Desert Training for Whites: Australian Road Movies

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My interest in Australian road movies is motivated primarily by the desire to work within recently emerging theories of anti-racist whiteness in Australia. My concern with Australian texts and contexts was fuelled by an assumption that Australian whiteness is produced and re-produced through locally specific racial regimes, at the same time that it is constitutive of and constituted by global elements of hegemonic whiteness. My writing on the road movie itself stemmed from its unique value as a site from which to unpack an anti-racist understanding of whiteness as a ‘glocal’ phenomenon, requiring both global and local readings, resistances and revisions. Its value derives from the fact that road movies in both Australia and the United States grapple with versions of whiteness that are (re)imagined against a given landscape, for almost without exception throughout its post–second world war history, the logic of the genre’s setting has combined with its narrative logic to produce a ‘non-white’ landscape traversed by refugees from hegemonic white society.

Writing today as an American citizen permanently residing in Australia in the uncertain months following September 11, 2001, I find this ‘glocal’ analysis of whiteness in relation to the desert landscape that is so central to Australian road movies even more compelling. As the ubiquitous images of the World Trade Centre towers collapsing are replaced by equally ubiquitous images of brown men marching across desert landscapes, or brown people demanding sovereignty for their desert homes, I find my present writing motivated by twinned observations: that while the hijackers’ network apparently stretches from Dallas to Manila, the predominant landscape of the ‘war’ offered by American and Australian media alike is ‘the desert’, and, that it is important to any consciousness about this war’s stockpile of rhetoric that Australia shares with its ally the United States a deeply ambivalent relationship to the history and present of ‘the desert’, including, significantly, its own desert and the brown and black peoples who live there.

Australian scholarship regarding desert landscape is, of course, legion. Still, the current crisis demands a renewed and enlarged conversation. The methods and foci of anti-racist whiteness studies, I believe, remain a relatively untapped source of both questions and answers regarding the ‘training’ that non-desert dwelling Australians have in reading the desert and its meanings in relationship to ‘our way of life’, to ‘the civilisation’ that was attacked. What is the extent to which white racism (conscious or not, overt or not) is supported by that training, and implicated in it? And what conclusions might be drawn, and what tools might be generated, for helping citizens in white-dominant western countries to read the past and present of media representations depicting white engagements with the desert and with the people who call it home. In other words, explicitly anti-racist methodologies might help media-saturated citizens read history back into this resurgence of what Roslynn Haynes calls the ‘discourse of negation’ regarding the
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desert, where the desert is not-home, not-civil, not-productive, not-even-of-this-
time, that is, not-modern. Perhaps in so doing, we might yet refuse the historical
imperative of that discourse, which was that ‘the European settler’—now
international-warrior-with-western-values—must redeem the desert through blood
sacrifice, thereby granting that benighted land ‘identity, meaning and legitimacy’.3
Perhaps, instead, we might re-imagine the relations of whites (and their western
nations) with ‘the desert’. What this essay hopes to add to such a history, then, is
to place one small piece of Australia’s filmic history of representing European
encounters with the desert against the larger contemporary crisis of western
nations as the keepers of civilisation versus Middle Eastern nations as the literal
and metaphoric deserts of civilisation.

Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark note that the paradox of the road film is that
‘the genre repeatedly does not oppose so much as bring together the modernity of
transportation on the twentieth-century road and the traditions still historically
present in the settings that the road crosses’.4 While the basic paradox that
modernity and tradition are co-present on the road is indeed the ‘informing
relation’ that ‘repeatedly organize[s]’Australian road narratives on film,5 it is clear
that a too-literal equation of ‘car’ with ‘modernity’ and ‘settings’ with ‘tradition’
would miss the point of the significant social problems imagined by these movies.
Rather, to understand the complex play of modernity and tradition across
variously racialised bodies, technologies, and landscapes, one must turn directly
to ‘the social’ and its ‘problems’ that the films cast (or recast) as symptoms,
symbols, or traces of modernity and tradition.

