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Antipodean Automobility and Crash: Treachery, Trespass and Transformation of the Open Road

by Catherine Simpson

Looking back through the rear vision mirror of Mad Max's V8 Pursuit Interceptor is a scrolling Aussie highway, a cinematic history of scorched and broken tarmac, littered with wrecks, smashes, breakdowns in the bush and burning automobiles. (Kitson 2003: 64)

Ken Hannam's 1974 film *Sunday Too Far Away* opens with a most spectacular, but not unexpected, car crash. In what has become an archetypal road movie shot, we see Foley, played by Jack Thompson, through the rear vision mirror, gradually dropping off to sleep at the wheel. In a long shot, moments later, his FJ Holden effortlessly rolls off the dirt track into the scrubby bush beyond. Foley nonchalantly swings open the door of his upturned vehicle, emerges unscathed and heroic, then continues on foot to his destination. While the mediated car crash is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon, an inordinate number of films produced since the film revival of the early 1970s, whether road movies or not, feature car crashes. By the late 1980s, critics Elizabeth Jacka and Susan Dermody signalled the emergence of a new "car-crash genre", which had
become "recognisably Australian and intensely popular in the wake of the first Mad Max" (Jacka and Dermody 1988: 98). The spectacular treachery of the open road was further normalised for Australian viewers through the graphic road trauma depicted in the infamous Victorian Transport Authority Commission (TAC) advertisements (1989-92) as well as the media's ongoing fascination with road tolls. In this paper I explore the significance of the car crash in postcolonial Australia and argue that car accidents are not only presented as an everyday and acceptable form of violence but that the attention to car crashes in Australian films suggests they figure as a moment of rupture in unspoken settler/indigenous violence. In using the term "postcolonial" I do not intend to imply that the process of colonisation is finished but rather emphasise that the colonial past is folded into the "postcolonial" present. The car crash provides a moment of rupture to notions of order, control and conquest associated with modernity and colonisation. In a country where stasis or stopping can literally mean death, the sanctity of vehicular mobility is utmost and produces a peculiar antipodean cinematic fascination with car breakdowns, crashes or boggings. This sanctity is reinforced by the appearance of roadside memorials to car accident victims that position car drivers as modern-day "battlers" or "warriors" in a hostile land. Furthermore, these memorials emphasise a yearning for a non-indigenous sense of emplacement and belonging in the landscape.

Australia does not have glamorous, Hollywood-style, celebrity car accidents. In discussing the differences between the Australian and US cinematic imaginations, Tom O'Regan argues that, "Americans dream of freeway pile-ups and their exploitation films have "crazies" driving spectacularly through crowded city streets pursued by slightly crazy policeman ... On the other hand, Australians dream of cars coming over hills in the middle or the wrong side of the road" (O'Regan 1989: 178).³ In Hollywood cinema, car crashes are usually posited as dramatic, violent spectacles, often creating visceral impact through death and destruction.
Certainly in *Mad Max I & II* (George Miller, 1979 and George Miller, 1981) these kinds of vehicular pyrotechnics are used to great visual effect. *Dead Calm* (Philip Noyce, 1989) also incorporates the stylistic strategies of the Hollywood thriller in its gruesome opening collision scene. In contrast, European cinema seemingly prefers the cerebral car crash. Instead of showing the vehicular impact, the *aftermath* is depicted, thus allowing a political or class critique, as in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, 1967 (Laderman 2002). As director David Cronenberg explains, "the car crash is to the traditional road movie what the sex scene is to the classical romantic comedy -the unspoken culmination, the hidden act toward which all others tend" (Cronenberg cited in Brottman and Sharrett 1999: 279).

Instead of culminating in car crashes, however, Australian films often open with them. In *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974) two brothers are diverted from the main highway into the country town of Paris when they (and their vehicle) become its victims. In *Road to Nhill* (Sue Brooks, 1997), four "lady bowlers" are depicted driving back from their Sunday match when their Ford Falcon rolls after hitting a blind spot on the road. *Peaches* (Craig Monahan, 2005) narrative launches with a dramatic roll-over at night in which the central character's father and pregnant mother are instantly killed, making her survival a "miracle". *Dead Calm* opens with a graphic car crash in which a toddler is violently propelled through the windscreen into oncoming traffic. And in *Spider and Rose* (Bill Bennett, 1994) an elderly man, perhaps a "grey nomad", is violently thrown from his rolling vehicle and lies motionless beside the asphalt while a fly buzzes round him as it would around a piece of trammelled road-kill.

The significance of car crashes in Australian culture more broadly has not gone unremarked. David Caesar's documentary *Carcrash* (1996) considers Australians' obsession with the motorcar and our ambivalence towards motor vehicle accidents. As several interviewees relate their heroic tales about surviving car accidents, it is clear these drivers feel
powerless in a society dominated by the constraints of domesticity and work. Cars give these drivers the illusion of power and freedom, and for this they are willing to risk violent death. In her article, "Fate and the Family Sedan", Meaghan Morris also explores the role of the car as a metaphor for agency and subjectivity in 1980s Australian cinema and alludes to this juxtaposition between freedom and danger when she mentions "cars' semantic potential for extreme volatility" (Morris 1989: 124).

