

Travel Writing at the End of Empire: A Pom Named Bruce and the Mad White Giant

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THE PRACTICE OF TRAVEL WRITING, and that of reading travel books, was inextricably intertwined with the creation and maintenance of European imperialism. Travel and its by-product travel writing were both enabled by and essential to, both cause and effect of, the project of imperial expansionism. As Sara Mills points out in *Discourses of Difference*, for many recent critics (that is since the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* [1978]), "travel writing is essentially an instrument within colonial expansion and served to reinforce colonial rule once in place" (2). Travel books were essential to European imperialism in that they implicated their readers vicariously in the imperialist project. Mary Louise Pratt's influential *Imperial Eyes* shows "how travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the "domestic subject" of Euroimperialism; how they have engaged metropolitan reading publics with (or to) expansionist enterprises whose material benefits accrued mainly to the very few" (4). Travel narratives, as part of what David Spurr has called "the rhetoric of empire," provided imperial administrators with information about the furthest reaches of the Empire (or beyond), facilitating the Empire's expansion and administration, while constituting "the Empire" for its readers. These narratives allowed Europeans, most of whom would never set foot in the

places described, to imagine a vast Empire of which “they” were in control. As Ann Laura Stoler shows in *Race and the Education of Desire*, the imperial project was essential to the constitution of identities—racial, sexual, and national. Travel, which “denotes a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledges, stories, traditions, compartments, musics, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions” (Clifford 35), repeatedly reconstituted the Empire and imperial identities through the necessarily repetitive nature of its performance. Furthermore, the genre of travel writing, particularly the subgenre that we might call “adventure travel,”¹ was the cultural by-product of imperialism, often written by those actively involved in the expansion or maintenance of the Empire (explorers, soldiers, administrators, missionaries, journalists), and dependent upon the support of the institutions of imperialism in order to facilitate the writers’ travels.

Travel and travel writing are determined by and determine gender, racial identity, national identity, economic status and a host of other interrelated markers of status and privilege. Travel is inextricably implicated in “a history of European, literary, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, recreational meanings and practices” (Clifford 33), and simultaneously invokes and disavows those connotations in producing the travelling subject. Some of the socio-cultural markings implied by the term “travel” are illustrated in the following passage from a guide to adventure travel:

Take, for example, Manhattan writer Fran Lebowitz, who defines the outdoors as “a place you must pass through in order to get from your apartment into a taxicab.” To Fran, a twenty-minute walk through the New Jersey suburbs would qualify as an adventurous undertaking, fraught with the risk of falling branches, the unforeseeable danger of Lyme disease, and the unexpected excitement of an encounter with a squirrel. To mountaineer Reinhold Messner, on the other hand, an expedition to the

1 By adventure travel I mean travel that is set at or beyond the margins of “civilization” (such as that by the Victorian explorer and travel writer, Richard Burton, for example). This is in opposition to travels to or within the centre of “civilization” (e.g. the Grand Tour, etc.). Martin Green, the best-known critic of adventure literature, defines adventure as “a series of events, partly but not wholly accidental, in settings remote from the domestic and probably from the civilized ... which constitute a challenge to the central character.” In meeting that challenge the adventurer performs heroic acts, exhibiting “courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership, and persistence” (*Dreams* 23). Ultimately, he argues, adventure implies a confrontation with death (*Seven* 1). Such distinctions between subgenres are, of course, arbitrary, and adventure travel is obviously not totally distinct from other travel.

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summit of Mount Everest, using supplemental oxygen, probably would not qualify as a particularly exciting or remarkable experience, since he's already climbed Everest a couple of times without oxygen, once by himself. (Noland xiii)

The distinction that Noland is making between two types of travellers is clearly marked by discourses of gender, race (Jew/German), and nationality (American/Austrian), as well as others. The point is that such discourses are always embedded within the notion of travel. The ability to travel is a reflection of economic and political power. "The traveller, by definition," Clifford argues, "is someone who has the security and privilege to move about in relatively unconstrained ways," or at least seems to have that freedom (34); adventure travel is "by and large a movement that originates in the rich parts of the planet and heads for the poor" (Rushdie 224). Janet Wolff reminds us that access to travel is not uniformly available, for "disparities of wealth and cultural capital, and class difference generally, have always ensured real disparities in access to and modes of travel"; in particular, Wolff states that "the practices and ideologies of ... travel operate to exclude or pathologize women" (224). The ability to travel is predicated upon social, economic, and political privilege, and, as a result, such privilege is embedded within writing about that travel, whether acknowledged or not. As Edward Said states, the power "to represent what is beyond metropolitan borders derives from the power of an imperial society" (99).

