

Discuss how the Australian highway has featured in popular memory over time.

Roads and streets are spaces surrounded by places: shops, houses, parks, schools, and cafes. No one wants to be on a road, it is a space which is utilised only to get from one place to another, where fatal accidents occur, where cars stop and start, where noise and air pollution are expelled, all washed away by the rain between the road's two gutters. Highways are different to roads. You don't 'cross the highway' like you do a road to buy the paper. It holds the power to transcend state and territory borders, between Indigenous lands, through towns and cities, the tropics and arid regions. This is a phenomena that cannot be separated from the landscape in which it exists.

A highway can be pinpointed on a map. It is a geographical reality. But is a highway really a *place*? My initial thoughts were yes of course, but why? The highway's intended nature is to facilitate movement from place to place. It is created for travel by the public between important destinations. For some, however, it is an important destination itself. I will argue that many people, including myself, believe the highway holds a special sense of place. Upon reflection, the thought that highways have a sense of place is extraordinarily odd. We are talking about a number of structures that exist throughout Australia, indeed all over the world, considered as standardised, sterile, inauthentic, man-made constructions, the epitome of placeless-ness, the awkward silence of road travel. I'm not convinced, not for a second.

The highways of Australia have been places of both national and personal significance and insignificance, shaping popular memory of the highway as a place to be utilised, feared and explored. While structurally fixed, the highway's sense of place is never static. Events such as the World Solar Challenge, in which competing Solar cars race from Darwin to Adelaide, Pat Farmer's monumental Centenary of Federation Run around Australia have contributed to popular memory of Australian highways as places to facilitate challenge and achieve personal and national goals. Additionally I will argue that the Australian highway has turned into a place to be feared as a result of the 'backpacker murders' by Ivan Milat throughout the 1990s, and the mysterious murder of Peter Falconio by Bradley Murdoch in 2001, both of which have received enormous media attention, reflected in popular culture, particularly film. Most importantly and lastly I will argue that the highways of Australia have an indisputable sense of adventure, initiated by the inland explorers and maintained in Australian popular memory. Recently promoted by the Australian tourism industry, the road trip adventure culture has also been developing as a result of increased leisure time and transportation improvements, and also influenced by international contemporary popular culture.

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They are as wonderful as they look weird. So flimsy, yet half will make it 3,000 kilometers across this harshest of continents - beautiful futuristic insects gliding through a timeless landscape¹.

In October of this year, the Panasonic World Solar Challenge will be celebrating it's 20th

¹ *Racing on the Sun*, written and produced by Megan James and Ian Allen, Screened on the ABC science program Quantum, February 1994.

anniversary, acknowledging the participation of more than 300 solar car teams comprised of over 2500 individuals from around the globe that have made the journey to Australia to compete against other solar powered cars². It involves participants traversing more than 3,000km over the Australian continent - from tropical Darwin to balmy Adelaide along the famous Stuart highway. The challenge motivates research and development into alternatives for personal transport, contributing towards a vital search for sustainable transport for future generations.

The World Solar Challenge, while about developing sustainable transport, is not about travelling to and from a location. The site of the Stuart highway becomes itself a place of challenge in which university, national and corporate teams compete and hope to achieve goals. The Stuart Highway determines and facilitates the World Solar challenge, chosen for its sunny location, and straight high-quality roads, and is the place in which the experiences of participants and viewers is based.

Chief Minister of The Northern Territory Clare Martin explains that ‘no matter whether you're racing, volunteering or watching the cars zip almost silently past you on the Stuart Highway, you're seeing solar technology move from theory to application - and that is history in the making’³. While the development of solar technology is the primary motivator of the challenge, it’s not all about technology. In transcripts from Megan James and Ian Allen’s *Racing on the Sun* aired on the ABC science program Quantum, the race

² *World Solar Challenge*, ©2007 The World Solar Challenge, website by Itmaze, last updated 05/06/06, <http://www.wsc.org.au/search/?search=2005+competition+>, viewed May 2007.