By virtue of the isolation of country roads and the long distances between major urban centres, the culture of automobility in Australia has some notable peculiarities. Unlike Europe and many other parts of the world, we depend on our cars not only for mobility but also for survival. Outside the major urban centres there are often no alternatives to car-based travel and if a vehicle breaks down or crashes in a remote area there is an outside possibility that no one will offer aid. Or, as Sandy in Japanese Story puts it: "[i]f you stop, you're stuffed!" And as Kitson emphasises, in his discussion of car crashes in Australian film: "a crash in the bush, in the outback, reduces us all to nothing… and plugs into our deepest fears and desires" (Kitson 2003: 68). As Jacka and Dermody argue, "our cars kill us, and without them we would die" (Dermody and Jacka 1988: 113). This car-survival (or not) has provoked numerous filmmakers to maroon and abandon their characters through car crashes, boggings or breakdowns in the outback or in "hick" country towns, to explore this auto-immobility. For example, Shame (Steve Jodrell, 1988) depicts Asta's Japanese motorcycle breaking down after which she gets stuck in the red-neck town of Ginborak; in High Tide (Gillian Armstrong, 1987), Liligets stuck in the coastal town of Eden after her Valiant breaks down and she loses her job; in Japanese Story (Sue Brooks, 2003) the central characters are marooned in the bush after their Landcruiser gets bogged; in Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) two children are left to fend for themselves in the bush after their suicidal father sets his VW Beetle
alight; and in Australia's most recent box office success, *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005), a gruesome fate awaits three backpackers when they are left at the mercy of a local madman after their dodgy Falcon breaks down in the outback.

For most urban-based Australians, the idea of perishing "out there" in the bush after a crash looms much larger than its likelihood. But this threat of auto-immobility in a remote place provides the framework for what I want to term "antipodean automobility". "To be antipodean", claims Ian McLean, "is to be out of place in one's place" (McLean 1998). This concept taps into a deep-seated anxiety in the dominant Australian social imaginary that is connected to the notion of the land as not only hostile but invested with a power to do things to those who venture into it. Non-indigenous characters in Australian cultural texts are often depicted battling the land against all odds, becoming its "innocent" victims. As critics have noted, in Australian film the land "exhibits agency: its irregularities roll cars and its hidden crevices engulf picnicking schoolgirls" (Brabazon 2001: 154). This concept of antipodean automobility is tied to the fact that narratives of violent contact between indigene and settler, including invasion, have often been suppressed. As Paul Carter argues, settler historians - and I would add filmmakers here - "have been tempted to invent a new dialectic, no longer between invader and invaded but between pioneer and nature" (Carter 1987: 343). For this essay, I'd like to update this dialectic and re-articulate it as being between car-driver and nature. In many Australian movies, the tension between nature and white car driver - the mechanical coloniser - climaxes in the form of the car crash, when cinematic cars and their white occupants are forced to stop, leave the road or are propelled into the landscape beyond. Interestingly, it is largely non-indigenous films that exhibit a fascination with car crashes. Although indigenous people are "over-represented in road fatalities by approximately 3.5 times", indigenous films do not generally depict car crashes (Macauly).
In her reading of *Mad Max III* (George Miller, 1985), Meaghan Morris uses the trope of "white panic" to argue that it is the white settlers who forget the violence of colonisation and imagine themselves to be the victims of violence. The automobile collision in the Australian context can be read as an interruption to this "forgetting"; a moment of rupture in unspoken settler/indigenous violence. For many white Australians, being forced to stop the journey and engage with the landscape generates "white panic"; confronting "unsettled settlement" in a hostile, alien landscape where they imagine themselves to be "innocent" victims of car crash violence caused by "nothing" in particular. If roads are a place where colonization is effected, articulated and resisted, then what happens when the road journey stops? How might the land beside and beyond the road be significant?

In the first part of this essay, I introduce Morris's notion of "white panic" and then examine one recent road movie, *Japanese Story*, and the significance of bogging, in light of this. The second part of this essay will consider car crashes through a close reading of *Road to Nhill* and, thirdly, Australia's archetypal car crash narrative, *The Cars that Ate Paris*. While all of these films retain certain road movie characteristics (such as their focus on vehicles, a pre-occupation with mobility, and their stylistic focus on framing mobile shots through car windows), they can simultaneously be read as departures from the genre because often they literally and geographically don't go anywhere at all. Most of the narratives in these films are spent not on the road, marginalizing both the road and the road movie genre.

