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# *The Songlines: an Ecocritical Perspective on Bruce Chatwin's Australia*

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*Dedicato ai miei nonni, in particolare mio nonno Felice.  
Colui che, nonostante non lo abbia mai conosciuto,  
è riuscito a trasmettermi il gene dell'irrequietezza.*

*Dedicated to my grandparents, particularly my  
grandfather Felice. The one who, though I never met him,  
managed to pass down to me the gene of restlessness.*



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## INTRODUCTION

### The Ecocritical Approach in the Age of Consequences

The increasingly common occurrence of exceptional meteorological phenomena and geological disasters seems to have brought the majority of scientists and environmentalists to agree on the fact that the world has reached a point of environmental crisis. Such crisis is the means by which “the Earth is reacting to human behaviour and is warning us [...] to respond” (Coates, 2003), a call for humanity to be aware that if nothing is done, the situation could only worsen. Indeed, it is sufficient to connect on the internet or to read the news to recognise that “we have entered a time when the wild has become the norm” (Ghosh, 2016: 8), and natural catastrophes from rare events have become an everyday matter.

The growing frequency with which cyclones, floods and droughts are happening is a direct consequence of humanity’s entry in the Anthropocene, the geological era in which “humans – thanks to our numbers, the burning of fossil fuels, and other – have become geological agent on the planet [...] (acting) as a main determinant of the environment of the planet” (Chackrabarty, 2009: 209).

The fact that humans have become geological agents, and that our lifestyle has thus become the major factor of ecological disasters, is making it compelling to solve the problematic relationship between humanity and the Earth in every possible way. Consequently, scientists’ warnings alone are no longer able to deal with the environmental crisis the World population is facing, but a response from every field of knowledge has become necessary, and literature makes no exception.

Even though it is evident that literature can have no practical solution or direct effect on issues such as global warming, climate change and water level rising, it can still raise awareness regarding these problems. As Pollak and MacNabb underline

Fiction has always been a powerful influence on society. An environmental catastrophe may be reported on TV news, but as soon as the program is over and

the viewer returns to mundane tasks the local and global problems tend to be forgotten. But if a horror is described in a novel, complete with the human element and the emotional consequences, a reader is touched – and takes to heart what is at stake. (2000: 12)

Hence, what distinguishes literature from any other means of communication is precisely its capacity of moving readers from an emotional point of view, thus bringing the problem closer to their own sensibility.

However, in this concern, Ghosh has lamented the limitedness of a corpus of literature that has, as its main focus, the effects of our disrespect for the Earth we live in. In fact, according to the author, literary works belonging to the so-called high-genres (i.e. realism) have always had the opposite intention to conceal the extraordinary, leaving space only to the ‘probable’ and to the ‘everyday’ (2016: 16-17).

In fact, exceptional phenomena tend to be relegated to subgenres such as science fiction, thus appearing as simple products of fantasy or set in a future so far from us that they seem to be unreal and unworthy of immediate preoccupation: “The modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable [...] here, then, is the irony of the “realist” novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real” (Ghosh, 2016: 23).

However, in a time when the ‘unlikely’ is becoming more and more ‘likely’, unpredictable and extreme events have become more real than ever and, thus, there is the need to re-introduce these issues as real and not as mere fantasies.

From this point of view, even though literature has still a long path to go by in order to re-design the limits of reality by dealing in a more effective way with what is still considered unreal and to directly consider nature and our relationship with it, literary critique is already moving in this way. Starting from the belief in the existence of a profound connection between environment and literature, a new critical approach which goes under the name of *ecocriticism* is being developed and is trying to respond to the question of what can be the role of literature in facing the current environmental crisis.



It was in response to the need for a new ecological approach to literature that in the second half of the twentieth century the term *ecocriticism* was first coined. In the late 70s, precisely in 1978, the word *ecocriticism* appeared for the first time in Rueckert's essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. With his pioneering definition, Rueckert meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (in Glotfelty, 1996: 107). From this primary definition of the term, it is already evident why it is important to have an ecocritical approach to literature: ecology is one of the most compelling problems of our time. Indeed, as Dubey states in his essay *Literature and Society* (2013), literature and literary studies have always acted as a mirror of issues concerning individuals and the society they live in:

Literature, when combined with culture and other facets – both abstract and concrete – of society, not only presents impalpable subjects like alienation, assimilation and transformation in society but also reflects the palpable issues, such as historical, political and social facts. (84).

However, the most compelling problem of the twenty-first century is one that is not simply focused on individuals in relation to their individuality (i.e. psychological insight of modernist novels), nor in their being part of society as a group of individuals (i.e. social criticism of realist and naturalist novels). Yet, – without questioning the importance of individual and social problems – twenty-first century's main issue should concern the effects of our being individuals in the broader context of the natural world. Since climate change is only one of the consequences of human mistreatment of the environment, it is now required from literary studies to deal with the need to raise awareness of the ecological crisis the Earth is undergoing due to our irresponsible behaviour towards it.

It is in this context that ecocriticism becomes essential. Stressing on the necessity of introducing nature among "the hot topics of the late twentieth century" such as "race, class, and gender" (2009, p. xvi), Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [...] (which) takes an earth-

centered approach to literary study” (2009: xviii). Analysing the ways in which literature deals – and has always indirectly dealt – with nature can help understanding where we went wrong and what can still be done to prevent the situation from collapsing.

### *0.1 The Australian Case*

Why is the ecocritical approach important overall in relation to Australia? According to Joëlle Gergis, an award-winning climate scientist and researcher at the University of Melbourne: “Australia is the most vulnerable country of the developed world when it comes to climate change. Our dramatic natural climate variability means that climate events are becoming even more extreme as the planet continues to warm” (2018: 219). From her words it appears evident that Australia is an extremely fragile ecosystem, and this is due to many factors:

- It is an island between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans – thus exposed to the alternation of strong El Niño and La Niña<sup>1</sup> events
- Its huge dimensions allow it to have a huge range of climatic zones, in a fight between tropical impacts from the North and cooler ones from the South
- It has an extremely variegated biodiversity, with flora and fauna characterised by unique species
- It is the flattest continent in the Earth, thus weather systems can cross the continent without hindrances
- It is located near to Asian countries, whose rapid and uncontrolled development is indirectly affecting also the Oceanic region.

For these reasons, as long as extreme events are concerned, there is no other country compared to Australia, whose naturally severe climate conditions are worsened by

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<sup>1</sup> El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ESNO) is a natural climate cycle which consists in the alternation of El Niño hot and dry conditions – causing major droughts and bushfires – and La Niña cold and wet weather – causing floods and cyclones.

human activities. The continent's climatic instability, its peculiar natural landscape and its unique biodiversity have always rendered Australia an exceptionally harsh land to live for those coming from milder parts of the world like Europe.

However, it was only after its actual exploration that Australia has been identified as a land of extremes. Indeed, as Gibson explains in *The Diminishing Paradise* (1984), before its discovery, European writers had already speculated about *Terra Australis*, or New Holland, as a sort of paradise located somewhere 'down-under', a "large and various land catering for El Dorado fantasies" (3). It was Cook's arrival to the actual continent that marked the beginning of a gradual reshaping of Europeans' expectations about this Southern dreamy world: real Australia was far from a paradise, it was more similar to a hell.

Since their first arrival to Port Jackson, Botany Bay and Sydney Cove in New South Wales, British settlers have been reporting about the Southern Land as a place where living conditions were rendered almost unbearable by the erratic climate, which was inadequate for European agricultural and livestock activities. Indeed, accounts of delegates of the British Empire like David Collins, Governor Arthur Phillip and Watkin Tench<sup>2</sup> report of a pitiless alternation of "wet and tempestuous weather" (Tench, 1893 in Gergis, 2018: 18) and severe droughts.

From this point of view, it is curious to notice that between 1789 and 1790, Collins related about an "extremely unfavourable" weather, characterized by rainfalls that "[...] came

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<sup>2</sup> Collins, D. (1804). *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales: with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, &c. of the Native Inhabitants of that Country. To which Are Added; Some Particulars of New Zealand; Compiled, by Permission, from the Mss. Of Lieutenant Governor King: and an Account of a Voyage Performed by Capt. Flinders and Mr. Bass; by which the Existence of a Strait Separating Van Diemen's Land from the Continent of New Holland Was Ascertained, Abstracted from the Journal of Mr. Bass.* Cadell and David, London.

Phillip, A. (1789). *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay.* John Stockdale, Piccadilly.

Tench, W. (1793). *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson.* Nicol and Sewell, London.

down in torrents, filling up every trench and cavity which had been dug about the settlement, and causing much damage to the miserable mud tenements which were occupied by the convicts.” (in Gergis, 2018: 16), while already in 1791, Governor Phillip wrote that “the dry weather still continued, and many runs of water which were considerable at this season the last year, were now dried up [...] at Sydney, the run of water was now very small” (in Gergis, 2018: 18).

These erratic weather conditions were obviously unendurable for settlers: British colonists were so accustomed to the mild and predictable environment of Britain that Australian untamed nature was seen as an enemy to be fought in order to establish human supremacy and recreate European order. From the analysis of British experiences down-under, it appears clear that here “nature could not seem immediately to be a mother” (Gibson, 1984: 37), but this was because white Australian society was not “a natural outgrowth of the environment” (ibid.). As a matter of fact, the problematic relationship between settlers and Australia was due to the fact that they tried to recreate life as they conceived it in a land that was not their own. In settlers’ point of view, the erratic climate and the presence of a completely new biodiversity characterised by unknown species like kangaroos, koalas, eucalyptuses and the so-called ‘bush’ had to be tamed in order to recreate a suitable environment: they started deforesting the land, introducing species like rabbits, goats and foxes and eliminating natives in order to bring their own ‘civilization’ to the ‘uncivilized’ land.

As previously stated, when British settlers arrived in Australia, they found a land that was too wild for their standards and, instead of becoming accustomed and adapt to that wildness, they aimed at taming and adapting it to their need. For this reason, colonialism is considered one of the major causes of anthropogenic climate change in Australia. As argued by Mahony and Endfield in their article *Climate and Colonialism* (2018), the naturally severe conditions of the Australian territory have been worsened by the extreme exploitation and alteration of the land after the beginning of British colonization in 1788. In the same way, Wright claims that “though the island continent holds some of the most-recently European-occupied land in the world, [...] there is virtually no part of it

that has not been influenced, often for the worse, by its European inhabitants” (1985: 30-31). In the course of only two centuries, with their attitude of ‘civilizers’, Europeans managed to transform a land that had already been inhabited for more than 40000 years. From this point of view, all the features of Australia that were considered unbearable by settlers and their descendants were thus considered because settlers were unnatural to the land. Yet, the same natural characteristics represented the norm for those people who had been inhabiting Australia long before European records.

Thus, in order to understand the current environmental issue, it is necessary to look back both at the relatively brief history of white-Australia and at the long history of Aboriginal relationship to the land, which characterised the forty thousand years before colonization, and a way to do so is by having an ecocritical approach to literary texts set in Australia.

### *0.2. The Chatwin Case*

Since literature has a fundamental role in the comprehension of past and present errors regarding environmental management, it can also help to try to rebuild a healthier and more balanced relationship with the Earth. In this concern, being Australia a land characterized by the double history of its European and Aboriginal inhabitants, both perspectives need to be taken into account from an ecological point of view.

Starting from these premises, a peculiar case to take in analysis would be that of a British author writing about his experience in Aboriginal Australia in a crucial moment like the 80s, when the effects of a bad relationship between men and nature were starting to manifest themselves and an ecological way of thinking was commencing to spread. Hence, a compromise between European and Aboriginal perspectives can be found in the figure of Bruce Chatwin.

Born in Sheffield (UK) in 1940, in his brief life, Chatwin managed to become an eclectic figure of the twentieth century British intellectual panorama: he was a writer and a photographer, but overall, he was a traveller. His wandering informed not only his writing production, but also his way of conceiving the world and human nature, which was

constructed around “his own sense of self in relation to [...] nomadism” (Johnson, 2002: 59).

Indeed, Chatwin’s knowledge of the world came from his desire of evasion from the limits his own Britishness, which made him incessantly travel from mother England to Afghanistan, from Patagonia to India, from Brazil to Australia. This way, he had the chance to enter in contact with different places and the cultures inhabiting them, to form his own ideas and theories about those same places and cultures and to give birth to his literary production. As a matter of fact, Chatwin’s masterpieces are deeply linked to his travel experiences: *In Patagonia* (1977) is about his voyage to Argentina and Chile following the footsteps of one of his ancestors, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980) recalls his experience in Benin, *The Songlines* (1989) is a fictional story on his actual journey to Australia, and his last work, *What Am I Doing Here* (1989), is a collection of essays and travel stories from the author’s life.

Already from the first pages of *The Songlines* the importance of travel in Chatwin’s biography is evident, since his alter-ego Bruce states that he quit his job in the art world to “travel in the dry places. Alone, travelling light. The names of the tribes I travelled among are unimportant – Reguibat, Qashgai, Taimanni, Turkomen, Bororo, Tuareg – peoples whose journeys, unlike my own, had neither beginning nor end” (*The Songlines*: 18). The real Chatwin may not have actually met all of the peoples he claimed to have travelled with, since he always openly declared that his work is simultaneously fiction and nonfiction. Nonetheless, he did quit his job to travel worldwide, and what emerges from his own words is that what brought him to be constantly on the move was his curiosity towards nomadism, which rendered him a sort of nomad himself. As reported by Hickman, “Chatwin spent 17 years trying to find a vehicle to express his obsession with nomadism, a body of rather vague ideas that had its roots in his own inability to settle anywhere” (1999: 49-50): he perceived stability as essentially dissatisfying.

This fascination for nomadism is a fundamental characteristic of Chatwin’s attitude, as underlined also by Jonathan Chatwin in his book *Anywhere Out of the World*, where he analyses the British writer’s work and comes to the conclusion that “when they are

examined in detail, and in the context of authorial biography, it becomes clear that all of Chatwin's books are preoccupied with a single issue: that of the affliction of restlessness, which became the 'question of questions' [...] for Chatwin" (Chatwin J.M., 2008: 9). Consequently, what brought Chatwin to Australia twice between 1983 and 1984 was precisely the union of his restlessness and his curiosity towards nomadic cultures like the Aboriginal one. He came across Aboriginal culture through the work of Theodor Strelhow<sup>3</sup>, which Chatwin claimed to be "the reason for my being in Australia" (Shakespeare, 1999: 409). This interest in Aborigines is also reflected in *The Songlines*' literal alter-ego of the author, who anticipates his curiosity to his childhood. Indeed, at the beginning of Chapter 2, the fictional Bruce recalls reading his aunt's book about Australia as a child and, among the numerous oddities of the land down-under, it was Aboriginal nomadism that caught his curiosity the most:

She [his aunt] had in her library a book about the continent, and I would gaze in wonder at pictures of the koala and kookaburra, the platypus and Tasmanian bush-devil, Old Man Kangaroo and Yellow Dog Dingo, and Sydney Harbour Bridge. But the picture I liked best showed an Aboriginal family on the move. [...] The man had a long forked beard and carried a spear or two, and a spear-thrower. The woman carried a dilly-bag and a baby at her breast. A small boy strolled beside her – I identified myself with him (*Songlines*: 5)

From these premises then, it is clear that when Chatwin travelled across Australia, he did so also with the aim of understanding himself: he felt that his own identity was wider than simple Britishness. Moreover, Chatwin search for his inner self was also linked to a need to identify himself with a more spiritual otherness.

Indeed, even if not openly declared in the book, when Chatwin went down-under, he was affected by HIV (of which he would have died in 1989, two years after the publication of *The Songlines*). His deadly illness brought critics like Morrison (2012: 2) and Alber (2016)

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<sup>3</sup> Author of *Songs of Central Australia* (1972) in which he recorded Aboriginal traditional songs and poems

to argue that Chatwin went to Australia with the aim of discovering a more spiritual culture that would have allowed him to find a peaceful and serene way to die: “Aboriginal men are not afraid of dying; they feel safe in the context of a world view which is based on the fundamental interconnectedness of all things [...] (Chatwin) knew that he would die soon, (and) was presumably hoping for a similar kind of peaceful death” (Alber, 2016: 107). This theory is supported by the conclusive line of the book, which presents the scene of three Aborigines serenely facing their death: “They were all right. They knew where they were going, smiling at death in the shade of a ghost-gum” (*Songlines*, p.294).

However, talking of Chatwin’s journey to Australia as a mere travel of self-discovery and peace-finding would be reductive and inaccurate: in the author’s view of the world, movement was central, since he conceived it not only as an antidote to the deadly immobility and a means of self-knowledge, but also as a source of life and knowledge of the land he was crossing.

From these terms, nomadism in the Aboriginal form becomes fundamental: movement is at the basis of their myth of creation, the understanding of which was the primary driving force of Chatwin’s travel. As a matter of fact, *The Songlines* – as the title suggests – is the effect of the author’s crossing Australia in pursuit of ‘*tjuringa lines*’, also known with the English name of ‘Dreaming Tracks’, which are a:

[...] labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known [...] to the Aborigines as the ‘Footprints of the Ancestors’ or the ‘Way of the Law’. Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, winging out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes – and so singing the world into existence. (*Songlines*: 2-3)

This idea of interconnection between movement and creation is what fascinated Chatwin about Australian Aborigines and their land, and was at the basis of his writing, which was his own act of creation. In his memory of his journey with Chatwin, Salman Rushdie, an Indian-British writer who travelled with him in Central Australia, accurately pointed out:



“How could writers fail to love a world which has been mapped by stories?” (1991: 232) Consequently, it is no wonder that *Dreaming Tracks*, in their being a form of creational narrative, became the subject matter of Chatwin’s own narrative in *The Songlines*. Even though the novel is clearly based on the author’s actual travel experience, there is an ongoing debate on how much actual information is held in the book, as it was intended not to be an objective ethnographic account, but a literary work, thus located somewhere in between reality and imagination. For this reason, when in 1988 the novel was nominated for the Thomas Cook Travel Award, Chatwin refused to take part to the competition by stating that ‘The journey it describes is an invented journey; it is not a travel book in the generally accepted sense’ (Shakespeare, 1999: 487). Notwithstanding its fictional component ‘Little of what occurs in this “novel” is invented. Mostly it is modified reportage’ (Ibid.: 417) and *The Songlines* still remains useful in the understanding of Australian Aboriginal culture and its profound connection with the land.

### *0.3. Not Only Ethnography*

Immediately since its publication in 1987, *The Songlines* has been examined and criticised in many different ways, but the most common one dealt with the book’s being controversial in representing Aboriginality. Indeed, as sustained by Morrison (2012), in the last thirty years, literary critique has always been divided between those who thought that Chatwin’s text could be studied as a useful means of understanding Aboriginal Culture and those who, instead, read *The Songlines* as a way of stereotyping native Australians and favour colonialist purposes.