Ann Curthoys provides a history of ‘two distinct yet connected public and
intellectual debates’ in Australian social life: one concerning ‘the cleavage
between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples’; the other ‘the immigrant, and
his or her challenge to Australian society at large’.6 And, although Curthoys argues
that Pauline Hanson’s rise to prominence in 1996 encouraged these debates to
converge and interact in ways they never had previously, still the ‘gap between
indigenous and multicultural discourses indicate[s] the continuing power … of the
history of separate discourses and distinct mechanisms of bureaucratic control’.7
Not surprisingly, this discursive and material separation of Australia’s two great
‘Others’, the indigene and the immigrant, often organises film narrative, as well as
public and intellectual debate.

In a review of the last two decades of Australian road movies, a clear pattern
emerges: with few exceptions, these films are structured through the themes
and/or characters associated with white Australia’s relationship to either
indigeneity or ‘ethnic’ immigancy. As this essay will show, either the ‘road
‘personnel’, that duo or trio that is ‘marginal and unassimilable by mainstream
culture’, includes an indigene or an immigrant, or the indigene or immigrant is
part of the road’s ‘alternative space’, its mise en scène, the site at which ‘isolation
from the mainstream permits various transformative experiences’ for the white
traveller.8 On the one hand, this distinct pattern suggests that the Australian road,
with its polysemic desert spaces, is a perfect location for re-staging these social
conflicts as conflicts between rogue individuals without recourse to, or
containment by, the public and intellectual debate of the larger culture (at least
until The Law reappears at the end of the road). On the other hand, this pattern of
separation suggests that these relationships all pose different social, as well as filmic, problems. Each demands a different articulation of the problem of modernity versus tradition. That is, Aboriginality and ethnic immigrancy each occupies a radically different position within the spectrum of modernity and tradition imagined by these films. They do not function interchangeably as signifiers of either modernity or tradition in relation to whiteness, nor, importantly, does whiteness signify the same thing in relation to Aboriginality in these films that it signifies in relation to immigrancy.

Significantly, the last twenty years of road movies in Australia can be divided up fairly neatly into two periods, with the 1980s featuring films structured by the ‘cleavage’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and the 1990s and beyond producing films organised around the ‘challenge’ posed by the immigrant to Australian society. Before turning to the final focus of this essay, then, which is the later films, I will turn to the film that serves to bridge the two periods: The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, directed by Stephan Elliott. While this film has been written about extensively, it rewards another look in the present context because it is the most important road film of the last twenty years in Australia that has attempted to create a narrative in which the two normally (or, perhaps, nominally) separate discourses of indigeneity and immigrancy are both featured. Priscilla followed the 1992 decision in the High Court’s adjudication of what is popularly known as ‘the Mabo case’ (Mabo v. Queensland [no 2] 1992) and the subsequent 1993 legislation (Native Title Act 1993). In 1994, the year the film appeared, the apparatus to administer the Native Title Act was established; in the same year, the Keating government scored what was by its own reckoning its greatest success in realising Australia’s ‘engagement’ with its Asian neighbourhood, through its consolidation of APEC as (eventually) a regional free trade coalition.9 Clearly, Priscilla was made and released during a significant period in the distinct but related histories of indigenous and immigrant discourses. As Marcia Langton remarks, ‘In Mabo, with a stroke of a judicial pen, Indigenous people reappeared as persons with law and proprietary—or at least possessory—rights’.10 And, as Paul Keating explains, the underpinning ‘convictions’ of his government at the time were unequivocally that Australia’s ‘future lay comprehensively in Asia’.11 The name of home, and the identity of the authentic locals, were being radically reshuffled. In turn, the symbology of modernity and tradition in the context of whites’ relation to the desert heart of Australia began to shift, and it is Priscilla, Queen of the Desert that offers a first, often messy articulation of that transformation.

