

# A FLÂNEUR IN THE OUTBACK: WALKING AND WRITING FRONTIER IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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Only a week or two ago the retiring Canadian High Commissioner described the lands from Alice Springs northward as a land of opportunity comparable with the formerly virgin west of Canada and the United States. It is the Commonwealth's duty to treat it as such.

—Former NT Administrator C.L.A. Abbott, 'Australia's Frontier Province,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 28 May 1946

█ Australian writers and journalists have widely characterised Alice Springs and Central Australia as a frontier, a representation of the supposed divide between black and white, primitive and modern. In fact, Richard Davis calls the frontier 'one of the most pervasive, evocative tropes underlying the production of national identity in Australia' (Davis and Rose 7). However, anthropological evidence from Australia's Northern Territory and from Alice Springs itself, suggests more nuanced 'lifeworlds' may be a closer approximation to a contemporary lived experience of the town and region (Finnane and Finnane 262; Hinkson 215; Merlan, *Caging* 4; Ottosson, 'Aboriginal Music' 276; Riphagen 78).

I engage with the lifeworlds of Central Australia through two recent texts in order to highlight how literary constructions of place and identity are more complex than simple frontier models that follow Turner's theory might allow.<sup>1</sup> The first text is a Central Australian Aboriginal Dreaming narrative, a traditional Kaytetye (pronounced *kay-ditch*) story called 'A Man from the Dreamtime.' Kaytetye elder Tommy Kngwarraye Thompson told the story to anthropologist Myfany Turpin, and it was later published as part of a collection called *Growing Up Kaytetye* (2003). One of the few Kaytetye-speaking elders left in country to the north of Alice Springs,

Thompson describes a journey on foot by two Dreamtime Ancestors along a songline that passes through the present-day location of the town. The second text is from Eleanor Hogan's *Alice Springs* (2012), a narrative of political geography fused with memoir in which Hogan tries to take the pulse of the town.<sup>ii</sup> In a chapter entitled 'The Gap,' the author walks around parts of the town near her home observing and recording what she sees and hears. Hogan lived in Alice Springs between 2003 and 2010, working as an indigenous policy specialist and residing in the urban Gap area near the Central Business District.

Fusing literary criticism with walking theory after Henri Lefebvre, Henry David Thoreau and Michel De Certeau, as well as recent anthropological work, I set out to nuance the representation of Central Australia, a place elsewhere likened to Mary Louise Pratt's 'contact zone' ('Arts' 34). Starting with Lefebvre's principle that space is socially produced, I search for evidence of this production in the two texts. A close reading of each story denotes the objects and encounters that are used to build a narrative environment. In addition to constructing the 'place' of the story, such objects and encounters can be markers of the politicisation of space. Here place is represented as space that is 'overwritten with stories and histories' of the people who have lived there (Saglia 124). Following Doreen Massey, who has suggested we imagine space as 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far' (*For Space* 9), I ask who is producing the space and for whom, and, after Foucault, what distribution of knowledge and power this might foster (Crampton and Elden 50).

Place in Central Australia is contested (Short 140; Lea et al 141), and characterised by what Åse Ottoson has distinguished as an identity politics or a politics of belonging ('To Know' 131). Furthermore, and in the same way Francesca Merlan has documented for the northern town of Katherine (and Ottoson for Alice Springs), place is also characterised by intercultural dependencies arising between Aborigines and settlers, and intra-cultural change among Aboriginal groups (Merlan, 'Explorations' 169). Popular and critical discourse around an intercultural experience of space/place and the construction of identity for Central Australians is couched largely in terms of oppositional binaries: black/white, ancient/modern, wilderness/civilisation, nature/culture (Dewar 15; Stratton 40; Carment 31). Frequently used in media and in popular and critical literature are descriptors such as 'frontier,' 'cross-cultural,' 'interface,' 'border crossing' and 'hybridity' (Ottoson, 'Aboriginal Music' 276). While as Vijay Mishra observes there are degrees of 'authentic' representation (165), my aim is to find a different way for writers to express place and identity; one which can easily be adapted for popular literature and press and which better reflects recent evidence.

With roughly one quarter of its population Aboriginal, the town of Alice Springs is defined as a 'postcolonial city' (Short 129). Widely perceived as the heart of the Australian 'outback,' Alice Springs (and Central Australia) embraces all that this term implies: a place where space has long been measured in terms of European settlement (McGrath 114). Australia's best known 'frontier' town, Alice Springs was crowned the nation's 'Outback Capital' in 2002, then soon after dubbed the world's 'stabbing capital' (N Robinson 2008).<sup>iii</sup> Eleanor Hogan suggests that the town's 'indigenous and non-indigenous populations were to some extent traumatised by the past and present realities of frontier life, and that certain aspects of this—like violence, alcohol abuse, racist attitudes—had become normalised as a result' (Wheeler Centre). Alice Springs is often represented this way, where 'remote and mainstream Australia . . . collide, with savage and unpredictable consequences' (Skelton 2011).<sup>iv</sup> However, others argue that 'the relatedness of black and white . . . resist simple racial polarities' (Finnane and Finnane 262).

