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A Wild Roguery: Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* Reconsidered

ABSTRACT

This article revisits, analyzes and critiques Bruce Chatwin's 1987 bestseller, *The Songlines*,[1] more than three decades after its publication. In *Songlines*, the book primarily responsible for his posthumous celebrity, Chatwin set out to explore the essence of Central and Western Desert Aboriginal Australians' philosophical beliefs. For many readers globally, *Songlines* is regarded as a—if not the—definitive entry into the epistemological basis, religion, cosmology and lifeways of classical Western and Central Desert Aboriginal people. It is argued that Chatwin's fuzzy, ill-defined use of the word-concept "songlines"[2] has had the effect of generating more heat than light. Chatwin's failure to recognize the economic imperative underpinning Australian desert people's walking praxis is problematic: his own treks through foreign lands were underpropped by socioeconomic privilege.
Chatwin's ethnocentric *idée fixe* regarding the primacy of "walking" and "nomadism," central to his *Songlines* thématique, well and truly preceded his visits to Central Australia. Walking, proclaimed Chatwin, is an elemental part of "Man's" innate nature. It is argued that this unwavering, preconceived, essentialist belief was a self-serving construal justifying Chatwin's own "nomadic" adventures of identity. Is it thus reasonable to regard Chatwin as a "rogue author," an unreliable narrator? And if so, does this matter? Of greatest concern is the book's continuing majority acceptance as a measured, accurate account of Aboriginal belief systems. With respect to Aboriginal desert people and the barely disguised individuals depicted in *Songlines*, is Chatwin's book a "rogue text," constituting an act of epistemic violence, consistent with Spivak's usage of that term?

Keywords: Chatwin's *Songlines*, Aboriginal desert people, nomadism, economic basis and typology of walking, authorial roguery.

[1] Hereafter rendered as *Songlines.*

[2] As Colette Mrowa-Hopkins discovered on the Linguee website, in relation to the English word "songline"(https://www.linguee.com/english-french/search?source=auto&query=songline), attempts to translate this term into the French language have rendered it even more problematic. Mrowa-Hopkins offered the following commentary: "One entry offers the following usage of 'songlines' as: 'les chants qui se rapportent aux sites sacrés' & 'Les anciens chants des pistes de la musique traditionnelle aborigène'and another entry defined it as 'les pistes ['tracks'] chantées du Rêve' ['dream,' 'dreaming,' or even 'fantasy'], or 'Temps du Rêve' ['Dreamtime' or 'Dream-time' or 'Dream Time'], which I didn't like. I prefer the idea of 'parcours' ['path,' 'route,' or 'course'] to 'piste' ['track'] and I didn't like the reference to 'chants' ['songs,' 'chants,' 'singing'] since I think it's larger than that."

To live in one land, is captivitie,
To runne all countries, a wild roguery.
John Donne, "Elegie III: Change" (1633)

Introduction and Background

In early 1982, I began working as a linguist at Lajamanu, a remote Warlpiri (Aboriginal) settlement in the Tanami Desert of Central Australia. Later that year a journalist friend working for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) contacted me, acting as an intermediary on behalf of British writer Bruce Chatwin, asking me to host the author. Chatwin wished to conduct research into a book about Australian Aboriginal desert people. Chatwin requested accommodation in my house at Lajamanu for several weeks in 1983 whilst carrying out his investigation.

In the early 1980s the majority of Warlpiri people at Lajamanu were living in humpies (makeshift shelters comprised of wood, leaves, and corrugated iron or other scrap metal). At that time the housing situation in remote Aboriginal communities was extremely tight, as remains the case today.

At any rate, my workload at Lajamanu was onerous: I had been employed to support the local Warlpiri people's aspiration to establish a bilingual education program in the local school. An English-only program had been in place since the school opened c. 1956–58. The older people had become extremely concerned that their children were losing proficiency in their mother tongue, Warlpiri. Prior to the advent of the bilingual education program in 1982, Warlpiri schoolchildren were caned or otherwise punished if caught inside the school grounds speaking their natal tongue.

Owing to Lajamanu's extremely remote location (see map) to have acquiesced to Chatwin's request would have meant that for me there would have been no alternative but to interact with him—a total stranger—day and night. That would also have interrupted my efforts to learn Warlpiri, as older Warlpiri people came to my home every night to talk. At that time many did not speak English, or only a little.

Declining Chatwin's request was unwittingly prescient. It transpired that Chatwin's major "research" modus operandi was to bombard white people working with Aboriginal people with multiple questions. This involved speaking over others, rather than interacting with and directing his enquiries to bona fide Aboriginal knowledge-holders. Most of the young white people whom Chatwin used as "informants" were working in the Aboriginal Land Rights movement as lawyers, linguists, anthropologists or as health care workers. Many were employed by Aboriginal organizations. That they were knowledgeable about the local Aboriginal people's life-

ways—exponentially more so than Chatwin—is not in question. Rather, it is Chatwin's fast-track method of acquiring knowledge that is one subject of this critique—he was a man skilled at taking intellectual shortcuts in ways that were somewhat morally compromising. At a personal level he had much to gain from that approach.[3]

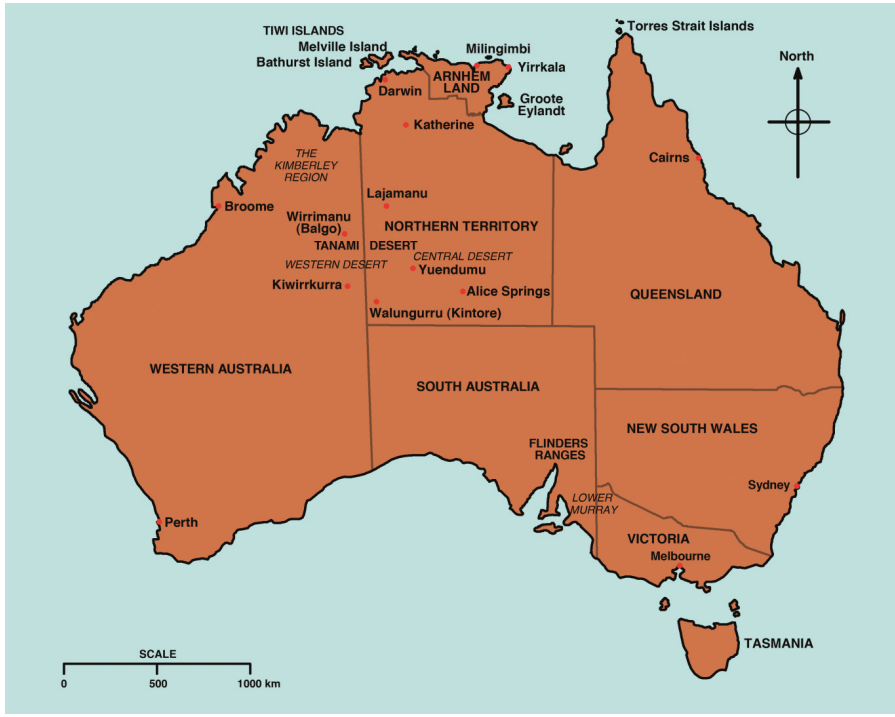

Fig. 1. Map of Australia, showing location of Lajamanu, the Tanami Desert and other Warlpiri sites in the Central and Western Deserts, Christine Nicholls, 2003; updated by Clinton Ellicott, with the permission of Wakefield Press Adelaide, 2019.

