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Songlines 25 years on: walking and encounter in a postcolonial landscape

Abstract:

Strident criticism since publication has failed to dampen enthusiasm for Bruce Chatwin's *The songlines* (1987), which a quarter century later remains popular among visitors to Central Australia and those interested in Aboriginal culture. Early critical reception was shaped by postcolonial theory during the emergence of Aboriginal land rights in Australia, and a corresponding period of critical reflection for anthropologists. This led to significant themes and strengths of the text being overlooked, which are now being retrieved under the influence of ecocriticism. As part of a research project aimed at helping Australian nonfiction writers to better tackle the writing of place, *The songlines* is read afresh for walking's contribution to its representation of a postcolonial geography. The narrative emerges as a peregrination, rather than as an example of Said's orientalism, for which it was widely criticised. The preliminary results presented here highlight walking's close relationship with place through embodiment, specifically its ability to help overcome the 'filters' through which humans view the world; in simple terms, when Chatwin walks, his prose talks. Walking enhances constructions of race and frontier, as well as underpinning the text's thematic concern with place-making. The research provides new and valuable insights for writers of place, and promises a productive critical reading of this popular work, notably as to walking's role in the construction of an Australian identity. Building on theoretical interest in walking as a critical tool, the paper contends that walking be considered as one technique of a postcolonial ecocriticism.

Biographical note:

Glenn Morrison is an award-winning journalist and author of the prize-winning essay 'Two towns called Alice Springs' (2010). He has worked for News Limited as a reporter and newspaper editor, contributed to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and is a casual producer for ABC Radio. Glenn's literary work has been published by Ptilotus Press, the Northern Territory Library, Small Dog Press, and in the Macquarie University journal *Neo*. In 2011 he began full-time studies towards a PhD via the media department at Macquarie University.

Keywords:

Walking – Place – Songlines – Alice Springs – Embodiment

1. Introduction

Writing about place is ‘a huge – not to say unwieldy – topic, and different writers approach it in vastly different ways’. So says Barry Lopez (Lopez 1997), a prominent literary voice from the long-standing and widely revered North American tradition of place writing. An Australian literature of place, by comparison, is in its infancy. In fact, according to poet and critic Mark Tredinnick: ‘Australian geographies have their characteristic musics, (but) rarely, it seems to me, have our prose writers caught those musics’ (Tredinnick 2003, 3).

This paper is an account of some of my research into how walking might help Australian nonfiction writers to better tackle the writing of place. The broader research project examines representations of place in the walking literature of Central Australia, and, as a parenthetical aim, the role walking has played in the construction of an Australian identity. Here, Bruce Chatwin’s *The songlines* (1987)¹ is read for how walking contributed to its representation of place. The paper builds on theoretical interest in walking as a critical method for examining postcolonial geographies. Weaving elements of ecocritical and postcolonial analyses, it suggests walking is both a fresh way to read *The songlines*, and an epistemological bridging of the two theoretical frameworks. Such a method complements current debate over a *postcolonial ecocriticism*, positing walking as the natural ally of both. A necessarily brief review of the literary criticism of *The songlines* is undertaken, before presenting preliminary results of a reading of the text for three aspects of walking: embodiment, walking as place making, and representations of race and frontier.

2. Background to the text

Since its 1987 publication, a quarter century of strident criticism hasn’t dampened readers’ enthusiasm for *The songlines*, which traces the author’s search for a nomadic psyche of humankind. When publishers Random House launched a 25th-anniversary edition this year, Central Australian historian Dick Kimber – who remains fiercely critical of the work – nevertheless conceded it was ‘one of the best-selling books about Aboriginal culture that has ever been’ (Weiss 2012). A new foreword claims *The songlines* transformed travel writing (see Stewart 2012, 1). By my reading of his text and life, Chatwin came to Alice Springs looking for a way to die. Increasingly ill researching the book, he discovered he had AIDS during its editing. Bruce Chatwin passed away in 1989, aged 48 (Krebs 1989; Clapp 1998, 240).

