Maps, Dreams, and the Presentation of Ethnographic Narrative: Hugh Brody's "Maps and Dreams" and Bruce Chatwin's "The Songlines"

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IN A RECENT STUDY of the role of the anthropologist as author,[1] Clifford Geertz has examined the variety of rhetorical strategies deployed in the presentation of ethnographic material. Geertz's is by no means an isolated project; it reflects rather the general shift of emphasis in contemporary anthropological studies from an analysis of the documentary product (the ethnography as *record*) to an exploration of the discursive process (the ethnography as *narrative*).[2] That boundaries have increasingly become blurred between the discursive practices of anthropology and those of fiction is borne out in the significant similarities between two recent works: Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* (1981), and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987). Brody provides a good example of the anthropologist as author: a professional ethnographer whose alertness to the rhetorical impact of his work is demonstrated in the unconventional but persuasive presentation of his ethnographic narratives. Chatwin, by contrast, provides an example of the author as anthropologist: a professional travel writer whose personal experience is skilfully transcribed into the contours of pseudo-ethnographic fiction. *Maps and Dreams* and *The Songlines* have similar subjects: the critical comparison of Western and indigenous patterns of territoriality and land use. But Brody and Chatwin have more in common in their respective works than their impassioned defence of Native land rights, for not only do both

writers have a strong thesis to present, but also they share a heightened awareness of the narrative means at their disposal.

I shall argue in this paper that *Maps and Dreams* and *The Songlines* can be seen both as sharply worded condemnations of Western materialism and as finely crafted examples of, and inquiries into, ethnographic discourse. In this context, the apparently straightforward titles of each work are disarming; for what seems initially in *Maps and Dreams* to be a blunt, even a naïve, distinction between a predominantly Western conception of space (the map) and a predominantly non-Western conception of time (the dream) turns out to be a subtle inquiry into the manipulation of time-space metaphors in Western ethnographic discourse. Chatwin's *The Songlines* is similarly surprising, for while the Aboriginal songlines are discovered, like Western maps, to be forms of territorial negotiation, they are also discovered to be metaphors for the nomadic instincts common to (if, in many cases, unacknowledged by) the human species. Both titles have metaphorical, as well as literal, significance, indicating Brody and Chatwin's shared concern for the impact of cultural bias on spatial perception and their more immediate interest in the relation that exists in different cultures between *graphic* (written) and *graphemic* (non-written) modes of spatial representation.

An example of the former mode of representation is the Western map. "It is hard to be completely relativistic about maps," claims the art historian E. H. Gombrich, because the mistakes in them can be "systematically rectified" (188). Nonetheless, it remains clear that the diagrammatic representation of the environment provided by the map owes much both to the disposition of its makers and to the expectations of its readers. The optical data codified in a map construct a model, not a copy, of the phenomenal world which facilitates our orientation in it. But the model also encompasses, and permits the reconstruction of, an historically specific set of social and cultural attitudes; furthermore, a discrepancy exists between the inevitably approximative function of the map and its frequently absolutist status. As the geographer Philip Muehrcke has noted, "maps impress people as being authoritative and tend to be accepted without qualification" (333), but while they present themselves as "truths," the visual "evidence" they

afford is necessarily "filtered through the perception of the map-makers" (339).[3] In this sense, maps provide good examples of what the anthropologist James Clifford has called "discursive partiality":[4] incomplete but persuasive accounts of the environment they set out to define and delineate. It is worth asking here what kind of discursive partiality maps possess. If we accept the (loose) definition that Western maps are graphic representations of a specified environment, we are in a position to understand the abiding Western preference for graphic over graphemic modes of representation; for the considerable authority invested in the map eventually traces back to the perceived supremacy of the written over the spoken word.[5]

In Australian Aboriginal and North American Native Indian cultures, however, maps tend to be perceived primarily as a means of *spoken* expression. They support a social system the spatial coordinates of which are graphemically, rather than graphically, represented: the knowledge gained from the map, like the knowledge which informs it, is communicated orally. But this distinction between Western and indigenous maps is by no means as clear-cut as it seems. Brody and Chatwin both contrast Western patterns of land use, which are based on the principle of material acquisition, with indigenous patterns, which are based on the principle of collective experience. They take care to point out, however, that the land use of indigenous (Native Indian/Aboriginal) societies is far more complex than is often supposed.