"If you stop, you're stuffed": *Japanese Story*

Rather than a car accident, *Japanese Story* (2003)\(^7\) features the bogging of a Toyota Landcruiser, which can be read as a "soft" crash. Despite a
departure from the bitumen, when the vehicle gets off the beaten track, *Japanese Story* does not make any real generic departures from the road movie as such. Rather, it is a narrative about trespass onto indigenous land, so the bogging can be seen as a failure to read the signs. Using Morris's concepts of "white panic" and cultural trespass, *Japanese Story* can be read as another "invasion scenario" that rewrites Morris's "phobic narrative". By extension, the sacrifice of the foreigner in the landscape enables the white settler, the "knowing guide" in the film, to claim a greater sense of belonging, if only through "knowing" about the dangers in the landscape that they have to take care in.

*Japanese Story* depicts a developing, 4WD-based relationship between a Japanese businessman, Hiromitsu Tachibana, and a geologist, Sandy Edwards. Sandy performs the role of reluctant guide to the visiting Japanese businessman, whose father part-owns an iron ore mine in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. After a visit to the remote mining town of Newman, Hiromitsu insists they visit the origin of an iron ore mass and the two trespass onto indigenous land without a permit, Sandy extremely reluctantly. Not even a gravel track awaits them as they press on and the vehicle struggles to traverse the fine, loose, red dirt track. A subjective point-of-view shot reveals the characters located at the extremes of the frame, gazing through the windscreen while Hiromitsu's bravado rapidly dissolves to fear as he desperately holds onto the dashboard. The 4WD swerves uncontrollably all over the track with Sandy only just managing to hold onto the steering wheel. When Hiromitsu pleads "Can we go back now? Can we go back now?", Sandy responds, "If you stop, you're stuffed!", at which point the vehicle comes to a soft halt. While not producing the same kind of violent spectacle that a car accident might, this precarious immobility enables the bogging to be read in similar ways. An establishing shot positions them bogged, out in "the middle of nowhere". Sandy gets out of the car to see how serious the situation is and then tries to make Hiromitsu, who sits nonchalantly in the
comfort of the air-conditioned vehicle, comprehend the gravity of their situation: "people die out here all the time", she says. As Hiromitsu emerges out of the vehicle, Sandy glances furtively towards the inhospitable landscape around them. What before had been merely annoyance on Sandy's part Collette then transforms into an expression of quiet terror. It is Sandy's expression rather than anything she says that illustrates this moment of "terror in the bush". Hiromitsu evidently senses this "highly contagious form of fear" (Morris 1998: 3), as he subsequently does everything he can to get them out of the bog. It is this sense of terror that I want to further investigate.

Narratives of sacrifice and survival in sublime landscapes, coupled with the often-absent narratives of colonial violence, contribute to what Morris calls "white panic". Her essay, "White Panic or, Mad Max and the Sublime" (1998), explores the ways Australian cinema of the 1970s and 1980s dealt with popular myths of race as well as the "psychodynamics of whiteness" (David Walker 1995: 33 cited in Morris 1998: 1). To explore this notion she calls into play the historiography and founding myths of Australia's interior isolation, within its island borders, as well as its exterior isolation within the wider world. Morris draws upon historian and journalist C.E.W. Bean's notion of the "colonial natural sublime (deadly space, isolation, 'nothing')" to explain this sense of interior isolation, where the sheer, alienating force of the sublime landscape displaces both the history of Aboriginal deaths as well as black resistance to white settlement (3). She enlists another national founding myth to explore the exterior isolation felt in Australia: that of "White Australia's menacing Asian sublime" (8), the "white peril" that circulated in Australia at the turn of the century, constituted by a fear of falling birth rates among white Australians combined with the "sheer and terrifying numberlessness" of "Asia" (4). These fears continue to circulate in various forms in postcolonial Australia, particularly in what Morris terms the "phobic narrative", of which Peter Weir's The Cars that Ate Paris isa
This particular film spawned a number of other "phobic narratives", in which,

a white couple is contained in a "safely" closed space - a house (Shame, Phobia [Tom Hearn, 1999]), a remote town or farm (Wake in Fright [Ted Kotcheff, 1971], Turkey Shoot [Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1983]), an isolated beach (Long Weekend [Colin Eggleston, 1978]), a boat (Dead Calm) - which is invaded by an outsider/other and turns into a trap, or is itself revealed to be a prison that accelerates the community's tendency to degenerate from within (4).

These phobic narratives engender "invasion scenarios", where whites are innocent victims and "the responsibility for colonial violence passes to a homicidal land" or, alternatively, to the coast that prevents "waves of over-population rolling in from the future (often, 'Asia')" (12). For Morris, the "white" panic of Australian settler culture and the history of violent colonial dispossession continue to haunt our texts. This sense of "terror in the bush" is powerfully enacted in the scene from Mad Max when Max's wife, Jess, is alone sunbathing on the beach. Suddenly and inexplicably she is overwhelmed by a sense of unease. Morris writes:

[m]any Australians know about this terror without ever having felt it. Without warning or reason, a person or a group (it is a highly contagious form of fear) is overwhelmed by a feeling of being watched from all sides, caught in a hostile gaze (1998: 7).