Perceptions of space which were set down in the Dreamtime still govern the lives of many Aboriginal people in Central Australia.<sup>v</sup> But traditionalist understandings of this worldview provide an incomplete picture of those Aboriginal people with full-time jobs and middle-class aspirations (Finnane and Finnane 262). Two extremes of space and being are invoked. One worldview is based around an emplaced ontology and adherence to Aboriginal traditional law and a storied understanding of space. The other acknowledges an Australian political geography of space governed by several tiers of legislation at local, Territory and federal levels. As Doreen Massey has described, places are ‘constructed out of articulations of social relations,’ not only local, but linked to elsewhere; and she notes a second influence: a disruption of the present by the past (‘Places’ 183). Most Aboriginal people exist somewhere between the two extreme notions of space and being described above. Within and beyond these groups, the town operates as a commercial centre subject to western rules and regulated by Federal, Northern Territory and local governments. As suggested in the epigraph, many settler Australians think of the Centre as a ‘land of opportunity,’ a representation I have written of elsewhere (‘Two Towns’; ‘No direction home’). In the postcolonial geographies of Australia, I will argue here, an understanding of one space cannot be realised without understanding the various others.

In this article I reimagine Charles Baudelaire’s *flâneur* to guide a critical reading of the texts. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the *flâneur* as ‘a man who saunters around observing society’ (*Flâneur*). In narratives of walking, encounters with landscape come in two forms: phenomenologically through the walking body; and through other means, such as discourse, narrative and representation. The common thread of walking renders both ‘A Man from the Dreamtime’ and ‘The Gap’ comparable as acts of place-making; further, it allows a fusing of literary criticism and narrative geography (Hones 686) and reveals the degree to which space in Alice Springs is racialised, as well as how this affects constructions of identity.

#### A ROLE FOR THE FLÂNEUR IN NARRATING CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Walking and place have long been close companions on the road to knowledge, as Robert MacFarlane’s etymology implies when he writes that ‘to learn . . . means—at root—to follow a track’ (31). 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, ‘a region one walks back into’ (MacFarlane 28). Westerners have also articulated walking as a way of knowing, and it is evident in the work of philosophers such as Rousseau, and writers from Charles Dickens to Bruce Chatwin. In central Australia, narratives of such journeys on foot abound (see Griffiths; Lynch; Morrison, ‘Songlines’; Haynes). These narratives take on a special hue, reflecting and shaping popular ideas of the national character while highlighting a history of colonisation and dispossession (see Rowley 134; Harper 100-2).

For Australian historical and contemporary culture is shaped by colonialism, the period after colonial invasion or settlement often termed the postcolonial period, defined as covering ‘all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day’ (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 2). In such environments, place emerges as ‘the concomitant of difference, the continual reminder of the separation, and yet of the hybrid interpenetration of the coloniser and the colonised’ (Ashcroft et al., *Postcolonial* 391).

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Though the term dates to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840) arguably marks the first literary appearance of the detached observer or *flâneur*, the solitary walker who observes and records the emergence and evolution of the modern city. Many have reviewed the history of the *flâneur*, citing this character as a re-emergent figure of twentieth and twenty-first century literature and critical theory.<sup>vi</sup> Most authors cite the poet Charles Baudelaire and critic Walter Benjamin, for the *flâneur* is less a figure of Poe’s London than one associated with nineteenth-century Paris and its arcades, demolished during the rebuilding and modernising of the city between 1853 and 1870 (Solnit 201). Baudelaire expressed the rise of modernity as an ‘unprecedented experience of change and

disruption,’ characterised by the ‘loss of stable external references for individual perception’ (Gluck 748). To the walker, modernity is manifest in unusual or unfamiliar encounters or objects of place: a new bridge, an unfamiliar path, a building no longer there. For the *flâneur* ‘read’ the city, as one would read a text; an idea implied by Poe, but most compellingly described much later by Michel De Certeau (1984).

While the *flâneur* is often thought of as a figure of the urban environment, changes in the landscape as perceived by the walking writer/storyteller might just as validly be gleaned in a rural setting. For example, a colonist’s new homestead viewed by a visiting Aborigine, a waterhole destroyed by cattle, or, from a settler perspective, an influx of remote Aborigines into an outback town. Strictly speaking, Baudelaire’s *flâneur* is a passionate spectator of his environment (Baudelaire 9), by turns a ‘popular journalist, urban reporter, caricaturist and story teller’ (Gluck 749). When observing unfamiliar objects of a place the *flâneur*’s walk is an act not only of placemaking, but of cartography, as Laurene Vaughan has described (316-22). In particular, the walk provides a map of observed changes to the environment. I propose that in the desert or remote town, a similar body of walking theory may apply as in the urban setting: objects and encounters as observed on a walk—as well as recorded changes to these—become building blocks of place and identity. As acknowledged earlier however, other influences such as narrative and representation are nevertheless also at play in the construction of setting. Perhaps the notion is best made by way of an example, from Francesca Merlan’s work near Katherine. She walks repeatedly in the same hills over a long period with some Aboriginal friends, and notes:

On these expeditions, over time, I began to feel that I was learning something of my companions’ mode of absorption . . . Over months, the experience became an increasingly subtle one for me, as I learned about some of the things they were watching for and learned something of the layers of

the past to which those markers belonged and of the people with whom they were associated.  
(*Caging* 29)

Walking traces a particular geography in the mind and, through the feet, on to the earth, a visual representation in memory comprising objects and encounters of significance and meaning to the walker. Through the navigating body—Merleau Ponty’s ‘measurant of the world’ (248-49)—a walker creates awareness and orients themselves within the bigger picture, creating place; when space feels familiar, it has become place (Tuan 73; Casey, ‘Between Geography’ 683; Relph 1). Even so, while such a place can act as a geographical source of meaning to one group, it can still alienate another (Massey, *For Space* 6). Nevertheless, the body remains the cartographer’s pencil in this exercise of map- and meaning-making.

