characters of the Redex trials, for example, was ‘Gelignite’ Jack Murray, who was famous for detonating sticks of gelignite to confuse other competitors and annoy the police. Gelignite Jack was described as a ‘[g]leeful, prolific-swearing, teetotal, non-smoking, practical-joking, former amateur wrestling champion, pioneer water-skier and Bondi garage and taxi owner’.27

Such representations of jocular and combative masculine resourcefulness confirm the arguments about masculinity and automobile culture put forward by a number of automobile historians. Clay McShane’s and David Gartman’s observations of early automobile consumption in the United States, Richard Strauss’s narratives of masculine car culture in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as Paul Gilroy’s analysis of African-American men’s investments in conspicuous automobile consumption in recent decades, each suggest, in very different historical contexts, that the hyper-masculinist elements of car culture have offered men a vehicle of compensation for the perceived loss in status that

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accompanied changes in their working lives during the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{28} As new kinds of social organisation, dominated by corporate and industrial models of production—and in the African-American case by the added burden of systemic racism—came into play during the twentieth century, men turned to cars to recuperate their sense of lost masculinity.\textsuperscript{29} These scholars of automobility argue that cars have appealed to men's yearnings for physical hardship and personal autonomy and that the competitive elements of car culture offered a new field through which men could salvage notions of masculinity that rewarded brute force and physical domination. Cars, the argument goes, have served to offer men an emotional substitute for the perceived loss of status they attributed to modern economic and social change.

While those analyses tend to oversimplify the variety of masculinities that have characterised the twentieth century, as well as the plethora of car cultures through which those masculinities have been expressed, they do go some way towards setting the scene for women's secondary status as consumers of automobiles during much of the twentieth century. Since men quickly claimed automobiles as a prized masculine technology and presumed to define the terms under which cars would be adopted into social life, women motorists were obliged to exert a great deal of effort in order to be accepted as competent drivers, far beyond men of their race and class—their fathers, brothers, husbands and male friends. The very term ‘woman driver’ announced that they were supplementary to the main game. Time and again male judgment confidently declared that while men ‘naturally’ took to cars, the most that could be expected from women was a timid and uninformed response to machinery, rather than a relationship of mastery or ease with it. Wherever they turned, aspiring women motorists found transparently partisan definitions of automobile technology that worked to place them on the margins, even as they were invited to become consumers of it.\textsuperscript{30}

During the 1950s and 1960s, Australian magazines and newspaper columns devoted to motoring emerged as sites for the elaboration of highly gendered meanings for automobiles. Targeted to a male audience, they worked to define cars as a quintessentially masculine technology and routinely denigrated women motorists, often through humorous stories or cartoons syndicated from the United States or Britain. There were numerous variations of ‘wife at the wheel’ jokes, in which women were depicted as reversing into fire hydrants, incapable of parking in the garage without running through the back wall, or using the


\textsuperscript{29} For a more recent articulation of the masculinity of automobile technology, see Seiler, Cotton 2008, \textit{A Republic of Drivers: A cultural history of automobility in America}, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

choke lever as a hook on which to hang their handbags. Young women drivers were frequently lampooned as ditzy, unable to concentrate on the task at hand or give a clear hand signal, and mothers-in-law were routinely portrayed as nagging back-seat drivers. The effect for aspiring women drivers was that even though the mechanical power of automobile technology promised to minimise the importance of organic bodily differences, and even though women were welcomed as consumers by automobile manufacturers, they were conscious of simultaneously being defined as trespassers on masculine territory. Women were obliged to do extra work to become motorists, beyond that required of male motorists. More than simply learning how to handle their cars, as men were invited to, women in those decades were also forced to compose their words and actions with an eye to the largely unwelcoming environment they encountered behind the steering wheel, under the bonnet and on the road.

It had not always been so, however, and the volume of popular ridicule towards women drivers that emerged in the 1950s was particular to that postwar era. During the 1910s and 1920s, when automobile ownership was largely confined to a privileged few, gendered disparagement of female drivers was more muted and some early women drivers even attracted public admiration. Until they were barred from competing against men, some women were respected and successful competitors on automobile and motorcycle racing circuits. In the post–World War I years, female motorists were frequently represented as quintessentially modern and adroit drivers and it was quite the thing for spirited young women to repair their own cars. Some women even established motor garages and were able to represent their businesses as the pinnacle of admirable female modernity. Only a decade before the Redex trials, during World War II, Australian magazines and newspapers published approving stories about women who were serving their country as motor transport drivers and mechanics in auxiliary military units. Having apparently forgotten the previous generation of women who worked in transport units during World War I and the female motor garages of the 1920s, press articles during World War II represented women’s ‘surprising’ mechanical facility and their skill in driving even the heaviest trucks over long distances as novel developments. When

31 For some examples, see Wheels, June 1953, p. 64; September 1953, p. 342; November 1953, p. 506; March 1955, p. 64; April 1956, p. 50; June 1956, p. 68.
32 Davison, Graeme 2003, Car Wars: How the car won our hearts and conquered our cities, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, Ch. 2.
35 For some press reports, see: ‘Women learn to become mechanics’, Argus, 25 November 1939, p. 12; Australian Women’s Weekly, 1 June 1940, 5 October 1940, p. 31, 10 May 1941; Sydney Morning Herald, 31 July 1940; The Age, 18 February 1942 and 6 June 1942; Melbourne Herald, 6 February 1942; Melbourne Sun, 7 February 1942 and 18 February 1942; Australasian, 14 February 1942 and 28 February 1942.
the war ended and motorcar ownership became more widespread, however, that public recognition of women’s mechanical competence and driving skill was rapidly withdrawn. Stories of incompetent women motorists soon came to dominate public forums in the 1950s.

In spite of the marginalisation of women in the burgeoning postwar Australian car culture, the number of female drivers grew rapidly during the 1950s and women found ways to represent their activities in positive terms.36 Ex-service drivers were particularly adept in developing strategies to resist their marginalisation. Women military transport drivers I interviewed during the 1990s remembered the public denigration of women drivers 40 years earlier, but privately continued to take immense pleasure in their mechanical capabilities and their wartime experiences of expanded mobility.37 Almost all of the women I interviewed were unable to find paid work that utilised their driving and mechanical skills when the war ended, though some remembered dearly wanting to do so. They recalled resenting the public ridicule of women drivers and retained their sense of competence by maintaining contacts with former members of their transport units. Most remained active drivers throughout their lives, sometimes servicing and maintaining their own cars into their old age. Ex-service drivers, such as Gwen Bagust of the 1954 trial and Enid Nunn and Nan Broughton of the Women’s Weekly team, had driven ambulances with the Australian Women’s Army Service. They were prominent among the female Redex entrants and were able to draw on their authority and experience as members of the transport units to articulate a legitimate place for themselves in the field.

Women who entered the Redex trials did so on terms that were different from men. Conscious of being in the public eye, they were forced to negotiate a fine line between definitions of the trials that marginalised their presence and yet not allow their own pleasure in the event to be spoilt. They had to secure the goodwill and cooperation of male officials and other competitors who were inclined to presume—even loudly declare—that women were ‘out of place’ on the trials and liable to find themselves in danger or constitute a hazard to others. They needed to defray their expenses by finding sponsors within a manufacturing sector that was sceptical of their talents and publicity value, and they had to avoid attracting the ire of the serious and aggressive competitors, who were impatient of any ‘amateurs’ who might slow them down. The result

36 The proportion of women drivers in Victoria was less than one in 10 during the 1950s, but by the end of the 1960s, more women than men were applying for driver’s licences in that State, though far fewer women than men were registered car owners. Davison, Car Wars, pp. 28–30.
for women competitors was that they had to devise ways to put forward their
own alternative definitions of and investments in the events. Some developed
public styles that demonstrated a fine eye for the ironies of their positioning as
less-than-welcome citizens of the road.

Some women entered as co-drivers or navigators in partnership with their
husbands. They were generally assumed to be supplementary to the main game
and, for the most part, it was only the women’s press that wrote about them at
any length. The *Women’s Weekly* noted:

Husband and wife team, driving a Singer Nine, are Bill and Norma
Williamson of Gerringong, NSW. Their car carries the Redex number 27
which tallies with the age of dark-haired, dark-eyed Norma Williamson,
the mother of Allan (8½), Bruce (7) and Christine (2½). In 1953 and
1954 Mrs Williamson stayed at home with the children and listened to
her husband’s progress. This year she is taking her turn at the wheel and
doing most of the navigating and food organizing.38

A few all-women teams entered the trials—for example, Stella Hall of Tamworth
and her daughter, Wendy Matthews, entered the 1955 trial, declaring they
intended to do all the mechanical work themselves.39 Such teams presented a
challenge to the prevailing ethic of larrikin masculinity and the representation
of women as adjuncts to their male partners. The only all-women team who
entered the first Redex trial in 1953—Lois and Nola Rowe and Diana Brunton—
represented their preparedness and motives for joining the event with more
than a touch of humour for their marginal positioning. Again, it was only the
*Women’s Weekly* that covered their inclusion in any detail:

The only all-woman team is determined to finish the course for the
sake of the good name of women drivers everywhere. They are Sydney
girls Lois and Nola Rowe, who are sisters, and Diana Brunton. They
will drive a Sunbeam Talbot. Lois Rowe said that from two mechanics
who work at the garage where their car is being overhauled they have
learned to change tyres, put in new condensers and coils and clean the
carburettor. ‘If anything else goes wrong we’ll just have to cross our
fingers and hope for the best’, she added. ‘Nola is going to navigate for
us. She hasn’t had any navigating experience, but is just naturally good
at finding the way’.40

38 *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 24 August 1955, p. 35.
40 *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 26 August 1953, pp. 27–9, and 16 September 1953, p. 20. The National Film
and Sound Archive holds their home movie footage of the 1953 trial: # 347419.
Two members of the 1954 Women’s Weekly crew, Enid Nunn and Nan Broughton, had been motor transport drivers during World War II. Their navigator and Women’s Weekly journalist, Helen Frizell, a signaller during the war, called them ‘expert drivers’ and detailed their careful preparations with admiration—the clothes and food they had chosen, the preparation of their Humber Super Snipe, the windscreen washers, special map pockets and aircraft safety belts they had
fitted, the de-ditching equipment, chains and spare parts they carried. The women christened their car ‘Narda’, the heroine in the *Mandrake* comic strip published by the *Women’s Weekly*, for her survival skills against all odds. They were the only all-women team to finish in the 1954 trial. A *Women’s Weekly* team again entered in the 1955 trial, that time driving the latest turquoise and white Holden business sedan, but like many competitors were forced to withdraw before the Port Hedland checkpoint because of the rough terrain and punishing schedule.

The *Women’s Weekly* covered the trials in great detail and featured the crew and their cars on the front cover of the magazine before the trials began. They were mobbed by women all around the country, who waved their ‘Redex Cover Girl’ copies of the *Women’s Weekly* and requested autographs. Fans threw fruit into the women’s cars, garlanded them with flowers, sent encouraging telegrams, and lined the route, shouting, ‘Come on Narda’. A male crew that followed them in the trial named their car ‘Mandrake’ and another became known as ‘Lothar’. Like other women competitors, the *Women’s Weekly* team announced they were content just to finish with their car intact. They were careful to maintain the goodwill of the rest of the field and keep out of the way of the serious contenders:

The attitude of men towards our all-women crew was excellent, considering there were plenty of opportunities on the trial for ordinary courtesy to wear thin as the weary miles piled up behind competitors and the strain became greater...We deliberately kept to a slower pace than the men so we usually did most of the pulling aside to let them pass. Nor did we ask for any help along the road, but if [it] was offered we appreciated that.

As with the Rowe sisters in the first trial, in Helen Frizell’s stories, the practicalities of what the *Women’s Weekly* crew should wear, where they would sleep, and how often they might get to bathe played an important part. The reports she filed stood in marked contrast with the bush-bashing ethic more common in the general press and men’s magazines, depicting women as engaged in a rather different enterprise. Frizell’s stories focused less on automobiles as modern tools for ‘conquering’ hostile terrain, reporting instead on the benefits they could bring to life in the ‘outback’. She wrote of the hospitality they met in the bush, the lonely life of outback women, beautiful wildflowers, iconic landscapes and ‘shy Aboriginal children and their mothers [who] hung around the whole time we were there, gazing at the hive of activity caused by the trial drivers’. The sources of Frizell’s imagery stood in marked contrast with the

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42 Ibid., 14 September 1955, pp. 20–1.
43 Ibid., 28 July 1954, p. 20.
inspiration for male reporters’ accounts. Of the conditions they found in the Top End, she wrote, ‘Yes it was the dust we had heard so much about—the colour of cocoa finely sifted as if by a housewife making a giant chocolate cake...[it] soon turned us all into the colour of Red Indians’.45 The following year, she described the mud they encountered as ‘about the consistency of chocolate blanc-mange’.46 Frizell’s imagery points to a 1950s, feminine version of the persistent urban Australian fascination with the ‘back of beyond’ of European settlement—the ‘bush’, the ‘outback’ or the ‘never-never’.47 She articulated a homely and domesticated orientation to those places that few urban women were able to visit.

It seems that some of the female entrants best situated to resist their marginalisation within the masculine climate of the trials, and even turn it into a publicly applauded stance, were older women of independent means who remembered a more honourable past for women motorists. These ‘Grannies of the trials’ were taken up as popular heroines and generated tremendous public attention—and not only in the women’s press. Sixty-five-year-old Mrs Charlotte Hayes of Glebe, who told the press she was ‘as strong as a horse’, captured considerable media coverage when she entered her Volkswagen in the 1955 trial, with her son and his friend as her navigator and mechanic.48 It was Mrs Winifred Conway of Rose Bay, who entered the 1953 and 1954 trials in her modest Austin A40, however, who emerged as one of the best-loved entrants. The press dubbed her ‘the most popular contestant’ and the ‘Granny who stole the limelight’.49 The progress of Conway, a widow who gained her licence in 1913, around the continent attracted front-page coverage in daily newspapers and she soon demonstrated a fine talent for supplying reporters with an irresistible quote. Her Redex career did not start auspiciously, however, and she declared that her small convertible touring car, which had done 24 000 miles (19 000 km) before the event started, was ‘probably the most unwanted car in the trial’.50

Winifred Conway chose a former army driver, Margaret Bruce, as co-driver and navigator for the 1953 trial and advertised to find a male driver, Denys Tanner, to accompany them.51 She declared she had been forced to make about 100 phone calls before she managed to secure some minor sponsors to support her entry. Eventually, she found backing from a manufacturer of hoods, a brake

48 Australian Women’s Weekly, 24 August 1955, p. 35.
50 Australian Women’s Weekly, 23 September 1953, p. 20.
51 Daily Telegraph, 13 September 1953, p. 5.
company, a respray firm which offered to repair any damage to the paintwork, and the Jubilee tobacco company, which painted ‘Ready rubbed, extra fine cut’ behind the driver’s door.

![Winifred Conway in the 1954 trial](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Figure 3 Winifred Conway in the 1954 trial**

Courtesy of the Ford Discovery Centre, Geelong, Victoria

When Conway approached the Sydney Austin dealer Larke Hoskins to officially sponsor her in the first trial, they spurned her request. ‘They told me they had already sponsored two teams, that the roads were too rough for a woman of my age and that I was mad’, she told the *Woman’s Weekly*. So angry was Conway about her rejection by the Austin dealer that for the early part of the trial, she declared she was driving a Monarch from Germany—an entirely fictitious make. Other male commentators loudly endorsed the dealer’s views. Experienced rally driver Lex Davison and the prominent journalist and author Douglas Lockwood similarly declared that the trials were no place for grandmothers like Winifred Conway. She responded by declaring that men and women would be on the same footing throughout the trials and that ‘an experienced woman driver is just as good as a man’.

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53 *The Courier-Mail*, 17 May 1954, p. 3.
What secured Winifred Conway’s popularity was not just her motoring confidence, but also her wit and vitality, her impeccable grooming, her sweet demeanour, and her apparent disregard for the combative ethic that characterised the trials. She always drove in hat and white gloves and delighted her fans when she turned up at the finish line with a fresh blue rinse. Conway first attracted national attention in 1953 when, arriving late at the Rockhampton checkpoint due to rough roads and bad weather, she told the press that she did not mind, as she was only competing for the prize of the automatic pop-up toaster offered to the best Austin entrant. She wanted to see the country, talk to strangers, have picnics, take photos and enjoy herself, she frequently announced.54 It was a holiday, she told the press, ‘the best rest I’ve ever had—no one to look after’. Conway kissed as many spectators as she could, signed hundreds of autographs and displayed a blithe indifference for the mechanical gravity of the event: ‘I am not worried about the car, it will look after itself’, she said. ‘My motto is never touch the engine. You always strike trouble when you start lifting the bonnet.’55

By the end of the 1953 trial, the Austin dealers had reversed their thinking entirely. Even though one of their sponsored entrants finished in the top 10 and Conway somewhere in the middle of the field, it was Mrs Conway—the ‘Galloping Grandma’—who had garnered by far the greatest publicity for their product. Larke Hoskins placed full-page advertisements in the daily press to promote her successful return.56 They hosted receptions for her, which attracted crowds of admiring women, and displayed her battered car in their William Street showroom. With great ceremony, they presented ‘Nannie Conway’ with the newest model Austin A40 convertible sedan. Conway won even more fans when she selected—contrary to her grandchildren’s advice—a racy convertible coupe instead of the staid sedan. It was the car of choice for film stars and millionaires, she declared.57 Though she had not been the best Austin entrant, at the end of the trial, Conway was presented with three automatic toasters—donated by the Woman’s Weekly, the Redex organisers and Larke Hoskins—as well as a gold watch set with sapphires and rubies.

Dame Enid Lyons, the retired politician who had become a popular newspaper columnist, was one of Winifred Conway’s prominent admirers. Lyons declared her indignation at the ‘withering’ male comments about women such as Granny Conway ‘cluttering up the contest’ and declared that her ‘heart had been with the grannies from the start’.58 Conway became a favoured figure in advertisements for a variety of products. A paint company used images of her on a ladder painting her house (‘It’s lots easier to paint a room a day than drive

54 Sunday Telegraph, 6 September 1953, p. 5; Australian Women’s Weekly, 16 September 1953, p. 23.
57 Australian Women’s Weekly, 23 September 1953, pp. 20–1.
500 miles a day’), a sewing machine company featured images of her beside her car with their portable machine (‘She sews as she goes with a Singer’) and department stores around the country put her car in their display windows and hired her to give lectures to other women on her motoring experiences. Conway was inundated with fan mail from readers from all over Australia, who simply addressed their letters to ‘Granny Conway’ and ‘the Super Woman’.

Figure 4 Winifred Conway’s triumph in the 1953 trial

Photograph courtesy of Hal Moloney

Such triumphs claimed by women entrants were, of course, far from the pre-industrial, gladiatorial style displayed by the male heroes of the trials—be they winners, such as Jack Murray, or magnificent losers such as Ken Wilson, whose numerous accidents and endless mechanical disasters attracted a great deal of press attention. Reports of women entrants articulated distinctly different concerns and pleasures, placing them on another kind of trial altogether. Edith Nielson, a widow from Brighton-le-Sands in Sydney and a keen amateur photographer, for example, stated that she entered the 1954 trial with the aim of making a colour film of her experience. She hoped to have the film screened in Canada, where a relative owned a chain of cinemas, as ‘unofficial publicity for

60 Daily Telegraph, 29 August 1953; Wheels, October 1953, pp. 378–90.
Australia’. Her driving partner, the ex-servicewoman Gwen Bagust, said, ‘I’m going on this trip because it’s a wonderful chance to see parts of Australia that most tourists miss’. Such women were engaged in a representational project that spoke to alternative modernist yearnings. Rather than the romance of a physically arduous and testing past, they articulated a vision of the future in which new technologies could make it easier for women to take part in projects and pleasures that had previously been denied to them.

Of all the female entrants, it was Winifred Conway who most forcefully expressed what the trials meant to her:

For years I have wanted to drive to Darwin and through Central Australia, but I was too afraid to go alone. I realised I would be perfectly safe on this trial, as the other drivers would provide a wonderful escort. As I mainly wished to see the country, take photos and enjoy myself, I have not worried about losing points. We have had picnics on the way.

At the same time as expressing her pleasure in the event, Winifred Conway adopted a critical stance towards the competitive ethic that dominated the trials. Implicit in her statements to the press was a particular view of the value of automobiles. She articulated a definition of the meaning of cars—what they were useful for, how they might be brought into social life, and the proper relationships that should obtain between them and their users—that was rarely expressed in the context of the Redex trials. It was a view that did not always endear her to male competitors. She spoke out plainly against what she perceived as the irrational approach to automobile technology adopted by male competitors and stoutly justified her cautious driving style. Unlike the rest of the field, she claimed, she drove at no more than 60 m/h (95 km/h) and her car responded well to that treatment. It ‘went like a camel’ through the desert, she declared, was economical on petrol, used very little oil or water, and arrived at the finish line without a scratch. Her assessment of the shortcomings of other drivers was blunt and to the point: ‘Drivers who skidded off the road, overturned their cars, or otherwise came to grief, did so mostly because of the high speeds at which they were travelling.’

Conway loved to repeat that she never ‘meddled’ with her engine, though she asserted that if anything went wrong she was able to identify the problem. She was scornful of the many hours that male competitors spent in garages ‘tinkering’ with their cars to prepare them for the next section. Instead of driving at high speeds so that they could get to the next checkpoint early to fix their cars, she declared, it would have been wiser for them to drive more carefully so those

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61 Undated newspaper clipping in Hugh King’s collection.
63 *Sydney Truth*, 20 September 1953, p. 45.
repairs were not needed in the first place. ‘Men should have more confidence in the engineers who build cars’, she said. ‘Leave it to the makers, they know what they are doing—that’s my maxim.’ Winifred Conway’s vision of automobile technology, which she characterised as properly composed of non-expert male and female users and expert male professionals, anticipated the car culture that gradually emerged throughout the twentieth century. As the technology became more reliable and automatically controlled, leaving fewer functions in the hands of drivers, ‘tinkering’ was increasingly discouraged, so that car owners came to risk losing their warranty if someone other than an authorised dealer serviced their car.

For Conway, a single middle-class woman of independent means, the prospect of mass automobile technology that was underpinned by professional male expertise had the potential to efface some of the limitations imposed on her. Car consumption promised to reduce the salience of sexual differences. It afforded personal security in public spaces and offered hope of addressing the unequal ways of moving that had acted as a constraint on her independent travel in the past. Conway’s statements to the press envisioned her car as something of a mobile living room in which she was able to safely journey from the privacy of her house into the daunting spaces of the Australian outback. A semi-private space in a public domain, her car allowed her to be at home on the road and she revelled in the new forms of sociality it enabled. Her forthright pronouncements on automobiles as a site of contestation between men and women—taken up and amplified by the press—struck a chord within national debates. Conway was widely admired for the deft touch she displayed as she staked her claim in that struggle, where both the meanings of automobiles and the notions of gender were at stake.

By placing women’s expression of their investments and interests in the Redex trials at the centre, rather than accepting standard masculine definitions of the events as the norm, this article locates both gender and automobiles as social categories in relation. It explores the ways that the meanings of both automobiles and gender are specific to their moment, always contested and thereby subject to change. While the dominant definitions of the trials sought to import earlier versions of heroic masculinity into the automobile era, recuperating ideals of male physical domination and prowess within a technology that was promising to efface those differences, women competitors and significant proportions of the national audience articulated another view. Winifred Conway and other women who took part in the trials put forward alternative modernist ideals. They were able to shape those high-profile national events in ways that could answer to their dreams of a more inclusive, comfortable and convivial future,

64 Ibid.
in which the technological innovations of twentieth-century modernity could provide them with new powers and new experiences. For them, the pleasure of an automatic pop-up toaster could be its own reward.