What happens, then, when the Empire ceases to exist (except in memory) and the ideology of imperialism is brought into disrepute? Although the once mighty British Empire has been reduced to a collection of small islands scattered across the world's oceans, travel writing remains a remarkably popular genre within British literature. In the past decade, many North American bookstores added "adventure/literary travel" sections alongside the numerous travel guides, and many of the books in these sections are by British authors. This paper will examine the travel writing of two white male British travel writers, Bruce Chatwin and Benedict Allen, in the light of the decline of the British Empire and the changes in attitudes brought about by that decline. Each author grapples with the problem of how to be a travel writer in this postimperial, postcolonial age and comes up with seemingly antithetical responses: Whereas Allen provides his readers with Indiana Jones-like tales of adventure and derring-do along with ethnographical descriptions of "primitive" tribes, Chatwin's self-conscious, postmodern travel writing highlights the detritus of Empire and is virtually devoid of the life-threatening adventures frequently associated with imperial travel writing. I will examine their responses in terms of the degree to which they

are able to successfully evade implication in the (neo)imperialist discourse of travel. How do their narratives attempt to disrupt, complicate, and/or disavow the discourses in which they are implicated? To what extent do they simply reproduce those discourses? What work is performed by their narratives within British or Western culture?

Chatwin and Allen and their books are positioned very differently within British literature, culture, and society. Chatwin was a widely acclaimed literary figure from the publication of his first book, *In Patagonia*, in 1977, described by Nicholas Murray as “one of the most original and interesting writers to have emerged in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s” (9). An expert in antiquities and Impressionist art, Chatwin studied archaeology and worked as a journalist and, in addition to his two travel books, published three well-received novels, all of which were adapted as films.² He has been the subject of a number of scholarly articles and doctoral dissertations, one full-length critical study (Murray), and a best-selling biography (Shakespeare). Allen, by contrast, has received little, if any, recognition as a literary figure. He has a degree in Environmental Science, and, unlike Chatwin, has only written travel books.³ Chatwin is marketed as innovative and experimental, with the front cover of the Picador edition of *In Patagonia* featuring a quotation from *The Guardian*: “The book that redefined travel writing.” Allen, on the other hand, is marketed as a neo-Victorian explorer. Ian Hamilton’s statement that “the age of adventure is far from dead so long as people like Benedict Allen tread the earth” adorns the back covers of many of his books, and the repeated invocations of his status as the “first white man” to cross the Amazon or be initiated into a Sepik tribe evokes the days of Victorian explorers such as Burton or Livingstone.⁴

While Chatwin and Allen may occupy different positions within British culture, they have both chosen to set their travel narratives at or beyond the limits of the imperial imagination. Chatwin travels to Patagonia, which, although never colonized by the British, was economically dominated by Britain, and the outback of Australia, one of the frontier spaces of the Empire.

2 For further biographical details, see Shakespeare, Clapp, Murray.

3 Allen was commissioned to write “a definitive survey of exploration books for a distinguished Oxford publisher” (*Jaguar* 3), which he put aside to undertake the journey documented in his fifth book.

4 Allen addresses this issue in *The Proving Grounds*: “My heritage says I must claim to be the first man to travel between the Orinoco mouth and Amazon mouth, to be proud to have ‘discovered’ eight new species of fig wasp and to have had one named after me—something *alleni*. I’m in a muddle. Out there in the forest this had been irrelevant—none of this had rung true. I feel tricked by my own culture” (17).

Both writers describe travelling as a familial, cultural, and even racial inheritance.

Most of Allen's travels take place in spaces that were never part of the British Empire, except for Australia and by extension parts of New Guinea, but were significant sites within the imperial imaginary, such as the Amazon and the New Guinea highlands, as some of the few remaining empty, unexplored spaces. In setting their narratives at or beyond the "periphery," they situate them within the imperial travel writing tradition, a tradition which worked to materially and imaginatively incorporate distant spaces into the Empire. In doing so, they run the risk of simply reproducing the assumptions and conventions of earlier imperialist travel narratives, for Allen's or Chatwin's travels are a reassertion of the Briton's right to go there. Furthermore, they people their stories with an assortment of eccentric Europeans left behind by the receding wave of imperial expansion, such as Theodore Hull in Allen's *Hunting the Gugu*, Father Terence in Chatwin's *The Songlines*, and many others. While the focus on such colourful characters is a convention of travel writing, this practice also serves as another means of incorporating these spaces into the West by assigning them an important function within the Western cultural economy, a function similar to that played by the frontier of the Empire. The Amazon, Patagonia, or the Australian outback becomes a space in which Europe's outcasts and misfits can escape from the restrictions and conventions of the cultural centre, one of the key clichés of Empire.

Both writers situate their destinations within themselves, within the contexts of their childhoods. The first chapter of *In Patagonia*, for example, describes the hold that Patagonia held on Chatwin's childhood imagination. Patagonia was a land of primeval mystery, as embodied in the piece of skin, purportedly that of a Brontosaurus, held in his grandmother's dining room, and later became a place of safety, where one could escape from the feared nuclear apocalypse (1–3). Similarly, in *The Songlines* Australia is identified with his childhood, as are its aboriginal inhabitants (5). Allen, too, begins *Mad White Giant* with a recollection of the importance that Amazonia had played in his childhood imagination (3). Associating their desire to travel to these places with childhood and its presumed innocence works to cleanse their travel of its more exploitative connotations. Yet it simultaneously evokes the identification of the Empire as an appropriate space for boys' adventure stories, such as *Treasure Island* and *King Solomon's Mines*, which were frequently explicitly pro-imperial; this, of course, undermines and complicates the success of this strategy of dissociation.