In the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin lent the *flâneur* a political dimension, making him more activist than journalist (Coverly, *Art of Wandering* 20). Later, walking experiments established walking as a commentary on the political geography of place (de Bord 5-8). James Sideaway explored the *affect* of geopolitics, in which the geography of the walk is revealing of, for example, the flow of capital (1091-1116), while theoretical work since 2000 has posited walking as a critical tool for examining postcolonial geographies and other landscapes (see Macauley; Bassett; Wylie; Spencer; Murphy). So too, in popular literature; for example, Raja Shehadeh uses what is arguably an adapted *flâneur* in walking the frontier zone between Palestine and Israel in *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape* (2008).<sup>vii</sup> Walking and the *flâneur* have started to appear recently in Australian research (Lea et al; Ryan ‘Not a bush *flâneur*’; Waite, Gill and Head) and journalism (Wood; Yeoman; Morrison, ‘Favenc’s Call’).

While not all of the modes of walking I have described above necessarily imply the *flâneur*, they all contribute to a reimagining of Baudelaire’s roving reporter equipped with Benjamin’s political sensitivity to the effects of Modernity. Together they provide a convincing lens through which to read the walking narratives of Central Australia. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) has argued and Edward Casey (1993) confirms, an understanding of social space is created through social practices. Michel De Certeau argues that one of these practices is walking (93). In the context of her ethnographies from the Territory town of Katherine and environs, Francesca Merlan notes that factors shaping place also shape the processes of social reproduction (‘Beyond Tradition’ 77). The effect of this shaping can be profound. For example, in characterising places that are significantly Aboriginal, traditionalist representations of Aborigines leave no room for the concomitant cultural change clearly evident in both Aboriginal and settler lifeworlds. In his review of Merlan’s *Caging the Rainbow* (1998), Bruce Kapferer writes that ‘whites and Aborigines are enmeshed in interpenetrating social worlds’ (185). Both groups tend to evolve together and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between them, just as it is impossible to predict the outcome of what is arguably a process of social evolution. For example, Merlan argues (and Kapferer reiterates) that Aborigines practice a form of mimesis, and that ‘Aborigines themselves have adopted the images . . . purveyed by anthropologists, administrators and other members of dominant society’ (Kapferer 185).

To the best of my knowledge, the *flâneur* has not appeared previously in any analysis of Aboriginal literature.<sup>viii</sup> Invoking the *flâneur* in Alice Springs, however, has its precedent: anthropologist Tess Lea and her co-researchers used the *flâneur* to investigate Aboriginal resistance to anti-vagrancy laws seemingly designed to evict them from shopping malls in Alice Springs (Autry and Walkowitz; Lea et al).

## WALKING THE TEXTUAL WORLDS OF ALICE SPRINGS

'A Man from the Dreamtime' recounts the journey of Aboriginal ancestors Marlpwenge and Nalenale, an old Kaytetye man and a young girl who are ancestors from the Dreamtime. The journey narratives of the Dreamtime Ancestors may be thought of as 'narratives of wandering creator beings and the sites they created, and tales of supernatural beings who may have human as well as animal characteristics' (Clunies-Ross 241-2). Both human-like ancestors, Marlpwenge and Nalenale are married, but of the wrong skin.<sup>ix</sup> Nevertheless, the couple live together about 300 kilometres north of present-day Alice Springs. One day the ancestors receive a message on the wind, a plea for help from countrymen living to the south near the present-day location of Port Augusta. The couple travel south to help, and the story of their journey tells the origins and importance of the skin name system (Turpin 28); in colloquial terms the narrative might be referred to as a 'skin story.' A journey on foot, it covers more than 1700 kilometres each way. The story is an allegory, which reveals important elements of place, identity and the cultural tradition of walking the Dreaming tracks. Also revealed is how some elements of the story might have changed subtly since colonisation. While this is perhaps an unconscious inclusion on the part of the narrator who lives in the modern world, the result is reminiscent of the observations of the Parisian *flâneur*, noting the changes wrought by Modernity. Nevertheless, the central message of the story is described here: 'A single man travels a long way, gets a wife from another country group and brings her back with him. The Dreamtime laid the way ...' (Turpin 37).

In *Alice Springs* (2012) Eleanor Hogan narrates the town using a variety of methods, one of which is the recounted walk. In her second chapter, 'The Gap,' Hogan ventures from her unit on a shopping errand and encounters Aboriginal people on the way. There are two types of journey here: one a rambling stroll, around which Hogan hangs a second journey, her first-person traversal of the political geography of alcohol in Alice Springs. As Benjamin might have phrased it, Hogan goes 'botanising on the asphalt' (36), for she is an urban detective poised for social encounter, in other words a *flâneur*. Hogan's destination is Piggly Wiggly's, an independent grocery store catering to a largely Aboriginal clientele. The conceit for the walk is established, and memoir is mixed with journalism for an ongoing discussion of the politics of grog,<sup>x</sup> over which the book circles for much of its length. In this respect, 'The Gap' is a walking essay, echoing Shehadeh's walks of Palestine in which he uses 'each meandering walk to amble no less circuitously around received ideas about the region' (Spencer 40). And yet, for its tight focus on the challenges faced by central Australia's contemporary Aboriginal community, *Alice Springs* met with harsh criticism from some reviewers (Wilson; Morrison, 'A Town'; Finnane; Mills).