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Hal Moloney and Hugh King, who kindly gave me access to their files and extensive knowledge of the Redex trials.
Imagine there’d been a battle on a battlefield. It’s over, and people are moving away. But the wounded are still lying out there. Well, someone must go back for those wounded. What we’re doing is going back for the wounded and bringing them with us because they can’t be left back there.¹

This paper analyses several journeys of memory and ‘return’ that are derived from ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall’s² 1987 feature-length documentary film, *Link-Up Diary*. The first section of the paper addresses the history and social issues that lie in the film’s content. The second section analyses the film further via the text of a conversation held about the film in 2007 and the third continues with my analysis of how the film and this conversation interact.

The primary journey described in this paper is the one represented in the film: the week-long car trip from Canberra to Sydney in the ‘Link-Up Falcon’³ undertaken by the Link-Up New South Wales team as it was constituted in 1983—Coral Edwards, historian Peter Read and trainee Robyn Vincent together with David MacDougall. When the film was made, the Link-Up organisation had been formally in operation for two years.⁴

*Link-Up Diary* is a testimony to Australia’s Aboriginal ‘Stolen Generations’ and therefore is embedded in those memories of loss and grief experienced by Aboriginal children and their families who were separated from each other

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² David MacDougall is a world-renowned ethnographic filmmaker, film theorist and author. He is currently Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities and the Arts at The Australian National University. He has filmed in Africa, Aboriginal Australia, Sardinia and India. MacDougall’s filmography includes the prize-winning *To Live with Herds* (1968–72), *Good-Bye Old Man* (1975–77), *Tempus de Baristas* (1992–93), *Doom School Chronicles* (five films, 1997–2000) and *Gandhi’s Children* (2005–08). For more information on MacDougall’s work, see <http://rsh.anu.edu.au/people/profile_system/public.php?id=115>
³ This is the name given to the vehicle that was used in the journey to Sydney depicted in the film, as well as many other trips undertaken by the Link-Up team in its early days.
⁴ Although government funding was not provided until several years later, Read dates the beginning of Link-Up to 1980, when Edwards invited him to come back with her to the NSW town of Tingha to meet some of her relatives for the first time. Under MacDougall’s mentorship, Edwards made a short film about her reunion with her family, which she called *It’s A Long Road Back* (c. 1981). The 1983 journey was in fact a prototype for the many other journeys undertaken by members of the Link-Up organisation and the Indigenous Australians they serve. For information on the present structure and activities of Link-Up, see <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/fhu/linkup.html>
according to Australian Government policy and interventions, predominantly during the first half of the twentieth century.5 Through this film, we also witness the story of the early days of the Link-Up organisation and the personal cost of working for Link-Up at that time; it is an organisation now run solely by Aboriginal people, to assist in reuniting Aboriginal families.6 Link-Up Diary was one of the first public acts of communication that addressed this conflict-embedded issue.

As well as describing the context and historical significance of the film, my account of the various journeys of the film Link-Up Diary includes other journeys of memory, recollection and interpretation. The journey of interpretation is my own; I viewed the film many times, interviewed MacDougall and Read in 1999 and included my analysis of the film as part of my doctoral thesis. My personal, intellectual and emotional journey of interpretation permeates the third journey: a journey of recollection that occurred when MacDougall, Read, ANU scholar Ursula Frederick and I met in 2007 and recorded our discussion of Link-Up Diary and some of the times and places it represents.

This paper emerged from another journey of recollection and exposure: a screening of excerpts from the film at the ‘Cruising Country’ symposium in Canberra in 2005, which included all the memories that the film evoked in the people present. MacDougall and Read attended this event. The screening was introduced by Read speaking the words of Stolen Generations member Sharon Condren, which included reflections on her own journeys in a Link-Up vehicle.

The Stolen Generations7

The historical dislocations of Australian Indigenous people, and especially the taking away of their children as the enactment of policy, occurred most significantly from early in the twentieth century and continued into the 1960s. These separations and dislocations were endorsed by policies of both Commonwealth and State Governments. The histories and stories of this cataclysmic separation of Indigenous families entered the wider public arena of debate and political action only during the 1990s. Link-Up Diary was made during a period when the Stolen Generations were still coming to conceptualise themselves through this identity term. Read powerfully describes how Link-

6 This now government-funded assistance includes historical document research, information provision, counselling and travelling with people to meet estranged family members.
7 This term was first introduced into the public domain by Peter Read in his paper ‘The Stolen Generations’, which he wrote for the NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in 1981. Read credits his wife, Jay Arthur, with ‘coining’ the term.
Up contributed to a turning point for Aboriginal people, when they realised that they had been accepting various governments’ bureaucratic lies about themselves and their families. In Read’s words:

Think back to the early Eighties: no one knew bugger-all about this. It’s really such an incredible transformation to think, to historicise, to see it in terms of government policy rather than just ‘slack mothers’, which many of our clients thought at the time. Even mothers themselves who had lost their children still blamed themselves. But the community knew nothing about it.8

In May 1995, nearly 10 years after the filming of *Link-Up Diary*, the Australian Government instigated the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. In June 2000, *Bringing Them Home: The ’Stolen Children’ report* was tabled in Parliament as a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Reference Committee’s Inquiry into the Stolen Generations.9 The report investigated individual histories and the continuing plight of generations of Aboriginal children—now adults—who were removed from their families under a succession of assimilation policies, particularly between 1916 and 1969.10 As Read makes clear above, not only were the stolen children injured by these removals. The agony of the families from which they were taken is also difficult to imagine.11 Amongst other major social and emotional challenges, Stolen Generations children grew up not knowing to whom they were related. Due to the span of time over which Aboriginal children were taken from their families, and to a persistent debate after the report’s release about whether or not the children were ‘stolen’ or ‘removed’, the plural term ‘Stolen Generations’ had gained common usage by 1999, although Read had described the Stolen Generations as such in 1981.12 Since the release of *Link-Up Diary* in 1987, many individual stories from the Stolen Generations have been exposed through media coverage of the *Bringing Them Home* report, subsequent court cases, and in the publication of many books and web sites.

During the hour-long conversation about *Link-Up Diary* convened in 2007 as a stage in the research for writing this paper, we discussed what the film meant at

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8 Summerhayes interview with Peter Read, 4 May 1999.
10 A comprehensive account of this disastrous scheme can be found in Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation and Tikka Jan Wilson 1997, *In the Best Interest of the Child? Stolen Children: Aboriginal pain/white shame*, Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation and Aboriginal History.
11 Anxiety and grief are the legacies of all people who are involved in reunions with family members from whom they have been separated for a long time. In the case of Link-Up clients, the tensions are greater because they are also members of Australia’s Stolen Generations with all the cultural distress that lies behind that identification.
the time of its making and what it meant to all of us at the time of our talking together. The edited and transcribed conversation presented below traces all three journeys described above, using the words of three people closely involved in the film’s production of meaning. The structural core of this paper is this recorded conversation. It is presented here as testimony both to the film itself and to the stories and people that inform the film’s content. The vernacular nature of the conversation, as transcribed, offers interpretative insights both into the poly-vocal nature of filmmaking and into the dialogic nature of the filmic text itself. Link-Up Diary reaches out to audiences and evokes new dialogues—new interpretations of the events that it recorded.

Recalling Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, the text of the film together with the conversation about the film, held 20 years after the film was released, weaves together many ‘voices’, developing ‘a plurality of relations, not just a cacophony of different voices’. Here, several voices—both of people themselves and of the two texts’ overall narrative—are presented as authoritative ‘points of view’. My argument is that these two texts also exist as narrative entities that are transpositionally inter-textual with each other. In other words, when seen in relationship to each other, they create another, new kind of signifying practice that could exist without each of the original practices—that is, the film and the recorded conversation.

My account of the different kinds of journeys associated with the film also illuminates some of the ways in which a film’s story, as it is made and as it is remembered, ‘travels’ over time. This use of time to provide better understanding is described well by Gadamer: ‘Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged, because it separates, but is actually the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome.’

I use the trope of ‘journey’ in this paper for two reasons. First, it denotes travel, and car travel in particular is integral to the film’s structure: it is what the people in the film are shown doing. The filming begins in Canberra and often takes place inside the Link-Up Falcon itself, and includes the packing and unpacking of this car as well as depictions of the places where rests were taken in motels, restaurants and public buildings, and finally, at Cronulla Beach in Sydney. Second, a journey is an event that does not need to be linear in time or space or even to be contiguous in these dimensions. For example, although this film was edited as a chronological chronicle of a particular journey, film editing usually uses the timing of events in ways that suit the main story rather

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than the chronology of shooting events. In the case of this film, it would need
to be at least as long as all the rolls of film used in shooting for it to accurately
represent what MacDougall captured through his cinematic equipment. As with
most documentary filmmaking practice, MacDougall needed to edit this footage
to suit the time requirements of the final film—so time was edited too although
the chronology of events was in the main, accurate. The word ‘journey’ also
conjures aspects of memory. The ‘vehicles’ for these kinds of journeys might
be times of quiet reflection, conversation, interpretative understanding and
commemoration.

I have edited but not restructured the 2007 conversation, presenting it as it
flowed but also embedding within it my comments and additional information
in some places. Its sprawling style reflects the drift of new and old memories
as people move over, around and then return to the main stories that grip their
attention. My telling of these journeys around this conversation as it travels
through countryside, city and recollection describes the experience of Link-
Up Diary as one of travelling through time, space and history. This account
especially relates how people can and do travel with goodwill, courage and
determination through experiences of difficulty and distress as they retrieve
people and their stories from unspoken histories.

The Film

Coral Edwards allowed MacDougall to join the original Link-Up team, herself and
Read with their trainee Robyn Vincent (also a member of the Stolen Generations)
for the making of this film. Edwards was happy to include MacDougall because
of her previous experience of him as a filmmaker who could participate in the
activities being filmed while at the same time minimising his intrusions on these
activities.

In making this film, MacDougall adopted a participatory ‘reportage’ style.
He was the sole filmmaker and juggled the new, experimental (at the time)
equipment that allowed him to film and record sound simultaneously by himself. This was one of the challenges he set himself in making Link-Up Diary.
Some of his difficulties during this experience are described in the conversation
transcribed below. The uneven sound and image quality, however, contribute
to the overall gesture of difficulty and vulnerability that the film presents.
Link-Up Diary particularly provokes two sensual experiences of reception,
and these experiences are intrinsic to the film’s narrative content. One of these
involves the exposure of people’s secrets, problems and histories. The other involves experiences of risk when the destination is unknown. In this sense, *Link-Up Diary* can be considered a ‘journey of exposure’.\(^\text{15}\)

The film begins with a set of photographs selected by MacDougall from the archives of the NSW State Aboriginal Protection and Welfare Board. They show Aboriginal men, women and children sitting outside small, simple shelters made from bark and timber. In a voice-over, MacDougall presents a summarised history of how the Stolen Generations came to exist in Australia during the twentieth century. In these opening moments, the film performs, through a disturbing juxtaposition of audiovisual images, a story of the horrific displacement and distress caused by the separation of children from their families. MacDougall’s relaxed and yet deeply concerned voice is heard over images of Aboriginal people in family groups, and in conjunction with sounds of some of the technologies that have been used to take their children away: motor vehicles, trains and the typewriter (a sound that was still associated with large bureaucracies during the mid-1980s). These sounds are finally embodied in the Link-Up office, but MacDougall’s keen sense of timing as an editor keeps these photographs in place just long enough to provoke a sense of disturbance and interruption. They are then replaced with two photographs of the Link-Up team as it was constituted in the week of 1983 when the film was made, one of which includes MacDougall and his camera. At this point, MacDougall introduces this road trip/car journey by speaking the following words over an image of a frosted-glass door panel at the entrance of the Link-Up Office in Canberra:

> The journey began for me in front of this door of the Link-Up Office, one morning in Canberra. A year earlier I had been invited by the Link-Up people to spend a week on the road with them, with the idea of some day making a film together. Now, a year later, we had decided upon an experiment. We would see if it was possible in the space of another week on the road to make a film which would represent the work they had been doing for the past five years. But I didn’t know where we were going this week, and I hadn’t asked.

Notice that he mentions earlier trips he made with Link-Up, whose destinations and purposes are also commented on in the conversation transcribed later in this paper. For MacDougall, these earlier trips were an important stage of his research for *Link-Up Diary*.

Thirteen distinct narrative segments organised by the trope of a car journey follow the film’s highly reflexive introductory opening. *Link-Up Diary* does not include all of the Link-Up team’s activities in the filming week, but it does

describe much of the business undertaken by the team during that time. Read and the ‘Link-Up Falcon’ ferry people to and from meetings that take place in private houses, in a hostel, a car park, a motel room and, finally, on Cronulla Beach in Sydney, where the team, exhausted by the week’s activities, muses on the inherent sadness of their work.

MacDougall’s stated quest in this particular filmed journey was to explore how a particular group of people, including the filmmaker, coped with the difficult task of finding information concerning the Stolen Generations, and also how they coped with the traumatic and heartbreaking stories they discovered. He has described documentary film as an ‘irrevocable inscription of acts of communication between filmmakers and the people they film’; ‘in the end, each stands exposed to the other in a new way’.¹⁶ Although MacDougall has always claimed that he is essentially an ‘outsider’ to the situations he films, Link-Up Diary shows that he was a passionately committed ‘witness’ to the continuing questions and distress experienced by people directly affected by the complex issues and horrors suffered by the Stolen Generations.

### ‘Questions You Can’t Ask’¹⁷

It is worth noting here the difficulties experienced by the early Link-Up team when dealing with people’s private and traumatic histories. In the following short dialogue from Link-Up Diary, we hear Coral Edwards and Peter Read in the Link-Up office in Canberra, on the phone to Link-Up clients while at the same time juggling their welcoming conversation with filmmaker MacDougall. Here, early in the film, Read and Edwards describe how one of the jobs undertaken by Link-Up is to help people find answers to difficult questions.

*Coral Edwards (CE): This is Coral again. You were disconnected. Sorry, go on. Thanks, I’ve got all that. Your mother’s and father’s names. Where you were born? Now I need your address and telephone number…*

*Peter Read (PR): Very hardworking this morning, aren’t we?*

*David MacDougall (DM): Is it always like this? Or are you just putting on a show?*

*PR: We usually start at 10.30, sitting around with coffee, talking about the weekend—*

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¹⁷ David MacDougall, Transcript of *Link-Up Diary* dialogue, pp. 2–4.
What’s that? You found your mother? Did you? Where was she? She’s already found her. Tremendous! She’s in Walgett? What amazing luck!

…We’re here to help people through the first part, when they meet their families for the first time…when you have worries and doubts…and questions you can’t ask.

Memories, Reflections: 19 November 2007

The following conversation, recorded in 2007, explicitly expands the information given in the film. In places, I have inserted subheadings as a way of commenting on the content of the conversation as it travels along. These subheadings usually quote some phrase from the section of dialogue that follows. Here, memories are invoked according to questions and recollections.

This first part of the conversation introduces MacDougall’s and Read’s reflections on how long it had been since they had seen the film themselves. It also introduces the central narrative position of the car used in the trip to Sydney, together with some of its history.

**DM:** I haven’t seen the film for so long.

**PR:** No, me neither.19

**DM:** Just looking over the [film] dialogue, it really brings back all sorts of things. Maybe more than even seeing it would.

**Catherine Summerhayes (CS):** It was called the Link-Up Falcon, wasn’t it?

**PR:** The car? Yes, it was. That’s quite right, it was a Falcon.

**Ursula Frederick (UF):** So was it the same car every time?

**PR:** Yeah, they’ve got a fleet of about 20 cars now of course…Well maybe that’s exaggerating a bit but there are a huge number of cars there because all the staff have them…Yeah, someone from the Aboriginal Ministry of New South Wales rang us up and said, ‘We are disposing of half a dozen Falcons from some project or other’. And I think they rang us simultaneously, Coral and me, and I said, ‘Yes, of course, we’ll have one’ and Coral said, ‘No, we don’t want one’. I don’t know why she said that because we used to hire them all the time up until that point. So we

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18 Transcription of this recorded conversation by Jessica Wilds.

19 Although MacDougall and Read were present at the showing of excerpts from the film during the 2005 Cruising Country symposium, neither had watched the entire film for some time.
got our heads together and to cut a long story short we rang back and said, ‘Yes we definitely do, thank you very much’. And that became the Link-Up car until, well [pause] until I left anyway. 1985.

**Link-Up cars: ‘what looked like a white government car was never a particularly welcoming sight…’**

In this section, Read and MacDougall describe how the meetings with people were arranged, and how and where they took place. Read notes here that arriving in a white government car was often not a good beginning to a meeting with people who identified anything to do with the Government as threatening their way of life. MacDougall also describes a trip he made to rural Australia with Read, before he filmed *Link-Up Diary*. One of the conditions of him filming the Sydney trip was that he should first accompany them on the earlier trip.

*CS:* David had gone out before with you on the week before—

*DM:* Yeah, we went west to Mildura and out that way.

*CS:* So you’d already been out that way to Dareton, Broken Hill?

*PR:* Dareton, that’s right, yeah.

*CS:* What did it feel like?

*DM:* It was sort of the rural version of the urban version that we made the film about. But it was a great introduction of seeing the car on the road. Rather than just sit in the office…We would head for a rural centre and we would find out, or maybe you and Coral would already know, people in the local Aboriginal community. We were generally looking for somebody specific and we would track them down and have a chat.

*CS:* But you weren’t seconded by the communities?

*PR:* No, we just lobbed in, although I think we actually went on a plane to Dareton, via Melbourne; very inconvenient place to get to as I recall—but when we were going anywhere we’d often go into the—well, we were looking for someone in particular but we would lob into some relevant office. Generally [the] DOCS\(^\text{20}\) office would have an Aboriginal staff member or Housing Co-op or whoever would give us a welcome. Link-Up wasn’t very well known at that time and so the arrival of Link-Up in town didn’t cause much of a stir or people [would] run for cover even…Yeah, well until we learned to travel incognito and not go round

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\(^{20}\) Department of Community Services (New South Wales).
saying ‘Hooray, Link-Up’s here!’ People would say once they got to know about Link-Up, ‘Oh Christ, this is about my child I never told my husband about…So I’m not sure I want to talk to these people.’

We would go and see the person, generally a parent, almost always a mother, and say, ‘Can we see you privately?’, particularly if husbands came to the door. But of course arriving in what looked like a white government car was never a particularly welcoming sight for Aboriginal people…If it was too far away, we just used to hire a car after flying there, and have a word with mum on her own. It might be half an hour or something and then make arrangements from there. I think it’s still done like this more or less, although I’m a bit out of touch with what they do with fieldwork now. And then we’d make arrangements to bring that person back again in whatever time was convenient, and we learnt from experience it is much better for people to make the best relationship they can before it happens—i.e., by telephone calls and writing rather than hopping in the car and going down next weekend, which generally is very rarely a good idea.

DM: It was brought out during the film, with Willie and Susan.

PR: Indeed, that’s right.

DM: You had second thoughts—certainly afterwards—about whether that was the best way to meet.

CS: [When I interviewed you in May 1999] I think you called it a ‘stuff-up’ to me.

PR: Yeah, it was a bit actually.

The incident referred to in this conversation was a team meeting with an older man called Willie, soon after they arrived in Sydney. Willie had been looking for his daughter, Susan, and Edwards told him that they had found her. She asked if he would like to meet her that same day since she lived quite close by. Then the team met with Susan, a heavily pregnant young woman who had been looking for her birth parents. The team had convincing evidence that Susan was Willie’s daughter and told her about Willie, and that her mother had died. Susan agreed to go back with them and to meet him straight away.

This particular meeting is dramatically crucial to the film’s narrative. It is a ‘reunion’ scene and as such it is highly charged with emotion. Later in the week, there was a return meeting between the team and Susan with her husband, Robin, who was not present at the previous one. In the film’s scene of this particular meeting in Susan and Robin’s flat, the audience learns that they are both unhappy about the authenticity of her relationship to Willie. Read has
always regretted the way in which this reunion—one that happened very early in Link-Up’s history—was organised. During our conversation in 2007, he drew attention to how the organisation now prepares their teams and monitors such situations.

PR: It is done much more professionally now. All the staff goes through huge numbers of courses in management, and drug and alcohol counselling, and violence counselling, and community awareness counselling and more things than you can poke a stick at.

CS: Well, that was in the days of experimenting to a certain extent.

PR: It’s got more bureaucratised now, really. It has to be. And some of that intensity probably has gone from it a bit but it has been replaced by extremely efficient management and a red-hot executive committee…

CS: So let’s see, when you were talking to me [in the 1990s], you said you dated the time of Link-Up starting to 1980 when Coral took you back out to Tingha. So that would make it 27 years.

PR: About 27 years. A lot of people have gone home now. We used to rejoice a bit, it was one a month, but now they take back a 100 people per year so it’s more—as it has to be—high powered and organised.

DM: And they [people from the Stolen Generations] are getting older…

PR: Well, there are still a surprising number of young people coming through though all the same.

DM: Which tells a lot about how long the program [of removal] operated.

UF: I guess that circles back to that original idea of when people were taken away. You know, I remember, Peter, some time back you mentioned to me that the car is significant for that reason as well. And given that it was a government car it must have brought back all kinds of—

PR: That’s right, in fact I was reading Joy Williams’ [a Link-Up client] transcript the other day and she actually said, ‘Oh my God!’ going back to Cowra in 1985, in the white car. I don’t know whether it was the Falcon or not, but she said something like, ‘It brought back so many unpleasant memories because I was taken away in a car and here I am coming back in one’…

DM: It’s always felt uncomfortable arriving in these cars, and I mean in other films as well. When I have had the use of a very new, flashy car it is often an embarrassment.
Cars

The following section directs our attention to the Link-Up Falcon itself and how it featured in, and affected the making of, the film. Read and MacDougall talk about how the confines of a car itself contribute to the nature of the conversation between passengers and how the car itself became a major site for filming.

DM: But there’s another aspect of it though, it’s a private place, like a moveable office, where you can talk privately to people. And I think a lot of the more interesting sessions we had with people is where we’d take them off somewhere and have a chat and, you know, they felt in a way [pause] When you’re inside maybe it feels safe.

CS: Well, I think of it as a domestic space because it would be when you are travelling. It would have been quite a friendly space inside for other people as well…

PR: Yes, and we were training up Robyn at the time and in my last year in Link-Up, when I was working there, we had Stan in the back as well, Stan Bowden. So there were two trainees there and we were talking about what we were doing all the time.

CS: Sort of like a teaching space in some ways?

PR: Very much so, yeah.

DM: And the odd thing about it is you are not face-to-face. You can have these conversations where you are talking to the back of somebody’s head, or you are talking to someone and they can’t see behind them. And because of the acoustics of the inside of a car you can hear each other generally pretty well.

CS: It’s like almost like a dreamlike, monological quality. [Yet] you’re talking to someone—

DM: And you are travelling through space and time.

PR: And don’t forget the music is pretty significant, too.

DM: It can be.

PR: Well, Coral always used to put on something in the last five minutes before arriving somewhere or taking somebody home. I’ve forgotten what it is.

UF: The same piece of music?
PR: I think so.

CS: She had a soundtrack to that part of her life?

PR: Yeah, ‘coming home’ type of music. It might have been Emmy Lou Harris. We used to be quite fond of her. It might have been one of her numbers. Especially in the last 10 minutes of arriving anywhere...

DM: Also if you have music playing you don’t have to talk, if people feel awkward about talking.

CS: But there can be problems with music in that not everyone wants to hear that music.

DM: And copyright problems, if you are a filmmaker [laughter]...[It] would have been against the aesthetic of the film actually [to intentionally insert music into a soundtrack].

UF: Were there any other sort of challenges to do with the filmmaking that you had to discuss as a team before undertaking this journey? Or was it you really going, as you were going along, trying to manage the situation?