The songlines follows ‘fictional’ protagonist Bruce on a journey to Alice Springs where he encounters Aboriginals and an exiled Ukrainian named Arkady who maps sacred sites for a railway company. Arkady agrees to introduce Bruce to what he describes as ‘a labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as “Dreaming-tracks” or “Songlines”’ (TS, 2). These emerge as a kind of musical or poetic map, which, if recalled correctly and followed to the letter, enabled a singer – in theory at least – to walk clear across the country without losing their way.

Rory Stewart divides *The songlines* into four ‘acts’, which rather effectively captures Chatwin’s structure and thinking as well as reflecting the reality of his field research (Stewart

2012). The first act takes place over a day in Alice Springs; the second concerns Bruce's and Arkady's three-day trip 'out bush' to the north of the town; the third act is the controversial notebooks section, a somewhat disjointed tracing of the peripatetic and other themes and metaphors across the history of literature and Chatwin's real-life travels; the fourth is an epilogue: journey's end and a death scene that brings together many of Chatwin's divergent themes.

3. Critique and context

The songlines and Chatwin have been widely studied, reviewed, and critiqued – far too widely to be reprised fully here.² Broadly speaking, the literary criticism can be grouped under three headings: ethics and genre, postcolonial and anthropological critiques, and ecocritical analyses.

Many have called *The songlines* a travel book, yet Chatwin himself declared it fiction (Ignatieff 1987, 23-4). In fact, when *The songlines* was shortlisted for the Thomas Cook Travel Award, Chatwin withdrew from the contest complaining: 'The journey it describes is an invented journey; it is not a travel book in the generally accepted sense' (Shakespeare 2000, 487). Still, biographer Nicolas Shakespeare noted: 'Little of what occurs in this "novel" is invented. Mostly it is modified reportage' (ibid, 417). Adding to the confusion, Chatwin's ethics came under fire: having presented himself as doing a serious work of nonfiction, he later fictionalised his sources as characters in his 'novel', which some felt 'abused the good faith of those who helped him during his trip' (Archer 2006, 22).

As for many travel writers, postcolonial critics judged Chatwin guilty of furthering the aims of the British Empire (see Brown 1991; Clarke 2002), and his text was deemed reminiscent of Said's *Orientalism* (see Said 1991, 295). Researched and published amid the emergence of identity politics in Australia and the struggle for Aboriginal land rights, Chatwin was accused of appropriating Aboriginal culture to further his pet theories of nomadism. Jeff Archer – who made the most serious attempt at a preliminary trawl of walking – later found Chatwin had taken the Aboriginal debate more seriously than Australian conservative governments since the mid-1990s (Archer 2006, 23). Further, like Morphy a decade earlier (Morphy 1988, 20), he believed non-indigenous Australians might learn something from this 'flawed novel' (Archer 2006, 22). Refuting Archer's contention, Robert Clarke argued Chatwin offered little of lasting value for non-indigenous readers (Clarke 2009, 231). Elsewhere, Clarke described *The songlines* as what Marie Louise Pratt calls an *anti-conquest narrative* (Clarke 2001, 166), echoing Ruth Brown's earlier position, which had also asserted Chatwin naively romanticised Aboriginals (Brown 1991, 6). The book's timing and high profile made it a target for Western anthropologists, who were undergoing a period of self-reflection regarding Western representation of non-Western cultures, while at the same time considering an embrace of travel writing as the new ethnography (Michaels 1988, 48).

Recently, the predominantly harsh criticism softened, and only last year a critic placed Chatwin's search for a 'right death' at the heart of *The songlines*' thematic endeavour (see Palmer 2011). Two things shaped this hostile reaction and its wane in recent times: the

politics of the day fused with an enthusiasm for postcolonial thought, and the subsequent emergence of an environmental ethic in the study and criticism of literature. This growing ethic became known as *ecocriticism*, which probed representations of nature and culture in literature (see Glotfelty & Fromm 1996; Buell 2005; Cranston & Zeller 2007). Ecocriticism's roots in phenomenology and romanticism put it in epistemological conflict with postcolonialism, which, in *The songlines*, had found issue with representations of nomadism, race and empire.

