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Still moving: bush mechanics in the Central Desert

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Still moving: bush mechanics in the Central Desert

Abstract

Brake fluid made from washing powder mixed in water? Welding a muffler with jumper leads, fencing wire and a car battery? Replacement brake pads carved from mulga-wood with a tomahawk, or an emergency clutch plate shaped out of an old boomerang? Spare parts filed in collective memory, and scattered in old car wrecks along dirt tracks? Strips of blanket wound into windscreen-wiper blades? Such is the car repair advice offered in *Bush Mechanics*, the series recently screened on ABC Television.¹ Presented with humour and enthusiasm, as well as a large dose of self-parody, this is mechanical advice unlike any other. Nyurulypa ("good tricks") are what the heroes of the series – five bush mechanics from Yuendumu in the Central Desert – call them. They are tricks offered as special knowledge, hard-won in collective experience, and first learned by the old men who tell some of their stories in the series. They suggest a particularly localised knowledge, presented as something that everyone should know, and all who love mutikars will enjoy.

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Still Moving: *Bush Mechanics* in the Central Desert

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I

Brake fluid made from washing powder mixed in water? Welding a muffler with jumper leads, fencing wire and a car battery? Replacement brake pads carved from mulga-wood with a tomahawk, or an emergency clutch plate shaped out of an old boomerang? Spare parts filed in collective memory, and scattered in old car wrecks along dirt tracks? Strips of blanket wound into windscreen-wiper blades? Such is the car repair advice offered in *Bush Mechanics*, the series recently screened on ABC Television.¹ Presented with humour and enthusiasm, as well as a large dose of self-parody, this is mechanical advice unlike any other. *Nyurulypa* ("good tricks") are what the heroes of the series – five bush mechanics from Yuendumu in the Central Desert – call them. They are tricks offered as special knowledge, hard-won in collective experience, and first learned by the old men who tell some of their stories in the series. They suggest a particularly localised knowledge, presented as something that everyone should know, and all who love *mutikars* will enjoy.

Maverick acts of resuscitation performed on clapped-out bush bombs by men from Yuendumu are a million miles away from the seamless images of automobiles usually encountered on our television screens. For the cars we see in this series are only barely related to the alphabet magic of contemporary automobile production. No ABS, EFL, All-mode 4WD, ALR seat belts, LSDs, TCMs or ECMs in the world of *Bush Mechanics*.² And the robustly practical *nyurulypa* the men offer find no parallel in the reverential approach to cars found in the lifestyle programs more often associated with automotive advice, such as ABC Television's *Dimensions: On the Move*. Furthermore, even though the terrain of the Central Desert is classic four-wheel drive territory, the urban myths of "Toyota Dreaming" and the suburban habit of using four-wheel drives for nothing more arduous than getting the kids to school do not rate a mention in these stories of bush mobility. Nor have the royalty payments from mining that have made a new Toyota a possibility for some people in remote communities reached these young men. But if the smooth fantasy lives in highly-produced rock-clip car advertisements ("Wake up kids we've got the dreamers disease..." for the Verada V6 or the "Zoom, Zoom, Zoom" of the Mazda MX5) are about excitement and pleasure, so too are *mutikars* for our teachers of *nyurulypa* – though it is a greasier, harsher kind of pleasure, and one with only a tangential relationship to "the" economy.

For *Bush Mechanics* expresses the fun of roaring around country in clapped-out Fords or (preferably) Holdens, a rifle ready for a shot at some bush tucker. It registers pride in rough and ready inventiveness, in desert knowledge translated into a modern setting, in family and friendship, in history, and in telling great stories. The sharp humour of these *Yapa* men is utterly compelling as they recall the ways the Warlpiri first encountered cars in the 1920s and 1930s, as they reveal something of how cars have since been

incorporated into their lives, and as they presume to tell non-Aborigines that we have much to learn about a technology we thought was our own.