DM: Well, Peter knew a lot about the problems in advance because he had been involved with filmmaking before and could anticipate problems.

PR: Coral wanted you and nobody else as I recall, didn’t she? That was the first issue...

CS: And you had all that new sound gear to manipulate by yourself.

DM: I had to manage. I seem to remember constantly changing batteries because I had two radio microphones, so for each radio microphone set you have a transmitter and then you have the receiver and each one of them has batteries that are constantly running down...I was carrying around an analogue cassette recorder...

CS: And the levels were a problem a little bit, too.

DM: The sound as a result is pretty crappy, let’s face it.

CS: I was thinking, with people getting in and out of cars or leaning in to say something or—I didn’t mind that at all, as you know. I’ve written about it as being a gorgeous gesture for the difficulties in communication, which are what the film is about to a large extent. So I felt when the sound distorted or wasn’t perfect at different times, it was really nice.
DM: Actually, the best sound was in the car... And the worst sound was when we would go into someone’s house... like filming Willie, when we first met him... It was a ground-floor flat with the windows open and a huge amount of traffic going by.

PR: I think the door was open, too, actually.

DM: I had to put the microphone down wherever I could.

CS: Did everyone have enough room in the car?

PR: Well, we only had four people there and it’s quite a big car, so yes. Two bucket seats in the back.

PR: But the other advantage of cars—and as David said, music can cover awkward silences—in cars there aren’t really any awkward silences, especially on the open road. If you stop at traffic lights and there are just two people [in the car], it can be, but for four people on the open road, you can go on for 10 minutes or 20 minutes and not say anything—which you couldn’t possibly do with us four sitting here [now].

UF: How long were the journeys on average?

PR: A week. Generally a week and David’s week on the road.

CS: It was about four days, I think; the one out west [Dareton] was, wasn’t it?

PR: Probably. Generally, coming home lunchtime on Fridays or something.

UF: So quite a lot of time was spent actually getting to these places.

PR: Or doing a lot of work in one place.

CS: They went from Canberra in this particular one, Canberra to Sydney and then all round Sydney. But there’s a beautiful shot towards the end of the film that I thought again used the car very well as an image, and that’s where the rain is on the windscreens wipers and Coral’s beautiful [monologue] about ‘going back for the wounded’.

DM: I love shooting inside the car to see the things [pause] to try to capture [pause] You look out the window and see something passing by or you look through to [pause] It’s almost like a cinema screen in some ways.

PR: And you got that. There’s a neon sign ‘Remake your own life’ or something, remember that?
DM: You just pick up the details like that.

PR: What Jay [Dr Jay Arthur, Read’s wife] liked actually was all the closure all the time, like red lights, and level-crossing gates and things saying stop, stop all the time. Jay really picked that up, actually. I didn’t notice it.

DM: And the sounds of the directional signals. I still remember that.

‘Absolutely an Aboriginal project’

In the next segment of our dialogue, Peter Read notes what he perceives to be a change over time in the uses people make of the Link-Up organisation. He emphasises that it is now a solely Aboriginal enterprise, and introduces the idea of Aboriginality as part of what was being returned to people through Link-Up.

CS: That space in the car, that warm, thinking space. [pause] Did the journey in its entirety feel like an Aboriginal project? It was for Aboriginal people and these days it is full of Aboriginal people in the car doing it. But in this case it was two [non-Aboriginal] men and two Aboriginal women totally convivial and totally supportive and I was wondering what the project felt like at that stage.

PR: Absolutely an Aboriginal project in a way that it perhaps isn’t anymore.

CS: That’s interesting.

PR: We were really, really full-on in returning Aboriginality to people, and it was just as important as returning people to the family. And that’s something that was part of the ’80s actually, not just Coral and me. Although looking back, I think I did a fair bit of pushing too and I’m not taking the credit for it because maybe it was something we could have done without, maybe it was a little bit full-on…That’s how Link-Up was in those days. Coral and I were both pushing it hard. And that’s not quite the—

CS: —the approach now.

PR: No, it’s more about finding your family, actually. There’s a very strong element of ‘our people’ still; all the staff are Indigenous.

DM: But all founded on the realisation that, you know, taking children away was to rob people of their Aboriginality and in effect to take apart Aboriginal society, wasn’t it? We felt that very strongly.
PR: There was a kind of semi-mystical, quasi-mystical element to it. That’s the point. And that’s not there anymore.

CS: And it was very much a car, you know, of this incredible goodwill going down the road, with incredible good intentions and determination as well.

DM: And there’s also something about travelling over roads and from one place and another that is a bit like travelling into history. There is a sense you have of discovery of the past as you go from one place to another.

‘A road movie’

In the following section, MacDougall describes the film as a ‘road movie’. The road movie is now considered a film genre. Consequently, the conversation expands the meaning of the film itself to include some of the tropes of the road movie, such as the connotations of long-distance travelling by a group of people who often see themselves as marginalised by society.

PR: There’s a kind of road-movie feel about it of course.

DM: It is a road movie!

PR: There are hundreds and hundreds of films about Link-Uppers going home. Well, not hundreds, but lots and lots. But people going home to find their families. These films generally don’t have that [journey] element at all. There’s talking here and scene two is arriving where your mother lives…instead of the journey. So not only is it different for the viewers but it’s different for everyone involved in it.

CS: …and [throughout the film] there is that kind of feeling of ‘I just want to be on the road!’

DM: Well, there is always attached to that a sense of freedom from responsibility because you are leaving behind all the work that is back there…So you do feel the freedom of the road and just the opening up of possibilities. You don’t know what may happen to you or what’s going to happen next or where you are going.

CS: …the teams that go out to these places, I imagine, it’s like ‘Well, this could be a happy ending’.

UF: …and the idea of not knowing the outcome, the horizon ahead.
DM: That was also one of the premises of the film. I told Peter and Coral not to tell me where we would be going, because I didn’t want to know. I just wanted to discover it while I was filming...I wanted to make the film a reflection of the experience of travel and of finding out how Peter and Coral worked, so that the audience would be put in the position of the filmmaker. I think that’s what lies behind it, to give the audience a sense of discovery that they are going through everything at the same time as the filmmaker.

CS: You always said that the film was about the team even more than the interactions that they had with the people that they were finding. It was to do a lot with the effect that these searches and the work had on the people doing the searches and the work. This is one of the things that you became very interested in, the effect it was having on everyone else.

DM: Yeah, because there is a kind of cumulative strain and burnout, I think, going on if you do [this] kind of work day after day, just because you are so exposed to other people’s distress. You know, how long can you take that week after week, given the fact that there are moments of joy when things work out well and all that?

PR: Although the modern staff don’t go out every second week. That’s a big strain.

CS: Well, the car would very much become the gypsy caravan.

PR: Yeah, true, that’s right, it was.

DM: But this trip for me was a kind of—it wasn’t totally unfamiliar in a way because one of the first trips I remember in Australia was going on a journey with Bob Reece who’s an historian, out in WA [Western Australia] now, who was trying to find out more about the Moree [western New South Wales] massacre and other massacres that went on around [the place]. We discovered many in fact in that region. Judith [MacDougall] and I made a long trip, a couple of weeks, I think, with him visiting Aboriginal communities around Moree and talking to people who remembered stories and the massacre. And then talking to the white farmers around there, some of whom were amazingly defensive, and were speaking about it as though it had happened 10 years ago instead of a hundred years ago—So it was very real and very much part of contemporary history. This was the feeling. This was in ‘75 or ‘76—But there were farmers who remember finding skeletons in their paddocks—that was another trip in the car—Very much the same feeling of going out to try to find out about the past from people who were living today.
City space/country space: ‘the travelling is different’

This section of dialogue highlights how the team distinguished between working in the countryside and their work in urban Sydney.

UF: You made that point about the city space and then there’s the going into country bit—literally, sort of urban versus ‘not urban’. Were there any kinds of distinct differences in that experience for you, Peter?

PR: Well [pause] more a sense of the rolling miles, I guess.

CS: The travelling is different.

PR: The travelling is very different, yeah. Once we got to Sydney it was sort of half-hour dashes through in heavy traffic, yeah [pause] which is very different from 200 kilometres without a bend in it.

DM: I was actually a little bit disappointed we were going to Sydney [for the filmed journey]. I don’t know if I ever said that before. I had hoped for another trip like the one we made out west.

PR: No, I don’t think you had said that before but it doesn’t surprise me.

DM: And one thing about these country towns is that the pattern is very different. There was generally an Aboriginal mission somewhere outside the town, or there would be a part of town where there would be a community, and people would come off the station or come off the mission. And of course in the city you met people who had had that history but they had passed through a whole set of other stages…So I was disappointed but then it had its own interest.

CS: I think as a document it was incredibly good because it really demonstrated just how much people moved, and how much people moved to the city as well, and the resources of the city.

PR: How many separated people there were in the city.

DM: And the whole aspect of it that was very interesting to me was the documentation of it and how all the detective work that was required by this sort of—Peter was the Phillip Marlowe [laughs] of Sydney going into these archives or trying to deal with these bureaucrats who didn’t want to give you information…And knowing the ways and means to find out, to match up one record with another, to prove that somebody was somebody else’s child.

CS: But the place of confidence was the car. Confidence and education. And safety.
DM: ...I think in a way for me reading the transcript is more evocative than maybe seeing the film because it's the text that is burned into my memory, having edited the film. You know, every line is like a line out of script now for me. And I can just see in the text the situation, the humour—if there's humour—and the tone of voice. And I know who exactly is speaking even though this transcript doesn't tell you who is speaking...So you replay the film in your imagination.

One thing that occurred to me about the relationship between cars and life, I guess, is that when you travel, the car is always part of the complex of other things including restaurants, petrol stations and motels. A car journey is punctuated by these stops, and so the film has the scenes of eating in restaurants, and it has discussions at night about what happened that day, in the motel room. And of course in people's houses where you would go. If you are talking about car trips, you have to talk about these other places and spaces.

**Gestures of respect**

Two repetitive features in the film are the welcoming hug given to Coral Edwards by the people the Link-Up team come to meet and that Australian ritual of mutual respect—the 'cup of tea'—that is inevitably offered to them when they arrive at their homes. These two gestures combine to show again and again the social intimacy that existed between the Link-Up team and the people they were working for.

CS: Well, one of the lovely things I was interested in was all the cups of tea, you know.

DM: You've got to have a cup of tea when you arrive.

CS: You've got to have a cup of tea every time, and you stop for a cup of tea every time. Also the way Coral would hug everybody when she met them and left them. So for me those two gestures really came out strongly. It was like bodily contact but also this cup of tea. ‘Yeah, we’ll have a cup of tea’, you know.

DM: And cigarettes in those days as well.

In an earlier discussion, MacDougall said that with *Link-Up Diary*, he was interested in departing from his previous filmic practice in order to depict on film his own personal experience of the social situation he was in with the Link-
Up team: ‘By having that experience, to learn something about what it meant to the people involved…not only the people who had lost their parents, or who had lost their children, but also the Link-Up people.’\(^{21}\)

Through MacDougall’s careful exposure of how this particular group interacted with one another and with other people, the film achieves another gesticulant practice that is not only one of exposure and journeying. As mentioned earlier, this practice is also one that suggests an attitude of careful respect towards both people and the complex relationships that are described throughout. This practice can be described in terms of the number of ‘greetings’ and ‘farewells’ that are included in the film. Every meeting between the Link-Up team and their clients is introduced within the film by images of people hugging, kissing, shaking hands or verbally greeting one another. Edwards in particular is depicted in this film as someone who gives not only of her emotions but also of the touch of her body to these people as comfort and support. Whereas these segments can be understood as MacDougall’s intention to portray the emotional burden that was borne by this early Link-Up team, the persistent, recurring imaging of such behaviour between people also can be considered to mark a ‘showing of respect’ towards the people whose lives are presented by the film. Through the filmmaker actually participating in these introductions, the film viewer is not only ‘introduced’ to these people, but is also shown the appropriate behaviour that enabled the meetings that the filmmaker witnessed. This film makes all who view it also witnesses of the human distress and complexity of problems that are the experiences of the Stolen Generations.

The experiences of the Indigenous families separated from each other over the past 100 years are not yet healed scars; they are still open wounds. Read eloquently describes these experiences as part of every Australian’s history.

PR: …when I reflect on it now as an historian 30 years later, well, the whole bloody racist wound is not just people who were taken away, but everybody…Those who stayed behind had just as hard a time but in a different way.

CS: But you go back for the wounded—you don’t just leave them there.

PR: No, no, that’s right.

UF: So in the context of that, how did you feel being part of that process?

PR: There’s one thing to say ‘we are older and wiser’ but that’s one thing I haven’t lost: my rage about it all, the whole thing about the Stolen Generations. And just going through Joy’s story again now has

\(^{21}\) Summerhayes interview with David MacDougall, 2 November 1999.
me boiling with rage about what happened to her and all her family. So I was delighted to be part of the undoing of that terrible part of our history. So, it was a real privilege to be there.

Renewal, but never a journey of closure

You think you become immune to the hurt, and the pain you listen to, but you just don’t.

By the end of the week, it becomes just one great feeling of sadness.22 Coral Edwards speaks these haunting words in the closing scenes of the film, over an image of rain washing the Link-Up Falcon’s windscreen as Read drives the team through grey, wet Sydney streets. Towards the end of the film, we see Edwards and Read walking along the sands of Cronulla Beach in Sydney’s south. They are subdued and tired, in need of fresh air and healing from the distress they found and witnessed during the past week. In this next section of our 2007 dialogue, MacDougall and Read appear to ‘make light’ of this excursion to the beach, and yet the filmic apparatus captured a moment of reflection that summed up the exhaustion and sadness that was incurred during the week’s work.

CS: …you drove to that beach and walked—

DM: Oh, Cronulla.

CS: There was this real melancholy look of all you people sitting down, like once again you are out of the safe little space of—the thinking space of the car and suddenly—

DM: Fresh air and sea breeze.

CS: But also the sadness.

DM: We were tired. It was the end of the week.

The filmmaking performances of Link-Up Diary show the viewer conversations with people who have only just come to realise that they had been accepting government-derived lies about themselves and their families. Read has spoken to me about a meeting he had with senior Aboriginal bureaucrats when he was seeking funding for Link-Up early in the organisation’s history: ‘Pens stopped

22 Transcript of Link-Up Diary dialogue, p. 69.
mid-flight and people stopped looking up their airline tickets—and you could feel the questions dashing around the room, people saying, “You mean, my mother didn’t put me away after all?”  

Read’s words recall Marcia Langton’s comments on how the very concept of being an Aboriginal person has been made problematic for people by persistent intrusion by the Australian Government into the domestic space of their family relationships: ‘For Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the State. They find white perceptions of “Aboriginality” are disturbing because of the history of forced removal of children, denial of civil rights and dispossession of land.’

As shown in this paper’s transcribed conversation and in the film itself, MacDougall’s respectfully interactive filmmaking involves a high degree of ethical and cinematic risk taking. Yet in taking such risks, the filmmaker allows the film’s viewers a wide range of sympathetic insights into other people’s experiences of coping with the past that would be difficult to comprehend otherwise. His filmic practice brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s hope that film could become society’s jolting weapon against the ‘shocks’ administered by the massive bureaucracies and mechanisations of modernity: ‘The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him.’

The information about the Stolen Generations is sensually exposed and compassionately communicated in Link-Up Diary. It is both shocking and deceptively contained within the mesmerising rhythm of a car journey. Together with the film’s gestures of respect, we also experience a filmic practice that ‘shocks’ with a seemingly casual elegance.

Although the particular journey described by the film is through the metropolis of Sydney, many other journeys also lie behind the story of this film. As described earlier, these include trips made to western New South Wales and Victoria by MacDougall with the Link-Up team, as well as those MacDougall made with his wife, Judith MacDougall, around Moree in western New South Wales. Then, and most importantly, there are the many terrible journeys by members of the Stolen Generations and their families, as documented by the Bringing Them Home report. Finally, the stories behind the film Link-Up Diary

23 Summerhayes interview with Peter Read, 4 May 1999.
24 Langton, Marcia 1993, ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television’: A chapter for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things, Australian Film Commission, North Sydney, NSW, p. 28.
have also journeyed over time and history: from the time of its making and release in 1987 to 2008, when Australian society formally recognised the wrongs done to the Stolen Generations and Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, finally said ‘sorry’ in Parliament, on behalf of all Australians for the past and ongoing suffering of the Stolen Generations and their families.

The 2007 conversation represented in this paper shows how the film continues to travel. Although the meanings of what we see and hear sometimes change over time—as in the case of Sharon and Willie’s premature meeting—these changes do not obliterate the original voices present in the filmic text. We are given, rather, a new dimension of meaning that is drawn both from memory and from the unfolding of actual events over time. The opportunities for ‘going back’ with the film itself, and through conversation with the people involved in making it, result in two significant outcomes. The first is an understanding of how film needs to be understood as a cultural performance that both endures and evolves over time. The second lies in the way that the film, in combination with the conversation, can now be better embedded within the historical fabric of how we understand what happened and is still happening for the Stolen Generations in Australian society. It is clear that the conversation itself speaks with a strong voice. The conversation gives even more information about the issues addressed by the film and reframes the film as a historical artefact.

My intention has been to present the conversation as a dialogic vehicle, in and of itself, for interpersonal communication about events pertinent to the film. Together, Link-Up Diary and the 2007 conversation form a new text comprising cultural meanings that intersect and extend the work each does independently. The Cruising Country symposium’s screening event should be included in this inter-textual structure of communication and understanding: its performance launched the film’s journey through time and space into the twenty-first century.

**People Quoted in the Film and Conversation**

CE: Coral Edwards

DM: David MacDougall

PR: Peter Read

CS: Catherine Summerhayes

UF: Ursula Frederick
‘Now we got truck everywhere, we don’t travel anywhere’:
A phenomenology of travelling by community *mutika* in the northern Kimberley, Western Australia

Anthony Redmond

Motor vehicles tend to be highly personalised in all kinds of cultural milieus. The process of personalisation is primarily achieved through a projection of the travelling subject’s own bodily schema onto the body of the vehicle. These strongly libidinal/narcissistic bodily investments are made visible, for example, in the penchant for personalised numberplates that expand parts of a vehicle owner’s/user’s bodily ego into that of their vehicle, in how some male truck drivers paint their wife’s or girlfriend’s name on their cab panels so that the driver is imaginarily travelling inside the desired woman’s cab/body, or even in the way we might speak of a vehicle being ‘gutsy’ or ‘gutless’. The projection of bodily schemata is also apparent in the way we internally differentiate a vehicle so that we might speak not just of its ‘body’, but also of its ‘headlights’, its ‘tail’ or ‘arse-end’, its steering *arms* and so on. Conversely, a vehicularisation of the human body is evident in idioms such as ‘punching someone’s lights out’, ‘making tracks’ or ‘going off the rails’. This dialectic between corporealisation of vehicles and a vehicularisation of the body is no less evident in the tropes used by the Indigenous people of the Kimberley region of north-western Australia where the forms of embodiment that are projected onto (and introjected from) vehicles take on the specificity of local body imagery and the particular ways in which vehicles are used there.

At the conclusion of one long bush trip, my wife, our Ngarinyin neighbour Molly, and myself had almost arrived back in the settlement where we lived when the rear axle of our vehicle disintegrated just as we pulled off the main road onto the long, corrugated track leading home. Molly, an elderly widow, clambered out of her seat, sat herself down on the dirt road and began to cry loudly and inconsolably not just for herself but for the *mutika* (motorcar): ‘that unguzman [old woman], he bin carry we bala every place…finish up now… praply buggered up.’

Other moving examples of this corporealisation of vehicles in another part of Indigenous Australia appear throughout the Warlpiri Media TV series *Bush*
Mechanics.\textsuperscript{1} In one of the more reflective interludes sandwiched between comedic scenes, a senior man picks through the rusted bones of a prewar Chevrolet truck. Pointing to the disembodied monolith of the engine block, he wistfully muses on how this particular truck—on which he and his age-mates first learnt their mechanical skills—‘bin grow us up that one’, and then goes on to say how its now disintegrating presence in the country continues to act as a ‘witness for us’. Gertrude Stotz also recorded some of the personalising statements about vehicles made by Warlpiri women, including a scenario in which she was admonished for pushing her overheated vehicle too hard by a passenger, who said of the car: ‘Your mum got headache, you got to drive slowly.’\textsuperscript{2}

For many Ngarinyin people, what the corporealised vehicle also implies (and this is something I also see in the Walpiri examples just given) is that the vehicle acts as an objectified container of relationships while simultaneously becoming bodily relativised (as in ‘made a relative of’) to its contents. This is hardly surprising when we consider that our bodily schemata are always inter-subjectively constituted from the face-to-face situations that provide a corporeal mirroring in which we not only recognise, but also build up, images of own bodies. This bodily mirror image—although constituted through social engagements—tends to remain a highly differentiated one marked with the particularities by which we carve ourselves out from others. In terms that resist a Durkheimian tendency towards hypostatising the body image as emblematic of ‘society’ itself, the pioneering psychoanalyst and phenomenologist of bodily experience Paul Schilder described a dual process of differentiation from, and dependency on, the bodily image of others as one in which

\begin{quote}
a body image is in some way always the sum of the body-images of the community according to the various relations in the community... There is a social image of the body. These processes between individuals may make them in parts identical. But they are still processes between individuals. When an individual has socialized his postural image it still remains his postural image. There does not exist a postural image of the community, or a ‘WE’.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

Consonant with this insight, most Ngarinyin people\textsuperscript{4} do not employ images of a single social body even though their bodily schemata definitely take account of the important ways in which close kin are felt to be very much present within

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{1}{Warlpiri Media Association 2000, \textit{Bush Mechanics: The series}, [Video], Warlpiri Media Association, Yuendumu, NT.}
\footnotetext{2}{Stotz, Gertrude 1993, ‘Kurdungurlu got to drive Toyota’: differential colonizing process among the Warlpiri, unpublished PhD thesis, Deakin University, Melbourne, p. 176.}
\footnotetext{4}{But see David Mowaljarlai’s depiction of Australia as a single body in Mowaljarlai, D. and Malnic, J. 1993, \textit{Yorro Yorro: The spirit of the Kimberleys}, Magabala Books, Broome, WA.}
\end{footnotes}
each person’s body. What is most salient here is something akin to what Roy Wagner has dubbed a ‘fractal’ type of personhood— that is, one in which any partial image of a person and their social world is always constituted in relation to others at different scales. Ngarinyin body imagery manifests this fractal quality most clearly in the experience of muscle twitchings (dambaj ngama), which correspond with a codified and readily interpretable set of relationship categories, and with particular persons with whom reciprocal rather than identical body images are shared.6

These networks of kin, which constitute the relational body for Ngarinyin people, are readily projected onto motor vehicles in a way that recalls Fred Myers’ account of the Pintupi experience of country ‘as the embodiment of kin networks and as a record of social ties that can be carried forward in time’.7 In the northern Kimberley, the travellers’ countrymen perceive community vehicles (these days usually a four-wheel-drive, flat-bed truck with a roll-cage on the tray) as exactly that kind of mobile condensation of country and people. The truck’s own relationship to country is rendered concretely by the insignia emblazoned on the driver’s door, which often conflates a local totemic signifier with some kind of emblem of the settlement’s recognition by one of the various government funding agencies. Local Aboriginal people who might be passing along the 700 km-long gravel and dirt Gibb River Road (the only main road in the northern Kimberley region) or sitting down in a roadside settlement quickly identify these vehicles by calling out their well-informed speculations about its place of origin, as soon as its dust cloud or exhaust note is detected: ‘Dodnun’ or ‘Gibb River’ or ‘Prap Prap might be’ or perhaps with the dismissive cry of ‘Nothin’— only touris’ that one’.8

The people travelling on board a community mutika not only endure the manifest discomforts of travelling this way, they also endure (persist) with a certain kind of inter-subjectivity through the shifting panorama of space-time. The concept of a ‘moving community’ is a very real one in Indigenous northern Australia where whole communities regularly travel together, often leaving just a few elderly people back at their settlement to feed the dogs and ‘mind the camp’ (a rationalisation commonly used by younger people for taking a holiday from their caring responsibilities for elderly kin).

