



## When the sheep had wings

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# When the sheep had wings<sup>1</sup>

PAUL MAGEE

## You can see it on the TV

Watching MTV by cable in Ushuaia, the capital of Argentine Tierra del Fuego, is slightly surreal. Watching a Swiss surrealist put an egg on top of the television set is even more so. ‘Christian,’ I asked, ‘What the bloody hell are you doing?’ No answer. He was watching the egg, waiting for it to hatch. ‘*Aquí,*’ he finally said, in broken Spanish, ‘*todo es posible!*’—everything is possible here! Christian was a theatre director from Basle. Back home he had written and performed a play about Tierra del Fuego in the time of Indians and Angels. He translated the title as *Cuando las Ovejas Tenian Alas*—When the Sheep had Wings. Christian was currently researching the place he had already written about, a time-travelling methodology derived, I suspect, from the idiosyncrasies of that same play. Its author, however, was adamant that such miracles were grounded in the magic at the end of the world itself: ‘*Aquí,*’ he repeated, ‘*todo es posible!*’

A weekful of Swiss Tierra del Fuego was enough. ‘I can’t understand why a person would want to act like such a fuckwit! [*pendejo!*]’ Horacio exclaimed. He ran the hostel where Christian and I were both staying, and had little patience for fly-by foreigners who wanted Tierra del Fuego to be as weird in person as it was in name.

One night Horacio, a few friends and I, went to El Disco Dali, a tacky provincial night-club for passing tourists. We could not afford the admission, so we bought some beer and went to the beach instead. We lit a fire, stared across the Beagle Channel at Chile, and chatted about foreign lands, travel and being elsewhere. Horacio was planning a trip to the US. He wanted to work that place out, he said, to see for himself ‘*¿cómo es la película?*’—literally, ‘how is the film?’—which is to say, to investigate the ridiculous image those *Yanquis* cast across the continental divide. So we warmed ourselves on ancient technology, and talked about images of elsewhere, there in the place Lucas Bridges (one of the island’s first White colonists) termed the ‘Uttermost Part of the Earth’.<sup>2</sup> To a passing ship, we must have looked like Magellan’s Indians, or Darwin’s ‘most abject and miserable creatures’, we refugees from the overpriced Disco Dali, postcard primitives, crudely visible in the distant firelight.<sup>3</sup>

## Would Michel Foucault go to Tierra del Fuego just for the T-shirt?

Thinking about why the Swiss surrealist seemed such a *pendejo*, I realise that he was the only traveller I met in all of Tierra del Fuego who actually took himself seriously. No one else had any other than a purely ironic reason to be in Ushuaia.

All of the foreigners I interviewed said that they were there, quite literally, albeit as a joke, ‘just to say I’ve been here.’ What other reason could there be for tourists to travel thousands of miles through unpeopled pampas, Patagonian deserts and treeless pastures to end up at a town with little to recommend it beyond its designation as El Fin del Mundo—The End of the World? How could a visitor pretend to have any other than an ironic relationship to the mythical dimensions of their travels in that ancient land of upside-down Antipodeans, the site for five centuries of fantastic European projections, the contemporary world capital of ozone-blind sheep?

Christian was the only traveller who treated the weirdness of elsewhere as actually adequate to its object, and for that reason he was there to experience it, carrying out that discourse to the letter. By giving Fuegian sheep wings, and according their televisions procreative powers, he truly seemed to articulate what James Clifford has termed the ‘rhetoric of presence’: to believe that he was actually in Tierra del Fuego, just because he was actually in Tierra del Fuego.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that this Swiss Surrealist’s naïve belief in his own rhetoric made him such a black sheep among the other travellers, is rather unsettling for one searching for the discursive groundings of the neo-imperialist travel project as it courses through South America. What does it mean if no one, except a fool, actually believes in the travels they enact?

