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Mobile encounters: Bicycles, cars and Australian settler colonialism

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Abstract
At the turn of the twentieth century bicycles and motorcars constituted a significant break from organic modes of mobility, such as walking, horses and camels. In Australia, such mechanical modes of personal transport were settler imports that generated local meanings and practices as they were integrated into the material, cultural and political conditions of the settler nation-in-the-making. For settlers, new technologies confirmed their racial superiority and reinforced a collective sense of their own modernity. Aboriginal people frequently expressed fear and epistemological confusion when they first encountered the strange vehicles. Contrary to settler investments in Aboriginal people as outside of the contemporary world, however, they soon incorporated bicycles and automobiles into their lives. Aboriginal people complicated that imagined divide between primitivism and modernity as they devised new pleasures, accommodations, resistances and collaborations through those new technologies.

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At the turn of the twentieth century bicycles and motorcars constituted a significant break from organic modes of mobility, such as walking, horses and camels. In Australia, such mechanical modes of personal transport were settler imports that generated local meanings and practices as they were integrated into the material, cultural and political conditions of the settler nation-in-the-making. For settlers, new technologies confirmed their racial superiority and reinforced a collective sense of their own modernity. Aboriginal people frequently expressed fear and epistemological confusion when they first encountered the strange vehicles. Contrary to settler investments in Aboriginal people as outside of the contemporary world, however, they soon incorporated bicycles and automobiles into their lives. Aboriginal people complicated that imagined divide between primitivism and modernity as they devised new pleasures, accommodations, resistances and collaborations through those new technologies.

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Photographer Thomas Cleary employed a group of Aboriginal people in northern Victoria to pose for a series of postcards in 1896. His models were members of the Wahgunyah community at Lake Moomemere, across the Murray River from Corowa. All studio shots, they were dramatically scripted images in which Aboriginal adults and children performed carefully composed tableaux of both primitive ‘Aboriginality’ and modern ‘civilization’. Of particular interest for this article are three photographs of members of the Wahgunyah community using a bicycle.

The first, captioned *Goodbye Mother*, shows one of Cleary’s models, Mary Friday, riding a bicycle with her young son seated on the ground watching her leave. Friday is precariously balanced against a bush scene backdrop. A furled parasol, a sign of feminine refinement, is tied to the bicycle frame. A cotton skirt is all that Friday wears, hitched up

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1 The State Library of Victoria has made available online some 15 of Cleary’s photographs made with models from the Wahgunyah community, http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/

to reveal both the man’s bicycle and her strong legs. The photograph invited voyeuristic pleasure at female nudity, presented as ethnographic realism. The highly gendered tableau also references the conservative, anti-suffrage imagery and debates, which reached a height in the mid-1890s, in which ‘new women’ in outlandish outfits ride bicycles for pleasure, politics and business, leaving their young children at home.³ The joke seems to be pointed two ways. It lampoons and exposes to an objectifying gaze a ‘primitive’ Aboriginal woman who presumed to claim modern (white, male) mobility by riding the latest model bicycle. At the same time, it seems to satirise white women cyclists who also inappropriately presumed to claim independent mobility to the neglect of their families.

The second photograph in that bicycle series, *Homeward Bound*, is a happier tableau that uses the same studio setting but brings the mother and child together.⁴ The young boy travels with Mary Friday, sitting in front of her on the crossbar, carrying what appears to be a parcel of books. The meaning of this image seems more transparent, depicting the apparent incongruity of an Aboriginal woman and child enjoying a bicycle. The power of the image rests on the expectation that bicycles and Aboriginal people do not naturally go together. Perhaps Cleary hoped to sell the photograph to the burgeoning advertising industry, which increasingly drew on the visual vocabulary of the Jim Crow era and African colonialism to depict comic or eroticised black bodies ‘out of place’ in eye-catching advertising copy.⁵

The third of Cleary’s surviving bicycle photographs, *Calamity*, shows a group of six Aboriginal men, women and children tending to a prostrate man and woman (Mary Friday) injured in a cycling accident.⁶ They bind their friends’ wounds with bark and sticks. John Friday, Mary Friday’s husband, offers her a drink from what may be a gin bottle. The joke in this

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tableau appears to be the potential for chaos that a modern technology brings, perhaps especially, to Aboriginal users.

These and other photographs in the series survived because Cleary registered them at a number of patent offices. They offer a mix of troubling narratives whose evident racism makes confronting viewing. We do not know the degree of narrative control that the Wahgunyah residents exerted in each scenario but it is reasonable to assume that Cleary sometimes hoodwinked them into performing demeaning scenes that were intended for an unsympathetic white audience. But Cleary was a trickster in more ways than one. Not only had he photographed his models in degrading tableaux, he also cheated them out of the substantial £10 fee he had promised them. Kwat Kwat artist Yakaduna, the senior man at the Wahgunyah community and widely known as Tommy McRae, took Cleary to Corowa’s Small Debts Court in 1897, seeking to have the money paid. Yakaduna lost his case and Cleary was not ordered to pay his models.