In her cogent analysis, Pamela Robertson finds that the Indigenous characters in Priscilla, while diegetically celebrated, are nevertheless inscriptions of an Aboriginality typical of a racially supremacist white Australian imagination.12 The white drag queens (played by Terence Stamp, Hugo Weaving, and Guy Pearce) may be invited back to an Aboriginal camp when their bus breaks down in the desert, and they may even perform ‘I will survive’ with an Aboriginal man in drag (Alan Dargin), but, as Robertson points out, the film offers absolutely ‘no insight into Aboriginal culture’; on the contrary, the ‘Aboriginal characters are not so much united with the drag queens but existing for them’.13 In this way, the putatively ‘multiculturalist’ Priscilla uses indigeneity in ways consonant with
what Vijay Mishra terms ‘Aboriginalism’, ways that serve to consolidate white prejudice against Indigenous peoples, as well as, importantly, white preference for themselves. The substance of that prejudice, here, is quite pernicious. It is no matter that the individual Aborigine’s performance is constructed through the technologies of an urbane, postmodern drag, and it is no matter that the community itself appropriates African-American blues, in a gesture to the postmodern accessibility of the cultural production of the ‘Black Atlantic’s’ modernity to other black peoples around the globe. For the Aboriginal camp is coded as part of the desert landscape, as nature, not culture—with ‘nature’ suggesting here that which is acted upon through ‘culture’. As Robertson notes, Aboriginality is reinscribed as a ‘concrete image’ of the desert, ‘available for the plot when the occasion suits but disappearing from view otherwise’.

Moreover, the nondiegetic didgeridoo music used to introduce the camp musically to the viewer suggests that the film’s sense of ‘tradition’ has greater kinship with that of Disney shareholders than Indigenous Australia. Wrenched from any cultural or historical specificity, this unmoored signifier hardly evokes the kind of ‘tradition’ that Cornel West calls, in a painfully related context of African-American slavery, ‘the genius of our black foremothers and forefathers’. This was a genius for creating ‘powerful buffers’ that ‘beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaningless, and lovelessness’, buffers that ‘consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities’. This film’s use of the sound of the didgeridoo and the image of a ‘corroboree’ simply does not (perhaps, cannot) join forces with its narrative conventions of white self-discovery in the desert to present a picture of Indigenous ‘tradition’, such as that theorised by West, one that is grounded in the material history of a people. Instead, offers a commodified, dehistoricised ‘image’ of tradition, and yokes it to the film’s larger project of consolidating white racial power (in the form of national belonging) for queers with white skin and white culture.

Ironically, the white queens’ ascension to racial power in this film is founded precisely on their queerness, that is, their unnaturalness. In stark juxtaposition to the Indigenous camp of rock and stone, the white drag queens are rock’n’roll. By associatively linking Indigenous people with an immutable, timeless and ahistorical desert, saddles those communities with a form of tradition that serves to all but deny them, in Marcia Langton’s words, the possibility of ‘dynamic cultural adaptation and engagement with historical process’. The white queens, on the other hand, are seen to be actively adapting and engaging in their linkings of tradition and modernity, including the pointed use of an Indigenously-inspired dot backdrop for their drag show. The use of Aboriginality as mise en scène allows the white drag queens to be understood, then, as not only adept consumers of tradition, but as consumers of modernity’s technologies of cultural (re)production and commodification, as well. The landscape comes alive with the choreographed play of mass-produced textiles, self-reflexive poses, and ironic dance that the queens perform. In the syntax of this film, both the Aboriginals and their metonymic signifier the desert must wait for urban whites to inscribe meaning upon them; no meaning of Aboriginality or, indeed, desert exists outside of its relationship with whiteness.
This enlistment of indigeneity and ‘its’ desert landscape by the economies and technologies of culture employed by the drag queens serves as a clear example of what Langton’s calls the ‘visual appropriation of Aboriginal culture for the purposes of creating the myth of the new nation’. It serves, as well, to offer whiteness as the sole subjectivity capable of radical mobility, traversing from tradition to modernity and back again, seemingly with none of the problems such mobility can sometimes hold for traditional peoples. Rather, this mobility, this voracious consumption of the ‘traditional’, actually feeds white modernity in this film, nourishing its sense of self and ‘other’ knowledges and quieting the gnawing hungers of postmodern anguish.

South of What?