This is not only starkly evident in *Songlines*, but is confirmed in Nicholas Shakespeare's detailed biography of Chatwin, where there are many allusions to the latter's unorthodox "research methodology," if that is not a total

[3] By the time Chatwin embarked on his *Songlines* project, his approach to attaining knowledge had been well honed. Chatwin's quick fix pathway to knowledge acquisition was a rapid route to self-advancement. This almost always served to enhance *his* reputation, rather than that of the others on whom he had leaned. For more on Chatwin's modus operandi while working at Sotheby's as a young man and "researching" while in Patagonia, see Shakespeare.

misnomer in this context. Shakespeare states that Chatwin used as his primary "sources . . . the anthropologists and lawyers who had spent the necessary time with Aborigines" (412). To put it bluntly, Chatwin did not put in the hard yards necessary to come to more than a superficial understanding of the ideas with which he was putatively grappling. The information he obtained had already been channelled via people whom, by comparison with Aboriginal desert people, had very different sociocultural backgrounds. By the time Chatwin sourced his material it had thus been distorted through two prisms: his own archetypally British assumptions, and then through the more reliable lens of the non-Aboriginal Australians upon whose knowledge he drew.

By 1983, when Chatwin arrived in Central Australia to undertake his *Songlines* project, he had developed a long-established, one-size-fits-all, conceptual framework on human walking (Shakespeare 14, *inter alia*). Chatwin's grand narrative involved a blend of "nomadic" travel with song. His over-weaning fascination with, and dilettantish philosophical musings on the primacy of nomadism, along with his essentialist conviction about Homo sapiens' relationship to walking had been long-term obsessions. This also provided Chatwin with a justification for being away from his wife for long periods of time.

So, when Chatwin made the first of two short trips to Australia's Northern Territory, he did not set out to test his theory: like Minerva, who had emerged fully formed from her father Jupiter's head, Chatwin arrived in Central Australia with an *a priori* schema that would become central to *Songlines*. Moreover, Chatwin was not one to let contradictory evidence get in the way of an *idée fixe*.

He did not ask Aboriginal desert people whether they agreed with his notions. For the most part, Chatwin spoke to white men *about* Aborigines, rather than *with* local Aboriginal people. Aboriginal voices barely register in *Songlines*; it is largely comprised of White noise. At no point did Chatwin question his modus operandi or his subject positioning as a public school educated and, in many respects, conservative, Englishman. The British colonization of what is now known as Australia has obvious ramifications for his interactions with Aboriginal and, to some extent, non-Aboriginal Australians. His approach was tantamount to what Carol Johnson has described in a different context as a "denial of the legitimacy of difference."

The balance of this article will be devoted to further critique of Chatwin's immensely popular book, the unfortunate influence of which continues into the present day (see, for example, Morrison's "Bruce Chatwin's Book as Popular as Ever"). Many of the weaknesses in *Songlines* are attributable to Chatwin's essentialist understandings informed by his own borrowed and prefabricated philosophizing, ideation and his use of

under- or undefined key concepts, including "nomadism" and "songlines." His tendency to overgeneralize extended to his ideas about the intersections between gender, race and social class.

Chatwin's *Grande Idée*—The Centrality of Walking and Nomadism in Human Life

Before writing *Songlines* Chatwin had written about "nomadic" groups in other parts of the world. In 1969 Chatwin pitched an idea for a book on nomadism to the Jonathan Cape editor Tom Maschler. As a result, Chatwin was contracted to write a book provisionally titled *The Nomadic Alternative*. Eventually a disappointed Maschler turned the manuscript down as unpublishable (Shakespeare; Shakespeare and Chatwin).

Songlines was published in 1987, almost two decades after Chatwin had failed to find a publisher for *The Nomadic Alternative*. In this new book on Australian Aboriginal desert people's travel, Chatwin set out to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship of his well-rehearsed nomadism *thématique*, merging it with Aboriginal song cycles. He proposed an eidetic relationship between walking and song, with nil clarification of the specific nature of that relationship. Although Chatwin claimed that his "reason for coming to Australia was to try to learn for myself, and not from other men's books, what a Songline was—and how it worked" (*Songlines* 12), in the book itself there is no evidence that he clarified this concept, despite reaffirming his aim to do so several times.

Chatwin had borrowed the term "songlines" from Theodor Strehlow, an anthropologist and the son of a German Lutheran missionary. While Chatwin acknowledged Strehlow in *Songlines*, he made no mention of another Australian anthropologist, Robert Tonkinson, whose ideas he also apparently borrowed. Several years before *Songlines* was published, Tonkinson had written that

> Songlines Singing is an essential element in most Mardudjara ritual performances because the songline follows in most cases the direction of travel of the beings concerned and highlights cryptically their notable as well as mundane activities. Most songs, then, have a geographical as well as mythical referent, so by learning the songline men become familiar with literally thousands of sites even though they have never visited them; all become part of their cognitive map of the desert world. (Tonkinson 104)[4]

[4] The Mardudjara people's traditional homelands extended across the Great Sandy Desert, which is part of the Western Desert located in the Pilbara region of Australia. Today their language is mainly rendered in written form as "Martu."

It is clear from this passage that Tonkinson does not offer a totalizing account of Aboriginal travelling and song. Tonkinson also makes it clear that Aboriginal people became aware of places that they had never visited relying only on song, but he does not state that such knowledge is guaranteed to offer a fail-safe traveller's guide into distant country. By using terms like "in most cases" and "cryptically" Tonkinson, who is infinitely more experienced in this field than Chatwin, leaves room for exceptions, steering clear of definitive pronouncements.

My own understanding of classical Aboriginal travel, gleaned from Warlpiri "first contact" people who had first encountered the white colonizers in early adulthood, is that their foot-walking mostly entailed systematic rotational navigation on an annual basis. This was premised on the likelihood of the availability of edible flora and fauna at specific times of the year in particular locations, but, most importantly, on the fundamental need to source potable water.

Fig. 2. Twin rockholes at Wakurlpu on Warlpiri country known as Miri-jarra ("Two Shield Handles"). The late Kay Napaljarri Ross drinking from one of the two rockholes, late 1970s/early 1980s. Photograph: Mary Laughren.

On occasions, including during years of drought or flash flooding in particular parts of their estates, people had to be flexible. Droughts presented obvious problems for survival. Knowledge of the location of

permanent water and/or normally reliable water sources was essential. Crucial to this was Warlpiri and other desert people's finely-tuned knowledge of country. It was never a case of aimless travel, because in the desert regions death would have been the result. The bottom line was *always* survival.