³ *World Solar Challenge*, ©2007 The World Solar Challenge, website by Itmaze, last updated 05/06/06, <http://www.wsc.org.au/news/Chief.Minister.s.Welcome>, viewed May 2007.

is described as ‘a personal epic’ for all involved, an adventure and a disaster, experiencing jubilation and exhaustion from start to finish.⁴

Continually expanding and evolving, the World Solar Challenge has become an event of huge significance. In the 1980s Danish-born adventurer Hans Thstrup designed the world's first solar car and traversed between Sydney and Perth in 20 days in what was the precursor of the World Solar Challenge. The competition since influenced the development of a Solar Cycle Challenge, in which solar power assisted bicycles race from Alice Springs to Adelaide. This mimicry of the World Solar Challenge suggests that it is more than the development of a viable form of sustainable transport, but about using the highway make challenges such as these possible.

As an ultra marathon runner, Patrick “Pat” Farmer has set numerous world and Australian records for a number of ultra-marathon events, including twice completing the Trans-America Footrace, and twice across the Simpson Desert, setting world records both times⁵. However it was in 1999 that Pat became a national hero following his Centenary of Federation Run around Australia. On 31 May 1999 Pat started his run from the steps of Old Parliament House in Canberra, the city created by federation, and ended in December 1999 at Centennial Park, Sydney. Pat raised considerable funds for charity, created numerous Australian and world records, but most significantly he reached out to millions of Australians with a message of unity and nationhood:

⁴ *Racing on the Sun*, Megan James and Ian Allen.

⁵ Pat Farmer, © 2007 Pat Farmer, *Sporting*, found under heading “About Pat”, <http://www.patfarmer.com/aboutPat/default.aspx>, viewed May 2007.

It is the people of this country that have given me the drive and determination to make this new record and smash all previous records on this significant run. I am doing this for all Australians to thank them for their belief in me and their support of the reason I am doing this run - the Centenary of Federation. I have been overwhelmed by the spirit of Australians over the last two months who have been right behind me all the way.⁶

While not the first record to be set, or the first ultra-marathon Farmer had completed in Australian or internationally, the 1999 Centenary of Federation run immortalised Patrick Farmer and the extraordinary journey he completed in the name of Australia. Unlike other more common ultramarathon events such as the ‘Cliff Young Australian 6-day Race’ which is held on a 400 meter circuit, Pat’s challenge was to transverse Australia itself, a land of harsh and challenging environments as inscribed in the hearts and minds of Australians, his path paved by highways and road. Interestingly, as a part of the Bicentennial Program many improvements were made to highways and roads, such as the Stuart Highway, which only a few years ago comprised of long stretches of rough dirt road.

While in very different ways, two particular events in Australia have pursued highways in high profile challenges, greatly influencing popular memory of the Australian highway as both a challenge to face, as well as a place to facilitate challenge.

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Fear comes in many forms, uneasiness at the sight of hospitals and prisons, fear of muggers in desolate streets and neighbourhoods. Fears are felt by individuals and are in this

⁶ Pat Farmer, © 2007 Pat Farmer, *Sporting*, found under heading “About Pat”, <http://www.patfarmer.com/aboutPat/default.aspx>, viewed May 2007.

*sense subjective; some, however, have a clear source in a threatening environment, others not*⁷.

In Yi-fu Tuan's classic book *Landscapes of Fear*, he claims that 'On modern highways and country roads motorists are not in the least afraid of being waylaid by gangsters. It is only as they drive into the decaying urban core that they nervously lock their car doors.'⁸ Written in 1979 in the United States, I would argue is that Tuan's view of the modern highway is significantly different to the contemporary Australian perception.

In early 2005 the Australian made film *Wolf Creek* was released after heavy advertising as based on 'true stories'⁹. Producers claimed it was not directly linked to any specific stories, merely drawing inspiration from reality, however it was not long before media outlets and the public had suggested that it is based on the Backpacker Murders of the early 1990's and the murder of Peter Falconio in 2001.