Most unsettling is the way that the series serves to invite glimpses of other, radically different Australian lives and other, radically different approaches to a familiar technology. They offer non-Aboriginal Australians a window into a part of Australia that is instantly familiar as the iconic "dead heart" of the continent, but the social realities of which most Australians are largely oblivious to – except perhaps vaguely, as an intractable "problem". And that offer is a particularly generous one. The episodes humorously portray, without rancour, some of the dimensions of Warlpiri life under colonialism. They suggest that technologies do not carry within themselves one fixed meaning and direct us to consider new ways to imagine the country we are told is "one Australia"³.

Bush Mechanics consists of five half-hour television episodes, the first made in 1998. Indigenous media associations like the Alice Springs-based Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and the Warlpiri Media Association at Yuendumu,⁴ which produced the series, were established in the 1980s to offer an alternative to the overwhelming weight of non-Aboriginal representations that satellite television and video rental were delivering to Indigenous communities. The aim was for remote communities to acquire the capacity to intercept national network broadcasting and replace it with locally-shot material (Langton 1993). The Warlpiri Media Association was at the forefront of Aboriginal television production in the 1980s (Michaels 1987), but during the 1990s had largely concentrated on radio. The *Bush Mechanics* series is part of a recent revival of television production at Yuendumu. An energetic new administrator facilitated the development of joint projects which brought together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers, Indigenous media organisations, and the Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission (Hinkson 2001). Pre-sales to the ABC also contributed funds to the series. Indigenous film and documentary production is arguably the most exciting development in Australian cultural life in recent times (for example, Sally Riley's *Confessions of a Headhunter*, and Rachael Perkins' *One Night the Moon*) and the National Indigenous Documentary Fund, largely funded by ATSIC, has been crucial to the development of innovative projects like the *Bush Mechanics* series (Riley 2000).

The first episode of *Bush Mechanics* was produced in large part with a Warlpiri audience in mind. It showcases a series of local characters in brief cameo appearances ("Im a Holden man") and in familiar car rituals (men pushing and towing their beat-up cars to the Yuendumu fuel pumps, or men stripping car parts in a paddock of wrecks) to an audience who already know them well. When it was screened nationwide on ABC television in 1999, however, *Bush Mechanics* attracted widespread attention, and won the 2000 Australian Film Institute Award for Best Original Concept. And its appeal has not been limited to Australian audiences. I first saw *Bush Mechanics* at a film festival in Washington D.C., where its unexpected take on what the audience took to be a quintessentially American technology made it hugely popular. Success led to the production of an additional four episodes, with national and international screenings in mind. The four new episodes of *Bush Mechanics* were screened on ABC Television in September/October 2001 and registered consistently high ratings. A lively online forum was also generated at the end of the series.⁵

David Batty and Francis Jupurrula Kelly were the joint directors of the 1998 *Bush Mechanics* episode. Both men had been involved in the establishment of CAAMA in Alice Springs in the 1980s. Batty, a non-Indigenous filmmaker who now lives in Broome, has been making television for and with Aboriginal people for almost twenty years, and Kelly is a Warlpiri man who had taken a leading role in early television production at Yuendumu (Michaels 1987). It is Kelly's creativity and enthusiasm as a

bush mechanic that drives the series. Kelly and Batty had worked together on a number of other video projects – most notably *Manyu Warna*, a ten-part children's series (the 'Warlpiri Sesame Street'), which began production in 1990 and was screened on SBS in 1994.

In the subsequent 2001 *Bush Mechanics* episodes, David Batty is credited as director, script-writer and cinematographer, with Francis Jupurrula Kelly as actor and co-director. The main onscreen performers, a close-knit gang of five Yuendumu men who were the bush mechanics of the title in the 1998 video, continued their roles in the subsequent series except for the replacement of Adrian Nelson by his brother. All five men – Steven Jupurrula Morton, Errol Jupurrula Nelson, Simeon Jupurrula Ross, Junior Jupurrula Wilson, and Randall Jupurrula Wilson (the 'Jupurrula' indicating that they all share the same skin classification) – play themselves in dramatised "real life" stories, in a quasi-documentary format. The production crew was expanded by bringing in outsiders Jeni McMahon as producer and Kath Shelper as production manager. Editor of the original episode, David Nixon, remained with the series. New technologies, in particular, inexpensive desktop editing software on a standard laptop, meant that early stages of post-production could take place on location at Yuendumu, offering the possibilities of greater community consultation, sensitivity to cultural protocol, and wider community involvement in the final product (Williams 2001). The soundtrack for each episode was recorded at Yuendumu in that distinctive Central Desert style first made familiar to outside audiences in the early 1980s by Papunya's Warumpi Band (Murray 1993).