As has been indicated, by the time Chatwin arrived in Australia for his project he had for years nurtured an overarching fascination with human walking. This culturally restricted, essentialist and quasi-religious *idée fixe* is reflected in his reference to the filmmaker Werner Herzog as

> the only person with whom I could have a one-to-one conversation on what I would call the sacramental aspect of walking. He and I share a belief that walking is not simply therapeutic for oneself but is a poetic activity that can cure the world of its ills. (Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here* 139).

Chatwin summed up his position in a definitive pronouncement: "Walking is virtue, tourism deadly sin" (*What Am I Doing Here* 139).[5] Chatwin's use of the word "sacramental" is telling: language specific to the Christian religion often enters his discourse. It also seems that Chatwin had no appetite for complexity but rather favoured single-cause analysis, arising from implicit ethnocentrism.

This struck me in 1987 when I first read *Songlines* while living at Lajamanu. Chatwin's reliance on Christian doctrine became more apparent in recent re-readings of his book. It came as no surprise to discover while reading Shakespeare's biography that when Chatwin was close to death he had converted to Greek Orthodox Christianity. To believe in God is to believe that the world was created, a form of essentialism that was one of Chatwin's essentialist beliefs. While Christian belief (or any other religious belief) is not inherently problematic, it can become so when projected onto the belief systems of others based on the assumption of its universality.

In *Songlines*, Chatwin's "mythical referent" is Christianity. His book resonates with the trope of the sacred, solitary journey into the desert, which heavily inflects Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Journeying alone into the "wilderness" brings into play the symbolic landscape of the desert as a means of integrating the self with that symbolic landscape, thereby purifying the soul, giving rise to some form of epiphany. Moses' encounter with the burning bush at the base

[5] Herzog and Chatwin had a shared interest in Aboriginal Australia. In 1984 Herzog's film *Where the Green Ants Dream* ("Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen") was released. Later the pair collaborated on Herzog's film *Cobra Verde* (1987, based on Chatwin's book *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, first published in 1980).

of Mount Sinai is just one example. Ultimately this is a journey of self-discovery, in which that "self" is conceptualized as an individual self, not as a collective "self."

Chatwin preferred solo walking, in itself a powerful Christian mythos and a significant element inflecting Chatwin's legendary but tendentious status as a credible interpreter of Aboriginal travel and song. Chatwin simply transposed his substrate belief system onto Australian Aboriginal people living in desert regions. What is astonishing in *Songlines* is Chatwin's staggering lack of self-reflexivity, in spite all of his well-documented solo travels to exotic parts of the world. The cliché about travel broadening the mind is, in many instances, a *furphy*.[6]

Early Christianity's relationship with the desert was geographically based, but this theme has been taken up and interpreted by Anglo-European Westerners as part of Judeo-Christian tradition, regardless of their location. "'Singing our way through the wilderness' is Old Testament rhetoric," notes Andrew Palmer (313). The desert is now conceived as a locus facilitating spiritual awakening, and where people, including New Agers, go to seek a contemplative life, self-knowledge and transformational experience (e.g., St Jerome and John the Baptist).

Chatwin's approach is discussed in Palmer's article "In the Shade of a Ghost Gum." Under the subheading of "God and Darwin," Palmer writes that

> [i]n Western literature, conflicting discourses—the Darwinian and the religious—make tracks across the desert. In *Songlines*, Chatwin draws on both to develop a thesis about, or a vision of, our innate natures. At the heart of the book is an evolutionist argument in which desert landscape figures prominently as the progenitor of human nature. (312)

Continuing in this vein, Palmer writes that "[this] evolutionist discourse is interwoven with a very different rhetoric derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition. For the Old Testament prophets, the desert figures as a place of harsh journeying that purifies the spirit." (312)

He then cites Chatwin's Biblical references: "The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea were nomadic revivalists who howled abuse at the decadence of civilization. . . . The prophets looked to a Day of Restoration when the Jews would return to the frugal asceticism of nomadic life" (312). According to Palmer, the interweaving of these two "conflicting discourses—Darwinian and religious" in *Songlines* draws

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[6] A "furphy" is Australian slang meaning a misleading, non-factual piece of information that is widely believed to be accurate.

> on Aboriginal discourses to destabilize that binary opposition. Chatwin's representations of the desert therefore challenge hegemonic ways of seeing. This challenge arises out of a subject position made discursively complex by Chatwin's sexuality and illness: *The Songlines* was completed by a man who knew he was dying and is driven by a search for the path to a "right death." (311)

This passage strongly implies that Chatwin was on a Christian quest, for which the ostensible study of Aboriginal desert people and their desert country acted as surrogates, legitimating his own sojourns. It may explain why so many readers in the Western world, primarily of Christian faith, applaud this book.

Apropos of Palmer's article, one can fully accept that Chatwin's homosexuality was undoubtedly a complicating factor informing his life and virtually everything he wrote. This was especially so because he was, in the view of many, at least on the surface, a happily married man whose American wife remained in England during almost all of his travels. Shakespeare touches on this a number of times in his biography of Chatwin. On the other hand, in terms of Chatwin's "representations of the desert" that "challenge hegemonic ways of seeing" one could argue that his sexuality had almost nil effect, except possibly as a factor instrumental to a possible desire on his part for redemption.

Voice and Locutory Style in Chatwin's *Songlines*

After the publication of *Songlines*, when a company was seeking film rights to it, Chatwin declared the book to be fiction (Ash; Shakespeare). This needs to be understood in relation to Chatwin's earlier *oeuvre*, which included travel writing and novels. Chatwin's admission unsettles the status of all of his previous books.[7]

It is no easy matter to disentangle whether *Songlines* is fiction, non-fiction, or a mix of both. One reason for this is that two "Bruces" are deeply imbricated in the telling of this story. The first "Bruce" is the narrator (B1), who takes the third person or impersonal voice. The second "Bruce" (B2) appears as a character in the book and discusses ideas and views with others. Both "Bruces" hold opinions apparently indistinguishable from those of Chatwin. The "Bruce" (B2) who uses the first person, acknowledging himself as "Bruce," is an almost exact avatar of the "real" Bruce Chatwin:

[7] Before *Songlines* Chatwin had written a number of travel books, including *In Patagonia* (1977) and *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), which had received a degree of critical acclaim.

an avatar in both the original Sanskrit and the populist sense of the word. This "real Bruce," reinforced by consistent use of the first person singular pronoun throughout the book, discusses Aboriginal people with other (mostly white) people in the book, and in almost all cases his predominant conversational style is competitive rather than cooperative.

Chatwin's second-string protagonist in *Songlines*, "Arkady Volchock,"[8] an Australian of Ukrainian heritage, is also Chatwin's chief interlocutor. While both Bruces (B1 and B2) regard Arkady as something of a sage, B2 Bruce's conversational style sometimes results in the pair's exchanges hovering on an almost combative edge. The B2 Bruce character always equals or trumps his most erudite and articulate interlocutors. Bruce consistently engages in an incisive and clever fanfaronade of one-upmanship, even when he is replying to Arkady's explanations with a question.