Brody begins his study by describing the early maps of the European pioneers in British Columbia which, like their treaties and trap-lines, "encircle[d] the Indians with legal and territorial limits" (115). These maps, suggests Brody, were instrumental in the formulation of a project in which "potential settlement and resources [became] the subjects of a new Northern mythology" (115). While later European settlers strove to fulfil a dream of progress in which the North was increasingly characterized as a "place of limitless material possibilities" (115), the Indians adhered with an obstinacy coloured by fatalism to a holistic view of their territory. Their land use, like the maps which conceptualized it, thus expressed the desire for coherence and co-operation, rather than the hope for (or confirmation of) personal gain. A distinction duly emerged be-

tween an allegedly "objective" representation of space in Western (European) maps which supported the notion of territory as a capital good[6] and a more obviously "subjective" representation of space in Native Indian maps which reflected their collective experience of the phenomenal "lifeworld." This distinction still holds good today, as Brody demonstrates by comparing patterns of land use among the various entrepreneurs and corporate conglomerates of the contemporary industrial northwest with those of indigenous hunter-gatherer societies such as the Beaver Indians. Ironically, the former group is revealed to be the more "predatory." More predatory, but not necessarily more sophisticated, in their interactions with the environment; as Brody suggests, the superior technologies developed by modern industrial societies have not necessarily helped those societies understand the complexity of their natural surroundings. In this sense, modern topographical maps may be considered symbolic of the essentially limited nature of environmental perception in a commercial ecosystem based on narrow profit motives and on an efficient management of natural resources which leads to the inequitable division of material spoils.

The Indian hunters' maps analyzed in Brody's text share neither this conception of "planning" nor this overriding concern for material acquisition. At first sight, the maps appear imprecise and confused, but, as Brody suggests, such impressions are the value-judgements of Western readers whose discriminating rationalism potentially inhibits their appreciation of the richness of the lifeworld. In fact, says Brody, the maps of the Beaver Indians chart not so much the vagaries as the complex variables of hunting behaviour: "to disconnect the variables, to compartmentalize the thinking, is to fail to acknowledge its sophistication and completeness" (37). A Western conception of planning, explains Brody, would merely "confound the flexibility" of the hunters' view of their environment, for

> ... [the hunter's] course of action is not, must not be, a matter of predetermination. If a plan constitutes a decision about the right procedure of action, and the decision is congruent with the action, then there is no space left for a "plan," only for a bundle of open-ended and non-rational possibilities. (37)

The multiplicity of available options does not preclude the possibility of a coherent pattern, however; for the hunters' maps are both composite and communal, reflecting a wealth of collective experience of the land. Although Brody acknowledges that composite maps such as these may "obscure changes in the pattern of land use that have occurred" (153), he emphasizes the continuity and consistency of their underlying territorial imperatives, which arise from the collective consciousness, but also from the collective unconscious, of the people.

To make this last point, Brody draws a comparison between the terrestrial maps of the hunters and the celestial "trails to heaven" of the people's designated "dreamers." The "dreamers" are those few truly "good" men within the band who, having devoted their lives to the welfare of others, are eventually rewarded with "the heaven dream." Strong dreamers are the spiritual guides of the band: their dreams are then transformed into maps, so that other members of the band may recognize and seek out their own trails to heaven. Brody takes care to point out that the maps of the dreamers and the maps of the hunters are indissociable, for the location of heaven is "to one side of, and at the same level as, the point where the trails to animals all meet" (47). The making and reading of maps thus depends both on the specific knowledge of individuals within the society and on a nexus of collective beliefs within the culture. The hunters' maps complement the dreams of the designated dreamers which, in turn, revive and embellish the dreams of the Ancestors. In this way, maps play an active role in the preservation or, more accurately, in the successive recreation of the cultural history of the people: they are valuable artifacts which, passed down from father to son, symbolize and reinforce the values of a predominantly oral culture. Brody's distinction between the maps and dreams of the Native (Beaver) Indians and those of the Western (European) settlers amounts to more, then, than a perceived conflict between two forms of territorial imperative, the one atavistic and proprietorial, the other teleological and mercantile; it also registers the clash between two different cultural systems, the one supported by oral consent, the other by written contract.