It would be a mistake to assume that *Bush Mechanics* is simply about ingenious ways of reviving dead cars, though the first episode takes that as its major theme. The storyline of that original episode is simple – the five heroes head off from Yuendumu to buy a car in Alice Springs, 350 km away. The one they are travelling in breaks down, system by system. For each breakdown the men work up a solution. A puncture is repaired without the usual tools by lifting the car onto a jerry can, removing the wheel nuts with a pair of pliers, and stuffing the tyre casing with spinnifex ("let's keep the tube, we might meet some whitefellas with patches"). The battery is recharged by heating it beside a fire. The petrol pump is bypassed, using the windscreen washer pump to bring fuel to the carburettor. Finally, with no windscreen, the gearbox operating only in reverse, the driver pumping the washer button on the broken indicator stalk, and with a tyre-less rear wheel sending up an arc of red dirt, the five men inch their way backwards towards the main road to Alice Springs, trying to enjoy the ride until the car gives up on them. When it does, they pile out of the car, give it a desultory kick ("This heap of metal has been nothing but trouble") and head off with their blankets and a box of matches to find a lift into town. In the Alice Springs car sales yard their boldness melts away, and the men choose a car mainly on the basis that it starts and the radio works.⁶ They leave as quickly as they can, returning triumphantly to Yuendumu in their new car.

That story, a hilarious sequence of everyday misadventure, told with ironic self-deprecation is cut with segments in which a number of men speak directly to the camera, explaining something of their passion for cars. One offers a beautifully delivered exposition on why *Yapa* prefer old Fords and Holdens rather than the later models. Unlike new models, old cars can be easily understood and fixed with materials lying around anywhere. He shows a fuseholder where brass 303 rifle shells replace standard fuses, and points out with a smile that this cannot be done with electronic control systems. ("That's the way we learn. From old peoples that have been driving cars like this Holden Toranas for a long time.") The chief bush mechanic, Francis Jupurrula Kelly, is also periodically cut into this episode, proudly demonstrating numerous good tricks that keep *Yapa* cars moving. A repair ramp may be built by resting a sapling against an anthill; a tail shaft is easily replaced by rolling a car on its side; timber and fencing wire can fix a broken spring; a door that won't stay closed can be sorted by knocking a wooden

peg, latch-like, through the roof channel. Needless to say, these are not the kind of solutions that any health and safety council would endorse.

As engaging as such creative responses to mechanical misfortune are, they are not enough to sustain a longer series. After all, how many ways can you coax a car back to life, and how many times can an audience be convinced that a piece of mulga-wood really will fix the brakes? But these sagas of resourcefulness provide a perfect vehicle for a broader expression of contemporary realities for these men. In pursuing other stories in which cars are not the major focus of attention, and in moving away from a reliance on realist modes of narration, the subsequent series allows for an exploration of more universal themes – while continuing to provide plenty of scope for car business. In the first episode of the new series, the bush mechanics form a rock band and are hired to drive to a neighbouring community to play for the kids. In the second, a nephew who has served his sentence phones the bush mechanics from the Alice Springs gaol asking them to come and pick him up, and on the way home two of the bush mechanics are themselves picked up by the police for outstanding warrants. Members of a rival football team steal a car from Yuendumu in the third episode, and the bush mechanics chase them back to their community ("they're rubbish that mob"), eventually torching the stolen car. And in the final episode Jungala, the Yuendumu rainmaker, sends the bush mechanics west to saltwater country to collect the pearl shells he needs for drought-breaking ceremonies. Jungala's rituals prove so effective they cause flooding throughout Australia, to the consternation of Monty, Northern Territory television's popular weatherman.