4. Walking with 'Bruce of the outback'

The rise of ecocriticism coincided not only with publication of *The songlines*, but with renewed interest in walking, perhaps helping to underpin walking's emergence as a 'focal point for a wide range of critical, theoretical and historical interest' (Robinson 1989/2006, 143). Walking Central Australia binds Chatwin's text to themes more readily handled within the postcolonial framework, which, being more widely accepted, steered critical interpretation of Chatwin's work towards a focus on the political. As a result, substantive thematic material was overlooked (Chatwin 2008, 2). The fact remains however, that, as Paul Theroux writes, walking defined Chatwin, he was 'one of the great walkers in travel literature'. Moreover, he believed 'walking defined the human race – the best of it' (Theroux 2011, 135-36). Surprisingly then, *The songlines* has not been read critically for walking.

Explorer John McDouall Stuart first walked through Central Australia in 1860, paving the way for the Overland Telegraph Line, cattle, settlement and a frontier period in which as many as 1000 Central Australian Aborigines were shot (Kimber 1990, 16). The Red Centre resonates strongly in representations of Australian identity in literature (Dewar 2008, 212-14) and much of the region's literature is concerned with traversal (See Griffiths 1996; Lynch 2007; Haynes 1998). Many Central Australian narratives involve walking: as narrative arc, mode of traversal, philosophy, theme or metaphor. Says Lynch: 'Travelling through the desert and subsequently returning to more settled regions along the coast to recount the tale is the dominant desert narrative' (Lynch 2007, 77-78). In fact, according to Griffiths travelling to the centre was to travel differently: 'One went "walkabout" in Australian culture to become liminal, to escape or to return to source. So travelling to the centre was a release and a pilgrimage, but ... also an exploration of Aboriginality' (Griffiths 1996, 179).

Explorers depicted the Australian landscape in their journals and maps, which Paul Carter and Richard White called a form of travel writing (see Carter 1987/2010 and White 2007). Such narratives emerge from diary entries; the map – a concrete representation of the imagined world – is the assembled journey. As a means of constructing European place from 'empty' space, says Carter, the explorer's account of his route 'would serve to bring the country into being' (Carter 1987/2010, 69). In fact, Australia has been described so widely in its travel literature that an examination of texts like *The songlines* is crucial to understanding how the nation is represented. This is not surprising when 'the earliest indigenous records and the very first European ones were attempts to describe journeys' (White 2007, 1).

Theoretical work since publication of *The songlines* posits walking as a critical tool for examining postcolonial geographies and other landscapes (see Macauley 2000; Bassett 2004; Wylie 2005; Spencer 2010; Murphy 2011). Having shaped critical appraisal of Chatwin's book, postcolonial theory is now undergoing re-evaluation in light of its embrace or otherwise of ecocriticism (see Huggan 2009; Huggan & Tiffin 2010). Of course walking – and perhaps more generally the journey per se – has played a significant role in the production of literature since Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Krauth 2010, 6). It has attracted the attentions of poets, essayists, artists, philosophers and social theorists (Bassett 2004, 398). The pace of walking is important, returning us, as Stephen Hunt observes, to 'an awareness ... more familiar to our evolutionary tempo.' Hunt quotes author and newspaper columnist Will Self, who argues: 'Nothing puts you in touch with the environment quite as much as walking; it has a balanced, rhythmic mantra of movement. When walking, you lose the screen through which you habitually perceive modern life' (Hunt 2009, 73).

In romantic, European and, more recently, American literatures, there has been widespread critical evaluation of walking and its role in literature (for comprehensive histories see Robinson 1989/2006; Solnit 2001; Nicholson 2008; Theroux 2011). Walking in American literatures is strongly linked to representations of national identity (Hamilton 2008). Melissa Harper suggests this is also the case for Australian literature (Harper 2007). Otherwise, there has been scant Australian critical examination of walking, with notable exceptions Stephen Muecke and Nigel Krauth (see Muecke 2004; Krauth 2010). Postcolonial theorist Paul Carter probed the peripatetic in explorer's journals (see Carter 1987/2010), and there is mention of Australian walking in the international literature (for example Solnit 2001; Hamilton 2008). Recently, John Ryan noted Henry David Thoreau's syncretic and embodied approach to place writing as an influence in early Australian literatures of place (Ryan 2011, 1).

