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## Bitumen Films in Postcolonial Australia

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In 2000, the Council for Reconciliation brought out the 'Road map' for reconciliation 'as we walk together along the reconciliation road'.<sup>1</sup> In May 2004, Reconciliation Australia launched 'Pathways to Reconciliation', again implicitly linking the trope of the road to nation, reconciliation and political progress as *movement*. This situates the politics of reconciliation within a discourse of 'freedom of the road' which has its cinematic apotheosis in the road film. Critics who suspect that reconciliation is the next phase in colonial re-settlement and domination<sup>2</sup> will appreciate that the road film is bound up with narratives of imperial expansion. This is clear in Timothy Corrigan's *terra nullius* sounding description of the road film genre as perpetuating 'freedom on the road to nowhere'<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added), or Cohan and Hark's 'back to the nation's frontier ethos'<sup>4</sup> where the road signifies 'an empty expanse, a tabula rasa, the last true frontier'.<sup>5</sup> Such *terra nullius* images of the US road movie genre ring hollow in postcolonial Australian cinema and culture that attempts to account for post-*Mabo* history,<sup>6</sup> and also the persistent history of Aboriginal sovereignty. This essay follows the associations that the 'road to reconciliation' conjures up and looks at how this trope of the road has been taken up in cinematic depictions of Aboriginality and whiteness on the road, both prior to the 'road to reconciliation' and after it.

The road bears a long tradition of figuring not only colonisation,<sup>7</sup> but also social movements of white and black resistance. In the case of 'actual' roads for instance, Stephen Muecke's book *No Road: Bitumen all the way*<sup>8</sup> indicates that a 'road' is not always bitumen but can be a path/track that is actually imperceptible to settlers.<sup>9</sup> Thus roads/tracks can be sites for demonstrating and calling attention to the performativity of Aboriginal sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> Such 'performativity' is well documented by some of the films discussed here, many of which take the 'road' as the site for this reclamation of national space.

The road is a liminal space, both a 'sign' of, or material semiotic form of, settler occupation, but it is also a site for its critique. Alongside the rise of the road movie genre in the US during the 1960s there was the Freedom Ride's critique of race relations. In Australia in 1965 we had our very own 'Freedom Riders'. The Freedom Riders were a group of mostly white University Students (led by Charles Perkins) who set off in a bus from the University of Sydney to Moree, Walgett and other towns practising overt racial discrimination. In February 2005, forty years later, the Freedom Riders set off again with a different group of students (and many more Aboriginal Riders) to reenact the original journey (with air-conditioning). This indicates the longevity of the issue of racial discrimination and also the endurance of the road's association with 'freedom' and political 'movement'. I followed this trip for some of the way and kept a critical eye on the road metaphor, how that metaphor of 'escape' and 'freedom on the road' disguised

other histories of containment. I wondered whether or not the Freedom Ride, like reconciliation's love of the road metaphor was tying itself too closely to a history of (post)colonial expansion and Aboriginal containment. At the same time it was impossible to remain untouched by the excitement of political movement. I got caught in the momentum, while thinking that momentum might be part of the problem: appealing to a desire to quickly 'solve' something, we keep things moving rather than sitting down, slowing down and thinking, which is often presented as not 'progressive', the opposite of 'action'/movement.

On the road there are always other things happening that might not be perceived, which is perhaps why the road is an apt metaphor for reconciliation: whites like me cannot presume to 'know' what reconciliation will mean finally. Four months before the bus load of Freedom Riders went north from Sydney, Michael Long began his 'Long Walk' along 'secondary roads' from Melbourne to Canberra to see the Prime Minister to discuss Aboriginal politics. While the Freedom Rider's mobility was not cast in terms of authenticity (even in spite of the 're-enactment'), Michael Long's 'Long walk' was. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* it was depicted as a walk through the land of his ancestors; he was, along with his Aboriginal supporters 'at home here among the gum trees. Their ancestors have walked the land for 40,000 years or so'.<sup>11</sup> Stephens was clearly touched by the powerful statement of this man's walk to Canberra, but his nostalgic reading cast the roads that he walked on outside of the frame of contemporary Aboriginal politics, suggesting that the road is a less authentic place for an Aboriginal person to be and not a site for contemporary Aboriginal politics. The 'road to reconciliation' suggests that this is not the case, as do numerous Aboriginal road films. Roads are always contested postcolonial places: neither entirely resistant (Freedom Rides) nor entirely dominant (*No way to forget*), but both and more. The following discussion of specific films attempts to draw out that contestation.

There are several films, documentaries and a TV series which highlight the relationship between Aboriginal people, whites, the road and the road film. These include feature films *Backroads* (1977) and *Backlash* (1986), the rock n' roll road documentaries *Beating about the bush* (1993) and *End of the corrugated road*, (2001) as well as the rock n' roll road film *Wrong side of the road* (1983). The ABC TV documentary *Cop it sweet* (1991) and TV series *Bush mechanics* (2001) are also important, as are the short films *No way to forget* (1996), *Confessions of a headhunter* (2000) and *Road* (2000). Some of these films have been directed by whites (*Backroads*, *Backlash*, *Wrong Side of the Road*, *Beating about the bush* and *Cop it sweet*). These films contribute to a critique of whiteness and they also demonstrate Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal collaboration (successful or not), as well as indicating Aboriginal input into the 'agenda' of the films.<sup>12</sup> For instance, *Backroads* was directed by Phil Noyce but with considerable input from Gary Foley. *Backlash* (1986) was written, directed and produced by Bill Bennett but with input and script improvisation from the cast (though probably less than in *Backroads*). *Wrong side of the road* (1983) was directed by Ned Lander with the script written in collaboration with Graham Isaacs and the bands Us Mob and No Fixed Address. *Beating about the bush* is a film with two white directors (Sherwood and Adler), about a white and Aboriginal band Djaambi, lead by Richard Frankland, who also acted as scriptwriter and producer of the film, and