What bodily containers contain

An experience of containment is a strong component of travelling in a community *mutika*—first because of the limitations on available vehicle resources, which means that the travellers’ bodies tend to be forced tightly together on the tray of the truck, wrapped up in various pieces of bedding or clothing to keep out dust, rain or wind. This sense of containment varies in its intensity according to the prevailing social situation. When travelling for funerals or initiation ceremonies, for instance, the age and gender-based hierarchisation of space pertaining both between the travellers within their truck and between those enclosed within it and the surrounding social world is at its most intense. This modality tends to create an inward-looking, centripetal group of bodies that finds its most intense form in travellers’ bodies being entirely obscured beneath blankets and canvas tarps while passing through an area where Law ceremonies are occurring. In contrast with this, a travelling group which has been drinking alcohol in town and is consuming the remains of their purchases en route to a home settlement (where alcohol may be officially banned) tends to be at their most outwardly demonstrative, entropically scattering emptied containers, personal items, initial high spirits, and the subsequent arguments and cursing across the country as they head for home.

Travelling in a community *mutika* always involves a tension between mobility and forced immobility, since it is the vehicle itself—as a mechanical, external shell of the body—which is now possessed of vitality and movement while the body of the traveller might gradually succumb to a heaviness and stillness that ideally lead to sleep or reverie, as the traveller’s body is transported through the world. The strictures of community *mutika* travel tend to induce experiences of the containment of a relatively immobile body within a larger mobile body, which gives rise to a sense of self continuing through time against the shifting panorama of country slipping past the traveller, ideally at least, at a fairly regular pace. The changing road surface, the dips (‘deeps’ in Ngarinyin Kriol) and steep inclines of the road, negotiated by a good driver who knows how to work through the gears and maximise the engine’s torque, are felt as periods of vertical variation occurring against a more or less continuous horizontal movement, allowing one’s body to anticipate and merge with the vehicle in order to maximise one’s equilibrium. These broader rhythms nevertheless encompass all sorts of jarring shocks such as those caused by badly corrugated stretches of road, which set off a shuddering within the broader rhythms of

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the road over several kilometres. Judging the correct speed to float over the corrugations without losing control is part of the skill required to drive on such roads. Potholes and bumps—unless previously committed to memory by one of the travellers who shouts out a warning as they approach—usually come out of the blue and often cause the passengers to yell out their disapproval and call for the driver to slow down. These same events might also start children laughing at their fellow travellers’ loss of bodily control. Children seem to have an infinite appetite for the slapstick humour of bodies becoming subject to uncontrollable forces, a humour that is contained only by the threats of being thumped or ‘growled’ at by those trying to recover their poise.

The fact that mutika journeys are often made sitting on one’s buttocks with legs crossed or drawn up against the body, or lying down on well-used foam mattresses, usually pressed against the bodies of other travellers, sometimes laying one’s head in another’s lap or shoulder or having another body leant against one’s own, means that an intimate inter-corporeality pervades the group of travellers. This mode of inter-subjective space-time brings into play templates of experiencing the body emerging from other dimensions of self—other relationships in which bodily immobility is similarly the precondition of a self-transcending mobility. While fathers tend to carry children on their shoulders like hunted game, the characteristic way for the mother or sister to carry a young child is on the hip and the point of contact between the two bodies is buttocks to hip, rather than buttocks to shoulders. Elevation, safety and the joy of effortless transport ensue for the child. The enclosed, often uncomfortable cramping of the body within the mobile shell of a community mutika, then, readily induces psychophysical resonances with the maternal holding and lifting up of the child’s body—something that seemed to me to be made explicit in Molly’s grieving as well as Stotz’s truck’s ‘maternal headache’ (see above).

An ideal vehicle trip is one in which the traveller can enter into periods of ‘knock-out sleep’, waking up close to one’s destination, interspersed with seeing and/or interacting in other ways with interesting things or people along the way, including animals such as goanna or bush turkey that might be hunted, or a vehicle full of kin and friends (and maybe recently hunted game) travelling the same route in either direction. Interactions also occur with features of the landscape, which might elicit historical, biographical and/or mythical stories from amongst the travellers. Adults often express a wistful envy at the ability of children to achieve ‘knock-out sleep’—with its sense of magical transportation—seemingly at will. Travelling in settlement style, which adults often undertake with all their worldly goods stuffed into the ubiquitous plaid plastic carry-all bag, has the potential to produce simultaneous experiences of enclosure and dispersal across the country. The experience of enclosure is inherent to being closely surrounded by kin within the confines of the vehicle. This is intensified
in the northern Kimberley by the fact that the Gibb River Road frequently flows along valleys between sandstone escarpments that rise up around the road so that the traveller is ‘inside the country’ in a very psychophysical way. This sense of enclosure is intermittently broken by ‘jump-ups’ (where the road ascends an escarpment), which give the traveller a wide view out across the country, allowing the traveller’s body image to expand to the horizon of the next range, and generating a transcendence of one’s bodily capacities, intensifying the transcendence already begun by the corporeal identification with the superhuman capacities of the vehicle itself. The jump-ups on the Gibb River Road are now increasingly bituminised for a few kilometres either side to offset the effects of erosion so the experience of momentarily emerging off the dust and corrugations is synthesised with the smooth flight of the vehicle into sudden panoramic expanses opening up before the traveller.

The view of a distant land feature is immediately an object of the traveller’s spatiotemporal intentionality—either something to ‘catch up’ with or a ‘poor bala’ being left behind. A bodily leaning into the future or the past can be generated by the forward thrust of the vehicle and a sense of the country rushing past one’s body, which continually projects itself onwards and outwards from a present moment in time. The value placed on ‘look ‘em round country’ implicates vision as a central modality for the extension of the self through the world. When looking out from high points in the ranges, a person is able to ‘expand’—warl—into the country before them, to become ‘satisfied or pleased’ with themselves. As Husserl notes, human experience of the here and now ‘always expands in to extension and therefore is never without its halo…it is continuously mediated with the not now’, and, I would add, with the not-here (indeed, a parting remark commonly made by Ngarinyin people when embarking on a journey is ‘All right, I’m not here!’). In these kinds of expressions, images of bodily interaction with country evoke Schilder’s description of the continual change of experience concerning the imaginary centre of the ego. There is a continual wandering of experience in centrifugal and centripetal directions…a tendency to keep the body image within its confines and to expand and extend it, to keep its parts together and to dissipate it all over the world.

11 ‘Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the “I can”.’ Merleau-Ponty, M. 1964, The Primacy of Perception, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, p. 162.
The descent out of the ranges onto the virtually treeless flood plains and mudflats in the Derby hinterland—which is relatively ‘stranger’ country for some of those Ngarinyin people living on the Gibb River Road—offers presentiments of an open-endedness that is sporadically marked by the historical trajectories of individuals who have accumulated some kind of ‘story’ there through their work history or other biographical associations. This open-endedness is amplified by the desirable but nevertheless dangerous unpredictability of the social scene around town. The compact sociality induced by community mutika travel is intensified once in town, where the travellers who have arrived on a vehicle tend to stick to it as though it were an exoskeleton providing support and security in the often stressful town environment and through which a person can mediate the indeterminacies of the wider world. This feeling-tone is in marked contrast with the experience of being at home, which involves travelling through the well-wooded ranges, being saturated in the relatively more predictable rhythms of small settlement life, and enjoying the relative autonomy afforded by one’s home camp.

**Travelling: Then and now**

Though older people are enthusiastic about their relatively recent access to motor vehicles, what some of them mean by ‘really travelling’ is walking—a term also applied to the rhythmic, creative journeys of mythic beings across the country. ‘Anybody [come] along from bush. Now these days we don’t do that, now we got truck everywhere—we don’t travel anywhere.’

This lament was, paradoxically enough, made by an older man whose unceasing back-and-forth movements by mutika are legendary in the region. It would seem that for him and many of his peers, the pendulum-like motion between town and settlement, and between his own settlement and adjacent settlements, following the fixed groove of the Gibb River Road, has a quality of sameness about it that ‘foot-walking la bush’ never did. For this man and many of his age cohorts, the welcome unpredictability of town life exerts a strong attraction, alternating with the repulsion that eventually drives them back to their home settlements to restore themselves socially, physically and emotionally. What seems to be often felt to be missing from mutika travel for older people—whose lives have long been strongly anchored in a set repertoire of places and kin—is the unpredictable encounter, something now more readily attainable when camping in town. Bakhtin describes this quality as being a central trope in the imagery of being ‘on the road’, where ‘any contrast may pop up, the most

16 The late Nyalali Reggie Tataya.
varied fates may collide and interweave with one another’. Even with the large complement of ‘touris’ now travelling the Gibb River Road in the dry-season months, there is seldom any interaction with such strangers apart from the odd curious word exchanged at the widely dispersed fuelling points. ‘Touris’, like the ‘gabmin man’ (government departmental officers), sail past in an air-conditioned cocoon or parallel universe, usually only one or two persons to a car, and, with tourists, three or four cars to a convoy.

For many senior Ngarinyin people, travelling is a mode of being in the world that still articulates with the imagery of ancestral beings—wanjina—‘carrying country’ on their shoulders from place to place. Identifications made between wanjina and the wet-season cloud formations (an.guban), ‘the travellers’ are also incarnate in large boulders sitting on the country. The remarkable symbolic equivalence that is created here between cloud and stone—the first by nature airborne and mobile and the other heavy and sedentary—highlights a serial transformation linking living persons and the alternating capacities for mobility and stopping in one place characteristic of the figures of wanjina and wunggurr—the ubiquitous and watery body of the Rainbow Serpent.

Wanjina conduct their peregrinations through the wet season, appearing as the cumulonimbus thunderheads accompanying the north-west monsoons (December to April), after which they are said to ‘lay emself down’ in the form of the deep freshwater pools to which the running rivers contract as the dry season (May through to November) ensues. Ngarinyin speakers use the term ‘we awani’ for this ‘laying down’ of the wanjina as they pressed themselves into the soft, jelly-like surface of the Earth in the originary epoch (Larlan). Gulingi, rain clouds, make the bodies of wanjina visible as distinct and mobile entities on the horizon as the monsoon season begins.

In the dry season, the cloud mass breaks up again into individual clusters before disappearing and the wanjina return to their resting places in their own countries. The long moving ribbons of river courses slowly break up into a series of isolated rock pools—the ngawan or ‘living water’ that never disappears no matter how dry the season. Despite this dry-season scattering of the body of wunggurr into distinct, emplaced fractals of itself (embodied in the permanent rock pools), the body of wunggurr becomes submerged in the Earth and beneath the water, leaving only the upper parts showing as ‘islands’ of stone.

17 Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981, The Dialogic Imagination, University of Texas, Austin, p. 243.
The *wanjina’s* alternation between moving and lying down, the appearance and disappearance of the rain clouds each wet season, and the flowing rivers gradually contracting to isolated pools, are all processual moments in the continual reanimation of country. One of the many stories dealing with ancestral travelling and stopping speaks of the emission of fluid bodily substances—mucus—by an ancestral Kangaroo, Walamba, and the drowning of his wives in what becomes a permanent spring. This event is quickly followed by Walamba’s metamorphosis into an iconic pillar of enduring materials and significance: a large cypress pine (a Ngarinyin version of Lot’s Pillar perhaps).

A useful contrast can be drawn between these ecological/cosmological flows and the high degree of mobility of contemporary Kimberley Aboriginal people who (during the dry season) travel back and forth between station settlements and towns such as Derby and Wyndham but become relatively constricted in towns or settlements during the wet season. The (now receding) impact of the pastoral work regime has meant that the cycle of travelling for adolescent male initiation (‘Law’), formerly undertaken in the middle of the dry season, now occurs about Christmas, just before the river crossings start to flood. Though the pastoral labour regime, in combination with the transition to dependence on vehicular travel on uncertain seasonal roads, long ago took over setting the agenda for Kimberley people’s movement, dry-season travelling continues to be undertaken for secular purposes such as visiting relatives, mustering and droving cattle, and attending sports carnivals, rodeos and music festivals. In some respects, then, the movements of people—which once closely mirrored those of *wanjina* and the water that comes with them—have become their dialectical opposite. Now people move in the dry season when water is still, while in the wet season water moves while people are still.

During the wet season, visitors tend to overflow from the houses of those relatives who maintain permanent camps in the reserves around town, often aggravating interfamilial conflicts as the limited resource base available in these reserves comes under even more intense pressure. At the same time, relationships between kinfolk might be re-energised by imposing an intensified sociality commonly marked by long, hot evenings of card playing, conversation, drinking parties, fights, band performances, children’s parties, basketball games and church-organised events. This tends to create a highly charged social atmosphere (drinking alcohol is known as ‘charging up’) and large groups of young men from the same settlement are usually to be seen milling about in the main streets of town, sticking close together while remaining alert to the possibilities for action offered up by being abroad in public spaces. There is also a great deal of motoring back and forth between the town camps and the edge of the river flood plains to fish and hunt goanna since the hot season is also goanna and barramundi season. In this sense, there is actually a great deal of mobility
but most of it occurs within the very narrow confines of the reserves, the town area and between individual households. From these narrow bases there is a constant movement back and forth into the main streets of town. Rather than large-scale travelling, then, people tend to engage intensively with each other and to move at high frequency within the limited space available to them during the big wets.

Alongside the values placed on mobility within contemporary Kimberley settlements there is also a pervasive moral discourse about why people should ‘stop in one place’ at various phases in their lives. Widows (baran) in particular, once they have made the initial move from their deceased spouse’s camp, are expected to remain in or near their new camps and to look after their own needs until the long period of mourning is over. Recently widowed women often make a public show of virtue out of this constraint by making themselves focal reference points for moral order within the highly mobile contemporary communities through embodying social boundedness and stasis.

At the opposite pole from the stasis of widowhood, children are some of the most mobile members of these communities and might be bundled aboard vehicles to visit relatives at other settlements for weeks or months at a time. These children are often transported back and forth between the camp of their mother (who might be struggling to cope with younger infants) and that of the child’s mother’s mothers, where they are often received with delight qualified by oblique or direct criticism of the mother’s quality of care. This shifting back and forth of children between a parent and grandparent also serves the evasion of pressure from welfare and school authorities to keep the child in one place so they can attend school regularly. Only male teenagers move about with anything like the frequency of these younger children. The high mobility of adolescent males in this social world might be seen as congruent with one of the characteristics of ‘bride-service’ societies, as described by Collier and Rosaldo, in which ‘the exchange of women is usually accompanied by moving men around’.19

Local understandings about embodiment are centrally concerned with the transformation of experiences of bodily heaviness and stasis into weightlessness, mobility and the throwing off of enclosing surfaces—experiences that encompass and mutually generate each other. To take one common example, it is only when a vehicle comes to an unexpected halt that the pleasure of being transported without personal exertion (a psychophysical state for which someone once coined the term ‘velocitude’) is transformed into distress and

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longing for a return to the experience of the spatio-temporal flow of the road. There is always palpable relief when a broken-down vehicle gets moving again and all the discomfort of being cramped and uncomfortable on the tray-back of the vehicle is forgotten as the traveller’s body is once again identified with the ‘flying’ vehicle. The pleasure of extending oneself into the world is, for a while at least, paradise regained—a condition made visible in the ebullient conviviality that tends to possess passengers who might have already begun to anticipate an uncomfortable, and maybe hungry, night stuck on the road.

The tension between this desire for movement and the state of rest that gives movement meaning is aptly captured in the Ngarinyin word ‘gi’—a term used to describe one’s grasping of a patri-totemic identity, something paradigmatically stable and emplaced, but that was also glossed by one man as to ‘push-start motorcar with flat battery’ because gi means ‘to push out’, ‘to move’ something that is resistant.20 Bakhtin has argued that this tension between the flow of time and the sedentary tendencies of place is most fully articulated in ‘the chronotope of the road’, in which ‘[t]ime, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)...its fundamental pivot is the flow of time’.21

The transcendence of the capacities of the self through the identification produced between the body of the traveller and their vehicle is enhanced by an ability to use one’s knowledge of the interior workings of the machine—that is, having enough knowledge to get it going again when it breaks down, a knowledge that tends to be unevenly distributed and thus enhances the prestige of those who can manage such knowledge effectively.22 The human capacity to organise enterocceptions/images arising from the internal workings of the body in a productive way allows the coordination and the creation of desirable effects on the world and provides the corporeal basis of mechanical intuition.23

_Bush Mechanics_ was a particularly brilliant treatment of the improvisatory and intuitive genius required to keep vehicles alive and running in the Tanami Desert. The fantasies that those stories allowed themselves to entertain speak clearly to the animistic thinking through which we all interact with motor vehicles. This capacity was epitomised by the magical Jupurrula character who is depicted as being in direct contact with ancestral forces and who is also a hilarious realisation of the dreams of omnipotence that are continually stimulated

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20 See also H. H. C. Coate and A. P. Elkin 1974, _Ngarinyin—English Dictionary_, 2 vols, Oceania Linguistic Monograph No. 16, University of Sydney, NSW, p. 241; also Stotz, ‘Kurdungurlu got to drive Toyota’, p. 226, on ‘battery’, the ‘fire producer’ of an engine, as a taboo word in Warlpiri.

21 Bakhtin, _The Dialogic Imagination_, p. 244.


23 Appadurai (ibid., p. 41) has made the point that the social knowledge required both to produce and to consume things has ‘technical, mythological and evaluative components’ rather than the technical and evaluative/mythological aspects being respectively allocated between producer and consumer.
and subverted by these complex objects. It is worth remembering here that the mechanistic European view of the world is historically recent (circa seventeenth century), prior to which the world was conceived as ‘something animate, alive and flourishing yet susceptible to decay and death, mirroring the life-cycle of individuals’. A mechanical view of the world is in fact a particular kind of extension, rather than a refutation, of our dreams of bodily transcendence as well as of the concomitant potential for failure of those dreams, which leads us, for example, to talk about a motorcar ‘dying’.

Old age, bodily exhaustion and widowhood are all factors that mark the body’s transformation from high mobility to stasis. Like *wanjina*, the travelling beings who eventually became ‘tired’ and ‘stopped in one place’, elderly people gradually have their range of mobility circumscribed by poor health, lack of control of their own vehicles (and a concomitant lack of offers from younger kin to take elderly people with them) and their own lack of desire to go beyond a domestic arena that they might have made manageable for themselves. Nevertheless, I have been struck by the incredible powers of endurance and spirit of adventure of many older Ngarinyin people and my impression is that Aboriginal ‘grey nomads’ continue to travel even more frequently and more intensively than their Euro-Australian peers, despite the privations of travelling on a tray-back truck as opposed to an air-conditioned mobile home. For those who stay at home, travelling remains a focus of nostalgia, dreams, songs and the vicarious pleasure of keeping abreast of the movements of those around them. Like the depleted bodies of the *wanjina*, which run out of breath, become tired from walking and ‘lay emself down’, very old people often disappear inside their homes for the greater part of the day and night, becoming increasingly inaccessible beyond the canine barrier they often erect around themselves. At Christian funeral services, hymns of travelling such as the favourite *Road of No Return* will be sung to accompany the spirit of the deceased person on its journey to Dulugun, the island of the dead—a trip that one senior man, Gowanulli, always described with his characteristic black humour as ‘one-way trip that one, that one’.

26 This aspect of ageing in Indigenous settlements has been explored by Dianne Austin-Broos, who remarks that ‘[a]ge is one circumstance among others that can place an individual at the margins of kin relations and, therefore, at the margins of society’. Austin Broos, Dianne 2003, ‘Places, practices, and things: the articulation of Arrernte kinship with welfare and work’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 30, no. 1, p. 120.
27 This wall of dogs that old people often build around themselves serves the multiple purposes of companionship, a personal alarm system, and, in some cases, allows communion with dead relatives who are re-embodied in these dogs. Canine companionship is one of the things that seems to be most sorely missed by the old and frail who are increasingly confined within the walls of the largely European-controlled space of the town nursing home.
Conclusion

In this article, I set out to show some of the ways in which Kimberley Aborigines deploy a more general human capacity for projecting images of the body onto tools (and of tools onto the body)—in this case, *mutikas*, which permit an expansion and transcendence of bodily capacities while also noting the potential of vehicles to confine and restrict these capacities (as Nyalali’s lament seemed to suggest). I have taken one point of departure from Nancy Munn’s supernova analysis of the psychosocial use of canoes in Gawa (Papua New Guinea) and another from Paul Schilder’s still unsurpassed phenomenological study of the body’s imaginative representations of itself and others. I also pointed to the ways in which corporeal expansion—and the correlative contractions associated with death, funerals and broken-down vehicles—is achieved in the Kimberley life world. The much less articulated bodily experiences inherent to travelling in community *mutikas* are broadly consonant with the kinds of well-articulated bodily identifications the older generation makes with country. Fundamental to these experiences are the bodily confluences, differentiations and positionings within the vehicle itself, which the traveller must constantly negotiate with fellow travellers and the wider world.

28 Munn, *The Fame of Gawa.*
Country Love (*day 1*)

Pamela Lofts

After Christmas I went out along Undoolya road as I often do to walk the dog. I turned into one of the bush tracks and was drawn to a bright green car in the red sand with the doors open like flags. Lots of bunched-up clothing was scattered around and my heart missed a beat because it looked like a body lying on the ground.
The scene had the feeling of something violent having just happened I went up to the clothing and was relieved to discover that it was just a heap of clothes.

A red jumper a green jumper some crushed velvet thing.. maybe a cloak.. a fawn cable knit jumper
A bit further from the car was a broken Chinese bowl a couple of Moselle casks two orange enamel plates and a cluster of tampons swollen from the recent rain and looking like marshmallows

A tape Country Love had unravelled and slithered like a slippery snake over a woollen beanie and a pair of screwed up black underpants

Inside the car which smelt of essential oils musky and thick were beads mosquito coil boxes and a book on Buddhism A broken didgeridoo lay on the front seat amongst shattered glass
The boot was open showing a recent newspaper. The astrology page predicted 'Aries are headed off to distant or remote and exciting places there won't be much you can do with the rest of the day because everything will be so awkwardly placed.
The number-plate said Tasmania Holiday Isle and was in the bush a few meters away.

A long way from home I thought.
Roadworks: Automobility and belonging in Aboriginal art

Ursula Frederick

Life is old there
Older than the trees
Younger than the mountains
Growin’ like a breeze
Country Roads, take me home
To the place I belong…¹

Introduction

As a growing corpus of contemporary art reveals, automobility has a strong presence in Aboriginal cultural expression. The manner in which this theme is conveyed and what meanings these works communicate vary considerably across media, style and individual treatment. I would like to suggest that as a collective, these ‘roadworks’ might reveal as much about Aboriginal relations to ‘Country’² as any other Aboriginal art of place.

For several decades the concept of Country has played a pivotal role in the public discourse of Australian Aboriginality. It is a term that succinctly communicates the vast network of relationships that binds many Aboriginal people to their ancestry, their kin, their languages and their land in all its sentient creative capacity. In the context of Australian art, Country has been a particularly useful term (along with ‘Dreaming’) for describing the dominant theme of Aboriginal visual culture. It effectively encompasses a plethora of visual devices, formal properties, modes of representation and material substances as well as the underlying structures, stories and meanings that so many Aboriginal artworks

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¹ Denver, John, Nivert, Taffy and Danoff, Bill 1970, Take Me Home, Country Roads. Although originating within an American country-western genre, these lyrics aptly convey both the permanence and the ephemerality that I understand Aboriginal notions of Country to embrace. They also capture a sense of movement, journey and a longing for home. Inserting them here, I am gesturing to the importance of sound and music in augmenting experiences of automobility. As Michael Bull notes: ‘For many contemporary drivers the proximity of the aural now defines car habitation.’ Bull, Michael 2004, ‘Automobility and the power of sound’, Theory Culture Society, vol. 21, p. 246.