The terror Sandy exhibits in Japanese Story is not quite the same as Jess's because the viewer knows that the bikie gang is actually watching Jess. In Japanese Story, "the hostile gaze" that Sandy is "caught in", is from the land itself. While Sandy and Hiromitsu exhibit this sense of "terror in the
bush" (or more precisely the desert) when they realise the gravity of their situation, they realise that irrationally fleeing their vehicle, their only means of survival, would guarantee death.

Spurred on by this highly contagious form of fear, Hiromitsu eventually manages to get them out of the bog and prove his masculinity. In Collins and Davis's reading of this film, they note the shift in emotional scale presented in these scenes, after the "unscheduled night bogged in the desert which takes Sandy and Hiromitsu out of themselves and leads to a mutual recognition and an idyllic cessation of conflict as they embark on a serendipitous detour 'off the map'" (Collins and Davis 2004: 177).

Moreover, through their romantic sexual liaison, *Japanese Story* draws a parallel between the cultural trespass of the characters' sexual relationship and their trespass onto the land of the Other. Throughout the film, Sandy performs the role of the knowing guide who predicts much of the looming trouble, with her comments about people "dying out in the bush all the time. Lots of people!" This role is particularly associated with the intractability of the unmapped land and the protocols associated with going "out of country". Hiromitsu, on the other hand, eventually falls victim to the consequences of cultural trespass that they both commit. Olivia Khoo has argued that "Hiromitsu is conveniently eliminated once he's served his purpose" (Khoo 2004). And like numerous Australian films which depict interracial relationships, one of the couple dies (such as in Craig Lahiff's *Heaven's Burning* (1997), Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), Stephen Wallace's *Turtle Beach* (1992)). In an extraordinary scene two thirds into the film, Hiromitsu, unaware of the dangers lurking below the surface, is instantly killed after diving into a gorge, thus realising Sandy's fears about the threatening landscape.

I argue here that *Japanese Story* can also be read as yet another rewriting of Morris's "phobic narrative", which engenders an "invasion scenario". Hiromitsu - a symbol of Australia's "menacing Asian sublime" - is the
"outsider/other" invading a "safely closed space" (Australia) that "turns into a trap" (1998:12). Myths of "the yellow peril" and "the Japanese" taking over Australia resurfaced in a revised form during the 1980s (and lasted until the collapse of the Japanese Yen in the early 1990s), with fears circulating in popular discourse over increasing Japanese interests in real estate and mining. Yet Hiromitsu is not just another quirky but harmless Japanese tourist on the run in an Australian road movie, like Midori in Craig Lahiff's *Heaven's Burning* (1997) or J.M. in Clara Law's *Goddess of 1967* (2001). Rather, he has an economic (and affective) investment in the land's exploitation and violation. This is apparent in the scenes where he eagerly watches the explosions taking place at the mines. For this destruction, like the urban couple in *Long Weekend* who "sin against nature" and are duly punished, he pays with his life.11

On the one hand, this film acknowledges indigenous sovereignty over the land. In the Australian version of the film, the opening diegetic music is "Treaty" by Yothu Yindi. For Collins and Davis, the sampling of this track marks the film's post-Mabo consciousness (177). However, the issue of ownership and protocol is realised through the expertise of the white woman guide and is not directly represented by an indigenous person. Moreover, the ramifications of the cultural trespass are felt on the body of the Other - the Japanese tourist who performs the role of the "bad settler" in the film, thus reserving the white settler's "goodness". The significance of being lost, getting bogged and losing direction signals the cultural trespass inherent to settler culture. The film depicts a failure to read the signs, and pay attention to them, leading to the car bogging and eventual death, 'out there' in the land.

*Road to Nhill* and "there happened - nothing"

The remarkable nature of the "soft crash" and its resulting "white panic" just related in *Japanese Story* is a far cry from other, perhaps more
quotidian versions of antipodean automobility. In some Australian films, such as *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1974) and *Road to Nhill*, the prevalence of the car crash is perceived as a "necessary evil"; an unremarkable result of movement outside urban centres. On first inspection *Road to Nhill* hardly appears as a narrative of violent contact between pioneer and nature, as Morris argues in relation to the *Mad Max* trilogy, nor is it a tale of cultural trespass of the kind to be found in *Japanese Story*. One significant aspect of the crash in *Road to Nhill* is its apparent everydayness, where the driver is not a predator, hunting another driver/car down (unlike the car crashes in the *Mad Max* films, *The Cars that Ate Paris*, *Midnite Spares* (Quentin Master, 1982), *Kiss or Kill* (Bill Bennett, 1997), *Doing Time for Patsy Cline*, (Chris Kennedy, 1997), and *Roadgames*, (Richard Franklin, 1981)). This is also not peculiar to *Road to Nhill*, as a number of other Australian films also depict "everyday" car accidents that appear to be caused by nature, or driver error - weather conditions in *Road to Nhill*, or human failure in the case of *Sunday Too Far Away*. This reinforces the notion of white car drivers as innocent and hapless victims of forces within a landscape that they cannot control.