The urge to travel, however, is seen to lie much further back than simply in their childhoods, for both writers describe travelling as a familial, cultural, and even racial inheritance. Chatwin writes:

The men on my father's side of the family were either solid and sedentary citizens ... or horizon-struck wanderers who had scattered their bones in every corner of the earth: Cousin Charlie in Patagonia; Uncle Victor in a Yukon gold camp; Uncle Robert in an oriental port; Uncle Desmond, of the long fair hair, who vanished without trace in Paris; Uncle Walter, who died, chanting the suras of the Glorious Koran, in a hospital for holy men in Cairo. (*Songlines* 6)

The unspoken context of his family's scattering is, of course, the expansion of the British Empire. Chatwin's justification for his desire to travel implicitly calls upon this imbrication of his family history with imperial history. His representation of travel as a family tradition is furthered by his memory that "one day, Aunt Ruth told me our surname had once been 'Chettewynde,' which meant 'the winding path' in Anglo-Saxon" (*Songlines* 9). This not only more firmly intertwines his family and travel, but also, I would argue, makes an appeal to race as well. Chatwin's identity as traveller is productive of and produced by the familial, national, and racial identities to which he explicitly or implicitly alludes. Allen makes a similar appeal to family tradition as the source of his motivation to travel:

But the Allens *et al.* and the tropics.... They mapped the tropical belt, they fought in it, they built bridges across it, they edited newspapers and invited Kipling out for his first job in it, they flew over it, they wrote books about colonial aspects of it, they planted tea on hills of it. Riding a mule, they bought a rug from a villager in the arid north of a fringe of it.... This was my world: not cricket or football or stamps but walls and shelves lined with foreign objects. At any moment, looking around about me, I saw the tropics. Naturally it began to look like home. (*Proving Grounds* 18–19)

"Wanderlust," he continues, was his "family inheritance" (19). Again, we see the intertwining of family history and the imperial project, which has the effect of naturalizing his wanderlust. As his friend Daniel, an educated Niowra, tells the Kandengei villagers, Allen's travelling "is only normal for a man of his position" (18). In fact, particularly in *The Proving Grounds*, travelling is represented as the natural activity of white men; as another of Allen's friends, Wallace, explains, "It is customary for whitemen to travel" (*Proving Grounds* 83).

The travelling traditions cited by both Chatwin and Allen are, of course, also clearly male traditions, although Allen's narratives are more explicitly linked to an articulation of masculine identity. To begin with, Allen's travel

books are easily situated within a tradition of British writing, in which boys had to venture out to the colonies in order to learn how to become men; in this tradition, the Empire represented a space in which masculinity could be both imaginatively and physically performed.⁵ *Mad White Giant*, in which the young Allen ventures off to the wilds of the Amazon and overcomes his ignorance, endures tests of skill and courage,⁶ surmounts many obstacles, and survives to return home, clearly fits into such a tradition.⁷ Manhood rituals are the explicit focus of *Into the Crocodile Nest* and *The Proving Grounds*, and these books, particularly the former, celebrate the solidarity of the homosocial world of the crocodile nest:

We were strong and complete, knowing ourselves and each other. Though the coming world might pride itself in the independence it gave individuals, we had proven our selfless loyalty, and that for now was greater. (*Crocodile* 213)

The special relationship that Allen and his fellow *bandedees* have as a result of their experience in the crocodile nest is one that is unavailable at home, and will not be possible for much longer, even in the Highlands of New Guinea.⁸ Allen's adventures enact a repetition of imperial masculinity, in the spaces that were once at least imaginatively available for the performance of that masculinity. Although Chatwin's travel books, as has already been mentioned, are also situated within a patriarchal tradition of travel, they do not address issues of masculinity as explicitly as do Allen's. Janet Wolff, however, notes that she felt "alienated from [*The Songlines*] as a 'masculine' text" (228). While she is unable to articulate exactly why she feels that way, we might note that, like Allen's New Guinea books, *The Songlines* focuses on a gender-segregated society, and Chatwin spends little time with women

5 Some of the more obvious books in this tradition would include Kipling's *The Light That Failed*, Buchan's *Prester John*, the early war reportage of Winston Churchill, and G. A. Henty's imperial adventure stories.

6 He even learns how to kill, and as Martin Green argues, "the fundamental fact about adventure ... is that it is about violence. More than that, one can say that adventure tales prepare their readers, via their identification with the protagonist, to inflict violence, to kill" (*Seven* 55).