While indigenisation certainly moves whiteness closer to an authentic relation to the land in the road films of the 1980s, it is not until the introduction of ‘Asian’ difference that the movement nears completion in the 1990s. In *Priscilla*, the scope of the changes that ‘Asianness’ allows in the signifying potential of the Australian desert in relation to white Australians is adumbrated in the character of Cynthia, a Filipino woman (Julia Cortez). Performed as excessive Orientalist femininity (expert in the Pacific Fleet’s delight of ping-pong balls shot out of her vagina), and narrativised as the conniving, dependent Oriental woman who traps a good Australian man (Bill Hunter) into bringing her home to the West, Cynthia’s Orientalism functions as comic relief … in a comedy. When both the Filipina’s home in Orientalist culture and her homelessness in the Australian desert are played for laughs, the character belies the film’s multiple anxieties about home, about Australia as home, about whites at home in Australia, and about an Australian home in an Asian neighbourhood. Audrey Yue offers a context for understanding such anxieties, arguing that *Priscilla* needs to be viewed in terms of its location within the ‘repositioning of Australian national cinema’ during the early 1990s. She explains that:

Australia’s postcoloniality during this period was marked by what Ross Gibson defines as its decentred position: south of the West. Such an identity is constituted in Australia’s colonial history and its relation to ‘the West’, wherein the distinction of south conjures a representation of Euro-Australia that is similar to the West, and simultaneously foregrounds a representation of Aboriginal-Australia that is fetishized and disavowed.20

Most significantly for Yue, at the ‘heart of this relocation’ is ‘an Anglo-Celtic Australian nationalist project’ that serves to inscribe the ‘racist in/visibility of the specificities of indigeneity and non–English speaking background (NESB) immigrancy’; in sum, ‘framed by a decentred West, Australia’s postcoloniality emerges as its (post)modernity, an unfinished project marked by an ambiguity highlighting the irreducibility of cultural difference’.21

These conflicting ideologies are held in fragile, but meaningful, alignment in *Priscilla*. On the one hand, cultural difference is ultimately irreducible in *Priscilla*; the specificities of indigeneity and NESB immigrancy are left materially unmarked through the film’s use of Aboriginalist and Orientalist clichés and/or fantasies. On the other hand, playing with that difference is the film’s—and the
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queens’—claim to the kind of (post)modernity imagined for Australia by both its official and unofficial discourses of ‘postcolonial’ multiculturalism. In contrast, Yue suggests that the project for Asian-Australian cinema is to put specificity back into cinematic representations of immigancy, and thereby imagine an alternative modernity—in this case, an Asian-Australian modernity. Indeed, Yue finds that in stark opposition to the culturally expropriating (post)modernity of films such as Priscilla, the alternative modernity of Asian-Australian cinema from the mid to late 1990s actively constructs itself ‘as a site of cultural negotiation’. Specifically, it does so through featuring, among other things, the inscription of ‘the history of a literal southward migration’, as well as ‘an aesthetics of multilingualism and cosmopolitanism informed by hybridity’ and an ‘emphasis on narratives of cultural mobility within multiple times and spaces’. Central to the unfinished project of Asian-Australian modernity, then, is a sustained, multivalent analysis of the geographical location of Australia as distinctly south of “Asia”.

For these reasons, the Filipina character of Priscilla might productively be viewed as a transitional figure in a transitional film in the road genre. Without critique and without development, the film simply plugs in the Orientalist discourses of femininity and of the desert, with the latter functioning as a site of ‘moral liminality’. This is the desert that Robert Stam and Ella Shohat identify in ‘Orientalist films’, movies that, like road films, ‘often begin in the city—where European civilization has already tamed the East—but withhold the most dramatic conflicts for the desert’. In the particularly rapacious form of (post)modernity privileged by this film, though, the Oriental-as-spectacle (in the form of Cynthia’s excess) is soon used up, and her character dropped. Still, the Orientalist exoticism that she provides, the sense of ‘carnivalesque play with national and gender identity’ remains present in the desert’s affective register. Her Orientalism helps authenticate the desert as a genuine location of ‘carnivalesque’ border transgressions, which, in turn, authenticates the white queens as genuine agents of border crossings. Orientalism, like Aboriginalism, thus serves to organise the film’s imagings of white Australia’s (post)modernity. By the time of the 1997 road film Heaven’s Burning, however, Orientalism is enlisted in significantly different ways in its relationship to white Australia’s mobility across the discursive fields of modernity and tradition, while Aboriginalism is omitted from the film’s meaning-making apparatus altogether.