5. Walking the songlines

The songlines is concerned thematically with walking, though it is not a walking narrative per se; that is to say, walking is not the narrative arc, as in, for example, Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980/1992), or Peter Matthiessen's *The snow leopard* (1979/1998). In fact, Stephen Muecke quipped: 'The book's walking is confined to the English garden path. It ends up, after a slightly sordid adventure with the Other, back home in time for high tea ...' (Muecke 1989). Even before Chatwin's arrival in Australia, however, his ideas about humankind's walking nature had 'approached the level of a secular religion' (Chatwin 2008, 12). I contend that Andrew Palmer's thesis – of a 'right death' (Palmer 2011) – recasts the work as a peregrination, a chiefly theological term meaning a 'journey on foot', a 'pilgrimage' or 'the course of a person's life viewed originally as a temporary sojourn on earth' (Hamilton 2008, 17). In this light, it would appear postcolonial analyses such as Clarke's and Brown's may be insufficiently nuanced to reveal the many layers present in the text. And rather than being a journey in the service of Empire, Chatwin's is of a more fundamental and spiritual nature: his walk is from birth to death and his concern the right way to step it, something akin to Sartre's life in good faith. Nor has *The songlines* been examined for walking's relation to identity³ and its construction of place, particularly the effect of embodiment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's

‘measurant of the world’ (Merlau-Ponty 1969, 248-49). As Mary Austin’s writing suggests of the Americas, ‘to truly understand American identity we must attend to the intersection of language, land, and body – an intersection we can locate in walking’ (Hamilton 2008, 251). Building from Hamilton’s and Harper’s premises, this paper begins a search for the same link in Australian literature. Three aspects of walking in *The songlines* are examined hereunder.

5.1 Walking and embodiment

In the following passage, protagonist Bruce takes a walk while visiting a remote Aboriginal community west of Alice Springs:

I filled my water flask, put two extra bottles in my rucksack, and set out. On the edge of the settlement, I passed a lady’s handbag hanging from a tree.

I walked over a plateau of sandhills and crumbly red rock, broken by gulches which were difficult to cross. The bushes had been burnt for game-drives, and bright green shoots were sprouting from the stumps. (Climbing a hill, I found) Old Alex, naked, his spears along the ground and his velvet coat wrapped in a bundle. I nodded and he nodded.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘What brings you here?’

He smiled ... and barely opening his lips, said: ‘Footwalking all the time all over the world.’ (TS 252)

The language is plain, the observations precise, aimed only at what Bruce sees before his eyes. As Will Self suggests, perhaps walking is the key to such clear observation. Further, there is a lyrical quality to the prose; an appealing assonance, the very sound of the words and their meter is arguably as important to the passage as the content. It is easy to imagine the rhythm of walking in the step of the prose. In fact, others have noticed this clarity. Chatwin’s co-editor on *The songlines* Susannah Clapp wrote, ‘his most effective broaching of new ground was his descriptions of expeditions – in making other people see places for the first time. *The songlines* benefits from the vigour of these descriptions’ (Clapp 1998, 205). Theroux quipped ‘when Chatwin is on foot, his prose is sharper’ (Theroux 2011, 136). What is proposed here then, is this: when Chatwin walks, his prose talks. The walking voice combines clear perception gained through perambulatory data collection, with a lyrical quality in the prose.

Bruce himself gives a clue here. In the notebooks section of *The songlines*, Bruce quotes from an interview with the director of the Transvaal Museum, Bob Brain, who believes the way to approach nature is to see things the way they are ‘without filters’ (TS 269): here is the phenomenological domain of the writer/walker. Ecocritic Lawrence Buell also likens the challenge of bringing intertextuality to account in the writing of landscape as akin to seeing through filters: ‘these filters begin with the human sensory apparatus itself ... Our reconstruction of the environment cannot be other than skewed and partial. Even if this were not so, even if human perception could perfectly register environmental stimuli, literature could not’ (Buell 1995, 84). Like Henry David Thoreau, it appears Chatwin also took both a syncretic and embodied approach to his apprehension of place. Above all, Chatwin

underscores his attempts by walking, prefacing Merlau-Ponty's philosophy of 'embodied experience' (Waldenfels 2008, 81). Put simply, this is to learn with the body, rather than just the brain (Krauth 2010, 5).