A similar clash informs *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin's fiction-

alized account of his travels in Australia. *The Songlines* charts a double journey: Chatwin's meandering through the Australian outback and his no less tortuous progress towards a discovery of the nature and implications of the Aboriginal Dreaming-tracks. In the process, he encounters several guides, one of whom, the ironically named Russian-Australian Arkady,[7] explains to him

> how each totemic ancestor, while travelling through the country, was thought to have scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the line of his footprints, and how these Dreaming-tracks lay over the land as "ways" of communication between the most far-flung tribes. A song, he said, was both map and direction-finder. Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across the country.   (13)

The Aboriginal Walkabout, says Arkady, is a reconstruction of the Aboriginal Dreamtime: "the man who went walkabout was making a ritual journey. He trod in the footprints of his Ancestor. He sang the Ancestor's stanzas without changing a word or note — and so recreated the Creation" (14). The circuitous nomadic routes of the Aboriginals reflect the complexity both of their individual Dreamings and of the collective Dreamtime. Like the Beaver Indians', the Aboriginals' negotiation of space is also a re-affirmation of their spiritual beliefs. To map the country is to dream it: the forward journey through space and the backward journey through time converge in the configurations of the Dreaming-tracks.

Chatwin's next mentor, ex-Benedictine priest and Aboriginal rights activist Father Flynn, reminds Chatwin of the distinction between Western and Aboriginal perceptions of the land. White men, claims Flynn, often made the mistake of assuming that

> because the Aboriginals were wanderers, they could have no system of land tenure. This was nonsense. Aboriginals, it was true, could not imagine territory as a block of land hemmed in by frontiers: but rather as an interlocking network of "lines" or "ways through." (56)

The songlines, explains Flynn, constitute trade routes in which songs, not things, "are the principal medium of exchange . . . a man's verses were his title deeds to territory. He could lend them to others. He could borrow other verses in return. The one thing

he couldn't do was sell or get rid of them" (57). Flynn distinguishes between the prevalent Western view of land as a capital good which can be freely bought or sold at market prices and an alternative, Aboriginal view of land as a shared resource the terms of which fluctuate in accordance with a flexible system of verbal exchange rather than in response to the latest market demands. This distinction reflects ironically on the attempt of Kidder, the Australian community leader, to "deprogramme" the sacred knowledge of the Aboriginals by returning artifacts and documents to their rightful owners (43). To Kidder, this sacred knowledge is "the cultural property of the Aboriginal people" (43): it has considerable commodity value. But as Father Flynn explains,

> Aboriginals, in general, had the idea that all goods were potentially malign and would work against their possessors unless they were forever in motion . . . "goods" were tokens of intent: to trade again, meet again, fix frontiers, intermarry, sing, dance, share resources and share ideas. (57)

The alternative viewpoints of Kidder and Flynn inform much of the rest of *The Songlines*: the first, a well-intentioned but misguided attempt to help the Aboriginals based on a Western conception of capital gains and losses, the second an attempt not so much to recover the "cultural property" as to discover the fundamental philosophical precepts of the Aboriginal people.