South of White

Both Chris Lahiff’s Heaven’s Burning and the other road film to which I will turn, Clara Law’s The Goddess of 1967 (2001), feature Japanese in the land with white Australians. Though these films manipulate very different ideologies, as well as narrative and filmic styles, each regards the history of white Australia’s relationship with the desert as a problem, one that can be read in terms of modernity/tradition. In Heaven’s Burning, a slight, seemingly placid Japanese woman (Kudoh Youki) fakes her own kidnapping at the end of a business-trip-cum-honeymoon in Sydney’s CBD to escape her salaryman husband (Isomura Kenji). When she writes him an apology he becomes humiliated and enraged, and determines to hunt her down. Later, while waiting in line at a bank, she is taken hostage in a botched robbery attempt and thrown into the getaway car that is
driven by an average bloke (Russell Crowe) who just happened to lose his smash repair business and needs a bit of quick cash. When the actual robbers, two brothers, decide to kill the woman because she’s seen their faces, the good bloke shoots one brother dead with a gun from the glovebox. The other brother (Robert Mammone) vows vengeance, and the chase is on—with the Japanese husband, the brother (plus his father, played by Petru Gheorghiu), and the law, all in hot pursuit.

It would be a wrong identification of this film’s racial anxieties to read the inevitable road romance between the Japanese and white Australian as primarily an example of what Gina Marchetti calls the ‘tragic and transcendent love’ endured by Asian/Anglo couples in Hollywood films. For, although like the movies Marchetti surveys, this film certainly ends in a fiery and tragic death for the couple (at the hands of the now-samurai husband), that death, like the film itself, seems little concerned with issues of miscegenation. That is, the couple don’t die because one is white and one is ‘yellow’. Rather, in this instance, the couple dies even though both are white: the Japanese woman has gone ‘white’ in the desert.

The particular valence that the Japanese woman, Midori, originally brings to the narrative, before she has redone her hair colour and her sartorial style in the fashion of the libertine, postmodern, bleached blonde West, derives from the new Orientalist image of Japan as a tyrannically rationalised cultural and social economy within (post)modernity. In relation to that version of modernity, Crowe’s character, Colin, moves rapidly closer to the position of ‘tradition’, if we understand this partly as a ‘re-enchantment’ which rises from ‘the experience of nature and landscape’. In one hideout, for example, the white man tells the Japanese woman that the name of the laughing bird she hears is the native kookaburra. That the white man is not simply providing an empirical lesson in taxonomy is made clear when the woman finds poetry and peace in the notion of a laughing bird. Colin’s knowledge of and ease within the natural world thus initiates Midori, as a refugee from (post)modernity, into the spiritual dimensions of the Australian continent as a space of—and for—life. Asianness, in its Japanese form at least, grants white Australianness a more ‘indigenous’ position within modernity. Especially in the absence of any actual Indigenous character, whiteness, in the figure of Colin, is freed to assume the position of authentic Australian, the knower—and keeper—of the land’s meanings.

Once in whiteface, however, the Japanese woman functions as something of a critique of the urban postmodern who knows the land only through poetry or postcards. During an overnight stop at Colin’s father’s property, Midori tells the beloved father, the white farmer (Ray Barrett) that the kangaroos grazing in front of them are beautiful. He replies, ‘Not really. They’ve eaten all the grass. They’ve taken all the last water from the dam’. This scene establishes the film’s ambivalence about white relations to the land because it is, in many ways, a conversation between two whites, one racially authentic and one not. Like Colin, the non-authentic white woman finds beauty and pleasure and meaning in the nation’s emblem. In its patriarchal form, however, the authentic white links that national/natural symbol with a drought. Further, he assumes a passivity, a fatalism in face of the engulfing desertification of Australia by lamenting that he all he can
do is ‘just sit here everyday and watch all my land blow away’. Whiteness fiddles while heaven burns.