Despite this clear exploitation, it is too simple to presume that the subjects of these photographs were simply duped. Cleary depended on his models’ goodwill and their active engagement conferred meanings beyond his intention. At the very least, the sessions presented an opportunity for earning much needed money. By the turn of the century, many Aboriginal people in Victoria well understood the value that settlers placed on photographs of them. Residents at Coranderrk mission had long demanded payment for their services and were able to exert control over the terms of their representation. The Wahgunyah models, we may assume, were also practiced readers of visual images and perhaps experienced, though unequal, partners in the making of them. While we do not know all their names, they speak to us as real people, present in that captured moment as self-referential collaborators. They...
appear to be taking some pleasure in the representational practice and their participation deserves to be honoured as a conscious desire to create images that communicate across cultural, spatial and temporal distances.

We may never be sure of the ways the Wahgunyah people’s sense of humour and narrative intentions overlapped with or worked against Cleary’s purposes. But whatever the photographer’s aims, the scenarios are open to complex and empathetic readings. We can reclaim them as precious images of people who we might otherwise not encounter. For their descendants, especially, they offer a rare record of ancestors actively engaged in the process of making meaning between cultures.10 Produced in traumatic times, these photographs compel us to wonder about the models’ creative responses to the painful experiences they lived through and challenge us to ask what the photographs might have meant for them. How can we understand them as intercultural products that expressed something of the significance that material objects like bicycles had for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?

The 1890s was a decade of renewed oppression for the Wahgunyah community, which had already suffered a great deal. In his sixties at the time of the court case, Yakaduna had witnessed frontier killings, the seizure of his lands, and the population influxes of the gold rushes. All of his children had been removed by the time the photographs were taken, in spite of his efforts to shield them.11 A decade earlier, however, Yakaduna’s community had managed to make a life alongside its white neighbours despite harassment at the hands of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which sometimes forced members to move across the border into New South Wales.12 Newspaper reports in the early 1880s portray him as a respected man, proficient in both Indigenous and settler worlds. His family made a good living as pastoral workers and agricultural labourers. They fished the Murray River, raised poultry and traded in possum skin cloaks. Yakaduna also sold on commission his much-admired pen and ink sketchbooks, some of which are now in public collections.13

11 Argus, 4 June 1891, 6.
13 The National Gallery of Australia, for example: http://nga.gov.au/McRae/Index.cfm; See also the National Gallery of Victoria: http://publications.ngv.vic.gov.au/
Yakaduna was well aware of the theatrical impact of Aboriginal people using modern technologies of mobility. In the better times of the 1880s, he owned a ‘very good’ American wagon and the sight of him driving his family, ‘all dressed in European clothes quite as good quality as the families of labouring men in the bush usually wear’, provided ‘one of the strangest sights to be seen in any inland Australian town’. Yakaduna’s prosperity and dignity, according to this contemporary newspaper report, challenged non-Indigenous observers to question their assumptions about Aboriginal futures. He showed that ‘native blacks are not incapable of civilisation’, as the writer half-heartedly put it. Yakaduna’s adaption to settler ways did not protect his family in the hard years of the 1890s, however. He died four years after the court case, impoverished and on Protection Board rations.

Cleary’s photographs point to the Wahgunyah people’s ease with the performative dimensions of photography and their agency in the creative process. Like stories of Yakaduna’s buggy in the 1880s, the photographs suggest Aboriginal people’s accommodation to new social contexts and their capacity to negotiate common ground, in spite of asymmetric power relations. While the meanings of the images remain open to multiple interpretations, they stand as a record of these people’s strategic negotiation with a colonial system that was not of their making but into which they were inevitably bound. The community’s engagement in a hybrid world – which included spears, emus and possum skin cloaks as much as cameras, money, lawsuits and bicycles – confirms the ‘historical coexistence and entanglement of settler and Aboriginal cultures’. The photographs depict Aboriginal creativity in a period of precarious survival and provide an early expression of the place that imported technologies of mobility had in their lives.

Mary Friday was not the only Aboriginal person aspiring to ride a bicycle in that very early period. In 1897, newspapers were reporting with surprise that Aboriginal men in northern NSW ‘take great interest in cycling’. Bicycles were then becoming a valued item of mass consumption, within the reach of growing numbers of people. A Kempsey correspondent to the *Town and Country Journal* offered as

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14 *Australasian*, 20 August 1881, 25.
proof of the advancement of ‘our dusky brethren in the district’ that ‘any day’ a man from the nearby Burnt Bridge reserve could be seen ‘gaily pedalling’ on his ‘wheel’, though he did not dare to show up in the town. He also noted that another local family drove a smart sulky into town, ‘all the same as white man’, and recorded Aboriginal people’s appreciation of the theatrical impact of their actions on non-Indigenous observers. Aborigines ‘imitate the white man in all ways’, the reporter concluded.\(^{17}\)