Throughout the volume Bruce and Arkady engage in serious conversation about desert Aboriginal people. Bruce (B1, the omniscient narrator) often paraphrases the words of Arkady and others, putting his own spin on the information that he has just acquired. This has the effect of destabilizing the subject positions of his "informants" because Chatwin's twin voices almost always override them. Chatwin's use of narrative voice as impersonal *and* personal, conveyed by his use of the first and third person forms, ultimately provides him with total narrative control.

Chatwin's narrative approach also generates a degree of cognitive confusion on the part of readers. This authorial *aporia* provided Chatwin with a great deal of space for in(-ter)vention and subversion of other voices and ultimately his appropriation of the voices of others. To supply but one example of this disingenuous approach that ensures Chatwin himself becomes the central figure in the book, an excerpt of one conversation with Arkady follows, beginning with the apparently all-knowing authorial voice stating that:

> Every Wallaby man believed he was descended from a universal Wallaby father, who was the ancestor of all other Wallaby Men and of all living wallabies. Wallabies, therefore, were his brothers. To kill one for food was both fratricide and cannibalism.
>
> "Yet," I persisted, "the man was no more wallaby than the British are lions, the Russian bears, or the Americans bald eagles?"

[8] There is no question that Toly (Anatole) Sawenko was, and is, knowledgeable about the lifeways of Aboriginal people. At the time he first met Chatwin, Sawenko had worked with Aboriginal desert people for a considerable length of time, in areas including health, education and Aboriginal land rights claims. Chatwin's too clever-by-half verbal exchanges simply serve to emphasize his intensely competitive approach to knowledge and rivalrous conversational style.

> "Any species," [Arkady] said, "can be a Dreaming. A virus can be a Dreaming. You can have a . . . rain Dreaming, a desert-orange Dreaming, a lice Dreaming." (Chatwin, *Songlines* 12)

At this point B2 Bruce, the self-declared polymath, chips in with, "[a]nd the Welsh have leeks, the Scots thistles and Daphne changed into a laurel" (12–13).

Throughout the book, the impersonal narrator and the more transparent Bruce figure both have a tendency to bring conversations about Australian desert Aborigines back to a default Anglo-European *point de repère*. While Chatwin had earlier claimed that he did not want to learn about the songlines concept from "other men," it *was* his use of other men's voices in *Songlines* that informed this book, although it is clear that Chatwin's understanding was limited. This was also a result of his tendency to apply Anglo-European knowledge systems as the benchmark test, rather than genuinely grappling with desert Aboriginal people's legitimate difference. This militated against any deep or empathetic understanding on his part. Chatwin's central subject positioning in *Songlines* greatly contributed to his later celebrity status.[9] His fame was cemented soon after its publication, owing to his well-publicized death from AIDS. His post-mortem status as an iconic, trailblazing gay man is ironic in terms of how he had conducted such a compartmentalized life.

On the Relative Absence of Representations of the Desert in *Songlines* and Divergent Views in Relation to Ideas about the "Desert"

Songlines is strangely devoid of any genuine attempt to describe or represent the desert itself, other than fleetingly. It seems that the arid and semi-arid landscapes of the desert regions into which Chatwin ventured were of

[9] More recently, Chatwin's seemingly endlessly replicated celebrity has extended to luxury merchandise. In 2015 under the imprimatur of the prestigious London-based Burberry fashion house, the company released a limited edition set of Chatwin's books, clothbound and selling for £495.00 per set. Burberry's design CEO also released a menswear collection including shirts and travel bags "inspired" by Chatwin and clearly pitched at affluent young gay men. This followed Burberry's successful marketing of an earlier clothing line based on David Hockney's artwork. The success of the Chatwin collection is underscored by celebrity endorsements including one by David Bowie, who placed *The Songlines* as one of his 100 "favourite" books. (https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/fashion.../burberrys-ode-to-bruce-chatwin/; Six-Piece Bruce Chatwin Book Set | Burberry | WishList | Burberry, https://www.pinterest.com/pin/390054017720026881/, 7 Jun. 2019. See Mulshine.

scant interest to him. Rather than engaging with the Australian Central desert as a unique space, he seems to wrestle only with his own ideas about nomadism and singing. It was as if he conceptualized the desert simply as a platform for the actors, while Aboriginal people conceptualize their country as more or less the reverse of that. In fact Chatwin's understanding of desert country contradicts Aboriginal understandings. In her book *Nourishing Terrains*, the anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose has written that "[from an Aboriginal perspective] country is synonymous with life" (10) and also that "[p]eople say country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy" (7).

When, for over a decade, I lived at Lajamanu in the northern Tanami Desert, over time numerous visitors who arrived from overseas or from large Australian cities, for example Sydney or Melbourne, came to stay with me. Some commented on their initial, sometimes continuing and profound disorientation in what they perceived to be a vast, drab, empty space. In places close to Lajamanu it is possible to take a three hundred and sixty degrees view of sparsely distributed flora, anthills and ochre-red earth (see fig. 3 and 4). It was perhaps a similar experience for early navigators sailing the world's oceans.

As an example, when an American Summer of Institute of Linguistics (SIL)[10] missionary arrived in Lajamanu in the early 1980s, she found the open terrain disturbing. Having lived in New York for most of her life, the seemingly endless panorama comprising miles of spinifex grass on the red earth, punctuated by small bushes and large red anthills (termite mounds) deeply affected her. While only living there for a relatively short length of time, there seemed to be no diminution of the young woman's anxiety. In contrast to her former life lived entirely in a New York apartment, in which she said she "didn't even have a pot-plant," she commented that for her the desert flora was evocative of "outer space."

Others too experienced dread at the openness of the country, including a young Japanese woman who visited her friends, a Japanese film crew already in Lajamanu, where their group was engaged in making a film about traditional Warlpiri hunting and gathering. This was the mid-1980s, and the young woman's kenophobia caused her to have a panic attack that I witnessed.

[10] SIL is a mostly Protestant, US-based, global missionary body specializing in Bible translation in the third world. All SIL are also co-members of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Fig. 3. View from my Toyota 4WD troop carrier on the rough bush track, close to Lajamanu, c. 1982. Photograph: Christine Nicholls.

Fig. 4. View from my Toyota 4WD troop carrier on the rough bush track on the almost 700 kilometre single vehicle width "road" between Lajamanu and Katherine, c.1982. Photograph: Christine Nicholls.

While Chatwin had previously spent time in desert areas on other continents, there were important differences. Genuinely "nomadic groups" live in parts of Africa and the Middle East. Further to this, Chatwin revealed nil understanding that desert people, including the Warlpiri among whom I lived, regarded the so-called "desert" as their economic base, requiring continuous rigorous labour on their part. As Aboriginal people did not travel with herds of animals that constituted their major economic base, the land itself was their economic foundation.

Moreover, their travelling practices were light-years away from the form of aimless wandering Chatwin evokes in *Songlines*, represented as either "nomadism" or "man's restlessness." Desert people did not walk for pleasure or to mitigate innate restiveness: Aboriginal walking was *work* that they depended on to stay alive.