In these stories, mythical and contemporary characters become blurred, as elements of magical realism are brought into play, and as spirit guardians enter the plot-lines. The chief bush mechanic, dressed in blue overalls, has the supernatural power to arrive instantaneously – *Monkey!* style⁷ – to help the stranded men, though on another occasion he is delivered by tourists in a minibus. The prison episode is built around the simultaneous claim of two laws, as the bush mechanic's nephew is brought home from the Alice Springs gaol to face the tribal payback that the spirit people in his dreams have been foreshadowing. In the final episode, faith in television weather forecasting as a Western explanatory system is placed against the efficacy of Jungala's rainmaking skills, and the mysterious power of the Ford V8 he has painted with the Rain Dreaming. So a variety of themes – 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, and the epistemological equivalence of European and Indigenous belief systems – are all, incidentally, brought into focus within apparently simple storylines.

Unlike on the coastal fringe, the impact of colonisation in Central Australia has been relatively recent, with the Warlpiri having had little contact with non-Aborigines until the 1920s. Yuendumu itself was not established until the end of World War II, set up as a rations distribution point for tribespeople under pressure, since their highly mobile economies were no longer viable after the imposition of pastoral and mining leases over their country (Rowse 1998). It has been crucial to the continuity of traditional life that Yuendumu lies within areas sacred to many of its inhabitants. But far from remaining static, traditional life has been extended into fresh spheres using new media such as rock music, video, and acrylic paints on canvas, as well as new forms of communication and transportation that include telephones, internet, video conferencing, automobiles and aircraft. Notwithstanding settled townships like Yuendumu, mobility within country and far beyond remains essential to the Warlpiri, as they steer a course in which traditional life, the cash economy that modernity entails, and the telecommunications revolutions of postmodernity all coexist (Young and Doohan 1989). This pervading inter-cultural fluidity is unmistakable in the multi-lingual dialogue of the series, which flows between

three languages – Warlpiri (the predominant language, minimally subtitled into English), Kriol, and some English. A further dimension is added with the distinctive sign language used throughout the series without explanation or comment.

In this series the specificities of place and history are indelibly stamped onto the series, and a Warlpiri view is the only one that matters. This is underlined in the way viewers are thrown straight into the lives of these men, with little set-up – as if we already know them. No time is wasted in introductions, and character development is minimal. Something of the random and inexplicable logic – or illogic – of colonialism is conveyed in the ways the men respond to the many things that go wrong as ordinary rather than unexpected occurrences. There seems little use in trying to anticipate them. Non-Aborigines – be they police, prison guards, service station owners who control the fuel that the bush mechanics need, car salesmen, or tourists encountered on the road – are a peripheral presence. They are a given, and need to be treated with varying degrees of wariness, occasionally expressed in sardonic and understated shorthand ("Cheeky police here in Broome"), but that is all.

[\[continued ...\]](#)

Continue with parts [two](#) of this essay.

Bibliographical references, author's biographical note and relevant links can be found at the conclusion of [part two](#) of this essay.

Footnotes

¹ <http://www.warlpiri.com.au/bushmechanic.html>

² For a translation, see Nissan Jargon Glossary: http://www.nissan.com.au/jargon_glossary.asp.

³ This is the term that John Howard first used in 1988 in a speech in Perth.

⁴ <http://www.warlpiri.com.au/history.html>

⁵ The series rated from 9 to 14 in Sydney and Melbourne, and went as high as 17 and 20 in Perth. An estimated 1 million watched the final episode. These are figures that the ABC would have been extremely happy with. Figures supplied by Mia Lum of Film Australia. For the online forum see <http://www.warlpiri.com.au/bushmechanics/forum>

⁶ The story recalls an earlier CAAMA video production *Flash Attack* (1989, Dir. David Haythornwaite), a comic warning on the dangers of getting ripped off by unscrupulous car-salesmen. Thanks to Annette Hamilton for bringing this to my attention.

⁷ *Monkey!* NTV/KHK 1979/81 was produced for Japanese television and shown in Australia in the 1980s. Based on a Chinese epic tale of the quest of a Buddhist priest and his four disciples to bring holy scriptures from India to China, it is a mixture of comedy, Asian mysticism, and a fight scene an episode. It was popular viewing in the Central Desert, as elsewhere in Australia, and is still screened on occasion. Thanks to Cath Elderton for making this connection.