Despite the controversy with which the text has been approached, what is indisputable is that both perspectives belong to the anthropological/ethnographical methodology, which has always been favoured in dealing with Chatwin’s masterpiece.

From this point of view, it should be underlined that Chatwin was not an ethnographer *stricto sensu*, “he does not have the anxieties of an anthropologist” (Stewart, 2012: xiv). Chatwin simply “provides an example of the author as anthropologist: a professional travel writer whose personal experience is skilfully transcribed into the contours of

pseudo-ethnographic fiction". (Huggan, 1991: 57). What can be inferred from Huggan's words is that Chatwin was first-of-all a fiction writer whose work remains a literary product: as such, it can also – but not only – be read from an anthropologic/ethnographic perspective. Therefore, although it is undeniable that *The Songlines* provides readers with a narrative insight in Aboriginal ethnography, the anthropological approach is not the only one valid when thinking about the text.

If *The Songlines* is confronted from a point of view that differs from the ethnographic account, the truthfulness or accuracy of the author's portrayal of Aborigines has no longer the same importance. Therefore, a way of detaching Chatwin's book from the controversy of its ethnographic precision, is to deal with it through a different form of literary criticism.

As stated at the beginning of this introduction, the current environmental crisis requires literary criticism to deal with texts in a renewed perspective like that of ecocriticism, which looks for the deep link between literature and nature. If attention is not focused only on Chatwin's limits in his ethnographical accuracy, it appears clear that ecocriticism could provide another valid way to treat *The Songlines*. However, it should be pointed out that one methodology does not exclude the other.

As a matter of fact, if Aboriginal ethnography is considered in relation to the natives' interdependence with the Australian soil – which is a result of their walking and "singing the world into existence" (*Songlines*: 3) – it is evident that the ecocritical and the anthropological perspectives are deeply intertwined: in the Aboriginal culture, the land and its inhabitants are a unified whole.

Moreover, walking is what allows Chatwin to enter in contact with Australian nature as well. As Morrison states by quoting Self, "Nothing puts you in touch with the environment quite as much as walking" (2012: 5)<sup>4</sup>. Hence, it is also Chatwin's own nomadism, his

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<sup>4</sup> Found in Hunt, S. E. (2009). The Emergence of Psychoecology: the New Nature Writings of Roger Deakin, Mark Crocker, Robert MacFarlane and Richard Mabey. *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, (10), pp.70-79.

walking around Australia during his journey, that poses him in deep connection with the place.

Starting from the realisation that walking puts both Aborigines and Chatwin in profound connection with Australian environment, this relationship with the land can allow an ecocritical interpretation *The Songlines*.

Nonetheless, what should not be forgotten is that Chatwin's book was written thirty years ago and that in the time-span that divides the work from its modern readers, many things have changed. Accordingly, an ecocritical interpretation of *The Songlines* must contextualize the text as a product of the eighties, when the effects of the Anthropocene were not yet as evident as they are now, but their roots were already there.

Furthermore, though fascinating, Chatwin's interest in nomadism cannot be read literally, but needs to be interpreted as a writer's romantic reverie from the contemporary perspective. As a matter of fact, in 2018, civilization has reached such a degree of development that a return to the hunter-gatherer way of life could not possibly be a solution to the environmental crisis the World is experiencing.

Nonetheless, the importance of an ecocritical approach to Chatwin's masterpiece lies in the fact that, if contextualized and interpreted, *The Songlines* can still help readers to comprehend that a healthier and more respectful way of dealing with the land exists and can provide an alternative to the disregard with which modern society has exploited and keeps on exploiting the Earth.

Hence, ecocritically dealing with *The Songlines* does not consist in promoting a literal interpretation of the text in the light of Chatwin's own aspiration to nomadism, but to invite the reader to learn and to take on the respect with which Aborigines treat their land.

Starting from all these premises, aim of this thesis will be that of offering an ecocritical interpretation of Chatwin's *The Songlines*. As already stated, a critical methodology does not exclude the other and, thus, Ethnography will be employed as a source of fundamental instruments and valuable information that can allow an Ecocritical reading

of the text. From this perspective, the analysis will proceed in four stages during which both approaches will be used.

Hence, a first chapter will be devoted to the examination of the relationship between Aboriginal culture and the land, dealing with the ancestral concept of Dreaming Tracks, and how this bond is represented in the literary text. Then, the second chapter will be focused on the notion of nomadism as a more genuine way of relating to and understanding the territory, opposed to the corruption of modern immovability. Here, the town of Alice Springs will also be analysed in its being a frontier zone, characterized by the coexistence of settlement and nomadism. Also the figure of Chatwin himself will be examined and compared to the figure of the 'environmental flâneur' who employs his own wandering as a way of comprehending Australian nature and Aboriginal culture.

The thesis will then proceed to a third chapter devoted to an analysis of the Chatwin's ethnographical and postcolonial approach to Aboriginality with the consequent globalization deriving from it. In this concern, the section will focus on how the author is perceived as controversial concerning these themes, trying to evince which were his positions and his intentions concerning colonization and globalization.

All these steps will lead to a final chapter in which *The Songlines* will be contextualised in present days, examining how Chatwin's masterpiece has had, and still has, controversial effects on Australian environment. On the one hand it has been among the causes of massive tourism to the red-earthed land – together with all the negative effects linked to it – while on the other, it offers hints for the possibility of a renewed and more balanced relationship with the territory and its extremely fragile ecosystem.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Matter of Interdependence: Australian Aborigines and Their Land

This chapter focuses on the profound relationship between Australian Aborigines and their land, with the aim of assessing how the concept of place is fundamental in Aboriginal Culture. I first analyse the importance of place and landscape as means of reasserting personal and cultural identity. Then, the deep bond that links Indigenous Australians to the environment they live in is examined through the Aboriginal Creationist Myth and the concepts of *oneness*, *Dreamtime* and *songlines*. Afterwards, I focus on the erroneous belief in the ‘impactless’ relation between indigenous and the territory, to understand how the apparent Australian wilderness was instead a product of Aborigines’ actions on the land. All those concepts are also observed in the light of Chatwin’s work, in order to understand how the British author represents the natives-land interdependence and how this interdependence can provide an inspiration for a healthier relation to the environment.

#### *1.1 Cultural Landscape and the Concept of Place in Literature*

As Ken Taylor declared, “We see and make landscapes as a result of our shared system of beliefs and ideologies. In this way landscape is a cultural construct, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meanings which can be read and interpreted.” (2008: 3). Certain kinds of landscapes characterise certain places, consequently influencing the identity and culture of people inhabiting them. This mutual shaping of place and culture is identified with the notion of *associative cultural landscape*, which – according to the WHC<sup>5</sup> – is a landscape marked by “powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element”.

The particular flora, fauna and climate of the place in which any population develops, not only are characterized with cultural significance, but are also some of the main determinants for the population’s cultural identity and values. As affirmed by Taylor:

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre

One of our deepest needs is for a sense of identity and belonging. A common denominator in this is human attachment to landscape and how we find identity in landscape and place. Landscape therefore is not simply what we see, but a way of seeing: we see it with our eye but interpret it with our mind and ascribe values to landscape for intangible – spiritual – reasons. Landscape can therefore be seen as a cultural construct in which our sense of place and memories inhere. (2008: 1)

From this perspective, if the Southern continent is analysed in its current situation, it can be noted how the traditional landscape of the Outback is being replaced by urban areas in the collective idea of Australia: this phenomenon leads to the consequent risk of losing the traditional identity rooted in rural areas. This is because Australia, over the last two centuries, has become “one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with 89 per cent of its population living along the coast in or near its six state capital cities [...]”. Therefore, city, not desert, has arguably become most representative of the Australian identity.” (Banwell et al., 2015: 384). Yet, in spite of the higher concentration of population in urban areas, claiming that the Outback and the so-called ‘bush’ are no longer suggestive of the Australian land would be misleading. In fact, rural areas remain the landscape of traditional Australian identity. As Gill notes, “outback, or frontier, mythology remains important in providing symbols and normative ideals that shape perceptions and landscapes of the inland and north” (2005: 67): thus, desert areas of the continent (Central Australia and Northern Territory) keep being evocative of traditional indigenous Australian identity in the collective imagination, remaining the distinctive features of the land down-under.

Not only those parts of the country – whose red earth, kangaroos and gum-trees recur in the shared idea of Australia – are the epitomes of this continent, they were also the very cradle of Aboriginal culture. This way, that of the Australian outback is one of those cases in which place has a fundamental role in preserving a culture and its traditions from extinction.

However, the connection between place and identity is important not only from a cultural and historical point of view, but also from the literary one. Analysing the concept of place in literature, it appears clear how it has always been crucial also in this field of studies. As Eudora Welty stated in 1956, "It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that feelings are bound up in place. The human mind is a mass of associations - associations more poetic even than actual. [...] The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place."<sup>6</sup> (in Bennett, 1985: 4). The centrality of the idea of place in literature is due to the fact that the very existence of a novel needs the existence of a place (whether real or imaginary) where to set it. Even though it could seem a banality, claiming that places are defining for stories is not prosaic at all. Places characterize literary works not only in their being settings where actions take place, but also in influencing writers, readers and defining people represented: this way, the setting of a literary work "serves a function in that it puts the reader where the writer intends him or her to be mentally, and this information gives the reader some insight into the history, the terrain, the people, the customs of a community, and so forth contributes to the larger meaning of what writers intend to convey to readers" (Jeremiah, 2000: 25). Yet, the concept of place is so rooted in the idea of literature itself that its importance sometimes risks being undervalued and not analysed in its significance.

With the birth of ecocriticism, place is regaining its centrality: by linking this wide concept to that of natural environment, the ecocritical approach has reasserted the importance of landscape in literary studies. In Bennett's opinion, this phenomenon of reaffirmation of place as natural landscape could be the reflection of "a need among inhabitants of the advanced technological societies of the West to re-establish roots in the soil before the widely advertised hi-tech paradise gets us firmly in its grips; it may be a last flurry defiance, or an assertion of needs that will outlast the current technologies" (Bennett, 1985: 4). Though modern man tends to be distracted from his identity – both individual and cultural – by the frenetic rhythm of modern life, place and nature keep being the key

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<sup>6</sup> Welty, E. (1956). Place in Fiction. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, LV (1), pp.55-72.

to the comprehension of our culture and of the Earth we live in. From this point of view, Bennet goes on noting that

there is [...] always an interaction between a person and his or her environment – even when this involves an attempt to block out that environment. The dynamics of the interaction are often explored by our most sensitive writers, or are implicit in their work; and an understanding of these dynamics may increase our own awareness of our relationship to place. (1985: 23)

Thus, when the ecocritical perspective is assumed, the place in which a certain novel is set becomes even more crucial, since the setting of a story allows the reader to better understand the relationship between a particular culture and the environment of that same setting. For this reason, in order to understand how Australia establishes its centrality in Chatwin's *The Songlines*, it is necessary to comprehend Central Australian territory and its culture first.

Moreover, since the place in which an individual lives defines his/her identity, in a time when the bond with land and nature is becoming increasingly loose, it is crucial to re-establish the importance of place as a means to reconnect with one's inner self, one's own culture and with the environment surrounding: "to understand ourselves we need to look searchingly at our landscapes for they are a clue to culture" (Taylor, 2008: 2-3).

If taken this way, the narrative of Chatwin's travel across the Australian Outback seems to represent a curious case to examine, since Australia was not the author's homeland. However, critics have often asserted that Chatwin – whose Englishness was "unstable and frustrated" (Balajthy, 2015: 43) – perceived himself as a sort of citizen of the world: English landscape was not enough for the author's journey of self-discovery, and he had to confront with different landscapes and people to understand himself.

From this perspective, it could be argued that the author's way of learning about himself had to go beyond the limits of Britain and had to be through the experience of a land and a culture different from his own, but still profoundly attached to nature like the Aboriginal one.



Chatwin wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture in order to understand himself, but also to satisfy his curiosity regarding the functioning of the Australian landscape in indigenous tradition. In this regard, Chatwin wants to raise readers' curiosity as well, and, for this reason, he avoids assuming a didactic attitude: with the use of the first-person narrator, Chatwin puts himself at the same level of the reader, and they embark together on a journey of self-discovery through the contact with a form of otherness and its relationship to the land.

Starting from the premise that the cultural identity and the character of a particular population inhabiting a certain place is shaped by the landscape and environment of that same place, Australian Aborigines are the perfect example of the mutual shaping of land and population. Thus, the dryness and harshness of the Australian landscape could be read as the rationale for the strong and reserved Aboriginal attitude. This conjecture seems to be confirmed by Banwell and his colleagues, who have argued that:

[...] cultural stereotypes were influenced strongly by the Australian landscape and climate, with the harsh, untamed, sun-drenched and isolating environment of the Outback contributing to the development of the Australian psyche as masculine, stoic, tough and quietly courageous. Hence, heat and the sun scorching the Earth, drying the ground and baking the skin is a consistent narrative contributing to, and sedimenting, the development of a particular Australian character. (2015: 382)

In the same way, if the case of *The Songlines* is analysed, the Australian landscape Chatwin describes and his very way of describing it, seem to be linked to the essence of Aboriginal culture. From this point of view, it can be said that the authors' own mode of depicting Australia could be considered as a depiction of the land itself. As Rory Stewart underlines in her introduction to the novel, "Curiously, for books that take place in extraordinary landscapes, Chatwin very rarely describes landscape." (2012: xv): the author never talks at lengths of the setting surrounding his character but provides readers of only some straightforward hints of it. Hence, his dryness of descriptions can be read as a metaphor of the dryness of the Australian land itself.

Moreover, Stewart goes on noting that Chatwin is instead very detailed – “like an Expressionist painting but more explicit” (ibid.) – in portraying Aboriginal people, whom are represented in all their toughness and harshness. Since these characteristics are also typical of the Australian landscape, it appears that not only natives are direct outgrowths of that same landscape, but also that Chatwin does not directly describe the territory because the portrayal of its inhabitants is sufficient to describe it as well.

Indeed, it is not only in Chatwin’s narrative that natives and the land become one. The British author’s representation mirrors a unity that is present also in the very essence of Aboriginal culture and is embedded in the ideas of *oneness*, *Dreaming* and *songlines*.

### *1.2 Oneness, Dreamtime and Songlines*

As stated by Gammage, “All religions attempt two things: to explain existence, and to regulate behaviour. Aboriginal religion integrated these by assuming the spiritual parity of all life, and by subjecting every aspect of it to overwhelming religious sanction” (2012, Kindle edition pos. 2310). This concept goes under the name of *oneness* and it is one of the bases of Aboriginal religion, which is the idea by which “Personal identity, human community and cosmic harmony are one-and-the-same” (Hendriks and Hall, 2009: 3). This feeling of profound unity with the universe – and consequently with nature – is presented at the very beginning of Chatwin’s novel, when the author explains that “The Aboriginals had an earthbound philosophy. The earth gave life to man; gave him his food, language and intelligence; and the earth took him back when he died” (*Songlines*: 11). In indigenous Australia there is a profound sense of interconnectedness between the earth and men, a sort of energy flow that equally goes from land to men and from men to land. This belief is not Chatwin’s literary invention, but is a principle of Aboriginal culture that is still deeply rooted in contemporary communities, as demonstrated by the words of the recently-died keeper of Uluru (Ayer's Rock) Robert ‘Bob’ Randall. Indeed, in a 2007 interview, Randall explained the deep relationship between Australian Aborigines and natural environment by saying that:

We just lived on the land as people of the land. To us it was a natural way of being, being part of all that there is was just the way it was. You didn't see anything any different from you. It was just a way of life that was inclusive of all that there is through life. Life is the binding and the connecting way. The oneness is: if you're alive, you connect to everything else that is alive. But that oneness included everything that was around us, and you're raised with that teaching from a child upwards [...] The land grows all of us up [...] no human is older than the land itself, it just isn't, and no living marsupial is as old as the land itself. [...] Part of land which has been handed down to you by your ancestors – we say “the granny law” – has given me my responsibility now that I am grown up to care for my country, to care for my mother, to care for everything that is around me – the oneness, the completeness of that oneness, to be responsible in [...] caring with unconditional love with the responsibility. And you feel that - you feel that so well that you feel good when you're in that space, and you kind of feel that you're living with family when you include everything that is alive in that space [...] It is a beautiful way of life, it doesn't push anybody out, but it brings everybody in [...] (Randall, 2007, *The Land Owns Us*)

Randall's interview provides the meaning of what the concept of *oneness* was, and still is, for Aboriginal people: it is a form of interconnectedness of all that is, the idea by which men come from and are part of nature, and they have to treat it with the same unconditional love and respect with which they would treat their family.

This form of connection, respect and dependence on the territory is emphasized in *The Songlines* as well, when the author explains the Aboriginal belief according to which indigenous are an outgrowth of the land itself. This is demonstrated by the idea of conception in Aboriginal culture, about which Chatwin reports that

the Aboriginals made no connection between sex and conception [...]. This, of course, was nonsense. A man knew very well who his father was. Yet there was, in addition, a kind of parallel paternity which tied his soul to one particular point in landscape. Each Ancestor, while singing his way across country, was believed to have

left a trail of 'life-cells' or 'spirit-children' along the line of his footprints" (*Songlines*: 60).

In Central Australian cosmology, this belief is referred to as *conception totemism*, which is the association "with the species of the area in which the conception of an individual is thought to have taken place" (Edwards, 2000: 80). Those species are identified as *totemic beings* (e.g. the Rainbow Serpent or the Great Kangaroo), who first created themselves into existence walking and singing across the land and then created every feature of the natural landscape. This way, since every human comes from nature, indigenous mythology induces to the respect of the land, which should be treated as a mother.

However, the presence of multiple Ancestors/totemic beings in the indigenous' myth of creation could lead to think that the concept of oneness is contradictory in the context of their cosmology. In native Australian tradition "there is no single ultimate religious principle which transcends human society and the world" (Swain and Trompf, 1995: 81), but there was a multiplicity of 'totems' who sung the world into existence. This apparent contradiction is due to the fact that the idea of *oneness* – which evokes the idea of a single universal principle – is not as old as natives' culture. It is instead the result of the encounter between their own religion and the Christian beliefs brought by missionaries during colonization.

Even though the concept of *oneness* is relatively recent, the profound respect of Aborigines for nature already existed, and was based on beliefs that are as old as their population. This way, though the idea of *oneness* comes from Christianity, it could find its place in a pre-existing system of beliefs. The indigenous word to indicate this idea is *kanyini*, which comes from the Anagu<sup>7</sup> language and means responsibility for and connectedness with *Kurunpa* (spirituality, soul and psyche), *Ngura* (land, mother earth) and *Walytja* (family, kinship and all living things) (Laudine, 2009: 156), and this

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<sup>7</sup> Indigenous name with which a number of Central Australia Aboriginal groups identify themselves

responsibility was given to natives' ancestors during *Tjukurpa* (the creation/*dreamtime*/belief system).