² Where I use the term Country in association with Aboriginal Australia, it is capitalised; in other contexts, it is not.
In this essay, I intend to explore how Country is represented through Aboriginal arts of automobility via visual analysis of specific paintings by four Aboriginal artists from rural and urban Australia.

I begin by introducing a variety of works by Aboriginal artists that incorporate automobility in different ways. I then focus on individual paintings by Christopher Pease (b. 1969), Lin Onus (1948–96) and Revel Cooper (c. 1934–83). Finally, through the work of the artist Ian Abdulla (1947–2011), I explore the art of automobility as an artist’s theme, considering the interrelated complexities of automobile subjectivity, Aboriginality and Country his oeuvre evokes. Before entering into a discussion of the art of Aboriginal automobility, it is useful to consider the role of Country in Aboriginal art and the experience of automobility in Aboriginal Australian history.

Mapping a Road to Country

In the Australian context, country is a word that commonly denotes either rural living or the nation-state. In recent decades, the term Country has also emerged as a key concept in defining and describing Aboriginal relations to land and identity. In its Aboriginal usage, the word Country embraces places, ecologies, kin, Law, beliefs, ways of being, a world view and a system of meaning. Although difficult to define in this context, as a gloss word Country may stand in for Indigenous language terms that signify specific places, tracts of land and, by association, a vast network of traditions and relationships. In other words, in usage, Country may be both abstract and very particular. In both senses, Country is something to which people belong. Consequently, in a very real way, Country can nourish the individual as well as distinguish and bind collectives of people. In post-Mabo Australia, Country can carry a particular resonance

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3 I do not mean to suggest that all Aboriginal art is explicitly about Country. It could be argued that, aside from what Aboriginal art means, it concerns Country because of the contemporary state of Australian politics. Sutton, Peter 1996, Country: Aboriginal boundaries and land ownership in Australia, Aboriginal History Monographs (ANU), Canberra; Bonyhady, Tim and Griffiths, Tom 2002 ‘Landscape and Language’ in Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds) Words for country: landscape & language in Australia, Sydney, UNSW Press, pp. 1–13.


with regard to the recognition and exercise of native-title rights and obligations, and in this allusion to the nation-state the term enfolds aspirations and claims to Indigenous sovereignty.

As an evocative and encompassing term, Country has been used across a variety of projects and programs implemented by individuals as well as public and private sector institutions, from local communities to government departments and universities. In the past decade alone, Country has been created, crossed, cruised, cared for, contested, pierced, painted and spoken. The creative arts industry in Australia has become a strong advocate for the use of the word Country as a structural framework for ordering the production, analysis, display and dissemination of contemporary Aboriginal art. For the most part, artists and arts workers recognise that Country is at the heart of much Aboriginal arts practice, cultural identity and sense of belonging. More than this, it is acknowledged that art as and of Country can operate as a site for the production and communication of Aboriginal beliefs, knowledge and identity.

I suggest that by reiterating the term Country, various art exhibitions, catalogues and essays on Aboriginal art have worked to normalise an Indigenous framework of belonging that further discredits the colonial concept of terra nullius. In this respect, country might mutually imply ‘Australia’ and rural life but it also acknowledges the existence of territories inhabited prior to colonial settlement. As Peter Sutton plainly puts it: ‘In Aboriginal terms, all landscape is someone’s home.’

In considering how Country might be read through artistic expressions of automobility, it is worth looking at how Country is situated in Aboriginal art more broadly. This can be examined through various disciplinary perspectives (including anthropology, archaeology and art history) and through different scales and ranges of production, via consideration of exhibitions and individual artworks. Strategies might include comparison of works with stylistic or thematic similarities within an artist’s oeuvre, art-centre practice or from common community/kin groupings.

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7 Some recent examples of this usage include the exhibition Crossing Country at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Landcare program Caring for Country.
8 It might also reflect a growing public familiarity with the term as an identifier of Indigeneity.
9 The Latin terra nullius (land belonging to no-one) is used in international law to refer to territory that has not been subject to ownership by a sovereign state. In the Australian historical context, its use denied prior Aboriginal occupation and was used as a justification for British claims to and settlement of the land.
Country in the Presentation of Aboriginal Art

Given what Country entails, one might argue that there is no better conceptual lens through which to view Aboriginal art. While it is certainly a very popular application, Country offers far more than curatorial convenience and a catchy title. It is the underlying logic that motivates many Aboriginal arts and crafts practices, past and present. Over the past two decades, anthropologists, art historians and gallery professionals have deployed the language of Country in their research, curation and writing about Aboriginal art. Country is used as a theme to structure exhibitions in a more or less direct fashion. Curatorial projects have focused on particular sites or land formations (such as Jilji) or on the forces and figures that emanate through them (such as Wandjina and Gwion Guion). Specific motifs have been used to thematically link artworks by different artists. Likewise, the representations of a single motif or object can allude to a specific Country and cultural group. There is a capacity for some figures to symbolise the unification of a region while also accommodating group difference, as in the case of the Rainbow Serpent Yingarna. Such motifs are a contributing factor in social cohesion and reveal an important nexus between art, Country and people.

Presenting the art produced from a single community, regional art centre or movement is a common approach to the curation of Aboriginal art. This can have the effect of presenting one Country through many eyes, revealing both synergies and diversity in artistic styles. Perhaps a more novel exercise in the context of Aboriginal art is the development of retrospectives, such as those for Bardayal ‘Lofty’ Nadjamerrek and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, which effectively chart a single individual’s renderings of their Country over the course of their artistic life. This curatorial method not only allows the viewer to observe an artist’s changing practice, it also offers multiple views of the same Country and therefore enables different sensorial engagements. River, Land, Memory, an early retrospective of Ian Abdulla’s work, follows a related temporal framework that

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11 This is particularly the case where Country is positioned to intersect with the concepts of Law and Dreaming, and their Aboriginal language equivalents.
12 Jila, Jilji and Miyi—Mangkaja Arts, 2007, Cool-Art Gallery, Coolum Beach, Qld.
14 Mowanjum Artists—New works in ochre, 15 October – 17 November 2010, Japingka Gallery, Fremantle, WA.
16 A regional approach to the display of Aboriginal art is perhaps the most common nod to ‘Country’ employed by galleries and museums, including the recently opened Indigenous art wing of the National Gallery of Australia.
Roadworks: Automobility and belonging in Aboriginal art

offers one artist’s outlook on the SA Riverina. In a less direct manner, some exhibitions have sought to highlight the linkages across geographies and between peoples, through the existence of sprawling narratives and ancestral journeys (Wagilag Sisters). More recently, this focus on Country has embraced colonial landscapes such as the Canning Stock Route and facilitated return to Country. It has also generated cross-cultural collaborations, such as that between Yolnu and balanda (non-Yolnu) in Djalkiri: We are standing on their names. Other scholars and exhibitions have emphasised the formal expression of power that is evident in Country. Howard Morphy, for example, has written extensively on bir’yun—the visual effect of shimmering that endows Yolnu painting with power, and which can also have specific connotations ‘depending on the clan and Ancestral Being concerned’.

At the same time, an artwork can embody the physical fabric of Country. Artists might incorporate these materials figuratively, as in Christian Thompson’s photographic series Australian Graffiti (2008). Or they might be tangibly embedded in the work itself. Natural pigments, bark, grasses, shell and stone are all material links to Country. Julie Gough has described collecting such materials together as a way of marking associations between places of personal experience. The use of organic substances and their associated place and cultural meaning are occasionally incorporated within the exhibition space through audio, video and other multimedia displays. Furthermore, methods of procurement, the cultural knowledge and protocols of place, and the social relations of hunting or gathering might be the basis of the artwork itself, as with Ricky Maynard’s photographic essay on mutton-birding in Tasmania.

Many curatorial endeavours use place as an anchor for exploring the linkages between the past and the present and for emphasising the importance of remembering. Thus, in a recursive sense it is acknowledged that speaking of and about Country, in text, paint and voice, are important practices for the

21 We Stand on the Footprints of the Old People, Film [34 min.], Morphy, Howard and Frederick, Ursula 2011, Djalkiri: We are standing on their names, Blue Mud Bay touring exhibition, produced by Nomad Art.
25 Taylor, Penny (ed.) 1988, After 200 Years: Photographic essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia today, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.
ongoing production and maintenance of cultural knowledge. And of course Aboriginal art has served a powerful political role as a form of protest and diplomacy (the Bark Petition),

Alongside these ancestral geographies, we might also find group exhibitions that evolve out of places constructed under the framework of European colonisation: pastoral stations, mission towns and colonial settlements. Carrolup, Ngukurr, Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Papunya and Warburton are each in their own way important loci of artistic activity, although the country that inspires their work extends far beyond the reach of their communities. It is in such centres that the expansive and visionary qualities in Aboriginal art are often most evident. Here we see how people are able to reach out for Country in their minds and then picture it on the canvas or page. Aboriginal artists often paint Country in this ‘extended’ way—that is, from a spatial or temporal distance from the Country being depicted.

In summary, there are many ways that Country can be expressed through art. It can be depicted at varying scales, spatially and temporally. It might appear pictorial or it might be abstract. The motivations behind its production are varied and often multifunctional, just as it might communicate different meanings through multivalency. It is important to recognise that the art-making process in itself can also be a mode for connecting with place. The examples I have offered give some indication of how Aboriginal art can express an engagement with Country. This in turn provides a context for considering how Country might be experienced automotively.

**Automobility in Aboriginal Australia**

Insofar as it ‘opened up’ the outback for sustained exploration and settlement, the car might be viewed as a colonising agent and an extension of colonial
administration. It is well known that the car is a symbol of modernity and that Aboriginal societies suffered under systems of governance in which modernity flourished. The system of automobility made Aboriginal lands and people more accessible to outsiders because with more roads and cars came more settlers, missionaries, miners, tourists and government officials wanting to see, use and at times control Aboriginal people, their land and their resources. Thus, as a set of historical policies and practices, the project of automobility might be seen to have worked against Indigenous people and their ongoing claims to land and sovereignty.

Not only have motor vehicles facilitated access to land by non-Indigenous peoples, road travel is also one of the ways by which white belonging is enacted. Roads, highways, petrol stations and motels normalise the occupation and governance of land by non-Indigenous authority and capital. Roads divide land into bounded entities and predetermined pathways maintained and controlled by government agencies. Moreover, the myth of terra nullius is perpetuated symbolically in the ‘explorer’ and ‘discovery’ tropes regularly used in the automotive advertising sector. Clearly, in the context of Aboriginal Australia, issues of automobility are tethered to tensions that are extant in the histories and contemporary politics of Australia.

The technology of the car facilitated racist policies and procedures in other ways. Cars were one instrument used in the administration of assimilationist policies, including the removal of Indigenous children from their families, until the 1970s. Laurel Nannup’s woodcut Leaving Home depicts the day a big, black car took her and her sister from their home to Wandering Mission. The print is one of many heartbreaking recollections from the Stolen Generations era. Ngunnawal elder Matilda House’s memory of being woken by an engine rumbling in the early hours of the morning is another harrowing example. While the consequences of this history are still being felt, automobility presents another raft of issues for Aboriginal people today. In addition to the associated issues of petrol sniffing (see Brady, this volume), car theft and negative stereotyping, the relatively high incidence of road fatalities and injury amongst the Aboriginal population are of major concern.

29 It is must be noted that other technologies of movement were involved in a long and complex process of exploration, dispersal, emigration and settlement. Jeremy Long’s account gives some insights on the matter: Long, Jeremy 1989, ‘Leaving the desert: actors and sufferers in the Aboriginal exodus from the Western Desert’, Aboriginal History, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 9–44.
30 Note, for example, the strong connections in advertising between off-road access via four-wheel-drives and utes as ways of normalising non-Aboriginal use of land.
31 Dictionary of Australian Artists Online: <http://www.daao.org.au>
33 Aboriginal Australians are over-represented in statistics relating to road deaths and injuries. In recognition of this fact, many States have developed road-safety programs and strategies aimed at the
I mention these matters because they are a valid counterweight to the more popular image of the car as a symbol of freedom. In recent years scholars have mounted compelling arguments for why we need to rethink the association between liberty and driving. There are in fact significant equity issues and contradictions to note. Yet I do not want to ignore what Gilroy calls the ‘popular pleasures of auto-freedom—mobility, power, speed’. Nor do I want to lose sight of the practical realities of automobility’s benefits. In fact, by attending to its presence in art, we might be able to critically examine both the opportunities and the dangers the road presents. But before we look at how some Aboriginal artists picture their relationships to the road, I examine some of the associations between automobility, Aboriginality and Country raised in previous studies.

The field of study identified as ‘automobilities’ research is a relatively new arena of scholarship. As Frederick and Stefanoff (this volume) outline, much of this work has emerged from Europe and the United States and reflects what Featherstone describes as a broader interest in the ‘flows, movement and mobility in social life’. Consequently, much automobilities research is concerned not only with the car but also with the cultures, spatialities and materialities that the automobile enables and affords.

Though few Australian researchers currently recognise the conceptual parameters of the new automobilities framework, several have explored different aspects of car culture in Aboriginal Australia. Much of this work derives from a single discipline: anthropology. The majority of ethnographic observations are made in the context of larger fieldwork programs rather than specifically car-focused studies. Nevertheless, they present useful insights into the social functions

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34 In the context of Aboriginal Australia there are grounds for suggesting that automobility might be perceived as a tool towards self-determination. See, for example, the Mutuka Project: <http://www.palyafund.org.au/projects/link/Mutuka.aspx> (viewed 8 October 2011).


38 Notable exceptions include historian Georgine Clarsen and film and cultural studies scholar Catherine Simpson.
and meanings of vehicles in Arnhem Land, Central Australia and northern Western Australia. They discuss how the motor vehicle is used and explore its symbolic and utilitarian currencies.

Like other items introduced by non-Aboriginal cultures, the motorcar is observed in Aboriginal mythology, and in a pragmatic sense it serves the practice of Aboriginal ceremony. In fact, Peterson has argued that increased access to the car in Central Australia, beginning in the 1970s, facilitated the reproduction of an expanded regional sociality based on male initiation ceremonies. He points to the great pleasure men receive from travelling and the importance of journeying in Western Desert religiosity and social dynamics. In suggesting that through ‘the extension of the initiation journey the greater Western Desert is gradually being integrated into a common moral community’, Peterson effectively demonstrates the role automobility has had in reshaping the social contours of Country. Recursively, Gerrard identifies how the ‘establishment of outstations has also created Aboriginal dependence on motor transport’. Speaking in the context of a specific Arnhem Land community, Gerrard examines how various social mechanisms are employed to overcome a chronic shortage of motor vehicles. Myers and Stotz similarly explore vehicle access as a resource. Stotz’s work highlights the gender relations of Walpiri automobility, and she argues that ownership of a community Toyota is a male privilege. Significantly, this privilege is asserted, she suggests, by linking control over the vehicle with traditional rights to land.

Stotz’s ethnography makes a number of interesting observations regarding mobility, space and time and the effect the ‘Toyota’ has had in their social


41 Anthony Redmond (this volume).


46 Gerrard focuses on one key mechanism to acquire motor vehicle access—that is, humbugging (ibid.).


48 Stotz, Kurdungurlu got to drive Toyota, pp. 2–3.
reproduction and negotiation amongst the Walpiri. Of relevance here is her identification of the space inside the car and how seating arrangements continue to reflect the social ordering of Walpiri space. She goes on to suggest that the small private vehicle is much like a portable camp used by a single family. Following this, Diana Young outlines some of the ways in which the car is used as an architectural support in Pitjantjatjara camps. If the socio-spatial relations delineated in reference to Country and kin outside the vehicle are also enacted within the car, it might then follow that in some situations the interior space of the vehicle is also experienced as a kind of Country.

This sensibility—of Country permeating the interior space of the motorcar—is captured in a scene from Beneath Clouds, a feature film by Aboriginal filmmaker Ivan Sen. Towards the end of the film, the two protagonists, Lena and Vaughn, hitch a ride. Close shots of the faces inside the car are spliced with views from the distinctive landscape outside. The passengers look up to a cliff that was likely an Aboriginal massacre site. An older Aboriginal lady breaks the silence: ‘Where are your people from, girl?’ she asks the young Lena, whom she now sits beside. Which is to say where is your Country, who are you? This performance of place-making and identity association within the space of the car is an example of how automobility can be experienced simultaneously as processes of movement and anchoring.

Although we generally associate a connection to place with fixity, this scene also suggests that the sense of stability that comes with belonging is actively created rather than static. The idea that something can be stable while in motion is also a sensorial experience of driving. It is perhaps this feeling that Jacky Tjupuru communicates when he describes his first ride in a motorcar, about 1930: ‘We climbed in straightway and we were sitting there…He took us away and I was ignorantly thinking that we were still sitting at the camp, but I saw the camp moving away in the distance. It was as if we were sitting there making a noise.’

This vignette reveals one man’s reflection on his first experience of automobility. Other early encounters between Aboriginal people and motor vehicles are


50 Young, ‘The life and death of cars’.

51 Sen, Ivan (dir.) 2002, Beneath Clouds.

52 Motion, place and kinship are reiterated and symbolically bound in several scenes within this film.


54 I am conscious that the coupling of Indigenous peoples with technology as symbols of modernity has also had a problematic history. As Gelder points out, it ‘can be a way of invoking Aboriginal naivety’. Gelder, K.
recorded visually in rock art and photography. Documentary films offer another representational format for the automotive experiences of Aboriginal people. And alongside Sen’s feature there are several fiction films incorporating Aboriginal stories within the road genre. In addition to the films themselves, there is a growing body of scholarship that examines Aboriginal automobility as represented in film and television.

Automobility in Aboriginal Art

There is no doubt that cars have played a key role in postwar Australian life so it is hardly surprising that automobiles feature strongly in Aboriginal art. Despite the prevalence of automobility in Aboriginal Australia very little has been written about it in relation to Aboriginal art. The few exceptions in the literature each demonstrate how vehicles might be entwined with Aboriginal art movements, and as objects that mediate exchange and social values. This research has, however, been more concerned with addressing the social mechanics of art production than in detailing individual works. Diana Young
makes several interesting observations on the relationship between cars and mark-making processes. One of these is her reading of Anmatyerr artist Mavis Holmes Petyarr’s painting on a car door:

The head of a person is painted on the window as though going along inside the car, and red and green country—rocks, trees, earth—is depicted on the metal paintwork part of the door. I imagine that the artist was showing how the travel of the car through that country had transformed both the vehicle and those inside it through access to ancestral power—that is, through access to country.62

Young’s account, along with the other examples from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands that she provides, suggests a unique insight into how the car, people, community and Country can be mutually transformed. She also relays how an Anangu history of roads—as human marks made on Country—is told as people are moving through the landscape: ‘These things are generally spoken of as they are passed.’63 And these ‘things’ that Young writes of reveal an intimate Anangu knowledge—of roads, potholes, curves and ‘events that happened on the road’64—which effectively equates to a knowledge of Country.

As in the work described by Young, some Aboriginal artists incorporate the car’s fabric as a material support. A series of bonnet paintings from the Western Desert Patyarr community is amongst this kind. There are many examples of artists using the car as a motif. The almost full-scale grass Toyota truck woven by the Tjanpi Desert weavers is an outstanding fibre-art sculpture that won the 2005 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. In some instances, the motor vehicle and the road become recurrent motifs, as in recent works by Billy Kenda. Or, for example, the light trucks and wide-angle roads in many of Jenny Broun’s paintings. In this regard the vehicle is an explicit part of the work’s composition and narrative, and reflects her individual experience. ‘Those experiences of [being] in the bush, especially traveling, is a big part of my life.’65 In other works, the car is a feature of the world the artist is depicting: motor vehicles are prevalent in a diverse range of areas from Ellen Jose’s suburban mise en scène to the ‘history paintings’ of Ngaanyatjarra Lands.66 Yet the car also features in more radical formulations as in A painting for the underdawg (2005), one of Gordon Hookey’s characteristically confrontational pieces. It is a comic-political play on words that incorporates anthropomorphised native animals as protagonists. A dingo driver with his passengers hoons across the canvas in

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Broun, quoted in Stanton, J. E. 2004, On track: contemporary Aboriginal art from Western Australia, Occasional Paper No. 6, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, p. 59.
66 History Paintings: All the stories got into our minds and eyes, [Exhibition catalogue], 6 May – 3 June 2011, Darwin. Outstation—art from art centres and Warakurna Artists.
a souped-up, jet-engine-propelled car. The painting is a response to negative stereotyping of Aboriginal people and their cars and linked to an exhibition called *Ruddock’s Wheel*.67

There are many other examples of cars featuring in contemporary Aboriginal art.68 Although the car is an important symbol of automobility, automobility itself cannot, however, be reduced to the motor vehicle. In the section that follows, I turn my attention to the road.

**On the Road**

Of the numerous ‘roadworks’ that exist in the corpus of Australian Aboriginal art, there are many that do not include cars. Some of these are ‘abstract’ works, such as the landscapes painted by Queenie MacKenzie and Freddie Timms. Their contemporary Rover Thomas (Joolama) is responsible for perhaps the most well-known ‘roadwork’ of all: *Roads Meeting* (1987). In a figurative sense, this painting appears as a landscape depicting the intersection of two roads: one red dirt, the other bitumen. At each side of the canvas, nested in the fork of the two roads, there is a hand with forearm reaching towards the central crossing of the paths. In their symbolic capacity, the two roads reflect the ‘two ways’ of Australia’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, coming together but maintaining their own integrity. As an expression of Country, Thomas’s painting would appear to show these two cultures inhabiting the one land. Given the date of the work’s production—in the year prior to Australia’s bicentenary—Thomas might also have been suggesting that Australia was at a crossroads in time.

For the purposes of comparison, the three artworks I have chosen for closer considered attention share a realist approach. Unlike the ‘abstract’ roadworks from Warmun and elsewhere, the selection of paintings I discuss below—by Nyoongar artists Revel Cooper and Christopher Pease and Yorta Yorta artist Lin Onus—employ a detailed pictorial mode.69 Another feature shared by these paintings is that the road is a key character in both the narrative and the

67 Many of Hookey’s works directly protest racist statements about Aboriginal people circulating in the media and political arena. Hookey is not afraid to address this racism in clever puns and (often crude) colourful imagery. *Ruddock’s Wheel* is worth noting because the painting and exhibition are responses to a remark made by Federal Government Minister Phillip Ruddock who stated with regard to contemporary Indigenous Australians: ‘We’re dealing with people who are essentially hunter-gatherers. They didn’t have chariots. I don’t think they invented the wheel.’ Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 2000, ‘Ruddock under fire from Democrats, Labor and Greens’, *PM*, 5 October, ABC Radio, viewed February 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s196112.htm>

68 There are too many examples to name here; some include work by June Richards, H. J. Wedge and Badger Bates.

69 In making this selection, I am aware that the artists responsible—Revel Cooper, Lin Onus and Christopher Pease—share some social and historical connections beyond the aesthetic connections seen in their art: Onus
composition, although it appears quite differently in each work. In Cooper’s painting, the road is central and bold, yet it is enveloped by dense bush. Onus’s road is subtle and symbolic; it doubles as a snake reflected in the side mirror of an unseen vehicle. In Pease’s composition, the road is the land, filling the entire ground on which the figure of a Nyoongar man stands. Yet in all three paintings the viewer is provided with a strong sensation of being on the road. The vehicle is implied rather than seen. An ‘on the road’ point of view is devised by the artist so that the viewer is located in the space of the car and the position of the driver. In this sense, the artist and viewer share the same road and the same view of Country.