The Economy, Baby

To elaborate more fully on the latter, at the time Bruce Chatwin jetted into Australia, many Aboriginal people, in the desert or elsewhere in Australia (Rose 43–65) had had their land usurped by colonial incursions. Arriving in Alice Springs, Chatwin could not have failed to notice that Land Rights had become a major issue for Aboriginal people.

There is no mention in *Songlines* that the land that many of the desert people had previously owned had been for eons their major means of production. This land was owned by specific groups of Aboriginal people. Land was Aboriginal people's foundational means of production and thus of survival. It was from their own land that they extracted food and water.

Frederick Rose (1915–91), a London-born, Cambridge educated anthropologist and zoologist who migrated to Australia in 1937 to conduct anthropological fieldwork in a classical Aboriginal society, elucidated on this matter. A Marxist, Rose was among the first non-Aboriginal persons in either of the latter disciplines to recognize the land as the basis of Aboriginal people's economies, regardless of their location on the island-continent. Rose arrived at the understanding that classical Aboriginal kinship structures and relationships were superstructure founded upon this substrate economic base at a time when most of his fellow anthropologists believed that the aforementioned kinship structures and interactions were the foundation of Aboriginal sociocultural practice. In addition, Rose recognized considerably earlier than the majority of his peers that his colleague and fellow ethnographer, Frederick McCarthy, was correct in stating categorically that, "contrary to popular concept, the Aborigines conserve food when possible, particularly for large gatherings, for trade and

for the time when the raw product is no longer available" (McCarthy qtd. in Rose 57). Rose also draws the conclusion that "[c]onservation of food by the Aborigines was a part of their economy that has not been given the attention it deserves," flagging the fact that later he intended to extrapolate on McCarthy's view that Aboriginal people planned for the future via their food preservation techniques (Rose 57).

While it is clear that in pre-contact days the extreme heat of the desert hindered food preservation particularly in the hottest months (once in mid-summer the thermometer I had placed in a shaded area outside my Lajamanu house rose to 57° Celsius, or 134.6° Fahrenheit), Warlpiri people who had grown up in the bush were adept in food conservation in which heat played an important part in some cases, as the following example demonstrates.

A Warlpiri artist and friend, the late Cecil Johnson Japangardi, in presenting me with a painting of his wanakiji or ngayaki (synonyms for the Australian bush tomato, *Solanum chippendalei*), discussed how in the "old days" Warlpiri would collect fresh wanakiji, thread them through skewers and take those with them while traversing their country. While the wanakiji dehydrated in the heat, transforming them into sun-dried tomatoes, they retained protein and calcium, and were also an excellent source of dietary fibre. In his artwork (fig. 6), in which wanakiji and the turlturrpa ("skewers"; see fig. 5 and 6) are depicted, Cecil Japangardi has also represented numerous gender-neutral people as u-shapes sitting on the ground, facing one another, possibly consuming wanakiji. For a portrayal of a Warlpiri child's depiction of turlturrpa, see Jillian Dixon Nakamarra's painting (fig. 5).

The method used is explained in the Warlpiri dictionary:

> "Miyi wanakiji kalu pantirninjarla kirlka-mani. Pantirnili, pantirnili, yangka kalu watiyarlalku yirrarni. Rdilypirr-rdilypirr-yinja-yanilki. Kirrirdimpayirla—watiyarla." "They pierce open the bush tomatoes and clean them out. They go on piercing, piercing, they put them on a stick. They thread them one by one onto a skewer. Onto a long thin stick." (Laughren, Hale and Warlpiri Lexicography Group 1201)

These lightweight carrying sticks used as skewers, called pinarlingi or turlturrpa, were quickly fashioned from thin, strong sticks, making them easy to transport on foot. Sun-dried tomatoes, which were often cleaned out with emu bones before being skewered, provided energizing snacks for Warlpiri while en route across their lands (Japangardi). At the same time, Cecil explained how sometimes the wanakiji would be placed in the sun until dry, then mashed up with water until it became a kind of paste, which was then consumed.

Fig. 5. *Young initiated Warlpiri man with kangaroo meat threaded on turlturrpa, which he gives to his family when re-uniting with them* (painting by Jillian Nakamarra Dixon assisted by younger Lajamanu school children, 2001). Reproduced from Molly Napurrurla Tasman and Christine Nicholls, *The Pangkarlangu and the Lost Child, A Dreaming Narrative*, Sydney: Working Title, 2002. Reproduced with permission from Harper Collins Australia Pty. Ltd.

Not long after Cecil told me this, I found out that the conservation of kangaroo meat, involving a similar method, was also a Warlpiri practice, particularly useful in the cooler months, providing people with an excellent source of protein with little fat. As the linguistic polyglot Ken Hale (1934–2001)[11] explicated in the Warlpiri dictionary, "*Kuyu-rlangu-jala kalu turlturr-pantirniji—marlu-rlangu kujakalu kanyi watiyarlu yangka watiya kirrirdirla, yirnmilki, ngula kalu turlturr-yinyi. Turlturr-pantirni. Yikarla yangka kanyi ngurrju-katu—kulalpa-jana katikarla. Watiyarlalku yangka yikalu turlturr-yinyi marlu—yirnmi*." The English translation reads:

[11] Kenneth Locke Hale, an American linguist of legendary status, worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He specialized in and mastered an extraordinary range of mostly endangered and/or previously undocumented indigenous languages, including Navajo and Warlpiri.

> It's meat that they put onto a skewer—as when they carry kangaroo meat by means of a stick—like on a long stick—when the meat has been cooked, and they put it on a skewer. Skewer it. So one can carry it better, he doesn't get weighed down by it, as it's on a stick that they skewer the kangaroo meat with. (Laughren, Hale and Warlpiri Lexicography Group 1247–48)

Such practices illustrate one instance of Chatwin's flawed view of Australian Aboriginal people as "nomads." Warlpiri did not take leisurely strolls though the desert, wandering here and there, relying opportunistically on finding sufficient food to eat and water to drink. Central Australian Aboriginal people's approach was rigorous. Their expertise in sourcing and conserving food where possible, along with necessarily disciplined route taking, belie such characterization.

Chatwin was the one who could afford, in all senses of the word, to go on "walkabout" wherever and whenever he felt so inclined, at any pace. This was a non-essential luxury and line of action that Aboriginal people in desert regions simply could not afford. Loss of life would have been the result. Unlike Chatwin, desert people did not go on lengthy walks electively. This view will be developed in the section that follows this one.

What else is wrong with Chatwin's theory about Aboriginal "nomadic" travel, as he applies it to the Central Desert Aboriginal groups represented in *Songlines*? The short answer to this is "a great deal." To begin, Australian desert people (and other Aboriginal groups) are in fact *not* nomads. The primary definition of "nomad" cited in Oxford English dictionary online reads as follows: "A member of a people that travels from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals and has no permanent home."