Thomas Schatz writes that ‘the most significant feature of any generic narrative may be its resolution—that is, its efforts to solve, even if only temporarily, the conflicts that have disturbed the community welfare’. The fact that no one, except the law, remains standing at film’s end, suggests that this film cannot resolve, even if only temporarily, the conflicting ideologies that drive its narrative. It is worth noticing, then, the order in which two of the deaths occur: the first to go are the father and son team trailing Colin to avenge their family member’s death. This ordering is significant given the film’s anxieties about who has legitimate knowledges of and places in the desert, for this family is explicitly Afghan and pointedly Muslim. They are killed after the father nails Colin’s hands to a hotel bureau, leaving him, it is no stretch to say, with stigmata on his palms. There is no backstory given for the family: we are quickly introduced to the father as he butchers a bloody animal carcass by the light of flames licking up into a night sky. Unlike the white family of Colin and his father, this Islamic family’s place in the history of the desert is rendered totally immaterial, and unlike the karmic understanding of history that Colin’s father employs to justify his past and present actions, and to which he is ultimately martyred, this family’s use of pre-modern revenge strategies to balance the death of a beloved son and brother are played only for their terrorist resonances. The film relies on Orientalist tropes of middle-Eastern identity, creating in the Afghan family more a desert terror than a mountain culture. The problem of Islamic ‘Arabs’ running amok in the Australian desert is simply not resolvable within the film’s ideologies of ‘white solipsism’, which is ‘not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or significant’. Consequently, while the father’s and son’s deaths may indeed serve to end the problem of Islamic terror in this film, their deaths do absolutely nothing to explore, much less resolve, the problem of terror between white Christianity and Islam.

The film’s concluding deaths of Colin and Midori suggest another series of irresolvable conflicts, most of which are played out on the body of the Japanese woman in whiteface. Regardless of its multicultural casting, the film seems more a meditation on whiteness divided within itself than it does a meditation on the position of the NESB immigrant or of Australia as a culture ‘south of Asia’. Rather, given Midori’s function in whiteface, this film’s location is more accurately described as ‘south of white’. For, where whiteness is modernity, she is more white than Colin and his father, and where non-whiteness is authenticity, the whites are more non-white (more south) than she. In her liminal position, though, Midori acts as a mediator between the two discourses of whiteness on the land as embodied by Colin and his father. Indeed, immediately after her conversation with the father about kangaroos and drought, she walks into Colin’s bedroom where they make love for the first time. Significantly, as the camera draws away from the lovers, it frames them behind the vertical bars of the bed in an image of imprisonment. That there is no way out for the lovers is, of course, a convention in the road genre. However, that neither Colin, the re-enchanted white man, nor
Midori, the mediating link between the past and future of whiteness, can survive, does seem to suggest a deep pessimism.

Midori embodies whiteness as a social construction, and through her, whiteness is explicitly constructed as an identity of emancipatory mobility across the Australian landscape (once in whiteface, for example, she stretches through the car’s sunroof and exclaims to the desert surrounding her, ‘I am free!’). Yet, at film’s end, with her lover’s dead body beside her in the upturned car, Midori takes his blood to her lips and shoots herself in the head. This ending suggests that there may be limits on whiteness as an infinitely fluid, emancipatory discourse of re-invention in its relation to the natural world. Although the road couple does actually make it to the coast, that fabled land of safety for Australian road movies, not even that space can protect them from their fate. The film’s conclusion, then, suggests that a natural world in crisis can no longer be depended upon to feed the constant need for the new—new identities, new choices, new lives—that is so characteristic of white (post)modernity.

South of Asia

The Goddess of 1967 is the latest film by the Macau-born Australian filmmaker Clara Law. In his review, Rob Lowing writes that Australian audiences could be forgiven for ‘being too overcome by déjà vu’ with the ‘same foreigners-adrift plotline’ that they have already seen in Heaven’s Burning and other films. But Law explains why Lowing may have been too hasty in his dismissal: ‘You start off with a beginning and you end up somewhere else and I think that is the journey. I would describe it more like a journey than a road movie’. In this reading I would like to explore the possibility that Law’s film does, in fact, stage such a journey to a space of ‘somewhere else’ along the Australian road.

