

Tarring the Tanami

Melinda Hinkson

On the way to Yuendumu

Bitumen is one of industrial capitalism’s great foundational inventions. A well-rolled-out piece of road carries so many transformative effects—on the comfort of the ride, on the rate of accidents, on the longevity of vehicles and, perhaps most crucially for capitalism, on the precious time taken to get from A to B. Rolling out bitumen continues to be the cornerstone of so many nation-making projects, in blind disregard of the environmental havoc wrought by our history of transport. I was pondering all of this last month as I drove the Tanami Highway, a road that stretches just over 1000 kilometres from where it forks from the Stuart Highway twenty kilometres north of Alice Springs, to its north-westerly end point at Halls Creek in the Kimberley.

I have driven along this road many times, or at least its first 300-kilometre stretch from Alice Springs to the township of Yuendumu on the southern edge of Warlpiri country. When I first travelled the Tanami twenty years ago the first 100 kilometres were sealed, the remainder red dirt. Depending on the season and on how long since the grader party had been through, the drive, in my middle-aged Subaru wagon, was by turns exhilarating and exhausting. The road was potholed, washed out, dusty and deeply corrugated—to drive the Tanami was to feel the shifts in geological formation and recent climatic events through the very bones of one’s body. It was common to pass several wrecks along the way, and later to hear the stories of those wrecks, and to stop a number of times to give assistance to travelling parties who had broken down and needed fuel, or water, or to exchange news. It was common to have to pull off the road altogether to make way for thundering road trains transporting their cargo of live cattle or mining materials, billowing clouds of choking red dust in their wake. It was common to blow a tyre. Over the two years my little Subaru drove this road, its joints were rattled so loose that one day the bonnet popped and folded back across the windscreen. Henceforth it had to be tied down with rope. Another time I hit a deep pothole so hard I spectacularly split my poor car’s chassis. A

friend and I camped beside the road for twelve hours until assistance and a long trailer could be sent for.

Back then the addition of small sections of tar seal to the road was cause for surprise and celebration. I recall my euphoria when approaching the most bone-crunching section adjacent to the Mt Wedge range only to find it was now encased in black tar. I also recall the exhilaration of discovering that, on the day I had to nurse my car with smashed windscreen into town for repair, the road had been freshly graded to smooth perfection.

The Tanami has had a reputation as a bone-jarring, car-wrecking stretch of road since its earliest days as the track that took gold-fever-afflicted southerners to the Granites. The track was said to reduce grown men to tears and more. Some of this was immortalised in journalist F. E. Baume’s grim account of the 1930s Granites gold rush, *Tragedy Track*. Baume wrote of wheels (yes wheels) being shredded and engines gauged by tree roots, and of torrential downpours that swept cars off the road altogether.

The time of Baume’s visit coincided with the height of a prolonged drought, a deadly factor in intensifying hostilities he reported between the settler-pro prospector heroes of his tale and the ‘myall tribes’ of Warlpiri, whose attempts to remain on their ancestral lands stood in the way of progress.

It was the same road along which neck-chained Warlpiri men and women were forced to walk hundreds of kilometres to appear in court, having been charged with the murder of a prospector. The case was thrown out and they were left at the edge of town to make their own way home, again on foot. It was the same road that witnessed Warlpiri and Anmatyerre people fleeing the guns of police and pastoralists in 1928, in the brutal killings that came to be known as the Coniston massacre, although by and large Aboriginal people avoided the road whenever possible, preferring the relative safety of the bush. It was the same road that Warlpiri men were put to work to clear and level through the 1940s and 1950s as part of the project to civilise them, as well as the environment in which they were to become sedentary citizens. It was the same road along which many of their countrymen and women were subsequently transported on the backs of trucks to populate a newly established government settlement beyond the northern edge of their own country.

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Now the Tanami is poised to become a fully sealed two-lane road. According to Infrastructure Australia’s 2012–13 Assessment Brief, ‘the objective of the project is to upgrade the Tanami Road to improve access to support mining operations in the Tanami region, create opportunities for the Indigenous population and reduce costs to government of delivering and maintaining infrastructure and services in the communities’. The ‘problem’ to be tackled by this large-scale project is stated as:

limitations on economic development in mining, tourism and pastoral operations; high costs associated with travel times and repairs and maintenance to machinery; reduced incentives for employment and enterprise development for the Indigenous population due to significant transport requirements; and risks to health and safety for Indigenous peoples, transport operators and tourists.