7 Allen is aware of his implication in this tradition. He writes in *The Proving Grounds*: "All this just to prove I'm a Man of True Men. It suddenly sounds no better than a *Boy's Own* adventure, that I'm doing this for sport, finding another Western way of belittling nature" (221).

8 This highly charged homosocial experience verges on the homoerotic at times: "My wau [mentor] leaned back, his hands under his head as a pillow, his black-haired chest drawn high and up. I slowly placed myself on him, leaning steadily

in the narrative portions of the book. Although, as Graham Huggan has suggested, the narrative is “polyphonic” (65), it is one that is relatively devoid of women’s voices, both as sources of the notebook section and as significant characters within the narrative portion. It might also be suggested that Wolff’s feeling is a result of Chatwin’s failure to acknowledge the gender, racial, and economic privilege that allows Chatwin to travel to and throughout Australia.

Travel, and confrontation with the Other, has often been seen as being constitutive of the self (MacCannell, *Tourist* 5); as Charles Grivel writes: “Writing about a journey means writing about the subject. Someone constructs himself, his I, during the journey. Unseen countries, unknown races, extinct species are good for this” (256). Travel as a journey of self-discovery, self-realization, is more explicit in Allen’s books than in those of Chatwin, where broader philosophical and cultural issues serve to obscure the more purely personal. Chatwin as protagonist is absent from much of *In Patagonia*, for instance, as large sections of the book are devoted to stories about Patagonia and those who live there or who passed through, not to Chatwin’s actual travels. Chatwin’s narratorial presence in *The Songlines* is complicated by the semi-fictional nature of the narrative sections, and by the seeming absence of narratorial control in the notebook sections. In Allen’s books, by contrast, the narrator is foregrounded. His books tell us what he did, what happened to him, what he saw, with few lengthy digressions or theorizations.

These two approaches reproduce, at least partially, the complementary discourses of the anti-conquest⁹ that Pratt identifies with bourgeois travel

backwards from sitting between his legs astride the canoe, conscious of my great weight as the small of my back settled on his genitals. I adjusted my muscles and bones to his; my head rested in the nook of his breast. My back and shoulder stuck tightly to him with the sweat of both of us; our forms were cleaved together. Our platonic snugness was beautiful” (*Crocodile* 143). Of course, there is a long tradition of representing places at the furthest reaches of European imperialism as spaces in which otherwise transgressive sexual behaviours and desires could be realized (see, for example, Boone, Martin, Hyam). Moreover, such a scene should be considered along with the scene of homosexual panic that occurs when Allen is on the verge of returning to “civilization” near the end of *Through Jaguar Eyes*: “He dropped his supper into my lap and insisted on wiping up the mess with a damp cloth. After a few wipes he came to the area of my crotch. Suddenly the deprived man could control himself no longer. He was on me, his hands wrestling with my flies.... I hadn’t come across the Amazon Basin ... just to be molested by a sex-starved civil servant,” so Allen fights him off and flees (283).

9 Pratt uses the term “anti-conquest” to “refer to the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (7).

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writing, which constructed itself in opposition to more overtly imperialist narratives. “Claiming no transformative potential whatsoever,” Pratt writes, anti-conquest narratives “differed sharply from overtly imperial articulations of conquest, conversion, territorial appropriation, and enslavement,” creating “a utopian, innocent vision of European global authority” (38–39). The two anti-conquest discourses are those of scientific travel and sentimental travel: “In travel literature ... science and sentiment code the imperial frontier in the two eternally clashing and complementary languages of bourgeois subjectivity” (39). The travel writings of both Chatwin and Allen embody traces of the discourse of scientific travel, which Pratt principally related to natural history, although Chatwin’s historical and anthropological focus is more closely aligned to it. The scientific traveller is positioned at the periphery of the discursive field and is a disembodied eye (Pratt 78); similarly, Chatwin is often situated at the periphery of the narrative and is an often disembodied presence within both *In Patagonia* and *The Songlines*. In the scientific travel narrative, the human presence is marginalized by the attention given to describing the geography and identifying flora and fauna (Pratt 51), while in Chatwin’s narratives the present living human presence is also marginalized but by the texts’ attention to stories, anecdotes, and theories. *In Patagonia* provides only scattered details of life in Patagonia in the 1970s (and is almost completely silent on the socio-political situation of Argentina), focusing on earlier accounts of its exploration and settlement. *The Songlines* is often more concerned with elucidating Chatwin’s theories about nomads and wandering than about describing life in the Australian outback. As the naturalists’ detailed descriptions of geography enabled the imperial appropriation of land, *The Songlines* similarly works to appropriate the Aboriginals’ songs into Chatwin’s universal theory of nomadism.¹⁰

Another parallel between Chatwin and the naturalists Pratt describes is their similar attitudes toward the European settlers. Naturalists such as Anders Sparrman expressed condescension toward the Afrikaaners settled in southern Africa (Pratt 53–56); similarly, as Ruth Brown argues, *The Songlines* presents its readers with a caricature of native-born white Australians as racist philistines, while Europeans, represented by Arkady and Bruce, are portrayed as enlightened and cultured, and Aboriginals as spiritual (6).