whose influence and presence is particularly clear throughout the film (he has a central role). While Frances Peters-Little argues that 'both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film and television makers ... [are] capable of telling real Aboriginal stories', *Beating about the bush* is probably not one of those success stories. Importantly, the Aboriginal characters in the film are divided over its politics of representation. In the film, Peter Rothmanus criticises it as a 'white documentary like another version of the bush tucker man in the Northern Territory' and, on the other hand, Richard Frankland still appears hopeful that 'white Australia will be really touched by what they have seen ... and perhaps they still will be'. As a film about and based on white and Aboriginal collaborations, it is difficult to argue that the film is 'white' only, though it demonstrates brilliantly some of the problems with white representations of Aboriginal people. It also happened to come out in the same year as Marcia Langton's discussion of these issues in *Well I heard it on the radio, and I saw it on the television*<sup>13</sup> as well as Karen Jennings's *Site of difference*.<sup>14</sup>

In road films like *Wrong side of the road*, *Confessions of a headhunter*, *Backroads*, *Backlash*, *Beating about the Bush*, and even *Bush mechanics* the road is a place in which Aboriginal people socialise the car and Indigenise the road in ways that might be unexpected for a white audience. Rather than being 'narrow',<sup>15</sup> the road film is something which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film makers have deployed in a number of ways, including its realist potential and its aesthetics. The films discussed here show that the road is a place which enables an expression of belonging; for instance, in *Beneath clouds*, *Dust* and *Bush mechanics*, Aboriginal men and women are seen travelling between and past important sites of cultural memory in their cars.<sup>16</sup> It is also a site of resistance and of the desire to keep moving and escaping, which is akin to optimism in many road films.

On the other hand, these films also attest to the attempted control of Aboriginal mobility by the State and police as 'mobile panopticons of the state', to quote Davies's very useful line.<sup>17</sup> Colonialism attempts to render Aboriginality and Aboriginal people immobile, settled rather than nomadic,<sup>18</sup> but also attempts to keep them on the move and out of sight, from settlement to reserve to mission, as Sen's early film *Vanish* (1998) depicts. The Aboriginal drivers and passengers in road films discussed here move without ease, with police constantly checking their identity ('driver's license please') and the suitability of the cars ('bald tyres, that's a one hundred dollar fine'). This is not the 'freedom of the highways'—this is the attempted containment of Aboriginal mobility by whites who are positioned in these films as presuming to be more 'legitimate' users of the road and managers of its space.

The white people depicted in these films (police, attempted kidnappers, racists, 'well intentioned' fearful whites) are confronting to white viewers who might want to identify with Aboriginal resistance. The spatial control of Aboriginal people is paralleled in these films by whites who also attempt to define Aboriginal identity. For instance, in *Wrong side of the road*, Pedro (Peter Butler) tells a white cop 'I'm black too', to which the cop (played by Chris Haywood) responds, 'don't shit me'. In *Confessions of a headhunter*, Frank is called a 'wannabe blackfella' by the arresting police officers. To question these men, the police also 'question' their Aboriginal identity, linking criminality to cultural authenticity. These whites

who ask the questions are, of course, 'non-defined definers'<sup>19</sup> in this situation, never having to question their own identity if they can assume that blacks are blacks and whites are whites. The slippage between Aboriginality and skin colour is actively exploited by Lena in Ivan Sen's *Beneath clouds* (2001). By walking into pubs and being welcomed by whites, by having white ladies stop to offer her a ride, Lena demonstrates the ease of white mobility. But the cost of this mobility is indicated by Vaughn's continual rejection, the whites in the pub withdrawing their welcome, white women drivers driving off when they see Vaughn next to Lena. Lena's 'whiteness' licenses her freedom to move into these white public spaces—and her whiteness, should white viewers wish to identify with it, places us/her on the side of the unwelcoming, the door-shutting pub users, the ladies who drive off and the arresting officers.

The connection between white mobility and privilege is acute for the white viewer of these films. Jenny Brockie's documentary *Cop it sweet*, which I discuss later, also brings home the complicity of white spectatorship, the white gaze. In this TV documentary, the camera often takes up position in the back seat of the police vehicle looking out at *them*: the Aboriginal residents of Eveleigh Street. This positioning of the viewer as complicit with police surveillance of the street indicates that the white participant on the 'road to reconciliation' cannot always assume that we are positioned walking hand in hand across the Harbour Bridge (as in the Reconciliation Walk in 2000), but that we might also be situated as other white managers of cultural space.<sup>20</sup> These films, which depict the relationship between Aboriginality, the road and whiteness, therefore invoke the dual role of whiteness on the road to reconciliation: 'walking together' with the Other *and* occasioning his/her containment. This is the condition of white spectatorship and indeed, white critique: that I/we might end up recognising ourselves as not 'free', but as those who do the oppressing: sitting in the back seat of the police vehicle not as a heroic prisoner but as a complicit critic.

The films discussed here utilise the association between the road and identity, with the road film providing the space in which Aboriginal identity is asserted under conditions of restraint, while white identities are present as threatening and threatened. The films demonstrate the strategic appropriation of colonial and postcolonial apparatus, which, as Moreton-Robinson argues, is a feature of Aboriginal cultural forms.<sup>21</sup> There are many examples of this in these films. For instance, melting down the heads of bronze statues of white colonial explorers to make a sculpture representing Aboriginal mother/child survivors; it's the same substance (bronze) and art form (sculpture) but it tells a very different story (*Confessions of a headhunter*). So too the road, once associated with the ever expanding frontier 'out there' can also be the site for very different kinds of stories. The road in these films is existential, colonial/postcolonial, rural, traditional, urban, dystopian, predatory and poetic.