*Tjukurpa* – or *Dreamtime* – is what aroused Chatwin's curiosity towards Aboriginal culture and the consequent writing of *The Songlines*, in which he tried to describe and simplify this concept in order to make it accessible to Western readers. As it emerges in one of his first explanations of the *Dreamtime*, Chatwin uses the Christian reference – familiar to Western culture – to allow the comprehension of the concept. Here, the author makes Arkady<sup>8</sup> state that:

To get to grips with the concept of the Dreamtime [...] you had to understand it as an Aboriginal equivalent of the first chapters of Genesis – with one significant difference. In Genesis, God first created the 'living things' and then fashioned Father Adam from clay. Here in Australia, the Ancestors created themselves from clay, hundreds and thousands of them, one for each totemic species. 'So when an Aboriginal tells you, "I have a Wallaby Dreaming," he means, "My totem is Wallaby, I am a member of the Wallaby Clan. [...] Every Wallaby Man believed he was descended from the 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. (*Songlines*: 12)

Hence, *Tjukurpa* indicates the Aboriginal creation myth, "when ancestral beings, *Tjukuritja*, created the world as we know it, and from this the religion, law and moral systems." (Australian Department of Environment and Energy<sup>9</sup>): the moral system provided during the *Tjukurpa* is at the basis of native's deep connection with and respect for the natural world.

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<sup>8</sup> Arkady Volchok is the fictional character who becomes Bruce's guide through the Outback, and he is a Russian-Australian expert in Aboriginal culture who fight for their Land Rights.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Government: Department of Environment and Energy <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/national-parks/uluru-kata-tjuta-national-park/culture-and-history/tjukurpa> [Accessed 2 Oct. 2018].

Even though it could seem a simple and straightforward concept, that of *Tjukurpa* is instead a very complex idea involving a series of ambiguities, including that around its English translation. The indigenous term has been translated into English with the words *Dreaming* or *Dreamtime*, and these translations were at the basis of a strong debate. In this concern, some – like the Australian Department of Environment and Energy – believe that ‘*dreaming*’ is an inappropriate adaptation, since it suggests the unreality of these beliefs. Others instead, sustain the suitability of the term *Dreamtime*, since it:

acknowledges the fundamental temporality of the concept, which is akin to the spacetime of actual dreaming when asleep. When Aborigines dream they believe their spirit - which is an incarnation of *Dreaming* – temporarily leaves their body, as if the night is down time for the spirit, the time when it returns home. Images, events, stories and voices perceived during a dream – during this dream time – relate to the spirit world. What happens in a dream has real consequences. If one is hurt in a dream then sickness might result. Dreams are also the way in which *tjukurrpa* is often updated, providing the means for the new, say a recent massacre, a car crash, a drought, to be folded into the continuum of *tjukurrpa*. New song and dance narratives are often revealed in dream. (McLean, 2009: 17)

Consequently, the term *dreamtime* consents to grasp the meaning of a cosmology which is ongoing, subject to changes and continuously producing life, both in the form of men and natural elements. As Chatwin reports in his narrative, “Aboriginals could not believe the country existed until they could see and sing it – just as, in the *Dreamtime*, the country had not existed until the Ancestors sang it” (*Songlines*: 14). This way, it seems that every feature of the landscape was produced during *Dreamtime*, while every change is justifiable as the product of new songs – or changes in old songs – that are revealed to natives during dreams. If read this way, the term *dreamtime* appears as a suitable translation, since it allows to perceive the interconnection of oneiric and actual dimensions in Aboriginal cosmology.

The debate around translations of Aboriginal terms and the consequent access to secret and sacred concepts involves also the idea of *songlines* or *dreaming tracks*, which are the English equivalents of indigenous *tjuringa lines*.



Fig. 1 - Example of visual representation of songlines: *Tjukurrpa Kungkarrangkalpa — Kulyuru and Kuru Ala* by Betty Laidlaw and Nyumitja Laidlaw (1994) <sup>10</sup>

According to Chatwin’s official biographer, the indigenous word “is not translatable in any sense. It is at once a map, a long narrative poem, and the foundation of an Aboriginal’s religious and traditional life; the marrow of his identity” (Shakespeare, 2018). For this reason, by popularising the English translation of the term, Chatwin’s novel – and the author himself – became at the same time fundamental and problematic.

Although he was accused of mistreating Aboriginal sacred knowledge (a problem that will be discussed in Chapter Three), Chatwin’s transformation of Aboriginal cosmology from secret and elitist to accessible to a wide public, cannot be read only from a negative perspective. Indeed, by inserting indigenous complex ideas in a narrative work and explaining them in an accessible way, the profound – and often unclear – interconnection of Natives to their land becomes vivid to Chatwin’s Western public. Therefore, it can help that same public changing its own relationship with nature through this “glimpse of a

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<sup>10</sup> Source: Nma.gov.au. (2018). *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* | National Museum of Australia. [online] Available at: <http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/songlines> [Accessed 2 Oct. 2018].

moral universe [...] in which the structures of kinship reach out to all living men, to all his fellow creature, and to the rivers, the rocks and the trees" (*Songlines*: 70)

Chatwin's way of explaining the songlines is profoundly evocative: he recalls images belonging to shared knowledge, which allow readers to understand complex concepts with few simple words. Thus, in his terms, songlines become a "labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia" (*Songlines*: 2), and, through these songs, the continent itself could then be read "as a musical score" in which "there was hardly a rock or creek [...] that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualise the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that, in which every 'episode' was readable in terms of geology." (13).

From this point of view, it is important to notice that even the concept of dreaming tracks consents to comprehend the interconnectedness of men and land in natives' culture: as Chatwin explains, "By spending his whole life walking and singing his Ancestor's songlines, a man eventually became the track, the Ancestor and the song" (*Songlines*: 179). Being songlines a representation of the land, it appears clear how, through their performance, Aborigines become the land itself: then "To wound the earth [...] is to wound yourself, and if others wound the earth, they are wounding you. The land should be left untouched: as it was in the Dreamtime when the Ancestors sang the world into existence'. (*Songlines*: 13). Mistreating the land would mean mistreating oneself and this is the ecological message readers should derive from *The Songlines*. From this perspective "this deep sense of [indigenous'] oneness with all reality [...] does not return to the past in a nostalgic way; nor does it deny the importance of this type of natural or cosmic mysticism for reconnecting us with the earth in profound and vital relationship" (Hendriks and Hall, 2009: 4): what emerges from Chatwin's narrative is a sense of unity with the land which finds its roots in the past but could still prove to be useful in the current management of the environmental heritage. Consequently, dreaming tracks become "a way of spiritually recuperating and collecting the earth; what was lost is found, and the landscape is experienced concurrently as both symbol and as home." (Enns, 2014: 108).



### 1.3 Mutual Shaping and profound knowledge

The last section of this chapter focuses on the effects of Aboriginal intervention on the Australian soil. As pointed out at the beginning, any landscape is a cultural landscape, where men and land mutually shape each other. Starting from this premise, it appears clear that claiming that indigenous population did not have any impact on the land they inhabited would be paradoxical. Indeed, as stated by J.B. Jackson<sup>11</sup>:

Landscape [...] is never simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment; it is always artificial, always synthetic, always subject to sudden or unpredictable change. [Landscape] is where the slow, natural processes of growth and maturity and decay are deliberately set aside and history is substituted. A landscape is where we speed up or retard or divert the cosmic program and impose our own (in Nassauer, 2012: 221)

Hence, the risk in dealing with indigenous cultures and their relationship with a particular territory is that of excessively romanticising them as ecologically 'impactless' populations. From this perspective, also Chatwin's narrative risks being read as an idealization of Australian natives, starting from his definition of Aborigines as a people "who trod lightly over the earth" (11). This figure of Aboriginal lightness over the land cannot but evoke to readers' minds a sense of innocence towards the territory.

However, contrarily to this romantic idealization, it has lately been recognised that "hunter-gatherer impacts were probably greater than has been generally recognized just as earlier views of "natural" landscapes required revision when the profound effects of agricultural activity became apparent" (Simmons, 1989 and Faegri, 1988 in Head, 2000: 16).

From this point of view, Australian Aborigines make no exception, and over the last thirty/forty years the effects they had on the territory during their long permanence have

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<sup>11</sup> Jackson, J. (1984). *Discovering the vernacular landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

started being reconsidered. As Reynolds underlines, until recently, it was commonly believed that “given the uniquely primitive nature of indigenous society, the Aboriginal nations had moulded their way of life to the country in which they lived” (introduction to Gammage, 2011, Kindle ed. pos.298). Lacking technological advancement, natives were deemed to be incapable of altering the territory, and Aboriginal lifestyle would have been the result of mere adaptation to the land. This way, the belief in the primitiveness of aboriginal societies has misled common opinion about the effects of indigenous people on the territory, which was thought to be irrelevant.

Even though it is true that Aboriginal societies had not the tools that are necessary to alter the territory in the same devastating ways of Western colonizers, they nonetheless had a significant impact on Australian soil even before the beginning of colonization.

In this regard, a major research has been carried out by the Australian historian Bill Gammage in his *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011), in which he examines how the Australian natural landscape that was colonized in 1788 was not natural at all: on the contrary, even before settlers’ arrival, the land down-under had already been shaped by indigenous people according to their own needs.

From the analysis of first settlers’ records – which report about trees with no underwood, the presence of regular “natural avenues of gum-trees” and logs peculiarly placed as bridges over creeks and rivers<sup>12</sup> – it was possible to deduce that the landscape they described at the moment of their arrival – though difficult to adapt to – was anything but naturally wild. Gammage notes that the curiously methodical arrangement of natural elements in the Australia of early colonization can be taken as a demonstration that before British arrival the land and its ecosystem had consistently been moulded by indigenous populations. Indeed, Gammage has noted that also early illustrations of Australia (Fig. 2-3) show a landscape that recalls more a well-designed park than uncontrolled wilderness.

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<sup>12</sup> Cook, J. (1773). *An Account of a Voyage Round the World...*, Brisbane 1969. Parkinson, S. (1784). *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, London 1984. / Angas, G. F. (1847). *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and NZ*. New York 1968.



Fig. 2 - Martha Berkeley (Australia, 1813 – 1899) - *Mount Lofty from The Terrace, Adelaide c.1840*, Adelaide, watercolour on paper 53.3 x 65.7 x 2.6 cm (Frame) - South Australian Government Grant 1935, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, the intervention of Aborigines was limited by their technological possibilities but, from the analysis of the chemistry of the soil and of early representations of the landscape, it appears that indigenous Australians

Where possible [...] worked with the country, emphasising or mitigating its character. Sometimes this was all they could do. Mountains, rocks, rivers and most swamps were there to stay. Yet even in these places people might change the country. They dammed rivers and swamps. They cut channels though watersheds.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: Artgallery.sa.gov.au. (2018). *Art Gallery of South Australia: Collection*. [online] Available at: <https://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/agasa/home/Collection/detail.jsp?accNo=0.851> [Accessed 25 Oct. 2018].

They used fire to replace one plant community with another. What plants and animals flourished where related to their management. (Gammage, 2011, Kindle ed. pos.374)



Fig. 3 - Joseph Lycett (c.1774 – c.1825) - *Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos c.1820*, watercolour and gouache on paper. - National Library of Australia<sup>14</sup>

Hence, from recent analyses, it has been discovered that the relationship between Aborigines and landscape was not simply one of people's adaptation to the territory, but also of people's adaptation of the territory. The main instrument natives used were controlled fires (Fig.2), which they repeatedly and masterfully employed with the aim of creating easy pathways through vegetation, maintaining vegetation-patterns to support

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<sup>14</sup> Source: Nationalunitygovernment.org. (2018). True Light and Shade: An Aboriginal Perspective of Joseph Lycett's Art | Sovereign Union - First Nations Asserting Sovereignty. [online] Available at: <http://nationalunitygovernment.org/content/true-light-and-shade-aboriginal-perspective-joseph-lycetts-art> [Accessed 25 Oct. 2018].

new plant-growth and attract animals to hunt and encouraging the development of edible or spiritually meaningful plants<sup>15</sup>.

If taken this way, it appears clear that romantically believing that Aborigines did not impact on the land would be inaccurate, since what settlers found in 1788 was the result of millennia of actions on the territory. Being human, also Aborigines cannot escape what Prichard (1855) defined as “that impulse peculiar to man, which urges him to attempt and persevere through long successive ages in the effort to obtain a conquest over the physical agencies of the elements, and to render subservient to his uses and wants the properties of surrounding bodies” (in Head, 2000: 35-6).

However, even though it has been proved that – contrarily to commonly shared ideas – Aborigines had a significant impact on Australian landscape, what is important to underline from an environmental point of view is that they did so in the respect of all the elements characterising that same territory. Indeed, indigenous operated on the land under their religious ecological philosophy called ‘the Law’, which “prescribed that people leave the world as they found it” (Gammage, 2011, Kindle ed. Pos. 345).

It is thus this element of respectful management of the land that is perfectly represented in Chatwin’s description of Aborigines as a people “who trod lightly over the earth”, since the less they took from the earth, the less they had to give in return.” (*Songlines*: 11). Though romanticizing, his words should not be read as the affirmation of indigenous ‘impactlessness’, but as the recognition that natives’ actions on the land were far from western exploitation: they only operated in the limits of what was strictly necessary to their survival.

For this reason, Aborigines were – and still are – often perceived as conservative (meant as ‘against changes’) by white Australians. In *The Songlines* this perspective is embodied by the figure of the policeman who, in chapter 24, discusses with Bruce and Arkady about the construction of the railway line in the outback. The policeman does not understand

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<sup>15</sup> Dpaw.wa.gov.au. (2018). *Traditional Aboriginal burning*. [online] Available at: <https://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/management/fire/fire-and-the-environment/41-traditional-aboriginal-burning> [Accessed 25 Oct. 2018].

the reasons for Aboriginal opposition to the railway (a symbol of modernity) and consequently concludes that “They’re incapable of progress” (123).

On the contrary, as it has been demonstrated, Aborigines are not contrary to the modification of the land, but they agree only to operations that do not ‘offend’ the sacredness of the territory. This is confirmed also by the fact that changes in the landscape are conceived also in Aboriginal religious system, since every modification of the land comports a modification of the songlines, which encode every change in an “endless accumulation of details” (*Songlines*: 70).

Thus, since natives were strongly determinant in the shaping of Australian landscape, Aboriginal conservativeness should not be perceived as underdevelopment or as the triumph of wilderness, but as an administration of the territory that is the product of millennia of experience over the land.

Indeed, every practice of Aboriginal landscape-making was not only regulated by religious beliefs and a profound respect for the land but was also informed by the deep knowledge of the territory and its ecosystem. As Gammage explains:

Land was managed at a local level. Detailed local knowledge was crucial. Each family cared for its own ground, and knew not merely which species fire or no fire might affect, but which individual plant and animal, and their totem and Dreaming links. They knew every yard intimately, and knew well the ground of neighbours and clansmen, sharing larger scale management or assuming responsibility for nearby ground if circumstance required. (Gammage, 2012, Kindle edition pos.375-82)

Thus, this deep knowledge of the territory and the species inhabiting it was not simply a manifestation of care for the environment, but also warranty of survival for Aboriginal people. In this concern, one of the many Aborigines Chatwin meets during his journey in *The Songlines* explains him what territory means to his people: ‘Territory, you see, [...] is not necessarily the place you feed in. It’s the place where you stay...where you know every nook and cranny...where you know by heart every refuge...where you are invincible to the pursuer’ (*Songlines*: 113). Aboriginal understanding of their environment, apart

from being a guarantee of a respectful landscape-management, allowed natives to feel secure in the land they inhabit, in a mutual form of protection.

Consequently, as demonstrated by Gammage's work, it appears clear that the definition of Aborigines as 'impactless' is the effect of the excessive romanticization of which also Chatwin was accused. However, what is important to notice is that, even though they consistently altered the Australian landscape, Aboriginal management of the environment did not have the same implications of colonizers' actions on the territory. This is because settlers acted on that land without knowing its functioning, consequently having devastating effects on an ecosystem that had already been undeniably altered, but following a respectful and knowing "earthbound philosophy" (*Songlines*: 13).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Movement and Stasis: Two Faces of the Same Continent

Having discussed the concept of place, it is now important to analyse how different approaches to the same landscape can affect its ecosystem. The two most common ways of entering in contact with the territory are movement and stasis, represented by the opposing lifestyles of nomadism and settlement.

Since nomadism is at the basis of Chatwin's production in its entirety – influencing also his lifestyle – it appears clear that dealing with his work cannot exclude treating the theme of movement. For this reason, the aim of this chapter is that of examining the opposite trends of mobility and stasis, which are characteristic of Australia and are respectively embodied by indigenous and colonizers. In this concern, nomadic and settled lifestyles are examined in relation to their impact on the environment, with a specific focus on Alice Springs as 'frontier' territory and its representation in *The Songlines*. Lastly, Chatwin's own attitude of wandering observer is taken into analysis and is compared to the Baudelairian figure of the *flâneur* in relation to the environment he moves in.

#### 2.1 *The Nomadic Alternative*

According to Will Self, "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' (in Morrison, 2012: 5). Movement is conceived as what allows modern men to connect with themselves and the environment they move in, and it could thus be interpreted as the key that links ecocriticism to *The Songlines*. As Morrison – quoting Robinson<sup>16</sup> – underlines, "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'" (in Morrison, 2012: 4).

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<sup>16</sup> Robinson J.C. (1989/2006) *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press.



The belief in the connection between movement and nature does not belong only to modern thinkers but finds its roots in the past, namely in the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

In the eighteenth century, in his *Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*) – particularly in the Fifth Walk – Rousseau explains how walking in the natural environment in isolation allows him to enter in contact with the essence of his human nature and its interconnectedness with the natural world. Although Rousseau's work has been examined in many different ways, recently, contemporary critics have started revisiting it from the ecological perspective. This way, it has been noted that alienation from nature can be interpreted not only as the main cause of modern societies' corruption, but also as one of the reasons for the environmental crisis we are currently facing. From this point of view, as Lane underlines, Rousseau's work can be read as a declaration that

humanity constitutes a threat to the environment because of a transformation of human nature. In Rousseau's account, our environmental problems are intimately tied to our denaturalized human character [...] human beings who are dominated by *amour-propre* are inescapably committed to what Hobbes characterized as "the restless pursuit of power after power ceasing only in death." Although Rousseau's primary concern was not ecological in the contemporary sense of the word, it was he who first explained why this "restless pursuit" inevitably results in the destruction of the ecosystems in which we are embedded. [...] We are by acquired passions to make ourselves, as Rousseau puts it in the *Second Discourse*, 'the tyrant of [ourselves] and nature' (2006: 475-6)

Rousseau believed that detachment from natural environment was the cause for the alienation of modern man from his own nature, which has consequently brought corruption to western societies. Even though the philosopher did not directly include the ecological discourse in his reflection, Lane (2006) believes that his perspective could also be extended to the relationship between men and the environment. The 'restless pursuit'

to gain power over nature by imposing human rules over natural ones could thus be interpreted as the roots of the current environmental crisis.