The two texts from Central Australia are culturally and thematically different; even the eras they represent are separated by hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Yet they both revolve around walking and represent Central Australia, and so in this sense they share an epistemology. Walking and place invoke the twinned notions of dwelling and journey and so construct discourses of place-making. Such ideas resonate with Indigenous traditions of ritual journeys along Dreaming tracks, otherwise called songlines after a term coined by British travel writer Bruce Chatwin (1988). In pre-contact Australia, Dreaming Tracks criss-crossed the landscape, and can be thought of as walking pathways of exchange and travel in the Aboriginal economy (Ingold; Rumsey; Memmott and Long; Peterson; Morphy; Donovan and Wall; Kerwin; Meyers). Still readily apparent in the liminal spaces of Australian postcolonial geographies, Aboriginal songlines relate song and story through walking journeys, which were, and remain,

a cultural pillar linking people and country. As Robert Dixon and Martin Duwell note, the journey narratives of the Dreamtime Ancestors may contain both traditional Aboriginal law and history (xiv). In turn, Eleanor Hogan's narrative of a walk through Alice Springs can also be thought of as way to develop a relationship with the landscape, as well as a way for her to come to terms with what she represents as the harrowing experience of living in the town. Of particular interest is that both texts imply a unique political geography of space with corresponding constructions of identity.

During the journey of the ancestors described by Thompson, the protagonist Marlpwenge and his walking companion observe objects significant to Kaytetye culture, law, and for navigation; together the objects articulate a landscape well known to the couple. Shortly after setting out on their journey, the pair sight 'newborn puppies,' topographic features created by other traveling ancestors, at *Alekerange* [Ali Curung]. At *Arntwatnewene* or Bluebush, they find bush plum and later record the location of two important soakages (where precious groundwater is known to be close to the surface). In the desert, a working knowledge of the location of reliable food and water supplies means the difference between life and death for a traveller on foot (Clarke 140). Through the narrative, 'A Man from the Dreamtime' maps a 'geography of survival' for Kaytetye in a perilous (and pre-colonial) environment.

Aboriginal place, or 'country,' is a 'network of places linked by paths' (Munn 215). As Tim Ingold notes, these paths were laid down 'through the movements of ancestral beings in that formative era known as the Dreaming . . . paths . . . continually retraced in the journeys of the living people who take after them' (228). The idea of space becoming known through memory and the stories of travel across it, is analogous to De Certeau's vision of the city as place constructed through ritual practices like walking (1984); the familiar territory of the *flâneur*. While early white explorers navigated across such space using a compass and stars, Ingold outlines how Aborigines used narrative history. In the Aboriginal worldview, Ingold argues, places 'exist in space but as nodes in a matrix of movement' (219). He calls this 'wayfinding,' distinguishing it from navigation that references an independent or global set of coordinates. Such routes help Aborigines define a relationship with country, and with each other, through the Dreaming stories and language (Donovan and Wall 3). When Marlpwenge receives a plea for help, for example, he is bound to act. The conceit of the narrative is established and he and Nalenale set forth. Yet the journey is also a lesson of Kaytetye Law. The term 'countrymen' refers to groups living along the same songline, the track walked in this Dreaming story. As well as the geography of survival, then, there is also this other bond, or obligation, to other language groups who live along the same Dreaming track. This emerges as the narrator continues:

Marlpwenge and Nalenale used the soakages that were all along the track . . . It was a busy road. In the old days people coming from the south used it to come to Oodnadatta; they travelled on foot, naked in those days. The early white people asked the Aboriginal people to show them their track. They showed them all their soakages and the white people took their horses and camels to the soakages to get water. Marlpwenge knew where all these places were. (26)

When the pair turns for home, the narrator tells us: 'Aboriginal people would come back on that track, on their Dreaming track, northwards. Those two Kaytetye people followed that line. They are all relations along that track. Countrymen' (Turpin 33). Ritual walking of the songlines, a form of pilgrimage (McBryde 152), underpins an emplaced Kaytetye identity. The narrative path which the protagonists travel generates a map of water and food sources; from the map come knowledge of country and a network of places conjuring home. There is a striking contrast

between this geography of home and the widely invoked representation of pre-colonial Australia as wilderness. The wilderness representation is refuted by recent research, which argues precolonial Australia was a cultural landscape (see Sauer 1925), socially produced and shaped by human action (Gammage 2; Head 482; Langton, 'Aboriginal Balancing Act' 39). It is in the manner of the *flâneur* however, that the Kaytetye narrator observes many new elements in the cultural landscape being walked, and these can be detected throughout the story. These changes are the manifest influence of colonialism, to which I now turn.