As Philip Deloria argued in the context of Native American auto-mobility, it is crucial to resist seeing such early Aboriginal engagements with modern technologies of mobility as inherently anomalous or imitative. They are much more productively understood as cross-cultural practices that ‘ignored, not only racial categories, but also those that would separate out modernity from the Indian primitive’.\(^{18}\) When Aboriginal men and women rode bicycles, contrary to settler expectations and even at the risk of their hostility, they were refusing to accept the terms of racial difference and technological entitlement that most settlers assumed. The Kempsey cyclist and sulky driver may not have viewed their actions in political terms but, like Mary Friday and Yakaduna, they nevertheless presented a challenge to settler power that was social, cultural and political in its impact. Through their actions they were ‘engaging with the same forces of modernization’ that allowed non-Indigenous people to ‘re-evaluate their own expectations of themselves and their society’.\(^ {19}\)

Non-Indigenous representations of Aboriginal people as primitives whose involvement with bicycles and automobiles was necessarily imitative worked to re-enact in a new field of practices an imagined divide between settler modernity and Indigenous primitivism. The responses of Aboriginal people across the continent to the new modes of transport and the alacrity with which they absorbed them into their lives, provide an ideal prism through which to consider Indigenous people’s relationships to modernity.\(^ {20}\) Contrary to settler investments, the angle of vision suggested by Deloria reveals Aboriginal people devising a middle ground of modernity through new vehicles of individual mobility.

\(^{17}\) Town and Country Journal, 13 March 1897, 13.

\(^{18}\) Philip Deloria, Indians in Unexpected Places (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 156.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 6.

Bicycles and automobiles first arrived in Australia from elsewhere but rates of ownership were soon among the highest in the world.\(^{21}\) They were received not just as prized items of personal consumption but also as ‘colonising vehicles’ that could be put to the collective project of ‘conquering’ the continent.\(^{22}\) As early as 1896, during the decade of federation droughts, newspaper reports imagined that motor vehicles, ‘stronger than a horse and more enduring than a camel’, would hasten the full possession of ‘the waste places of our continent’.\(^{23}\) Well before vehicles that ‘only need feeding with kerosene oil to generate steam’ were up for the job, reporters wrote of how they could bring ‘the barren interior of Australia’ into productivity. That ‘substitution of inanimate for animate power’, they claimed, ‘is a question of very great moment’ for the nation.\(^{24}\)

The attribution of nationalist value to those prized masculine commodities served to disguise acts of consumption as a serious and honourable practice, a world away from ‘frivolous’ female desires for commercial products. Commercial sponsorship and widespread press coverage of ‘overlanding’ journeys extended older constructions of bush masculinity and reworked raced and gendered subjectivities around settler men’s mechanised travel in remote terrains.\(^{25}\) New iterations of white, masculine subjectivity came to adhere in mechanical knowledge and skill, in the increased speed and mobility that the vehicles afforded, as well as in the hard physical labor of dragging bicycles and cars through outback Australia.

In the same year that Yakaduna took Cleary to court and the Burnt Bridge cyclist and sulky drivers were attracting attention, an un-named photographer produced an image that perfectly expressed the presumed

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\(^{22}\) *West Australian*, 21 February 1900, 3; John Weaver and Joan Tamorria Weaver, “‘We’ve had no punctures whatsoever’: Dunlop, Commerce and Cycling in fin de siècle Australia’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 16, no. 3 (1999): 94–112; Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini, ‘Settler Colonial Automobilities: A Distinct Constellation of Automobile Cultures?’ *History Compass* 10, no. 12 (2012): 889–900.

\(^{23}\) *Advertiser*, 3 February 1896, 4.

\(^{24}\) *Queenslander*, 4 June 1904, 25.

distance between Aboriginal people and modern technologies. This time the photograph was not taken in a studio but somewhere on the Overland Telegraph Line, probably at Alice Springs. The photograph shows two un-named Aboriginal men warily observing what we assume is the first bicycle they have encountered. Unlike Cleary’s photographs, this tableau was simple to compose and it is likely that the photographer directed it with less input from his models. The men do not engage with the camera but are probably aware of the future viewer, as Aboriginal people had seen photographic images at missions and telegraph stations like Alice Springs.  

The bicycle belonged to Jerome Murif, the first cyclist to ride through the centre of the continent. Murif did not carry a camera, but he hovers just out of frame, his presence invoked in the meagre travel kit strapped to the handlebars. His observation in an interview at the end of his journey suggested a caption: ‘My machine scared the life out of [the Blacks], and even when I met them around the telegraph stations nothing would prevail upon any of them to come near my bicycle.’

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27 *Australasian*, 26 June 1897, 23.
The photograph juxtaposes ‘stone age’ natives and their wooden weapons against the shiny, steel technology of settler modernity. The men have eyes only for the material object, observing it with apparent trepidation and awe. Viewers of the photograph, in turn, are invited to look at the men as exotic objects to be scrutinised, echoing their fascination with the bicycle. Though an apparently simple image, it offers a complex parable, instantly recognisable to settlers, of the sudden intrusion of modernity into a remote and ‘timeless’ place. It gives material expression to a moment of Indigenous incomprehension, impending change, expanding settler mobility, the impersonal forces of progress, and even the moral rightness of settler power.