Country Roads: *South–West Landscape near Pemberton* (c. 1962)

In his painting *South–West Landscape near Pemberton*, Nyoongar artist Revel Cooper depicts a lush landscape of tall gums, grass trees and other native vegetation. The trees stand straight and strong, with white trunks and verdant foliage. The ground is a warm-yellow, rock-scattered surface that rises steeply to hills in the background. Only a small sweep of sky can be seen, slipping between the high terrain of land and a rich canopy of leaves and branches that crowds the foreground. The forest frames the scene, enveloping every edge and corner, but for a bold band of black that sprouts from the very bottom of the image.

The central position and open space of the road provide some interruption, but, rather than cleaving or competing with the adjacent flora, the road provides a visual respite to the vibrant and congested detail of the surroundings. In return, its stark presence is softened by amber hues. This point of view holds viewers and the artist together, hovering directly above the road. The eye cannot help but follow this line as it curves its way into the hills. If one traces its route, we pass native forest and clearings. We witness kangaroos alert and unfettered in the foreground and in the middle ground we find horses grazing in an enclosure adjacent to a small farmhouse. Beyond this the road climbs through the hills to a point in the distance before it suddenly becomes absorbed by the forest.

Cooper has painted the road as a trajectory winding through the landscape, and this lends the scene a temporal quality and narrative anticipation. We are on a journey of some kind. Where will this road take us? What is beyond the hills? How far are we going? When will we stop? Although the painting is unique, it is one of a number of paintings that Revel Cooper made of the landscapes of south-western Australia, his home. Born in the town of Katanning, Revel...
Cooper, along with many other Nyoongar children, was forced to live on the Carrolup Native Settlement,\textsuperscript{70} at Marribank in the southern wheatbelt of Western Australia. It was here, as a child, that he first learned to draw and paint. Key features of Cooper's painting find precedent in this earlier ‘Carrolup School’ style, which was rich in silhouetted trees, native animals and receding roads that represented ‘the world they knew from their own experience’.\textsuperscript{71} Many of the Carrolup artworks were noted for their ‘balanced composition…sure handling of movement and the true sense of perspective’.\textsuperscript{72} This painting—made when Cooper was an adult—reflects a maturity and a strength of technical skill that came through years of dedicated art practice.

It has been suggested that the bush landscapes of south-west Western Australia that are the focus of the Carrolup art movement resonate with a yearning for the world outside the settlement: ‘We could speak of their attempt to escape through art into a world far removed from the actuality in which they found themselves.’\textsuperscript{73} John Stanton has noted that the conditions of institutionalised settlement life encountered at Carrolup can be seen to parallel those observed in prison. And it was in such circumstances of incarceration that Cooper spent many years of his life. In fact, he also produced several artworks from Fremantle Prison, remarking: ‘I paint mostly from memory…I’m happy painting whether I’m in here or outside.’\textsuperscript{74}

Cooper’s experience highlights the significance of mobility for Aboriginal people at a time when their movement was controlled and curtailed. In this regard art and automobility might serve a common aim: to escape, to move through, to travel the physical landscape of space and the imaginative landscape of the mind. Fellow artist Primus Ugle’s words bring another dimension to Cooper’s roadscapes and the potential significance of the road motif in earlier Carrolup art: ‘We skipped over towns back in those years, skipped over them…back in the ’40s, ’50s, yeah, I remember it all, it was safer for us, safer for us to keep going. And not to stop.’\textsuperscript{75} Ugle’s recollection highlights the importance of the motor car in maintaining the security of Nyoongar families. It is relevant here to link Cooper’s visual integration of the road and bush with the pragmatic importance of mobility to Nyoongar people and their experience of country. Cooper’s own

\textsuperscript{70} The Carrolup Native Settlement was established in 1915 before temporarily closing in 1922. The institution was reopened in 1940 and the Carrolup art movement began in 1945 under the encouragement of headmaster, Noel White, and continued until Carrolup closed permanently in 1951. Stanton, J. E. 1992, \textit{Nyungar landscapes: Aboriginal artists of the south-west—the heritage of Carrolup, Western Australia}, Occasional Paper No. 3, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, Perth.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p. 13.

\textsuperscript{72} The \textit{Great Southern Herald}, quoted in ibid., p. 16.

\textsuperscript{73} Phillips and Berndt, quoted in ibid., p. 14.


\textsuperscript{75} Primus Ugle quoted in Stanton, \textit{On track: contemporary Aboriginal art from Western Australia}, p.14.
practice speaks of the potential for realising a vision and connection with country, through art and memory, even where the artist is directly displaced from it.\textsuperscript{76}

If Cooper's painting communicates something of the intermittence and movement of Nyoongar people through Country—landscape as moving picture—then Christopher Pease's urban roadscape conveys an effort to consolidate Aboriginal presence, over time, in place.

*Nyoongar Dreaming* is a dramatic and moody representation of a particular stretch of road in urban East Perth, Western Australia. Although the stillness, austere geometry and amorphous landmarks give the scene an air of anonymity, this is not just any road. In fact, as the title suggests, it is a place of Nyoongar significance. This is made evident by the Nyoongar man standing in the centre of the road and the lemon-lime sunset reminiscent of the vibrant Carrolup style.\textsuperscript{77}

### Beneath the Bitumen: *Nyoongar Dreaming* (1999)

The image depicts Nyoongar artist Peter Farmer standing in the centre lane of East Parade near the turn-off to a newly constructed freeway. This major transport artery skirts the edge of metropolitan Perth and is named after Peter Farmer’s uncle, football legend Graham ‘Polly’ Farmer. The road Pease depicts is incomplete; there are no signs or lights; the freshly painted arrows and lines are the only indications. Incomplete that is but for Peter Farmer, who stands resolutely facing the viewer, both occupying the road and watching over it. Unlike the signals he replaces, Farmer does not stop or block our view, nor does he guide our direction onwards. His presence arrests the eye and raises questions in the viewer. Who is this man? And what is he doing standing at the intersection of a freeway? Farmer’s position is disarming—this is not where we expect a person to stand—and it is welcoming; he is the only sign of life in a surreally still inner-city desert lit by an electric-green sky.

It is this sight of Farmer—simultaneously unsettling and comforting—that brings the work its gravitas and meaning. The eerie emptiness of the urban environs occupied by Peter Farmer speaks to what Byrne and Houston identify as the work’s capacity to capture ‘both the “presence” and “absence” of Aboriginal culture, memory and history in Perth’s contemporary inner city landscape’.\textsuperscript{78} As

\begin{itemize}
  \item[76] Similarly, Alison French has spoken of how Albert Namatjira’s ‘“watercolours generate journeys: cruising country of the mind and spirit.” French, Alison 2005 ‘From camel ‘boy’ to flash Dodge ‘driver’? The role of transport in the art and life of Albert Namatjira and its misrepresentation in the public domain’, unpublished conference paper, Cruising Country symposium, Canberra.
  \item[77] In addition to other Nyoongar artworks, Pease’s painting might be drawn into comparison with the many roadscapes of non-Indigenous artist Jeffrey Smart—as Brenda Croft points out (Albert’s gift’, p. 87).
  \item[78] Byrne, J. and Houston, D. 2005, ‘Ghosts in the city: multicultural redevelopment and urban memory in East Perth’, in D. Cryle and J. Hillier (eds), Consent and Consensus: Politics, media and governance intwentieth
well as being a portrait of a place, a person, an identity and a road, this painting reflects a historical moment in the redevelopment of East Perth and it makes reference to a much longer history that lies beneath the bitumen.

Pease’s decision to represent the freeway after it is built but prior to its completion lends the painting a liminal quality, a state of ‘in-between-ness’ that is no doubt intentional. Curator Clotilde Bullen suggests that this unresolved road ‘is a metaphor for unfinished business’ that relates to the fact that the road runs through Nyoongar land, usurped first in the early settlement of the Swan River Colony (Perth) and once again for the East Perth Redevelopment Project. Like many road construction projects, the building of this freeway was highly contentious. It formed part of a broader ‘urban renewal’ scheme that displaced contemporary Aboriginal, immigrant and working-class people and masked their attachments and memories of the area through urban design and marketing materials. The ‘space that was once an inner city industrial enclave and a contiguous Aboriginal cultural landscape—a site of both everyday inhabitation and spiritual significance’ was sold off to residents looking for a fashionably hip community. Pease’s ‘roadwork’ addresses automobility in its most contemporary conceptualisation: as a system of car and driver, material infrastructure and regulations that collectively ‘may be seen to function as “technologies of government” which translate political rationalities and shape the performances and movements of drivers, vehicles, and the spaces of the road’.

Although it is not necessary to understand the contested nature of the Graham Farmer Freeway to gain something from Pease’s painting, this background does illuminate the political nature of the painting. This political energy extends to broader issues of native title, land rights, spatial governance and the politics of ‘naming’ places. In bringing Graham Farmer’s nephew into the frame, Pease humanises the road—establishing the Nyoongar identity of the man after whom the freeway is named. In doing so, he reminds us that this is not merely a road but a place that was and is inhabited by Aboriginal people. And this is perhaps where Pease’s use of the road is most striking. By signalling that the freeway—the leitmotif of high modernity—is also a site of Aboriginal belonging, Pease bypasses the trappings of ‘deep time’ that have consigned Aboriginal people and their ancestral connections to Country to the pre-colonial past. In this regard, the road is no idle signifier. It is contested, not only because it is an expression of land; it indicates that the lived attachment to that land is experienced now.

80 Byrne and Houston, ‘Ghosts in the city’.
81 Ibid., p. 3.
In making the road a centrepiece of the canvas, we cannot ignore the blackness of the ground on which Farmer stands. This is the freeway made flesh, and the cityscape reclaimed as Nyoongar Country, in man and name.

Through the Mirror: *Road to Redfern* (1988)

While the road in *Nyoongar Dreaming* has a stability and weight anchored in a documentary orientation, Lin Onus’s road is unseen and illusory. *Road to Redfern* (1988) is an unusual composition that represents the view through the driver’s side window. A large rectangular wing mirror projects from the bottom left corner of the painting, creating the illusion that we, the viewers, are driving in a vehicle. Looking out beyond the mirror, we can see a field of pale yellow-grey grasses beneath a clear, blue sky. The rolling contours of this land are echoed in three pairs of unfurled ribbon—red, yellow and black—flowing freely from the vehicle’s mirror in the centre foreground. The ribbons are uplifted by the vehicle’s motion, like an Aboriginal flag carried on the wind. Although they are attached and streaming from the mirror, the ribbons also appear to intermingle with the undulating terrain behind. In this instant of automobility, the fabric of the vehicle and the land become one.

The side rearview mirror is a compelling feature of *Road to Redfern*. Its size and shape resemble a truck mirror, but they also evoke the proportions and orientation of an Arnhem Land bark painting. This is made all the more apparent by the detail that appears within its frame: a black-and-white snake winding its way across a ground of rarrk—the pattern of fine cross-hatching integral to this art form. Yet if we are to read this rectangular shape also as a mirror then this image is a reflection of the view behind us. The snake is actually the road on which we are travelling and whose movements are echoed in the undulating hills of the country. To make this allusion stronger, Onus has cleverly designed the snake’s head to look like a car. Is this the serpentine figure that underpins so many Aboriginal lands and beliefs? Is this a trick of the eye, a moment of white-line fever? This is precisely the kind of double entendre for which Onus’s work is famous. Thus, the painting becomes an image of the road as a living entity and the driving experience as an awakened encounter.

If we examine closely the surrounding vegetation, we might discern that the field is made up of fine crisscrossing lines. In painting the grasses in this manner, Onus links the rhythmic growth of the landscape to the cross-hatching patterns found in the bark/mirror. These, then, are two corresponding yet alternative visions of the one landscape, mutually reflective. Onus’s innovative application

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83 According to Donna Leslie, this is the view from the artist’s four-wheel-drive.
84 Although Leslie suggests the vehicle in question is a four-wheel-drive, the dimensions and size of the mirror are more likely those of a truck.
of multiple systems of representation allows for the presence of different realities of Country. Perhaps as a Yorta Yorta man with exposure to a large store of cross-cultural art influences, Onus is suggesting that there are various ways of experiencing, seeing and representing Country.

Such propositions and witty visual illusions are common in Onus’s work and reflect the power of his process of juxtaposition to ‘unsettle the natural or established order of things, to subvert conventional expectations’. Road to Redfern is in keeping with this ability to cleverly synergise different visual traditions within the single composition. In this roadscape, Onus manages to integrate narrative and symbolism and to create a sense of simultaneously moving forward and reflecting back. In so doing, Onus manages to capture the phenomenological experience that comes with automobility, the time-space distanciation, the impressionistic thoughts and feelings that seem to pass through the body as it travels. He also realises the sensory atmosphere of driving: the wind, the speed, the clear light and air and the distinct visual nature of country glimpsed through a moving vehicle, the fact that you can see detail in the foreground, though distant features are blurred.

Onus created this painting in 1988, and its title is no doubt indicative of his own journey to attend Australia Day protests in Sydney. In a less literal sense, it alludes, as Donna Leslie points out, to the path of ‘Aboriginal history as a story of survival’ and Onus’s own ‘lifelong awareness of political reality and its collective challenge’. Consequently, what the painting conveys is both light-hearted and deep, the sacred embedded in the everyday. Painted in the Australian bicentennial year, it cleverly poses the question of where Australians are, where we are going and where we have been.

**Going Places: The journeys of Ian Abdulla**

The individual paintings described above go some way towards indicating the scope and potential of the ‘roadworks’ theme to illuminate Aboriginal experiences of Country and automobility. I now want to home in on the work of one particular artist for whom automobility has been an enduring subject.

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87 Redfern is an inner-city suburb of Sydney. It has a large Aboriginal community and is recognised historically as an epicentre of Aboriginal activism, resistance and enterprise. It was from here that the 26 January 1988 Invasion Day protest march, attended by Onus, commenced. ‘All roads lead to Redfern, if you’re black’, according to Sonya Brindel, a participant in the Redfern Oral History Project (viewed 25 September 2011, <http://www.redfernoralhistory.org/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx>).
To my mind, no other Australian artist has represented automobility with such sincerity and concerted attention as the late Ngarrindjeri artist Ian Abdulla. Viewers familiar with his art will know that there is a strong current flowing through the opus of his life in paint: the River Murray. And while it is clear that the Murray sustained Abdulla and his family, shaped his daily life and deeply influenced his art, I would suggest that there is another corridor via which we might experience Abdulla’s stories. Together these two courses—the river and the road—frame the country we have come to know through Abdulla’s oeuvre. They are complementary flows. Like the diurnal rhythms within which his stories are set, they mingle together.

The importance of the road and the river to Abdulla might be measured not only in the regularity by which they were painted by him but also by the sheer expansiveness of their presence. Rarely does the canvas contain the course of either. Instead, both flow beyond the picture plane of a single work, into another and another, so that collectively Abdulla’s oeuvre might be seen as a vast map made up of tributaries of water and bitumen. This network of black and blue is Abdulla’s Country and it represents the history of his life in the Riverina of South Australia.

Each of Abdulla’s paintings depicts an episode from his life, from his childhood in the 1950s through to his adult years. Abdulla’s style of painting has been described as naive, and although it is generally figurative, many of the features in his landscapes are almost abstracted. The stars of the sky are yellow dots, the trees and bushes blocks of colour. His process of mapping Country through visual narratives is reinforced by a characteristic use of bird’s-eye perspective and text at the top of the canvas to direct the plot. In this way, Abdulla’s oral and visual recollections play out distinctively and complementarily, entwined in the same picture plane. As such, his series of works offers a different perspective on the road to those artworks discussed above. Instead of being brought into the space of the road, car and driver, and the immediacy of the automobile experience, the viewer is kept at some distance to the scene depicted. This is a clever visual cue that conveys a temporal detachment between the viewer and the incident. Abdulla is clearly reflecting on his past and we are invited to share in the reminiscences.

It is clear that Abdulla is on the move when we see where these stories are formed. His voice, hovering as text in the sky above, tells us the places to which

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89 My reading of Abdulla’s corpus as a vast map is influenced by Abdulla’s use of text to denote places, people and activities within the image. The narrative quality of his texts are also complementary with reading his art practice alongside the road movie genre.

90 Floating text is central to the composition and narrative tone of Abdulla’s art, for more discussion of this device in Abdulla’s work see Fox, Stephen, Abdulla, Ian and Maughan, Janet 2004, *Ian W. Abdulla: Elvis Has Entered the Building*, Wakefield Press: Adelaide.
he is going: Marree, Loxton, Winkie, Gerard Mission and so on. The car and
the road are key subjects in many of these recollections. Even where they are
incidental to the stated narrative, the presence of the road or car implicitly
asserts it was the means by which the narrative was made possible.

Whether it is parked or moving, the vehicle is the agent through which we
encounter many episodes in Abdulla’s life. Often these moments are light-
hearted and nostalgic reminiscences of youth, such as the drive-ins at Barmera,91
spotlighting for rabbits92 or having a few beers by the River Murray.93 And
through an honest and open style, Abdulla engages the viewer to join him on
the journey. With him, we attend the movies and go to the races, the oval to
play baseball or to the river to catch fish.94 These are spaces that we share with
mates, girlfriends, brothers, aunts and uncles, and they are moments where
Abdulla reflects on life, sees God and misses his children.95 They also reveal,
in addition to times spent fishing and hunting, something of his life working
on the farms of the Riverina, for the Government and as a ranger monitoring
the duck-shooting season and counting wildlife.96 There are times when the
narrative explicitly concerns driving, as in the episode when his V8 Valiant cut
out in Me and my step-brother coming down… (2009).

Abdulla’s narratives of driving capture the mood within the car, the sociality
of driving, the funny instances shared and the unusual sights witnessed:

One day the kid’s Mother and myself were driving along the road on a
Sunday’s drive when one of the girls seen this bull mounting this cow
and she said Mum why is that cow pushing the other cow well I couldn’t
drive any longer well I had to pullover and have a good laugh.97

Yet as often as he depicted the landscape in motion, Abdulla represented the
car as stationary. These episodes are moments of stillness and reflection, when
he sits on his car watching the cockatoos in the trees98 or thinking about his
children.99 These roadworks offer poignant and magical visions such as the time
when the artist shone his spotlight on the middle of the oval and saw three female
kangaroos and a joey feeding.100 In painting these moments, Abdulla captures

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91 Watching pictures at Barmera drivin (1998).
92 Spot lightning at night for rabbits (2009).
93 Me and my partner having a few beers by the River Murray (2010).
94 Watching the T’s at gawlar (2009).
95 My cousin and uncle’s come down from Cooberpedy (2009).
96 Swapping Tins of Bully Beef for Local Food (1994); Duck Shooters (2008); Counting Wildlife at Night (2001).
97 Cow pushing the other cow (1995).
98 Sitting on the tailboard (2009).
99 Thinking of my children…seeing God speak to one of his followers (1997); Thinking of my children (2002).
100 Travelling out to Gerrard Mission… (2009).
the serendipity of driving, the things you encounter on your journey.\textsuperscript{101} Such unforgettable events are not always pleasant but Abdulla does not shield us from their view.\textsuperscript{102}

![Image of Ian Abdulla's artwork](image.png)

**Figure 1** Ian Abdulla, *On my way home from Burra...* (2009)

In this respect, Abdulla is not uncritical in his depiction of the consequences of automobility. In *On my way home from Burra...* (2009), he recalls the sight of an injured kangaroo (Figure 6.4), and in other works he reveals the difficult circumstances to which being automobile can lead. This is, in fact, an important aspect of Country that Abdulla’s automobility lays bare: the fault lines of racism and inequality that underlie many parts of social relations in Australia. *No blacks in this town* (2001) makes this obvious through text, when a white woman suggests that Abdulla and his mate park on the outskirts instead of in the town centre. But it is also implied visually as in *Collecting botteles along the road*, in which the white waterskiers on the river run adjacent to ‘some of us

\textsuperscript{101} On My Way Home Seen This Big Red Kangaroos (2008), Evil Spirits left my body (1991).

\textsuperscript{102} On my way home from Burra to Morgan... (2009).
boys…collecting botteles along the road’ to beat ‘the hard times’. The leisure activities of white people are juxtaposed with the efforts Abdulla’s family has to make to simply survive.

Almost as frequently as he is represented driving through the landscape, Abdulla also appears walking along the road. In doing so, he captures the realities of automobility that rarely rate mention: the social inequalities of car ownership, and the fact that cars shape the lives of even those who are not ‘explicitly automobilized’. Indeed, Abdulla’s stories of being without a vehicle reveal other aspects of life in the country: taxis delivering sly grog; walking home with his dog, Skip; hitchhiking back from the pictures; being parched and covered in dust; or being picked up by the cops and having his kids left stranded on the footpath.

Abdulla’s paintings have been appreciated for their optimism, and there is no doubt his stories are often humorous, detailing good times and ripping yarns:

One night when we were out spotlighting we got bogged down in the soft sand so we tried to push the station wagon of mine out and while we were doing this we could hear voices in the dark well we soon got the wagon out cause we knew that the voices were the sound of ghosts in the night so we didn’t go back there again.

Many of his vignettes, however, also reveal the injustices he and other Ngarrindjeri people faced as well as depicting how Ngarrindjeri people utilised the country, and how they relied on its sustenance to stay alive. The joys of car camping with his family at Katarrapka Creek are tempered by the knowledge that this was ‘be for we had to pay money to camp…be fore white man stole our Land’. Many of his roadworks possess a political flavour or a concern for the state of the land, precisely because of what he notices during his road trips: ‘Here I am on my home…Now all I see is no water and dead Native Wildlife’.

Abdulla’s treatment of the car, like the other subjects he depicts, is loose and generalised. He shows the barest of details: the windows, the steering wheel,
the bumper, the aerial, the tyres and wheel nuts. But the most striking feature of Abdulla’s vehicles is the light they cast in the darkness. Anyone who has ever watched a car move through the country at night will recognise the accuracy of Abdulla’s observations, with their vibrant beam lighting the way forward. These same spotlights, which illuminate so many of Abdulla’s Riverina narratives, are ‘defected’ by the police when he drives the streets of Adelaide.\footnote{In this painting, Abdulla touches on another aspect of race: law and order, where automobility might also be perceived as a threat to order in so far as the ability to locate, know the whereabouts of and contain Indigenous and minority peoples is a well-established protocol of government control. Concerns over racial profiling of drivers by police have been raised in the United States—most famously in the case of Rodney King.}

If you are black be proud… (2009) is something of a revelation about Abdulla’s own sense of belonging: ‘You see Im from the country I’v all ways felt verey touchy about the police in Adelaide.’ While this painting serves to highlight how Abdulla experienced differences in driving in the city and the country, at the same time it builds a bridge over that dichotomy of urban and bush as separate terrains of Aboriginal dwelling.

**Figure 2** Ian Abdulla, *If you are black be proud…* (2009)

Image reproduced courtesy A. P. Bond on behalf of the artist’s estate

In keeping with the theme of this issue, it is worth noting that Abdulla’s roadworks encompass urban environments, rural towns, back roads and beaten tracks. He presents a broad scope of what it means to be automobile in different
situations, as well as what it means to be without wheels. As such, Abdulla’s unique autobiographical narratives represent different aspects of automobility and the subjectivities it produces.

The mood he captures with his big skies and tiny people communicates a vision of the driver as being enveloped by the landscape. The detailed mapping that Abdulla’s roadworks represent tells the great journey of his life. It includes the people—black and white—and the moments from different stages of his life. It might well be considered what Gelder calls ‘a practice of repossession in the context of dispossession’. Abdulla’s landscapes are rarely unpeopled. Cars, humans, birds, trees and kangaroos all come together in an ecology of the road that is both uplifting and poignant. This body of work reflects the reality of automobility in all its devastating potential: political, tragic, captivating, liberating, painful, humorous and mythic. Yet, as we contemplate the network of roads that runs through Abdulla’s corpus, it is impossible to forget Abdulla’s rendering of the river. Its course across the canvas is echoed in the bends of the road. And that is why his work is such a compelling insight into the art of automobility as Country.