5.2 Walking as place-making

Space – as distinct from place – is the 'uniform medium in which things are arranged in three dimensions' (Merlau-Ponty 2008, 38). Geographer Edward Casey calls this geometry the 'encompassing void in which things (including human beings) are positioned' (Casey 2001, 1). Conversely, place is 'perceived or felt space, space humanised' (Buell 1995, 253). Meaning imparted through narratives of memory, lived experience and knowledge, turns space into place for people. Walking and place are closely interwoven: walking 'locates the body in place', and 'traces a place through the continuous trail left by the moving body and the memory of its motions' (Macauley 2000, 7). Walking therefore creates place, and in postcolonial geographies becomes a starting point for reflection and scholarship (Murphy 2011, 239).

Prior to its crossing, inland Australia must have been a blank canvas in the mind of the early explorer, a white void marking the centre of the earliest map: empty *space* labelled simply as 'unknown'. And yet, in another sense it was already filled with mystery and hopes as yet unrealised, a landscape ready for inscription: an object of desire. Conversely, for Aboriginals, the desert was already *place*; as Haynes writes: 'the whole land is semiotic, a complex web of signs, pointing beyond themselves to a spiritual meaning' (Haynes 1998, 28). In *The songlines*, Chatwin positions walking at the intersection of place, life and (Murphy's) scholarly reflection upon that life; embracing the peregrination, linking language through naming and walking to a Heideggerian sense of being.

Paul Carter believes explorers create place as 'a telling of the journey rather than a slice of geographical reality'; as the traveller makes his journey, step by step, naming as he goes, the landscape is recorded anew (Carter 1987/2010, 69). Chatwin takes this idea a step further, as an aesthetic rendering, fictionally reinterpreting (in a dream) anthropologist Theodore Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* as a reimagining of the Genesis story: the result is a hybridised Aboriginal Dreaming (*In the Beginning* TS, 80-82). Chatwin's 'dreaming' takes up as the Ancestors rise from their slumber beneath the earth's crust, to cry out:

'I AM!' 'I am – Snake ... Cockatoo ... Honey Ant ... Honeysuckle ...' And this first 'I am!', this primordial act of naming, was held, then and forever after, as the most secret and sacred couplet of the Ancestor's song.

Each of the Ancients (now basking in the sunlight) put his left foot forward and called out a second name. He put his right foot forward and called out a third name. He named a waterhole, the reedbeds, the gum trees – calling to right and left, calling all things into being and weaving their names into verses. (TS, 81)

Here is Larsen's aesthetic rendering of the mind/body boundary, as well as of Marie Louise Pratt's *contact zone* (Larsen 2007, 356), a more nodal and less linear imagining of what

might otherwise be called the frontier (see below). Here the frontier is manifested as a world called into being through walking; the link is made between place and its creation, walking, naming and dwelling, as well as the comforts of a rightful place (*now basking in the sunlight*).

5.3 Walking, race and frontier

If all representations of Aboriginal people in *The songlines* were based on the little Chatwin learned of traditional culture, he would certainly be guilty of romanticising them. However, they are not. As Homi Bhabha argues, the problems of cultures emerge most at the boundaries between them, sometimes called by others the frontier. Here ‘meanings and values are misread or signs are misappropriated’ (Bhabha 1995/2003, 206). The frontier is considered by Richard Davis ‘one of the most evocative tropes underlying the production of national identity in Australia’ (Davis 2005, 7). Frederick Jackson Turner, who galvanised the term in North American history, described it as ‘the meeting point between savagery and civilisation’ (Turner 1893, 2), a line dividing nature from culture. Such linearity is criticised as foreign to an Aboriginal worldview (Carter 1987/2010, 161). Yet Larsen argues the human body plots this same dividing line, a screen upon which we may project some measure of the environment and our interaction with it: ‘we are that boundary ... in our bodies’ (Larsen 2007, 365).