The ambiguity of the 'true story' on which the film is based most certainly played an instrumental role in creating the highway as a place to be feared. Because of the lack of specificities in the film (for example, the location of *Wolf Creek* is inspired from the Wolfe Creek Crater located in Western Australia, however the film was not specifically set nor filmed there), the fear created by the film is projected by the audience not onto a specific place, but the concept of the Australian Highway itself.

⁷ Yi-fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, (New York: Panthenon Books, 1979), p. 3.

⁸ Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, p. 131.

⁹ *Wolf Creek*, produced, written and directed by Greg McLean, Released in Australia, 03/11/2005.

Wolf Creek replicates the very familiar cinematic thriller theme of the helpful stranger to car traveling foreigners. In the film, characters Ben and two British girlfriends Liz and Kristy buy an old car to travel through the outback of Australia with little money. Their first stop is to visit a meteor crater in the isolated Wolf Creek National Park, but when they go back to their car, they find that it does not start and without option they decide to spend the night. Later a local man Mick Taylor offers to help the trio by towing them to his camp where he could help by fixing the car. The three are drugged and tortured, separated and almost get away. Several scenes are based on the Highway, particularly when Kristy flags down a passing motorist for help after her escape, but he and Kristy are eventually murdered by Taylor. Alternatively, Ben evades the highway and instead escapes onto a dirt road, where he is saved by two Swedish travelers, and we eventually learn that Ben is the only survivor.

The murder methods portrayed by Character Mick Taylor in *Wolf Creek* are similar to those employed by Backpacker Murderer Ivan Milat during the early 1990s. Milat abducted backpackers hitchhiking on the Hume Highway (Milat's home was in Eaglevale, a suburb just off the Hume Highway), and subjected them to torture and buried their bodies in the Belagalo State Forest, south of Sydney.

The concept of Hitchhiking has long held a prominent place in American and Australian culture after writer Jack Kerouac immortalized hitchhiking in his book *On the Road*¹⁰.

The road has since been a fascinating subject in American culture, and countless writers

¹⁰ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (First published: United States of America, Viking Press, 1957).

have written of the road and hitchhiking since. However in Australia, The Backpacker Murders (perhaps more appropriately the Hitchhiker Murders) dramatically changed the cultural acceptance of hitchhiking as the cultural perception of the highway had changed it into a place to be feared. Many sub-culture hitchhiking groups such as Digihitch.com are aiming promoting ‘a more positive image of the nature of hitchhiking and “*road questing*”’, trying to salvage the reputation of hitchhiking that has been so severely damaged¹¹.

The abduction of British tourist Peter Falconio and the assault of his girlfriend Joanne Lees in July, 2001 by Bradley Murdoch in the Northern Territory are also cited as influences to the creation of *Wolf Creek*. So influential in fact that Murdoch's trial was still underway at the time of the film's initial release in Australia, and for this reason the Northern Territory court placed an injunction on it's film release.

While traveling at night along the isolated Stuart Highway near Barrow Creek in the Northern Territory on July 14, 2001, the pair were stopped by a man driving behind them indicating for the couple to stop their car, suggesting there was trouble with their car's exhaust. Falconio got out of the van to help, and shortly afterwards Lees heard a gunshot, believing that Falconio had been shot dead. Murdoch bound her and forced her into his ute. She escaped and fled into the dark, hiding under bushes for hours while he tried to find her. Murdoch eventually headed back to Alice Springs, then left to go to Broome via the Tanami Highway. Falconio's body has not been found despite a massive police

¹¹ Digihitch, *About Digihitch*, created February 2001, last modified 17/03/07, <<http://www.digihitch.com/about.html>>, viewed May 2007.

search. In December 2005, Murdoch was convicted by the Supreme Court in Darwin for the murder of Falconio and was also convicted of other assault-related charges on Joanne Lees.