My project—an *ethnohistory of the White colonial subject in his and her travels through Tierra del Fuego*—necessitates taking seriously whatever it is that drives and has driven such movements. The ethical imperative to analyse and thus contest the motivations behind the initial colonisation of Tierra del Fuego is obvious. The genocidal process, whereby the Fuegians’ ancestral lands were stolen to make way for sheep flown in from elsewhere, must not be repeated. For all the obvious difference between that hundred year old atrocity and the seemingly innocuous and frivolous tourism of the present, there is an equal imperative here to comprehend and contest what is not only one of the largest industries in the world, but also fast becoming one of the economic mainstays of contemporary Chilean and Argentine Tierra del Fuego. With all the force of persuasion at their disposal, international and local neo-liberal elites are now promoting the tourist industry as one of the great ‘hopes’ in the ‘restructuring’ and ‘rationalising’ of these and other economies in the region. The force of these hopes should not be ignored. Through the inequitable flows of international capital that it channels, the highly gendered division of labour it either solidifies or sets in place, as much as the internal political repression that it is used to justify, the international tourist industry has become ‘one of the principal pillars of contemporary world power’.<sup>5</sup>

Tierra del Fuego is on the absolute periphery of such global concerns, and may well seem a trivial object for critical concern too. Yet far from frivolous, my project is conceived in the hope that the ideology of a movement that is itself so all-encompassing can be usefully analysed and critiqued from a peripheral point at which certain otherwise unnoticed characteristics come into focus—like the fact that travellers need have no faith in what they are doing to do it anyway.

The joke played out in Tierra del Fuego makes havoc of the standard paradigms for the study of travel cultures, which focus overwhelmingly on the

faith component of these rituals of participatory observation and self-discovery. Victor Turner's theorisation of pilgrimage, for instance, has been invoked in various ways to comprehend the constitution of the sacred within contemporary travel landscapes.<sup>6</sup> Julie Marcus has taken from Turner to characterise New Ager's attempts to find, in their travels to Ayers Rock, a contemporary site for the sacred through ecstatic 'union' with Aboriginal cultures at the 'heart' of the Australian nation.<sup>7</sup> Yet Marcus' borrowing is hardly reverential. The spin she gives to Turner's vocabulary, in analogising it to the delusions of New Age imperialism, only underlines the obvious poststructuralist critique of his work. Few today would have much time for his 'spontaneous existential communitas', that unifying and liberating ejaculation of 'anti-structure' through which pilgrims find themselves and their truth.<sup>8</sup> A Foucauldian critique would see such 'resistances' as internal to power itself—the very point of Marcus' article.<sup>9</sup> The fact, however, that she aims her whole attack at this minority of easily ridiculed revivalist believers, begs the question as to how she would address the mass of other pilgrims who, far from seeking 'the sacred center of a rapidly developing settler cosmology', visit the Rock for no other reason than the simple secular fact that it is there.<sup>10</sup>

At first blush, Foucault's treatment of the history of sexuality as the self-inscribed truth of the subject would appear to have much more to offer the study of exotic travel than any theory of transcendent spontaneity. The pre-textualised practice of subject constitution in such travel representations could be likened to the self-discovery through discourse that for Foucault makes sex 'tell us our truth'.<sup>11</sup> Further, the 'erethism' that characterises this 'incitement to discourse', the will to power through knowledge, could be appropriated to theorise the extraordinary growth of contemporary travel and tourism.<sup>12</sup>

Yet for all the incitement to Foucault in the social sciences today, the attempt to track such travels down through discourse theory trips up on the very 'truth' it seeks to uproot.<sup>13</sup>

Foucault grounds his history of contemporary sexuality-as-truth in the Catholic confessional he sees as its predecessor.<sup>14</sup> This only underlines the cogency of religious analogy (for him genealogy) in attempting to analyse such modalities of discourse, a word with classical roots in movement as much as pre-modern connotations of sermonising.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, for all the differences, the fundamental tenet shared by both Turner-esque and Foucauldian paradigms can be discerned through the theological terms they respectively invoke: pilgrimage, confessional, self-discovery. Both presuppose that the being of the subject is predicated upon the search for and discovery of truth. This is particularly the case for Foucault. The truth seeking subject is integral to his Nietzschean insistence on the pre-eminent role of the will to knowledge in the constitution of power, indeed, in the constitution of the positive subject him or herself.<sup>16</sup>

But how can one use such theories to account for the fact that, in Tierra del Fuego, this sincere, fundamentally faithful, subject looks like such a *pendejo*? How can one analyse the nexus of power/knowledge in a place where there is no truth to be discovered; indeed, where the search for and discovery of truth is the very sign of stupidity? Just as there is nothing in the ecstatic spontaneity of the pilgrim's communitas, nor is there anything in the faith-finding 'truth effect'

of confessional discourse, to explain the dead letter disbelief that impels someone to go The End of the World 'just to say I've been there'.