10 Pratt calls “the main protagonist of the anti-conquest” the “seeing-man”: “he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (7). One might describe Chatwin as the “hearing-man”: he who passively listens and possesses. Furthermore, given that the songlines serve as a means of mapping, the relationship between the naturalist’s descriptions of geography and Chatwin’s of the songlines is closer than it may at first appear.

Brown writes: “While Bruce and Arkady investigate spirituality and treat individual Aboriginals kindly,” *The Songlines* portrays white Australians as “evil beings ... hoping for a self-administered final solution to the Aboriginal problem” (7); doing so, she argues, allows Chatwin to disavow British responsibility for the situation of Australia’s Aboriginals by placing all the blame upon the white Australians. Despite such disavowals, however, the scientific traveller cannot escape his (or sometimes her) complicity in the discourses of imperialism, for although their travels brought them into contact with the consequences of, and were made by possible by, imperialism, the discourse of scientific travel “turns on a great longing: for a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence” (Pratt 57). Chatwin’s reason, he writes, “for coming to Australia was to try to learn for myself, and not from other men’s books, what a Songline was—and how it worked” (12), to take possession of the central element of Aboriginal culture.

Sentimental travel writing “explicitly anchors what is being expressed in the sensory experience, judgement, agency, or desires of the human subjects. Authority lies in the authenticity of somebody’s felt experience” (Pratt 76). It focuses on personal experience rather than the accumulation of data. Although the sentimental traveller “is positioned at the centre of a discursive field,” he (or she) is also “constructed as a non-interventionist European presence. Things happen to him and he endures and survives.... [H]is innocence lies ... in submissiveness and vulnerability” (78). That could easily be a description of Benedict Allen’s travel books. The sentimental travel narrative is structured around reciprocity. As Pratt argues, “what sets up drama and tension is almost invariably the desire to achieve reciprocity, to establish equilibrium through exchange” (80). While in the case of a late-eighteenth century explorer like Mungo Park, the concern for reciprocity is usually in relation to the exchange of commodities in return for safe passage and survival (Pratt 80–81), Allen is more concerned about less tangible exchanges. For example, in *Into the Crocodile Nest*, the story of his initiation into a Sepik tribe in New Guinea, his request to participate in the initiation is motivated by a New Guinean mystic’s vision:

What he was “seeing” was me being initiated just like a Sepik boy to the secrets of the spirit house.... Any objections—and, understandably, there would be plenty—would be overcome by the spirits, whose will it was for me to do this. He had seen the future, and it would happen one way or another. (94)

Rather than being an imperialist forcing his way into the secrets of the Other, he is told that he has little choice in the matter, that it has been decided for

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him by the spirits. He is in fact doing a favour for the tribal elders because, as a result of the encroachment of Christianity, there has not been an initiation for years: “The elders wanted any chance to reinforce the Old Ways ... and my arrival provided that chance” (105).¹¹ As in the case of Mungo Park, Allen’s “role is a passive one ... in which his agency and desire play little part. He does not predict eclipses, cure the sick, do card tricks, or become the man who would be king. This is not conquest, but anti-conquest” (Pratt 80). In sentimental travel writing, “seeing itself operates along lines of reciprocity” (81), with the sentimental traveller being subjected to the gaze of those among whom he travels. Allen’s white skin is subjected to inspection a number of times in his books. One example is in *Into the Crocodile Nest* after he has been accepted as an initiate:

[The headman] had not come here to stand around shaking hands. His palm had bypassed mine and was journeying along the inside of my forearm, slipping so gradually up that I stiffened—his feel was so intimate.... I was surprised rather than alarmed as he curled his thumb, claw-like, and dug a thick yet sharp nail into my skin, meanwhile smoothly drawing his hand back to his ribby chest, so scoring a straight line up to my wrist.... I felt slightly indignant at the man satisfying his curiosity about a white skin, but this was an experiment to be repeated by teasing elders several times before the initiation. (One bright morning in the spirit house I was stood naked, my shorts rolled around one ankle, as old fingers ploughed over me, wondering how the thinner, more delicate skin would take to patterning.) (106–107)

His passive acceptance of being poked and prodded confirms his status as an anti-conqueror. Like Mungo Park, in a number of his journeys Allen loses all, or nearly all, his material possessions and is stranded alone in the jungle (*Mad White Giant, Hunting the Gugu, Through Jaguar Eyes*). In such a moment, “he is no longer defined by European commodities” (Pratt 81), and thus achieves transcendence. In *Mad White Giant*, Allen writes: “With no company or possessions I am close to God.... He is everything.... God is Mother Nature” (226). Such a transcendent moment, repeated in similar terms in *Hunting the Gugu* (“God = Everything. But for my purposes = female” [187]), distances his