**Driving Home**

I began this essay by considering the emphasis on Country in contemporary Aboriginal art discourse. By now I hope it is clear that automobility is an undeniable, though at times ineffable, force in the mediation and maintenance of Aboriginal relations to kin and Country, and its communication in art. While I hope to have demonstrated that the Aboriginal art of automobility—what I have called *roadworks*—is a prolific and engaging theme, I have also signalled that more attention to this theme is warranted. I have only stirred the surface of the dirt, the bitumen and the gravel that make up these Country roads. Nevertheless, the artworks I have touched upon illuminate important aspects of Aboriginal experiences of automobility and Country. For a start, they show us histories of automobility that counterbalance the dominant images of European exploration, modernity and Western progress. Such histories show particular places and travels as evidence of how Aboriginal people have continued to maintain connections to Country despite the pressures of dispossession, trauma, social struggle and incarceration.

Not surprisingly, some of these artworks are insistently political. Yet in symbolic terms Aboriginal automobility is always politicised because since the advent of mass motorisation, ‘driving and car ownership were anchored

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112 Gelder, ‘Mad Max and Aboriginal automation’, p. 61.
by themes of competence and self-determination; the figures of the driver and the citizen were regularly conflated’. The ‘right to drive’ and move about at one’s own discretion carries added relevance for those previously denied such possibilities. Pictured in this way, the very act of driving might constitute a political redress to the history of dispossession, confinement and regulation that many Aboriginal Australians have experienced. Moreover, stories and scenes of Aboriginal automobility might be seen to counter-map the cadastral boundaries and surfaces written by the dominant white culture. Aboriginal automobility offers a means for reinscribing these maps with an Indigenous geography that comprises Aboriginal histories, people and pathways—and which, like Pease’s, Cooper’s and Onus’s paintings, speaks of the realities of Aboriginal experience: absence as well as presence, flight and captivity, the sacredness and the mundaneness of living. Abdulla’s vast road network—made up of paintings, drawings, stories and installations—is precisely the kind of reconfigured road directory that way-marks Aboriginality within the Riverina.

Automobilities involve complex geographies comprising humans and non-human agents that are consistent with Aboriginal ontologies of place as connected and connecting and which ‘enable people and materials to move and to hold their shape as they move across various regions’. Likewise, the framework of automobility might be seen to support a logic of Country where place is both enduring and emergent, and because ‘places themselves can be seen as becoming or traveling, slowly or quickly, through greater or shorter distances… Places are about relationships, about the placing of peoples, materials, images and the systems of difference that they perform’.

Roadworks might be seen as narratives of Country that are conducive to the movement and regenerative dynamism of an ancestrally ordained system. They tell an important part of the recent histories of Aboriginal people and their contemporary relations. In contradistinction to those theorists who emphasise the banality of the road, the boredom and the detached ‘place-less-ness’ of the driving experience, the Aboriginal art of automobility suggests another view, another subjectivity and another type of journey entirely. They quite literally mobilise the representation of Aboriginal identities along new paths, further

113  Seiler, Republic of Drivers, p. 109. One might consider as a specifically Australian example the experience of Albert Namatjira (see Croft, ‘Albert’s gift’).

114  As Paul Gilroy adds in the context of African Americans, the histories of confinement and coercion must have given black Americans ‘additional receptivity to the pleasures of auto-autonomy as a means of escape, transcendence and even resistance’. Gilroy, ‘Driving while black’, p. 84.


117  Ibid., p. 13.
destabilising outmoded conceptions of culture as ancient and unchanging. Roadworks reconnect the routes of the traditional with the contemporary, and the urban with the outback, thereby overriding the many defunct dichotomies that have inaccurately defined Aboriginal art and identity.

Finally, the art of automobility chimes with an Aboriginal sensibility of Country because it embraces ‘mobile, dynamic and relational accounts of space and place’,\(^{118}\) which should be seen to complement rather than oppose more rooted perceptions of time and place. Perhaps most importantly in the context of Australian art, *roadworks* demonstrate that identity creation, maintenance practices and notions of home are not construed statically. Dwelling within and belonging to Country can be served equally through motion.\(^{119}\)

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\(^{119}\) I would like to thank Alison French, Lisa Stefanoff and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
‘we’re not truckin’ around’: On and off-road in Samuel Wagan Watson’s *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*

Katherine Bode

Cars and roads traverse the poetry of Samuel Wagan Watson, a self-identified Aboriginal man of Bundjalung, Birri Gubba, German and Irish ancestry. The narrator(s) of the poems in *Smoke Encrypted Whispers* are repeatedly on the road or beside it, and driving is employed as a metaphor for everything from addiction and memory to the search for love. Road kill litters the poems, while roads come to life, cars become men, and men have ‘gas tanks that can’t see empty’. Watson’s poetry has received significant critical attention and acclaim: his ‘haunting, uncanny, layered poetics of history’ and depiction of ‘colonial degradation’ have been explored, and his poems—including those featuring cars and roads—have been analysed in relation to such themes as the sacred, locatedness, and creative processes. Given the extent to which cars and roads dominate Watson’s poetry, it is notable, however, that his use of both to explore and resist ‘colonial degradation’ has not received sustained attention.

This neglect is even more apparent in light of the critical focus on the use of cars and roads to represent—or deny—colonialism and its aftermath in broader Australian cultural discourse, especially film. Roads were fundamental to the colonisation of Australia, and the inscription of European ownership of that space, and, in some remote parts of the country, ‘European incursions...were

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3 ‘back road’ in ibid., p. 117.
4 ‘scenes from a getaway car’ in ibid., pp. 97–8.
5 ‘the dusk sessions’ in ibid., p. 87.
6 ‘the last bullfighter’ in ibid., pp. 115–16; ‘brunswick st blues’, p. 119.
8 ‘midnight’s boxer’ in ibid., p. 34.
experienced almost simultaneously with cars and trucks’. As a number of critics have discussed, this historical relationship of cars, roads and colonialism is deployed extensively in Australian films to allegorise and enable colonialism, as in the Mad Max trilogy (1979, 1981, 1985) and more recently, Japanese Story (2003). In contrast, films and television series such as Backroads (1977), Wrong Side of the Road (1983), Bush Mechanics (2001), Confessions of a Headhunter (2000), Beneath Clouds (2002) and Lucky Miles (2007) are seen to use cars and roads to represent and critique colonialism and to assert Aboriginal identity and culture.

Watson’s poems clearly belong in this second category of representing and resisting rather than denying or celebrating colonialism. This article explores the specific and complex ways in which he employs roads and cars in Smoke Encrypted Whispers. Watson clearly identifies these technologies with the settler/invader, and his descriptions of the damage wrought by cars and roads signify the devastating and ongoing effects of colonialism on Aboriginal people and culture. At the same time, his poems almost always hold out possibilities for resistance to colonialism and hope for the future. The important thing about these possibilities, however, is that they cannot be separated from the technologies of colonialism.

Rather than distancing his Aboriginal narrators from cars and roads—a fantasy of a return to pre-colonial times that would, in effect, contain and constrain Aboriginal subjectivity in the past—Watson depicts them in various relationships with and critical attitudes towards these technologies. Thus, waiting by the side of the road, or moving onto or along it, expresses possibilities for Aboriginal subjectivity. One thing these poems do reject, however, is the teleological version of history implied by the linear road trip. For Watson, just as contemporary Aboriginal subjectivity cannot be separated from modern technology (or from colonialism), nor can it be severed from the past. Refusing or fearing the past, in these poems, divorces Aboriginal people from the land.

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14 See, for example, Gelder, Ken 1998, ‘Mad Max and Aboriginal automation: putting cars to use in contemporary Australian road films and narratives’, in David Thomas, Len Holden and Tim Claydon (eds), The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century, Ashgate, London.


and their culture. Instead, Watson insists on an Aboriginal subjectivity that is deeply connected to the past, present and future, and which gains its potency and political power precisely through these multiple connections.

Throughout *Smoke Encrypted Whispers*, Watson employs roads to symbolise colonialism and to explore its effects on Aboriginal people and culture. In ‘last exit to brisbane…’, the road—‘Boundary St/that forged black scratch’—inscribes colonial definitions and inequalities on the land. Once on the edge of the city, but now near its centre, Boundary Street was

...the line  
the limit  
where the dark-skin were told  
DO NOT CROSS!

The road, in other words, physically enacted the separation—intrinsic to colonial discourse—of ‘dark skin’ from white, or here, from ‘the colonial domiciles of angels and gadflies’ (with gadflies connoting both people of leisure and annoying insects).

Although enacting colonial discourse, this road is clearly not a pioneering one. Watson describes it, instead of being laid over nothing, as ‘scratch[ed]’ upon land already inscribed by Aboriginal history and culture, such that

...even today, at rush hour  
that tar permanently keeps the scar alive  
and the dead languages buried.

These lines resonate Stephen Muecke’s description, in *No Road (bitumen all the way)*, of Australia as ‘a country where the deep indigenous narrative lines have been confused by the imposition of another grid of lines’. In ‘last exit to brisbane…’, the colonial grid, which attempts definitively to exclude Aboriginal people and meaning, in fact coexists with the buried languages that signify Indigenous inscriptions of the land. As the reference to the scar as alive indicates, this coexistence of meaning in space is also a meeting of past and present: a folding in time with an explicit political message. Although mainstream Australian society might believe it has moved away from its colonial past—that colonialism is in the past, that the scar has healed—Watson insists that

...this boundary continues to stay true  
to its makers

18 Muecke, Stephen 1997, *No Road (bitumen all the way)*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, WA, p. 192.
denying the junkyard dingo
the treasures of the city
no access to Easy St.

The distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—while no longer physically enforced—retains its power.

The title of Muecke’s book—No Road (bitumen all the way)—references a story told to him by his friend Grace. Asking an Aboriginal man if there was a road to his community, Grace received the reply: ‘Road? No road…NO ROAD. Bitumen all the way. Bitumen aaall the way.’ To the Aboriginal man, the bitumen leading to his community is not a road; a road is made of dirt. Muecke uses this story to emphasise the coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous meanings: one person’s road is another person’s track. In contrast with Muecke’s metaphor of the road as the site of multiple, ongoing epistemologies, Watson’s description of ‘dead languages buried’ might seem despairing. In a sense, it is. The death of these buried languages is intrinsic to Watson’s insistence on the continuing effects of colonialism: the colonial inscription of the land has had an irreversible effect on the languages that once produced the cultural meaning of that place. The positioning of these languages beneath the scar of colonialism is also an insistence that the relationship between epistemological systems is hierarchical; the white boundary is clearly pre-eminent, in contemporary Australian society, to Aboriginal meaning.

But at the same time as Watson insists on the real death produced by colonialism, he holds out hope for the resurrection of Aboriginal culture. Even though they are dead and buried beneath colonial inscriptions—every day, even twice a day, ‘at rush hour’—these old languages ‘escape in the bitumen heat-haze’ and rise from the dead. This is not an idealistic resurrection on Watson’s part: these dead languages ‘fall on deaf ears’. But there is a sense that, in this repeated rising from the dead, and in the words of the poem, the inscription of Aboriginal history and culture continues. And as everyone who lives in a hot place knows, given enough heat and enough traffic, bitumen will eventually melt and crack.

These same themes—the exploration of colonialism and its effects in relation to the road (and in this case, the car) and a folding together of past and present—feature in ‘a verse for the cheated’. In this poem, Watson draws an analogy between a childhood ‘growing up on the southern fringe of the Sunshine Coast’ and the experience of colonialism, presented in terms of the influx of tourists. These tourists ‘arrived in their brand-new cars that sparkled/upon a strip of

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19 Ibid., p. 18.
20 Watson, Smoke Encrypted Whispers, pp. 27–8.
bitumen that we regarded as a petulant beast’. The thrust of this strip of bitumen into the community mirrors the colonial mode of entry into and occupation of Aboriginal land.

Petulance—connoting childishness as well as insolence—might seem an unusual way of describing colonialism. In using this word, however, Watson puts a specific, subversive spin on Australian colonialism. The tourists (the European invaders) are childish—and ignorant—in respect to the land they have entered. While they claim absolute access to this space, their use of distant—or foreign—epistemological frameworks for understanding means they can never fully know the land. Thus, they buy

...postcards of pristine beaches
that were nowhere near us
and purchasing painted coral stolen from hundreds of miles away
and branded with the tag, MADE IN TAIWAN.

Their ‘odd hunger for visitation’ cannot be translated into knowledge by these symbols and they ‘soon left as tourists’. As well as challenging the validity of colonial assumptions about Australia—the idea that a land, inhabited for a very long time by multiple nations, could be proclaimed unoccupied, terrnullius—this charge of childishness reverses the colonial idea of an ‘adult’ European culture arriving to civilise and improve a ‘childish’ native culture.

In their childishness and ignorance, the visitors cannot really see the deaths of the young Aboriginal people (symbolic of destruction of community and culture) caused by the road—symbolic of colonialism: ‘its greedy black claws lubricated on the nectar of broken dreams.’ They treat these deaths as part of the tourist experience, taking photographs of the crosses by the side of the road that mark sites where people have been killed or injured, and constructing an idealised version of the life they suppose the Aboriginal ‘kids’ are living—‘carefree’ in their ‘haven’. The folding of past and present, enacted through the analogy of colonisers and tourists, is continued in the symbolism of the roadside crosses, which inscribe into the present—and onto particular sites—a record of past horrors as well as a warning of potential present and future danger. The tourists are depicted as deluded and callous in the distanced and idealised view they take of these crosses. But at the same time, in personifying the road itself as the killer, Watson perhaps shifts some blame from the individual tourists/colonisers to the system itself, which, in the form of the road, has become part of the landscape—or the psychology—of Australian society.

While ‘a verse for the cheated’ insists on the continuing impact of colonialism for Aboriginal people, it also presents some hope for a future that escapes these
power inequalities. While characterising the road as the cause of deaths, and the destruction of culture and community, the poem ends with the road as the future:

…the recalcitrant animal
prepared to deliver us on our future paths of success
and to pick a few off on our way.

There is no going back, the poem asserts, to a time before colonialism, so any ‘future paths of success’, although they will differ from the road, will be achieved via it, however intractable and dangerous that journey might be. It is along this road—the road of past colonialism but also of future opportunity—that the protagonists in many of the other poems travel or, in some cases, beside which they break down.

A number of Watson’s poems show Aboriginal people and culture left by the side of the road. In a particularly bleak poem, ‘a bent neck black and flustered feather mallee’, Watson imagines Aboriginal culture as road kill: a ‘deadened crow with eternal lockjaw’ claimed by ‘bitumen madness’. As in ‘last exit to brisbane…’, here, beneath the bitumen is a land inscribed with prior meanings and spirits: ‘this is someone’s land/played host to someone’s lust.’ But instead of a daily resurrection of Aboriginal culture in the ‘heat haze’, this poem is soaked in tears and blood:

…tears
fallen into the blackened tar and earth
blood soaked earth through massacre
war
and plague.

It seems that without the heat—of expressed anger, perhaps—the ‘black feathers’, though they ‘scatter the highway’, cannot release that which is buried by the road. The despair is overwhelming and leaves the

…frozen bitumen spirits
locked forever in the heat and tar
sealed forever
like the constant anger
and sorrow within.

Being left by the side of the road is not, however, always a metaphor for destruction and despair. ‘we’re not truckin’ around’ represents the side of the road as a sensible site of refuge from and refusal of the lunatic route forged by

21 Ibid., p. 36.
22 Ibid., pp. 90–1.
colonialism. In this poem, the ‘Invader’ attempts to ‘mimic creation/and plough through this land/inventive/but blindfolded’, with colonialism thus figured as both the forced creation of a road and the movement along it. As with the analogy of colonists and tourists in ‘a verse for the cheated’, this depiction of the ‘Invader’ as a crazy driver brings the colonial past into the present and insists on its ongoing effects and destructive potential. ‘where’d ya get ya licence’ and the implicit reference in the title to ‘fuckin’ around’ are comments on the irresponsibility and dangers of such driving.

Despite this humour, the road is clearly shown to intrude on and marginalise Aboriginal culture:

the bitumen vine of wandering impetus
drove right through the bora-ring

... 
forcing us to stand out on the shoulder of the road
looking for a lift.

But instead of ‘lusting/that 18-wheeler of a lifestyle’, the Aboriginal people in this poem have become

...used
to feeling a kinship
with the discarded and shredded
black pieces of truck tire
on the fringes of the big road.

The fringes are thus transformed from a place of exclusion to one of kinship through connection with others on the margins. Rather than jumping on board with the ‘Invader’—and mimicking the headlong movement of ‘you lead-foots’ along the ‘highway’ towards an ‘encroaching absalom’—the narrator might ‘just pull up a seat on the shoulder’ to await the crash that is the inevitable result of driving blindfolded.

Kinship by the side of the road is also the theme of ‘hotel bone’. The hotel in this poem sits ‘idle on a vein’ of a street and houses

...asylum seekers
Iraqi, Indonesian, Sri Lankan
and one crazy Aboriginal...who lives with a typewriter.

Unlike the asylum-seekers, the Aboriginal writer/narrator has citizenship: ‘my longevity was guaranteed before I was born/in the 1967 referendum.’ But this legal ruling has not changed the position of Aboriginal people in Australia,
'where multi-culturalism is in an airline format/first-class, business and economy seating’. Thus, the narrator must remain with the other people, excluded by Australian society and relegated to a place where ‘white faces don’t come.../ until they’ve been classified unfit for duty’. This common marginalisation from white society is, however, the very source of the solidarity and belonging the narrator finds at ‘hotel bone’:

a haven from Saddam, Suharto, the Tamil Tigers
and One Nation
this Hotel Bone;
it is hard
it is reachable
it is home.

An alternative to either death or kinship by the side of the road is proposed in ‘kangaroo crossing’. This poem depicts ‘the dreaming’—in the form of the kangaroo—‘that suddenly crawls onto the road’. Rather than becoming road kill—or simply waiting by the side of the road for the destruction of the ‘Invader’—this eruption of Aboriginal culture from the margins seems and perhaps seeks to destroy the driver:

...takes it
out of the living—
the ones who fantasised constantly on their own immortality
behind the wheel.

A similarly active attack on colonialism occurs in ‘night racing’, in which driving facilitates a reversed invasion of the white suburbs. In this poem, a car-load of young Aboriginal people is

night racing through the suburbs
of white stucco dreaming
the menacing glow of the city’s tainted body behind us
as the custodians of the estate domiciles
spy through the holes in their lace curtains
at the howl of our twin-cam war party
drowning out the dying heartbeat of this captured landscape
our small bodies shivering a techno pulse

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24 Ibid., p. 88.
26 Where this poem enacts a reverse colonisation, ‘cribb island’ describes an Aboriginal family ‘[w]andering through [the] deserted houses’ of an abandoned white community: ‘we were the first Aboriginal people to analyse the remains of the first Europeans to be cleared from this soil’ (ibid., p. 151).
This invasion of the white suburbs, enabled by an appropriation of precisely that technology—the car—that produced the suburbs in the first place, is specifically figured as a challenge to the ‘dream’ that place represents: of individualised land and homeownership, nation-building and middle-class respectability. Like Boundary Street, this dream and the ‘settlers’ sacred sites’ are built, not on an absence, but upon a ‘dying…captured landscape’. The ‘howl’ of the car’s engine and the techno music shatter the silence that has enabled this dream to continue—‘breaking the silence of the settlers’ sacred sites/enveloped in shadows when not haunted by the silhouettes of urban myth’—with these youth treating ‘the bitumen labyrinth’ of the suburbs ‘with the same contempt as laid upon us’.

This reverse colonisation speaks directly back to a history of colonial power predicated on the right of the settler/invader not only to enter and occupy Aboriginal land, but also to control the movement of Aboriginal people, as demonstrated by the history of missions, travel passes, the Stolen Generation and, more recently, the Northern Territory Intervention.27 As Probyn-Rapsey argues in relation to Australian film, the ‘strategic appropriation’ of cars and roads by Aboriginal people challenges this historic dichotomy of white mobility/Aboriginal immobility at the same time as it rejects colonial constructions of Aboriginal people as ‘off-road’ and separate from technology.28 These speeding, car-driving, techno-music-listening Aboriginal hoons are about as far as one could get from the archetype of the non-modern, non-urban Aborigine, and their vitality ridicules the idea of Aboriginal people as a ‘dying race’.

While the poem obviously revels in the fantasy of reverse colonisation—and identifies with the vitality these youth embody—there is a dark side to the ‘night racing’. In terrorising the white suburbs, the Aboriginal youth are unaware that their music and the howl of the engine further suppress the landscape’s ‘dying heartbeat’. And while they appropriate the car for their own purposes, they are also driven by fear. The poem ends with the assertion that the

…darkness and the dreaming…cradles us too
like the Earth Mother did the warriors of old
but we’re too scared to look behind us or in the rear-view mirror
to catch a wink from Voodoojack
and his perpetual black grin.

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28 Probyn-Rapsey, ‘Bitumen films in postcolonial Australia’.
The dread of looking backwards—which is emphasised by repetition (‘behind us or in the rear-view mirror’)—signifies fear of the past. Although not lacking anger at what has been done to Aboriginal people, the youth, because they do not understand their cultural history—the ways of the ‘warriors of old’—cannot appreciate and care for the land on which they drive.

The fear of the Aboriginal youth in ‘night racing’ is very different to that experienced by ‘the lone riders’ in ‘skeletons in the trunk’.29 These drivers I interpret as the kin of the crazed semi-trailer ‘Invaders’ in ‘we’re not truckin’ around’; and the bodies that have ‘overcrowded’ their homes and are ‘starting to appear/in the trunk’ are the ghosts of those who have been damaged or killed by their reckless driving. This is guilt-induced fear, and the irony, of course, is that with the bodies in the trunk, escape by driving is impossible:

the lone riders can’t escape the tunnel vision
   cruising until the rubber subsides
   and the bitumen is
   no more
   this is an endless midnight run for the driver
   through the white of the eyes.

The Aboriginal youth in ‘night racing’ have nothing to feel guilty about, but the effect of their refusal to fully face and acknowledge the past is the same as for ‘the lone riders’: a headlong, compulsive movement forward that can never escape or make up for the damage that colonisation has produced.

Given the association in Smoke Encrypted Whispers of frenetic movement forward with a denial of the past, it is perhaps no surprise that the collection ends with the narrator coming to a standstill and claiming a home. This cessation of forward movement is represented in the form of the poems: they are still in free verse but, where earlier poems were stretched across and down the page, the final poems are in prose blocks, squarely on the page and somehow resolute and determined in that positioning. What is particularly forceful about the final poems in this collection is the specific place where the narrators claim a home: on Boundary Street—the site, in Watson’s oeuvre, of the original scar of colonialism. ‘darkroom’30 begins: ‘I had to grow up someday…so I moved to Boundary Street, West End, in the last residence on the old bitumen line.’ ‘snapshots’31 ends with the protagonist watching ‘a group of Aboriginal adults and children welcome strangers to their country…[d]uring a street festival’, ‘dancing barefoot on the black tarmac of Boundary Street, where only 40 years ago their ancestors would have been shot at’.

29  Watson, Smoke Encrypted Whispers, p. 136.
30  Ibid., p. 156.
31  Ibid., p. 168.
Discussing the ‘trope of the road’ in American film, Pamela Robertson describes home as its ‘structuring absence’: ‘If the road movie is in some deep sense about the road itself, and the journey taken, more than about any particular destination, it is still a genre obsessed with’—and, she argues, reliant upon—‘the concept of home’.32 Robertson thus describes a relationship between home and road where home is always the point of arrival and/or departure, although that point might not be represented on screen. This is not the case in Watson’s poems. For the Aboriginal people he depicts, home is much more complicated: it is not somewhere else, waiting out of shot; home has been destroyed and stolen and, in particular, buried and overwritten by the process of colonisation that the road represents.

