

# **‘The Poetry of the Earth is Never Dead’: Australia’s Road Writing**

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William Hay’s novella-length 1921 ghost story, ‘An Australian Rip Van Winkle’, begins with a kind of prologue about South Australia’s ‘nowhere roads’. From the new traffic causeway near the coast, the unidentified narrator tells us, it is possible to see small white tracks threading through the hills. These ‘roads’ are mostly natural phenomena, formed by bushfires; the local children used to ride their ponies along them, fantasising about finding some Greek temple or other romantic ruin at their end. As the story unfolds, the children’s friend Jake, a dreamy stockman, rides far up one of these tracks to visit the abandoned house of his dead friend Biddy Laurence. Here Jake is attacked — or possessed — by something and endures a strange series of aural and visual assaults. Eventually, he finds himself lying in a trance by the river at the back of the property, where he hears the (unsourced) line from Keats’ ‘On the Grasshopper and the Cricket’ running through his head: ‘The poetry of the earth is never dead.’ When he returns, half-dead, he discovers that he has not spent a single night in the house as he had thought. Instead, three weeks have passed.

With its diffuse sense of hauntedness, multiple time-warps, and eerie appropriation of northern hemisphere literary texts, Hay’s story offers a suggestive frame for reflecting on our relationship with the road in Australia and the way it is figured in our writing; to consider the road not only as a material artefact represented by our road texts but as a set of cultural traditions and tropes. Hay’s story is also a useful starting point to reflect on editing *The Penguin Book of the Road*, a collection of fiction and non-fiction set on the Australian road. The story’s layered hauntings offer paths to unpacking of the odd sense of unease that permeates so many of these road stories. Using ‘road writing’ (my own term) as a strategic generic category through which disparate works can be interpreted, this paper will, following Paul Carter, consider them as instances of ‘spatial history’ opposed to more triumphalist literary traditions.

It will also, finally, consider the Australian road within a global context, examining how Australian road texts, particularly the more recent, reflect in canny ways upon the relationship between the global and local to reveal a productive ambivalence toward the road’s association with modernity, the American vernacular tradition and the homogenising landscapes of corporate globalism. In particular, it will explore the strategic ways in which these stories, as Meaghan Morris has remarked of other genres, play with strategies of ‘positive unoriginality’ and adaptation; how many make a virtue of borrowing and making-do from imported traditions and technologies as a specific expression of an adaptive and self-aware Australian tradition.

*The Penguin Book of the Road* is the first Australian anthology to collect together a selection of our ‘road writing’, the very significant number of fictional and nonfictional texts that take place on the road. My aim as editor was not to produce a definitive

scholarly survey of the road's place in our literature or history but a commercial book aimed at a summer reading market. Nevertheless, my search for pieces to include was framed by a number of factors. First, my major intention was to avoid any chronological or evolutionary account of Australia's roads (from the imaginary road to China envisaged by the convicts of Port Jackson as described by Carter, through early carriage travel to the contemporary use of off-road vehicles, for example). Instead, my interest was in a more horizontal model: that is, in focusing on a diversity of travellers and road users' experiences of the road. I was interested in the road as a negotiated space that offered different hopes and produced different effects for users of varied gender, race, sexuality, age and class. Second, as this was a landmark collection, I wanted to ensure that I included certain 'classic' road texts: for example, D'Arcy Niland's *The Shiralee* and Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers*.

My choice of pieces was also determined by the nature of an anthology, in which it is impossible to offer much context for each included piece. Short works of fiction and literary non-fiction were most desirable, as they would be of a completeness and length that would work well in a collection. Any excerpts had to operate as stand-alone pieces that would make sense out of the context of the larger work. Unfortunately some works, such as Eve Langley's *The Pea Pickers*, Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks* and Peter Carey's *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, did not lend themselves well to extracts. However, at the same time as I wished to include certain landmark pieces, I was also driven by the desire to avoid some obvious choices. Although I originally considered using a bushranging story by Rolf Boldrewood (an extract from *Robbery Under Arms*, or 'Fallen Among Thieves' his account of being held up by bushrangers en route to Wagga Wagga in 1867), I instead chose his tribute to his two favourite carriage horses Steamer and Railway ('The Horse You Don't See Now') and the pleasures of driving such a well-matched pair through the streets of Melbourne. There was an additional rationale at work in the choice of Boldrewood's essay: having written a cultural studies PhD thesis on the road in postwar America, I was committed to the cultural studies approach of focusing upon consumers' pleasure and resistance. Although selecting with a strong sense of the road's history as a technology of colonisation and authority, I was determined, by including pieces such as Clive James's account of the great Kogarah billycart race from *Unreliable Memoirs*, Dorothy Hewett's 'Nullarbor Honeymoon' and Helen Garner's 'A Happy Story', to strike a balance between stories that were aware of the road's potential for oppression and those that embraced its capacity for joy.