Let me return here to the notion of the map. In my reading of Brody's *Maps and Dreams*, I suggested that the graphic display provided by the standard (Western) topographical map affords not only a means of orientation in the environment it represents, but also an instrument for the eventual appropriation of that environment or a justification for the terms of its tenure. The map can be said in this sense to symbolize a Western desire for, or to reinforce Western myths of, territorial expansion. In Aboriginal cultures, on the other hand, territory tends to be conceived, perceived, and represented in graphemic terms, a generalization which seems to hold true both in hunter-gatherer societies such as the Beaver Indians of British Columbia and in nomadic societies such as the Central Australian Aboriginals. In *Maps and Dreams* and *The Songlines*, the graphemic representation of space in predominantly oral cultures is shown to pertain to a system of verbal

exchange, whereas the graphic representation of space is shown to amount to a system of capital accumulation prevalent among predominantly literate cultures.

If the distinction were as hard and fast as I have involuntarily implied here, Brody and Chatwin would then be faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem: in brief, how can the writer convey an intended critique of Western consumer culture in book form, when the book not only is a primary artifact of that culture but might even be considered an epitome of that culture? Brody and Chatwin's approach to the problem is to interweave "spoken" and "written" modes into the narrative presentation of their texts in such a way as to suggest that the schematic division between "oral" and "literate" cultures may itself be the product of cultural bias, a strategic means by which literate Western cultures have promulgated their superiority over their non-Western "others."[8]

Brody first comments on the structure of his text in the preface to *Maps and Dreams,* where he states that "the odd-numbered chapters try to follow a route selected by the people" (xvi), whereas the even-numbered chapters deal more with his own "research schemes and agendas" (xvi). This contrapuntal structure is combined with the interpolation into the text of a series of palimpsestic maps in which the Native Indians' hunting routes are superimposed onto the standard Ordnance Survey grid. Brody thus illustrates his attempt to *alternate* between cultures; by switching between the operations of scientific record and those of personal memoir, Brody further suggests the inter-subjective nature of ethnographic inquiry. In the odd-numbered chapters, he explains,

> I have chosen to use fictitious names and have in other ways sought to conceal the identification of both people and places. I refer to the community as the Reserve, intending thereby to suggest that it has a general as well as a specific significance.   (xvii)

Brody comes close here to James Clifford's suggestion that ethnographies be read not as "objective" scientific documents but as multivalent allegories.[9] Brody's fictionalized field-notes also suggest that his concern as an ethnographer extends beyond the written presentation of audio-visual material to the palpable construction of historical narrative. Within the framework of this

narrative, Brody continually shifts modes: the realistic docudrama, the homiletic parable, the ironic confession, and so on. As a result of these shifts, and of the interplay of voices in the narrative, Brody attempts to achieve a polyphonic ethnography in which no single voice, point of view, or cultural stance is privileged over the others. The flexible design of *Maps and Dreams* also indicates Brody's concern to break down the traditional dichotomies of ethnographic discourse by "laying bare" the artifices of narrative presentation. Conscious of his compromising position as a white ethnographer "intruding" into a non-white culture, Brody wishes to avoid the condescending gesture of delivering a nostalgic paean to an "oral" culture which finds itself diminishing in the face of an ever-expanding "literate" one.[10] Instead, he demonstrates the relativity of modes of cultural production in different societies. The implications are clear: speech and writing are relative concepts the nature and functions of which should be considered in international, multicultural contexts rather than within the necessarily limited framework of a single nation or culture.[11]

Chatwin is no less aware than Brody of the cultural biases and uneven power relations that underlie a supposedly "neutral" scientific approach to ethnography. Like *Maps and Dreams*, *The Songlines* is a polyphonic narrative. Chatwin's cast is wider and more cosmopolitan than Brody's, but his quirky blend of the popular travelogue and the pseudo-philosophical treatise has a similarly relativising effect to that of the contrapuntal structure of Brody's text. Chatwin's most striking narrative device is his interpolation into the text of a clutch of travel notes liberally sprinkled with anecdotes, conjectures, and epigrammatic shafts of wisdom. The effect is mimetic: Chatwin's thesis that migratory instincts are not particular to nomadic societies, but are common to the human species, gains support from the "migratory instincts" of his own narrative.[12] Chatwin's notes thus effectively sketch a songline of his own, a concatenation of semi-connected voices charting the uneven territory of the text. Significantly, the majority of these notes is clustered together in the central part of the text. Apart from the obvious connection here between his physical and his philosophical quests (a variant of the journey-into-the-interior paradigm), Chatwin also decentres his text: first, by interrupting the flow of

the narrative; and second, by dispersing the ethnological, philosophical, and sociohistorical content of the dissertation.