Joanne Lees: Murder in the Outback is a telemovie which aired in Australia on Channel Ten on March 18, 2007¹². Unlike the ambiguous *Wolf Creek*, it is based on the real life disappearance of Peter Falconio and the associated murder case which started a worldwide media frenzy that continues today. Britain and Australia refused to accept Joanne's innocence, and she became the victim of a relentless trial by media across two continents. With the trial of Murdoch and Lees vindication, this film is less about the murder than the untold story of the victims. What the film does prove is that the case and trial of the murder and assault on the Stuart Highway was at the forefront of the minds of Australians.

The actions of Ivan Milat and Bradley Murdoch have not alone created the highway as a place of fear, however films such as *Wolf Creek* and *Joanne Lee's: Murder in the Outback*, have both reflected and reinforced the highway as a place of grave danger. No longer is the modern highway seen as a safe place, as Tuan once suggested it was. A new description of highways has been embedded in the Australian popular memory, a memory experienced through mass media reports, and subsequent cultural productions.

¹² *Joanne Lees: Murder in the Outback*, Written by Kate Brooke, producer Matt Carroll for GC Films for Network Ten Australia, Director Tony Tilse, Screened on Channel Ten in Australia, February 2007.

Robin Bowles describes the Stuart highway in her non-fictional account of Peter Falconio's murder:

The highway stretches out of sight, two lanes boarded by rough gravel. On each side are stunted mulga trees and clumps of needle-sharp Spinifex grass. Bloated cattle hit by road trains lie along the highway verges. The stink of the decomposition is sucked in by the air-conditioning long before the carcasses appear... Territorians rarely drive at night.¹³

While theatrically setting the scene for the murder, she both reflects and reinforces the new Australian memory of the highway as a place to be feared. While this fear and anxiety of the highway forces us to seek security from it, we contrarily seek adventure; we turn curious. As Tuan states, 'The study of fear is therefore not limited to the study of withdrawal and retrenchment; at least implicitly, it also seeks to understand growth, daring and adventure'.¹⁴

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On the highway beyond [Katoomba] we found the Explorers' Tree, blazed by Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson when they camped there on 25th May [1813], now a concrete-supported piece of wood aged to a hard item, somewhere between disintegration and petrification¹⁵.

Often the lonely paths that Australia's explorers trod have become well-used tracks, roads and even highways, while others have been abandoned and forgotten. The Australia they pass through is in some parts the same and in others totally different, but along the paths of the explorers there is a continuity of spirit that only the traveller can truly grasp, a

¹³ Robin Bowles, *Dead Centre: The Real Story Behind the Disappearance of Peter Falconio*, (Sydney: Bantam Publishers, 2005), pp. 17-18.

¹⁴ Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Phil Jarratt, *There's a Track Winding Back*, (Sydney: Pan Publishers, 1990).p. 13.

sense of exploration, adventure and reverence, as we are reminded by monuments like the Explorers' Tree, of those who did it first.

All highways today are well-travelled routes, by a variety of people with a variety of intentions. For the road-train drivers earning their living, the highway is their workplace. For people in fast cars carrying people in a hurry, the highway is the fastest route to get somewhere. But for 'grey nomads' chasing the eternal summer around Australia, and slow old vans bearing backpackers on the well-worn tour of Oz, the highway is a place of adventure and exploration¹⁶.

The Australian tourism industry promises that the highways of Australia will provide Adventure and a journey of a lifetime to those who pursue them in their travels. While less than 10 percent of the Australian population lives outside the urban settlements on the coastal fringes¹⁷, the outback and the history of its exploration and settlement provides Australians, and non-Australians, with a mythical backdrop to Australian road travel.