While avoiding an evolutionary account, I nevertheless wanted the pieces selected to show the road's central place in effecting major changes to Australia's physical and cultural landscape. This presence is hardly surprising, given the size of our country and the subsequent amount of time so many of us spend travelling from one place to the other. The road has from the beginnings of settlement been a technology of colonisation (opening up indigenous land to settlement); enabled some of the most significant changes in our physical environment (dams, deforestation and nuclear tests); and been part of great social movements from the depression-era search for work to the 1965 Freedom Ride for Aboriginal rights to today's circulation of sea- and tree-

changers. Thus David Malouf's 'Lone Pine' was chosen for its depiction of grey nomads; an extract from Brenda Walker's *The Wing of Night* for its description of a shellshocked World War I Lighthorseman tramping the roads near his home-town; the extract from Peter Rose's *Rose Boys* for its description of his brother Robert's debilitating car accident; while the extract from Roberta Sykes's autobiographical *Snake Cradle* recounts her appalling abduction and gang rape by a group of white men in a car.

What was more surprising than the road's continual presence in our literature, especially given our abiding critical fascination with landscape, was the lack of academic work the road's ubiquity in Australian literature has attracted — although roads and cars themselves have begun to attract interdisciplinary scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The road's invisibility within our literary criticism is no doubt due, in part, to cinema's takeover of the road as a cultural form in the shape of the 'road movie' with its distinctive generic tropes. It is also the case that the road story as a cultural form has a particular currency as *American*, as canons have formed around both road writing (from the celebrations of the road by Walt Whitman to Kerouac's *On The Road*) and that nation's wealth of road films such as *Vanishing Point*, *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Along with this American tradition, about which I have written elsewhere (Falconer, 1995) have come normative expectations of the road movie or story: as a largely homosocial form (albeit one that women sometimes access, but with the exceptionalism of their appropriation foregrounded, as in *Thelma and Louise*); as embodying a journey west to freedom; and frequently — particularly for men — as a place of wild, existential joy. (Although it must also be noted that the American form has traced an increasingly nostalgic and dystopian trajectory since Frederick Jackson Turner's turn-of-the-century announcement of the closure of the western frontier. A sense of suffused horror is particularly discernible in films from the seventies onward, no doubt assisted by the oil crisis, increased awareness of pollution and the historic diversion of the national road budget from building new roads to repairing existent ones. Nevertheless, the American road journey has continued to stand in unambiguously for America's own national journey, as evidenced by Peter Fonda's role as "Captain America" in *Easy Rider*, dressed in stars-and-stripes leathers, and Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe trilogy with its self-conscious references to iconic national holidays, such as Independence Day which gives the second novel its title).

Australian road writing, on the other hand, is less selfconsciously invested in assessing the state of the nation, less masculinist, less obsessed with loners, and less generically discreet. It often imbeds itself within other texts. Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*, for example, is a novel of family healing which nonetheless contains a long, highly cinematic sequence (included in my anthology) in which the hero Fox hitchhikes north to the mining town of Wittenoom where his father contracted the mesothelioma that killed him. Again, the second chapter of Malcolm Knox's novel *Summerland*, an appropriation of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* into the context of wealthy middle-class late twentieth-century Sydney, is devoted to a dreamlike invocation of the coastal roads through remnant bushland of the 1970s city.

Given the idiosyncracies of my own selections for this anthology and the embeddedness of road writing within other texts, I am aware that I am on contentious ground labelling it as a minor genre. Yet, as a strategic gesture, this is highly useful, as the ‘noise’ that surrounds these texts falls away once they are collected together, and they begin to reveal certain similarities of mood and preoccupation. In many of the pieces in *The Penguin Book of the Road* the road appears as haunted and hyper-alert. Things shimmer, sensations are heightened, relationships become slightly unreal, even characters’ relationships with themselves. Even at their sunniest, these texts often give the impression of being on guard, of not taking progress for granted, aware of other paths that cross their own. The traveller’s mind, too, often finds itself in overdrive, dogged by memories or unfulfilled desires. There was a sense in so many of the stories I collected that the road has its own unusual presence that brings an odd quiddity to the stories that take place upon it. It is this distinctive but productive unease that this paper seeks to explore: the way in which so many of the stories in *The Penguin Book of the Road* seemed to depict the road as a place that demands something of us; which, in rushing forward, leads us strangely to the past.