The flexible format of *Maps and Dreams* and *The Songlines* thus suggests that both writers are aware of the thin dividing-line between the ethnography as document and the ethnography as fiction. Brody and Chatwin choose the map as the principal spatial paradigm informing their respective works, but they simulate alternative spatial patterns which break down the traditional Western conception of the map as a linear graphic representation to assert an Aboriginal conception of the map as a network of interconnected voices. Neither project is entirely successful. It is difficult at times to tell whether Brody and Chatwin are speaking *with* the "other" or *for* the "other": the "intersubjectivity" of Brody's text and the "polyphony" of Chatwin's remain rhetorical strategies by Western writers to bridge the gap between themselves and cultures the points of view of which continue to be interpreted by outsiders rather than being allowed to represent themselves.[13] The self-conscious design of either text indicates, however, that both writers are well aware of the contradictions inherent in ethnographic narrative. As a professional ethnographer, Brody seeks to ally himself with a culture that remains irrevocably "other"; as a travel writer, Chatwin parodies, but also reinstates, the "exoticism" of a foreign culture whose social customs and philosophical outlook are very different from his own, but whose differences are ironically reabsorbed within the same "master theory" (of nomadism) that promotes and celebrates them. For Brody, the ostensibly non-fictional text relinquishes its claims to neutrality without ever really coming to terms with its own biases; for Chatwin, the ostensibly fictional text parades its own biases but ultimately fails to distinguish its writer's desire for self-parody from his impulse towards self-congratulation. The shortcomings of Brody and Chatwin's texts, then, are considerable; but they should not be allowed to override the genuine concern of both writers for cross-cultural ethnographies which, in highlighting the close relation in different cultures between cultural perception and spatial representation, go some way towards accounting for the alternative ways in which cultures dream and map space.

NOTES

1 The phrase is Geertz's: like Geertz, Brody and Chatwin are both concerned to undermine the misconceived authority of traditional ethnography. They are influenced in this deconstructive process by Foucault, whose seminal essay "What is an Author?" calls into question the privileged status of the individual author and draws attention instead to the *variety* of discursive practices which constitute the "author-function" of any given text.

2 For essays which chart this shift, see those in Clifford and Marcus. Essays which deal more specifically with ethnography as narrative include those by Bruner and Webster.

3 For an account of cultural biases in the history of cartography, see Tuan (esp. the chapter "Ethnocentrism, Symmetry, and Space"). On the political ramifications of mapping, see also Harley.

4 See Clifford's introduction to the essays in Clifford and Marcus for a further discussion of "discursive partiality" in ethnographic texts.

5 My argument here is indirectly related to Derrida's (e.g., in the opening section of *On Grammatology*). The revisionist ethnography of Brody and the pseudo-ethnographic fiction of Chatwin both appear to draw on Derrida's discussion of the relation between ethnology and (Western) logocentrism: see his essay "Structure, Sign and Play" in *Writing and Difference*.

6 For a discussion of the growing importance of the map as a capital good (from early modern European times onwards), see Mukerji.

7 Arkady with a "k," not a "c." Arkady's celebratory exposition of the ancestral beliefs of the Aboriginals is ironic in light of the current, ravaged state of their culture. It is doubly ironic in light of the discrepancy between romantic European images of Australia as a land of Arcadian innocence and the harsh realities of convict and free settler life. Historical encounters between the early European settlers and the Aboriginals merely serve to confirm the discrepancy. For a fuller account of the tensions generated by the confrontation between European conceptual vocabulary and a land which persistently challenged or even contradicted that vocabulary, see Gibson.