The brief goes on to make a case for sealing 300 kilometres of double-lane road at a cost of \$196 million, \$126 million of which is to be sought from the Commonwealth. The project would result in sealed road all the way from Alice Springs to the Granites Gold Mine. The report sees the project as ‘strategically aligned’ with the government’s priorities to ‘increase Australia’s productivity’ and ‘improve social equality and quality of life’. Further, it notes, the upgrade of the road supports the government’s ‘closing the gap’ objectives, as well as the objectives of the Regional Infrastructure Fund:

This project has been identified as an opportunity to develop employment outcomes for local Indigenous people, including providing construction work and reducing the existing transport barriers to employment...the Northern Territory Government is committed to the employment and training of Indigenous people of the Northern Territory on its construction and maintenance contracts. The Department of Business requires an Indigenous Development Plan to be implemented through the whole of the contract period; this involves identifying Aboriginal employment and enterprise targets within the response to tenders and demonstrating how they will achieve the targets.

The report concludes by rating the project’s ‘social benefit score’ for the proposed option as 3.17—whatever that means.

The Tanami campaign has gathered further steam as part of the latest federal push to ‘Develop the North’ and in October 2015 the NT and WA governments banded together to pledge funds and call for further investment by the Commonwealth to seal the road to its termination point at Halls Creek, at a total estimated cost of \$680 million.

Having travelled the length of the road with his WA counterpart just prior to announcing this cross-border bid, NT Minister for Transport Peter Chandler listed government priorities in the order they have long been held when he said,

Sometimes you have a little bit of vision and a little bit of faith that if you put money into infrastructure like this, [considering] what are the benefits for the cattle industry, what are the benefits for the mining industry, what are the benefits for Aboriginal communities that are strung all along the Tanami...

On 2 March 2016 the Tanami Action Group Facebook page announced with some excitement that the proposal to seal the full length of the Tanami Road was now on the priority list for the Australian Infrastructure Plan.



As shorter sections of the Tanami have progressively been sealed there have also been steady changes in the vehicles that regularly pass along it. My impression is that two decades ago there were

many more Aboriginal cars on the road. Up until the end of the so-called self-determination era every Aboriginal community organisation and outstation had its own vehicle. This was the period in which the idea was hatched for the legendary Warlpiri television series *Bush Mechanics*, a humorous, ironic take on the infinite variety of bush skills that could be deployed to keep pre-computerised models of Holden and Ford on the road. Mobility is a core dynamic of life out here. Warlpiri cars are driven intensively between bush communities and regional centres and do not survive for long. From time to time people will travel all the way to Adelaide or Melbourne to purchase a good-value second-hand vehicle that is less likely to have acquired the collateral damage sustained on outback roads.

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It is also in cars that Warlpiri frequently cross paths with police. People are fined heavily for not wearing seatbelts, for driving unroadworthy or unregistered vehicles, or for driving without licences, as well as for drink driving and occasionally for grog running. Unpaid fines result in warrants being issued, welfare payments being docked, time in gaol. Many people have made the journey to Alice Springs in the back of a police wagon.

The locally owned Yuendumu Mining Company has been running its own campaign to improve the road since 1973. Its vision has always insisted upon local industry involvement and Aboriginal employment as crucial components of the proposal. Over the years the company has received occasional piecemeal slices of the road-making action, such as making urgent repairs and clearing sand from the road after the flooding of local creeks. A series of more ambitious co-partnered projects resulted either in financial losses or the failure of Yuendumu to secure a portion of any profits. A few years back the manager of the Yuendumu Mining Company had a rare opportunity to take a visiting delegation, including the NT Chief Minister and the Minister for Regional Development, to the peak of Yuendumu Hill, from where they could look across a spectacular vista that takes in the Yuendumu gravel pits and a large sweep of the desert. He was keen to convince them that it made good commercial sense to contract this local company to provide sealing aggregate to maintain the road from Yuendumu to the halfway point between the township and Alice Springs. Such a contract would

also have enabled the company to invest in substantial machinery and create ongoing employment for Warlpiri road crews. From their elevated vantage point watching the sunset across the spinifex plain, the politicians were reportedly full of enthusiasm—enthusiasm that mining-company manager Frank Baarda observed must have dissipated by the time they reached the 10-kilometre boundary on their departure from the community. Nothing ever came of it.