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Still Moving:
***Bush Mechanics* in the Central Desert**

Georgine Clarsen

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II

As *Bush Mechanics* tells us from the start, European incursions into Warlpiri country were experienced almost simultaneously with cars and trucks. And that paradoxical juxtapositioning is never far from the surface in the series. A fused history of dispossession and technological marvel is graphically and humorously recalled by some of the old men, and their memories of early European contact are used to structure the first three episodes. The stories, which open and close each episode, frame an ongoing history of the Warlpiri within those new modes of mobility. They portray a lived connection between the past and the present, mediated by what has become a prized technology. Jack Jakamarra Ross, a father figure of the bush mechanics, recalls his experience directly to the camera, his young self played on screen by Francis Jupurrula Kelly with a lightness of touch that holds more than a hint of irony at notions of the "noble savage".⁸

Initially, as the old man tells it, trucks were encountered as a mysterious presence – monsters perhaps – creatures whose tracks were unfamiliar and threatening, all the more so because they did not appear to shit. But they were soon understood to be instruments of European power – power to take over their country, power to remove the Warlpiri by trucking them to prison at Jay Creek for spearing cattle, and eventually to the settlement of Yuendumu, where their mobility was to be restrained (a never-realised intention). A derelict truck, now almost hidden in grass and scrub, remains alive to these storytellers as a witness to that past. Its rusting skeleton has become a container for memories of the "killing times" – the Coniston massacres of 1928, when scores of Warlpiri – men, women and children – were killed in reprisal raids, leading to their avoidance of further contact with Europeans for the next decade and more (Cribbin 1984). That Coniston station truck, we are told with chilling understatement, was one Aboriginal people were definitely not permitted to ride in. Recollections of violent dispossession, as well as subsequent pleasurable memories of the cars *Yapa* themselves have owned and loved, inhere in the wrecked cars and trucks scattered throughout the bush. They have become personal, biographical markers, as other features of the landscape, such as trees and waterholes, may also have their stories.

While the humour, indignity and anguish of first encountering a technology that came with invasion remains the informing backdrop to *Bush Mechanics*, it is soon superseded by stories of the ways that Warlpiri men themselves have taken to automobiles. For if cars were first brought in by Europeans, now these Warlpiri men go out of the community to bring in cars for themselves – for their own purposes, and according to their own understandings of their value. In Andrew Ross's terms the men have socialised the technological objects of automobiles according to "a fully cultural process, soaked through with social meaning that only makes sense in the context of familiar kinds of

behaviors" (Ross 1991: 3). Most obviously, their own distinct "car culture" rests upon sidestepping the cash economy as much as they possibly can.

Just as Crocodile, the dapper advocate of humpy living in the fourth episode, explains the importance of bush tucker in contemporary Warlpiri life, so too have automobiles been located by choice and by necessity within a local subsistence economy that has continued, in conjunction with the wider cash economy. As Crocodile proudly demonstrates, digging kangaroos out of the ashes, he is able to offer his family a big feed without the supermarket. By incorporating cars within that partial subsistence economy, the bush mechanics have similarly found ways around the material deprivations that characterise much of Yuendumu life. They have devised their own ways of being men with wheels, based on an impressive disregard for the orthodoxies of individual car ownership, the economics of the car market, and the professionalisation of automobile repair. In so presenting the bush mechanics as moving targets – foragers of mechanical parts and disseminators of alternative solutions the series offers upbeat parables of their self-determined survival within colonialism.

But what is framed on-screen presupposes and points to what is off. As Tim Rowse has reminded us, it is important to remember that "the" community of Yuendumu is a complex entity, with a long history of talented individuals who have forged productive alliances with outsiders (Rowse 1990). There is, then, no one Yuendumu, and the series inevitably represents particular, rather than general, versions of Yuendumu life. These are stories of young men's adventures. Men who are always and already on the edge of trouble. Their stories are immediately cinematic – part road-movie, part buddy-movie – and resonant with a wider working-class men's tradition of backyard do-it-yourself repairs, now fading as legislative provisions exert greater control. Precisely because they are so vivid and so evocative, these stories prompt questions about other possible versions of Warlpiri car culture – versions that cannot easily find a place within the narratives of masculine bravado so familiar in cinematic traditions.