The ancestors pass many examples of modern infrastructure on their journey with names such as Wagon Gap, Adelaide Bore, and The Bungalow at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station.<sup>xi</sup> Talk of the 'olden days,' modern place names and the fallout of colonialism mark this as a syncretised version of the Dreaming story, infused with later events and colonial place names, as well as new places previously absent. Modern retellings of Dreaming narratives sometimes use settler place names in this way. The essence of the Dreaming narrative remains, clinging to the songline that underpins the story. As Merlan suggests from her work in Katherine, Dreaming narratives adapt to change. Spatial practices change too, and place identity follows. The result is that 'points of subjective grounding became recognised as a framework of places along settler travel routes and at sites of incipient development of a built environment' (*Caging* 111). For example, when Marlpwenge and Nalenale arrive at New Crown Station, they 'travelled along where the railway is today—that track of theirs where the white people put the railway line down. Before that people used to take camels along that road' (Turpin 26).

Similarly, there is no longer a perfect fit between Kaytetye narratives, their language, and the shifting postcolonial landscape around them. What word might Kaytetye people have used for *The Bungalow*, for example, where so many of their brethren were housed and mistreated at the hands of whites? The name has no precedent in Kaytetye, and yet it appears on the Dreaming track of Marlpwenge (25). Any answer to this question must seemingly support Dianne Austin-Broos' assertion that contemporary Aboriginal society is not so much embracing a modernist worldview, as updating the traditional hunter-gatherer worldview. Such renaming is implicit in the exercise of power of coloniser over colonised, as Paul Carter has argued. Yet, like the *flâneur*, these storytellers note the objects of modernity they find dotting their world, which I suggest may serve as a simplified gloss on Dianne Austin-Broos' broader proposal of an 'ontological shift' among the Western Arrernte further to the south (Austin Broos 266). In this way, and as Carter has noted '. . . language, like traveling, gives space its meaning' (175). The Kaytetye identity emerging from Thompson's story is of an Aboriginal group strong in culture and steeped in the ways of ancient law and storytelling, yet embracing of change.

Like Marlpwenge and Nalenale, but with significantly different motivations, Hogan also notes encounters and objects of place she passes on her walk of contemporary Alice Springs, as well as introducing elements of a popular political discourse. Noting as she departs for her walk that a cyclone security fence surrounds her home, Hogan adds statistics for the number of murders in her area (43); also that much of the violence is 'black-on-black' (for more on this see Finnane and Finnane 261). Aboriginal people are her focus; there are few white people apparent in Hogan's rendering of 'The Gap,' though they form 79 per cent of the town's population (Charles Darwin University). The structure of Hogan's walking prose is reminiscent of Thoreau's excursion narratives (Robinson, 'Place and History' 83-92; Johnson 1986; Thoreau; Ryan, 'Recalling Walden') or Iain Sinclair's (see 'Lights Out for the Territory'), not in tone or style so much as the method of constructing place. Like Sinclair, Thoreau, Shehadeh and other

walking writers, Hogan mentally collects the objects she sees and arranges them in order on the walk, presenting them as issues or interesting anecdotes for expansion, discussion and analysis. Not long after setting out for example, Hogan approaches Heavitree Gap where:

A police troopie grinds around in the riverbed. It parks for a few minutes and a couple of cops jump out. They disappear into the shrubbery; they might be checking on people or looking for stashes of grog or other signs of illicit drinking. (44)

Sighting the police vehicle in the river facilitates a return by Hogan's narrator to the broader intent of the walk, a discussion of the politics of alcohol. In 'The Gap,' there is little discussion of walking itself and, in contrast to Sinclair and Shehadeh, Hogan's 'self' rarely makes an appearance. Hogan is not the romantic solitary walker of Hazlitt (14-35), or even Rousseau whose 'senses are possessed by a deep and delightful reverie ...' (Rousseau 108). Perhaps Hogan abandoned such notions to make more room for political geography; as Jonathon Bate notes: 'the price of [romantic] intoxication with the spirit of things is a definitive break from the human community' (41). The polemical nature of Hogan's text betrays Benjamin's activism, for the walking soon makes way over subsequent pages for a detailed discussion of the various ways alcohol is regulated in Alice Springs (48-57). Yet such dry political treatment renders the narrative what Finnane labels a 'spiritless inquiry.'

Exactly which objects and encounters a walking writer chooses to record is significant. Iain Sinclair argues that what he passes and thinks on the path is not as important as what he chooses to record, for it is that which he records that underpins his prose. In his first London walk of nine in 'Lights Out for the Territory,' Sinclair sets out from Hackney bound for Greenwich Hill then back along the River Lea to Chingford Mount. He traverses the streets and back alleys of his route in a bid to record its graffiti, and the resulting narrative he labels 'serial composition: the city is the subject, a fiction that anyone can lay claim to' (Sinclair). For Sinclair, reading the city emerges as a more reliable alternative to reading the newspapers, which have 'atrophied into the playthings of grotesque megalomaniacs, uselessly shrill exercises in mind control.' Reading the tags is akin to reading one layer of the urban environment. The resulting prose is overtly political, lying as it does at the intersection of Sinclair's self and the path he walks. As a depiction of place, he judges it fiction. Here is the hybrid nature of the walking narrative of place, amplified in Merlin Coverly's definition of psychogeography as 'the point at which psychology meets geography' (*Psychogeography* 13). The psychology is that of the walker, whom the reader meets in any resulting narrative. Another walker might not trace so political a trail as Sinclair (or Hogan), for this is Sinclair's tracing, a locus of points describing the arc of the places where his mind and memory meets the environment. The narrative becomes the sum of his interests and background multiplied by the objects he sees, the answer writ large on the blackboard of his politics. But this practise reaches beyond the urban; for as Paul Carter wrote of the Australian explorer, the country does not precede the traveller, rather it is 'the offspring of his intention' (349).