All of the poems I have discussed explore the idea of home. Some show the resurrection of a buried home in the eruption of the past into the present. Such eruptions, however, are fleeting, and when they pass, the colonial inscription of the road again overrules the land. In some poems, the narrator constructs a home based on kinship with other marginalised and, not incidentally, homeless peoples: with the refugees in ‘hotel bone’ or with other ‘discarded…black pieces of tire’ in ‘we’re not truckin’ around’. Such connections are important, not least of all for what Delia Falconer describes as the ‘new roads in and out’ of ‘nationalism’ that ‘globalization’ enables.33 Based on common homelessness, however, these nomadic communities cannot offer what Watson in ‘night racing’ calls the connection to ‘the Earth Mother’ experienced by the ‘warriors of old’.34 In asserting a home on Boundary Street, the narrators of these poems not only claim the right to move through and disrupt a colonised space—as the Aboriginal youth do in ‘night racing’—they also claim this space as their own. The home they build there keeps the scar of colonisation in sight and under foot, and thus insists on the continuing importance of the past to the present. In building on the scar, these narrators are asserting a new and future relationship to that colonised place, based on connection with and belonging to the land, as well as links with the wider Australian community. ‘Grow[i]ng] up’, for Watson, does not mean forgetting colonial history; but it does mean not allowing that history to determine the present and future for Aboriginal people in Australia.

33 Falconer, Delia 1997, ‘“We don’t need to know the way home”’: the disappearance of the road in the Mad Max trilogy’, in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), The Road Movie Book, Routledge, London, p. 252.
34 Watson, Smoke Encrypted Whispers, pp. 99–100.
Fuel, Cars and the Geography of Petrol Sniffing

Maggie Brady

The petrol which kids and adults are sniffing, well it’s really bad. It makes people listless, and will make you sick. It will burn you away, your lungs, liver, brains, heart, eyes. Tell them immediately to stop, you mothers, fathers and anyone else. The Police and the Council have said [this]. Your children, and your siblings, tell them off quick. They could increase in number, and their breathing could be impaired from sniffing. If they sniff all the time it will increase.

Petrol isn’t milk, cool drink, or water, no—it belongs to motor vehicles. You aren’t a car, no you’re a person. Take it easy, drink water, cool drinks, milk.¹

Inhaling petrol fumes in order to achieve a euphoric mood is usually discussed as a form of social pathology—after all, it is a deviance made more illicit and peculiar because the substance (petrol) is not intended, or designed, to be a drug; its real purpose lies elsewhere. The intensification of the drug-using activity we have come to know as ‘petrol sniffing’ was intimately linked to the exponential rise in Aboriginal ownership of vehicles and the availability of petrol. Ironically though, it has been the fuel itself in a modified form that has, in the end, helped to curb the practice. This essay provides a brief ethnographic review of sniffing and the unanticipated consequences of automobility. Many of the ideas here draw on original anthropological fieldwork undertaken by the author in several parts of remote Australia.²

Most people are surprised to learn that the deliberate sniffing of petrol has been reported among Aboriginal Australians for more than 60 years. Two prominent Aboriginal men, the late Charles Perkins and Bob Randall, recalled that, as children in the 1940s, they had experimented with petrol sniffing at the institution known as The Bungalow in Alice Springs.³ Apart from this specific

¹ Junga Yimi, Yuendumu, November 1982, translated from Warlpiri by Dr David Nash.
² The author undertook fieldwork focused on petrol inhalation in Arnhem Land, NT (Numbulwar, Groote Eylandt, Ngukurr, Milingrida, Galiwin’ku), Western Australia (Warburton, Blackstone, Jamieson, Warakurna) and South Australia (Yalata, Oak Valley) between 1988 and 1990. She held a World Health Organisation travelling fellowship to Canada in 1990 that focused on sniffing prevalence and treatment. Since then the author has maintained an active research involvement in the issue.
report, a folklore of sniffing has become established, attributing its origins
to imitative behaviour in which Aboriginal people were said to have copied
the activities of American servicemen stationed on northern coasts during
World War II. Verifying this rumour is difficult; there are no official reports
of servicemen inhaling petrol fumes.4 Perhaps it is worth remembering that
American servicemen were said to be responsible for the advent of glue sniffing
in the United Kingdom as well.5

In Australia the first written documentation of the practice dates from 1950,
when a report noted that Aboriginal people were sniffing petrol on the
Cobourg Peninsula, a tract of tropical land north-east of Darwin. Historians
know the peninsula because it was the site of two failed nineteenth-century
British settlements, at Raffles Bay and Port Essington. The petrol being sniffed
on this occasion was not sourced from cars—it came from a sawmill that had
started operations in the 1920s and which employed Aboriginal men from the
surrounding region. These men were accompanied by their wives and children.
In 1950, a government patrol officer found that some of the ‘natives’ were
‘disposed to inhale the fumes’ of the petrol powering the mill, and he locked
it up out of harm’s way.6 When these people returned to their communities—
mostly dotted along the coastline to the east of the peninsula—those who had
been experimenting with sniffing the fumes took with them the knowledge
they had acquired. They had learned that petrol fumes could make you see and
hear imaginary things—an experience not felt before. These returning workers
inadvertently sparked the diffusion of a substance use that spread across
Arnhem Land ‘like fire’ (as one local Aboriginal man put it), which was to cause
angst, despair and death in the decades to come.7

Using petrol as a drug is not confined to Aboriginal people in Australia, but is
part of a global landscape of drug use. It seems inevitably to be a fringe drug—a
substance used by a subset of young people who are themselves a minority
group within a society. Some are indigenous, and petrol sniffing is reported
among aboriginal groups in Canada and the United States, and among Islanders
and Maori in New Zealand. Other users are reported to come from poor or
marginalised groups including Mexican-Americans, Brazilian street children,
black South Africans and some Pacific Islanders. The use of volatile inhalants
other than petrol is common in these populations as well.

4 Brady, M. 1992, Heavy Metal: The social meaning of petrol sniffing in Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press,
Canberra, p. 140.
6 National Archives of Australia, CRS F315 11949/393 A111 CA 1078, Native Affairs Branch, National
Archives of Australia, Canberra.
7 Brady, Heavy Metal, p. 142.
Geography

In Australia the knowledge of sniffing radiated out from several hubs in the north and centre of the country from the 1960s onwards, moving between communities linked by language and kinship, in concert with increased access to cash, the opening up of new roads and the growth in car ownership. Access to cash and vehicles led in turn to an increase in mobility and visitation between communities for schooling, church fellowship, sport and ceremonial activity. Demographers John Taylor and Martin Bell have identified what they term ‘circular mobility’: networks of movement between places that combine to form functional regions. There were five communities reporting sniffing in the 1960s, nine in the 1970s, 12 in the 1980s, and, once established in these locations, sniffing rarely left them. By the 1990s, sniffing had taken hold in parts of Arnhem Land and Central Australia, the Goldfields and old Central Reserves of Western Australia, and the far west coast and northern regions of South Australia. There were outbreaks on Queensland’s Cape York Peninsula and in outback New South Wales. In 2006 there were still 600 regular sniffers in desert regions of the Northern Territory, and in 2008–09 new or repeat outbreaks of sniffing were reported in other regions of the Territory, in the Kimberley, the far west of South Australia and in Queensland.

Notably absent from this geography of sniffing were the old cattle station regions of the north, such as the Barkly Tableland, the Victoria River district and the Kimberley. Somehow, among Aboriginal groups living on or near the pastoral properties on which the older (and some of the younger) generation had mustered cattle, built fences and broken in wild horses, petrol sniffing was absent. Intimate involvement with the cattle industry in the recent past seemed to protect the young from the desire to take up sniffing. This was the case in the 1980s and is largely the case today in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These were locations where the Aboriginal cowboy ethic lived on and permeated the younger generation. A greater sense of independence, pride in work, a secure masculine identity and the chance to engage in alternative ways of taking risks—all of which are associated with involvement in the cattle industry—constitute the social underpinnings for the absence of sniffing in these regions. Aboriginal people were living on or near their own country and ranging into it as part of their mustering work or in the off-season when people were free to make visits. The populations here were smaller than in the welfare

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9 Senate Community Affairs Committee Secretariat 2009, Grasping the opportunity of Opal: assessing the impact of the Petrol Sniffing Strategy, Senate Committee Report, Standing Committee on Community Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, pp. 8–9, <www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/COMMITTEE>
or mission settlements, and there was comparatively less official interference in people’s day-to-day lives. Cattle station workers also absorbed whitefella notions of keeping youths under control; there seems to have been less ‘cheek’ and fewer examples of kids getting ‘on top’ of their parents in the ways complained of by Aboriginal families in the larger government settlements.¹⁰

During the 1970s and 1980s petrol was the drug of choice for children and teenagers (who were mostly but not exclusively boys), but by the 1990s, as the cohorts of surviving sniffers grew older, adults too were sniffing petrol.¹¹ In these decades, sniffing became something of a subculture, and young people in some regions created named gangs, differentiated from others by an adopted style of distinctive clothing and by the type of music played on their ghetto blasters: heavy metal. Kids learned about sniffing from one another, with older brothers inducting younger ones. New users learned the performative rituals of stealing petrol (cutting fuel lines if necessary) and how to personalise the empty beer or soft drink cans used for delivering the drug. Aluminium cans work well if shaped to fit around the nose and strung with wire around the neck (hands-free). Users also taught one another the technique of removing the top of a can by rubbing it on concrete, so that sniffers’ haunts were littered with neatly sheared-off can tops.

Figure 1 Modified soft drink can found on Maningrida Oval, October 1986

Photo courtesy of Maggie Brady

¹⁰ Brady, Heavy Metal, pp. 183–90.
In 1988 a young woman in east Arnhem Land told me her story:

My brothers and cousin-brothers were learning me to sniff…get the tin, scrape tin on cement to get the top off. They taught me. [I] started in 1983. It was killing my brain and the petrol bin go all over my body and I bin sick. After that I bin sniffing again and then I went to [nearby town] with boys and girls to steal car and drink beer. Went to steal truck, skid around. Got petrol from workshop, where cars staying, from old car. After that I was stealing too much, sniffing 24 hour [that is, day and night]…Not this time [that is, now] I bin Christian. I bin baptized and confirmed in river. I’m good life, getting strong and too much tucker. I bin forget about it, sniffing. (HD, aged twenty)

Sniffers enhanced the experience of intoxication through shared, learned rituals: sitting with candles at night or watching scary videos. Each sniffer dared the others to confront ghosts or snakes and summon up ‘the horrors’. The effects were frightening, thrilling and oppositional. Apparently oblivious to the risks of permanent damage to the brain and nervous system, a sniffer could not only engage in imaginary warfare and be liberated to explore unsupervised youthful sex, he could also provoke immediate responses from those around him: attention, fear, outrage, persuasion, coddling or rejection. ‘We don’t listen to anybody!’ one young man boasted. One reformed sniffer told me: ‘When I was sniff, and my parents told me not, [I said] “I got my own life. If I want to die, I die, you don’t have to tell me what to do. I don’t take notice from anyone!”.’

A ubiquitous retort from sniffers was ‘It’s my body!’. Many young sniffers exploited the loopholes that were becoming increasingly apparent in customary, highly permissive Aboriginal child-rearing practices. Adults told me they were often frightened of sniffers; they also attributed supernatural powers to them: sniffers were thought to be abnormally strong, they ran around fast, they could ‘see’ anything—monsters, devils—or see through people with their X-ray vision. Young men had tantrums and engaged in emotional blackmail, threatening elderly parents or grandparents with their continued use of petrol unless their demands were granted. Sniffing gave power to the otherwise powerless within the gerontocracy of Aboriginal society. But even the elders had trouble managing sniffing, and collective action in many communities was undermined by sniffers’ families who defended their own against expressions of disapprobation coming from others. By the 1980s, community councils often consisted of men and women whose own sons or daughters were using petrol, making it doubly difficult for them to take decisive action. Some council members had even been sniffers themselves in preceding

12 Brady, Heavy Metal, p. 86.
years. This was a substance abuse not so easily explained by the usually deployed reasons such as poverty, dispossession or the lack of land rights; its prevalence included regions where Indigenous people controlled and owned their land and had never been removed from it.14

Some communities were paralysed by social disorder and disharmony, compounded in turn by the pain, sorrow and guilt associated with the sniffing behaviour of their young people. Governments washed their hands of the issue for decades, conveniently citing self-determination policies and expecting the communities concerned to manage it themselves. It was only the pressure arising from several prominent coronial inquiries into petrol-related deaths in Central Australia and dramatic front-page newspaper coverage15 that provoked more concerted policy responses in the twenty-first century, as well as finally attracting the attention of the petroleum producers.16

Aboriginal people (and government officers) had seemed initially bewildered and paralysed by the peculiar nature of the activity.17 The early responses to petrol sniffing emanated from concerned outsiders—teachers, welfare officers and police—and interventions included bush camps and outstations, temporary ‘exile’ and isolation, community service orders, and cattle and fencing activities. The YMCA ran recreation and after-school ‘prime crime time’ activities to offer alternatives to young people.18 There was a family counselling team in Central Australia with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members, and in Western Australia a working party of health educators was set up; both involved local community members. It was only in the 1980s that social projects and interventions initiated by Aboriginal community members began to flourish. Some communities tried public shaming and physical punishment; others organised separate out-camps for sniffers, supervised by caring Aboriginal couples. An outstation beyond Yuendumu, Mt Theo, became the most well known and successful of these strategies.19 Aboriginal art was also recruited in efforts to communicate messages about sniffing and there was a proliferation of

posters (‘Sad boys are sniffing’) and flip charts including the *Brain Story*. Other preventive strategies included the production of music cassettes of Aboriginal bands featuring songs of sorrow and exhortation about sniffing—for example, the Wedgetail Eagle Band and Ilkari Maru, both from the Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia:

Out in the cold night, our children wander around
Why don’t they understand, why don’t they listen for a while?
You throw your lives away
With a petrol can today
Please, please listen to what I say.21

Makes me feel like crying so many nights
What can I do with this problem?
So help me someone find a solution
So many young ones are dying with a can
Like the sun sinking behind the mountains.22

In 2001, the Australian Children’s Television Foundation and Palace Films released *Yolngu Boy*, a film with a message about three Yolngu teenagers and their passage from adolescence to adulthood; one is a petrol sniffer in real life as well as in the film. This young man and his film persona became fused in the minds of some young Aboriginal viewers, and although the film came with a teacher’s guide to its study, its release might have been partly responsible for a short-term upsurge in sniffing in the actor’s home community.23 This outcome exemplifies the challenges and dangers attached to educational attempts at dealing with this drug use.

21 Wedgetail Eagle Band 1988, *Wedgetail Eagle*, [Sound cassette], Petrol sniffing [song], Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Imparja Records, Alice Springs, NT.
22 Ilkari Maru 1984, *Ilkari Maru*, [Sound cassette], Petrol sniffer [song], Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Imparja Records, Alice Springs, NT.
Cars

Sniffing was unwittingly facilitated by the proliferation of privately owned vehicles and the increased availability of fuel in remote communities. In the 1950s and 1960s, most settlements had been without their own petrol pumps. In 1966, for example, the petrol supply at Ernabella in north-western South Australia consisted of just a couple of 44-gallon drums with hand pumps. In the years when private car ownership among Aboriginal people was uncommon and most vehicles were owned by whitefellas, sniffers sometimes cut fuel lines to obtain petrol— but later sniffers were stealing petrol from cars owned by Aboriginal drivers. In 1970 at Yirrkala in east Arnhem Land, four clans had bought their own vehicles to facilitate hunting, and mission vehicles were rented out occasionally. In the following decades, cash wages, sales of art and artefacts and better access to welfare and training allowances meant more disposable income. Motorcars (station wagons or saloons) were the number-

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one item and they were cheaper to buy than four-wheel-drive diesel vehicles. By the mid-1980s at Maningrida, there were about 60 vehicles, one-third of which were privately owned by Aboriginal people. As the ultimate desired object, the ‘mutika’ caused friction and humbugging. In Central Australia in the 1980s, members of the Healthy Aboriginal Life Team (HALT), which ran a program to ameliorate petrol sniffing, were forced to clarify the fact that their program would not be providing communities or individuals with Toyotas, nor would the program disburse monies for their purchase. This was done to counter widespread expectations at the community level that a petrol-sniffing program usually came with a four-wheel-drive vehicle ‘attached’, ostensibly to take youths out bush but frequently purloined for extraneous and less altruistic uses. The approach of the HALT program was to focus on interpersonal work designed to reactivate kinship responsibilities between older and younger men, rather than relying on the more common ‘diversionary’ trips away.

Fuel

By the late 1970s petrol for sniffing was relatively easy to obtain. Every community had a rubbish tip and cars that were permanently abandoned or temporarily unattended awaiting repairs. In coastal communities, some people unthinkingly left jerry cans in their dinghies overnight. The advent of petrol pumps in communities meant that community councils were forced to take evasive action: some housed their pumps behind locked steel-mesh cages, while others built locked underground petrol tanks. Diesel vehicles were encouraged.

The petroleum industry has known for a long time that its product is toxic. Lead—a heavy metal—was added to petrol as an anti-knock agent from the 1920s until the 1980s, when it was phased out. In 1925, the high toxicity of lead caused a cluster of deaths among workers in the petroleum industry, and production was brought temporarily to a standstill. One of the world’s leading neuro-toxicologists believes that had the toxicity of lead been better understood then, it would never have been added to petrol. It is easy to forget that in the 1980s there were major environmental campaigns to remove lead from petrol in the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, and that the petroleum companies and governments vigorously resisted change.

The early concerns about sniffing in Australia (as elsewhere) were focused on medical matters and on lead poisoning in particular. Sniffing leaded fuel could and did cause clinical lead encephalopathy (a degenerative disease of the brain) leading to death, as well as causing a host of serious neurological problems in long-term sniffers. Aboriginal deaths among new users began to increase in the 1980s. They died of acute causes such as car accidents or burns. There were also deaths among users who had been sniffers for 10 years or more. These chronic sniffers died of pneumonia, asphyxia or cardiac dysrhythmias. For example, 1984 was a bad year: 10 young Aboriginal men died; six died in 1986. Between 1981 and 1991, there were at least 63 Aboriginal deaths Australia-wide associated with sniffing, mostly clustered in desert regions; over a 22-year period (1981–2003), the recorded number of deaths was 109.28 Hundreds more young people were hospitalised and many were permanently disabled in the years when petrol still contained its toxic loading of lead. Twenty-five patients were admitted to Perth hospitals with a diagnosis of intentional petrol sniffing between 1984 and 1991; five had acute intoxication from an isolated incident, the remaining 20 were chronic sniffers, 18 of whom were Aboriginal. These patients showed a high prevalence of seizures and an alarmingly high case-fatality ratio: 8 of 20 died. All had an altered mental state with drowsiness, delirium or stupor. They showed abnormal jerky movements and ataxia. The high blood-lead levels of these patients were associated with a poor prognosis, and attempts to reduce their lead load with chelating agents were disappointing. The neurologists treating these 17 males and three females observed that sniffing could cause sudden death or irreversible encephalopathy, and that even with treatment the prognosis was poor. The physicians called for better preventive strategies.29

Unleaded fuel and the new range of cars that could run on it were slow to penetrate the remote regions of Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite its complement of toxic hydrocarbons such as benzene, toluene and xylene, unleaded fuel did eventually cut presentations to health clinics and the number of hospitalisations. The deaths of sniffers continued, however; many were from accidents, burns or suicide, or were the result of cumulative medical problems from long-term sniffing with leaded fuel.

Aboriginal mobility between communities had unintentionally assisted the diffusion, and the reappearance, of the practice of sniffing in different locations, but in the end it was grassroots contact with other communities that brought decisive change. In 1992, an Arnhem Land community discovered that avgas—aviation fuel—was not sniffable, and could be used safely in vehicles that ran on

regular petrol. Council members from other communities made visits in order to learn more about this; they instituted the use of avgas themselves and word spread through the grassroots from the north to the centre and to Western Australia. More and more communities substituted avgas for ‘red petrol’, and avgas did make a difference, especially where communities consistently maintained it over time as a petrol substitute and where alternative sources of petrol were difficult to obtain. Avgas contained fewer hydrocarbons than petrol (these are what produce intoxication and cause damage to the central nervous system), and its use reduced easy accessibility to regular petrol. Elaborate attempts by sniffers to make avgas usable by various means were largely unsuccessful. The communities that used avgas in concert with efforts to provide employment and skills training had considerable success in putting an end to sniffing and, in communities where sniffing persisted, the practice became more episodic and dependent on irregular (and sometimes illegal) supplies of petrol. Avgas became ‘Comgas’ in 1998 when the Commonwealth Government agreed to subsidise its purchase by communities, as it was more expensive than unleaded petrol. Evaluators of this scheme recommended its expansion as being worthwhile, while acknowledging that its impact, naturally enough, was variable between communities.

There was one problem with avgas as a substitute for petrol. It is a leaded fuel, and, with moves in 2004 to reduce its lead content, more aromatic hydrocarbons would be added, making it environmentally acceptable but potentially sniffable. Finally, the petroleum industry, which, like the alcohol industry, had long denied any responsibility for the unwanted uses of its product, began to be involved in a meaningful way. In the 1980s, the Australian Institute of Petroleum had attempted a well-meaning but ill-considered intervention involving the odorant ethyl mercaptan (in an attempt to render petrol foul-smelling and unsniffable), together with a poster campaign based on ‘scare tactics’. Neither was successful. But in February 2005, after considerable research and development, BP Australia launched a new unleaded fuel called Opal, which has low levels of the aromatic hydrocarbons associated with the ‘high’ sought by petrol sniffers—only 5 per cent as opposed to standard unleaded petrol with 25 per cent aromatics. In short, BP produced a non-sniffable fuel. Unusually for a transnational oil company, BP has made Opal available to Shell, Mobil and Caltex distributors for the same price, and Canadian Aboriginal communities—where sniffing has also been widespread—are also interested in the ‘no-sniff gas’.

30 Shaw et al., An Evaluation of the Comgas Scheme, p. 11.
The Australian Government subsidy scheme that helped pay the costs of making Comgas available has been extended to Opal fuel, which would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. Because of the subsidy, the new fuel costs the same as standard petrol, and the overall costs of the subsidy itself greatly outweigh the estimated $79 million costs of petrol sniffing through the burden of disease, the cost of rehabilitation, and the strain on the health and justice systems.31 As a result of vigorous lobbying by The Opal Alliance (a coalition of industry, Aboriginal women’s and youth organisations), Opal has been progressively distributed to about 70 registered Aboriginal communities, where it has universal support.32 The rapid drop in the numbers of people sniffing following the installation of Opal has mobilised community members in those locations to confront the remaining sniffers, who were told they had to stop. Together with youth diversionary activities and the hard work of non-governmental organisations such as the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service,33 Opal fuel has brought about the first major cessation in sniffing across a wide area of the country in 60 years.

31 Opal Alliance, Media release, 8 March 2006, Alice Springs, NT.
Fuel technology has—for the time being—given Aboriginal communities the chance to take stock. But although dozens of fuel outlets servicing the regions subject to the most intense concentrations of sniffing have substituted the new Opal fuel for old petrol, others on the fringes of these regions have not. Some petrol stations within striking distance of communities have been highly resistant to stocking it. Premium petrol is still about and deaths associated with petrol sniffing continue to occur, as do the coronial inquests. Petrol sniffing is socially contagious. Frequent Indigenous journeys and circular mobility between communities and towns within and across regions present constant opportunities for the practice of petrol sniffing to be reignited.

34 Senate Community Affairs Committee Secretariat, *Grasping the opportunity of Opal*, pp. 52–3.