From a perspective of general Australian prosperity, it is clear that life at Yuendumu is far from easy. It is difficult not to notice that the bodies of the bush mechanics, or at least some of them, have hard living and risk-taking written on them. They are bodies that speak of the "Fourth World" conditions found within many Indigenous communities, with their adverse impact on general health, and particularly mens health.⁹ Brief glimpses of AvGas fuel pumps, which have been introduced into Yuendumu and other communities in an attempt to mitigate some of the devastating effects of petrol sniffing in the generation a little younger than the bush mechanics, serve as a reminder that cars have more than one flip side.¹⁰ They alert us to another, serious companion to car pleasures: the instantaneous pain of death and injuries from accidents all too frequently experienced by Indigenous people in the Central Desert, and most especially by young men. In the Northern Territory motor vehicle accidents are the second highest cause of death for Indigenous men in the 15-24 year age group (suicide being the highest), and Indigenous men in the Territory of that age group are 1300% more likely to be killed in such an accident than Indigenous women of the same age.¹¹ These appalling statistics reflect the long distances travelled, often in unroadworthy cars, over corrugated roads and rough tracks, and in areas where emergency help is never just a mobile phone call away. As Jack Jakamarra Ross, the man who recalled encountering those strange track-making creatures so long ago tells us, he knew then that the Warlpiri would need to be really careful of them, though perhaps not for the reasons that he imagined at the time.

There are other stories that *Bush Mechanics* can make us wonder about, too, though this is not for a moment to imply that the series should have tried to tell them. The point is, rather, that the images leave us thinking about life in Yuendumu long after the series has ended. It invites questions about the "also" and the "beside" that the series suggests – the

"constitutive outside" to these narratives. What might be the stories of other people with quite different relations to automobiles, and more circumscribed access to them? We know, for example, that women play an important part in Warlpiri life. Especially notable is their increasing role in public ceremony and art (Dussart 2000: 14), in the ways they have worked to hold the community together, and in their efforts to provide protection from some of the worst of men's excesses. The outstation movement, which has often been instigated by women, depends on reliable transport. Women widows and grandmothers have displayed tremendous courage in the face of male retribution, to establish and maintain the night patrols that aim to bring security to their communities.¹² Like men, women frequently travel on official and personal business. Might not these women, with their specific experience of cars have quite different stories to tell about what cars mean in Warlpiri life? Perhaps the masculine love of automobiles, so celebrated in *Bush Mechanics*, plays a part in the problems of alcohol, fear and violence that the night patrols are a response to? How do *Yapa* women gain access to cars and to the knowledge needed to keep them moving? How do they raise money for their patrol cars? How do they learn to drive them? Who keeps them moving? Are there any women bush mechanics, or aspiring bush mechanics, and are their approaches to cars different from the men's?

There are many more stories that *Bush Mechanics* might also elicit, and not only from a Warlpiri standpoint. The series – for all its celebration of Warlpiri creativity, and for all its testimony to the power to survive – inevitably delivers challenges to non-Aboriginal Australia. To the extent that it so effectively personalises another, hidden, Australian reality it surely must raise questions about how structural inequalities along raced lines can appear so natural within mainstream public life. How does it happen that a "Fourth World" remains so entrenched within "First World" Australia? If we are committed to Australia as a broadly egalitarian society, how can we observe with equanimity the enormous disparities in wealth the series incidentally, but so powerfully, points to? My own response remains contradictory. I have been immediately drawn into the anarchistic spirit of the series, and then in the same moment become tremendously scared of the casual disregard of risk that gives the series much of its edge. I am, after all, the kind of person who habitually tells my friends to "take care" when I say goodbye. But here were five men, who I came to like so much, packed into a car that was racing through the desert with bald tyres, no seat belts, missing doors and too much band equipment tied on the roof with a couple of bits of string. Yet *Bush Mechanics* compels me, by the sheer power of these Warlpiri men's choices to celebrate paths I consider unwise, into an acknowledgement of creative plurality, and the actuality of radical difference.¹³ It is a familiar impasse, and all-too often we have remained paralysed by its complexities, bogged within its terms. Clearly, positing simple oppositions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, between risk and safety, or between equality and difference, will not go very far towards hauling us out of that impasse, but stretching the car metaphor in another direction may perhaps move us along, if only just a little.