Rousseau's ecological influence is demonstrated by the fact that echoes of his theory are present in the works of later nature writers (i.e. Thoreau) who have already been studied from an ecocritical perspective. However, the application of Rousseau's philosophy should not be limited only to those writers who directly deal with the relationship between man and nature, but it could also provide an interesting starting point for the ecocritical analysis of travel writings such as Chatwin's *The Songlines*.

Rousseau's influence on Chatwin finds its roots early in the author's life. Indeed, the Rousseauian theory of the 'noble savage' had been the focus of Chatwin's interest since his youth (Chatwin J.M., 2008: 193) and was elaborated by the British author later in his life. The French philosopher's idea was the inspiration for the formulation of Chatwin's own theory of "the Nomadic Alternative", which had to be an "answer to [his] own restlessness" (Shakespeare, 2000: 14) and constitutes the centre of *The Songlines* as well as of the majority of his works.

As Stewart explains, in Chatwin's vision "*Homo sapiens* is *Homo ambulans*." (2012, p.xi) and thus we function in a most efficient way when we walk: "Modern civilization imprisons us in offices, and treats tramps, Gypsies, mystics, and nomads as misfits. But in fact, these wanderers are in tune with an ancient and more natural form of human life. [...] to find yourself you must travel" (ibid).

This idea obsessed Chatwin all his life and is discussed in one of his many essays about nomadism included in the posthumously-published collection called *Anatomy of Restlessness*. "The Nomadic Alternative" is the notion by which walking is a way of reconnecting with one's own human nature through "a life in harmony with 'nature', unhampered with possessions, free from the grinding bonds of technology, sinless, promiscuous, anarchic, and sometimes vegetarian" (*Anatomy of Restlessness*, 1997: 85). For this purpose, Chatwin defined as his perfect case study "The hunters and gatherers who live at the minimal level of material culture in bands of twenty-five to fifty, bound up within a kinship structure of five hundred or so all speaking the same dialect, are

usually to be distinguished from all others by their complete freedom of movement.” (in Chatwin J.M., 2008: 193).

For the author, the Rousseauan ‘bon sauvage’ was thus embodied by the figure of the nomad, since in his view nomadism is the natural state of man. In this regard, Chatwin affirms that

Natural Selection has designed us – from the structure of our brain cells to the structure of our big toe – for a career of seasonal journeys on foot through a blistering land of thorn-scrub or desert. If this were so; if the desert were ‘home’; if our instincts were forged in the desert; to survive the rigours of the desert – then is easier to understand why greener pastures pall on us; why possessions exhaust us, and why Pascal’s imaginary man found his comfortable lodgings a prison. (*Songlines*: 162).

If Chatwin’s idea of nomadism is read in the perspective of Rousseau’s philosophy, the passage from a life on the move to settlement – being a form of detachment from nature – is the cause of human corruption. In *Anatomy of Restlessness*, Chatwin talks about the fact that settlement – by ‘warping’ human natural instinct towards walking – produces a sort of frustration in man that ends up in “violence, greed, status-seeking or a mania for the new” (1997: 12).

In the particular case of Aboriginal societies, Merlan confirms this idea by explaining that “for many settlement-dwelling people, the town is a spectre (as well as sometime attraction) of abandonment to alcohol and loss of regular participation in the communal ceremonial life [...]” (1998: 78): behavioural deviations are the effect of human detachment from what Chatwin defines as his natural ‘migratory drive’.

The nomad was the one who was not corrupted by the vices of sedentary life and, not being burdened by private property, he could move from one place to another enjoying a harmonious relationship with the environment.

Chatwin's praise for nomadism was due to the fact that "the nomadic existence seemed to represent [...] an ideal state of being, in tune with nature and the seasons, and with one constantly on the move" (Chatwin J.M., 2008: 30).

What raised Chatwin's interest in Central Australian Aborigines was that he had noted that their nomadism was far from a form of primitiveness, but it was instead the effect of a profound comprehension of the territory they lived in, which they encoded in songlines:

Aboriginals [...] could not imagine territory as a block of land hemmed by frontiers: but rather as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through'. 'all our words for "country" [...] are the same words for "line".' For this there was one simple explanation. Most of Outback Australia was arid scrub or desert where rainfall was always patchy and where one year of plenty might be followed by years of lean. To move in such landscape was survival: to stay in the same place suicide. The definition of a man's 'own country' was 'the place in which I do not have to ask'. Yet to feel 'at home' in that country depended on being able to leave it. (*Songlines*: 56)

Even though Chatwin has often been criticized for not having the sufficient ethnographic preparation to talk about indigenous people, his deductions were not far from truth, but were instead confirmed later by the works of anthropologists and researchers. For example, in analysing aboriginal seasonal knowledge, Clarke states that:

On a drought-prone continent with harsh climatic extremes, Australian hunter-gatherers maintained their mobility to maximize the seasonal availability of food, water, medicine, shelter and artefactmaking materials. [...] The way of life for Aboriginal people demanded a detailed knowledge of the relationships between weather and the landscape, enabling them to observe and forecast its constant changes. (Clarke P. A., 2009: 79)

Chatwin had comprehended this interconnection between nomadism and the knowledge of the impervious territory and erratic climate of Central Australia, and states that Aboriginal nomadism was the logic consequence of the fact that

In arid country, resources are never stable from one year to the next. A stray thunderstorm may make a temporary oasis of green, while only a few miles off the land remains parched and bare. To survive in drought, therefore, any species must adopt one of two stratagems: to allow for the worst and dig in; to open itself to the world and move. (*Songlines*: 250)

This way, Australians' nomadism represents a form of adaptation to the territory that depends on the profound knowledge of the functioning of that same territory: "The mobile lifestyle of Aborigine groups was both a response to the unpredictable climate of Australia and a means to sustainably extract resources from fragile ecosystems" (Pettit, 2015: 34). A life on the move is the natural effect of the acceptance of the Australian erratic climate and of the consequent unpredictability of food supplies. This idea is confirmed also by Gergis in *Sunburnt Country*, where the climatologist explains that

The First Australians have followed intricate seasonal cycles of plant and animal cues for over 40000 years, passing them down from generation to generation [...]. The ability to adapt to extremely harsh weather conditions has allowed countless generations of Aboriginal people to survive. An intimate knowledge of the environment was literally a matter of life and death: it was used for practical purposes like tracking hunting grounds or identifying safe travelling routes as the seasons began to change. (2018: 116)

Even though – in the previous chapter – it has been stated that Aborigines altered the landscape in order to facilitate their access to food provisions, they did not try to set themselves against the power of nature. Indigenous were perfectly aware when nothing could be done against natural phenomena and – when the conditions were unfavourable – they indulged and moved away without trying to contrast natural agents in order to survive. Natives had understood that Australian climate and territory should not be confronted but respected.

Being informed by the comprehension that Aboriginal nomadism was the consequence of climatic and seasonal knowledge, Chatwin's perspective could thus be interpreted as the affirmation of Aboriginal mobility as a low-impact way of inhabiting the territory. Aborigines' 'life on the move' distinguishes itself from colonizers' stability, which is instead represented by Chatwin as a dystopic form of modernity (Williams, 2003). Consequently, the comprehension of the negative impact of British settlement on Australia's environment may have been what made Chatwin indirectly align with the position of the Aboriginal Land Rights Movement. As Huggan notes in his reading of *The Songlines*,

Chatwin [...] contrast(s) Western patterns of land use, which are based on the principle of material acquisition, with indigenous patterns, which are based on the principle of collective experience. (He) take(s) care to point out, however, that the land use of indigenous (Native Indian/Aboriginal) societies is far more complex than is often supposed. (Huggan, 1991: 59)

This way, the author proposes a different form of modernity which is detached from western dependence "on the values of property, settlement and material acquisition" (Williams, 2003: 101), which restrict the individual's capacity to move, consequently leading to "an alienation from the natural world" and the "environmental destruction" (ibid.).

## *2.2 Walkers vs Settlers: Two Ways of Land Knowledge and Management*

The opposition between mobility and stability has been characterizing Australia since the beginning of its colonization. During their millennial permanence on the Australian soil, Aborigines have always been a nomadic population who depended on movement for their survival. Their mobility was the reason why, at the beginning of British settlement, few were the encounters between indigenous and colonizers. In this concern, Pettit explains that "limited native encounters, lack of cultivated acreage, and the

commonplace discovery of abandoned huts contributed to the British impression of an open, uninhabited landscape ready for conversion into agricultural parcels.” (2015: 41). Contrarily to common belief, Pettit underlines that Aborigines were not completely unknowing of the concept of private property, since they were not real nomads but semi-nomads, who “returned to favored camps in particular locations and had defined territories whose limits respected the boundaries of neighboring groups.” (2015: 34). In the same way, in *The Songlines* Chatwin highlights the fact that “Before the whites came [...], no one in Australia was landless, since everyone inherited, as his or her private property, a stretch of the Ancestor’s song and the stretch of country over which the song passed” (*Songlines*: 57).

However, colonizers’ reliance on the Western way of conceiving land management – based on private property and agricultural use – made them believe that natives were not able to administer their own territory. For this reason, in the Eighteenth century, the wrong assumption based on the alleged absence of ‘private property’ in Aboriginal culture, led colonizers to justify their – autonomously-taken – right of exploiting Australian land in order to ‘civilize’ it. Natives “were denied to “own land” as property because they appeared simply to dwell in nature and to wander over the land” (Myers, 2002: 101).

British colonists based their argumentations for the occupation of the Australian soil on the principle of *Terra Nullius*<sup>17</sup>, which identifies a “Land that is legally deemed to be unoccupied or uninhabited” (Oxford Dictionaries) and that can consequently be appropriated. At the time of British arrival, since few were the natives encountered, colonizers assumed that Australia did not have any identifiable owner and that the continent should accordingly become property of the British Empire.

Since 1788 – by claiming their right over the Australian soil – the settlers started to establish their own administration and land organization, thus profoundly affecting

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<sup>17</sup> Latin for “land that belongs to nobody”. This doctrine remained in the Australian law system until 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1992 with the Mabo Decision, which recognized land ownership to Aborigines.

Aboriginal societies in their lifestyle and their knowledge of the territory in its availability of resources. This aspect has been underlined by Merlan, who states that

Towns and other places of settler development had significant effect upon Aboriginal populations in earlier times and still do, in changing ways. Such centers were always in places with access to water and other requirements for settler life and livelihood. Such siting inevitably disrupted Aboriginal people, often forcing them into situations of competition with settlers and introduced animals (Merlan, 1998: 3)

British arrival brought with it the beginning of a difficult coexistence between natives and colonizers, which eventually resulted in the adaptation of Aborigines to the settled lifestyle. The importation of settlement did not affect solely Aboriginals from an anthropological point of view, but it had devastating effects also on the management of the Australian territory. Merlan explains that “settlers could insert themselves into the middle of Aboriginal relationships to places” (1998: 73), imposing their own environmental management over the indigenous one, replacing nomadism with settlement and consequently setting the roots for the environmental crisis now affecting Australia.

At the base of the ecological damage made by colonists there was what Clarke defined as the “contrast between [...] a gift economy and a commodity culture” (2009b: 237-8), which correspond respectively to the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal traditions.

According to this vision, the Aboriginal relationship to the land is associated with the idea of gift economy. This perspective implies that Aborigines perceive the Australian environment as an inalienable good: the land should be treated as a gift, and the task of man should be that of taking care of its ecosystem in order to grant its preservation and safeguard.

On the other hand, settlers – and the descending white-Australian society – are characterized by a commodity culture, which is instead based on the alienability of the good. From the British point of view, “A prevailing perspective of Australia, besides being a desolate land, was of a place waiting to be turned into a productive agricultural



establishment to the benefit of the colonists and Britain alike.” (Pettit, 2015: 1). Colonizers did not see the land as a gift but as a material possession and a source to be economically exploited: with British arrival, “The genuinely natural ways of indigenous ecosystems were irretrievably undone as ‘wild’ lands were cleared for farming or opened up to pastoralism” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010: 8).

Analysing *The Songlines*, Clarke (2009b) notes that Chatwin had understood the gift/commodity binary in land management, and he used that dichotomy in order to celebrate nomadism as a way out from Western materialism. Walking in the desert does not imply any modification of the territory in order to satisfy human greed for material possession but is instead a form of respectful relationship to the land.

Hence, the beginning of settlement in Central Australia marked the beginning of a form of land-exploitation, with consequent disastrous effects on the continent’s ecosystem, following the instinct that brings men to “tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the wild and prehuman to human dimensions” (Abbey, 1968 in Graulund, 2003: 356).

Being an ecosystem completely absent in Europe, the modification of the desert represented a difficult challenge to colonists, and this is the reason why Chatwin decides to write about this environment. Since the Australian desert has been able to partly preserve its natural wilderness and resist to the destroying effects of settlement, in Chatwin’s representation it is a place in which man can re-establish a healthier relationship with the environment through the reconnection with his natural essence of nomad.

This way, the British author’s praise for nomadism can be interpreted not as the desire for a regression to primitiveness, but as the invitation to a more sustainable lifestyle. In this concern, Williams underlines that

Rather than representing a place of banishment constructed against a cultivated Garden of Eden, the “visionary” reading stresses the purity of the desert in the light of its material sparseness. Chatwin articulates his argument against materialist settled civilisations, portrayed as dystopian, by constructing an opposition between

the city and the plains/desert. He amasses textual evidence to support the purity of the plains as opposed to the corruption of the city [...]. (2003: 108).

While settlers believed that – being nomads – indigenous were underdeveloped, from Chatwin's perspective nomadism emerges as a form of utopic relationship with the land which is instead far from primitiveness.

Contrarily to common Western opinion, Chatwin believed that Aborigines were not backwards, but they simply did not rely on materialism. Even when it came to the most material of practices – economy – the author underlines that indigenous had their own form of trade system which was 'immaterial'. As Arkady explains to Bruce, Aboriginal trade was related to walking, and was thus encoded in indigenous songlines "because songs, not things, are the principal medium of exchange. Trading in "things" is the secondary consequence of trading in song. [...] A man's verses were his title deeds to territory. He could lend them to others. He could borrow other verses in return." (*Songlines*: 57). Chatwin goes on noting that "The one thing [natives] couldn't do was sell or get rid of [verses]" (ibid.), underlining the 'immateriality' of Aboriginal culture, which – in his philosophy – is associated with an idea of pureness.

It is precisely this 'purity' of Aboriginal communities that Chatwin celebrates, believing in the cathartic effect of walking: movement is the universal motor of life, to which any society, and not only the Aboriginal Australian one, should go back in order to find again its incorruptness:

I felt the Songlines were not necessarily an Australian phenomenon, but universal: that they were the means by which man marked out his territory, and so organised his social life. All other successive systems were variants – or perversions – of this original model. [...] I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages; that wherever men have trodden they have left a trail of song (of which we may, now and then, catch an echo); and that these trails must reach back, in time and space, to an isolated pocket in the African savannah, where the First Man

opening his mouth in defiance of the terrors that surrounded him, shouted the opening stanza of the world song, 'I AM'! (*Songlines*: 282).

If taken too literally, Chatwin's view appears as anachronistic, since his depiction of Aborigines seems to challenge the Darwinian theory of the "survival of the fittest", according to which "the society of the colonial power [is] more developed and civilized than others". (Gill, 2005: 99). In his view of the world, there is no link between settlement and development.

However, if this discourse – which may appear markedly utopic and eccentric to modern readers – is relativized to the environmental issue, it emerges that Chatwin's way of perceiving Aboriginal nomadism can become the example of a more ecologically-sustainable way of life: "The difference was one of outlook. The whites were forever changing the world to fit their doubtful vision of the future. The Aborigines put all their mental energies into keeping the world the way it was. In what way was that inferior?" (*Songlines*: 123-4).

Since it has been stated that a return to a nomadic lifestyle with its total renunciation of every form of possession of material goods would be anachronistic, Aboriginal nomadism should be interpreted as an invitation to a return to a simpler way of living. As Clarke – quoting Featherstone<sup>18</sup> – interprets it, Chatwin's nomadism is characterized by the "possession of a few material things as possible and by constant movement", this "nomadism does not mean the absence of possessions, but that the qualities lent by possessions must [...] be supplemented by movement in order to contribute to a balanced sense of self" (2009b: 233). If Chatwin's message is ecologically read, what emerges is that we need to limit our greed for material possessions in order to embrace not an inferior, but a more sustainable lifestyle that could lead us to re-establish an equilibrium both with our nature and with the external one. Chatwin's

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<sup>18</sup> Featherstone K. (2001). 'Everything Fitted into a Suitcase': Possessions and Nomadism in Chatwin's *The Songlines*'. *Studies in Travel Writing* 5, 2001, pp 83-105.

primary concern takes the reader beyond contemporary Australia and backward through the millennia to pose questions about man's basic nature. [...] Is not the sedentary life conducive to greed, possessiveness, territoriality, and warfare? Does the nomadic life produce a different kind of man, one who sees the world as being perfect as it is, with no desire to change it - i.e., ruin it? (Willbanks: 1988: 724).

### *2.3 The Frontier: Alice Springs and the Difficult Coexistence of Movement and Settlement*

The problematic coexistence of nomadism and settlement, and thus of Black and White Australians, has been a pressing issue since the arrival of British colonizers. Notwithstanding the abolition of the *terra nullius* principle – with the Mabo Decision in 1992 – the presence of two completely different cultures on the same land has remained a crucial issue in Central Australia.

As Gill points out, Australia's inner and northern regions are territories where “the treatment and status of indigenous people have remained significant social and political issues, and where national and regional conflicts over indigenous land ownership and title have been most focused, particularly in relation to extensive pastoralism” (2005: 67). This is the reason why these territories – despite their not being at the borders with any other country – are often identified as ‘frontier’ zones.

From this point of view, it is worth underlining the fact that that of frontier is not only a geographical concept but it also

evokes the edges of possibility, beyond which glimpses of new and exciting prospects can be seen. Indeed, it is the real and imaginative spaces where edges and borders between ideas are traversed, where identities can lose their certainty and be reassembled, and where power fluctuates between people and the world [...] (Davis, 2005: 7)

Australian outback can be thus referred to as 'frontier', since it is the place where differences meet, and where it is possible to observe the anthropological and ecological effects of the interaction between those differences.

In the collective imagination, the emblem of the Australian frontier was represented by the town of Alice Springs, which has been "widely characterised [...] as [...] a representation of the supposed divide between black and white, primitive and modern" (Morrison, 2012: 51).