Why else would you go to the end of the world? A Swiss woman I spoke to in Chilean Puerto Natales was going there, she boasted, 'just to buy the T-shirt that says I've been there.' Her friend, meanwhile, planned to bypass Ushuaia all together, and fly to Puerto Williams, the Chilean naval installation on the other side of the Beagle Channel. This place, as the *Travel Survival Kit* will tell you, is truly the southernmost inhabited place in the world, despite Ushuaia's claim to be El Fin del Mundo.<sup>17</sup> Even though there is nothing to do there, you may as well go anyway: 'if you've come as far as Tierra del Fuego, you can hardly turn back now'.<sup>18</sup> The fact that such an empty, even unbelievable, formality is so compelling as to be enshrined in the 'traveller's bible' points to the impossibility of explaining such a culture in terms of the discursive truth through which its believing subjects constitute themselves as subjects.<sup>19</sup> Nor can such an ironic culture, so geared toward *going through the motions*, simply be passed off as a bad joke—unless one accepts that a bad joke has the power to make Tierra del Fuego one of the pre-eminent tourist destinations of South America. As a woman in the Punta Arenas Tourist Bureau told me, Tierra del Fuego is now '*de moda* [in fashion]'. Not that she, or any of the other locals I spoke to, seemed to have any faith in the future of the fickle industry currently advertised as their economic salvation. Indeed, they seemed as sceptical about the whole exercise as the travellers. Yet surely one must have faith in one's fashion? Not to mention one's self-fashioning? And surely the pilgrim traveller needs to find more than simply a stupid T-shirt relic in the process?

### **In Patagonia: the rhetoric of absence**

To guide us through these questions I want to turn to Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, one of my favourite books as a child. It was this travelogue which inspired me, now grown-up and in half-hearted imitation, to head to Tierra del Fuego. Hitchhiking down through Patagonia, Chatwin takes a lift with a truck driver, whose dashboard is adorned with 'a statuette of the Virgin of Luján, a St Christopher and a plastic penguin that nodded with the corrugations of the road'.<sup>20</sup> Thus the traveller, in motion, nods at the patron saints of travel, observing at a distance the divinity they carry for his Argentine driver.

Chatwin is on the trail of his great Uncle Charley, a man who had lived as a colonist in turn-of-the-century Punta Arenas. Charley had once sent Chatwin's grandmother a piece of 'dinosaur' skin, which he discovered in the Cueva del Milodón [Cave of the Milodon], just north of Puerto Natales. To young Bruce, growing up in the late 1940s, this colonial souvenir seemed to symbolise all the adventure and romance of an exotic place in a bygone era. Now in the 1970s, this token of Chatwin's childhood, irrevocably lost, becomes the pathetic beacon (a mock version of Jules Verne's *Lighthouse at the End of the World*) inspiring him to travel back through Fuegian texts and landscapes in search of the relics of a past he can no longer own.

So bemused by the beliefs of others, Chatwin would probably have appreciated the irony of the canonical status his book now has among travellers in

Patagonia, for whom *In Patagonia* seems as much of a bible as any guidebook. Yet anyone who searches for a fundamentally believable image of Tierra del Fuego will find this collection of 97 travel fragments decidedly lacking in guidance.<sup>21</sup> Chatwin's authorial voice, far from providing any 'I-witness' rock of Petrine presence, speaks straight from the dead heart of this so sceptical book.<sup>22</sup> The only meaning articulated, if at all, in this assemblage of plastic penguins and displaced elsewheres, is the pointlessness of meaning itself.

Nor does the text's pseudo-conclusion—as Chatwin at last reaches the mythic Cueva del Milodon—offer any resolution. Here the traveller, dazed and momentarily questioning his sanity, finds amid the dirt and darkness some strands of what he decides to take for Milodon hairs, but which are obviously little more than symbols for the circuit of discursive automatism and half-disowned desire impelling the text on to nowhere. So he accomplishes 'the object of this ridiculous journey', arriving at the Cueva, to arrive at nothing.<sup>23</sup> Chatwin hardly finds his truth in Patagonia.