Cars, for most of "First World" Australia are increasingly presented as sealed objects where users are discouraged, even penalised, for interfering with them. Tinkering of any kind, let alone the radical surgery performed by the bush mechanics, is discouraged by the complexity of the objects, the cost of specialist tools, and the risk of having a warranty voided. Cars are increasingly objects given by experts, and designed with no room to move except for the kind of authorised movement already built into them. That flattening of possibility, no matter how apparently rational, no matter how much it seems to inhere in the natural evolution of generations of constantly improving cars, and no matter how much it might be welcomed as progress, also embodies political choices about how lives should be lived, how we may act, and who can take responsibility for what. It is precisely on these issues that the series provides a timely reminder of the contingent nature of the technological worlds we inhabit.

In the third episode Jack Jakamarra Ross, speaking from a radically different technical context, lovingly touches what to me appears to be a defunct engine block inappropriately dumped in the bush. Translated into subtitles, the words he uses to declare its value are, "This motor grew us up. Now it is lying here like a witness looking after us." It is a startling statement, a key to the way I have come to understand my responses to the series. His is a declaration that points to the heart of how technologies are taken up into social life – changing people, but also being shaped by people into something new, something quite different from what was first encountered. Jakamarra Ross's articulation of a Warlpiri view invites us to suspend our automobile habits, and challenges us to ask fresh questions. Questions of how cars and the power of First World privilege more generally have differently grown us up. What kinds of knowledges and distribution of powers have they made seem natural, and what desires or fears do they bear witness to? Might those privileges also be our loss? Are there more inclusive or democratic terms available in which to re-draft the power to move, in ways that will not close down the possibilities of cross-identifications – and of justice – across difference? The fact that our current government has re-framed debates and turned political processes away from issues of native title and reconciliation, does not absolve our responsibility to reject the terms so given, and to find other ways to move. Clearly there is much to learn, and much to be done.

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Footnotes

⁸ This is a story that Jack Jakamarra Ross has also told in other contexts, see Taylor (1988 pp.288-289).

⁹ "Fourth World communities are characterised by their experience of being colonised or of being a minority in relation to the dominant encompassing state. Many have been forced to assimilate, losing most of their land and their economic base, and therefore their autonomy." J Reid and P Trompf (eds) *The Health of Aboriginal Australia*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1991. Quoted by Lowitja ODonoghue, "Indigenous Health: Hopes for a New Century," John Chalmers Oration, Flinders University, 6 July 2000.

¹⁰ AvGas is an aviation fuel that causes severe head- and stomach-aches, and inhalation offers a less euphoric effect than petrol. (dAbbs and MacLean 2000, pp.42-44).

¹¹ This is in an environment where Indigenous life expectancy Australia wide is still some 18 years less than for the general population, and where motor vehicle deaths are around four times more common amongst Indigenous than other Australians (Cunningham and Paradies 2000). Compare this to the figure of 129% more male deaths for all men compared to all women in the Northern Territory. Figures released for the NT Indigenous Male Health Conference, held at the Tennant Creek Showgrounds 29-31 August 2000. http://www.nt.gov.au/nths/comm_health/mens_health/conference/appendixc.shtml. See also Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, <http://www.ath.crc.org.au/crc>

¹² "Yuendumu Womens Night Patrol" in *Aboriginal and Islander Health Workers Journal* 16:2, April/March 1992, pp.14-15.

¹³ Rowse presents the challenge in his study of the move from a rations to a cash economy in the Central Desert since the 1970s as: "'Assimilation postulated a single set of Australian norms, while 'self-determination' opens up the troubling possibility of normative plurality within the one nation.'" (Rowse 1998. p.213).

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In *Australian Humanities Review*, see also

- Henry Reynolds's [After Mabo, What About Aboriginal Sovereignty?](#) and [The Stolen Children – Their Stories: an afterword](#)
- John Frow's [A Politics of Stolen Time](#)

- Sue Stanton's [Time for Truth: Speaking the Unspeakable – Genocide and Apartheid in the 'Lucky' Country](#)
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