In order to understand the structures of feeling underpinning so many of Australia’s road stories it is worth returning to Hay’s story in closer detail. ‘An Australian Rip Van Winkle’ is structured so that the road itself becomes an odd echo chamber of horrors, the more disturbing for its apparently multiple and unlocatable sources of hauntedness. It works at a number of levels to deflect closure. To begin with, Hay’s narrator, who never identifies himself, appears intent on keeping the surface of his story as rational as possible and stymieing any supernatural interpretation; a stance which immediately establishes an odd tension with the story’s title, which references a northern American story of the supernatural, Washington Irving’s 1819 ‘Rip Van Winkle’ (itself an adaptation of German J.C.C. Nachtigal’s ‘Peter Klaus the Goatherd’). The narrator distances himself, too, from the ‘romantic’, ‘melancholy’ (Hay 138) and sometimes ‘not quite coherent’ (Hay 139) Jake, inferring that he prefers a more practical interpretation of events for the stockman’s ordeal: that is, that Jake has been a victim of human crime. Nevertheless, Jake himself stands dreamily aloof from the children’s own romantic interpretations of what may lay at the end of these roads, establishing another level of narrative tension. Added to this is a certain ambiguity about the origin of these roads: whether they are a result of bushfires clearing the sandy soil of undergrowth to create little avenues of trees, or whether they are in fact also remnants of colonial activity, since Jake reveals, when questioned, that some of these roads do lead to abandoned wells surrounded by ‘ancient railings’ (Hay 140)—and, in one instance, Bidy Laurence’s old, empty house.

Jake may or may not have been Bidy Laurence’s lover, but it seems more likely that he was one of a number of ‘favoured males’ (Hay 141) who did chores for the forbidding, eccentric and solitary woman. On her death, Laurence willed her cottage to inheritors yet to be tracked down, making Jake and ‘two visionary shepherds’ (a ‘gypsy’ and a Dane) her co-executors. These men have been keeping the house tidy (though, the narrator adds, there had been some talk in the neighbourhood that they had also been gambling there ‘and that the natural result of such proceedings occurred’ [Hay 159]).

Because of the continual rearrangement of Bidy Laurence's belongings, Jake has come to suspect someone of tampering with them and has been spending nights watching the house. In an atmosphere of paranoia, the men apparently decide to boobytrap Laurence's bedroom, where they have found the rug persistently awry. One night not long afterwards, Jake takes shelter in the house during a storm and hears a thump from this upstairs room. When he opens the door 'there was a ghastly crash of thunder and a blue light came out of the chimney and advanced over the floor towards him. He received at the same instance a sort of sickening blow at the back of the neck and fell in a swoon beside the bed' (Hay 161). The gypsy subsequently admits to having removed a chunk of wood from the door to begin building a trap, but vehemently denies it had been put in place; the narrator notes that it 'looked rather black for this man' (Hay 162) until Jake himself laughed off the idea of his involvement. Jake's experiences afterward could thus be viewed as the result of assault, concussion, and, later, even drunkenness.

Yet events in this abandoned house on this forgotten settlers' road are so odd that the reader is hard-pressed, in spite of narratorial promptings, to come to anything but a supernatural conclusion. Waking under the bed with a terrible thirst Jake feels his legs 'guided' outside the house, which is filled by a strange 'herby' smell and briefly sees a figure in a bonnet and shawl. Half-conscious beneath the apple tree he finds a jug in which the sour fruit has fermented with the rainwater 'into an ardent spirit' (Hay 165) that makes him mysteriously elated. Jake then hears footsteps; voices in the house repeatedly singing the first lines of the hymn 'Though dark my path, and sad my lot'; a loud and weird bell; the crack of a stockwhip; and two deep chords of a piano and two 'impish trebles' (Hay 167). A silver light springs up by the river, answered by one in a black window of the house. Only the 'voice' of the river comforts Jake, recalling the line 'the poetry of the earth is never dead' and, he convinces himself, actually embodies all that is left in this place of Laurence's existence. But this is not the end of Jake's strange harrowing. His horse appears in a terrible condition while a monstrous goanna approaches him, only to be fended off by his dog. With the animals' help, and strangely sustained by the powerful draught, Jake is able to struggle away.

Who or what, then, is haunting Jake? The phenomena he experiences seem far more diffuse than one lonely woman's spirit could produce. While Jake seems to convince himself that he is protected by a good spirit, probably hers, it is, by inference, protecting him from other, more troubling, presences—some of which, like the ball lightning and goanna, seem to emanate from nature itself. In fact Jake's haunting replicates the uneasy slippage between emptiness and human occupation that disturbs the beginning of the story from the moment its 'nowhere roads' and their ambiguous origins are introduced. On the one hand, the land is viewed as a wilderness, as empty; any colonial life that once scratched out an existence here appears to have been extinguished. The story repeats this claim that there 'is *nothing*, and never was anything, of permanent consequence' (Hay 137) in this landscape; that 'nothing could have been more motionless' (Hay 148) than Bidy Lawrence's old property. Yet this void or feeling of 'vacant emptiness... which seemed almost bottomless' (Hay 169) seems to have its own mysterious presence; to be filled with a *something* all the more unsettling for the ambiguous line between human and inhuman. This is especially the case when it comes

to the landscape's 'labyrinth'<sup>2</sup> of roads which by a trick of nature resemble 'private driveways' (Hay 146) but also appear (or at least 'seem') to be 'discarded' human ways. In this weirdly 'undead' landscape the boy following Jake's footsteps finds himself thinking: 'There seemed something sacred in such an old road, and to ride upon it was like troubling something that was shyly dead' (Hay 146).