Set in the middle of the Northern Territory State and close to one of the few stable sources of water of the Australian desert, Heppell and Wigley (1981) explain that Alice Springs was built in 1872 to be a telegraph station: the first 'outpost' of British colonization in the inner parts of the continent. Since then, the town has been subject to the arrival of an increasing number of settlers in search for more land to conquer. After having already occupied the majority of the coastal zones – more suitable for the British lifestyle both from a climatic and a territorial point of view – settlers began moving inward. Indeed,

With most of the land in more desirable areas of Australia already alienated, the Central Desert was seen as a last source of land which would not also require a large capital outlay. Once permanent white settlers moved into the area, increased contact with the original inhabitants was inevitable. The consequences of that contact were monumental and devastating for the Aborigines, and the effects of it are still felt. (Heppell and Wigley, 1981: 4)

Alice Spring is significant also for Chatwin, since there he began his journey and could observe and report the dynamics of the coexistence of past and modern values belonging to different cultures: "the frontier is a confusing place. [with] this conflation of culture old and new, foreign and homespun, ancient and modern" (Morrison, 2012: 8).

When Chatwin crossed Australia between 1983 and 1984, the problem of Aboriginal land rights was at the final stages of the strong debate that had been ongoing since the arrival of British colonists. Consequently, – even though it is not known if it was in the author's

intentions – Chatwin’s narrative adds his voice to the chorus of critical voices who were in favour of the movement for indigenous rights over the Australian territory. Indeed, it has been stated that Chatwin never openly declared his position, but from his words it can be deduced that he perceived whites’ lifestyle and their appropriation of the land as deleterious. He talks through characters, and makes Arkady speak in defence of the maintenance of Aboriginal tradition: “the idyllic days of hunting and gathering were over [...] What could be done for Aboriginals was to preserve their most essential liberty: the liberty to remain poor, or, as he phrased it more tactfully, the space in which to be poor if they wished to be.” (*Songlines*: 3).

For Chatwin, the town of Alice Springs represents the emblem of the intervention of a dystopian modernity on an Arcadian, utopic environment (Williams, 2003): it is the symbol of a sudden, deadly stasis that interrupts the vitality and naturalness of Aboriginal movement. For this reason, it is no surprise that the only two times in which the author describes Alice Springs, he does so by connotating it negatively. Indeed, already from the first lines of the novel, the town is introduced as “a grid of scorching streets where men in long white socks were forever getting in and out of Land Cruisers” (*Songlines*: 1), and then described as not being “a very cheerful town either by day or night [...] a dreary, Americanised strip of travel agents, souvenir shops and soda fountains” (30).

The scarcity of representation is not surprising since Chatwin never lingers on descriptions of places (Stewart, 2012: xv), but with the use of few words he is able to produce an incisive portrayal of a town that is perceived as hostile also by the reader.

As stated in the previous chapter, in *The Songlines*, the perception of the places Chatwin describes comes through his portrayal of characters. From this perspective, it can be observed that not only the whites Bruce meets in Alice Springs – and in all the other towns – are negatively connotated, but also those Aborigines living in those towns. Since, according to the author, the passage from the nomadic to the settled lifestyle marks the corruption of men, not only white-Australians, but also Indigenous characters who have abandoned their nomadism to embrace a settled lifestyle are depicted as degraded. As Williams explains, in Alice Springs Aborigines “are seen to be living in a fallen state,

irrevocably damaged by their proximity to Western man and the loss of their traditional lands” (2003: 111).

For this reason, indigenous people inhabiting Alice Springs and all the little towns of the Australian desert are not the ‘bon sauvages’ Chatwin wished to encounter but are instead characterised as drunkards who drink away problems of settlement life, land rights and racism. As Morphy puts it

The Aboriginal heroes of the book are not those shadowy figures who Chatwin set out to find, 'the old songmen of the tribe' in touch with the underlying mysteries, but the many Aboriginal people of extraordinary capacity whom he encountered fighting in an almost nightmare world, continually mediating between cultures, constantly moving between worlds. (1988: 20)

The most significant episode of disillusionment for Chatwin is the one of the hunting trip, where Aborigines are represented while repeatedly running over a kangaroo to kill it with their car: Bruce is horrified since those cruel men are not the pure indigenous he wished to meet, but the product of the encounter with the corruption brought by white society (Johnson, 2002: 59).

From the grotesque portrayal of the characters inhabiting frontier towns, it emerges that those settlements – being places where different cultures mingle together – are anything but idyllic places; and this is true both from the anthropological and from the environmental points of view.

From an attentive analysis of those scenes of the novel that are set in urban areas, it can be noted that there are some traces of the roots of the current environmental crisis. Those elements are for the major part of Western importation, and they come together with settled habits and unaccustomedness with the environment, but they have been taken up also by indigenous people. In this concern, traces can be found of problems of waste – “plastic, paper and scraps of metal sheet, spiralling [...] into the sky” (i.e. 97) –, use of air-conditioners (i.e. 68; 90), and the excessive use of cars (i.e. 1).

From this point of view, it could also be noted that Bruce himself is not completely innocent, since he is the first to employ air conditioner (68) and other environmentally harming devices. However, in his defence, it has to be acknowledged that when the book was written in the eighties, the disastrous ecological effects of those practices were not known yet.

In any case, even though Chatwin's interest was undoubtedly more anthropological than environmental, reading *The Songlines* from an ecocritical perspective can help finding details of ecologically wrong behaviours, the effect of which he would have never known.

Nonetheless, Chatwin's outback is not only Alice Springs: outside the frontier towns it is still that exotic red-earthed land. Rural areas of Central Australia are still

characterised by emptiness, wilderness and arguably, by settler transience in the face of a land that has not been transformed according to the mythical progression from wilderness to garden. [...] the wilderness remains ever present." (Gill, 2005, p.69).

And this is the Australia Chatwin looks for: the one in which the contact with untamed nature could allow men to remain true to their own nature.

#### *2.4 The Environmental Flâneur*

As Morrison underlines, "For non-western cultures, walking was a way of knowing the world, a means of understanding landscape and one's place in it through the feet. Walking constructed a spatial narrative of history" (2014: 53). For nomadic societies this is particularly true, since their continuous walking – as opposed to Western stasis – keeps the sense of touch constantly activated and allows to enter in direct contact with the ground and discover the surrounding landscape.

Ingold argues that, among all the five senses, touch is the one that consents the most immediate access to the world around us; touch is the sense through which children begin to discover the world, and it thus represents an innate way of accessing knowledge. Being



feet the first parts of the body to enter in contact with the ground, Ingold stresses upon the fact that walking produces knowledge of the territory, since “it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground (albeit mediated by footwear), that we are most fundamentally and continually ‘in touch’ with our surroundings” (2004: 330).

From this point of view, Aboriginal songlines are a perfect example of this dynamic of knowledge: through walking, Australian natives mapped the territory, comprehended its functioning and created their peculiar creationistic mythology. As Arkady explains to Bruce in *The Songlines* “The man who went ‘Walkabout’ was making a ritual journey. He trod in the footprints of his Ancestor. He sang the Ancestor’s stanzas without changing a word or note – and so recreated the Creation” (14). Aboriginal nomadism is not simply a form of wandering but also a way of place-making and place-understanding, a “mode of absorption” (Merlan, 1998: 29) of landscape’s details and changes.

On the contrary, the settled lifestyle typical of white-Australian and Western societies, being characterized by the reduction of walking practices, produces the consequent loss of acquaintance with the landscape.

Even though settled cultures tend towards the almost complete loss of contact with the environment, there are nonetheless cases in which, in European societies as well, walking is conceived as a way of knowing. In this concern, Morrison notes that an example of this re-evaluation of the link between movement and knowledge can be found in Nineteenth century France, with the Baudelairian figure of the *flâneur*.

In his 1863 collection of essays entitled *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne (The Painter of Modern Life)*, Baudelaire introduces to the figure of the *flâneur*, which he defines as the insatiable wanderer of the city, the passionate observer, the one to whom:

It is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world [...]. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. (Baudelaire: 9)

Even though the *flâneur* is a typically urban figure, Morrison underlines that “changes in the landscape as perceived by the walking writer/storyteller might just as validly be gleaned in a rural setting” since “Strictly speaking, Baudelaire’s *flâneur* is a passionate spectator of his environment” (2014: 54). If interpreted this way, it appears clear that the space of action of the *flâneur* should not necessarily be an urban one but it could be extended to the natural environment.

Being removed from the city to be re-placed in nature, the baudelairian figure might as well be read in ecological terms and become the ‘*environmental flâneur*’, who observes the transformations of the natural landscape and people inhabiting it: “When observing unfamiliar objects of a place the *flâneur*’s walk is an act not only of placemaking, but of cartography [...]. In particular, the walk provides a map of observed changes to the environment” (ibid.).

Consequently, Chatwin’s walking in the outback allows to create a parallel between his character, that of the *flâneur* in his ‘act of cartography’ and Aboriginal songlines from an ecological/ethnographical perspective.

Chatwin’s own wandering in Central Australia and his observing both Aboriginal and white-Australian societies allow him to understand both cultures and territory. The characterization of the British author as the ‘*environmental flâneur*’ is enforced by his ‘detached involvement’ with what he describes.

Indeed, in defining the *flâneur*, Baudelaire stresses upon his observing society without interacting, but remaining instead a disengaged spectator. When talking about his own approach, Chatwin conceived himself in the same way, as demonstrated by an interview with Michael Ignatieff in which the author stated that his “stance was to remain an observer [...] to get as close as I possibly could without going through all that.” (1987 in Moran, 1999: 97).

Even though in *The Songlines* the author uses the first-person narrator – in the figure of his alter-ego Bruce – he always maintains an external perspective on events, his encounters with natives are always mediated by guides and he tries to be as objective as possible. As Moran notes, this way Chatwin has “an impressionistic view, since he always

sees (Aborigines) at a distance, speaking to them through initiated interpreters outside the settlements and receiving monosyllabic answers to his questions, rather than encountering them in their day-to-day existence.” (1999: 101).

Chatwin does not want to embrace Aboriginal lifestyle but only to observe it and understand it in its authenticity. At the same time, he confronts with numerous white-Australians in order to comprehend their perspective as well and to ‘express’ both like the Baudelairian *flâneur* did with French bourgeois society. By remaining a detached observer, Chatwin can eventually draw conclusions on what he sees without personal involvement: readers end up trusting Bruce in his impartiality and take their own position through the analysis of the situations depicted by the narrator.

However, in the end, Chatwin’s opinion emerges through the examination of the discourses of his characters. Even though the author does not express directly his personal opinion on the matter of land rights, he makes characters speak for themselves, and articulate their ideas from their own point of view. Chatwin uses this device to convey what he thinks and to indirectly convince readers: “while each protagonist is characterised as a *flâneur*, the reader is also led to act like a *flâneur*, mentally walking pathways through textual worlds, critically evaluating them, deconstructing the palimpsest and noting impacts of modernity” (Morrison, 2014, 63).

Particularly significant in this concern is a scene depicting one of the many encounters between Bruce and natives, in which the protagonist has the opportunity of talking with an Aborigine activist who interrogates him:

‘Are you English?’

‘Yes’

‘Why don’t you go back home?’

He spoke slowly, in clipped syllables.

‘I just arrived,’ I said.

‘I mean all of you.’

‘All of who?’

‘White men,’ he said.

The whites had stolen his country. Their presence in Australia was illegal. His people had never ceded one square inch of territory. They had never signed a treaty. All Europeans should go back where they came from.' (*Songlines*: 31)

From this exchange, readers cannot but perceive the presence of non-natives in Australia as unnatural. Hence, it could be argued that Chatwin does not explicitly declare what he thinks on the matter because he wants to rely on readers' empathy with Aborigines to convey his opinion.

Like the *flâneur*, who "becomes our eyes" (Milburn, 2009: 2) and makes readers observe and draw their own conclusions from his detailed depiction of what he sees in society, Chatwin simply reports and lets us reflect upon what we read: "He portrays them from the outside, sensing that they inhabit a private world and have little interest in engaging with him or other foreigners" (Stewart, 2012: xxii).

In his pursuit of objectivity, Chatwin does not offer an idyllic portrayal of Aborigines. Nonetheless, from his account, I think that readers are invited to sympathize with indigenous people, since we have the impression that their scornfulness is the consequence of years of oppression. The same oppression that has been imposed over a land, which has been forcefully appropriated and modified by what indigenous people still perceive as the colonizer.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Chatwin on Trial: Ethnography, Colonialism and Globalization

Right after its publication in 1987, *The Songlines* was enthusiastically acclaimed by those who were captivated by the originality of what it talked about and by the celebrity of the author (Moran, 1999 and Clarke R., 2009b). Yet, on the other hand, Chatwin was accused of being “unbearably pretentious” (in Mott, 1992: 482) in dealing with Aboriginal ethnographic information and of exploiting “the various exotic manifestations of Aboriginality as a contemporary cultural commodity” (Clarke R., 2009b: 231).

As Morrison states

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 (2012: 3)

Every part of Chatwin’s work has been both praised and criticised, without the possibility of establishing which perspective is the most truthful.

The ambiguous reception was due to the fact that – as Nicholas Shakespeare states – one can “say almost anything of Bruce Chatwin and the opposite is also true” (1999: 11). His biographer had caught the main aspect of Chatwin’s personality: he never took a clear-cut position, but “it is a rare person who remains neutral. ‘People feel some attitude has to be taken about Bruce, as if you define yourself by how you react to him’” (ibid. quoting Francis Wyndham). Chatwin’s apparently impersonal attitude brought both the public and the critique to be divided regarding his work, especially as far as his position towards ethnography, colonialism and globalization is concerned.

Although this thesis aims at providing an ecocritical analysis of *The Songlines*, it has been said that Chatwin’s masterpiece cannot be completely detached from the ethnographical and postcolonial discourses. This is because the ecological message derives from a

thematic interpretation of the text and its ethnographical research, which instead lies at the core of the novel and has postcolonial implications.

Since *The Songlines* swings between being “referenced as an authoritative – or indeed scandalous – text in relation to Aboriginal culture and Australian race relations” (Clarke R., 2009b: 229), focus of this chapter is the analysis of Chatwin’s approach towards the subject matter of his novel, in an attempt to understand the author’s intentions behind what he writes, both from the ethnographic and the postcolonial points of view. This analysis will then lead, in the next chapter, to the examination of ‘the Chatwin effect’ (Shakespeare, 1999: 535) provoked by the public reception of the book and its environmental impact on the Australian soil.

### *3.1 Realist or Reflexive Ethnography*

In writing *The Songlines*, Chatwin had no declared intention of making a scientific anthropologic account of Aboriginal culture, but it is undeniable that his novel finds a strong foundation in ethnography. As Escriche Riera explains, it is in the nature of travel writing to have a link with anthropology/ethnography, due to

its depiction of worlds other than ours. Contact with a different culture entails contemplation of and responsible research into that new culture, therefore, the study of the Other, when writing travel accounts, frequently includes an anthropological field-study and eventually a contrast and reflection on the new encountered world. (2009: 102)

For this reason, it is no surprise that *The Songlines* is often referenced as an authoritative ethnographic narrative and it is frequently employed for the academic study of Australian Aboriginal Culture. Huggan underlines the fact that Chatwin presents himself as a writer who has the sole aim of inserting his experiences in a “pseudo-ethnographic fiction” (1991: 57).

Chatwin was not a real ethnographer and “lacked a strong intellectual foundation”<sup>19</sup> (Messenger, 2011: 23) in the matter, but he “always followed his whims as a reader and appreciator” (ibid.), thus deepening his knowledge on everything that was of his interest in order to develop his own conclusions. Being rooted in academically-accepted sources<sup>20</sup>, the author’s theories are not so detached from reality and are consequently taken as authoritative by readers and scholars, also thanks to his convincing and evocative way of displaying anthropological concepts: as Morphy notes “the images Chatwin develops are precisely of the kind that a literary popularising anthropologist would be content to have developed.” (1996: 174).

Thus, *The Songlines* reflects its author’s own vagueness by blurring the line between fiction and ethnography and leaving readers perplexed regarding the categorization of the text. Chatwin was perfectly aware of the impossibility of qualifying his work into any clear-cut category and stated that “To call *The Songlines* fiction [...] is misleading. To call it non-fiction is an absolute lie” (in Stewart, 2012: xviii): it is a speculation on real experiences in order to draw personal theoretical conclusions.

Hence, an author who is not an anthropologist *stricto sensu* manages to build up a fictional-narrative that finds its roots in his readings about Aborigines and in his real experience in Australia, which can be considered as a form of ethnographic fieldwork. The basis from which Chatwin started his writing of *The Songlines* makes it clear that his “work [...] displays a range of textual strategies borrowed from ethnography, which attempt to persuade the reader of his uniqueness, both as character and as authoritative writer.” (Featherstone, 2000: 69). In order to comprehend where Chatwin’s approach can be located in the field of Twentieth-century ethnography, it is important to outline the mainstream ethnographical methodologies of his time.

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<sup>19</sup> He had a “modest performance in the classroom” (Shakespeare, 1999: 71) and he did not go to university, so he did not receive a proper anthropological formation.

<sup>20</sup> From his biography it emerges that Chatwin’s knowledge about the concept of songlines came from his reading of Theodor Strehlow’s *Songs of Central Australia* (1972)

Chatwin's attitude can be found midway between the two main strategies of ethnographic research developed in the last century, which are identified by Featherstone with the definitions of "Realist ethnography" and "Reflexive ethnography" (2000). Those methodologies are both based on the idea that fieldwork is the starting point of researchers' understanding of the functioning of the studied culture. However, the realist and the reflexive modes differ from their points of view regarding fieldwork methodology, the objectivity of the research's outcomes and the way they are arranged in writing.

According to Realist Ethnography – the most traditional approach – ethnographical theories should be based on the total immersion of the scientist in the studied culture, through the learning of its language and the active participation to rituals and traditional events. This theory goes under the name of 'participative observation'<sup>21</sup>, which was believed to allow the researcher to reach a total understanding of the studied culture:

By striving to record carefully what we see in the world of the empirical and in seeking to identify all the possible happenings and events in the world of the actual, [...] we have the basis for arriving at understandings about the underlying causal tendencies that might explain them. (Barron, 2013: 120)

Realist ethnographers believe that active participation to the life of the studied community could lead to the formulation of theories that were fixed and could be objectively and universally recognised as true. According to Featherstone, this approach "was concerned with giving an 'objective' view of the host culture, and took for granted the difference between non-developed, non-literate cultures, and the civilization from whence the anthropologist came" (2000: 71-2). The objectivity of the realist approach should also be reflected in the writing style of these works, which Huggan identifies with the expression of "ethnography as *record*" (1991: 57).

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<sup>21</sup> Theorised by Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski – in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922).



This mode of ethnographical writing implied that during fieldwork the scientist had to keep a personal journal where to write down a detailed account of the events witnessed. Then, the gathered data allowed the behavioural analysis, which had to be transcribed in a text whose main characteristic was the minimization of the scientist's subjectivity. The obscuration of the researcher's persona had the aim of conferring objectivity to the text by eliminating the personal perspective of the author: "in this mode of representation, the obvious use of literary devices was deemed to be an abandonment of objectivity" (Featherstone, 2000: 74).

