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Symposium Report: *Cruising Country: Automobility in Non-Urban Australia*

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In a country with such vast distances and isolated pockets of population, Australian automobility has enabled access to a particular set of experiences of the road and the car. One of my few memories from the 1970s is a journey from Perth to Sydney (and back again) in my parents' 1975 HQ Kingswood station wagon, across the newly asphalted Eyre Highway. I spent five long days (s)trapped in the back seat between my two older brothers. My initial excitement about the overland trip evaporated just outside Kalgoorlie, rapidly giving way to an

overwhelming sense of ennui, partly, I suspect because I was too short to see out of the window. A recent ANU-based conference, "Cruising Country: Automobility in Non-Urban Australia" (ANU: 26-28th May 2005), <http://www.anu.edu.au/culture/cruising/>, 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. One of the strengths of the conference was that it managed to encompass an extremely eclectic array of disciplines with anthropologists, sociologists, historians, film theorists, artists and cultural theorists, along with the odd car enthusiast, coming to the fray to discuss the contested space of the road the vehicles that travel on it. I found 'Cruising Country' so inspirational that I hope it signals just the beginning of an extremely fruitful exchange of ideas and information between an inherently interdisciplinary range of scholars.

In their call for papers, <http://www.redeyemedia.com.au/theswamp/index>, the conference convenors, Lisa Stefanoff and Ursula Frederick, state that, "since the early 20th century, motor vehicles of all descriptions have been central characters in the settlement, governance and representation of non-urban Australia... They are objects of desire and exchange, actors in subsistence, ceremonial and market economies and sites of deep projective identification." Issues associated with indigenous automobility were an important focus of the conference with the first day culminating in a discussion of the hit series 'Bush Mechanics' with Francis Jupurrula Kelly and Catherine Summerhayes and a visit to the National Museum of Australia to marvel at one of the previously desert-residing EH Holden's, that has now been given a prized position in the exhibition in the exhibition called 'Extremes'.

For many remote communities, the presence of vehicles has often provided a contradictory set of circumstances. In the two-part paper, "Standing Truck and Running Tree" Vivien Johnson and Jeremy Long argue that, while on the one hand, roads in the Western Desert were designed for 'whitefella access to their country ... and facilitated the tribespeople's departure' — they also enabled a return for artists to country a generation later. In another case, one Arnhemland community was able to access country to protect their land from mining. Bill Fogarty's paper, "You got any truck?" focused on the novel function the Toyota Landcruiser performs in education provision in Arnhemland's remote community outstations, where attendance at schools is an on-going challenge. He argued that this type of 'nomadic learning' where the vehicle becomes the 'mobile classroom' — packed with pencils, crayons, videos and blackboards — has given rise to the potential for decentralised mobile education delivery where the classroom can come to the students. In "The Social Universe of Kuninjku tracks", Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson argued that the arrival of the truck in this Western Arnhemland community has facilitated social interaction such as hunting, shopping, art production, maintaining kinship networks.

During the wet season the truck is a necessity for local and regional ceremonies. Access as a passenger is a necessity and the mere arrival in a truck is a public demonstration of authority.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the conference was the range of artists involved and the extensive film program running every evening. Ros Bandt, (whose father invented the Aussie Ute!), is an acousitologist. Bandt argues that while Australia presents a unique sonic cultural space and contemporary road culture has produced rich sonic environments it has also silenced other sounds, such as those of remote wheat towns and rail networks. For Bandt, the ear is a barometer of culture and Australia is a culture of erasure so she calls for some way of heritage-listing sounds, like we heritage-list buildings.