Today the only people who can afford to own cars are those fortunate enough to receive royalty payments for the mines operating on their ancestral lands from multinational company Newmont and—even less likely—those fortunate enough to be in waged employment. As Aboriginal cars have decreased in number the grey nomads hauling caravans have arisen in their place, alongside the steady stream of mining vehicles, government four-wheel drives, and the occasional Japanese cyclist.

Some have long worried that the price for sealing the road would be a greater influx of tourists into bush communities. The permit system requiring visitors to Aboriginal communities to seek permission to enter and stay in those places was abolished under the terms of the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention.

The ‘opening up’ of communities was envisaged as another vital move to stimulate increased economic activity. In the history of fleeting NT- and federal-government imaginaries for these places, Yuendumu was briefly identified as a ‘Territory Growth Town’, a regional hub destined for special investment in infrastructure and other forms of support. The short-lived idea was subsequently reborn in the federal program to target ‘priority communities’, under which twenty-nine remote communities were required to develop ‘Local Implementation Plans’, or LIPs, which promised ‘a long term generational commitment based on delivering coordinated, targeted and accelerated development in indigenous communities...changing the way governments invest in remote areas’. This ‘long term generational commitment’ has since been replaced by some other equally compelling acronym.

Pursued independently of these grand visions, the Tanami-upgrade project similarly promises to deliver development possibilities to Yuendumu, to facilitate the export of yet-to-be-identified commodities and services. Yet, apart from the art centre, football matches, voyeuristic curiosity and perhaps the chance for some serendipitous cross-cultural interaction, it

is difficult to imagine what might lure people without government business to this area. One question of particular significance locally is: will the reduced transport costs translate into more affordable prices for food and basic provisions?



Yuendumu’s Warlpiri residents are delighted with their newly sealed road and the prospect of it reaching all the way to Western Australia. Now everyone will be kept safe, my friends tell me. Too many people have had accidents, been badly injured or died on that road. This is a development project on a scale rarely seen in these parts. Everyone is talking about it. ‘What about that road?’, people ask, their eyes sparkling. The two-lane seal has quickly become the new standard, rendering the old 100 kilometres of single-lane road from Alice Springs a poor stretch by comparison—when will it be upgraded? A number of men and women from local communities are already on the road crew, working fifteen-hour shifts, six weeks on, one week off. Several men from Yuendumu are in the process of being enlisted, keen at the prospect of ‘big money’ and a short respite from the lawn mowing that currently dominates their Community Development Program work-for-the-dole schedules. Yet, as is so often the case out here, there is significant distance between the promise of employment and its realisation. As one man told me, he will be off to join the road crew just as soon as he has saved the \$360 to get the licence required to drive the vehicles—savings to be made, somehow, from the below-the-poverty-line work-for-the-dole payments with which he currently supports an extended family.

My own trips, as a wealthy, salaried visitor from the south, are made these days by way of hire car, most often a Toyota Prado four-wheel drive, fully air-conditioned and with a suspension system that simulates the experience of travelling by hovercraft. My car and I glide over any remaining ruts and corrugations in hermetically sealed comfort as I monitor the searing heat of the desert as it passes forty degrees from my dashboard-mounted digital thermostatic display. The combination of the height of these vehicles and the raised bitumen road causes us to ride above the country, taking in the commanding view.

Travelling to Yuendumu in early March, largely ignorant of the grand scale of development under way, I am astonished to find that, aside from a twenty-kilometre detour for the latest stretch of sealing work, just the final fifteen kilometres to the community turnoff remains unsealed. As the wheels of my Toyota leave the bitumen for that short strip of chocolate-red earth, I feel a deep sense of relief. As we dip down off the raised tar seal, the surrounding country momentarily reclaims its capacity to envelop the car and the driver within it. The mulga scrub takes on a different hue of deep green, with rays of light from the setting sun streaming through the branches of acacias. The Prado’s air-conditioning unit hits its limits and traces of dust seep into my nostrils. I drink it in with a deeply nostalgic, melancholy sense that this may be the last time I will ingest red dirt to get to Yuendumu.

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