Enchantment (perhaps even the 'sacred') hovers over this gap as a kind of third presence that attempts to reconcile the two extremes of nature and culture. The northern hemisphere texts become significant within Hay's story, as they come to stand in for an innate sense of something unsettlingly foreign at the end of the road: or, as Ken Gelder and Jane M Jacobs might put it, after Freud, a postcolonial version of the *unheimlich* (Gelder and Jacobs 23). Introducing into the story the northern hemisphere landscapes of Rip Van Winkle's Catskill Mountains and Keats's English countryside, these references establish a weird atmosphere of melancholy disconnect (very similar to that which Peter Otto observes in Henry Kendall's poetry) at the heart of the Australian bush; one that is particularly disturbing when attached to thoroughfares that ought to be the most literally pedestrian features of our landscape. Jake comforts himself with the line from Keats and its promise of a familiar continuity at the heart of nature. But for the reader the poet's paen to northern hemisphere seasons and their gentle creatures (the summer grasshoppers and winter cricket) is overwhelmed in the story by a sense of more unpredictable, chthonic forces that seem to emanate from the Australian earth.

Of course for a contemporary reader there is another 'poetry of the earth' hovering at the edges of Hay's story, and that is the vast, organic poetry of the dreaming. These colonial roads south-west of Adelaide would most likely have been cut or formed themselves through land occupied by Indigenous Australians (probably Ngarrindjeri) and could well have been mapped by their own complex network of dreaming tracks. It may be overly fanciful to read this story as a fable, albeit perhaps an unconscious one, that anticipates a settler anxiety about the truth of *terra nullius*. But it is certainly a story in which enchantment or sacredness productively *unsettles* the very notion of settlement, as both the origins and extinguishment of human presence are made ambiguous. In this way, Hay's story seems to embody the 'postcolonial uncanny' Gelder and Jacobs describe in *Uncanny Australia*. Although the Aboriginal sacred is not explicitly invoked in this story, the effect is similar to that described by Gelder and Jacobs: as an 'activating, soliciting thing ... that is not just in one place but potentially all over the place' (Gelder and Jacobs 25) it opens these roads up to negotiation, to a productive uncertainty, that denies, or 'unsettles' more triumphalist notions of a successfully and completely settled landscape. The narrator's almost obsessive dwelling upon the whiteness of the sand roads becomes in this context particularly suggestive: 'these tracks of white sand'; 'the soil of the uplands [which] is almost entirely whitish sand'; the mysterious roads, 'nearly always pure white, in places quite hard and scattered with white crystals'; made up of 'simply soft, white sand'. As Jake rides up these white roads, their whiteness becomes an unnatural object of inquiry, of hallucinatory uncertainty. In spite of all the signs of domesticity represented by Laurence's cottage, this is no place in which to feel at home.

Hay's story is thus a revealing textual landmark that points to ways of understanding the discomfort, eeriness, and retrospective movement of other road stories. It is interesting, in this context, to briefly look at another piece included in the anthology: Major Sir Thomas Mitchell's account of the disappearance of his botanist, Mr Cunningham, from the fragile path his 1835 expedition has been laying over the mountains of western NSW. Cunningham strays meters from this rudimentary 'road' and is literally swallowed up by the bush. For the modern reader a dimension of intense, extra horror attaches to the botanist's fate because Mitchell's account continuously presents evidence (the smoke from fires, the different fragmentary tribal groups encountered by the party) that the land is busy with Aboriginal presence and thoroughly familiar to its indigenous inhabitants. Indeed it may be a conceptual problem, rather than a linguistic one, that causes Mitchell to be repeatedly met by blank faces when he runs into different groups of Aboriginal people and tries to convey to them to look for '*the white man lost in the bush*' (Mitchell 86: italics his). Mitchell's text reminds us of the plentiful textual evidence of Aboriginal occupation in early records. As Mark McKenna points out in *Looking For Blackfella's Point*, although many white communities managed to 'misremember' stories of Aboriginals' violent dispossession (and, one would add, had little sense of Australia's complex network of dreaming tracks as a legitimate mode of knowledge until the publication of Bruce Chatwin's controversial *The Songlines*) knowledge of previous presence was always in circulation. This presence was rarely denied, could even be celebrated; but stories of resistance were either reconfigured in popular memory as nonviolent, often natural passings, or said to have occurred elsewhere. As Martin Thomas has explored in *The Artificial Horizon*, it was also broadly assumed that colonisation had entirely terminated any ongoing indigenous relationship with the land. The sense of bad faith involved in this process may give some extra force to the anxieties 'An Australian Rip Van Winkle' reveals about the incomplete extinguishment of the multiple presences (both colonial and sacred or supernatural) on Bidy Laurence's land.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, the sense that the landscape has no fixable centre in 'An Australian Rip Van Winkle' has profound and multiple effects on imperial time itself. Not only does Jake find that three weeks have passed during the 'night' he has fallen under the spell of Bidy's house,<sup>4</sup> but it turns out that the road he has travelled has also propelled him back into the past. For when a picnic party including Jake travels to the property some time later, they discover it is not the recently-vacated house that closed around Jake, furnished, swept, and replete with smells of hearth and cooking, but a cold and almost-empty ruin. This might lead us to conclude that Jake's supernatural experiences were imaginary, brought about by injury and distress, but Hay's coda returns us to another story, again distorting narrative time, imbedded in the middle of Jake's ordeal. Halfway through 'An Australian Rip Van Winkle' one of the children made his own journey, following Jake's trail — and also found the house in perfect order. When the boy reveals his experience at the picnic, the road is made strange all over again, as, instead of moving forward, it threatens to head back into the past.