Similarly, Hogan's walk traces the psychology of author/narrator against the background of Alice Springs, a factor central to any understanding of the narrative as 'non-fiction.' While concentrating elsewhere on the environment of the present day and its challenges, Hogan turns briefly to the Alice Springs of old. Walking toward the dry Todd River near Heavitree Gap, Hogan writes:

... dark figures drift down between the trees towards the river near the picnic area. It used to be a sacred place where only men could go. Women traditionally made a detour 30 kilometres west

...because of the presence of men's sacred objects at Heavitree Gap. If they passed through The Gap, they walked in the footsteps of the men with their head bowed, looking at their feet. Some women still walk this way or avert their gaze out of respect in the area. (44)

The reader is cast back to precolonial times and the journeys of the ancestors. Walking a little further however, Hogan reveals the layer of modern infrastructure now dressing this ancient world: the Ghan railway line, a five-way roundabout and highway, a dry riverbed where once flowed a spring, and finally The Gapview Hotel. The effect is to juxtapose momentarily the past with the present, emphasising the significant impact of colonisation on Aboriginal lives. Hogan aligns herself with the dispossessed; she is on their territory. Yet at times her discomfort is discernible; she describes Aboriginal people making their way down the Todd Mall as 'shoals of disconsolate fish' (Hogan 23). Her conversations with her 'other' are awkward, yet clearly she takes the part of Aborigines in her political dissection of their predicament. Here Hogan betrays a curious imagining of self, which perhaps speaks more broadly to the confused state of an Australian identity. Since the Land Rights era, Australians have leaned heavily on indigenous culture as a means of establishing a more authentic identity. In a recent interview, Hogan herself confesses she is a 'do-gooder urban type' (Wheeler Centre).

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Similarly, some forty years earlier, Charmian Clift donned a *flâneur's* hat in *The Centre*, expressing her shame and uneasiness upon arriving at Alice Springs, that 'landscape of saints, mystics and madmen' (203). In her descriptions of Aboriginal people in the town's shopping mall, Clift-as-*flâneur* observes how Modernity has affected them; she protests injustice and carries its trace into history's prose, her fate 'bound up with the fate of the city' (Coverly, *Psychogeography* 20). For example, Clift writes:

I will be haunted by that daily frieze impasted on banks and tourist agencies and galleries and gem shops and rock shops. Patient. Waiting. Moving, if at all, from one side of the street to the other. The women and girls squatting in ripply black silk circles around groomed trees in a groomed park. Looking on. (205-6)

Here Aboriginal people are situated as hapless outsiders, 'looking on' to the white man's world of groomed trees in groomed parks, modernity, an alien world for which they seemingly have no ticket of entry. 'What are the dreaming people dreaming now?' Clift wonders guiltily (206). In similar fashion to Thompson's narrative—except that now a whitefella is the observer/narrator—Hogan narrates changes to the Dreaming landscape, embracing elements of indigenous culture in a personal search, like Clift's, for an explanation of colonial dispossession. As Hogan strolls the impact zone between black and white, she chronicles an Aboriginal culture grappling with western modernity (in binary representations, the antithesis of primitive culture). Her simple phenomenological apprehension of place through walking is supplemented by journalism, history and encounter. As Nicole Pietrantonio observes, encountering landscape and conceptualising place is an ongoing process of negotiation between competing systems of representation (1); between the

past and present of place (Massey, 'Places' 182). Writing place requires this syncretic and embodied apprehension (Ryan, 'Recalling Walden' 55).

Importantly, *Alice Springs* also invokes several competing representations of Aborigines. Hogan certainly spells out the inequality wrought by colonial expansionism and local profiteering from alcohol, also reported elsewhere (Krein 2011). However, in articulating relations of power over a socially-produced space, the author reproduces a spatial politics of her own. For example, strolling to The Gapview Hotel, Hogan passes a resort frequented by whites, where 'Couples and families lounge by the pool' only to arrive shortly afterward at a 'dusty tongue of dirt,' where the 'familiar surf of bottle tops, VB cans, casks and silver foil bladders' ebbs at Hogan's feet (46). The latter is represented as an Aboriginal world, where, under large XXXX signs, Aboriginal women linger in the bottle-o driveway waiting for 'cheap take-away grog' from the shop itself: 'small and dingy, with grimy fly strips,' where staff are 'surly and patronising towards Aboriginal people' (46). Here is Marcia Langton's 'drunken Aborigine' ('Rum' 195), a common representation and familiar sight on the streets of Alice Springs. The contrast between the traditionalist, perhaps even 'romanticised' walker of the songlines portrayed in 'A Man from the Dreamtime' and the problem drinkers waiting for their fix at the hands of profiteering publicans, couldn't be more starkly wrought. And so the pattern emerges: whites are demonised and blacks portrayed as victims, deepening predominant media representations.<sup>xiii</sup> And yet as journalist Helen Womack observed while reporting on a controversial murder trial in 2009:

Alice Springs is full of well-meaning white people with university degrees, working for Aboriginal development. While Aborigines might seem concealed in some cities, this town grapples daily with the task of peaceful coexistence and reconciliation.