Nor is there any truth here for Chatwin's readers, for whom the futility of such searching is mimed through the experience of reading itself. Like its author, Chatwin's book seems constantly on the verge of falling apart. Anecdotal fragments and chapter divisions join, jar and enjamb different stories and experiences. The reader's movement through narrative, connotation and association is simultaneously articulated and disarticulated to the point that this movement itself becomes an impossible search for the truth of the text, its ever disappearing author, and perhaps even its reader. In this sense, to follow Chatwin through his text of travels is to end up in the Cueva too, which becomes a metaphor for the ceaseless circulation of mimesis and desire within this travelling, searching, reading.

Reading this elusive prose while travelling in Tierra del Fuego alerted me to the similarities and minor key echoes I encountered of its author's self-stylised 'insane restlessness'.<sup>24</sup> In Puerto Natales I met a British hippie, who similarly articulated and failed to answer—though only a fool would try to answer it—the rhetorical question which provides the title for one of Chatwin's essay collections, and pervades his entire empty body of writing: *What am I Doing Here* [sic: no question mark].<sup>25</sup> The stop-over flight from New Zealand had dropped Richard some 600 kilometers north of Ushuaia. Having very little money, he had not planned to travel in Argentina, which was then expensive. Furthermore, Ushuaia was at least two days away, through multiple bus connections or an even more difficult hitch, and everyone said there was not actually anything there, apart from the End of the World. 'Shit!', this Richard said to me, complaining about the stupidity of a trip he eventually did undertake: 'I just know that if I don't go, now that I'm this close, I'll regret it.'

An even emptier echo of Chatwin's meaningless meandering, this tale of unliterary annoyance reveals the everyday underside of that same repetitive joke: *I'm here just to say I've been here.*

### Bad nomadology

*What was I doing there?*—taking down tales like this, looking for a thesis on

Fuegian travel discourse, finding nothing? Was I thus, in my travels, realising the meaninglessness of motion woven through Chatwin's text, that endlessly shifting surface of pure form and irony? Should I treat *In Patagonia* as one of Barthes' 'scribble' texts?, an anti-theological scripture, through which the critic, 'by refusing to assign a "secret", an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law'.<sup>26</sup> And could I, as traveller-critic, well-read on Chatwin, and now travelling back through the 'world as text' of Tierra del Fuego, be born again as the scriptor of his ironic and meaningless songlines?

To the extent that Chatwin will admit of a God, one finds Him here, in observing the 'refusal of meaning' that is movement itself. Long before arriving at the Cueva, Chatwin encounters a missionary of the Baha'i faith, and the following dialogue ensues:

'Which religion have you?' Ali asked. 'Christian?'

'I haven't got any special religion this morning. My God is the God of Walkers. If you walk hard enough, you probably don't need any other God.'<sup>27</sup>

This liberating, albeit laconic, hymn to being-in-motion later gives associative power to the pathos of Chatwin's description of the genocide. From the moment the White settlers first arrived in force in the 1880s, the nomadic Fuegians began to die. They appear literally fixed to the stake by 'God and his hypostases' as Chatwin describes them, herded in and butchered by land-grabbing capitalists, imprisoned by God-fearing priests, and reduced to Thomas Bridges' famous *Yámana-English Dictionary*, the monumental text which contains their last remains in language as if it were a tomb.

Now on the porch of the Bridges' *estancia* in Tierra del Fuego, Chatwin reads the Dictionary and quotes approvingly the definition of the word *wejna*, which means, among other things, ' "to swing, move or travel"—or simply "to exist or be" '<sup>28</sup> Through ceaselessly articulating such associations, Chatwin begins to appear a nomad himself, restlessly moving through his own text, requiring the reader to find him, by becoming him, by trying to track him down. As Eric Michaels has written of another of Chatwin's 'para-ethnographies', through the multiple ellipses, evasive analogies and other such refusals to set meaning, he literally becomes 'Other' to his reader, going native, slipping off the page, never falling into the trap of being himself.<sup>29</sup> In thus transcending the truth of his own traces Chatwin could be seen as the patron saint of anti-theological activity.