Certainly, Australian audiences have seen versions of all this before: a Japanese man and a white girl motoring through the outback in a fetishised car (the title’s ‘goddess’ of 1967, a vintage Citroën, that the Japanese man has come to Australia to buy). Still, in its plot, characters, ideologies, and cinematography, The Goddess of 1967 opens up the genre to fresh images, meanings, and uses. And it does so, I will argue, through the filmmaker’s articulation of the kind of Asian-Australian modernity identified by Audrey Yue. For example, through the characters of JM (‘Japanese Man’, played by Kurokawa Rikiya) and BG (the white girl who is, importantly, ‘Blind Girl’, played by Rose Byrne), the film explores the migration of an urban Japanese to outback Australia. While that migration is initially fuelled by the man’s postmodern consumerist fantasy that within a commodity (the car) lies emancipation from, or meaning within, one’s routinised, alienated labour, the film’s ending, as I will show, suggests the multiple and mutually important transformations that his migration enables for both characters and their cultures.

The film further constructs a new Asian-Australian modernity through its aesthetics of multilingualism and cosmopolitanism that appear in the form of multiple border crossings. JM and BG are thrown together as soon as he arrives in Australia to buy the Citroën from BG’s uncle. The uncle has murdered his wife and then killed himself over a dispute about what to do with the money they would get from the sale of the car. As a result, BG informs JM that the Citroën didn’t really belong to the uncle anyway, and the two embark on a five-day road trip
across desert and bush toward the man she says can hand over the title. Along the way, the film takes time with the border crossings this trip sets up as JM enters the meaning-making apparatus of Australian English and European culture, and BG enters his world of sighted knowledges and languages. She learns to dance with his body and desire as guide; he learns to hear the sounds of death hitting the windshield with her inner vision as guide. Together they create a new sexual vocabulary, hybridised from the sexual codes and conventions not only of visual and embodied knowledges, but of urban, alienated, Japanese masculinity and geographically isolated, sexually abused Australian femininity.

JM’s alienation and BG’s abuse are presented through another feature of the film that Yue might well identify as constitutive of an Asian-Australian modernity—that is, its exploration of cultural mobility through the use of flashbacks that allow past and present to comment on each other. Through flashbacks, JM’s Tokyo story is told in blues and blacks and greys. His apartment is high-tech, hard-surfaces and emotional sterility. BG’s story is staged in various temporary habitats: the tent of a travelling show, an abandoned house in which she and her mother take refuge, the trailer in which her father lives. Unlike JM’s, BG’s story is not one of stultifying routine—rather it is one of random terrors: sexual abuse by her father (who is also her grandfather) and the suicide of her mother. It is through the interactions of these separate ‘pasts’, then, as well as their relation to the shared future that the film’s ending allows us to imagine that the film constructs a ‘somewhere else’. But before analysing the importance of that space, it is first helpful to notice what it actually looks like.

Much has rightly been made by reviewers of the director of photography Dion Beebe’s use of a bleach-bypass process which strips some colour out of the images, giving the film’s landscape a surreal, sometimes electrified look. This technique helps the film convey its critique of the kind of modernity found in other Australian road films. As JM drives himself and BG to her grand/father’s property, this de-naturalising technique draws renewed attention to the landscape as *mise en scène* in a way which allows the landscape of the road to regenerate its meanings in a genre that often appears to have exhausted the land’s images by clichéd use. In addition, the technique offers exegetic help for the spectator, especially in the scenes featuring the grandfather’s property, which sits on a plateau above the desert. The photographic technique gives *this* white man’s property an overdeveloped, overlit, overly visible quality which makes both the setting and the scene not only newly visible, but *painfully* visible, physically and ideologically.

The white grandfather embodies western modernity’s most privileged discourses of scientific rationalism, technological triumphalism and Enlightenment individuality all in their most socially destructive, self-aggrandising forms. He is an oenologist who makes wine only from chemicals, not nature, and a miner who takes from the earth but is never seen giving anything back. He is a father and grandfather who destroys familial ‘potentials’ of trust, mutual empowerment and individual sovereignty by dictating a family structure organised through incest. And what the film makes clear is that the man relies entirely upon very particular discourses of the desert—white modernity’s discourses of the desert, specifically—as a *tabula rasa*, a *terra nullius*, upon which he is free to inscribe his own (per)versions of white modernity and its
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ideologies of progress. As the man emphasises about his location, ‘We’re free to do anything here’.