Hay's story, considered in the light of Gelder and Jacobs' and McKenna's work, goes some way toward illuminating why so many of our road stories (both written and

cinematic) are also horror stories. It is interesting to note that even our most famous ghost story, 'The Ghost Upon the Rail' (although not included in my anthology) is also a road story; one in which the ghost of a murdered man makes its way to the roadside near Wiseman's Ferry to alert passersby to the unfinished business of his death. An uneasy conscience about our roads' violent role in the colonial process may account for our stories' particular fascination with criminal violence, especially with the random, inexplicable acts of psychopaths and serial killers; a preoccupation reflected in my anthology by Robert Drewe's 'The Bodysurfers' and David Malouf's 'Lone Pine'. We also have an apparently insatiable appetite for stories of road killers like the 'Gatton Man', Ivan Millat and Bradley John Murdoch.<sup>5</sup> Part of the legendary force of these stories is their incompleteness. We wonder, for example, what variety of superhuman strength or persuasion was used by the Victorian-era Gatton killer to subdue and rape a brother and two sisters on their way to a dance. The broken rail, empty field, and mutilated carriage horse leave a dreadful space for the imagination that our horror stories probe.<sup>6</sup> Ross Gibson makes a similar case in *Seven Versions of An Australian Badland*, his study of the notorious 'horror stretch' of the Pacific Highway between Rockhampton and McKay. The accretion of myths around this section of highway depicts it as a kind of Bermuda triangle for accidents and shootings. Gibson reads this as a response to the hidden history of massacres of Aboriginal people in this part of southern Queensland. According to Gibson, areas of unmourned violence (or 'traumascape') attract stories of violence to themselves, because myth steps in to resolve what rational means will not. These stories repeat, over and over again, the broken and disrupted nature of the land.

Yet for a settler culture to accept, even subconsciously, that the road is a thin veneer laid over 'country' — or, to put it differently, is only one among a ghost-map of conceptual 'roads' — is to face the threat of a great existential emptiness. Carl Strehlow's account of his Lutheran missionary father's death must be one of the more devastating literary instances of the incompatibility of the landscape with the centring stories of Judeo-Christian culture. After enduring an agonising journey south from Hermannsburg in search of medical attention, Strehlow senior, swollen by dropsy, can go no further than the pub at Horeshoe Bend; here the devout Christian, trying to hide his imminent demise from his wife, and surrounded by a country pregnant with the Aranda's own gods, comes to the terrible and lonely conclusion in his last words: 'God doesn't help!' (Strehlow 238).

Patrick West's story 'Nhill' in my collection offers the most self-reflexive exploration of this sense of a pregnant emptiness at the heart of the Australian landscape. A middle-class husband and wife travel to the centre of the Little Desert of Western Victoria — its 'heart of salt' — but everything in this story conspires to convey a sense of fragility and unreality. 'The surface of the scrub was even and uninterrupted, but the smallest bird to alight on it sank beneath the feathery leaves and tips. Sank to fly out of the scrub's surface bafflingly elsewhere (the same bird? Or another?)' the husband recounts (West 65). In fact, the couple seem to have entered a similarly ambiguous time-slip as William Hay's hero, having been neither fully 'in' or 'outside of' the desert. In an oddly dreamlike detail, their exit seems 'not to have registered' on the carpark's

turnstile counter; on leaving, they have accidentally bumped it backwards and yet the number remains the same as when they entered. Thus even narrative time itself seems to have been suspended, to have become borderless; which, in an reversal of the traditional ghost story, makes the couple themselves insubstantial, virtual phantoms in the landscape. Leaving, the narrator finds himself struck by the thought that ‘our trip to the salt lake was somehow never to stop happening’ (West 69).