8 The argument is expanded in Goody, and discussed in a relevant literary context by Brydon.

9 See Clifford's essay "On Ethnographic Allegory," in Clifford and Marcus.

10 The problem of legitimacy in the (white) representation of (non-white) Native cultures is discussed at length in the essays in Clifford and Marcus; also in a useful essay by Mandel, which calls into question four foundational myths underlying the representation of native cultures in Canadian "ethnographic fiction," namely, the myth of the primitive, the myth of origins or ancestors, the myth of the frontier in which the Native is identified with landscape, and the myth of marginality "that seeks the identification of writer, Native, and place" (36). Brody and Chatwin are both well aware of the pitfalls involved in representing Native cultures from an outsider's point of view, although it might be argued that the attempt in their respective texts to avoid a dichotomous relation between (observing) "self" and (observed) "other" leads them to subscribe to a suspect "myth of marginality" which ironically reinscribes their own authority. See my discussion of this issue above.

11 See Goody, also Ong. The latter's apparent faith in the superior skills of
    literate cultures — improved upon rather than compromised by the tech-
    nological advancements of the Electronic Age — unfortunately hinders his
    appreciation of the different kinds of skills, and different ways of looking
    at the world, provided by cultures which retain an oral basis. Despite the
    perceptiveness of an analysis which stresses the relativity of oral/literate
    modes in contemporary "developed" and "developing" societies, Ong seems
    to fall victim to his inability, or reluctance, to connect the idealistic rhetoric
    of the Global Village with the hegemonic practice of the multinationals,
    for whom the project of "world literacy" admirably serves their own eco-
    nomic interests.

12 Chatwin's thesis is derived in part from Deleuze and Guattari's treatise on
    "nomadology"; it is subsequently channelled through the collaborative
    anthropology of Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe, which uses the theories of
    Deleuze and Guattari to promote a "nomadic" perception of the land
    among Aboriginal societies which militates against set (Western) patterns
    of territorial enclosure. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Muecke defines
    nomadology as "an aesthetic/political stance [which] is constantly in flight
    from ideas or practices associated with the singular, the original, the uni-
    form, the central authority, the hierarchy, without for all that ascribing
    to any form of anarchy" (15). The definition serves equally well for Chat-
    win, whose work continually undermines its own authority, and to a lesser
    extent for Brody, who shares Chatwin's concern to break the self/other
    dichotomy of traditional Western ethnography.

13 See Geertz's essay "From the Native's Point of View" (in Basso and Selby,
    eds.) for a characteristically sarcastic account of the difficulties involved in
    interpreting anthropological information, and in ascertaining whose "point
    of view" is being represented in the process. For a critique of Geertz's inter-
    pretive anthropology, and for what he sees as a more "dialogic" approach to
    the relationship between (white) anthropologist and (native) informant,
    see the opening section of Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture*. Brody
    and Chatwin's questioning of the ethnocentric attitudes underlying white
    incursions into native cultures owes much to the debate (reopened by
    Geertz and continued by Clifford) in Malinowski's *Diary* which explodes
    the "myth of the chameleon field-worker, perfectly self-tuned to his exotic
    surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience, and cosmopoli-
    tanism" (Basso and Selby 222). It is worth noting, however, that Brody
    and Chatwin's attempts "to follow a route selected by the people" (Brody
    xvi) do not dissuade the former from providing his *own*, dominant exegesis
    of native culture, or the latter from relying on *white*, rather than native,
    "informants." (It could be argued in Chatwin's defence that he is a travel
    writer, not an anthropologist, but as I have tried to suggest in this paper,
    the crucial issue is not the one of what qualifies as "correct" anthropological
    practice but the broader one of what constitutes the "legitimate" represen-
    tation of a "dominated" culture by a "dominating" one.) The self-critiques
    incorporated into Brody and Chatwin's ethnographic narratives are salu-
    tary, but the critical self-consciousness of either writer, and the variety of
    points of view they present in their respective texts do not alter the fact
    that the weight of anthropological interpretation is carried in both cases
    by a representative (or representatives) of Western culture.

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