### ***Bush mechanics***

David Batty and Francis Jupurrula Kelly's *Bush mechanics* (ABC TV, 2001) did much to dispel the image of the 'authentic' non-car-using Aboriginal man. The series utilises the energy of the road film, following the story of five men who set out from Yuendumu to go to Alice Springs (350 kms away) to buy a new car. On

the way, their old car repeatedly breaks down, occasioning amazing repairs like using grasses to fill a burst tyre, making a jack from a young springy tree and charging a battery by heating it next to a fire. The journey is intercut with pieces to camera where men speak about their relationships with cars. In her excellent reading of the series, Georgina Clarsen argues that these 'sagas of resourcefulness provide a perfect vehicle for a broader expression of contemporary realities for these men' which she lists as 'the centrality of country, the ongoing importance of ceremonial life and law, the continuing economy of hunting and collecting, the everyday proximity of spirit people, the material deprivation of Yapa life, the physical desolation of the Yuendumu township'.<sup>22</sup> Clarsen notes that the series is based on the historic legacy of colonisation and the fact that European colonisation in that part of the country was achieved through cars and trucks; the series demonstrates the strategic adoption and assimilation of cars into Warlpiri custom.<sup>23</sup> Clarsen reads this series as indicative of their 'self determined survival within colonialism'<sup>24</sup> and also that 'technologies [like the car] do not carry within themselves one fixed meaning'<sup>25</sup> which might position them as either white or black only. Clarsen contextualises the appropriation of such technologies. The series challenges stereotypes surrounding 'traditional' Aboriginal people and their relationship to technology. But in demonstrating the absence of a clash between technology and 'tradition', the series is still in a sense caught up within that false dichotomy and as much as the series dispels this image of the 'authentic native' who doesn't drive, it also probably derives much of its novelty value by returning audiences to this association yet again. This is an association that tries to kick Michael Long off the road and back into the bush: back into a time of 'authentic' and romanticised connection to the land as suggested in the 'this land is me/rock, water, animal, tree' lines sung by the Tracker in Rachel Perkins's *One night the moon* (2002).

Karen Jennings warns in *Sites of Difference* that the bush can be a site of romantic containment in depictions of Aboriginal people in film, and she is critical of the romanticisation of Indigenous people's spiritual connection to the land in films like *The last wave*, *Journey among women* (1977), *Walkabout* (1971), *Eliza Fraser* (1976) and *Manganinnie* (1980).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Colin Johnson warns of the 'chthonic' representations of the Aboriginal male lead in Australian films, where 'mysticism replaces any depiction of the Aboriginal male and he becomes chthonic—a natural earth force without humanity.'<sup>27</sup> Anne Hutton has also described commercial feature films including *Walkabout* (1971), *Eliza Fraser* (1976), *Storm boy* (1977), *The last wave* (1977) and *The chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) as depicting the Aboriginal male as "alien" with characterisations built upon stereotyped notions of the Aboriginal race, not as individuals who are also Aboriginal'.<sup>28</sup> This emphasis on the spiritual attachment to place and landscape has also been described by Marcia Langton as 'Mumbo Jumbo'.<sup>29</sup> Films like the ones that I am discussing here are largely set in cities and country towns, places where connections to land, place and spirituality are expressed with and through 'automobility'.<sup>30</sup> For instance, it is the car that is the space for Aunty/Mum's recollection of the massacre in *Dust* (1999). In *Confessions of a headhunter* it is the car and the road which enable Vinnie and Frank to reclaim places of public memory and history, as in *No way to forget*. In

other words, the car, a road, provides another territory for its expression. This is a simple point, but as the representation of Michael Long showed yet again, it is amazing how often white depictions of Aboriginal people insist on them being 'off road' in the sense of its negative connotations, as in outside of modernity, Nations, without culture, lost, without contemporary politics.

Anthropological work on the relationship between Aboriginal car users and tradition also highlights the absence of a clash between 'tradition' and automobility. In anthropological work with the Warlpiri community, Gertrude Stotz points out that the way that community-owned Toyotas are 'socialised' rather than simply appropriated by the Warlpiri shows that 'they are active, albeit unequal partners in the colonizing process'.<sup>31</sup> She goes on to suggest that the Toyota could 'replace the loss of mobility people had suffered since they were institutionalized since the late 1950s'.<sup>32</sup> She argues that car use plays an important role in the community and says that she 'would go so far as to argue that the car has virtually replaced walking ... No major hunting trip, no firewood collection and no ritual engagement, not to speak of many other activities, were possible without the Toyota or other motorized transport'.<sup>33</sup> In his reading of privately owned cars of the Anangu of Pitjantjara lands, South Australia, Young argues that: 'Life without cars in remote bush communities is considered impossible'<sup>34</sup> and that 'Anangu say that they cannot look after country without access to cars'.<sup>35</sup> It is clear from these anthropological texts and from *Bush mechanics* that the *perception* of traditional Indigeneity as opposed to technologies like the car persists.

#### **Who's driving on whose land?: *Beating about the bush***

It is not just white texts which position Aboriginal culture as a matter of loss rather than transformation. For instance, Peters-Little argues that 'film-making that is obsessed with maintaining and recording traditional culture dominates' the industry, and she relates this to the sidelining of Aboriginal productions from down South (and East) by the ABC Aboriginal Film Unit and SBS. Even though these productions far outnumber the productions from up North, they do not get archived or referenced as readily. A similar trope of the 'real North' as opposed to the East and South is played out in *Beating about the bush* (Sherwood and Adler, 1993). In this documentary, band leader (and scriptwriter/producer) Richard Frankland talks to the filmmakers about his personal conflicts in Melbourne when people assume that he is not Aboriginal (because they associate Aboriginality with skin colour only). He describes it as a 'big identity crisis, like being in two worlds'. To illustrate this point he then goes on to say that 'I see our role down south as not necessarily teaching anyone anything up here [Northern Territory] but at least making them aware of what can happen if they lose their language and much of their culture'.