A new unit called "Australian Experiences" was established in the Australian tourism marketing sector in 2005 after the Federal Government's *Tourism White Paper* of 2003 identified the need to assist in dispersal of consumers throughout Australia, not just

¹⁶ Bowles, *Dead Centre: The Real Story Behind the Disappearance of Peter Falconio*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Tourism Australia, "Marketing Resources", site updated daily, Copyright 2007 Tourism Australia, www.tourismaustralia.com/Marketing.asp?lang=EN&sub=0432, viewed May 2007.

capital and coastal cities. Analysis and research undertaken by Tourism Australia throughout 2005 identified the “Global Experience Seeker” as Australia's global target market¹⁸. This group of travellers actively seeks to travel to and *throughout* Australia (rather than having a positive yet inactive predisposition of Australia as a holiday destination), best meeting the industries concern to disperse travellers.

Tourism Australia markets the Australian holiday not as a destination, but a journey:

From the outback to the coasts, Australian journeys are more than just getting from one place to another: they're about discovering the diversity, the wonders, the vibrant towns, the people and their unique way of life.¹⁹

However overt the Australian tourism industry has been in presenting the highway as an adventurous journey, it is not outside of historical developments in Australian vacationing and transport, as well as Australian and international influences in popular culture.

From the beginning of the Second World War until the 1970s, Australia experienced a period of maintained economic expansion, marked by a large increases in the Australian population, a double in the standard of living, and an increase in manufacturing,

¹⁸ Tourism Australia, “Marketing Resources”, site updated daily, Copyright 2007 Tourism Australia, www.tourismaustralia.com/Marketing.asp?lang=EN&sub=0432, viewed May 2007.

¹⁹ Tourism Australia, “Marketing Resources”, site updated daily, Copyright 2007 Tourism Australia, www.tourismaustralia.com/Marketing.asp?lang=EN&sub=0432, viewed May 2007.

including automobiles²⁰. As a result, the 1950's saw rapid growth of ownership of automobiles, as they developed as a more trusted mode of transportation. Not only was the car used for work purposes, but leisure trips as well. The FJ Holden, released in 1953 as a car that had been specifically designed for Australian conditions, revolutionized car travel in Australia:

They certainly didn't break down as often as the English cars or American, for that matter. The thing that really earned them the respect of the Australian public was toughness. There was a lot of scepticism about how it would stand up to our shocking road conditions and long distances.²¹

As more reliable and luxurious vehicles developed, long distance road trips were easier for individuals and families, and length of time required to travel was reduced²².

Additionally, as the number of cars increased, roadside buildings and signage were reinvented, now designed to be viewed by the fast-moving driver rather than the pedestrian. Just as the streetscape of Australia radically changed, so too did the Australian perception of roads and highways as a places no longer to dread, but to be enjoyed and embraced.

Today we have seen the results of these developments in road travel in what we consider modern road tripping, a fast growing hobby in Australia and internationally. The goal of road trip enthusiasts is to experience the culture, nature and history of the route, and to celebrate the 'open road', and not to simply consider highways and roads as means of

²⁰ Don Loffler, *She's a Beauty: The Story of the First Holdens* (South Australia: Wakefield Press: 1998).

²¹ Loffler, *She's a Beauty: The Story of the First Holdens*.

²² A. Veal, *Australian Leisure*, (Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education Australia, 2001).

reaching destinations. Those who look upon road trips not as a method of travel but rather a hobby frequently describe themselves as Road Enthusiasts or Professional Road Trippers, many taking the concept of road trips very seriously²³.

Novels and films in American popular culture present the highway as a place of adventure, but also one of escape; the highway holding the power to induce departure²⁴. For many youths, the idea of shedding parental bonds and taking that great leap out on one's own attracts many young men and women to head out on the open road.

This year is the 50th Anniversary of Jack Kerouac's first publication of *On the Road*, which launched the Beat Generation of America. The story follows Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty as they careen cross-country in search of the next great place and epiphany, fueled by jazz, speed and city lights. As *On the Road* is largely an autobiographical work based on the spontaneous road trips of Kerouac and his friends, hundreds of references in the novel have real-world counterparts. Perhaps this is why the novel still motivates and dizzies readers to take to the road today. The non-materialistic lifestyles of the protagonists were embraced by many readers, who perhaps envied Sal's spontaneity and escape onto the wide open road.