*Road to Nhill* concerns a small community's attempts to treat the effects of a non-fatal car crash that has left four "lady bowlers" stranded in their upturned Ford Falcon, just outside the town of Nhill. The crash happens *en route* from their Sunday bowling match at the neighbouring country town of Quambatook, when the driver attempts to avoid running over a rabbit after encountering a "blind-spot" on the road. The main "event" (or non-event) of the film is the car accident, which can be seen to subvert everyday expectations because no one dies nor is seriously injured. The crash, which occurs at the beginning of the film, also thwarts the forward-moving momentum of the narrative (and the car) and can be read as a subversion of the road movie genre because the characters (and the narrative) do not proceed anywhere at all, apart from back into town. A significant proportion of *Road to Nhill* is spent stationary, with the
characters belted in upside-down in their upturned vehicle; a comic inversion of Paul Virilio's "paralysed spectator" in which the (potential) speed of automobility ironically produces stasis for its occupants, who gaze motionless through the windscrease at the passing spectacle, as well as for the spectating audience.12

In *On the Wool Track*, C.E.W. Bean described the forceful and sublime "nothingness" of the landscape that faced the first white pioneers in Australia. His description is not only an appropriate way to describe *Road to Nhill's* lack of narrative action and drama ("there happened - nothing") but also the scrubby and prosaic landscapes surrounding the town:

There were no Alpine precipices … or black jungles full of wild beasts … Nothing appalling or horrible rushed upon these men. Only there happened – nothing… No one came. Nothing happened. That was all. (C.W Bean 1945, 2-3 cited in Morris 1998:1)

As Morris argues, in North America the appearance of the "Western" genre conceded that there was violence between settlers and indigenous people, however in the Australian context, "there happened - nothing" (1998). Until very recently there has not been a sustained group of films that have engaged with settler/indigenous violence, perhaps indicating "a society that continues to yearn for the disappearance of its founding traumas" (Gibson 2002: 84). The duplicitous nature of the sublime landscape is such that on the one hand Bean can make claims about its "nothingness" while on the other it had "actually done them [the pioneers] to death" (Bean 1945, 2 cited in Morris 1998). As Morris asserts, practised in this way, the colonial sublime "displaces the often bloody human conflicts of colonial history with a pale metaphysics of landscape" (Morris 1998).

There is certainly a "nothingness" about the environment surrounding
Nhill (as the Nihilism of its title implies), as well as a palpable sense of fatalism and inevitability. The townsfolk's inability to control their environment is a focus of the film, particularly emphasised through the gently mocking, "Voice-of-God" narration (spoken by the famously atheistic journalist, Phillip Adams). There is a combination of apathy and acceptance that accidents will just keep happening, exemplified by the local cop who fails to investigate either the accident or the dangerous "blind-spot" that caused it. It is later revealed that this is actually the spot where almost everyone in the town has had an accident. Amusingly, the final sequence of the film depicts a yellow Falcon clipping along around the infamous bend only to be struck by the afternoon sunlight before swerving erratically off the road into the bush. A fatal accident is averted as the anonymous driver quickly regains control of the vehicle and swerves back onto the bitumen. In Road to Nhill there is no sense of agency, of "man" battling the natural environment in order to forge the male character, which pervades many earlier Australian films. In fact C.E. W. Bean's description of the colonial sublime - "there happened - nothing" (C.W. Bean 2 cited in Morris 3),- would be an appropriate addendum to this film.

The Cars that Ate Paris and "a new way of being"

In The Cars that Ate Paris (hereafter abridged to Cars), the car accidents are caused by the local inhabitants of the town, rather than by nature or driver error. However, the response from the local authorities to the brothers' crash is much the same as it is in Road to Nhill. The police officer in Cars is quick to point out how inevitable the accident is, thereby requiring no further investigation: "late night, a beer with dinner, towing a caravan and bang, straight over the side of the embankment". Through the normalisation of the "treachery on[f?] the country road" in prevailing discourse, the townsfolk of Paris use the ordinariness of car crashes to conceal the fact that they're actually causing and exploiting
them. It was exactly this normalisation of car crash violence that Dr George Miller supposedly drew on for the first *Mad Max*. While many criticised the film for being an "American genre piece", complete with an "American form of violence", Miller argued that while America has a "gun culture", Australia has a "car culture" (O'Regan 1989: 178). He argued that his films tapped into the social record because, at the time of the *Mad Max's* release in the late 1970s, Australia had the highest per capita road trauma in the western world. In *Mad Max I & II* as well as in *Cars*, the cars themselves cause most of the violence.

*Cars* is a black comedy set in the fictional country town of Paris, the antithesis of urban sophistication often associated with that other place called Paris. The prelude to the film's opening credits satirises Timothy Corrigan's oft-quoted conception of the genre's romanticism ("freedom on the road to nowhere") and is an overt critique of capitalism. A bourgeois couple (they could easily be Parisians from Godard's *Weekend*) ventures beyond the suburbs onto the open road in their sporty Datsun convertible. As they approach what appears to be a "quaint" country town the car topples over an embankment. Next, we're introduced to Arthur and his brother, on the road looking for work. Forced to detour through Paris, they become victims of a car accident engineered by the town's locals. With his brother dead and unable to escape due to a post-traumatic fear of driving (as well as having lost his licence after running down a pedestrian!), Arthur discovers the entire economy of Paris is dependent on horrific car crashes - the locals cause the car accidents then scavenge the vehicular and human wrecks. The spare automobile parts are traded for food by old ladies, become incorporated into Parisian house architecture, or are used by the disaffected car gangs to create anonymous hybrid human-vehicular monsters. Meanwhile the local doctor experiments on the human car-accident victims, leaving them as "vegies" and "zombies".