In her neglect of more traditional (or 'romantic') representations during this chapter, Hogan foregrounds the Aboriginal drunk and demonises whites on their behalf. Hogan is largely concerned with disadvantage; in a recent interview, she says of her time in Alice Springs: 'there was a lopsided emphasis among urban elites on media representations and symbolic issues at the expense of a focus on basic need, especially in relation to social justice and difference' (Wheeler Centre). However, I would argue that representation can have a vitally real effect on the lives of anyone living in remote Australia. As Kapferer observes, 'The way Aborigines are represented is implicated in their frequently shocking political and social circumstance and in often destructive debates that surround them' (184). In the same interview Hogan reveals that she aligns herself with a growing number of critics, who, as Marcia Langton has put it, encourage 'a more sophisticated view (of Aborigines) than the archetypal one of the native as perpetual victim with no hope'; in particular I refer here to Langton's history of a proposed 'economic Aborigine' (*Quiet Revolution* 12). And yet, wherever the reader ventures in Hogan's published world of *Alice Springs*, they find Aboriginal suffering. Finnane and Finnane condemn similar representations as being to 'reproduce a stereotype of Aboriginal people as victims, lacking agency' (262). Upon her return to the town in 2005, travel author Robyn Davidson remarked:

People come to the Centre hungry to learn—the town floats on the tourist dollar—but how are they to penetrate something so inherently secretive and complex? How can they see past the drunks and the misery, or the sentimentality and kitsch, to the sophistication and beauty of aboriginal ideas? (143)

Nowhere in Hogan's *Alice Springs* is to be found Davidson's 'beauty of ideas,' merely the tragedy of dispossession. As such, while I have only examined one chapter from a broader work, Hogan's walk in 'The Gap' represents only one facet of the town's multi-dimensional story. The reader who digests only the 'strong in culture' Aborigine of 'A Man from the Dreamtime' as representative of an all-pervading tradition is equally misled. Virtually ignored, for example, is an emerging Aboriginal middle class in the town, revealing that walking creates a particular form of place, one linked closely to the interests of the walker.

Intimately familiar with the imprint of colonialism in central Australia, Hogan describes the politics of space. She notes the 1984 'two-kilometre law' regulating public consumption of alcohol, as well as 'prescribed areas' declared under the 2007 Federal Intervention banning Aborigines from drinking, possessing or supplying alcohol and pornography. The bans started on remote communities and in 2008 were extended to Alice Springs' town camps; as a result, inhabitants who 'already could not drink in public places, could not lawfully drink in their own homes either' (Hogan 55). Some Aborigines drink in public, in the riverbed or on pathways and in parks; drinking camps are set up on the fringes of town, on or behind hills tucked out of sight (Rothwell 2011). Begging for money to buy alcohol is frequent (Hogan 64). In Alice Springs' Central Business District, security guards and police encourage Aboriginal pedestrians to 'keep moving on' (Lea et al 152). Walking further, Hogan warns an Aboriginal man and two Aboriginal women of these alcohol laws:

'You know you can get in trouble with the police for drinking in a public place?' I say.

Geraldine nods.

'Does it bother you?'

She shrugs.

'I saw the police driving up and down the riverbed a little while ago.'

None of them seem fussed. (63)

Perhaps, like Marlpengwe and Nalenale, these Aborigines abide different laws of space, defined by tradition, where the old (but not necessarily fixed) ways still hold sway. The political geography of contemporary Australia is superimposed over the top of these old ways. Yet the imbrication of both spaces is confused further by alcohol. The Aborigines Hogan interviews ignore or are at least not fully conversant with the new ways in this produced space of structural inequality, where regulations create white space that excludes Indigenous Australians. Hogan and some whites emerge from *Alice Springs* as the aforementioned 'do-gooder urban type[s]' who come to Central Australia to work in the 'Aboriginal industry' (Wheeler Centre), while others are demonised for leading blackfellas to grog.

## CONCLUSION

'A Man from the Dreamtime' (2003) constructs an emplaced culture, rich in ceremony and myth, in which identity is established through kinship and an intimate knowledge of place. Relationships and obligation are forged through country, family and along the songlines. But the telling of this story has changed since colonisation, as new objects and encounters have emerged. Baudelaire's 'loss of stable external references for individual perception' (Gluck 748) becomes an influence on the Kaytetye narrative. Thompson's embracing of such change speaks

of a dynamic narration of the Dreaming, reinforcing that it is, as Stanner termed it, 'Everywhen' (58). This challenges commonly-held misconceptions of a 'timeless land,' of an Aboriginal culture that is unchanging and static. Langton argues against the myth that Indigenous Australians can't adapt to modern life, declaring the classification of their land as wilderness a travesty of justice. She notes that '[t]he unspoken expectation is that Aboriginal people are 'noble savages' and should not be engaged in economic development such as mining, which could drag them out of grinding poverty' ('Aboriginal Balancing Act' 39).

Hogan's more recent appraisal of the same region in 'The Gap' eschews romantic representations of Aborigines to focus on issues of basic need. Her walking becomes a conceit from which to suspend a second journey, a discussion of the political geography of grog. The narrative reflects Hogan's identity as writer-activist for the Aboriginal cause, yet recasts Aborigines once again as victims. The cultural collision zone of Alice Springs, described by theorists such as Dewar, Short and Ottoson, emerges as Hogan's '[s]chism the nation is built on' (Wheeler Centre). But it is by no means a complete picture. Traditional representations such as those Langton might dub the 'new noble savage' are largely forgotten, as well as those of an emergent Aboriginal middle class, arguably Langton's 'economic Aborigine' (*Quiet Revolution*).