11 One of the Kandengei villagers tells Allen: “[The bigmen] are so pleased: a white man choses Kandengei, and tell them this village custom is best. If the master want the custom, so can the Kandengei child be made to want the custom” (106).

narrative from the imperialist and capitalist, even patriarchal, discourses in which it is embedded. Unlike Park, however, whose suffering directed attention away from “the decidedly non-reciprocal momentum of European capitalism” (Pratt 81), Allen’s continual attention to the consequences of European imperialism and global capitalism for native peoples and the environment ensures that rather than sanitizing imperialism and capitalism his narratives simply work to disavow his culpability, only obscuring the degree to which he remains implicated in them. In the end, Allen, like Park, “become[s] that creature in whose viability and authenticity his readers may have longed to believe: the naked, essential, inherently powerful white man” (Pratt 81).

Eric Leed suggests that the traveller’s arrival in a “new” place provides him or her with an opportunity to recreate his or her identity, to assume disguises and personae that would be forbidden at home (107). Of course, we might add that these “new” identities are negotiated between the traveller and his or her hosts. Early in his stay in Alice Springs, Arkady introduces Chatwin in the following manner: “This is a Pom ... A Pom by the name of Bruce” (4). A few pages later, he pulls out his notebook, only sold in Paris (12), which reinforces his identification as “European,” as an outsider: “Paris? [Arkady] repeated, raising an eyebrow as if he’d never heard anything so pretentious” (12). During his first journey in the Amazon, Allen is also named so as to reinforce his foreignness. He is called Mad White Giant, although he encourages the various native peoples he runs into to call him by his preferred nickname Louco Benedito. It is in New Guinea that he is more fully accepted, as is indicated by his being called Wumvunnavan by some of the Kandengei villagers.

In fact, throughout his five books Allen repeatedly adopts a “native” persona. One example, in *Mad White Giant*, occurs when he and some of his native companions come across a group of white Brazilians:

The Brazilians were a curiosity at first: real white men. We gaped at them as much as they gaped at us. But they were scared out of their wits, whereas we were just curious. We met them more and more frequently downriver. We had a growing excitement, a trembling in the pit of our stomachs, as the outside world came within reach. We were paddling towards our future. (192)

Note Allen’s use of the plural first person, and the fact that he does not differentiate between himself and his companions (as presumably the Brazilians did). His identification with the natives allows him to speak for them. But in the next sentence he becomes an observer: “The Indians didn’t know what to expect of it. They just marvelled at each Coke bottle and twist of

sweet wrapper that floated by us as we canoed on” (192). He then switches to his own “whiteman” feelings: “My excitement was the achievement of my goal, the end of my journey” (192). His adoption of the native persona, more complete in parts of *Into the Crocodile Nest* and *The Proving Grounds*, provides him with the authority to represent the world of the native peoples to his Western readers and dissociates him from the destruction of that world,¹² which is what *The Proving Grounds* is largely about. Despite all his efforts, however, his adoption of a native identity is always partial and unstable. He is taken out of the crocodile nest early, for example, because his “whiteman” medical skills are required. He only maintains his “native” persona for short periods of time, often slipping into his “whiteman” persona, or somewhere in between. Being a Niowra allows Allen to portray the confrontations between Niowra culture and Western culture, which in most travel books would be seen from the Western perspective, from the perspective of those being looked at, whether the event is the arrival of a couple of Australian tourists to observe the crocodile nest (*Crocodile* 154–156) or the arrival of a mining company (*Proving Grounds* 186–193). Doing so allows Allen to make a more vivid critique of Western intervention, while distancing him from those interventions, and obscuring the impact of his own interventions.¹³ Such descriptions are also anti-touristic¹⁴ gestures, as in the following example:

Bob and George [two missionaries] do not travel simply. They prefer a cavalcade. The vanguard breaks through the forest fifteen minutes ahead of the main body of the army—men carrying radio batteries, men carrying noodles, men with tin cans,

12 It is also central to the way in which his books have been marketed. *Into the Crocodile Nest*, for instance, features a picture of him as a young crocodile initiate covered in clay. The back cover of *The Proving Grounds* features a picture of him dancing during the crocodile initiation ceremony—covered in clay and virtually naked.

13 After all, the reason that his Carib companions, Yepe and Pim, end up working for Brazilian miners, for example, is because Allen hired them to accompany him on his journey (*Mad White Giant* 202–203).