The fact that such existential instability is already embedded in the Australian road trip may account for why our stories are far less likely to pursue the existential thrills, speed, and nihilism one finds in innumerable American works like *On The Road* or *Vanishing Point* (in which antihero Kowalski famously drives his white Challenger at full speed into a roadblock, so that it explodes, at the movie’s end). Interestingly, it is only indigenous author Robert Bropho’s ‘Great Journey of the Aboriginal Teenagers’, an account of a car-stealing spree from the West Australian camps which heads off-road along the rabbit-proof fence, that comes anywhere close to the popular American male ‘buddy story’ (such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or *Easy Rider*) in my collection. Instead, Australian road stories typically make family and domestic relationships central to their narratives, especially the search for lost parents and lovers. Such journeys occur in Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*; Tara June Winch’s ‘Territory’ whose narrator hitches in search of her absent father; Barbara Baynton’s ‘A Dreamer’ in which a pregnant woman battles a flood to visit her mother in her childhood home; and Brenda Walker’s *The Wing of Night* as Joe tramps the roads of Western Australia searching for his first love. Frank Moorhouse’s ‘Across the Plains, Over the Mountains, and Down to the Sea’ makes this psychoanalytic dynamic explicit, as his narrator recalls an idealised past relationship during analysis.<sup>7</sup> Such Freudian quests to restore primary relationships on the road can also be read as narrative strategies that attempt to solve the broken, unfinished business of our landscape.

A postcolonial sense of pervasive, endemic loss may also account for our road stories’ heightened materiality, since their hyper-awareness of the present creates a kind of compensatory intensity. Fox’s travels through ‘late crops that stand brassy in the sun’ (Winton 330) and ‘scree slopes the colour of dried blood’ (Winton 340) in *Dirt Music* represent a kind of Technicolor harrowing in which, sharing monster rollies with truckies and feeling the ‘slipstream blasts’ of the road, he finally succumbs to a spiked drink and achieves a parallel intensity with the landscape. Similarly, Joe’s travels in *The Wing of Night* are oddly ecstatic and filled with dreamlike beauty: ‘On the road, he floated above himself as the fenceposts drifted by... He was light as a fist... Vast wings seemed to open beside him’ (Walker 60). Other writers invoke the physical sensations of travel with heightened pleasure. Helen Garner’s tiny suburban road tale ‘A Happy Story’ equates driving a new car through the streets of Melbourne with choral music: ‘Habe dank!’ (Garner 372). Gillian Mears makes the connection between loss and heightened observation explicit in her premonitorily nostalgic ‘The Burial and the Busker’. A melancholy awareness of the new highway advancing towards the town of Fineflour’s cemetery causes her teenage narrator to be inordinately sensitive to familiar hometown details like the parrots that ‘come shattering — green blue and bright’ to eat berries on the graves (Mears 123). One might also read her fascination with the babies’

graves as an attempt to forge a foundational, overcompensatory story of connection with the land.

Yet while some non-Indigenous writers, like Robert Hughes, enrol the Aboriginal sacred into their quest to connect with the landscape, West's story offers an alternate vision of a kind of grace achieved through close, unspiritualised attention to the specificity of our surroundings—a grounded, materialist process that both embraces and respects their uncanny impenetrability. 'There was nothing mystical about the scene in the end,' his narrator writes. 'No unwordly presence suggested itself in the shallow water. There was only the salt lake precisely as it was, and a sky that all day had not been disturbed by an aeroplane. All the same, it was a place (the lake, the sky, the whole sense of it all) that you didn't want to treat like more familiar places' (West 68).

Because of this frequent focus on the present, Australia's road stories offer a challenge to more nationalistic versions of our history that privilege a fixed and deterministic point of view. Following Carter, they can be understood as exercises in 'spatial history' (and subsequently as assaults on imperial time): that is, texts that allow us to focus on the active process of cultural imagining that goes into the creation of Australian space, and the uncertain, explorative nature of this process. (Thomas is perhaps more revealing than Carter on the inherent violence of this dreamwork).

Largely provisional forms, in which the present unfolds moment-by-moment, road stories are texts in which the future is never a *fait accompli* but instead is always on the verge of becoming. In this sense they are particularly amenable to creating a lived sense of historical space and its unique 'spatial and temporal context' (Carter xvi). For as Carter points out, '[n]othing could be less appropriate to the evocation of historical space than the one-way logic of positivist chronology' [Carter 293]). By staging conflicts between different travellers and interest groups who meet randomly upon the road, these stories make us aware of the road precisely as a 'two-way' street: and of the repressed history of negotiation—both violent and non-violent—that has literally made (and continues to make) Australian space.