The term's origin, according to the Oxford Dictionary Online, is stated as being from the late 16th century: from French *nomade*, via Latin from Greek *nomas*, nomad: "roaming in search of pasture," from the base of *nemein*: "to pasture." Chatwin's loose, populist understanding of nomadism apropos of Aboriginal people is misleading. That this misinformation has confused some readers, including John Verlenden, becomes obvious in the following passage. Verlenden, writing an article apropos of *Songlines,* stated that:

> The [Australian] aboriginals [sic], of course, were nomadic. They drove their stock around their given plots of land following rigidly constructed topographic surveys composed of songs. Instead of being honored for coming up with a system of aesthetic and mathematically sophisticated world-knowledge, they were marginalized. (Verlenden, n.pag.)

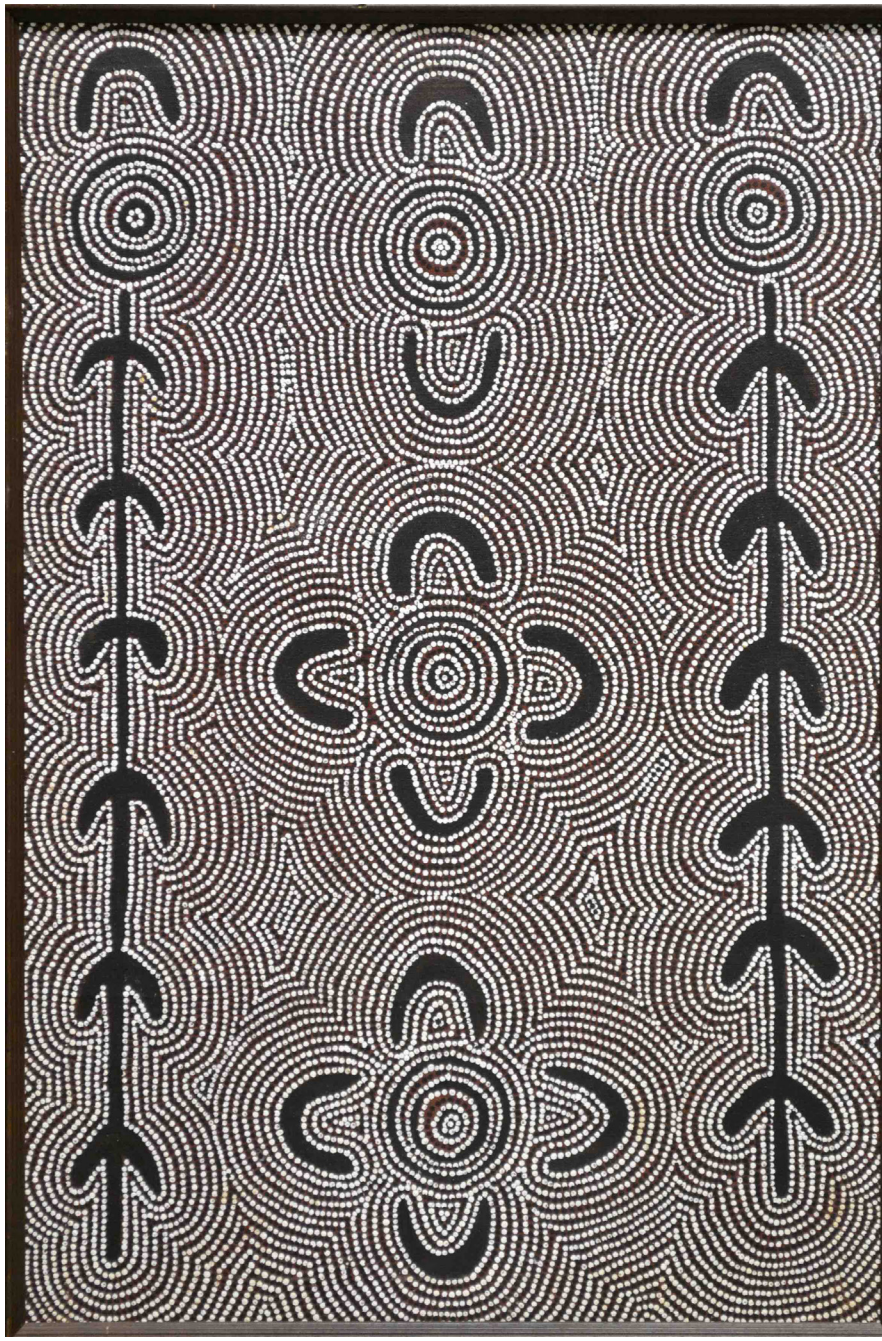

Fig. 6. The late Cecil Johnson Japangardi, Warlpiri, Lajamanu, NT, *Wanakiji* or *Ngayaki Jukurrpa* (*"Bush Tomato"* or *"Wild Tomato" Dreaming*), c. 1988, acrylic on canvas, 92 x 60 cm; © the artist's estate Lajamanu, permission courtesy of Warnayaka Art, Lajamanu.

Given what Chatwin wrote in *Songlines*, Verlenden's interpretation is valid, and his use of the phrase "plot of land" (also from Chatwin's book) is equally telling. The word "plot" in relation to land derives originally from Old English and into Middle English, meaning a "small parcel or piece of land," and applies to agricultural societies, not hunter-gatherers.

Equally, there is no evidence that Australian Aboriginal people, over a period of occupancy of this island-continent of more than 65,000 years prior to colonization by the British, ever "drove stock" around "given plots of land following rigidly constructed topographic surveys composed of songs." While the same dictionary defines a secondary, more recent, populist usage of a nomad as "[a] person who does not stay long in the same place; a wanderer" ("Nomad"), this describes Bruce Chatwin himself, rather than Australian Aboriginal people. Australian Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers, typically travelling light, accessing water, harvesting fruits and vegetables and hunting game.

O'Dea et al. write that the "successful survival [of Aboriginal people as hunter-gatherers] depended on a comprehensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of their territory" (233). Further to this, as Lewis writes, Aboriginal prowess in terrestrial navigation was premised on the fact "that there is no such thing as a featureless landscape" (37) and that "[m]oreover, in *physical* orientation, the *spiritual* world, manifested in terrestrial sacred sites and Dreaming tracks, would appear to be the primary reference" (37). This was flagged earlier, when Chatwin's undefined conceptualization of "nomadism" and walking praxis was compared with that of classical Aboriginal people.

So, rather than regarding Chatwin's irreconcilable belief systems as a form of creative dissonance that "*challenge*[s] hegemonic ways of seeing" (Palmer 311), a central point in his otherwise convincing argument, from my secular, eighth generation Australian perspective, Palmer's account begs the question. While one can accept the significance of Chatwin's substrate Englishness and the formative role that Christianity played in his early socialization, it seems apparent that he was unable to step aside sufficiently to accept the genuine otherness of Aboriginal belief systems.

Chatwin's heavily inflected Christianity overrides any of the superstrate titbits of knowledge about Aboriginal people that Chatwin may have acquired mostly from white men while on the hop during his two short visits to Central Australia. Judging by his sense of entitlement, underpinned by economic and social capital, demonstrable in a myriad of ways, Chatwin never found it possible to transcend this background. While the hegemony of the British Empire with respect to the colonies had waned by the time Chatwin was born, the male public schools in Britain continued to espouse similar colonial attitudes, class hierarchies and ideas to those that had informed the colonial era.