Such photographic images did not exist in a vacuum but were produced as part of a plethora of representations of Aboriginal people as outside the contemporary world, which reached back to stories of first encounters with horses and camels. The stories and images circulated through popular forums and were endlessly rehearsed in outback travel narratives. Thousands of press articles in newspapers, magazines and trade papers, as well as commercial brochures and popular travel books were published about early bicycle journeys around and across the continent at that fin-de-siècle moment. Reporters frequently quizzed cyclists about their encounters with ‘the natives’ and they obliged with picturesque accounts of fear and comic misrecognition. As Murif approached the Horseshoe Bend store on the Finke River, he recorded that one of the local blacks rushed to tell the storeman that ‘a whitefellow come along ridin one big mosquito’. Murif added that ‘piccaninny engine’ and ‘one-sided buggy’ had ‘also been a native’s not inapt description of the novel vehicle’. Three years later the around-Australia cyclist Arthur Richardson similarly reported that Aboriginal people at Flora Valley Station in Western Australia were ‘very much surprised’ by his sudden appearance. They were wary of but also delighted by his bicycle, describing it as, ‘him little fella buggy-buggy, no more belong yarridee (horse). Him quick fella walk, that one.’ Some were ‘put on to the machine, and wheeled around on it’ with the result that ‘horses and carts are held in contempt there now’.

29 Weaver and Weaver, ‘We’ve had no punctures whatsoever’; Clarsen, ‘Pedaling Power’.
31 *Advertiser*, 6 January 1900, 8.
Early Indigenous encounters with bicycles appear in the archives from a settler perspective. They say more about Western knowledge production and the settler project than they do about Indigenous responses. The accounts are best read as apocryphal stories, distilled from countless campfire yarns, rather than truthful reports of actual historical events. There are many variations on the story, some empathic and some derisory, but all posit a frozen moment of heightened significance, a simplified and mythologised instant of the bicycle’s sudden appearance in another world. Aboriginal people’s gratifyingly childlike, fearful or uncomprehending responses to objects of settler ingenuity and power appeared to enact a clear divide. The stories worked to assure settlers that there could only be two positions in relation to modern technology. There were those who could naturally claim bicycles as ‘theirs’, whether or not they were cyclists, and those for whom bicycles patently belonged to someone else.

The apparently voluntary Indigenous recognition of settler superiority in these stories was simultaneously received as confirmation that the era of frontier warfare was over and that Aboriginal people no longer posed a threat to settler society. Though massacres in central and northern Australia continued until the late 1920s, by the turn of the century settler power was well secured. Early overlanding cyclists, however, carried firearms and expressed fear for their lives when they travelled through areas where Aboriginal resistance continued. As late as 1910, the prominent overlander Francis Birtles described sometimes feeling like a ‘hunted rabbit’. He boasted of ‘often’ using his repeating rifle against ‘treacherous natives’ who ‘stalked’ him with spears on the Murrangi track.\footnote{Argus, 15 December 1910, 6; Francis Birtles, Lonely Lands: Through the Heart of Australia (Sydney: NSW Bookstore Company, 1909), 140–2.} Earlier at Jasper Gorge in the Victoria River District, a pair of cycling overlanders reported using their Winchester rifles against ‘treacherous’ warriors who attacked them from high ground with spears.\footnote{West Australian, 6 February 1900, 6; Australian Cyclist, March 1900.} The cover of a promotional brochure for Dunlop tyres featured the cycling overlander, Arthur Richardson, firing his pistol at a fleeing Aboriginal man near Wave Hill Station.\footnote{Arthur Richardson, The Story of a Remarkable Ride (Melbourne: Dunlop Tyre Company, 1900).}

While shootings continued during that period, changing notions of frontier masculinity and the declining regime of violence were expressed through representations of bicycles as welcome substitutes for lethal force. The carbines that had infamously ‘talked English’ to Aboriginal
people were being put away and honorable masculinity was increasingly defined through the avoidance of violence. Bicycles, powerful and frightening enough to make Aboriginal people run away, proclaimed Aboriginal dispossession and settler ascendancy in a different way. They were cast as more peaceable weapons in the modern era. Murif made that transitional moment explicit when he reported his pleasure at not having to use the revolver he kept mounted on the bicycle’s handlebars by day and slept with at night. ‘My bicycle was the best revolver I had’, he punned.  

Automobiles were added to the mix of transport modes in inland Australia a decade after Murif cycled the Overland Telegraph track. Unlike bicycles, however, there are records of Aboriginal people’s responses to automobiles. For more than 30 years, ‘The Line’ had been a ribbon of cross-cultural contact that cut through Aboriginal lands. The surrounding deserts where people had lived for thousands of years were being emptied as starvation and violence forced landowners to move to places where rations and permanent water were available: to missions, cattle and telegraph stations. It was at one of those telegraph stations that an Indigenous account of the first automobile to pass along the line was recently placed on public record.