On the other hand, reflexive ethnography – also known as auto-ethnography – is the methodological approach theorised by Clifford Geertz (1974 in 1983) which focuses on the author as an individual whose background experiences cannot be removed from the ethnographic account. Contrarily to the Realist one, this approach "has grown out of 'the crisis in representation' which [...] privileges the researcher over the subject and the method over the question" (Spry, 2001 in Roberts and Saunders, 2005: 296).

According to the auto-ethnographical approach, when dealing with another culture, researchers should constantly remind themselves of the influence of their own background on the carried research. As Geertz explains, "perhaps the simplest and most directly appreciable way to put the matter is in terms of a distinction [...] between [...] 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts" (1983: 57): the researcher is not a native, and consequently he can study indigenous people as close as possible but he will never be able to see "things from the native's point of view" (ibid.: 58) and live the experience as they would. By remembering that they come from a culture that is completely different from the one they are examining, reflexive ethnographers are aware of their cultural limits and acknowledge that they will never be able to understand exactly what being part of the examined culture means.

To Geertz, the Malinowskian "myth of the chameleon fieldworker" who is "perfectly self-tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopolitanism" (1983: 56) did not exist. Although, through fieldwork, ethnographers can bring themselves into line as far as possible with the object of their study, they will

never reach an all-encompassing and definitive knowledge of it, since there will always be an unbreakable cultural barrier between subject and object.

The importance of the researcher's background leads to the formal impossibility to obscure authorial perspective from the ethnographic account, with the consequent development of a form "ethnography as *narrative*" (Huggan, 1991: 57).

As Roberts and Saunders point out, "the reflexive trend in ethnography over the past decade has given rise to the place and necessity of the personal narrative as a reliable mode of expressing findings from the field" (2005: 295). Reflexive authors try to interpret the local culture the best they can and then write their experience from their own perspective in order to render it comprehensible to those who share with them the same cultural background.

When it comes to Chatwin's own ethnographical approach, I would agree with Featherstone's opinion, who affirms that

Chatwin's work has much in common with the realist mode of ethnography, but also that in departing from the conventions of travel writing, Chatwin writes in a mode which can be compared with reflective forms of ethnography too (2000: 69).

In fact, I would argue that the author is more inclined towards reflexive than realist ethnography, as it is made evident not only by the narrative style of his work, but also by his declarations at the beginning of *The Songlines*, when Bruce states that

my reason for coming to Australia was to try and learn for myself, and not from other men's books, what a Songline was – and how it worked. Obviously, I was not going to get to the heart of the matter, nor would I want to" (12).

From this passage, it appears clear that Chatwin's approach takes from auto-ethnography, since the author acknowledges that his British cultural background will never allow him to "get to the heart of the matter" (ibid). Indeed, as he declared in an interview with Michael Ignatieff "he has the feeling he can only be English, behave as

such and only regard himself as an Englishman when he is not at home" (in Escriche Riera, 2009: 41). Despite his conflictual relationship to his own nationality, like a reflexive ethnographer Chatwin is perfectly aware that he cannot avoid his English nature, and that – despite his coming into contact with Aborigines – he will always have a partial access to their knowledge.

Even though Chatwin acknowledges that in order to understand Aboriginal culture he has to go himself to Australia and do some 'fieldwork', it has to be underlined that his approach is not that of Malinowski's participative observation: "It is instead the view of the sympathetic out-sider with a belief that something of value is there" (Morphy, 1988: 19). As explained by Moran, Chatwin refuses

to get his hands dirty [...] [and] the Aborigines are always observed at one remove. In fact, Chatwin made a conscious decision not to live on an Aboriginal settlement, because he would have had to submit himself to a long initiation process involving circumcision and subincision. "My stance was to remain an observer," he said, "to get as close as I possibly could without going through all that". (1999: 97)

Contrarily to the Malinowskian 'chameleon', Bruce does not want to be involved in Aboriginal rituals from within but to remain an outsider who needs intermediaries to communicate with indigenous, "sensing that they inhabit a private world and have little interest in engaging with him or other foreigners" (Stewart, 2012: xii). Nevertheless, the protagonist presents himself as an authoritative voice, who is respected and accepted by the indigenous community. Featherstone underlines this aspect by maintaining that

The narrator's authority is reinforced by the relationship which he establishes with several important characters in the text. [...] characters who usually reserve admiration or information respond to Chatwin in positive ways. [...] It is impressed upon the reader that 'Bruce' is liked and trusted. In addition, he handles the habits (kangaroo hunting, sleeping in the outback) and vocabulary (the "eskie", for example) with expertise, explaining to the reader as though the narrator himself

were already knowledgeable. He shows 'savvy' and a 'feel' for the context, demonstrating his intuitive understanding [...] 'Bruce' therefore passes intellectual tests as well as physical ones, and is keen to convey to the reader his acceptance by the other characters. (2000: 107).

The protagonist is perceived as having a privileged perspective on Aborigines, since he is allowed to have access to knowledge which is normally kept secret from Westerners. Through the display of experiences that are exotic and consequently appealing to the reader, the use of meta-textual references to support his writing and the author's ability of creating connections among cultures, Chatwin manages to establish a form of "experimental authenticity" which allows him to present himself as an authoritative ethnographic voice. As Morphy sustains, "At times when he attempts to elaborate the details of his model, he oversimplifies; on other occasions he stretches the evidence beyond what is known; but overall his work is consistent with anthropological writing" (1996: 174)

For this reason, notwithstanding its partial fictionality, *The Songlines* is now recognized as an ethnographic work, and is often used for university lectures on Australian Aborigines, as it is demonstrated by the example of Ruth Tringham, a professor at Berkeley who sustains that Chatwin

managed to [...] get further into the landscape and people than I ever imagined he could. It's not the truth, it's Bruce's story, but as an idea of trying to grasp an entirely different way of thinking about space and time it's just as good as anthropology (in Shakespeare, 1999: 541)

This way, Chatwin has now become one of the major ways of diffusion of Aboriginal culture to the Western public, gaining "currency in anthropological departments, to correct the paternalism of previously undisputed western methodologies." (Shakespeare, 1999: 541). However, where the accusations on his dubious anthropological authoritativeness end, those about Chatwin's neo-colonialist attitude and his globalizing effect begin.

### 3.2 Post-colonialist or Neo-colonialist Travel Writing

As Shakespeare reports, “Bruce [...] hated the classification of travel writer. ‘He was a writer who happened to travel. He was writing to prove or further some ideas, like the songlines’” (1999: 448). Despite the author’s refusal of being labelled as such, he undeniably was a travel writer, with the consequent problems arising from the subject matter of his texts. Indeed, every travel narrative inevitably deals with the cultures encountered during the reported journey, and even more problems arise when the author comes from the country that has subjugated the encountered culture for centuries. As Clarke explains

Famous travellers and travel writers have always been seen as cultural translators and mediators, and even as (quasi-) ethnographers. [...] Chatwin does not necessarily provide non-Aboriginal readers with ‘knowledge’ about Aboriginal culture; rather, his public persona provides his readers with an example of how to manage the conflicting regimes of values attributed to Aboriginality within the postcolonial public sphere. (2009b: 231)

Hence, one of the most common accusations addressed to Chatwin concerns his controversial position towards Aborigines from the postcolonial perspective: some interpreted *The Songlines* as a novel that takes the British colonizer’s point of view on the colonized culture, and that “tries to appropriate and use Australian indigeneity for certain Western purposes” (Alber, 2016: 97). For this reason, Chatwin’s novel has often been considered as a form of neo-colonialist narrative.

At the same time Clarke notes that “Since the 1980s, non-indigenous Australian travel narratives have increasingly suggested the possibility that white travellers engage ‘peacefully and respectfully with Aboriginal guides and hosts’” (2009a: 167), aligning more with a postcolonial perspective than a neo-colonialist one.

The debate concerning whether Chatwin’s approach to Aborigines could, or could not, be inserted in the postcolonial discourse (or, more precisely, whether the text deals with

aboriginality in a post-colonialist or a neo-colonialist way) started at the time of the publication of the novel and went on even after the author's death. From this point of view, Chatwin's premature death in 1989 probably exacerbated the dispute, since the author did not have enough time to witness and express his position regarding the question of the recognition of Aboriginal Land Rights in 1992. Chatwin's passing before time left his audience without the possibility of knowing what he would have said on the matter, thus allowing conjectures on the author's intentions.

Since 'postcolonialism' is a controversial concept itself, the first step to take in order to carry out this analysis is to understand the meaning of this term. The most direct interpretation of the word 'postcolonial' refers to what comes after the end of the British Empire. Yet, as Butt states, the word holds more than just one meaning:

Postcolonialism does not simply seek to tell the story of what happened after decolonization, but seeks a critical perspective on its ongoing, problematic legacy: as Young writes, "Postcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and neo-colonialism, race, gender, nationalism, class and ethnicities define its terrain" (2013: n.p.)

A postcolonial analysis of a text does not simply aim at describing the aftermath of colonialism on the subjugated country and its inhabitants: it also refers to texts that were written before the end of the occupation, seeking at finding traces of colonial oppression in every aspect of everyday life. It is for this reason that – despite its having been written before the recognition of Aboriginal land rights – *The Songlines* offers a postcolonial perspective both on the relationship between black and white Australia and on Chatwin's own position towards indigenous culture.

Chatwin's approach to Aboriginality has often been seen "as an example of Said's orientalism" (Morrison, 2012: 1). According to Said's theory, Western authors have always had – and keep having – the tendency to define every form of 'otherness' with

the umbrella-term of 'Orient', thus generalizing and homogenizing the many different cultures involved. Said states that

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. [...] the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate, both of which had a privileged communal significance. (1978: 9)

This way, Western literature has created a dualism between what was Western and what was other, without recognizing that neither the West nor that other are unified wholes but are instead characterized by a multitude of cultures that are completely different one from the other. Through the imposition of the occidental view of the Orient as the only one existing, Orientalism silences other cultures' self-expression, thus becoming "a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Said, 1978: 11). Orientalism can thus be interpreted as a form of cultural colonialism that seeks to establish Western authority over another culture not through the use of physical violence but through the imposition of its own definition of that culture, overlooking natives' opinion.

In his ethnographical approach towards indigenous Australians, Chatwin "was accused of appropriating Aboriginal culture to further his pet theories of nomadism" (Morrison, 2012: 3). The author's attitude was often interpreted as a form of orientalism, employed to impose his own vision of Australian indigenous culture, which was adapted to fit into Chatwin's theoretical view. In this perspective, Moran argues that – in his massive use of intertextual references – *The Songlines*

has less to do with postmodern self-reflexiveness than with an attempt to create a new kind of hierarchy, based not on the authority of first-hand experience but on that of scholarship and textual exegesis. (1999: 94)

This way, *The Songlines* was “often criticized by aboriginals as just another form of appropriation of their culture and traditions” (Riem Natale, 2009: 109) for the fulfilment of Chatwin’s – supposedly – neo-colonizing intentions. The author was blamed for perpetuating the colonial enterprise since he was deemed to be interested not in Aborigines as such, but in the possibility of exploiting and adapting their local traditional culture and lifestyle for his own “‘master theory’ (of nomadism) that promotes and celebrates them” (Huggan, 1991: 66).

Some critics argue that Chatwin romantically employed Aborigines to celebrate the myth of the ‘bon sauvage’, who was inherently good in his primitivism. However, the author is far from romanticising indigenous people (as already stated in Chapter 2): Chatwin realises that the form of ‘good primitivism’ he hoped to find in Australia had been almost destroyed by the intervention of British colonization. It is for this reason that his “representations of Aboriginal people vary widely, and are boldly characterised” (Morrison, 2012: 9) in “a continuum of Aboriginal humanity, a potpourri of traditional and modern, according well with a lived experience of the town and other contact zones” (ibid.).

Despite these accusations of excessive romanticization, Chatwin was often condemned for being Westernly biased. This judgement comes from the belief that Chatwin – like a Western civilizer – wanted to talk about Aborigines in order to give voice to those who could not speak for themselves. This way, the author is thought to become a sort of ‘civilizing-colonizer’, who – speaking of and for Aborigines – claims to be superior over the subject matter of his text. His approach also brought Chatwin into troubles, since Moran reports that “many of the people depicted in *The Songlines* and *In Patagonia* were distressed at what they perceived as insulting and inaccurate portrayals” (1999: 94)

Even though Chatwin’s approach was associated with a sort of “Dances-with-Wolves syndrome”, according to which “you need a white guy to mediate and render Aborigines intelligible” (Shakespeare, 1999: 412), I would argue that the unintelligibility of Aborigines is not due to their incapacity of expression, but to the effects of colonialism. In this sense, I would align with Johnson, who maintains that “By imposing his own representational



structures on indigeneity, Chatwin reinforces the impossible position to which Indigenous Australians are subject” (2002: 62): he did not believe Aborigines to be incapable of expressing themselves, he had understood that colonialism prevented them from doing so.

Clarke reports that “significantly and controversially Meanor<sup>22</sup> associates Chatwin’s literary acumen with his ‘concern over the devastating effects of Western cultural imperialism on native cultures, such as the Australian Aboriginals’” (2009b: 231). Although Chatwin was often accused of not paying attention to the political struggles Aborigines were facing at the time, but of solely following his own interest in their nomadism, “*The Songlines* [...] contains many references to the suffering of Aboriginal people under the British colonizers and past Australian governments as well as attempts to eradicate all forms of Aboriginality” (Alber, 2016: 105). From an attentive reading of the text and from the analysis of discourses and characterizations, it emerges that Chatwin did make reference to Aboriginal suffering, but without making any straightforward accusation.

In its ‘involved detachment’, Chatwin’s position towards the political rights of Aborigines can be compared to his ethnographic approach. The author tends to distance himself from the matter, observing and reporting from an outsider’s point of view, without directly taking side but letting the reader reflect upon the problem. Indeed, as Travers sustains

Surrounded by stories of white racism and violence against Abiriginals, and immersed, if briefly, in a community deeply divided by the historical conflict, Chatwin remains characteristically distant. At a historical/geographical locus when being apolitical was impossible, Chatwin attempts just that. His evasive postures are largely responsible for accusations of amorality against him. (2002: 60)

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<sup>22</sup> Meanor P. (1997), *Bruce Chatwin*, Twayne Publishers. (p.ix).

It is true that Chatwin never makes open accusations, but, as Travers goes on noting, “in light of the implications of European exploration and conquest in Aboriginal territories, Chatwin’s narrative practice, naively or not, evokes a colonial unwillingness to accept the Aboriginals’ presence on the land” (2002: 61). This is made evident – among many others – by the episode of ‘the man with the purple birthmark’, who, having understood that Bruce was interested in Aboriginal sacred sites, asks the protagonist and Arkady:

‘Know the best thing to do with sacred sites?’ he drawled.

‘What?’

‘Dynamite!’

He grinned and raised his glass to the Aboriginals.

(*Songlines*: 122)

In this passage, the figure of the man becomes the emblem of white Australia, which wants to erase the memory of black Australia from the continent. Chatwin’s grotesque characterization of the man and Bruce’s reaction to his words makes the reader understand that he does not align with the character’s position, but that he wants to ridicule him and his intentions. Hence, it appears clear that Chatwin’s aim is far from being neo-colonialist.

The same conclusion can be drawn also by the author’s providing the Aboriginal perspective about the burden of English colonialism. Indigenous’ point of view is made evident also by the perception of Bruce himself before his recognition as ‘well-intentioned Englishman’, when a Land Rights Activist asks him: ““And what makes you think you can show up from Merrie Old England and clean up on sacred knowledge?”” (*Songlines*: 33).

Initially, Bruce is seen as any other Englishman, who are not allowed to access the Aboriginal community and their sacred knowledge. The author would not have presented the man’s diffident reaction if he had not been aware of the negative effects of British colonialism on Aboriginal traditions. In the mentioned passage, it is evident that when it

comes to white people – especially when they are British – indigenous’ perception is inevitably influenced by centuries of oppressions.

Therefore, though Bruce never makes open declarations against British presence on the Australian soil, it is clear that – through the representations of his various confrontations with both black and white Australians – the author makes a distanced condemnation of the effects of English colonialism in the book, and overtly condemned the colonial enterprise in real life (Escriche Riera, 2009: 42).

In the end, I would agree with Alber’s position, when he states that “*The Songlines* is a deeply ambivalent travel narrative” that divides its readers regarding its postcolonialism, even though it is evident that “we are confronted with a well-intentioned nonindigenous narrative” (Alber, 2016: 109). However, I do not believe that *The Songlines* “ends up prioritizing white desires” (ibid.) but global necessities instead: Chatwin believed that Aboriginal local culture had to be exported even outside Australia both for its survival and to provide Western societies with an example of the lifestyle they have forgotten.

### 3.3 *Ethnography as Globalization*

Many critics argue that – in writing *The Songlines* – Chatwin was not interested in Aboriginal culture as such, but that he wanted to study it with the sole aim of finding evidence to sustain the general validity of his theory of nomadism. Morphy underlines this aspect by stating that

Chatwin’s overall quest has something of the nineteenth-century anthropologist’s agenda about it, in that it seeks out the Australian Aborigines in order to discover something about the essential nature of man: in this case, his nomadic psyche (1996: 173).

From this perspective, it emerges that, in *The Songlines*, Chatwin examines Aborigines as a particular case-study that could allow him to draw conclusions for humanity as a whole, in a sort of globalizing process: the analysis of Aboriginal nomadism made the author

believe that he could assume that the benefits of a lifestyle on the move were not limited to the reality of native Australia, but that they could be extended to all human beings.

This generalizing attitude is sustained also by the insertion of passages from other authors' books in the section of the Notepads, where Chatwin uses arguments from his background readings to support the validity of his own nomadic theory. Those references do not concern Australian Aborigines properly: they come from French literature, (i.g. numerous extracts from Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Pascal), Buddhist and Hinduist precepts (179), the Bible (187), Bedouin proverbs, Greek philosophy (204) and Chatwin's own thoughts and notes taken during his travels around the world. All those references are meant as a confirmation that the need for movement is not an Australian phenomenon but an instinct that is in the essence of men, wherever they come from.

Chatwin's generalizing approach becomes even clearer in the last part of his novel, when he envisions the possibility of a net of songlines stretching all over the world since the beginning of time (282). This way, the author employs a traditional belief drawn from Aboriginal culture and extends it to all cultures in a sort of "universalising effect" (Escrichia Riera, 2009: 83), in order to demonstrate that the nomadic law underpins all men.

Against the accusations of superficiality and disrespect towards Aboriginality as a local culture, I would argue that the discourse on Chatwin's generalizing and globalizing attitude is not as simple as it seems. Indeed, it is true that the author studies Aboriginal culture in order "to depict processes which he believes have global implications, rather than being situated in sole reference to the Australian outback" (Featherstone, 2000: 50), but this approach does not necessarily have to be interpreted negatively.