### Going through the motions

What the disciple of such scriptures too easily forgets is that, for all of Chatwin's rhetoric of absence, he does effectively travel, seek and find, *as if* he really did believe in the meaning of the motions he goes through at such self-distance. For Chatwin could be the patron saint of Peter Sloterdijk's *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, too.<sup>30</sup> Parodically titled after Kant, this work attempts to supplement the

theory of 'false consciousness', which comprehends lies, errors and ideology, to include cynicism, which Sloterdijk describes as 'enlightened false consciousness'.<sup>31</sup> He argues that the post 1960s *zeitgeist* is characterised by subjects who bear a 'schizoid' relationship to their activities and words. The 'falseness' of their discourse is already 'reflexively buffered' against critique by their recognition of its falsity.<sup>32</sup> In Slavoj Žižek's paraphrase of this work, and parody of the Marxist text through which he then reads it: 'They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'.<sup>33</sup> For Sloterdijk, as for Žižek, there is nothing 'truly revolutionary' at all about Chatwin's 'anti-theological'—i.e. 'reflexively buffered'—travels.

*The Critique of Cynical Reason* would have been a good guidebook to take to the Benetton retail outlet which I visited (just to say I've been there?) in Ushuaia. The cynical advertising campaigns through which this multi-national company lures people into playing out the politics of representation under their logo has won them a certain notoriety.<sup>34</sup> The irony of 'the United Colors of Benetton' is apparent the moment you turn to Benetton's postmodern politics of production, founded in anti-unionism and decentralised subcontracting. Thus they unite a factory of female piece-workers of various colours, each invisible to the other.<sup>35</sup> Benetton represent the fashion, again literally, in neo-liberal industry now being so heavily promoted to the populations of the 'backward' countries of South America. The company has large property holdings in Patagonia, as well as retail outlets in Punta Arenas, Ushuaia and Rio Gallegos. As with tourism, such neo-colonial relations do not necessarily elicit any faith in those who find themselves within them. Indeed, the publication which I purchased in their Ushuaian outlet, *COLORS: a Magazine about the Rest of the World*, makes no effort to advertise the company's production lines.<sup>36</sup> It concerns itself instead with laughing at those people who, in such a world, are still naïve enough to believe in anything.

One night Horacio, a friend Mónica and I, sat around her house, laughing our way through a few issues of *COLORS*. First we turned to *No. 9: Shopping*, which comes in the form of a mock catalogue of all the nasty and weird things money can buy: South African skin whitening creme (US\$5), Italian land mines, with photo of young Thai victim (US\$41), rubber cast models of feet, for mail-order foot fetishists (US\$74.95) etc.<sup>37</sup> The foot fetishists stand out here, amid the rather crude Barbara Krügerish consumerism critique, for their representation of the weird elsewhere that characterises the humour of this magazine. The fetishes of others are even more integral to the second issue we leafed through, *No.8: Religion*. In between critiquing and poking fun at the conservatism of the 'vast cultural industrial complex called the Catholic church', this issue focuses on the commodification of religion. The humour derives from the idea of others dumb enough to believe that a disenchanting modernity can be miraculously re-enchanting by the glitter of money.<sup>38</sup> An article entitled 'Instant God', for instance, opens with the ironic header, 'If gods want to be a part of our lives they are going to have to adjust to our schedule'. They will need to make use of more time-saving devices, like 'The Electronic Rosary Counter', which, its manufacturers claim, 'helps you pray' (US\$32.95).<sup>39</sup>

The staginess of the left/liberal stances which *COLORS* consistently assumes,



in the midst of such jokes, is grounded in the fact that the company is itself, like the Vatican, a ‘vast cultural industrial complex’. How else could these Italian magazines fly so far into the periphery as to turn up in Tierra del Fuego? Yet the irony of Benetton’s own vastness, far from constituting an omission in an otherwise critical magazine, openly pervades the whole enterprise. The difference between Benetton and the Church is that Benetton is quite open about the fact that it does not believe in its mission. The one actual advertisement for the company within *No. 9: Shopping* takes up the final two page spread and features nothing more than a blank roll of toilet paper, alongside the phrase ‘the United Colors of Benetton’. Coming at the end of this mock-catalogue of all the things that can be consumed and turned to money, this advertisement ironically reduces the magazine to the very code it critiques, alongside forest-devouring chopsticks, penis enlargers and Nestlé milk powder for babies.<sup>40</sup> Only an idiot, the logic unfolds, would believe that it is possible to work outside this stinking circuit of capital, consumption and exploitation.<sup>41</sup>