While Bruce Chatwin and Salman Rushdie were travelling together in the Northern Territory, the former discussed his songlines concept with his friend. Rushdie would later inform Nicholas Shakespeare that

> [w]hile he [Rushdie] responded to the metaphor, Rushdie distrusted Bruce's anthropological accuracy. "Bruce's vision is that this is a continuous song disgorged while walking through a landscape whose creation it describes; if you walk at 6 m.p.h. the song will describe what you see. If you think about this for five minutes, it's the longest song ever, much longer than *The Iliad*. It's true, the song tells of the creation myth in a few verses, but it doesn't create an exact relationship. He was trying to make it more exact than it is. I asked him, 'What happens when the stories cross? Is there a grid?' He didn't have the answer." (Shakespeare 435)

To conclude this section, Palmer may have put forward a more convincing argument had Chatwin never before "gone into the desert" prior to writing about Australian Aboriginal people. As noted earlier, Chatwin had done so in Africa and the Middle East for lengthy periods on occasions prior to his quest to understand the terrestrial navigation prowess of Central Australian Aboriginal people.

Chatwin on Walkabout: Occidental Individualism and Rambling On

Chatwin's *raisons d'être* for walking solo had virtually nothing in common with classical[12] Aboriginal walking in the desert. The foremost differences are economic. Flowing on from that, walking is conceptualized very differently by people in economically privileged "Western" societies and those of hunter-gatherer desert Aborigines, a matter to be expanded upon further.

Central and Western Desert Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers. As O'Dea et al. write, Aborigines derived

> their diet from a wide range of uncultivated plant foods and wild animals. The composition and diversity of the food supply, and the relative proportions of plant and animal foods, were greatly influenced by the season of the year and the geographic locations. (234)

[12] In this article I deliberately use the word "classical" in contradistinction to "traditional" because "classical" has for the most part been restricted to the context of the achievements and high art of Western cultures, notably Latin and Greek accomplishments. The word "traditional" has also been discussed by Hobsbawm and Ranger as largely "invented," in that in the western world much of what is regarded as "traditional" is in fact very recent. See Hobsbawm and Ranger.

The authors add that "[s]urvival depended on an intimate and detailed knowledge of the land, and the impact of the annual cycle of seasonal changes on the flora and fauna of their territory" (White; Hiatt and Jones; Kirk qtd. in O'Dea et al. 234). While O'Dea et al. underestimate the extent of the Aboriginal food storage economy, which has more recently been a greater focus of research (see, for example Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, despite Pascoe's possible overgeneralization of the extent of this practice by focusing on a particularly well-watered and relatively cool geographic area). O'Dea also points out that food collection was undertaken by smallish extended family groups or bands of Aboriginal people. Only in exceptional circumstances did desert people walk alone.

Solitary walking—and also, more recently, driving alone into the desert regions—was, and still is, a rarity from the perspective of Aboriginal desert people. Unaccompanied walking in the desert regions is considered dangerous and Warlpiri people who do so are thought to be "warunga" (mad; deranged) either temporarily or permanently for doing so (Jeannie Napurrurla; Valerie Napanangka). Napanangka was specifically commenting on an occasion when a middle-aged Warlpiri woman disappeared for several days, after walking alone into semi-arid country near Lajamanu. This alarmed the entire community.

It needs to be made clear *why* Central and Western Desert people "foot-walked" (to use their Aboriginal English term) their country—arid or semi-arid estates that extend over vast tracts of country in Australia's interior desert region. This resulted from sheer economic necessity. Far from wandering aimlessly or looking for enlightenment, as implied by Chatwin's elective "nomadism," Warlpiri and other desert people (and elsewhere) were obliged to travel in annual cycles over their country to procure seasonally available flora including bush fruit and vegetables, and most importantly, water.

In this they were dependent on their pre-existing comprehensive knowledge of the times and places where fauna would likely come into season during the annual cycle. This was underpinned by complex kinship systems via which people developed specialized expertise in botany and zoology, including detailed knowledge about specific species and subspecies, understanding the properties of the latter, identifying and conserving them. Kinship rights and obligations also apply to land ownership, from which intellectual copyright over songs and narratives flowed; they were not sung as a kind of post-hoc libretto to accompany the musical notation of a specific tract of land, as implied by Chatwin's notion of songlines, but developed over eons of knowledge acquisition acquired experientially, the bottom line of which was survival in harsh country. The songs were mnemonics reflecting the people's economically-underpinned travels—and more.

In "Travel as Performed Art" American-born sociologist Judith Adler proposes that "the reproduction and modification of distinctive travel styles be examined in terms of the social worlds of their producers" (1373). She notes that

> [t]ravel undertaken and executed with a primary concern for the meanings discovered, created, and communicated as persons move through geographical space in stylistically specified ways can be distinguished from travel in which geographical movement is merely incidental to the accomplishment of other goals. (Adler 1368)

I would further argue that distinctive travel styles to a greater extent reflect the *economic* realities and worlds of their producers, which in turn bring to bear *secondary*, flow-on effects on people's *social* worlds. While somewhat more than incidental to the books he published on his exploits, Chatwin's modus operandi in relation to his long treks, his aforementioned "elective nomadism," meant he could take breaks when he felt so inclined. Chatwin's major focus on "the meanings discovered" in his globetrotting jaunts is as dissimilar as it is possible to be from the Warlpiri or other desert people's daily necessity to walk: apropos of the latter group, they had no other options. The history of British walking and relatively recent research about specific walking practices also illuminates social class differences within Chatwin's own sociocultural and economic demesne.

The British cultural geographer Tim Edensor makes the dual points that "the rise of excursive walking in the [British] Romantic era is part of the development of modern corporeal reflexivity" ("Walking" 82), and that this superseded the idea of walking as the dominant form of transportation, which gave way to walking as a leisure activity.

Chatwin's "travel style" was attributable to his conservative-leaning, middle-to-upperclass English background and public school education, but most of all, to the economic advantage that gave him the wherewithal for these excursions. His travels were also greatly enabled by his marriage to Elizabeth Chanler, an American from "old money." In the course of Chatwin's walking adventures, as the stay-at-home wife and farmer, Elizabeth Chatwin bailed out her husband financially and in other ways.

Chatwin's walking adventures included multiple, mostly brief, sexual encounters with men (Shakespeare; Shakespeare and Elizabeth Chatwin). Chatwin's walking was not the result of poverty or political persecution, nor was it economically underpinned migration; and it was not an economically-based decision compelling him to join an army or mercenary group. It was entirely voluntary. It licensed Chatwin's adventures of sexual identity. While Chatwin justified this freely made choice as being the

essential *raison d'être* underpinning "man's" restlessness, it enabled him to exercise a significant part of himself that he did not wish to disclose to his immediate family or certain friends: his homosexuality.

This does not imply criticism of Chatwin's sexuality per se, nor disapproval of his decision to hide it from specific persons. At that time, this revelation undoubtedly shook others greatly, including his pious Catholic wife who may have been aware of his sexuality but not about the extent of his adultery, when this came to light via mass media announcing his premature death from AIDS in 1989 (Shakespeare).