Towards the end of the film, the town erupts in a civil war when car-
gangs take over in their anonymous hybrid monsters, tearing down all the civil structures and destroying its inhabitants. Realising his loss of patriarchal authority, the Mayor exasperatedly states: "Nobody can drive. There are traps in and out of the town. There is no safe road…” As Deidre Gilfedder has argued, in *Cars*, like in modern warfare and as on modern roads, mobility is a means of survival. However *Cars*, like *Road to Nhill*, is a narrative of stasis and inertia. The curious nature of cars in the town is that they no longer perform their intended role: they "they don't go anywhere … immobility is a state of being in Paris … this town which was founded on movement, on a great pioneer push to the interior, … now works on inertia" (Gilfedder 1994: 38). *Cars* subverts the sanctity of vehicular mobility until the final scene of the film when the effeminate "foreigner", Arthur, overcomes his driving phobia, as well as the tyrannical Mayor, and reasserts his mobility/masculinity with his auto-affirming (and perhaps pioneering) proclamation, "I can drive!"

This violent car-crash culture depicted throughout *Cars*, along with the civil chaos and anarchy envisioned in the *Mad Max* films, is not necessarily unique to the Australian context but is more often viewed as part of the modern (usually urban) condition. For instance, Cronenberg's 1998 film *Crash*, based on the eponymous novel by J.G. Ballard, uses the car crash "as a total metaphor for man's life in modern society" (Gaves-Brown 1997 cited in Urry 1999: 2), which illustrates "the exhaustion of the civilizing process" (Brottman and Sharrett 1999: 276). These nihilistic and violent visions of car-based societies echo Virilio's argument that vehicles are intimately connected with war: "Cars are machines of war, lined up along the highways of the world destroying everything in their wake" (Virilio 1980:44). However, in the following quotation, Virilio captures both the destructive and the transformative potential of the car accident, when he claims that:

the law of movement means accident … and our metabolic
I don't wish to take issue here with Virilio's (often critiqued) technological determinism but rather to adopt this last phrase to consider how the connections between car crashes and war might resonate in the Australian context, particularly in light of the growing preponderance of roadside memorials. The transformative and regenerative potential of the car accident is something that is often overlooked in readings of *Cars*. Thesignificant critical attention that the film has attracted (Morris, Rayner, Gilfedder, Jacka and Dermody) usually emphasises the dystopian nature of the community's practices. However, the black comic tone of the film thwarts its potential dystopian power because it mocks the relationship between people and cars: we consume them while at the same time, they consume us, something which American distributors made literal in their renaming of the film: *The Cars that Ate People* (Rayner 1999: 105). Read in this way, *Cars* enables a unique symbiotic and regenerative relationship to exist between humans and cars, where car crashes create "a new way of being", that in turn elicits an alternative society and innovative array of consumption and reproduction. In the final section, I argue that death on the country road is producing a new form of belonging in Australia and roadside memorials, as commemorations of sacrifice, transform the roadscape to create "a new way of being".

**Roadside memorials: Sacrilising the roadscape**

Memorials usually signify a particular kind of death — most often heroic sacrifice for the nation in war. While roadside memorials are not a uniquely Australian phenomenon, they are particularly compelling within
the context of antipodean automobility. While "the car's promise to overcome the hostile, alien Australian bush made it seem like the victory weapon in the colonial battle" (Tranter 2003: 24), the car accident is a continual reminder that the battle continues. The increasing prominence of roadside memorials outside of dense urban areas seems to strengthen the notion of the car driver as a modern-day "battler" in a hostile land. Monk has argued that generally monuments "are intended to commemorate what we value and to instruct us in our heritage through visible expressions on the landscape" (Monk 1992: 124 cited in Hartig and Dunn 2002: 16). Roadside memorials then in the Australian context can be read as visible markers of the driver's sacrifice in/to the land. 

Just as Georgine Clarsen argues that travelling around the continent and "seeing" the "real Australia" implies a "cultural possession" over the land (Clarsen 1999: 359), I argue here that the car accident and its memorials function similarly in marking public space to indicate a possessive investment in the roadside.