In 1990 at Thangkenharenge or Barrow Creek in Central Australia, three Kaytetye women vividly recalled the first motorcar in their country. The women, Daisy Akemarre, Katie Ampetyane and Rosie Casson Ampetyane, recorded their immediate ancestors’ stories about two Adelaide motorists who stopped at the Barrow Creek telegraph station on their way to Darwin. This was a story of hard times, of Kaytetye ancestors struggling to make sense of colonialism. The women spoke as if it were they themselves who had seen the car as little girls, the power of the frightening encounter still palpable. The vehicle was different from other ‘whitefeller’ imports the community already lived with and its loud sound made them shiver with fear. The tracks it left were strange, too, perhaps a snake. Was it a new kind of animal or something more sinister, an arrentye, or devil, perhaps? Certainly here was more danger for Kaytetye:

Footprint, reckon, animal bin go. We bin frightened alla girl. We don’t know that motorcar. We bin see-em. ‘An, nah, arrentye him

35 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 28 May 1897, 3; Barrier Miner, 30 June 1897, 2.
36 Michael Smith, Peopling the Cleland Hills: Aboriginal History in Western Central Australia (Canberra: Aboriginal History Monograph 12, 2005).
comin there close, *arrentye. Arrentye comin there.’ We see-em wheel. Like that one. ‘Hey, see-em *arrentye* track here! We bin just go in scrub. Disappeared. [The grownups sent the young girls to hide for a long time, saying] ‘Hey don’t cry, don’t sing out! Don’t cry! Don’t play! Stop quiet!’" 37

Their countryman Peter Horsetailer added: ‘The car kept going ... a long way until it hit Darwin. That car went for good. It never came back again, never turned up.’ 38

Their stories reveal the overland telegraph as a corridor of traumatic and transitory encounters. The Barrow Creek massacre was well within living memory and the bones of those young girls’ grandparents’ generation had been left to bleach in places that settlers had given chilling new names, like ‘Skull Creek’. 39 The women’s words, ‘Hey don’t cry, don’t sing out! Don’t cry! Don’t play! Stop quiet!’ carries a painful resonance with events far beyond Barrow Creek. They echo the words spoken by Aboriginal parents across the continent, who for the next seven decades desperately hid their children in the bush as government cars and trucks came to take them away to white institutions.

A few days before the Kaytetye children’s frightening encounter at Barrow Creek, nearly 200 miles south on Arrernte country at Mparntwe (Alice Springs), the observant 15-year-old daughter of the telegraph stationmaster also saw the car come through. Doris Bradshaw (later Blackwell) recalled that day in the heat of the 1907 summer as one of the most memorable in Alice Springs. Toward the end of her life Blackwell wrote of *Arrernte* and settler responses to the arrival of the noisy, smoking motorcar.

White residents, who were expecting its arrival, ‘perplexed’ the ‘natives’ by showing little consternation. They feigned nonchalance in front of Aboriginal people even though they, too, were excited. In the camp near the river, however, ‘pandemonium’ and ‘panic’ erupted over the ‘monstrous thing’ that ‘belch[ed] and roar[ed]’. 40 Old women grabbed their favorite dogs and climbed trees to escape the danger and ‘piccaninnies’ cowered and yelled in fear. Horses bolted and ‘hundreds’ of camp dogs ‘howled piteously’. Aloof from the chaos, as Blackwell

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38 Ibid., ix, 36–7.
related it, were the old men, *Arrernte* elders, who displayed disdainful indifference to the ‘smoking buggy’ and continued their ‘accustomed contemplation of the surrounding tribal land’. They carefully performed contempt for the object that the colonisers valued so much. When asked what they thought of the car, the ‘old patriarch named Billy’ thought for a long time, spat ‘eloquently’ and reportedly said, ‘“I reckon might be that white-feller properly Number One fool. Him make’m anything like buggy-longa-smoke. But he can’t make’im rain, eh?” And that was that’.  

The men who displayed such considered lack of interest had seen the first pastoralists in the centre usurp their lands and then retreat south during the droughts of the 1890s. Cattlemen had been returning in the better years since the turn of the century, but men like Billy claimed the power to sing up rain or withhold it in the hope that the settlers might yet again leave. Before too long, Blackwell wrote, curiosity overcame fear and ‘almost every soul at the station’ came out to stare and wonder at the machine. They made welcome the first motorists in central Australia. 

The two men whose car made such an impact on both black and white residents of the central corridor offered a third version of those cross-cultural encounters. Widely disseminated in newspapers, magazines and trade journals, theirs was the dominant narrative. Harry Dutton, who funded this first automobile crossing, was the well-connected, Oxford-educated son of one of the most prominent pastoral families in South Australia. His companion was Murray Aunger, a resourceful mechanic from a modest background who had arrived at the right time to catch the automobile boom. For Dutton and Aunger, the day they caused so much consternation to the *Kaytetye* girls and their parents was just like any other on that arduous journey. Aunger’s journal records that as they neared the telegraph station their attention was on the difficult terrain and their car’s many mechanical problems, oblivious to the fear they had generated.

The motorists’ many references to encounters with Aboriginal people, however, acknowledged that they were passing through land

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41 Ibid., 150–1.
with a history of violence. In a light hearted after-dinner speech to the Automobile Club of South Australia when he returned, Dutton, whose pastoral background guaranteed he had close knowledge of how the land was won, joked that he had no harrowing tales of peril on the trip: ‘They had no sport, and he did not think they had even shot a blackfellow (laughter).’

Dutton knew that this country had been fought over and remained uneasily shared territory, someone else’s home.