The sense of uncanniness that also attaches to road stories as specific forms of spatial history, further necessitates, as Gelder and Jacobs argue of the postcolonial uncanny, a kind of productive engagement with the landscape in which key terms of Australia's colonial self-identity, such as settlement and whiteness, are rendered unnatural and thus subjects for further inquiry. This is particularly exciting if, as I have suggested, in analysing West's story, road stories also problematise any importation of European notions of the sacred, thus forcing a negotiation with both ambiguity and an intensely local, material appreciation of the land-in-itself. Australian road stories, then, make us aware of the road not just as a means of getting from A to B as part of an uninterrupted progress toward the future. In fact, the road often takes on the uncanny quality of almost being a character itself within these stories—one whose powerful history and strangeness cannot be denied.

But what is the future for Australian road writing as globalisation's corporate logic erodes the differences between local landscapes, while at the same time exerting commercial pressure on different locales to sell 'colourful' versions of themselves? It is interesting to return to Peter Carey's allegorical story 'American Dreams', written in 1974, in which a local eccentric builds a perfect scale-model of his town. This site attracts Americans with cameras and money—but it turns out that they expect the townspeople to remain frozen in time, just as they were when their portraits were taken.

Written at an earlier mode of globalisation, Carey's story raises a host of complex questions. On the one hand, it recognises that postcolonial yearning has shifted away from England to America as a source of power and cultural capital: instead of comparing themselves to a European model, the townsfolk make their landscape over for an American audience along the lines of the archetypal American roadside attraction. Carey's story suggests that a colony's perceived distance from modernity, typified by America, is also part of the sense of pathos and unreality that clings to the road; the worry that our backroads are not only the 'nowhere roads' of the nation, but, in an echo-effect of obscurity, of the world. In this way 'American Dreams' seems to echo the sentiments of one of the characters in Wim Wenders' *Im Lauf Der Zeit (Kings of the Road)* that 'America has colonised our subconscious'. To return to Moorhouse's reconstruction of the road as psychoanalytic territory, this makes our experience of our own roads secondary, haunted by the existence elsewhere of a greater 'real'.

Yet Carey's townspeople who harbour 'American Dreams' of progress and recognition soon find that they are not granted equal subjectivity by their American visitors, when they come, but are instead doomed to repeat localness for the tourists' consumption. Not only that—by playing up their local colour for outside eyes they risk becoming less authentic to themselves. They are thus caught in an endlessly repeated loop in which locatedness in place and time becomes a kind of cliché or joke, albeit so intensely and numbingly felt as to not be funny. The narrator of 'American dreams' finds himself, as he is photographed, spending 'my time feeling guilty that I have somehow let [the American tourists down] by growing older and sadder' (Carey 109).<sup>8</sup> Carey's story, written at the beginning of a new boom in our literature and film, can be read as a cautionary allegory for Australia's creative industry itself, faced with the possibility of performing tired versions of national identity and place for a new international audience. Or, given its complex layerings, and the fact that its miniature landscape is at once intensely local and artificial, it is even possible to read an extra cautionary meaning into Carey's story-as-allegory, to see it as anticipating the transformation of our landscape into a potential environment of non-places given over to the fluid logics of a global capitalism. For Carey's story is haunted among other things by both the early regearing of Australia's economy away from a fortress-like protectionism toward the free market, and by the reorientation of the landscape toward 'visiting, investing, cruising, developing' (Morris 'Panorama' 162).

What is remarkable, revisiting 'American Dreams' over thirty years later, is how greatly America has receded in the (western) collective imagination as the archetype of modernity and its ills, such as mass tourism, and how, having become so naturalised, it

is difficult to see these effects as exceptional. Instead, as corporate globalism spreads, one is struck by the homogenisation of so many of the world's spaces; by how many countries now share a kind of globalised architecture of highways, mega-rest stops, and transitional outer-urban service strips filled with the same international drive-in banks and fast food outlets. Added to this is a service economy in which surveillance is now highly naturalised and more accepted than at the time Carey wrote his story. Almost all small towns have internalised the tourist gaze, producing versions of local colour in which deeper histories are difficult to detect; though these are now less likely to be geared around hokey 'roadside attractions' than a palatable tourist 'experience' incorporating international standards of cuisine and service.