14 Anti-tourism is a rhetorical gesture, founded upon the distinction between travel and tourism that developed with the perceived democratization and commodification of travel beginning in the early nineteenth century, in which the writer seeks to distinguish him/herself from other travellers (see Buzard, Fussell 37–49). Anti-tourism involves a series of performative rejections of “typical” tourist behaviour, and explicit condescension and abhorrence toward tourists. Travel utilizes anti-touristic rhetorical strategies as a means of displacing and evading culpability for the socio-cultural transformations produced by both travel and tourism (see Frow, Culler).

all of them with necks strung tight as they bear the weight of the bags on their foreheads. They swarm through the forest, flattening the flora, widening paths, blazing trails. (*Proving Grounds* 166)¹⁵

Contrast this with Allen's approach of "leaving western equipment at home and learning from the people who actually lived on the spot" (*Jaguar* 6).¹⁶ Such anti-touristic gestures are scattered throughout his books (e.g., "Like all tourists, they missed the point" [*Crocodile* 155]), and function as a means of privileging his travel and dissociating him from the intrusions of tourists, missionaries, and miners.

Allen's claims to oneness with the natives he encounters are undermined by the degree to which his travel books participate in a colonial discourse of authority. Despite his professed friendship with many of the natives, and despite his obvious sympathy for them and their vanishing way of life, like Graham Greene in *Journey Without Maps* (see 145–150, for example) he is continually preoccupied with the question of how to make them do what he wishes. In *Mad White Giant*, for example, he is stranded by what he characterizes as his betrayal by Yepe and Pim (221), and a little later by a second betrayal, that by his adopted dog (213). (He later ate the dog [237].) He then spends much time in both *The Proving Grounds* and *Through Jaguar Eyes* attempting to find loyal and trustworthy guides, not always with a great deal of success.¹⁷ Sometimes, like British imperial administrators in much of the Empire, he exercises his authority through indirect rule, as in the following passage:

I thought I was going to faint. "Please, Tautau, just find out what will satisfy these people. I don't care how you do it. Get them drunk or something. I want to know why they don't want to come." I stormed away, bitterly sorry I was putting so much

15 The signification of this scene is complicated, however, by the fact that the missionaries' arrival saves Allen and his companions from a difficult and dangerous situation among the Gahuns. The unwritten cliché here, of course, is that of the cavalry arriving at the last minute to rescue them from the "Indians."

16 This was not the case in *Through Jaguar Eyes*, as he was accompanied by video equipment, and required a number of people to help him carry all his equipment and supplies.

17 Finding guides does not allay his anxiety, as the following passage illustrates: "The arrows in our bows softly clattered against the striplings as we walked on with the two men, who were obviously coming along whether I liked it or not. I hoped I was not losing control. When would Meréné realise his load was entirely salt, the wages?" (*Crocodile* 58).

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past.

pressure on Tautau. He was only trying his best. (*Mad White Giant* 166)

And when he is threatened by the Obinis he feels “a pang of sadness” that the one who is being the most aggressive and threatening is the little boy whom he had attempted to befriend (*Crocodile* 73). What is significant about the attention Allen pays to this concern is that it reproduces the difficulties with governance that the colonial powers often experienced: How does one inculcate respect for the imperial authority? How does one determine whether the natives are truly loyal?¹⁸

Both Chatwin and Allen embark on their travels in order to get something from the indigenous inhabitants. As I have already pointed out, Chatwin’s objective in *The Songlines* is to learn about the Songlines; similarly, Allen wishes to access the indigenous peoples’ “knowledge of the soul of nature” (*Crocodile* 176–177). Both are travelling to find that which has been lost in Western society, travelling to the past. In *Patagonia* too is a search for origins, as Chatwin traces Patagonia’s impact on Western culture via Shakespeare, Darwin, and a multiplicity of other sources. In assigning their destinations to “our” past, they assign value to these places with regard to their significance in our culture’s terms, rather than in their own terms. Both writers valorize indigenous peoples as being ahistorical. Chatwin tells an anecdote about his time with a Beja nomad in Sudan: this “timeless” people, Chatwin suggests, had not noticeably changed since the days of Ancient Egypt (*Songlines* 18). The Aboriginals are the modern equivalent, he argues, to “real or half-real tribes which hover on the fringe of ancient geographies” (205). Allen despairs that the last places of timelessness are disappearing, with the incorporation of the New Guinea highlanders into the world at large and the incursions of global capitalism: “The gold is coming ... Timelessness, the forest, is ending” (*Proving Grounds* 171); when Pablito decorates Allen, “time stilled a little for me as he painted” (*Jaguar* 209). In gesturing at the ahistorical, Chatwin and Allen reproduce a colonial discourse in which “the savage ... lives in a continual state of self-presence” and is thus identified “with the unchanged and ever self-present earth” (Spurr 99). Even though

18 This sense is reinforced by his occasional use of the possessive. He refers to “my Caribs” (*Mad White Giant* x) and “my jungle” (*Crocodile* 51), for example. In addition, considering Pratt’s identification of the importance of the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene (201), with which the viewer can appropriate what he or she sees, the photograph of Allen in such a pose on the top of Mount Roraima in *Mad White Giant* (photo insert between 118 and 119) reinforces the appropriative sense of his narratives.

such a state may be viewed positively, and it certainly is by Allen, it denies the ability of the indigenous peoples to be historical actors in their own right.