As with the first bicycle overlanders before them, newspaper stories frequently highlighted travellers’ encounters with Aboriginal people. Eleven days out of Adelaide, near Oodnadatta, the men reported noticing that ‘from all sides black faces were to be seen peeping from behind the bushes’. They were invited to sample bush food and briefly stopped to watch a corroboree that was perhaps intended to open a relationship and accommodate them in an Aboriginal world. But as Peter Horsetailer observed, the men were just passing through on their way to somewhere else. Their eyes were on Darwin, their final destination. ‘Plenty of [Aboriginal people] were seen hereabout’, Murray Aunger noted of the region around Barrow Creek, ‘but they were all poor and skinny, and apparently too weak to harm anybody’.

Such assessments seemed to place Indigenous people on the periphery of their journey. Viewed from a wider angle, however, the displaced landowners were at the very heart of their travels, indispensible to the larger story of settler mobility, belonging and legitimate possession of the terrain.

Apocryphal stories told by non-Indigenous people about Aboriginal responses to automobiles have tracked well-worn paths. They loop across the decades and draw on earlier accounts of Aboriginal people’s first encounters with bicycles – but also with horses, buggies and camels before that. The young Doris Blackwell’s description from Alice Springs is a familiar one, recorded in contemporary newspaper stories, photographs and travel literature. Indeed, there is every chance that Doris did not actually observe the scenes she so vividly described. She was fascinated by her Aboriginal neighbors and expressed sympathy for their plight, but was forbidden to visit their camp. Blackwell’s description was, perhaps, as much a compilation of yarns told on the verandah of the telegraph station as it was about Aboriginal people’s awe at white people’s power.

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44 Register, 3 October 1908, 4.
45 Advertiser, 15 September 1908, 6.
46 Australian Motorist, 15 September 1908, 17.
and cleverness. The stories were often expressed in proximate creole, simultaneously suggesting child-like excitement, comic naivety and acute observation: ‘buggy going all by hisself, him got smoke coming out longa him’, she remembered.48

This was a well-rehearsed and familiar scenario: humorous, reassuring and confirming of settler sensibilities. Six months after that first encounter in Alice Springs, for example, Adelaide newspapers published a similar account, this time further south at Hergott Springs (now Marree) during Dutton and Aunger’s second attempt to complete the journey to Darwin. Once again, the Aboriginal population was said to have fled in terror at the sight of their car. ‘It was rather amusing to watch the black faces peeping round the corners of houses and sheds or bobbing up from behind cases and carts, watching with wondering eyes the fearful, snorting “Debil-Debil”’, the Hergott correspondent telegraphed back to Adelaide.49 Later, a Darwin newspaper recorded that in the tiny mining settlement of Yam Creek, an Aboriginal ‘girl’ rushed to a house with, ‘Missus, quick! Come on! Buggy bin run away. Him loose im horse, kill im white man’.50 Such stories were long-lived and decades later they were still being retold in settler circles. In 1929, an ex-police trooper recalled that when he asked ‘Old Joe’ of Mount Serle in the northern Flinders Ranges to describe a motorcar, his response had reportedly been: ‘Him all same big feller buggy. Turn’um little wheel, run about all day. Him stink all same camel.’51 The stories proposed a particular conjunction of primitivism and modernity, where settlers were placed as the force of the future and Indigenous people were left behind, comically trailing in their wake.

While settlers took pleasure in narrating Aboriginal people’s naïve and charming responses to their novel vehicles, they had a more serious investment in these stories. It was important that the mysterious objects were recognised not just as bizarre but also as evidence of settler power and ingenuity. Everywhere travellers found, and even tried to elicit, evidence that Aboriginal people were not only puzzled by the vehicles, but also overawed and impressed by them. When Dutton made it back to Adelaide, he was asked the inevitable question: ‘were you troubled by the blacks?’. He answered, ‘Oh dear, no. They were certainly curious,

48 Blackwell, Alice on the Line, 86, 150.
49 Register, 8 July 1908, 5.
50 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, 21 August 1908, 3.
51 Register News-Pictorial, 2 May 1929, 6.
but not in the least offensive. In fact they seemed to recognise that the white man can, with his genius, invent anything’. He continued with an account of a conversation at Barrow Creek, when a ‘blackfellow’ was questioned on the provenance of his motorcar: “Big fellah, Kedaitcha devil, come up this time, you think?” The native’s answer was, “No blanky fear. Whitefeller make’m all right.” In this reported exchange Dutton suggested that Aboriginal people did not view the motorcar as a fearful object from their own universe, but understood it as a settler invention. The inference was that they recognised the car as evidence of the superiority of white technology and, implicitly, of the rightness of their dispossession. Such stories served to hold up a mirror that reinforced settlers’ collective sense of their own modernity.

There were occasional acknowledgements in settler records that some Aboriginal people did not display the expected admiration, like the Arrente elders’ refusal to be impressed by the motorcar at Alice Springs. In 1897 two pioneering ‘overlanders’ who were cycling across the Nullarbor Plain recorded with surprise the response of an Aboriginal man and woman near Mundrabilla Station just across the South Australian border, who rolled on the ground and ‘roared with laughter’ at the sight of the two men on wheels. Such counter-stories acknowledge a range of Aboriginal responses, but they also allowed settlers to revel in their modernity without appearing to boast. After all, it could be assumed that most readers would agree that such refusal to be impressed was further confirmation of Aboriginal distance from the modern world.

