Unsettling Colonial Automobilities
Unsettling Colonial Automobilities: Criminalisation and Contested Sovereignties

BY

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For First Nations people whose lives have been taken at the hands of settler colonial automobilities.

For our families who have supported us and have been part of the struggle against colonialism in all its forms (Joel, Lyndal, Sophia Alex, Gilly, Rosie, Markus, Mark).
Table of Contents

List of Figures                           ix
Acknowledgements                        xiii
Note on Terms                           xv
Foreword                                xvii
Preface                                 xix

Introduction                           1

Chapter 1      Colonial Processes of Enforced Mobility and Immobility  11

Chapter 2      Neo-Colonial Interventions – Regulating First Nations Peoples’ Motor Vehicles and Criminalising Drivers  29

Chapter 3      Cars, Courts and Carceralism                              43

Chapter 4      Necroautomobility and the Colonial Chase in the Cultural Imagination  63

Chapter 5      No Justice, No Peace: Police Necroautomobility and Lack of Accountability  79

Chapter 6      ‘I’ve Been Chased by People in Cars – White People in Cars’ – Settler Necroautomobility in the Murders and Disappearances of First Nations Peoples  103
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>viii</th>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 7  Automobility in First Nations Sovereignty-Making 131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References 159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index 191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


List of Figures

Introduction

Fig. 1. Francis Jupurrurla Kelly and Other Warlpiri Bush Mechanics. ‘Motorcar Ngutju (Good Motorcar)’ Bush Mechanics (2001). From the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. Used With Permission. 3

Fig. 2. SAFA Freedom Ride Bus Outside the Boggabilla Hotel. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Courtesy SEARCH Foundation. 4

Chapter 1

Fig. 3. Ryan, Lyndall; Debenham, Jennifer; Pascoe, Bill; Smith, Robyn; Owen, Chris; Richards, Jonathan; Gilbert, Stephanie; Anders, Robert J; Usher, Kaine; Price, Daniel; Newley, Jack; Brown, Mark; Le, Le Hoang; Fairbairn, Hedy Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia 1788–1930 Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 2017–2022, http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1340762 (Accessed 14/10/2022). Used With Permission. 12

Fig. 4. Aboriginal Protection Legislation and Ordinances in 1911; Produced by Authors. 14

Fig. 5. The ‘Slave Map’, 1891, Printed in the British Anti-Slavery Reporter. Reproduced in (Anthony & Gray, 2020). 16

Fig. 6. Map of Missions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reserves and Government Stations, 1883–1969. 17
Fig. 7. Children Were Taken and Transported in Trucks Like Animals. Image from https://thestolenage.weebly.com/gallary.html. 20

Fig. 8. ‘First Nations Children on Truck at Children’s Home’ National Library of Australia. https://nla.gov.au:443/tarkine/nla.obj-152934744. 21

Fig. 9. Taking the Children in Rabbit Proof Fence (2002). Reproduced With Permission Phillip Noyce and Christine Olson. From the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. 22

Chapter 4

Fig. 10. Aboriginal Hunt© The Sidney Nolan Trust. All Rights Reserved. DACS/Copyright Agency, 2023. 65

Fig. 11. Aboriginal Hunt, Tasmania© The Sidney Nolan Trust. All Rights Reserved. DACS/Copyright Agency, 2023. 66

Fig. 12. We Can Be Heroes (Tony Albert, 2012 – Reproduced With Permission From the Artist). 67

Fig. 13. Burning Police Car Mural (Scott Marsh, 22 June 2020 Reproduced With Permission of the Artist). 69

Fig. 14. The Chase in Rabbit Proof Fence (2002). Reproduced With Permission Phillip Noyce and Christine Olson. From the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. 74

Fig. 15. Backroads (1977) (Bill Hunter and Gary Foley) Reproduced With Permission Phillip Noyce. From the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. 76

Chapter 5

Fig. 16. 2019 Petition to NSW Government Calling for Justice for TJ Hickey https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lc/petitions/Pages/tabled-paper-details.aspx?pk=76755. 91
Fig. 17. Richard Milnes ‘A Man at the March has a Copy of the Plaque that TJ Hickey’s Family want to Place at the Location where he was Impaled on the Fence’ (2014) Image provided by Alamy Stock Photo.

Chapter 6

Fig. 18. Gribble Creek Reserve. Source Google Maps Accessed 20 May 2018.

Fig. 19. Extract From Elizabeth Jarrett’s Facebook Account From 21 July 2017. Used With Permission.

Chapter 7

Fig. 20. Julalikari Patrol Vehicle. Used With Permission.

Fig. 21. Larrakia Night Patrol. Used With Permission.

Fig. 22. Tangentyere Youth Patrol Vehicle. Used With Permission.

Fig. 23. Francis Jupurrurla Kelly and Other Warlpiri Bush Mechanics. Still From ‘Motorcar Ngutju (Good Motorcar)’ Bush Mechanics (2001). From the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. Used With Permission.

Fig. 24. Attorney-General’s Department, View of Relationship With Night Patrols.

Conclusion

Fig. 25. Long Bay Gaol Protest Convoy, 19 September 2020.
We would expressly like to thank:

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Prior Published Work

Parts of Chapters 1 and 2 were published in Thalia Anthony and Harry Blagg (2012). Addressing the ‘Crime Problem’ of the Northern Territory Intervention: Alternate Paths to Regulating Minor Driving Offences in Remote Indigenous Communities (Criminology Research Council); Thalia Anthony and Harry Blagg


Parts of Chapter 6 were based on Kieran Tranter and Thalia Anthony ‘Race, Australian Colonialism and Technologies of Mobility in Kalgoorlie’ (2018) 45 University of Western Australia Law Review 99–134.

