



The Last Highway

Road notes

lina Kastoumis

It's easy to romanticise or sensationalise a place you've never stayed in. Your best guess is a summation of parts received throughout your life via spun narratives of print and electronic media or verbal reports from '...a friend who once...".

It's easy to imbue a 'foreign' place with frequencies of distorted humanity and hyper-culture if you yourself have not been there. What about Bankstown? Sure there is widespread gastro-pornographic acknowledgement of Bankstown as an authentically flavoured 'Food Safari' oasis. I sometimes describe this as "we don't want to meet you, we just want to eat you", a phenomena that has been meticulously explored by respected scholars, such as Dr Ghassan Hage ¹.

But what of our other, more 'unsavoury' reputation? 'Crime Hotbed', 'Ethnic Ghetto', 'Un-Australian', 'Drug riddled', 'Dangerous', 'Lock up your cars and daughters'. I think many of my ilk have payed their militant wog dues writing, performing and satirising against 'cultural stereotypes' year after year. Suffice to say, I now abbreviate my cultural experience into a mere general comment: "Sydney, it's so tribal".

What interests me now is what separates us. Where do the borders and lines begin and end, and what delusions do we all have of each other? Are they external, i.e class or race? Or are they internal, i.e fear or desire?

If you haven't lived or worked in the Lakemba, Punchbowl or Bankstown area, you might not know that many of us locals do not understand what all the fuss is about. Sadly, the only screen genres our suburbs usually inspire are 'police dramas'. Evidently, stories of love, music, fantasy, quirky friendship or even existential art-house meanderings can't be 'set' in places like my hood. However, a suburb or shared social space does not operate like a film shoot. There is no robotic choreography of extras wearing topo-specific costuming. There is no emotive soundtrack floating over human action. There are no thirty-minute car chase scenes, nor film noir conversations about 'needing to get out of here alive'.

We don't need to run on contrived super-narratives of our area or our lives because, just like everyone else, we simply live. Being a Lakemba kid, born and bred, I have no fear of or effusive patriotic love for Canterbury Road. It's just a road. Yet it was, is and always will be, a force in my life. I know it so well that I own it. I own it as a necessary artery for anywhere I want to go, a fluid moving exit or entry point into the world outside my door.

During the day, the Bankstown end of this road is an extremely congested industrial thoroughfare. There is no stopping or parking. Many old shops from my childhood haven't survived this pace and have gradually closed to make way for small industries (with customer

¹ Hage, Ghassan (1997) 'At home in the entrails of the west: multiculturalism, ethnic food and migrant home-building'. In H.Grace, G.Hage, L.Johnson, J.Langsworth and M.Symonds (eds) 'Home/World: Space, Community and Marginality in Sydney's West. Sydney, Pluto Press 1997.

parking) such as automotive repair and home improvement outlets and showrooms. By night however, this grinds right down to only a handful of petrol stations being open. The parking lots are deserted, the side streets scarcely lit. There is no reason for anyone to stop and spend time at this part of the road unless they need petrol, or other deeper needs. *The Last Highway* is positioned in this time and space – between the dead of night and a barely inhabited social arena.

Canterbury Road is not a destination. There are more people passing through than staying put. Nor is it an outright community. Community happens when you stop moving in order to share time, space, ideas and feelings with other living beings. Because of the generosity, support and trust of Wendy Parsons, Kha Hien Huynh, Sione Crawford and Suzanne Robinson (the fabulous outreach crew at SWOP and NUAA) Alicia and I were able to stop on the road and start conversations with the sex workers. We found our interface and were welcomed into a community. This led to recruiting a dedicated group of consultants who became a valued part of our artistic crew. Through their enthusiastic word-of-mouth, the project became known to other workers on the road. We eventually found our 'blokes', i.e cab drivers, petrol station attendants and other 'citizens of the night'.

Our community consultants are neither caricatures, heroes or villains. They are unique, everyday people with whom we have spent much time talking with, listening to and learning from. You can't imitate even a tiny symbolic gesture inspired from another person's supposed life without some offered own truth of how they live and work in a particular time and place. You'd be surprised what you learn about people when you have the heart and stomach to ask. Every person has stories, no matter where they live or how they live. If you are only driving by and glancing, then you are not really reading.

I warmly thank Alicia, Simon, Deborah and Bibi at UTP for this rare opportunity to work closely with so many different people and pull apart some of my own 'delusions'. I am delighted that our consultation group became it's own community with everyone coming to our rehearsal sessions with such joy, interest and care, making so many facets of *The Last Highway* their own.