This road film's trajectory of going North to 'bring positive messages' to the communities about black and white collaborations echoes the association of North with the 'realities' of Aboriginal life. On arriving in the first Aboriginal community, filming begins to take on 'real' political significance (signalled by the serious, disappointed film-maker's voiceover) that complicates the film's utopian departure point. Like many road films, the documentary starts off full of

expectations, but it quickly runs into constraints. Arriving at Yuendumu, the community asks them to film only in certain areas. This is consistent with Marcia Langton's account of the Warlpiri media reaction to the 'white film gaze' where the Yuendumu community 'discover that they did not wish to be film subjects without any control or determination of the representation made of them'.<sup>36</sup> The control that the community wants over the 'white film gaze' (which also applies to Frankland as scriptwriter and producer), is reported within the film as a disappointment, a containment and indeed a challenge. So instead the filmmakers use long shots to get more footage, trespassing through magnification.

This road film/documentary couches the immobility of the camera as a problem rather than as a condition. Their disappointment is understandable in the context of what appears to be the deployment of the road film genre. The North, which was supposed to be the horizon to which the band members would be free to move into and to be warmly welcomed and celebrated, turned out to be a slightly more complicated space with a particular set of filmic protocols that did not necessarily gel with the 'free' roaming road crew and film crew.

Another documentary that makes use of the road film genre is *End of the corrugated road* (2001), a film that does not run into the same problems of location. It follows the last show of the Warumpi Band at Stomping Ground in Broome, and the documentary (shot also in a way that resembles the road film), emphasises *connections* to the places that the band members have, for instance, Sammy Butcher's connections with Papunya, George Rrarrumbi's connections with the coast ('My island home') and Neil Murray's connections to his grandfather's farm. This reading of the road film highlights the character's 'home' rather than their destination, whereas *Beating about the bush* obsessively presents a thwarted destination. Stuck in the car park, the camera in *Beating about the bush* strains to focus on what it should *not* be filming, thus epitomising the problem of the road film when 'stuck' having to obey societal commands.

It seems that Sherwood and Adler's deployment of the road film genre itself had something to do with the frustrations depicted in this film. Following a band on the move, the filmmakers could not do (what they saw as) 'justice' to the conditions that they were hoping to 'reveal'. In the film, Peter Rothmanus's point to the filmmakers is prescient here: 'You've got to be here for ten or twelve years before you can start to bring proper issues out'. This raises the question of speed and depth in the road film as a whole: can it do justice to 'proper issues' if it cannot keep still but has to fill itself busily with music and movement and roads and horizons?

#### **Speeding white lines and black lines: *Confessions of a headhunter* (2000) and *No way to forget* (1996)**

Two films that make the most of the speed associated with the road film are Sally Riley's *Confessions of a headhunter* and Richard Frankland's *No way to forget*. The latter is a short film that utilises the melancholic elements of the road film to great effect. The film follows the road trip from Swan Hill to Melbourne of a Field Officer (played by David Ngoombujarra) during the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Shane Francis is haunted by the memories of the stories of black deaths that he is investigating. Most of the scenes of his car

journey are at night, the headlights illuminating only a short distance of the road in front and to the side. The sense of containment and isolation, and the burden of the stories that he hears results in him being distracted from the road and he swerves, almost crashing off the side of the road. More memories of survivors and victims' families assail him and he uses the car horn to shout, again reflecting a sense that he is alone with these tragedies, with no one to listen to him but the car that carries him through his memories one by one: 'The white poles look like ghosts at the side of the road, standing to attention and watching me as I drive past maybe watching my work and the things I do. I've seen them so much I try to ignore them now.' The road is the space of those memories of suicide and death. With his 'spirit so tired' he wonders whether 'this road I'm on, doesn't seem like it'll ever end ... the towns have all begun to look the same, maybe they are.' It is an affective short film that utilises the road film's association with alienation and societal containment. The road's repetition and signs of unending whiteness (the white lines, the white ghosts, the white poles) indicate the ghosting and imprisonment of the lives he is investigating within the bureaucratic machine of government. The road's 'no way', the road block, signals death, and true to the dystopic images prevalent throughout the film, it ends in a long shot of a crammed highway into the city of Melbourne. The city itself is an image of institutional alienation where slowing down in the traffic signals another 'no way', another block.

The speed enabled by the road is also utilised in Sally Riley's short film *Confessions of a Headhunter* (2000), based on a story by Archie Weller with a screenplay written by both Sally Riley and Archie Weller. The film, set initially in Perth, begins with the OED definition of a headhunter and then opens with a man packing a bag full of tools and sharpening an axe: headhunting gear. The film cuts to the same man (Frank) in police custody saying: 'I'm the Dutchman' and 'the Dutchman's coming for you wadjullas'. The police officers (the aptly named Detective Stirling played by John Gregg and Detective Leake played by Matt Potter) respond with: 'Dutchman? Fuckin Madman', and they call him a 'wannabe blackfella', signalling their belief that Frank is not black enough to be calling *them* 'wadjulla'. In this road film, the road trip is set in the recent past and is recounted in the form of a confession to the police. It is also a buddy movie that involves Frank and his newly discovered cousin Vinnie (Kelton Pell) on a road trip around Australia in their Ford Falcon, heavily weighed down by the number of heads they carry in the boot.