Note on Terms

We have used the term First Nations peoples as a sign of respect and acknowledge ment of the unceded sovereignty of the peoples whose cultures and communities predate the British invasion and occupation of the lands that have become to be known as Australia. We retain the imposed terms ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ only in relation to quotes in historical material and in relation to the formal names of legacy entities and institutions such as the ‘Aboriginal Protectors’ or the ‘Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody’.

Sensitivity Note

This book contains names and images of people who have passed. It also discusses details of colonial violence and First Nations deaths at the hands of the police and settler automobility.

First Nations readers and people impacted by the carceral system are advised that details of violence inflicted by settlers and the state may cause re-traumatisation.
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As an experienced practitioner with over 30 years in the justice systems, including police and legal arenas, I thought I knew it all, well, as it happens, the reality is that I don’t.

This book and its authors, Professors Thalia Anthony, Juanita Sherwood, Harry Blagg and Kieran Tranter, they all put a whole new meaning to the statement ‘drive it like you stole it’.

Using the motor vehicle as the metaphor, this book highlights how a colonial tool which First Nations people in Australia still heavily rely on to visit family, connect with country and culture, hunting and culture, alongside the need to attend ceremonies and other social purposes has become more than just a means of transport.

Instead, this book outlines how the motor vehicle can be best understood as a colonial weapon. A weapon where the vehicle, as well as the driver’s licence that many of us take for granted has been used to intercept, control, manage and constrain First Nations actions and activities. How colonists use motor vehicles to impose colonial power and behaviours on First Nations people.

All too often First Nations people have remained the ‘passengers’ of these motor vehicles, controlled and under surveillance by others with power and privilege, even when we own the land, and the motor vehicle. We as First Nations people are still made to feel like we stole it – all of it.

Those who doubt this concept need to read this book to see how this happens.

How First Nations people have been captured, processed and consumed by the justice system as drivers, passengers and pedestrians, and the criminal sentencing of First Nations drivers and more.

This book highlights that colonial controls continue in 2023 for both adults and children, playing a role in the deterioration of our well-being and compounding our ongoing high levels of intergenerational poverty, trauma and disadvantage.

With the turn of every page, you will be intrigued, because who would have ever thought that a motor vehicle and its relationship with First Nations Australians would be so intense and ever so present in our criminalisation since colonisation that continues even today.

From First Nations led night patrols, to the danger of police chases, the dangers the roads, these all take on a different meanings alongside the use of the vehicle for travelling to and from communities.
Unsurprisingly, First Nations people have also been able to turn the colonising car on its head and use it as a powerful tool of decolonisation. Easily accessible examples include Bill Davis’ Pitjantjatjara anthem Mutuka Wiya (no motorcar), the Warumpi band’s Jailanguru Pakarnu (Out from Jail) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubxzsfyEwWY and the ironic, incredibly joyful and inventive Bush Mechanics film made by Walpiri media and the spin-off television series, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8WfjkgqK9A.

So, if you want exposure to the relationships between First Nations Australians and motor vehicles since colonisation, then this book is a must read. It will open your mind to new issues, new explanations and bold thought-provoking concepts.

Leanne Liddle

_Arrernte Lawyer 2022 Northern Territory Australian of the Year
South Australia’s First Aboriginal Police Woman
Director Northern Territory Aboriginal Justice Unit_
In a book on the legal and cultural place of the motor vehicle in occupier states, there is a tendency towards using a car-based lexicon. This book emerges from an intersection of distinct projects and concerns shared between us. The collision between an absolute and resurgent colonial sovereignty and First Nations peoples’ law, culture and way of life that was the Northern Territory Intervention in 2008 was a particular catalyst. For criminologist Harry Blagg, who had been working with First Nations communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, the Intervention immediately highlighted a contestation of mobilities. The mobile agents of the state – welfare officers, police and army – speed into First Nations communities and one of the immediate effects was to stop First Nations peoples’ movement. The historical ways that the occupier state reduced the movement of First Nations peoples in the Northern Territory, the carceral mentality, was of particular interest to lawyer and criminologist Thalia Anthony. In the early 2010s, Harry and Thalia completed a project funded by the Australian Institute of Criminology on the ‘law and order’ outcomes of the Intervention. That project revealed that the Intervention had led to a significant increase in the criminalisation of First Nations peoples for minor traffic offences.

The motor vehicle and its use is a primary site for ongoing colonialism. For Juanita Sherwood, a Wiradjuri woman, health worker and researcher, the motor vehicle as a technology of the occupier state was visceral – the anxiety of seeing a police vehicle, the accounts of community members of being hurt in vehicles, chased by vehicles and hit by vehicles driven by police and occupiers. For Kieran Tranter, whose background is cultural legal studies, the journey to this project began through reading the Australian Human Rights Commission Report on the Stolen Generations that was released in 1997. A striking feature in most survivor stories was the memories of the motor vehicle as the active agent in the taking of children.

Juanita and Harry also came to this book following their trailblazing research on First Nations night patrols in the early 2000s. Harry conducted an Australian study on patrols and Juanita researched the distinct features of NSW Aboriginal patrols – both finding that night patrols mobilise the vehicle to empower community and enact First Nations sovereignty. This common recognition that the occupier state and its colonial project of the twenty and twenty-first century is embodied in the colonisers’ motor vehicle – mechanised, fast, carceral and with explosive violence – while also met with resistance of night patrols and First Nations forms of automobility – brought us together and lead to multiple
research and writing projects. This book capstones and brings together these projects. In particular,


- Parts of Chapter 6 were based on Kieran Tranter and Thalia Anthony ‘Race, Australian Colonialism and Technologies of Mobility in Kalgoorlie’ (2018) 45 *University of Western Australia Law Review* 99–134.