While Judith Adler does not reference Chatwin in any articles, she throws considerable light on his ambulatory praxis in her observations that walking of any kind in the western world was originally an almost exclusively male activity, although over time it became the province of rich, leisured persons of both genders (see Adler's "Youth on the Road").[13] In a later article Adler elaborated on walking in the western world as a "performative" practice among those with economic capital, which the walkers are able to transform into a form of social capital, although this is inferred rather than stated explicitly:

> Non-repeatable encounters with strangers more easily serve metonymic functions delivering unambiguous exemplificatory knowledge of "the Frenchman," "Italy," "the Third World," or even "humanity," than the multiplicity of open-ended and complex contacts of life in a home territory. Observations and experiences occurring only once in a lifetime, or even only once every year, gain in intensity and (like "important" cultural texts) function as relatively abstract signifiers open to changing interpretation and use. Paradoxically disorientation and lack of knowledge pertinent to a travel site only further free encounter to be seized as the stuff of private dream and enacted myth. (Adler, "Travel as Performed Art" 1383)

England has a particularly extensive travel history, inclusive of the colonization of distant places (for example Australia) that made up the British Empire. That long-term British history stretches back to before the Middle Ages. "Rambling" is another phenomenon that Edensor describes as "collective walking." Edensor believes that concept of rambling entered common usage c. the 1920s or 30s (personal communication with the author). Edensor also points out that rambling in a group is regarded as a markedly different—and inferior—pursuit vis-à-vis solitary walking,

[13] In this article Adler makes the point that both walking and tramping were overwhelmingly male-dominated activities up until relatively recently, with the advent of cultural tourism in the western world and beyond.

pointing out that "[t]hose who advocate solitary walking place it above these communal [collective walking] values" ("Walking" 89). On the same page he notes that solitary walking is a practice that hints at "the development of a refined bodily disposition, a claim that becomes more explicitly status-oriented when solitary walking is more crudely promoted as superior in contrast to collective walking practices."

The radical individualism that Chatwin demonstrated in his solo walks is highly valorized in the Western world. Tellingly, such ventures are only accessible to the relatively wealthy—or mega-wealthy. Solo sailing around the world, ascending Mount Everest, golf championships, marathon individual walks, these are the playthings of members of affluent societies. In the context of the Western world, and increasingly elsewhere in the developed world, this concept also applies to solo concerts and other performances, including art exhibitions of individual artist's works, which are regarded as superior to group shows.

Such pursuits are the cultural products of socio-economic premises that differ greatly from the "corporate" cultures of classical Aboriginal people in which the group is recognized as being more significant than the individual. Chatwin's ethnocentrism, which seems to have remained intact despite his travels, proved a disabling block to his developing any real understanding of this defining cultural difference.

Misogyny and Chatwin

In a number of encounters with non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women, Chatwin expresses curmudgeonly misogyny that exceeds the aforementioned ethnocentrism. A couple of examples relating to his representation of Aboriginal women will suffice here. In Katherine, a violent colonial town in the Northern Territory in the 1980s, largely defined by its racism, Chatwin entered the rough tin-shed pub in the main street, a pick-up joint where white men paid as little as $5.00 for fleeting sexual encounters with Aboriginal prostitutes. These took place at night while patrons were standing outside in the shadows of its almost unlit beer garden—at the back of the premises.

Chatwin recalls that "a black whore pressed her nipples against my shirt and said, 'You want me darling?'" (*Songlines* 37). Further to this, when visiting a place called "Skull Creek Camp" with Arkady, the pair parked under some ghost gum trees, and found that "[t]wo full-bosomed women, one in a loose green smock, lay asleep on the porch. 'Mavis,' Arkady called. Neither of the fat snoring creatures stirred" (*Songlines* 86). Later the same day, continues Chatwin: "Mavis heaved herself to

her feet and went off lumpily to wake her husband. She needn't have bothered" (*Songlines* 87).

Chatwin's description of the woman in the pub as a "whore" and the others as slothful, bovine creatures reveals just how little he grasped the existential circumstances of peoples whose economic foundation had been thoroughly usurped by the colonizers, leaving them with no recourse but to enter the cash economy by any means whatsoever. Neither is there any consciousness on his part as to why Aboriginal men and women (both genders) might gain a lot of weight. This was a direct result of their enforced sedentarization and diaspora brought about by colonial land theft, notwithstanding pressure from a minority of enlightened missionaries and non-Aboriginal people, whose concerns about the ill-effects of colonization on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people were largely ignored by the authorities. Compounding this was the fact that the stores in the outback settlements mostly sold flour, sugar and sweet drinks, with little or no fresh fruit and vegetables available. The white shopkeepers, and beneficiaries of the "Aboriginal dollar" tendered as their main excuse the cost of transportation of healthy food over distances that were sometimes in excess of a thousand kilometres.

Conclusions

In a 2007 article, I referred to *Songlines* as "inferior and overrated" (Nicholls 96), a position from which I do not resile. In fact, the subsequent impact and global influence of Chatwin's under-researched populist account has hardened that earlier view. As Pfister wrote more than two decades ago, "there is surprisingly little critically incisive writing on Chatwin" (253). This, for the most part, remains so today.

In *Songlines*, Chatwin was rehearsing his long-term theories about walking and nomadism. He regarded these views, self-interestedly perhaps, as universal in application. In universalizing this he is not the first or only person to become captive to an essentialist theory purporting to explain everything. So blinded was he by his own cultural presuppositions and precepts that he seemed incapable of understanding that the urge to walk is not based on a single, homogenous, innate causal factor. There are various explanations for its aetiology, all of which are entirely dependent on the economic and social worlds of the walker. Apropos of the latter, he failed to comprehend the broader social, economic and political situation of the Aboriginal people that he encountered.

The book is a testament to that mis-recognition. Chatwin also compresses an entire epistemology into the "Songlines" concept that he

appropriated from others. In *Songlines* he fails to expand on or develop this core concept, leaving it largely undefined. One could argue that *Songlines* not only represents a form of epistemological violence apropos of those Aboriginal people represented, but is also a reflection of Chatwin's overly hasty and erroneous assumptions. In the end *Songlines* sheds more light on Chatwin himself: others act as exotic backdrop, or scenery. The book is an expression of Chatwin's ontological position, and the hierarchical nature of the culture that shaped him, rather than a masterful unveiling of "the truth" about the Aboriginal people in Australia's Central Desert, and their *raisons d'être* for walking and singing.

Does this matter? Yes, in my view, because this book continues to mislead millions of people, including those who have never encountered an Australian Aboriginal person and have no means of accessing more accurate accounts. They rely on *Songlines* as speaking truth to power. And they've been conned. Chatwin's "wild roguery" in life and in art, as he "*ranne*" (past tense of the Middle English verb "*runne*") *all countries*, might make for a cracking light read, but it does not succeed in enlightening its readers about desert people's core concepts or life-ways.

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