When this road movie ends with no deaths, it seems a different journey may truly have been taken. For when BG and JM finally arrive at the grandfather’s property after their five-day journey of mutual discovery, she immediately descends from the too-bright of the property’s surface to the too-dark of the mine’s gothic interior. As an aria swells from within the mine, BG follows the voices in her head telling her to ‘kill the fucking bastard’. She stands behind the now-impotent grandfather with a gun aimed directly at his head. But she turns away, seeking out JM who stands beside her, accepting in him the only thing he has to offer her, which is his story. For earlier in the mine, he attempts to give her another story in place of the one driving her to madness and murder. He offers to tell it to her, saying simply, ‘Look, I have a story to tell. It’s a long story’.

When BG refuses to murder her torturer in the desert, and turns instead to make a relationship with her historical ‘other’, she embodies an interruption in the (re)production of the kind of white modernity fathered/husbanded by the desert patriarch: she refuses the version of individual sovereignty that strives to construct a safer, stronger self by destroying all its ‘others’, even those harboured within its own breast. Importantly in this film, the character’s ability to seek alternative models of subjectivity is located not in any facile relation to the landscape and its past. In one flashback, BG is certainly aligned with the natural world when she sleeps easily on the ground, surrounded by a ring of protective dingoes, still the promise of her future is nowhere located in any image of ‘re-enchantment’. There is no state of ‘enchantment’, no ‘tradition’ to which she may seamlessly return. There is only the traumatic history of white modernity from which she comes and that she carries indelibly inscribed within her.

As BG’s relationship with JM demonstrates, the character’s past (and her blindness) are not simply to be ‘transcended’ against the desert landscape of the road; instead it provides the necessary raw materials out of which, with JM’s help, she might work toward a transformed subjectivity. BG’s ‘journey’, then, is another kind of mobility for whiteness in Australian road movies. It is not one of expropriating other’s stories but of actively engaging with them. And through that engagement, the Australian woman and the Japanese man are able to realise a mutual exchange of subjectivity: they exchange attention, trust, and, ultimately, something that JM, at least, calls ‘love’. For these reasons, the film provides a small intervention into the representational training of white Australians (and Americans) in the semiotics of desert. The desert is no longer merely the road’s patented landscape of otherness, whether dangerously threatening or benignly exotic; rather it is an integral site of white psychology and ideology within modernity. Only by spotlighting that truth, the film suggests, can a homeless refugee from white modernity begin the long process of re-making home in the desert with her (no longer) ‘other’.

Landscape theorists from Henri Lefebvre to George Seddon remind us that landscape is a form of ideology. As cultural geographer Don Mitchell summarises this idea, landscape ‘is a way of carefully selecting and representing the world so as to give it a particular meaning. Landscape is thus an important ingredient in constructing consent and identity—in organizing a receptive
audience—for the projects and desires of powerful social interests’. The landscape of the desert may be equally fetishised in Euro-American and Australian discourses as it does not signify home to the ‘powerful social interests’ of those cultures. Surveying only one small part of the desert landscape in Australian cultural life, this essay has attempted, then, to bring to the fore a few of the ‘things’, as Mitchell writes, ‘that landscape tries to hide, in its insistent fetishization’, for these things are ‘the relationships that go into its making. These relationships are economic and political to be sure, but they are also clearly products of struggle over issues of race, ethnicity, and gender’. As the United States and Australia, among other western powers, continue to bring war to the desert in search of those who commit crimes against humanity, and as they begin to contemplate expanding that war throughout desert regions, our citizens need at the very least to interrogate their own representational training, demystifying the media’s and the state’s use of that ‘stark’ landscape as a natural, even preferred site for war. As at the time of writing, no government has yet to unleash smart bombs on Hamburg, for instance, although the city is an apparent location of a major al-Qaeda cell. It seems appropriate, therefore, to reconsider the question of ‘the desert’ in the western imagination, to consider the view that the desert is a space of potential ‘home’, and to suggest that its people are unacceptable forms of ‘collateral damage’ of either political or military policy.