Like many of the filmic car accidents described in this essay, Hartig and Dunn also assert the everydayness of the accidents memorialised on country roads. "Motorists are jolted by these intrusions of the sacred into everyday space, and as they flash by they serve as reminders of mortality and of the real possibility of motor vehicle accidents" (Hartig and Dunn 2002: 10). Memorials both commemorate the sacrifice to this hostile land and caution other motorists. And just as there is an expectation that there will be casualties of war, the victims of road trauma are similarly anticipated. In Australia this has produced a cultural fascination with road tolls; they are often detailed on the nightly news, as if they somehow signify how "we" are doing against the "enemy". As Graeme Davison has also noted, in Australia, the rhetoric of warfare was often employed to curb rising road toll statistics. In 1946, the Australian Automobile Association declared, echoing Morris's trope of "white panic", that traffic accidents: "constitute an enemy which takes almost as great a toll of
Australia's already sparse population as did the enemy nations in the second world war" (cited in Davison 2004: 143). This notion that car crash fatalities are "innocent" victims of an ill-defined, faceless enemy seems to be further exemplified by the fact that, by the 1970s, road trauma came to be seen as characteristic of an (urban) system, rather than purely human failure or responsibility on behalf of the individual motorist (Davison 2004: 164). Thus it is weather conditions, road conditions, the contours of the landscape, wild animals, black spots or blind spots which produce the accident and perhaps a fatality, which, in the end, no one is really that surprised about.

Most theorists agree that roadside memorials generate interpretations well beyond their intended private expression of grief and in fact their very public nature seems to reinforce this. In their study of memorials in Newcastle, New South Wales, Kate Hartig and Kevin Dunn (2002) found that roadside memorials were most often dedicated to those regarded as most "at risk" on country roads - young men. As Mayo (1988: 73) has shown (cited in Hartig and Dunn: 15-16), while war memorials can be read as patriotic celebrations of valour, they can also "signify the failure of the nation to prevent warfare". While the young male victims of car accidents are not traditionally considered heroes, like the soldiers of war dying for the nation-state, the growing preponderance of these visible markers and their societal significance seems to indicate otherwise.

Roadside memorials are perhaps manifestations of another kind of failure and another kind of war - vehicular /human failure to read the road and Carter's displaced conflict between "pioneer and nature". By extension, if just surviving in the Australian landscape is a feat, then these sacred sites can be read as modern day "Gallipolis" and the victims as contemporary ANZACs.

Jennifer Clark argues that the roadside memorials are not only symbols that society is reclaiming the road but also that the connection between
the road and death is becoming recognised:

As memorials grow in number, the roadside is actually changing. It is no longer some sort of shifting spot, some sort of open space. It is taking on a life of its own. It is becoming a deathscape. It looks different. Its function is now different. And we as a community need to assess how we relate to that change (Clark 2003).

Australia needs car crashes, just like all countries need their badlands. Ross Gibson has argued that the "badland" enables a culture to contain a no-go, prohibited space and to maintain the myth that the rest of the landscape is tamed, controlled and subdued. Most cultures have these "badland" spaces but as Gibson argues, they are "especially compelling within colonial societies" (2002: 15). On the one hand, the cultural function of car crashes is arguably similar. We mark the ground where the car fatality has been, thus signalling to other motorists to beware and forewarning them of this "badland", this "black spot" on the road. On the other hand, this kind of sacrilising the landscape with memorials can also be read as investing the landscape with meaning and making the appropriate sacrifice in order to belong. As Virilio argues, car crashes create a "new way of being" but ironically, perhaps not the one that Virilio envisioned, which would be produced only through speed.

**Conclusion: Treachery, transformation and white belonging**

Until very recently, indigenous characters were written out of most mainstream Australian (road) films, creating a filmic terra nullius (Morris 1998). This essay began with Paul Carter's assertion that in Australia, the violence of invasion, the violence between settler and indigene, has often been suppressed but, as Morris argues, it re-surfaces in Australian cultural texts as a battle between pioneer and nature. With an inordinate number of car crashes in Australian cinema this essay attempts to update this
dialectic or battle and re-articulate it as an on-going one between car-driver and nature. On the one hand, despite cars enabling an illusion of "freedom", on the other hand the car crash in the Australian context enables the white car driver to imagine they are innocent and hapless victims of the hostile landscape and forget a long history of settler/indigenous violence. The car crash or bogging can be regarded as a moment of rupture or an interruption to this forgetting. For instance, the bogging in *Japanese Story* signals a failure to read the land. This film is an example of Morris's phobic narrative, an invasion scenario where the "foreigner" is punished for cultural trespass. The sacrifice of the foreigner in the landscape enables the white settler, the "knowing guide" in the film, to claim a greater sense of belonging.