Frank, who has recently found out about his Aboriginal heritage, meets Vinnie in a park where he and his uncle are hanging out. They quickly ascertain that their mothers were sisters. Frank's new found identity gives him a sense of belonging as he explains to the police: 'I felt I belonged somewhere', to which the police respond: 'Now it's time to cut the reunion crap, where's Vinnie?' Frank is not deterred by the policemen's lack of interest in his personal history and continues with his story regardless—the confession to police enabling his story to be told to the white authorities and to the audience. Frank decides to align himself with 'my warrior ancestors' and in revenge for the taking of Yagan's head he becomes an avenging headhunter, knocking off the heads of public monuments to white 'heroes' and claiming them as booty in his Falcon. He tells the cops: 'White



settlers cut off Yagan's head and skinned him for his tribal markings', to which the police officer replies: 'Ancient bloody history mate, it's got nothing to do with me'. Detective Stirling's name conjures up Captain Stirling, who laid the first claims to the area around Perth and whose head Frank and Vinnie take first. This shared name contradicts the belief that it's '[a]ncient bloody history mate, it's got nothing to do with me'.

This film patiently details the headhunting, and the car is crucial as getaway vehicle and as the vehicle for transporting the 'victims'. In one scene, Frank and Vinnie drive the car right up to the foot of a statue to use it as a ladder to reach the head. Frank ascends the statue and cuts off the head, which rolls onto the roof of the car and off the bonnet. The car wears its own marks of being witness to this 'crime'. A photo of Frank's mum has pride of place on the dashboard of the car. In pursuit of more heads, the two headhunters begin a pan-Aboriginal revenge. They drive to Adelaide to get 'revenge on those white invaders'. In NSW they spare the Dog on the Tuckerbox on the basis that Vinnie has 'good memories of that dog'; 'We'll give him a pardon then', says Frank. They behead Queen Victoria in George Street, Sydney. Captain Cook's head goes too, Frank explaining to him that: 'You see mate, you never discovered this territory. They [Aboriginal people] didn't have to discover the land because they belonged to it, where's their fuckin' statue eh?'

Frank and Vinnie melt down the heads and make their own monument to those who are left un-monumentalised by a white/bronzed (bitumenised) version of history. Their monument is of an Aboriginal mother and child and a younger child standing on the water overlooking the city of Perth. They appear windswept, their clothes pushing backwards while the child pushes forward: interestingly, an image of movement despite being fixed in bronze. *Confessions* utilises the speed of the road film to match an argument about the need to (in a sense) melt down a static white version of history that freezes black history out of the picture. The fluidity and mobility that the road film manages to create through the frenetic energy of the car and the evasion of pursuit, echoes the transformation of a static bronze into a different kind of memorial for an unknown, unnamed Aboriginal woman with her children. The speed of the car and the travel around Australia echo the resolute, direct action of the headhunters and their speedy interventions into public memory/memorialisation. The road film seems predestined to symbolise the nation,<sup>37</sup> and thus it is not surprising that this film presents the remodelling of history along black lines.

### **The car as predator: *Road***

A less speedy, buddy road film, in which the main protagonists have to outrun and outsmart cars (taxis) is Catriona McKenzie's film *Road*. Like *Confessions of a headhunter*, this film also depicts urban mobility. The pursued here are Lance (Gavin Richie) and his friend Murray (Shane O'Mara), two Aboriginal men who decided to leave the country ('this shithole') and move to the city (Sydney). The film opens with them moving down the street at night with a shopping trolley as transport, trying to catch a taxi, but none will stop. A fight ensues with a taxi driver which results in the two men being pursued by a cop car and then by taxis. Arriving at the safe haven of a friend's house, they enter the living room where a

road sign hangs, indicating a dangerous bend in the road ahead. Murray and Vance sit down and in response to the question 'what happened to you?', Vance answers: 'Two words ... Sydney fucking cabs'. Out on the road again, the two are chased by taxis. We don't see any cab drivers, we only see predatory shots of cars on the road from the perspective of the front wheel, positioning Murray and Vance as pedestrian obstacles, targets. When the two reach a place of relative peace, sitting in a playground singing, three cabs drive past in the distance. When they find their way to the beach, Vance walks off after an argument and is killed on the road. A taxi pulls off in the distance. The film ends with Murray taking Vance into the surf, the one place where there are no roads. Here the road is positioned as a site of predation and containment of mobility.

**The trifecta: Mobility, Indigeneity, cops in *Cop it sweet*, *Backlash* and *Backroads*.**

The car functions in a number of films to signal the structure of unequal relations between Aboriginal people and white police, who speak about them, with them, chase them and arrest them, often slowing them to the point of imprisonment. The road film lends itself well to the depiction of classic cops and robbers style car pursuits and the genre is itself well placed to dramatise the audience's sympathies with the ambivalent heroes who take to the road to rebel against the state. In the case of Aboriginal road films, the police appear as particularly brutal figures of the state whose attitude might be summed up as: 'If they give you any trouble, hammer 'em' (*Wrong side of the road*). White cops are routinely seen to call the Aboriginal people (mostly men) that they stop 'boys' (*Wrong side of the road*, *Beneath clouds*) as well as other racist terms like 'boong', 'black cunt' and 'Sambo' (*Wrong side of the road*). The documentary about the mobile Redfern police patrol *Cop it sweet*, made in 1991 by Jenny Brockie, is worth considering for its account of the effect of police 'car-based subjectivity'<sup>38</sup> as well as the apparent threat that Aboriginal mobility poses to police.