²³ For an example of such groups see: *Open Road Trip: A Transparent Exploration of America and Culture*, website by Creative Commons, <http://openroadtrip.net/media/view/media/home>, viewed May 2007.

²⁴ Stephen Muecke, "Outback", *Imagining Australian Space: Cultural Studies and Spatial Inquiry*, ed. Ruth Barcan and Ian Bunchanan, pp. 136-137.

Phil Jarret recounts a similar story of an encounter with a man who “looked liked he’d been around”. The man explained that he had:

Been on the road for thirty years now, give or take a spell workin’ here and there. It’s the best life. No rules. You just roll along until your buggered, then you stop for the night. I don’t care where I end up, one place is as good as the next. That’s the beauty of it.²⁵

While Jarret’s acquaintance may have a romantic and inspirational life on the road, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* follows the radically different road tip of an Australian minority group²⁶. The Oscar -winning Australian film is about two drag queens and a transsexual woman driving across the outback from Sydney in a large bus they have named Priscilla, to perform at a casino in Alice Springs. Along the way, they encounter the homophobia of rural Australia, sexual violence, and the problems of vehicle breakdowns. They eventually arrive at their destination with costumes and dance routines prepared, not without a revelation of a secret marriages and son. While the film achieved a strong cult status in the gay community as a camp classic, it also portrayed Australia's outback and open road in an idyllic way, showcasing its beauty and remoteness, and the road trip from the perspective of an Australian minority.

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Although the highway has become entrenched as a space of transport, by looking at it as a cultural place, it is always represented in terms of the journey that is not about transport, not about getting to a destination, but about what happens in the pace called

²⁵ Phil Jarratt, *There’s a Track Winding Back*, p. 67.

²⁶ *The Adventures of Pricilla Queen of the Desert*, written and directed by Stephen Elliot, executive producer Rebel Penfold-Russell, released in Australia 08/09/1994.

‘highway’. This representation as featured in Australian popular memory has changed over time for a number of reasons.

The World Solar Challenge and Pat Farmers ultra marathon run around Australia have pursued highways, while in very different ways, in high profile challenges, shaping popular memory of the Australian highway. The highway has been both the path and the obstacle to Australian and world record for Pat Farmer, while for participants of the World Solar Challenge and Solar Cycle Challenge it has been the only place to allow for ground breaking technological development and glory of achievement. In both instances however, the highways of Australia have proven to be places which exist as and facilitate challenge, and achieve personal and national goals.

Many people previously considered the Australian highway as a safe place to travel either as a driver or hitchhiking passenger, until two dramatic events which occurred on two of Australia’s most well known and traveled highways, and changed popular memory of the highway forever. The ‘backpacker murders’ by Ivan Milat through the 1990s tainted hitchhiking as a safe and viable mode of transportation on highways, even extremely busy ones such as the Hume Highway, while the mysterious murder of Peter Falconio by Bradley Murdoch in 2001 highlighted the danger of isolated stretches of highway like the Stuart Highway. Both cases received huge media attention for a number of reasons, and developed as inspiration for a string of films and books which further embedded the Highway as a place to be feared in Australian memory.

The colonization and exploration of Australia has long held a prominent place in Australian popular memory as a defining feature of what it is to be Australian. However it was not until the development of the first all-Australian car and increase in standard of living that vacationing, and eventually the modern road trip became a viable form of pleasure and featured in Australian popular culture. Promoted by the Australian tourism industry in order to disperse tourism, along with a recent yet powerful literary and cinematic romantic revolution of the highway and the 'open-road' in Australian and international popular culture, the highways of Australia have developed in popular memory as places which ordinary Australians can experience adventure and exploration of their own.

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