The term 'globalization' in itself has an ambiguous meaning, since it can have both a positive and a negative interpretation. Sotshangane sustains the ambivalence of the concept and states that

Certainly, the process of globalization disrupts fragile societies and disrupts traditional identities. On the other hand, globalization does not necessarily mean

homogeneity. Indeed, in some respects globalization fosters and allows for differences (2002: 223).

With the diffusion of a knowledge that was meant to remain exclusive to Aborigines, Chatwin becomes a 'globalizer' in the sense that, through his writing, he allows a worldwide public to access this local reality. Being a globalizing act, the author's divulging attitude was seen by some as a form of disrespect and commodification of Aboriginality: in Chatwin's novel "Spirituality ceases [...] to be integral to Aboriginal life and becomes something else, a marketable item" (Brown in Johnson, 2002: 59).

Yet, on the other hand, the author's globalizing attitude also had a role in the safeguard of Aboriginal culture. Indeed, although it is true that globalization can be seen as a threat to the uniqueness and sacredness of local cultures – which become a "cultural commodity" (Clarke R., 2009b) – it is also true that with the diffusion of local traditional knowledge this process can have a role in their preservation from extinction. As Lindsay explains, Chatwin is a "mediator of cultural capital" who

not only engages with a sense of the local in the book through the aboriginal cultural heritage of song but is also himself responsible for a globalizing process which links distant localities in a network. On one level, there is the concept at the very heart of the book, the songline, a labyrinth of invisible pathways which stretch to every corner of Australia and which connect the small, isolated and often dispersed localities of Aboriginal culture. On another level, Chatwin, as a traveller amongst these communities in Australia, takes on a globalizing role in the sense that he is able to communicate to large numbers of people (readers of his books) his description of this "local" culture. (2006: 66-7)

Hence, if Chatwin's work is inserted in this perspective, his position can be read in a positive light, since "it would be impossible to precisely quantify Chatwin's influence on non-Aboriginal understandings of Indigenous Australian culture" (Clarke R., 2009b: 230).

Even though the author was accused of appropriating of a culture that was not his own, through *The Songlines*, Chatwin allowed Western public to know of a culture whose uniqueness has become a threat to its own survival. Thanks to the text

The reader is made aware of the fragile, transient nature of the world described, although attention is rarely drawn to the transient, subjective nature of the representation. Instead, it is suggested that the value of accounts of these disappearing worlds lies in their ability to depict them accurately and clearly for the reader. (Featherstone, 2000: 15)

From this perspective, it appears clear that Chatwin employs the example of Australian Aborigines in order to sustain his own general theory. Yet, his approach is not a form of homogenization, but an evaluation of the local in favour of a global pursuit. Chatwin does not underestimate the exclusiveness of Aboriginal culture, he simply understands that some of its aspects can be considered in relation to a wider context. That of Chatwin is the role of the modern anthropologist, who has to analyse personal and cultural interactions in a context that is no longer limited:

personal relationships “[...] emerge in a specific medium, and the medium, nowadays, is the entire world, the global world. [...] the history of the world - as such - has just started: until now there were partial histories and, now, there comes the beginning of the history of the world.” (Escriche Riera, 2009: 84 quoting Augé)

In this regard, Chatwin’s globalizing attitude can be seen in the light of Chackrabarty’s theory of ‘deep history’ (2009), according to which human history should no longer be separated from natural history. This principle requires us to concentrate on ourselves as a species and widen our temporal and spatial perspective in order to think about the connections between our actions and the environment. This way, the impact of every single individual and, consequently, of every local culture should be considered from the point of view of its global implications.

In this sense, Chackrabarty's position allows to bring the discourse about *The Songlines* back to the ecocritical analysis. As explained by Featherstone

the relativist position on globalization argues that it is not a homogenizing process, but one which compels individuals and individual cultures to consider their identity and cultural practice, not in isolation, or in a local context, but in the context of global interaction and the global flow of capital and cultural values. (Featherstone, 2000: 126-7)

Starting from this assumption, it appears that imagining a globalizing network that involves humanity as a whole – like the one imagined by Chatwin (282) – suggests that every action of individuals has an implication not only in their individuality, but also on the global level.

Since with the presentation of the 'nomadic alternative' through the particular case-study of Australian Aborigines Chatwin presents a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle<sup>23</sup>, with his globalizing attitude it appears that this discourse can no longer be limited to Australia, but it should be extended to the entire world. Even if the author did not mean it this way, Chatwin's globalizing approach could now be interpreted as a call to humanity to understand that "we are all in this together" (Gergis, 2018: 264) and that there exists no individuality when it comes to the environmental consequences of our actions.

This way, although *The Songlines* seems to threaten the sacredness of an elitist knowledge by proposing it to a wide public, the text not only preserves it from extinction, but it also creates a connection between that culture and ours. Chatwin presents a more sustainable lifestyle which – being rooted in our human essence – can and should be an inspiration also for Western – and less sustainable – civilizations.

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<sup>23</sup> Chapter 2

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Chatwin Effect: Following the Footsteps of a Wandering Author

In the previous chapter, I suggested that Chatwin had a globalizing effect in the sense that he managed to spread the local traditional reality of Aboriginal Australia to a world-wide public. As Shakespeare notes

He died [...] before the revolution in information technology. He hated computers almost as much as he did the combustion engine, but he was in a sense a precursor of the Internet age: a connective super-highway without boundaries, with instant access to different cultures. The thirst for international experience and encounters may account in part for his appeal. He holds out the possibility of something wonderful and unifying. He inundates us with information and the promise that we will one day get to the root of it. (1999: 542)

Such attitude has had, and keeps having, effects that inevitably go beyond the simple – though debated – spread of sacred knowledge: Chatwin raised global curiosity towards Aboriginal Australia. The author's own curiosity, combined with his sense of restlessness, have rendered *The Songlines* and the protagonist himself an inspiration for many readers who, following the author's example, decide to set out to discover the Australian desert by themselves. This way, the central part of the country has become an important destination for literary tourism.

Notwithstanding the picturesqueness of travel experiences that allow to enter in contact with different landscapes, tourism undeniably has environmental consequences that cannot be ignored, overall when the tourist destination is characterized by an extremely fragile ecosystem. For this reason, the aim of this chapter is that of examining the relationship between literature and tourism, outlining the impact that Chatwin-inspired travels have on the environment of Central Australia. I will start by analysing the general link between literature and travel through the explanation of the concept of 'literary



tourism' and the examination of its dynamics, trying to define the role of Chatwin in the development of Aboriginal tourism. Then, I will move from the example of Chatwin-inspired travels in order to try to define the environmental impact that tourism has on the Australian ecosystem, focusing, in particular, on the reality of its Central desert. Lastly, I will provide a series of reflections on the possible link between sustainable tourism – or ecotourism – and the reading of *The Songlines* with the aim of finding a compromise between the necessity for adventures and their environmental and cultural sustainability.

#### 4.1 *Literary Tourism*

Literary tourism has recently become a recognized phenomenon, and the relationship between the written word and tourist economy has started being analysed only during the last two decades. Indeed, only fifteen years ago, Robinson and Andersen pointed out that

Despite some academic excursions into tourism and literature relationships, there seems to have been surprisingly little analysis of the relationship between the two, particularly in the light of two fundamental realities, namely, firstly, that much of tourism is based on the written word, and, secondly, that tourists read and are inspired by literature (2003: 4)

That of literary tourism seems to be a very straightforward concept, but it can be defined in many different ways. Robinson and Andersen describe it as “a dimension of cultural tourism, representative of [...] (a) set of experiences that we find ‘exciting, edifying, pleasurable, estranging, broadening’” (2003: 2): we want to take up journeys to literary-destinations in order to improve ourselves and our reading experience by visiting places that have been the setting of or simply important to our favourite authors or books. In this frame of reference

the reader does not have a passive role: he/she becomes co-author of the literary work. This opens new perspectives regarding the interrelation between reader, literary work and literary geography: on the one hand, the experience of the real setting of the literary text by the reader leads him/her to find new meanings for the text, increasing its polysemy. On the other hand, the text leads him/her to find new meanings for the landscape and to “cowrite” it. Hence, the place and the book invite the tourist and the reader to re-read the text and the landscape, thus enriching the place, the literary work and the reader himself/herself (Carvalho et al., 2012: 6)

Though it has been conceptualised only recently, the connection between literature and tourism has a very long story behind it, since literary texts have always been a stimulus for travel. Indeed, Cultural – and particularly literary – tourism is a phenomenon that dates back to the classical era when

Influenced by Herodotus and his work *Histories*, many rich Greeks and Romans travelled up the Nile. Over the centuries, literary works by other authors have stimulated their readers to travel and many locations have been associated with important authors” (Carvalho et al., 2012: 2)

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, literary tourism has become increasingly important, particularly in England (Hoppen et al.: 2014). This trend is testified by the spread of Literary destinations linked to English romantic poetry (e.g. Wordsworth’s Lake District) and 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century novels (e.g. Hardy’s Wessex or the Brontë sisters’ Yorkshire), which still are the most visited by literary-inspired travellers.

The reason for cultural tourism is always the same: visiting tourist destinations that are linked to authors’ lives and works “allows literary enthusiasts to interact with the authors they admire insofar as they can see or touch objects or memorabilia associated with (them)” (Hoppen et al., 2014: n.p.). This way, literary pilgrimages allow to improve the comprehension of a text, to understand the reason why a certain author decided to write a certain book, to come into contact with the author’s life or simply to follow his/her footsteps in the case of autobiographical works.

Moreover, literary tourism does not simply allow to better understand the work of an author, but it can also provide readers with a key to the interpretation and comprehension of the places they visit. Indeed

Literature [...] does not seek deliberately to say anything about the processes of tourism or about tourist destinations and attractions. Rather they inhabit the world of what Gunn (1972) calls 'organic information sources', and it is through these we learn of tourism – of destinations and landscapes, of cultures and peoples, about how to interpret them and understand what they mean. (Robinson and Andersen, 2003: 4)

Though every literary journey shares the same motivation, what changes is the reason why a piece of writing is linked to the particular destination readers decide to set out to in their journey. In this regard, Carvalho et al. (2012) distinguish three categories of literary destinations, which are:

1. Destinations that relate to the author's life (e.g. Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford Upon Avon)
2. Destinations that belong to or have inspired the literary world – whether real or imagined – created by the author (e.g. Top Withens, *Wuthering Heights's* inspiring cottage in West Yorkshire)
3. Places that are common both to the writer's life or works and to the readers' own background. This way, the reading experience becomes an evocation of memories producing nostalgia, which in turn provokes in the reader a desire to go back to those places.

As Hoppen et al. underline, a particular case is represented by destinations linked to travel writing, since this kind of literary work "is considered a channel through which both places as well as people have been re-interpreted and communicated to wider audiences" (2014: n.p). Tourist destinations that are linked to autobiographical travel narratives are meant to put in touch the reader with both the text and the author, with

the possibility of sharing the same experiences and encountering the same characters the writer has lived and met him/herself. This way, travel writers leave to readers the “bequest of extensive international routes of associations and sites, which have become markers on the routes which modern literary ‘pilgrims’ can follow, in part or completely” (Robinson and Andersen, 2003: 11).

Consequently, one of the main effects of travel writing is that of producing in readers curiosity about the world. Such curiosity translates itself in the so-called ‘wanderlust’, which indicates “A strong desire to travel” (Oxford Dictionaries), a sort of chronic necessity to leave the comfort of our dwellings in search of our own adventures in the world. Sometimes, this compulsion to travel is innate but, more often it is informed by books or their authors’ lives: readers feel the need to take off in order to experience the same journeys of their literary heroes.

It is in this form of literary-inspired tourism that Chatwin’s travel narrative finds its place. As it is the case for the majority of famous travel writers, readers are encouraged by Chatwin’s adventures to follow his example and travel not only in Australia, but around the world as much as they can. The author’s influence is also testified by Rory Stewart in her introduction to the novel, where she affirms that she went on foot across Asia in order to imitate her hero’s adventure in Australia. She declares that

*The Songlines* was one of the reasons that I left my job and spent a year and a half crossing parts of Asia, entirely on foot. Chatwin made me imagine that I could internalize a continuous unfolding line of footprints – stretching across six thousand miles – and perhaps even be able to call these steps back, and re-create the whole long journey in my memory (2012: xiii)

However, the effect of Chatwin’s work was not limited to Stewart’s example: he motivated “a generation of travelers to break loose and roam the planet with their pens” (Taylor R., 2002: 57) and, following the footsteps of his experience in Australia, “backpackers from all over the world have been to Alice Springs to get in touch with Australian Aboriginal culture after the publication of *The Songlines*.” (Escriche Riera, 2009: 5).

Hence, it is not surprising that *The Songlines* – together with Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under* (1990) – is indicated among the most popular readings with overseas travellers in Australia (Ryan and Huyton, 2018: 81).

The huge impact *The Songlines* had, and keeps having, on travellers is proven by the number of photographic reportages<sup>24</sup> or travel-blogs<sup>25</sup> written on Chatwin-like experiences and the many travel guides to the British author's Central Australia. One example above all is provided by Brooks's *Literary Trips: Following in the Footsteps of Fame*, a travel guide containing a chapter dedicated to Chatwin and entitled *Walkabout in Australia* (Taylor R., 2002). In this chapter, the author talks about his travel experience in Australia, made in the light of *The Songlines*. Taylor starts by reporting that, following Chatwin's nomadic philosophy, he and his wife

Decided to use our money, time and energy for travel [...] as romantic nomads we've managed to rid ourselves of our material possessions so that we can travel to the most amazing places on Earth (Taylor R., 2002: 56)

In his testimony, Taylor explains how the reading of *The Songlines* not only raised his curiosity towards the land down-under, but it changed his whole life philosophy. Chatwin's work has invited him to devote himself to a life on the move, taking up the message of the innateness of human nomadism. Moreover, the author does not simply provide the example of his own experience, but he also reports that

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<sup>24</sup> E.g.: The Explorer's way. (2018). *Sulle tracce di Bruce Chatwin /1*. [online] Available at: <http://temi.repubblica.it/nationalgeographic-the-explorer-s-way/2016/01/07/sulle-tracce-di-bruce-chatwin/> [Accessed 3 Oct. 2018].

<sup>25</sup> E.g.: Australia-di-chatwin.temi.kataweb.it. (2019). *Repubblica.it | Viaggi - Blog - L'Australia di Chatwin*. [online] Available at: <http://australia-di-chatwin.temi.kataweb.it/page/3/> [Accessed 09 Jan. 2019].

Many of the travelers [he] encountered on the beaches and hiking trails in Byron Bay who weren't reading *The Fatal Shore* or Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under* were devouring *The Songlines* (ibid: 61)

Apart from the author's account, the chapter – being part of a travel guide – provides an information sheet with itineraries to follow in order to go after the steps of Chatwin's journey, suggesting literary sites or places where the author has been or slept in. The table also contains information about the geography and history of the tourist destination and about how to reach it, providing tips to interact with locals and to easily move around in order to have an authentic experience of the Australian Red Centre.

However, what strikes many of Chatwin's critics is the fact that he inspired so many people to take up an 'adventurous life', even though his experiences were partly invented and far from being literally 'adventurous': "his journeys are safe, the excitement being found in the aesthetic quality of the travelling experience and its telling rather than in other signs of adventure." (Escriche Riera, 2009: 27).

From this point of view, "Chatwin's journeys are not really much in themselves: there seems to be no danger or risk in them but their uneventfulness does not engender boredom or emptiness" (ibid: 63). Notwithstanding the apparently ordinariness of his experience, what makes *The Songlines* so inspiring to modern travellers is the fact that Chatwin "made 'something altogether new out of a relatively commonplace experience, and he did it in three ways: in form, selection and above all in style' (*Eothen* x)" (ibid). The fact that Chatwin transforms his travel narrative in an anthropological quest makes *The Songlines* a testimony that a journey can be more than a vacation.

Besides, the way the author arranges his material is captivating and manages to evoke that kind of authenticity of the travel experience that has been lost with the modern idea of tourism. Thus, the way the author presents his travel experience becomes appealing to the reader, who wants to imitate his/her literary hero in order to have an equally enriching journey.

I would add that – perhaps even more than the author’s mere experience – what inspires *The Songlines’* readers is the figure of Chatwin himself: the restless traveller who needs to move in order to understand first-hand the functioning of human nature. According to Moran

What Chatwin's readers are buying, in part, is a romantic myth of the individual traveler, propagated by publishers and the media, who feed avidly on the Chatwin legend, "the promotable ideal of the literary adventurer" which recalls a tradition of educated, English, interwar travelers like Robert Byron and Peter Fleming. (1999: 94)

The way Chatwin presents himself as a traveller with only a pair of worn out boots and a light rucksack (as demonstrated by the most famous portrait of the author: Fig. 4), and who has the sole aim of interacting with locals to understand their culture, has something of the previous century explorer. With his persona and his life, Chatwin “gave a new definition of the Writer as Hero” (Micheal Oppitz<sup>26</sup> in Shakespeare, 1999: 541).

The fact that such ‘old-school’ figures still existed in the late Twentieth century was and still is fascinating to the modern reader, who is used to a totally different kind of travel experience, identified with the term ‘tourism’ and characterized not by challenges and first-hand discoveries but by comfort and ‘pre-packed’ tours. Chatwin invites his readers to a different kind of journey, which is one of discovery. This way, the author

has become a totemic figure, beloved of those young westerners who set off from home in search of consciousness-changing experiences, committed to a life of nomadism that they are convinced was lived by the author himself. (Chatwin J.M., 2008: 13)

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<sup>26</sup> Former Director of the Zurich Museum of Ethnography who met Chatwin when he was travelling in Nepal



Fig. 4 - Bruce Chatwin by Lord Snowdon, vintage bromide print, 28 July 1982 - NPG P804 © Armstrong Jones<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, it is also thanks to *The Songlines* that “Aboriginal tourism products based on Aboriginal culture has an interest for approximately a third of the visitors to the [Northern] Territory” (Ryan and Huyton, 2000: 80).

#### 4.2 Environmental Impacts of Tourism

The publication of Chatwin’s text was an incentive to travel to Central Australia, with the consequent development of a greater tourism economy in the region. Since 1987, *The Songlines* has brought, and keeps bringing, ever more visitors to the Australian Northern

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<sup>27</sup> Npg.org.uk. (2019). *Bruce Chatwin - National Portrait Gallery*. [online] Available at: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw19221/Bruce-Chatwin> [Accessed 2 Jan. 2019].



Territory than before and, like any other kinds of tourism, even the cultural one undeniably has impacts on the destination from different points of view.