*Cop it sweet* was made after Brockie spent six weeks following the Redfern police mobile patrols where 78 per cent of police were under 25 and mostly white. The ordinariness of the violence in the film is brilliantly captured by the culture of 'automobility'<sup>39</sup> that it portrays. It is the police (and camera crew) who are mobile in this film, while the Aboriginal people in it are largely depicted as car-less. The first incident we witness is checking and curtailing the mobility of two drivers stopped in Eveleigh Street for having bald tyres (an event that also occurs in *Beneath clouds*)—a reminder that in a city built around roads and highways, access to the car is also access to social mobility. The police patrol spends most of its time looking for cars that are a 'bit suss', which means driven by ethnic minorities or other 'types', as in: 'you might find a car that's a bit "suss" with four young blokes in it' or 'a commodore hotted up that is absolutely flying ... a red Laser for instance, you might find an Aboriginal driving it, not a lot of Aboriginals drive red Lasers for instance'. Perhaps one of the clear signs of police dysfunction in the film is the number of times that we see the police car drive slowly down the block and the viewer is situated in the back seat looking out at *them*—the other under the gaze of the Law. We not only see the police officers seated in the patrol cars but we are on patrol with them, a complicit and therefore often uncomfortable

(if critically useful) place to be. Cruising down Eveleigh Street, the police cars become what Jude Davies has called 'mobile panopticons of the state'.<sup>40</sup> One officer tells the camera that he and his fellow officers refer to this section of their patrol as the 'lion park': 'every time you drive down here you got to wind your windows up'. This situates the Aboriginal people as animals, the police as zoo keepers and the car as the 'haven of security'<sup>41</sup> that separates the police officers from the wild and dangerous world outside—a world in which the police then situate themselves as vulnerable, powerless prey. On patrol with the police officer in the car, Brockie asks the officer what they do when it's all quiet and he answers: 'Just drive around like this'. They are literally *looking for trouble*. Police officers in this documentary display what Davies has called in another context, 'car-based subjectivities'<sup>42</sup> where the car represents a 'haven of security' from the outside world. Jenny Brockie also reads the police 'retreat to their cars'<sup>43</sup> as the desire for a 'sanctuary from the world outside'. She goes on to argue that the car 'ensures limited, sometimes no, contact with the community' and that 'you don't earn respect from Redfern's Aborigines by cruising Eveleigh Street in a police car. But if you feel under siege—from all sides—it may seem the most appropriate place to be'.<sup>44</sup>

The film depicts significant resistance to this road-style surveillance. Towards the end of the film the police car goes down Eveleigh Street again with full beams on. The police officer is told by a man passing by: 'Ain't no problems here, OK? So get out, fuckin' shit'. The cop immediately calls for a truck to pick up 'an Aboriginal causing trouble'. When he is approached by the police officer the man (whose name we find out later is David) tells him, 'I don't like you studying the block'. The officer mishears and asks 'starting?', only to be told again 'STUDYING'. This defiance is met with arrest for 'offensive language', to which David replies, 'You're kidding' and 'I'm going to fight you all the way' and invites the camera to get it all on record. Inside the police station, the structural relation of dominance that is produced by the 'car-based subjectivity' of authority is again pertinent. In the police station the officer rarely makes eye contact or looks at his prisoner, who is held in a ludicrous looking wooden cage that reaches to his waist. The camera comes to stand in for the space in which this non-dialogue is played out. David keeps talking as if to the officer, but it is to the camera that he also appeals for recognition of the absurdity and injustice of the situation. The officer's car-based subjectivity appears vulnerable. Is he fearful of this 'lion' in a half cage in front of him? Is this why he stands behind the desk and rarely looks at the man he's arrested? Once out of the car he is unable to perform in the same manner: he has no high beams, no cover of darkness and no speedy flight from the scene.

In her reading of Australian police culture published in the *British Journal of Criminology* Janet Chan points out that much of the public concern over *Cop it sweet* was directed not at the actual racism depicted (racist comments as well as the spurious use of public order offences), but at the fact that the officers were aware that they were on camera and that this meant that they were perhaps more restrained than usual.<sup>45</sup> In 1991, the same year that the documentary came out, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission raised serious concerns about the use of public order offences against Aboriginal people as well as the high arrest rate and imprisonment rates for Indigenous Australians.<sup>46</sup> The Royal Commission

into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1989–1996 found that Indigenous people were 16.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to die in custody between 1990 and 1995. The report also found the continued use of what it called the ‘trifecta’ (offensive language, resisting arrest and assault occasioning no harm). This ‘trifecta’ meant that Indigenous people are twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to be arrested and three times more likely to be imprisoned for such an offence.<sup>47</sup>

A film that takes place largely within the confines of a police vehicle is *Backlash*. It is a film that demonstrates the liminal space of the police vehicle itself. While the two police officers (Trevor played by David Argue and Nikki played by Gia Carides) sit or drive in the front seat with the prisoner behind them (Kathy played by Lydia Miller), there are few opportunities to contextualise the film’s thesis about white and black law, which Karen Jennings has pointed out is confused. The car functions as a mobile prison cell so that most of the significant intervals in the film occur outside of the vehicle. It is when the car breaks down that Kath, David and Nikki’s relationship becomes more fluid. The departure from the police vehicle and the car-based subjectivities that it enforces (a silent captive in the back seat) produces opportunities for differently structured communication.