This ahistorical, essentializing tendency in the writings of Chatwin and Allen is disrupted, however, by the attention that both writers give to “travelling natives” and hybrid natives. In *The Songlines* we meet Father Flynn, who travelled to Europe and had an audience with the Pope, before renouncing his ordination; he is familiar both with the world of the Catholic Church and that of his “own” culture (49–54). Joshua is an Aboriginal musician who performed in Europe and the United States, who drew a “Qantas dreaming,” tracing a trip to London (152–155). Titus is an Aboriginal who was educated in a Lutheran school, and can switch between being a Western intellectual in a double-breasted suit and an “ultra-conservative song-man who lived, half-naked, with his dependants and his dogs” (156). Allen’s wau (mentor) claims: “I know much about your whiteman’s world already. It is an interesting one. Sometimes when I am unconscious I travel to your home” (*Proving Grounds* 91). Pablito, who trains Allen to survive the jungle, shifts “between two worlds—ours and his” (*Jaguar* 199). These “natives,” and the many others in these narratives who are also hybrid in some fashion, disrupt the essentializing tendencies present in both Chatwin’s and Allen’s travel books, because the hybrid “breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (Bhabha 116). Furthermore, some of them participate in competing discourses of travel, which challenges the hegemony of the “travel myth” (i.e., that travel is only possible for white males of the proper socio-economic status).

Yet, although Allen documents this hybridization, he remains uncomfortable with it. This is most evident in his attitudes to clothing, as throughout his books he repeatedly makes negative comments about those “natives” who choose to, or are made to, wear Western clothing. “Wearing clothes,” he writes in *Into the Crocodile Nest*, “was affectation for these people, and ridiculous in the clammy forest” (58); and he later observes: “The stained Western garb—sweat bands, hole-riddled bras—strapped proudly on among the flicking headdress feathers, the swinging painted limbs and crescent kina shells was slightly pathetic” (84). In *The Proving Grounds*, he writes: “At the top, women are gardening under golfing umbrellas, and wearing shirts which are clean and bright—town clothes on forest people” (224). As Spurr points out, “under Western eyes, the body is that which is most proper to the primitive, the sign by which the primitive is represented” (22). To mark that body with Western clothing is to lessen the body’s value as a sign of difference, and in the case of Allen, as a sign of innocence; and for Allen, it is as “the primitive” that these people are truly of value to him for it is only then

that they are a sign of the authentic experience that he is seeking.¹⁹ Yet, even if he knows that it is not wholly authentic, Allen prefers the display of the body wearing traditional ornamentation. The following passage describes his reaction to the Goroka Highland Show, a display of tribal dances:

But it's the people with feather head-dresses that I enjoy more than the Westernized ones. Call me an old softie if you like, but the spectacle of men still prepared to get out of their shorts and into bark cloth, the women prepared to throw off their T-shirts and rub on axle grease to make their breasts shine, all this old-fashioned glamour warms the cockles of my heart. (*Proving Grounds* 172)

The problem is that, even in New Guinea, the primitive “Other” no longer exists, as MacCannell argues (*Empty* 26); that “authentic” experience is no longer to be found. For Allen, though, the possible existence of the “authentic” primitive is important, for, like the *gugu*, it represents one of the last mysteries in the world. More cynically, perhaps, we might also add that the market value of his writing is dependent upon his ability to deploy the sign of the primitive in his books.

While Chatwin and Allen may successfully use marginal spaces and peoples in order to articulate alternative ways of relating to the world than the one that is currently dominant, this act of appropriation is consonant with those acts of appropriation which have destroyed and are in the process of destroying those spaces and peoples. What Tim Youngs writes about Chatwin could also apply to Allen: “Chatwin’s championing of the non-material is deceptive since he and others are commoditising the concept” (83) by, among other things, structuring their consumer product around the deployment of signs of “the primitive.” While Chatwin’s and Allen’s accounting of the imperial debris (imperial eccentrics, institutions, etc.) that the British Empire has left scattered across the globe may remind us of the consequences of imperialism, it simultaneously reminds Britons of the power of that Empire. Setting their travel narratives at or beyond what were once the boundaries of the British Empire works to incorporate those marginal spaces and peoples into the British Empire of the imagination. The relative continuity of their spatial practices with those practiced during the height of imperialism works “to assure society’s continuity in a relatively cohesive fashion and the reproduction of the social relations of production” (Shields 52). That is, they work to produce a neocolonial relationship between centre

19 Similarly, he is disappointed when he is first addressed in English by one of the Kandengei villagers (*Crocodile* 101).

and periphery. Ultimately, these seemingly very different travel writers do as much to reaffirm as they do to destabilize gender, national, and racial identities. Like the recent academic interest in colonialism and race, the proliferation of travel narratives, particularly those focusing on marginal spaces and peoples, can be read as a “response to the crisis and anxieties of securing bourgeois identity in a rapidly shifting transcultural world” (Stoler 198), a response that reveals the anxiety of securing British masculinity in a post-imperial world.

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