The frontier of *The songlines* is not linear, but nodal and discontinuous. It is confused, and manifests when least expected, perhaps in the comment of a fellow drinker: ‘know the best thing to do with a sacred site? ... dynamite!’ (TS, 135). Or in a lady’s handbag absent-mindedly ‘hanging from a tree’ (see earlier TS, 252). Or when relentless heat means it would be ‘madness to go on’ (TS, 253); or as wily traditional artist Winston, who, thought to be naïve and about to be carpetbagged by Mrs Houston, unexpectedly demands his rights and a higher price for his artwork (TS, 290-91).

Then, once again Chatwin cleaves to romanticism:

from what I knew of the Songlines ... the whole of Classical mythology might represent ... a gigantic ‘song-map: ... the to-ing and fro-ing of gods and goddesses, the caves and sacred springs ... could be interpreted (as) totemic geography. (TS, 130)

Later, when an Aboriginal man named Joshua traces a songline in the sand, Bruce has trouble understanding, until he realises: ‘this was a *Qantas Dreaming*. Joshua had once flown into London’ (TS, 171-73). Chatwin comes full circle; the frontier is a confusing place. This conflation of culture old and new, foreign and homespun, ancient and modern, is typical of a frontier, or Pratt’s *contact zone*, which many believe Alice Springs to be (for example Womack 2009). Occurring repeatedly in the text is Fanon’s zone of ‘occult instability where the people dwell’, revealing how ‘claims to the inherent originality or purity of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity’ (Bhabha 1995/2003, 208).

Chatwin's observations of the frontier speak of his presence or embodiment in the contact zone, which impacts on his representation of Aboriginal people. Rather than constituting the 'backdrop' or 'shadowy presence' of one critic's appraisal (see Harvey 1987, 27), representations of Aboriginal people vary widely, and are boldly characterised. Consider Bruce's first meeting with an Aboriginal person:

An Aboriginal girl came in with a stack of papers. She was a secretary, a pliant brown girl in a brown knitted dress. She smiled and said: 'Hi Ark!' but her smile fell away at the sight of a stranger. (TS, 5)

The reader perceives a young woman in every way unremarkable, perhaps shy with newcomers, preferring to keep to herself. Now consider a later flashback, to lunchtime in Katherine, when: '... a black whore pressed her nipples against my shirt and said, "You want me darling?"' (TS, 37).

Rather than romanticising Aboriginal people, Chatwin presents a continuum of Aboriginal humanity, a potpourri of traditional and modern, according well with a lived experience of the town and other contact zones. Out of such confusion, safely contextualised, can emerge the romantic appeal of the Dreaming; here an American tourist views a painting: she 'liked to think of the honey-ants dreaming their way across the desert with the bright sun shining on their honey sacks' (TS, 29).

6. Conclusion

Early critical reception of *The songlines* was shaped by postcolonial theory during the emergence of Aboriginal land rights in Australia, and a corresponding period of introspection for anthropologists. This led to significant themes and strengths being overlooked, which are now being retrieved under the influence of ecocriticism.

A preliminary analysis of walking in *The songlines* reveals new and valuable insights for writers of place, and confirms the literature of Central Australia as fertile ground in which to probe walking's role in the construction of an Australian identity. It is suggested embodiment helped Chatwin gain a clearer perception of landscape, delivering a strong textual sense of place that still resonates today. Further, while at times romanticising Aboriginal culture, Chatwin's representation of aboriginality (from a white perspective) is more broadly based than previous criticism suggests. The text highlights walking's close relationship with representations of place, and as an agent of place-making. With the printing of a 25th-anniversary edition, walking – as indicated by this brief analysis – promises a fresh critical reading of this popular work.

Endnotes

1. All references are to the 1988 Picador edition, denoted in text as (TS)
2. A more complete review of the criticism of *The songlines* is in preparation for a longer version of this paper. For the most complete published bibliography of academic criticism see Clarke 2009. Clarke does not, however, include recent ecocriticism: for this see Larsen 2007, Palmer 2011 and Natale 2009.
3. Though self as autobiographical representation is examined in Smith 2003.

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