Central to the concept of antipodean automobility is an absolute dependence on the vehicle not only for mobility but also for survival (or not). As a result, a constant fear or threat of immobility (through a crash, bogging or breakdown) in a hostile environment permeates the Australian social imaginary. Both *Road to Nhill* and *The Cars that Ate Paris* are narratives of inertia and auto-immobility. They marginalise the road and the linear journey and arrest the forward-moving momentum of the narrative with car crashes. The car crashes which occur at the beginning of both films can be read as de-stabilising the road movie genre because there is no concept of even the possibility of "freedom" in these narratives; the characters and the narratives do not proceed beyond the towns, so they are hardly Corrigan's conception of "freedom on the road to nowhere". They also both illustrate the failure of the pioneering enterprise on which the nation was founded, and the role that vehicles play/have played in it. In *Road to Nhill* car crashes are simply regarded as a systemic and acceptable form of violence; an inevitability in a place where the inhabitants have come to acknowledge that they can no longer do anything about the unpredictability of the environment. While the car crashes that open and close *Road to Nhill* are caused through failure to
pay attention to the conditions/things in the landscape - rabbits, the afternoon sun - there will always be "innocent" victims in the ongoing battle between settler and nature. In contrast, the car accidents in *Cars* are *caused* by the local inhabitants in the town; engineered because of the threat generated by the landscape which lies beyond the town. Through Paris's car crashes and its bizarre method of car/human reproduction the town's community has generated a new kind of society and "a new way of being". However, it is a society based on isolation and fear of/dependence on outsiders, making the film a pre-eminent example of Morris's "phobic narrative". In both these films the narratives of violence upon which these townships were founded has been simultaneously forgotten and displaced.

The recent cultural phenomenon of memorialisation of car crash victims suggests a significant cultural shift in an Australian social imaginary about cars and landscape. These cinematic crashes and memorials not only symbolise white human/car failure and sacrifice, but they attempt to reclaim the "nowhereness" of the roadside and invest it meaning and a sense of belonging. This white obsession to feel emplaced in the landscape is a continuing trope in Australian cultural texts but can elide much more complex issues of how invader/settlers can live with those people it has so violently dispossessed. Unlike the films mentioned in this paper which present a monologue with an imagined landscape, an increasing number of recent Australian films feature indigenous/non-indigenous engagements, such as *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phil Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002) and *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2002). These recent period films "backtrack" (Collins and Davis 2004) over the "unfinished business" of the nation's founding colonial traumas and offer both a recognition of difference and an indication that a sharing of country might be possible.
FOOTNOTES

1. This paper began its life as a broader collaborative research project on 'Australian No Road Movies' with Fiona Probyn. I am grateful to Fiona for her insight and theoretical rigour. Many thanks to the two anonymous referees, the journal issue editors Nicole Moore and Michelle Arrow as well as readers Grisha Dolgopolov, Noel King, Susie Khamis and to Macquarie University's Early Career Research Fund.


3. Or, I might add, they imagine simply rolling over or off the road.

4. The film became the international calling card for its director, Phillip Noyce and its lead actors, Nicole Kidman and Sam Neill.

5. While further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, in using the term 'antipodean' I am also making reference to Tom O'Regan's discussion of Australian cinema's unequal cultural and economic exchange with the dominant European and Hollywood cinemas: "the antipodal condition is central to the Australian negotiation of its possibilities. Australian filmmakers need to provide inventive solutions to being on the margins of the more dominant film cultures of the USA, UK and continental Europe" (O'Regan1996: 110). It could be argued that Australian road cinema negotiates these possibilities through its unique use of the cinematic car crash and
auto-immobility.


7. Made by the same creative team (writer/director/producer team Alison Tilson/Sue Brooks/Sue Maslin) that made *Road to Nhill*.

8. Played by Toni Collette, described on the front cover of the DVD as "a force of nature".

9. The 'yellow peril' and 'Asian hordes' also constituted a fear during the Second World War (particularly in relation to Japan and fear of invasion). In more recent decades, fear is articulated about not engaging with our nearest neighbours and as a result, being alone, isolated and forsaken in the world.

10. As an 'effeminate' Asian man, his masculinity was previously in question. In an extremely unerotic scene further on in the film, Sandy literally dons the pants and climbs on top.

11. In Colin Eggleston's *Long Weekend* (1977), "a corrupt white couple, having sinned against Nature (the man casually kills animals, the woman has had an abortion) is driven mad by 'nothing' – birds, a dugong calling her lost calf – in the bush; the sound of the mother dugong's grief *carries* between the human and natural orders, shattering the woman's brittle urban shell" (Morris 1998: 4).

12. Virilio states that: "Frozen in our dark cinematic vehicles, victims of dromoscopie, it is difficult to tell if it is our inertia or the rush of images that are illusory. We think we are moving, but we are still, we have not moved and yet we have travelled … a spectator in the cinema is all-time victim, and a passenger in a car is a paralysed spectator" (Virilio 1980: 117).

13. This also seems to be reflected in the (potential) violence caused by guns rather than cars crashes in the recent Martin Haggis film *Crash* (2004).
14. Paris, Australia perhaps has more in common with Wim Wenders' depiction of the Paris in *Paris, Texas*!

15. Research on this phenomenon is emerging from fields as diverse as cultural geography, religious studies and gender studies (Hartig and Dunn 2002, Jennifer Clark 2003, Marjella Franzmann 2003).

16. They have caused death, trauma and maiming on a scale equivalent to war (Davison 2004: xii).

17. The TAC also sponsored the 'Black Spot' program, designed to remove road hazards already known to have been the scene of fatal accidents (Davison 2004).

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