Like the nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneur* encountering Von Haussman's vision of modernity, the latter-day Aborigine adapts old ways and stories to new circumstances superimposed by Europeans. For the reader, the *flâneur* helps to negotiate two narrative snapshots of the same landscape from differing cultural perspectives, revealing the extent and complexity of change since colonisation. Interestingly, 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. Highlighted here as well, are the benefits and drawbacks of walking (and *flânerie*) as a way of narrating place. Both 'A Man from the Dreamtime' (2003) and *Alice Springs* (2012) reveal that the place of the walking writer is highly selective, closely bound to the intention of the walking narrator, but also sensitive to change. A purely phenomenological understanding of landscape however is insufficient; the walker in a postcolonial geography cannot ignore an inevitable and perhaps irreversible politicising of the landscape.

To summarise, while Turner had the American West in mind when he characterised the frontier as the 'meeting point between savagery and civilisation' (1893), such a representation fails to describe the more complex lived experience of contemporary Alice Springs that these texts offer. The idea of the frontier implies a clash between separate groups: two such extremes of space (and being) are both implied *and* disproven by 'A Man from the Dreamtime' and *Alice Springs*. One space is governed by Aboriginal law, in which history operates spatially, and which still holds sway for many; the geography of survival described in 'A Man from the Dreamtime.' At the other extreme, history operates temporally, and space is subject to Federal and Northern Territory law, as well as local

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regulation. The latter is superimposed over the former. Alice Springs embraces both, and yet, at the same time, is positioned somewhere between these two existential extremes, a zone that is perhaps better described by Kapferer's 'interpenetrating social worlds.' Though many readers and writers now readily acknowledge Australia's long Aboriginal history, fewer might recognise two laws operating simultaneously, and the degrees of grey this generates for anyone trying to understand social behaviour and practice. Political geography emerges as different for different groups. In between the two ontological extremes of the so-called frontier, lie imbricated shades of imagined geography. Such confusion is arguably just as challenging for political administrators and settlers, as it is for Aboriginal people. A reading strategy that uses the figure of the *flâneur* suggests one way to begin to unravel these complex spaces. I conclude by noting that the two spaces implicated in this paper were previously articulated by the prominent Aboriginal activist and Alice Springs traditional owner the late Wenten Rubuntja, who said: 'When English people found our country, and [found] Aboriginal people, they put their cities and culture all over our country. But underneath this, all the time, Aboriginal culture and laws stay alive' (Rubuntja and Green 175-176).

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#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> See Turner 1893.

<sup>ii</sup> *Alice Springs* is part of publisher New South's cities series, which asks authors to write about their home. See also Morrison 'In Search of Alice Springs' 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> The term 'stabbing capital' arose after a 2007 report in the *ANZ Journal of Surgery* by local physician Dr Abraham Jacob revealed the number of presentations at the Alice Springs Hospital for stab wounds—390 incidents for every 10,000 people. The report told how some 40 per cent of the stabbings in the town were thigh injuries, commonly a site of Aboriginal traditional punishment. Alcohol played a role in 30 per cent of all incidents (see Jacob A.O., Boseto F. and J. Ollapallil 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> See also newspaper articles by Nicolas Rothwell 2011; Anna Krein 2011; Natasha Robinson 2008.

<sup>v</sup> For example, see Brooks 2003.

<sup>vi</sup> For a popular introduction to the *flâneur*, see relevant sections in Solnit 2001; Coverly 2010 & 2012; Robinson 1989; and Nicholsan 2008. An introductory selection from the critical literature

might well include Kramer and Short 2011; Bassett, K 2004; Gluck 2006, Buck-Morss 1986; Waitt, Gill and Head 2009; Crickenburg 2007; Autrey and Walkowitz 2012.

vii Robert Spencer calls Shehadeh's walking method a device for testing preconceptions (40). While the *flâneur* may document the urban palimpsest, in contested Palestine Shehadeh extends this mission to examine what Spencer calls the 'forces and agents that threaten his environment' (39). Some of these threats are economic, just as economic imperatives drove Hausmann's grand redesign of Paris.

viii Though anthropologist Isabel McBryde compares Aboriginal walking of central Australian songlines to pilgrimage on the El Camino de Compostela (158).

ix Skin names are part of a kinship system, which delineates how people relate to each other, their roles, responsibilities and obligations and who they can marry (Central Land Council Kinship and Skin Names ).

x Originally meaning a spirit such as rum mixed with water, the Oxford English Dictionary explains that the Australian colloquial use of the term grog has come to mean alcohol generally. Anecdotally in Alice Springs, use of the term is more commonly associated with alcohol that is consumed by Aboriginal people; that is, whitefellas drink alcohol, blackfellas drink grog.

xi The Bungalow was a series of corrugated iron sheds operated by the Australian Government in the first half of the twentieth century, where up to fifty half caste children and ten adults were housed, reportedly in appalling conditions by modern standards. See ABC Aboriginal Australia: The Unfinished Business – Places

<[http://www.abc.net.au/federation/fedstory/ep4/ep4\\_places.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/federation/fedstory/ep4/ep4_places.htm) >

xii Another example is the interview with accommodation owner Ken (Hogan 82-85).

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