Aboriginal people’s early responses to cars have been increasingly documented in their own terms, decades after the events. Indigenous recollections of their first encounters, like the Kaytetye memories, are often told with humor as well as sympathy for their ancestors’ fear and ignorance of what soon became one of the most valued of all western goods, central to Aboriginal communities and individual lives. The television series, Bush Mechanics in the Central Desert (1998), produced by the Warlpiri Media Association at Yuendumu, offers a compelling

52 Advertiser, 27 January 1908, 6. More commonly ‘Kadaitcha man’, a powerful being who travelled invisibly at night with emu-feather sandals on his feet.

53 Fred and Bert James, ‘Overland on Wheels’, Geelong Grammar School Quarterly (December 1897): 6–11; Aleck McMillan, ‘Transcript of Bert and Fred James’ Diary of a Bicycle Trip Across the Nullarbor in 1897’, SLV, MS 12545, Box 3405/6 (no date).

first encounter narrative. The series documents how settler incursions into Warlpiri country during the late 1920s were remembered as almost simultaneous with the appearance of cars and trucks. It articulated an Indigenous perspective on an entangled history of painful dispossession and technological marvel.

As elder Jack Jakamarra Ross tells it, motorcars were initially encountered as mysterious objects or strange creatures whose tracks were threatening, especially as they did not seem to shit. But they were soon understood to be instruments of Europeans’ power to move into Aboriginal country, to remove Warlpiri to prison at Jay Creek for spearing cattle, and to force them to settle at Yuendumu, where their mobility was to be constrained, an intention that was never realised. Jakamarra Ross speaks of a derelict truck as witness to that past, its rusting skeleton a container for memories of the ‘killing times’ of the Coniston massacres of 1928, when perhaps 100 men, women and children were murdered in reprisal raids.

_Bush Mechanics_ reveals how fearful recollections of violent dispossession, as well as subsequent pleasurable memories of the cars that Walpiri themselves have owned and loved, inhere in the wrecked vehicles that are scattered throughout the bush, well-preserved in the desert conditions. They have become incorporated into an Indigenous universe and sit with ‘natural’ features, such as trees, rocks and waterholes, as markers of personal and collective pasts. They belong in the landscape and bring to mind those who knew them in motion, as well as the events, places and people they connected.

Twenty-five years earlier in the 1970s, Jacky Tjupuru, a Pitjantjatjara man who spent much of his life at Ernabella Mission in the eastern Musgrave Ranges, also recorded a rich account of his first encounter with a motorcar in the early 1930s. Tjupuru’s story, told to Bill Edwards, a former superintendent of Ernabella Mission, reveals a man whose intimate knowledge of his country was so profound that his first sight of the car and the experience of travelling in it constituted a serious challenge to his understanding of the world. Tjupuru’s ignorance of this thing, a

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‘dish that you climb into and move about’, dislocated his deep knowledge of his country. Here was a ‘rock-like thing’ that moved and might crush him. It sounded like an angry camel but, unlike all other objects in his universe, it possessed no *kurunpa*, or spirit. His friend who knew about motorcars told him that the whitefellow could take it around quickly, but did not control it through ritual or talking to it. And the ‘mutukar’ could not talk back. Persuaded to take a ride, Tjupuru recalled his fear at its speed and his conviction that he would fall out. He described the perceptual confusion of being a passenger: it seemed like he was still at the camp where he had stepped into the mutukar, ‘as if we were sitting there making a noise’, but when he looked back he ‘saw the camp moving away in the distance’.\(^{58}\)

Ten years before Tjupuru recorded his story, a young Martu woman similarly encountered her first car in the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia. Government patrol officers had come to remove her family from their home, which had been designated as the ‘dump zone’ for the Blue Streak Rocket launched from Woomera. Yuwali recalled the terror that the sight of a motorcar caused. For her it was a ‘big rock cracking in the silence’ that ‘came alive and was rolling around our camp’ and ‘got bigger as it moved’. When they got on the car, ‘we saw all the trees and ground running. We thought we’d be thrown out’.\(^{59}\)

Tjupuru and Yuwali’s descriptions of the kinesthetic and visual inversion that sitting in a moving car generated is strikingly similar to how early motorists in Europe described their first motoring experiences. Travelling in cars turned the normal order upside down and, contrary to what the mind might know, it seemed that the rider was stationary and it was the landscape that moved. Marcel Proust most famously articulated that perceptual inversion, but authors such as Edith Wharton, the Italian Futurists, Maurice Maeterlinck and Octave Mirbeau also wrote of a fundamental sense of disorientation, now normalised, which pulled the rug out from under the expected rhythms of daily life and precipitated new sensory engagements between humans, machines and landscapes.\(^{60}\) For Tjupurrula, whose

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identity was bound up in his knowledge of everything on his country, the motorcar made him feel *ngunti* (ignorant), a word he repeated many times throughout his story, rather than *ninti*, the knowledgeable person he had been before that encounter.\(^{61}\)