The automobile gravesites that dot our rural and outback landscapes provided inspiration for some of the other artists participating in an exhibition called 'Rust, Dust, ... and Other Places' featuring photographic works by Northern Territory artists Deborah Clarke from her series 'tRust', and by Bronwyn Wright from her series 'Swamp Dynamics'. These central works were supported by pieces by Ursula Frederick, Katie Hayne and Lisa Stefanoff. Bronwyn Wright's extraordinary artistic practice materialises (and de-materialises) in a 'wasteland' called 'the Swamp' on the outskirts of Darwin where she has been going for 16 years. Wright playfully transforms the rusting metal bodies of burnt-out car wrecks by feathering them or painting them in ways that resonate with the rich landscape around them. Central to her artistic method is the 'collaboration' with the local hoons who share 'the Swamp' and drive bombed-out or stolen cars until they go no more. These vehicles provide Wright with her canvasses and she enters into a 'dialogue' with the anonymous hoons when they mischievously alter her artworks by night, and she responds by returning the next day to re-feather or re-paint them. The cars in their various stages of transformation are symbolic mediators between earth and technological progress, claims Wright.

The fragile beauty and ephemerality of the disintegrating vehicular wrecks is also the focus of another central artist featured, Charles Darwin-based Deborah Clarke. Her artwork 'tRust' involves photographing rusting, crumpled metal car bodies and digitally printing these images. Often these are close-up shots of the rust and what emerges from these photographs appears like a landscape painting or perhaps an intricately-detailed aerial photograph of criss-crossing roads inscribed on a sparse landscape. At one point during her presentation Clarke displayed a photograph of an old burnt-out, rusting bus covered in the most curious white spots, the 'author' of which she had been searching. In an extraordinary moment of artistic serendipity, out of the audience sprang Bronwyn Wright with "I painted those!" Inspiration for the spots had come from Wright's Dalmatian dogs, along with the patterns on the ground where the bus had come to rest and die.

Throughout white Australia's history, particular kinds of car journeys have been significant in asserting ownership over land and developing an image of country, claims Georgine Clarsen (1999; 359). A number of the papers on the third day examined this very notion. Laina Hall's paper, 'Cruising Country' focused on the cartography of leisure motor touring from the 1920s to the present day. Seeing or imagining the outline of the continent, claimed Hall, beckoned people to traverse it. In the 1920s, lack of roads and reliable maps, meant that route maps, overlaid with travellers' personal journeys of accumulated place-names, became a way of dealing with the vast, open spaces. The rather telling term, 'white space', was used to talk about the 'unmarked' parts of the continent left blank in cartographic renderings. Focusing on quite a different type of journeying, Georgine Clarsen's paper "Redex Trials— The Flip Side" examined the forgotten stories of women's participation in the post-war Redex trials of the mid-1950s, when contestants were required to encircle the continent, pitting modern cars against the most demanding conditions in the world. In most accounts, this arduous but romantic contest has been couched within a masculinist discourse, even though at the time, stories of women competing in the Redex trials provoked much popular media interest. As Clarsen claims, revisiting this forgotten aspect of our history provides 'fresh perspectives on the ongoing colonial project of creating a new nation in an old country.'

Paul Carter has argued that travelling and storytelling are inseparable. Travel is now considered a 'transition rite' for the group formerly known as SADs (See Australia and Die). 'Grey nomads' were the focus of two excellent postgraduate papers on the final day and judging from the discussion they generated this area is becoming a focus of serious academic interest. Three things define grey nomads, claims Louise Yabsley in her paper, "Chasing the Sun": retirement status, mode

of transportation and destination. In her cultural history of the grey nomad phenomenon, Yabsley argued that interviews coupled with online web diaries often dispute many of the popular stereotypes. Donnell Holloway's paper, "See Australia and Die" argued that shifting discourses about grey nomads reflects a broader change in the positive attitudes towards (anti) ageing. The promotion of 'ageing as freedom' has been a significant strategy in the grey nomad tourism industry, as they have emerged as another demographic to market to and exploit.

Cars nurture sentiment and seep into country in ways that we are only just beginning to imagine and communicate. *Cruising Country* successfully explored the many conjunctures of Australian automobility, intercultural exchange, power and social transformation. The organisers of this conference should be congratulated on managing to bring together such a diverse range of scholars and artists to create such a coherent and inspirational program of events. I look forward to *Cruising Country II*.

References

Clarsen, Georgine (1999) "Tracing the Outline of Nation: circling Australia by car" in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, No. 3, 1999, pp. 359—369.

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