One of the most critically celebrated Australian road films that explores Aboriginal and white conflict and identity is Phil Noyce’s *Backroads* (1977), which features ‘real’ dialogue about Aboriginal/white racism between Gary Foley (as Gary) and Bill Hunter (as Jack) as they travel towards Sydney in their stolen Pontiac Parisienne 1962. They never make it, the police catching up to them, arresting Jack and shooting and killing Gary as he attempts another escape. Stephen Muecke’s reading of this film ‘*Backroads: From Identity to Interval*’<sup>48</sup> describes the film as articulating ‘a certain kind of poetry’ in the way that it was made (much of the dialogue was unscripted and based on actor input), in its incorporation of documentary realism (Essie Coffey’s song), and in its emphasis on chance meetings (hitchhikers and love interests) and competing life stories. For Muecke the ‘consciousness of a society ... is vehicled by popular forms like films, made up of linked codes and forces, which are articulated with a logic, not of causality, but with a more poetic logic of interval, movement, and a multiplicity of layers folding over each other in a heterotopic and variable space’.<sup>49</sup> This also seems an apt description of the road movie as a genre, where there is often more emphasis on the poetics of ‘interval’ than on the journey or destination itself. In Muecke’s reading of the ‘interval’ these become spaces for ‘cultural transformation’, which are then coded as allowing the possibility for positive cultural transformations. *Backroads* ends on a less than positive note, with Jack being arrested by police and Gary shot down. Muecke reports that there was an alternative ending to *Backroads* that was never made: ‘Instead of being killed and arrested by police, the mates and the Parisienne would make it all the way to the Harbour Bridge, only to be stuck in a traffic jam. At this point the mates would leave the car and continue on foot ...’<sup>50</sup> This ending might indicate a more positive transformation: the act of leaving the car on the Harbour Bridge to walk over the bridge and escape into traffic.

### Conclusion

In many of these films, Aboriginal mobility appears as a threat to whites, in particular to the State, which is represented by a white police force that takes excessive interest in Aboriginal people and their movements, contents of cars, driving licenses, bald tyres and 'bad' language. It is not surprising that Sen's *Beneath clouds* depicts the constantly interrupted journey of its main characters as more interval than movement, a slowing down, a paring down of dialogue and speed, with the result that the film reinvokes the poetics of the road through the space of its margins: the pedestrian, the hitchhiker, the Aboriginal person without wheels of his/her own, with communities of those who offer a ride and those who don't.<sup>51</sup> These road films, many of which were made around the time of the 'road to reconciliation' campaign, occasion a rewriting of history through acts of resistance against white monumental history (*Confessions of a headhunter*). They occasion dialogue between whites and blacks over what constitutes history, identity (*Backroads, Beneath clouds, Wrong side of the road, Confessions of a headhunter, No way to forget*), and the role of documentary (*Beating about the bush*) itself. These films are also engaged in the critique of whiteness and white people by drawing attention in particular to the privileges of white mobility and white fears of Aboriginal mobility. As such they re-present the 'road to reconciliation' as a contested space, articulating different histories of mobility and even different kinds of roads.

## Discordant Notes

- about to give up, the clouds hid the moon, the night became darker than it was before and a red, vigorous light appeared to her.
- 10 Not in the correct order in French: 'la blanche Anglaise'. The mistake confirms that Daniel has forgotten the English language.
  - 11 Allan Cunningham was a botanist and explorer, who settled with the first soldiers and convicts on the shores of Moreton Bay, in September 1824. He supervised the planting of the seedlings shipped from Sydney's botanical gardens. In G Blainey, *A Land Half Won*, South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1980, p 141.
  - 12 Jules de la Pilorgerie was the second French author to publish a history of the British Colony, *History of Botany Bay: A study of the effects of deportation, as a means of punishment and as a means of colonisation*, published in 1836. The first French history of European settlement in Australia was written by Ernest de Blossville, *History of the English penal colonies in Australia*, published in 1831. In C Forster, *France and Botany Bay: The Lure of a Penal Colony*, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 1996.
  - 13 J Lycett, Views of Australia (1825) in Anthony Hewison (ed.), *The Macquarie Decade. Documents illustrating the History of NSW, 1810-1821*, Broadway, Cassell, 1972, p.43.
  - 14 Colin Forster, *France and Botany Bay: The Lure of a Penal Colony*, Carlton South, Melbourne University Press, 1996, p.93.
  - 15 C Forster, *France and Botany Bay*, p.72.
  - 16 *ibid.*
  - 17 Georges Caley, *Reflections on the Colony of NSW*, J.E.B. Currey (ed.), Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1966, p 192.
  - 18 A Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1997, p 346.

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#### Filmography

- David Batty and Francis Jupurrula Kelly, *Bush mechanics*, ABC TV, 2001.  
Bill Bennett, *Backlash*, 1986.  
Jenny Brockie, *Cop it sweet*, 1991  
Ned Lander, *Wrong side of the road*, 1983  
Catriona McKenzie, *Road*, 2000  
Phillip Noyce, *Backroads*, 1977  
Rachel Perkins, *One night the moon*, 2000  
Sally Riley, *Confessions of a Headhunter*, 2000.  
Jason Ramp, *End of the corrugated road, Message stick*, 2001  
Ivan Sen, *Wind*, 1999.  
Caroline Sherwood and Nicholas Adler, *Beating about the bush*, 1993  
Richard Frankland, *No way to forget*, 1996

#### Notes

Thanks to Jodi Frawley for her editorial/research assistance and thanks also to Catherine Simpson for reading an earlier version of this essay.

- 1 From the Council for Reconciliation website: <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/2000/10/pg4.htm>> accessed January 2005.
- 2 See Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs, "'On the Border of the Unsayable": The Apology in Postcolonising Australia,' *Interventions* 2, no 2, 2000, pp 229-247. Simeon Moran, 'Imagining Reconciliation,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 76, 2003, pp 183-195.
- 3 Timothy Corrigan, 'Genre, Gender and Hysteria: The Road Movie in Outer Space,' in *A Cinema without Walls: Movies, Culture after Vietnam*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1991.
- 4 Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark, *The Road Movie Book*, Routledge, London, 1997, p 1.
- 5 Manohla Dargis, *ibid.*
- 6 Felicity Collins and Terese Davis, *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