The crucial difference between Aboriginal and settler accounts of these first encounters with modern technologies of mobility lies in assumptions about what happened next, what those early meetings set in train. Contrary to settler investments in ideologies of Aboriginal primitivism, Tjupuru and Yuwali did not remain ignorant about automobiles. Indeed, their recollection is compelling precisely because of their subsequent engagements with the technology and their capacity to envision a settler perspective on it. Their desire to record their stories is predicated on their creative responses to the changing material, social and political environment that accompanied such settler imports. Their stories are important precisely because they experienced the intrusion of the automobile, even more than other objects like camels and European foodstuffs, as the beginning of a new era, in which ‘for the first time there was a competing world view to be held in balance with the old’.\(^{62}\)

Aboriginal people’s ignorance of the technology was only momentary. By the time Tjupuru was recording with Bill Edwards, cars were part of daily life at Ernabella.\(^{63}\) His story presupposed that Aboriginal people were curious adaptors of new imports into their lives who engaged with change, just as settlers did. Far from reinforcing static primitivism, Aboriginal recollections are better thought of as dramatising a pregnant moment of separateness, an originating ‘ground zero’, which flagged the entangled histories that soon unfolded around those objects. Aboriginal people enacted new stories, devised new kinds of pleasures, created new practices, accommodations, resistances and collaborations as they incorporated automobiles into their lives.\(^{64}\) Their stories and actions


\(^{62}\) Ibid., 42; Koch, *Kaytetye Country*, 23.


complicated a neat divide between Indigenous primitivism and settler modernity.

Exactly when, where and how Aboriginal people began to move behind the steering wheel, differently across diverse communities and regions, still requires much research. Motorcars were more costly items to buy and run than bicycles, and ownership was more carefully surveilled and regulated. Few Aboriginal people were able to command wages comparable to white workers. However, in parts of South Australia and across the west, where labour was scarce and where some unions enforced equal wages, some Aboriginal men were buying cars by the 1920s.65 White travellers on the Nullarbor Plain, for example, were startled to encounter Aboriginal people in their cars well before most non-Indigenous workers were able to afford them.66 At missions like Koonibba, men like Yarie Miller and Dick Davey were skilled mechanics and proud car owners.67 Aboriginal men at Nepabunna had long been important providers of transport services in the Flinders Ranges and there were many early reports of their ownership of cars, along with their valuable donkey teams.68 Further west at Madura Station, Aboriginal men were similarly noted as skilled and creative motorists.69

Bicycles and automobiles were settler imports into Australia and arrived with a constellation of meanings and values that derived from the places of their origin. Mutable objects, they developed new uses and meanings specific to the material, political, social, cultural and racial conditions of their new home. The vehicles were soon put to advancing the ongoing settler projects of ‘conquering’ remote landscapes that had not been smoothed by modern infrastructures and of producing modern subjectivities that confirmed settlers’ status as the ‘new natives’, properly at home in the landscape. Wheels and mobility have remained a key measure of settler modernity and some of the presumptions about

66 Sydney Morning Herald, 11 July 1925, 9; Argus, 26 May 1928, 8.
67 Advertiser, 18 November 1926, 16; C. V. Eckermann, Koonibba: The Mission and the Nunga People (Clarence Gardens, SA: Elizabeth Buck, 2010), 146; NLA, nla.pic-vn6159557, Album 1170 #FIC/15603/1-357.
68 United Aborigines Messenger, November 1930, 7; Register, 7 September 1928, 13; Chronicle, 29 October 1923, 57; News, 21 November 1930, 16; Peggy Brock, Outback Ghettos: Aborigines, Institutionalisation and Survival (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 164.
69 Western Argus, 26 August 1930, 26; Peter Gifford, Black and White and In Between: Arthur Dimer and the Nullarbor (Perth: Hesperian Press, 2002), 84.
Figure 2. ‘Dick Davey’s Family and Car’, 1927.
Photographer unknown. Lutheran Koonibba Mission, South Australia, nla.pic-vn6159557, Album 1170 #PIC/15603/1-357. With kind permission of Haydn Davey and the Davey family.

Figure 3. ‘Two Aboriginal Men Who Own a Car: Photographed on the Edge of the Nullabor Plain’. Photographer unknown. Sydney Morning Herald, 11 July 1925, 9. Courtesy of the State Library of NSW.
Aboriginal primitivism at the turn of the twentieth century have continued to weave through contemporary debates. As recently as 2000, senior Australian politicians caused widespread outrage when they characterised Indigenous people in terms of technological deficiency, notably that they did not invent the wheel.  

Rather than perpetuating imaginings of a divided past, however, new understandings emerge if we rethink human aspirations for change and modernity as intercultural products that were shared, though not always in the same terms. Aboriginal people were active participants in a struggle over practices and their representation, in which imported technologies played a central role. As the producers of images, ideas and practices that refused their status as an anomaly in modern Australia, they created new ground between cultures. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, new technologies of mobility became central to hybrid cultural forms that took pleasure in experimentation and change. Understanding the entangled histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous mobilities offers one way of tracing the emergence of inclusive conceptions of Australian modernity that can accommodate multiple ways of moving and belonging.

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