Yet, returning again to Hay's appropriation of Keats' poetry in 'An Australian Rip Van Winkle' it appears that Australian road stories have in some sense long anticipated these events by developing a strategy that Meaghan Morris terms (in relation to the film *Crocodile Dundee*) 'positive unoriginality' (Morris 'Tooth and Claw' 248). That is, they have developed a resistant and specifically 'Australian' response, which is to selfconsciously and ironically foreground the very process of borrowing and adaptation. Indeed, many of our road texts make a virtue of a kind of feral canniness and making-do. Robert Bropho's 'Great Journey of the Aboriginal Teenagers', for example, is fascinating for the way the teenagers' improvisation (driving cars off-road, using them to hunt and kill kangaroos) anticipates the cult television series *Bush Mechanics* in which men from the Yuendumu community displayed feral acts of engineering with clapped-out cars. Even Clive James' account of racing trains made of billycarts makes knowingly humorous reference to an American tradition, as babies are relegated to the 'chuck wagon' in the back. West's, Winton's and Walker's stories incorporate into their descriptions an implicit interrogation of the compensatory nature of their heroes' reactions to the landscape, while Knox's entire book is a cannily self-aware adaptation of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. Australian road movies, meanwhile, have made a recognisable trope of the adaptation, cannibalisation and permeability of cars, from *The Cars that Ate Paris* to the *Mad Max* trilogy. The recent film *Lucky Miles* offers a delightful gloss on *Bush Mechanics*, as an illegal Iraqi refugee, hunted by the authorities in northern Western Australia, miraculously revives a derelict car and then (because its gears are ruined) rides it backwards through the landscape.

Contemporary Australian road stories and films are distinguished by a quality of looking over their shoulders, of taking a sophisticated and selfconscious approach to the questions of making, perceiving and using the things of the road. Their frequent emphasis on making do and re-adapting can thus also be read allegorically as a commentary on the genre itself. The irony of Carey's story is that, for all its descriptions of colonisation and the dangers of writing for a global audience, it asserts its own local defiance in its sceptical and ingenious staging of its story, with such darkly playful estrangement. Comfortable with its discomfiture, incorporating a sophisticated commentary on globalisation's enforced borrowings, and being original about its unoriginality, it does nothing less than offer itself as a model for a new type of national cultural production. According to such a model, ambiguous intensity, improvisation and

heightened materiality become forms of national expression in the face of the global, as the road story maintains its productive dialogue with the road.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 2005, for example, The Australian National University and National Museum of Australia convened the interdisciplinary conference ‘Cruising Country: a symposium and film event exploring automobilities in non-urban Australia’. <http://www.anu.edu.au/culture/cruising/> (Accessed 18 Sept 2008). See also Muecke, Clarsen, Collis and Gibson. The situation is somewhat different in America. When I completed my thesis on the road in American film and literature in 1995, there was almost no body of literature on the road in film or literature. Since the 1997 publication of Ina Rae Hark and Steven Cohan’s *The Road Movie Book*, however, road movies at least have become a well-visited area of scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> A term that recalls Martin Thomas’s discussion of the word and its place in the dreamwork of imperialism. In *The Artificial Horizon* he argues that the European conception of the Australian landscape (in this instance the Blue Mountains) as a labyrinth ‘reflect[s] the anxiety and the underlying violence of the arriving culture’ (97), because of its mythic association with endless wandering, death and entrapment.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Dixon’s *Searching for Aboriginal Languages*, which unfortunately also proved resistant to excerpting, is a sad testament to the end result of the road’s disenfranchisement of North Queensland Aboriginal communities. At the ends of the roads he travelled in the 1960s Dixon continually encountered the last frail speakers of ‘language’.

<sup>4</sup> Even this isn’t certain—at another point in the story (Hay 158) the narrator states that Jake was absent for two weeks and three days.

<sup>5</sup> I had very much wanted to include in my anthology an extract from Merv Lilley’s *Gatton Man*, which unfortunately proved unexcerptable. In this memoir, Lilley evolves the theory that his own father, a violent and abusive man, was the Gatton killer—a scenario that reads like a horrible implosion of the Australian road’s replacement of existential freedom with domesticity, which will be discussed later in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> This is not, of course, to deny the very real violence that has taken place on our roads and the particular vulnerability of the least enfranchised members of our society, often with the least access to transport. This is powerfully explored in Sykes’s piece and Kylie Tenant’s introduction to *The Battlers* in which she notes the casual brutality of the settled public to itinerant travellers on the road.

<sup>7</sup> This Freudian dynamic is also a feature of our road movies: *True Love and Chaos*, for example, or the *Mad Max* trilogy in which Max is driven by the loss of wife Jess and child Sprog. Even *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, with its glorious freedom-seeking trannies, concludes with the rediscovery and resolution between Hugo Weaving’s character and his long-lost wife.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Carey claims in a recent interview that the idea for his story ‘came out of looking at Indonesians in their houses and wondering how it might feel to be the one being looked at.’ Nicholas Wroe, ‘Between Two Worlds’ *The Guardian* Saturday January 19 2008 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/jan/19/fiction.petercarey>) Downloaded 29 September 2008).

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