- 7 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1988.
- 8 Stephen Muecke, *No Road: Bitumen all the way*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, WA, 1997.
- 9 I discuss the imperceptible nature of Tracks (to white critics/viewers) in an essay on Tracker films (*The tracker* (2002), *One night the moon* (2001), *Wind* (1999), *Rabbit proof fence* (2002)) in 'An Ethics of Following and the No Road Film: Trackers, Followers and Fanatics', *Australian Humanities Review*, December 37, 2005.
- 10 See Fiona Nicoll, 'De-Facing *Terra Nullius* and Facing the Public Secret of Indigenous Sovereignty in Australia,' *Borderlands eJournal*, December, 2002.
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- 12 John Harding, 'Cannons in the Camera: Definition of Black Films,' *Cinema Papers* 87, 1992, p 43.
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- 15 *ibid.*, p 49.
- 16 Adam Gall and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, 'Ivan Sen and the Art of the Road,' *Screen*, 47, no 4, 2006.
- 17 Jude Davies, in M S Fitzmaurice and T Fitzmaurice (eds), 'Against the Los Angeles Symbolic: Unpacking the Racialized Discourse of the Automobile in 1980s and 1990s Cinema', *Screening the City*, Verso. London, 2003, p 225.
- 18 Carter, *op cit.*
- 19 Ruth Frankenberg, *White Woman, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p 22.
- 20 Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998.
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- 22 Georgina Clarsen, 'Still Moving: Bush Mechanics in the Central Desert,' *Australian Humanities Review*, March 2002, pp 4–5.
- 23 *ibid.*, p 7.
- 24 *ibid.*, p 8.
- 25 *ibid.*, p 2.
- 26 Jennings, *op cit.*
- 27 Johnson, Colin. 'Chauvel and the Centring of the Aboriginal Male in Australian Film', *Continuum*, vol 1, no 1, 1987, p 48.
- 28 Anne Hutton, in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), 'Black Australia and Film: Only if it Makes Money,' *An Australian Film Reader*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1985, p 334.
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- 30 Mimi Sheller, *Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car*, Department of Sociology Lancaster University, 2003 cited; available from <<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/soc124ms.pdf>>; John Urry, *Automobility: Car Culture and Weightless Travel: A Discussion Paper*, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, 1999 cited; <[www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Urry-Automobility.pdf](http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Urry-Automobility.pdf)>.
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- 32 *ibid.*, p 227.
- 33 *ibid.*, p 232.
- 34 Diana Young, in Daniel Miller (ed.), 'The Life and Death of Cars: Private Vehicles on the Pitjantjatjara Lands,' *Car Cultures*, Berg, Oxford, 2001, p 36.
- 35 *ibid.*, p 38.
- 36 Langton, *op cit.*, p 67.
- 37 See Gall and Probyn-Rapsey, *op cit.*, for discussion of the limitations of this association.
- 38 Davies, 'Against the Los Angeles Symbolic: Unpacking the Racialized Discourse of the Automobile in 1980s and 1990s Cinema', *op cit.*

## Discordant Notes

- 39 Sheller, op cit.; Urry, op cit.
- 40 Davies, op cit., p 225.
- 41 *ibid.*, p 227.
- 42 *ibid.*
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- 44 *ibid.*
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- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 Stephen Muecke, 'Backroads: From Identity to Interval,' *Senses of Cinema*, 2001. <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/backroads.html>>.
- 49 *ibid.*, p 5.
- 50 *ibid.*, p 6.
- 51 See Gall and Probyn-Rapsey, op cit., and also Tony Birch, in Scott McQuire and Nikos Papastergiadis (eds), 'Surveillance, Identity and Historical Memory in Ivan Sen's *Beneath clouds*,' *Empires, Ruins + Networks: The Transcultural Agenda in Art*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic. 2005, pp 185–201.

### **'Walking the Wire of Prejudice': The Flying Fruit Fly Circus's 2004 production of *Skipping on Stars*** Loretta de Plevitz

- 1 Mark St Leon, *The Wizard of the Wire: the story of Con Colleano*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1993, pp 175–6.
- 2 *ibid.*, p 175.
- 3 Steven Sewell and Kim Walker, (unpub.), *Skipping on Stars*, act 2, scene 3.
- 4 The author gratefully acknowledges the playwrights' generosity in providing a copy of the script.
- 5 St Leon, op. cit.
- 6 Joyce Morgan, 'The bastard who lived to tell his tale', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 April 2003, <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/04/22/1050777252902.html?oneclick=true>>, last accessed 21 February 2005.
- 7 Sewell and Walker, op. cit., act 2, scene 4.
- 8 for example, on the one billing in a show presented in Roma, Queensland, in 1917 the members of the Colleano family variously called themselves the Royal Hawaiians, the Marasetta Sisters, Zeneto, Senorita Sanchez and Miss Katherine. St Leon, op. cit., p 55.
- 9 ABC TV, *Dynasties*, 'The Ashton Family', broadcast Tuesday 23 November 2004 at 8 pm.
- 10 *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW), s 7(e).
- 11 *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW), s 8; *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld), s 11.
- 12 *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW), s 10.
- 13 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld), s 4(a).
- 14 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Amendment Act 1901* (Qld), s 2.
- 15 *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW), s 14.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld), s 3.
- 18 *Dempsey v Rigg* (1914) St R Qd 245, 248.
- 19 *Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act 1939* (Qld), s 2(ii).
- 20 *Aborigines Act 1905* (WA), s 2, inserted by the *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* (WA).
- 21 L de Plevitz, 'What price pastoral leases? The exploitation of Queensland Aboriginal labour by pastoralists and government 1897–1968', *QUT Law Journal*, vol 14, 1998, pp 143–158.
- 22 L de Plevitz, 'Working for the Man: Wages lost to Queensland workers "Under the Act"', *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*, vol 3 issue 81, 1996, pp 4–8.
- 23 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld), s 4(d).
- 24 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld) s 33.