On the one hand, literary tourism generally brings cultural and economic benefits to the interested location, among which Carvalho et al. (2012) identify:

1. Spreading knowledge of and raising interest in the culture and traditions of the region
2. Drawing more educated tourists – who also have a higher purchasing power and can consequently raise the destination's incomes
3. Raising the appeal of destinations with a low tourist demand, even during the low season, since “there is a higher proportion of cultural tourists that travel in winter” (Ibid.: 21)
4. Allowing the destination to distinguish itself from other literary destinations, given that “a tour involving the places mentioned in a particular book cannot be replicated anywhere else” (ibid)

On the other hand, while literary tourism, like any form of tourism, undeniably brings advantages to the destination, it also has some drawbacks. As reported by UNESCO<sup>28</sup> “If it is managed well, tourism can contribute significantly to regional development, if not, it can have devastating effects on nature and society” (2019). These shortcomings concern overall the environmental impact of the tourist phenomenon on the destination's flora and fauna, since “tourism does not take place in a void without impacting upon and being impacted upon by the natural environment” (Holden, 2008: 210).

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<sup>28</sup> Portal.unesco.org. (2019). *Sustainable Tourism Development in UNESCO Designated Sites in South-Eastern Europe*. [online] Available at: [http://portal.unesco.org/es/files/45338/12417872579Introduction\\_Sustainable\\_Tourism.pdf/Introduction\\_Sustainable\\_Tourism.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/es/files/45338/12417872579Introduction_Sustainable_Tourism.pdf/Introduction_Sustainable_Tourism.pdf) [Accessed 9 Jan. 2019].

Leaving aside the discourse concerning the levels of pollution produced by the means of transportation employed to reach a certain destination<sup>29</sup>, it should be acknowledged that, from the ecological point of view, “the reliance of tourism upon the natural and cultural resources of the environment means invariably that its development induces change which can either be positive or negative” (Holden, 2008: 65).

Unfortunately, the effects of tourism on the natural environment generally tend to be damaging, overall when the destination is characterised by an extremely fragile ecosystem and an endangered indigenous population, as it is the case for Central Australia. Indeed, the alteration and occupation of lands for the construction of tourist infrastructures such as hotels and attractions and the competition with indigenous people for the utilization of natural resources – in particular water – threatens the environmental balance upon which the region and its inhabitants have lived for millennia. As Holden points out

The addition of hundreds or thousands of bed spaces in a destination, combined with the lifestyle demands of western tourists, such as a daily requirement for showering, clean sheets and bath towels, means that tourism is responsible in some destinations for the consumption of copious amounts of water compared to the needs of the local population. (2009: 84)

In the case of the Australian desert, the problem of excessive water consumption does not only concern Aboriginal people, but also those animals and plants inhabiting the environment. Indeed, that of the Central Australian desert, being characterized by a strong endemism and an already-harsh climate, is one of the ecosystems that are threatened the most by the effects of invasive human actions, climate change and global warming (Gergis, 2018: 237). It is true that, being an already-desert area, Central Australia is inhabited by a human population and a flora and fauna that are used to live upon a small quantity of water, but a strong variation in the usual amount of water

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<sup>29</sup> It would be a useless discussion since there are certain destinations, like Australia, that are only reachable by plane, which is one of the most polluting means of transportation.

disposability – like the one caused by the construction of tourist infrastructures – is threatening those species to extinction. As sustained by Rankin et al.,

The Australian flora is particularly vulnerable due to the large number of endemic species. There are approximately 21,000 species of plants in Australia, 93.3% of which are endemic to the continent [...]. Australian flowering plants account for 15.2% of the world's threatened flowering plants [...] with common threats including land clearing, feral animals, weeds, pathogens, altered fire regimes, salination and climate change [...]. (2015: 293)

Such vulnerability renders the Central Australia's environment an 'easy prey' for the devastating effects of human actions, among which tourism – when deregulated – makes no exception. Indeed, due to its natural roughness, the Australian desert is not a conventionally suitable environment to host vacationers, and consequently the tourist economy demands for the alteration of the land in order to render it welcoming for visitors. Such interventions on the natural landscape mean that "tourism and recreation, including nature-based tourism, have a diverse range of negative environmental impacts that can increase the extinction risk for already threatened plants" (Rankin et al., 2015: 293-4).

The environmental dangers are not limited to plants and flowers alone, but they are extended to the entire ecosystem, which comprehends the wildlife as well. The alteration of the landscape in order to create tourist accommodations is a threat to the survival of some species, which are often forced to move from their natural habitat in order to allow the construction of those infrastructures.

In addition, as Holden (2008) underlines, apart from the excessive consumption of water and the dislocation of animals to facilitate the tourist business, one of the major dangers for the environment and its wildlife is linked to tourists' selfish or careless behaviour. From this point of view, tourists' close encounters with animals, though generally moved by genuine curiosity, paradoxically produces negative effects on wildlife. Human observation in proximity – when massively and constantly repeated – can alter animals'

natural behavior, forcing them to move from their usual habitat or to dangerously react by attacking what they perceive as the 'invader'. Furthermore, Holden notes that

A common problem associated with tourists is littering, which can potentially result in the death of animals eating the litter, and also lead to the attraction of predators of endemic species into areas where they would not normally go (2008: 89)

The problem of littering is mainly due to ignorance since, as Holden underlines, at the roots of this uncaring behavior there are a "conscious or subconscious disregard for the environment and a lack of interest in learning more about its natural or cultural history" (2008: 55).

It should also be acknowledged that tourists' ignorance is a danger for the traditional indigenous culture of the destination as well. All these aspects are deeply interconnected and, "from an Aboriginal viewpoint, the cultural impacts of tourism cannot be separated from the economic, environmental and social impacts of tourism" (Schuler, 1999: 4).

In this regard, it could be argued that the main risk for Aboriginals occurs when their "Indigenous culture is trivialised, misrepresented or cheapened and tourists perceive Aborigines as exotic and inanimate curios rather than as members of a dynamic, complex culture" (Schuler, 1999: 7). What happens in these cases is the commodification of Aboriginal culture, with the consequent alteration of its actual traditions in order to respond to the tourists' demand for perceived-as-authentic experiences. However, as Schuler points out "tourists do not seek authenticity, but rather experiences" (1999: 25) and these experiences are a commercial product which is often far from being authentic. Tourists' incapacity to distinguish a genuine experience from a commercial artefact can eventually lead to a loss of authenticity for indigenous people as well. Holden underlines this aspect and argues that

This can result in established rituals and ceremonies becoming a parody of the authentic culture, to satisfy the demands of tourists, in effect turning into 'pseudo-events'. Tourists are unlikely to understand the significance and meaning of the event they are watching or participating in, and with the passage of time it is also

possible that the performers may lose sight of the original cultural importance of the practice (Holden, 2008: 90)

Consequently, one of the outcomes of the commodification of Aboriginal culture for tourists' amusement is the fact that "locals may reject their culture if it is laughed at, or seen as quaint or curious" (Schuler, 1999: 16).

It is in this perspective that literary tourism – and in particular Chatwin-inspired tourism – can become useful: the reading experience can prepare tourists to confront with the Aboriginal reality in a more respectful way. Notwithstanding all the accusations of excessive romanticization of Aboriginality, it is undeniable that *The Songlines* allows its readers to become – at least partly – more aware of the complexity of Australian indigenous people, and this awareness turns out to be helpful for a more conscious form of tourism in Central Australia.

#### *4.3 Sustainable Tourism or Ecotourism: What is Being Done and What Literary Tourism Can Do*

Given that tourism depends upon territory, traditions and culture in order to survive, it is fundamental to take action in order to reduce its impacts on these realities. Even though the one previously depicted is a rather catastrophic portrait of the current tourist situation, it does not mean that there are no ways out and that nothing is being done to prevent from environmental and cultural disaster. From this point of view, Rankin et al. maintain that

management strategies can minimise some visitor-related impacts in protected areas [...]. This includes limiting visitor numbers in sensitive habitats [...], including sites with threatened species [...], restricting the creation of informal trails [...], prohibiting particularly damaging activities such as 4x4-driving [...], using infrastructure with fewer impacts such as raised board-walks [...], limiting the spread

of weeds, pathogens and feral animals [...] and educating park visitors about how they can minimise their impacts [...]. (2014: 297)

these measures represent the cornerstones of tourist sustainability, and are all encompassed under the name of *ecotourism*, which is a form of “ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.” (Earth Sanctuary, 2019).

It has to be acknowledged that, in Central Australia, this kind of sustainable tourism is already successfully being promoted, also thanks to the work of ecofriendly associations that encourage visitors towards an environmentally-conscious form of tourism. An example is represented by Earth Sanctuary<sup>30</sup>, a leading organization in the development of ecotourism in the region, which offers travellers the possibility of experiencing tours of the Red Centre, with major concern for the safeguard of the environment and its inhabitants<sup>31</sup>.

The coordinated actions of both the Northern Territory Government and Ecotourism associations has enabled the region to become one of the most concerned about the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism.

However, apart from initiatives promoted by the Australian Government and public organizations to diminish the risks connected to deregulated tourism, it is in the individuals’ critical conscience that awareness should be raised about the consequences of their behaviours. In this perspective, I would argue that literary tourism, with its diffusion of cultural heritage, could help the preservation of both natural and cultural legacies instead of worsening the situation. Indeed, each literary route “preserves the

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<sup>30</sup> Earth Sanctuary. (2019). *Earth Sanctuary - Education, Tours and Events in Alice Springs*. [online] Available at: <https://earth-sanctuary.com.au/the-sanctuary> [Accessed 9 Jan. 2019].

<sup>31</sup> The organization produces 80% of its energy from renewable resources, capture 65% of water from rain water tanks and reduces to zero the production of waste by recycling and composting. (All data taken from the “Eco Footprint & Environmental Accountability” section of the website).

landscapes (natural heritage) that could offer future generations (domestic and international) a tangible experience *in situ* related to his masterpiece (cultural heritage)” (Ruiz Scarfuto, 2013: 3).

Particularly in the case of *The Songlines*, the diffusion of Aboriginal culture through Chatwin’s writing has allowed a wide Western public to appreciate a reality that, otherwise, would have remained unknown to the greatest part of the world. I believe that this comprehension of Aboriginality could consent readers to have a more sensitive approach to the host culture and the related environment when they decide to undertake a literary trip to Central Australia. Chatwin’s ‘action’ in this sense, can be declined in different ways.

First of all, even though *The Songlines* does not directly talk about the preservation of Australian flora and fauna, Chatwin presents a culture whose attitude towards the natural world is of total respect. As explained in the first chapter of this thesis, the relationship between Aboriginal culture and Australian landscape is one characterized by deep interconnectedness, founded on a profound respect for the Earth and all its elements. In his work, Chatwin stresses upon this men-land bond through the explanation of the Aboriginal creationist myth, which consequently becomes familiar to the reader. It is from this point of view that *The Songlines* could assume an important function: as Morphy argues,

Although some of the details are wrong and some of the claims exaggerated, he sets the reader thinking in a productive way about the links between songs and land, the ownership of songs, and the way they create connections between places. (1988: 20)

By making the public aware of the existence of a culture that is so respectful of the landscape they inhabit, the reading of Chatwin indirectly manages to ‘create’ environmentally conscious-readers. When this consciousness is transposed in the perspective of literary tourism, it is plausible that readers who decide to follow Chatwin’s footsteps and to travel to Central Australia would be more inclined towards a sustainable

kind of tourism, paying respect to a land that is perceived as sacred. Hence, following the idea of songlines and the author's praise of nomadism, the Chatwin-inspired traveller is likely to be one who chooses an eco-friendly approach to the destination, favouring walking over driving and selecting his/her accommodation paying attention to its environmental impact.

Moreover, from the cultural viewpoint, Chatwin indirectly criticizes the figure of the ignorant tourist. In a scene in Chapter 6 where two Americans intend to buy an Aboriginal painting, Chatwin condemns the superficiality of tourists who believe that this way they could have an authentic testimony of indigenous culture. Not knowing how real Aboriginal culture works, the American tourists do not realize that "*real* drawings representing the *real* Ancestors [...] are only done at secret ceremonies and must only be seen by initiates" (*Songlines*: 22). This way, the Americans are not able to understand that the one they are buying is not a real representation of dreaming tracks, but a product made just to be sold.

As Clarke explains,

For them the painting is simply a souvenir, something to provide them with the fantasy of having appropriated a piece of Central Australia. It will only have meaning in their 'home' culture through the narrative that they append to it: the story of their holiday and their purchase, but not the 'authentic' story of the painting (2009b: 240-1)

This episode is just an example but, in real life, this attitude can have serious consequences. "Tourists are unlikely to understand the significance and meaning of the event they are watching or participating in" (Holden, 2008): ignorance towards the local culture of a tourist destination can lead to the loss of that same culture, since it does not allow tourists to distinguish between genuine and bogus experiences. This superficiality perils indigenous cultures, which often renounce to their authenticity in order to please tourists' demands until, in the long run, that authenticity is completely lost. As Shuler underlines,



all tourists seek authenticity in times and places away from their everyday life but tourists may or may not experience authenticity in the location they visit. Some travellers pursue authenticity in foreign cultures and yet may have doubts about authenticity when visiting destinations. (Schuler, 1999: 25).

From this point of view, in the case of Central Australia, Chatwin-inspired tourism could have an important function as means for the preservation of indigenous culture. Being midway between a travelogue and an ethnographic account, *The Songlines* tries to render Aboriginal culture accessible to the Western public. Consequently, after the reading of the book, the literary-traveller will be more prepared to confront with Australian Aborigines and will have a more critical eye towards what is authentic and what is sold as such.

Visitors' – at least partial – knowledge of the host culture is fundamental for a sustainable form of tourism: an aware traveller is a traveller who chooses the actual experience of Aboriginality over the commercial product, which is tailor-made for tourists' amusement instead. This way

The process of commodification that some writers [...] perceive as inhibitor of 'realities' and 'truths' can, in fact, help to maintain an authenticity for Aboriginal Australians by locating tourists at arms length from their communities (Ryan and Huyton, 2018: 83)

Still, it has to be reminded that Chatwin's "journey of discovery is set very much in the Australia of today" (Morphy, 1988: 20). When the author comes into contact with Aborigines, they are no longer genuine savages. In his ethnographic pursuit, Chatwin theoretically presents the original indigenous culture but also leads readers to reflect upon the effects of modernity on that same culture, and massive and superficial tourism is one of them. Hence, it is no wonder that in the author's philosophy the concept of tourism assumes a negative connotation.

However, what Chatwin condemns is not the idea of travel, which remains attached to the ancestral idea of walking, of a journey of discovery of a land and its traditions through movement, but tourism as a commodification of indigenous culture. Thus, I believe that the ones inspired by Chatwin's philosophy may not be simple tourists, but literary travellers who are aware of the functioning of the host culture and its traditions and of the consequences of their actions on the reality they are entering in contact with.

## CONCLUSION

Literature can have an important role in dealing with the current environmental crisis not only by producing new writing that deals with the ecological issue, but also through the critical analysis of past texts, trying to understand in which ways they can be considered as 'environmentally-committed'.

For this reason, I have suggested that *The Songlines* can provide an interesting starting point for reflections about the relationship between men and the environment. The main point was that of demonstrating how even a text that does not directly deal with the environmental issue can be examined under the ecocritical spotlight.

I believe that the analysis of the relationship between Aborigines and their land demonstrates how Chatwin's text can warn the reader regarding the necessity to re-establish a respectful way of inhabiting the territory. Indeed, the kind of interconnectedness that indigenous populations had with the natural surroundings is being lost with modernity. In this perspective, it can be said that modern men's detachment from nature brings him to treat the environment as something that has to be exploited to his benefits: losing our attachment to nature we have also begun to treat it as inferior, thus exploiting its resources with few or no respect. In this regard, *The Songlines* communicates to the reader the need to go back to treating man and the environment as equally valuable, abandoning the anthropocentric vision of the world which is typical of modern Western societies.

However, it is worth repeating that respect for the landscape does not necessarily mean leaving it in its wilderness. Indeed, I did not intend to condemn any kind of intervention on the land, but to make readers conscious of the need to find more sustainable ways of doing so. From this point of view, Aboriginal land management can be taken as an example of how men could intervene on the territory for human purposes even without destroying its ecosystem.

At the same time, the concept of walking and that of the nomadic alternative allow us to understand the necessity to lower the standards of our lifestyle in order to limit its negative effects on the environment. A way of life characterized by movement and little or no possession is a means of knowing, mapping and connecting with the landscape, which in turn leads to a healthier relationship with the environment. On the contrary, it appears that settlement, by limiting human knowledge of his surroundings, could bring to a wrong administration of the territory with its damaging consequences, producing the anthropocentric belief that humans can impose their own rules over biological ones and disrupt the natural order of things.

In dealing with this theme, I am perfectly aware that, in the twenty-first century, a return to nomadism would be anachronistic. Yet, I think that what the reader can learn from Chatwin's praise of a lifestyle devoid of all material possessions is the necessity not to abandon all of our comforts but to embrace a simpler way of living as a means of fighting the current environmental crisis. Since the main cause of the present dramatic ecological situation is precisely the impact of Western lifestyle and its continuous need for more and more possessions, even the simple choice of adopting a more conscious and sustainable way of life could make the difference from the point of view of emissions and consumption of natural resources.

Moreover, it is important to reiterate that the subject matter of the third chapter is not inappropriate, since ethnography and postcolonialism are directly related to the environmental issue. This is because I believe that from all that has been said, it appears clear how men and nature are deeply interconnected, and, in this framework, anthropology could turn out to be useful also to the environmental discourse.

Chatwin observes the negative effects of colonialism on Aboriginal culture, and this observation can easily be extended to the land inhabited by the colonized population. While it is true that this discourse relates to Aboriginal Australia, I believe that these reflections could have implications that go beyond this limited context, since the situation is not so different in other ex-colonies.

Indeed, the colonial past can be considered among the causes of the current environmental crisis from two points of view. On the one hand, imperialism has implied that colonizers introduced their own techniques of land management on territories that were different from the one they came from, bringing to wrong environmental decisions whose effects are becoming observable only nowadays. On the other hand, colonizers exported also their lifestyle. Consequently, in a sort of globalizing trend, indigenous people have started to imitate settlers' habits, thus substantially extending the percentage of population that undertakes an ecologically unsustainable way of life.

Sustainability does not only concern our lifestyle but also our way of relating to other cultures. With his popularization of Aboriginality, Chatwin raised Western public's interest in Australia and its indigenous traditions, thus preserving that culture from extinction at the cost of exposing it and its territory to the threats of massive tourism. However, literature in general can have a fundamental role for the cultural and environmental sustainability of tourism. Indeed, I maintain that an informed traveller is a more sustainable traveller, and, with the example of *The Songlines*, I wanted to demonstrate how literature can play an important part in the formation of visitors by preparing them to confront with the culture and the land of the tourist destination. For this reason, I believe that literary-inspired travellers, being more aware of the functioning of the host culture and of its relationship with the environment, may also be more attentive in their attitude towards both.

To conclude, I would say that further research could be done in this ecological trend of literary critique with the analysis of the texts Chatwin wrote before *The Songlines*, in order to see if something different could be evinced from his past works and if the ecological approach is applicable also to the subjects of his other travel writings. Hence, in this wider perspective, this study could be considered as a small step in the long path towards a more "environmentally-conscious" literature.

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