The ironic, ‘reflexively buffered’, manner in which Benetton represents its own obnoxiousness is matched by the toilet paper manner in which *COLORS* reduces its own discourse to rubbish. This is where postcolonial critics are made to wear their own desire to fix meaning. So Nimmy Akaiba of Phoenix, USA, found, after submitting the following (eagerly published) letter:

I quite like your magazine, however, I really, really hate your motto (*a magazine about the rest of the world*). It comes off as ethnocentric, tinged with some sort of imperialist perspective. Like ‘us’ the important ones, and ‘them’ the rest of the world. Exactly who is the ‘us’ and who the ‘them’? ...

Dear Nimmy: We thought it meant that wherever you read *COLORS*, it’s about somewhere else.<sup>42</sup>

### **A thesis about the rest of the world: capitalising upon the Other’s naïveté**

Rather than falling into the trap of trying to catch *COLORS* out seriously misrepresenting itself or others, it strikes me as much more important to attempt to unravel their offhand humour. The discursive strand uniting all these throwaway images of other people’s weirdness is the set of absolute beliefs they postulate not for the self, but rather for the Other. More than anything else, reading *COLORS* that night in Ushuaia, we laughed at ‘them’, the people who believe religiously in the commerce and the products that we would otherwise enact or consume so indifferently. Rubber cast feet and electronic rosary counters, are only amusing the moment one imagines ‘them’, those naïve people who live elsewhere to ‘us’, and who place faith in such things. Our own ambivalence and self-distance thus enabled us to laugh at the picture of a Coke bottle, full of flowers and lovingly placed on a peasant shrine to a Saint who died of thirst. It was uncanny for all of us to realise, on reading the caption, that the picture was actually taken in Argentina. Having the naïveté of the rest of the world reduced to your own living room at that world’s end gives you an awkward inkling of the need the disenchanting have for ‘somewhere else’ to laugh about. Indeed, of the various critiques of Sloterdijk’s work, none seem to

have noticed the way the subjects he addresses offset their cynicism with ceaseless delineations of the naïveté of others.<sup>43</sup>

This is equally apparent reading *In Patagonia*. The way such naïve Scriptures are repeatedly called in to supplement Chatwin's crisis of faith causes me to question the sincerity of his disbelief. If *In Patagonia* is such a perfectly poststructuralist refusal of meaning, why does it derive so much of its movement from the beliefs of others? The long line of deluded others among whom Chatwin travels leaves him at the book's end, still laughing laconically at the naïve Other. This time it is the mad poet of Punta Arenas, who is left reciting Lorca to his pet rocks as Chatwin's boat leaves for England.<sup>44</sup> Why is it so amusing for this fundamentally skeptical and meaningless man to find faith in the fantasies of others? Take Anselmo, 'the Pianist' of Welsh Patagonia, who is possessed of 'the authentic blinkered passion of the exile'.<sup>45</sup> As the naïve accompanist to Chatwin's text, Anselmo plays his part to the letter:

The playing was remarkable. I could not imagine a finer Pathétique further South. When he finished he said: 'Now I play Chopin. Yes?' and he replaced the bust of Beethoven with one of Chopin. 'Do you prefer waltzes or mazurkas?'<sup>46</sup>

Chatwin's End of the World is populated with such displaced characters, whose distance and difference causes them to misrecognise the magnitude and the meaning of Europe and its things. Without their (rhetoric of) presence, his text would not only be dead, but lifeless.

As much as Chatwin's meaninglessness speaks to me and my travel experiences, so too does this ironic, self-superior humour. I am reminded of myself, lazing around the hostel in Ushuaia, getting drunk with various other travellers and swapping anecdotal accounts of indigenous naïveté. Carlos, who was now realising his childhood dream to visit Tierra del Fuego, told us about an Indian who wanted to know whether he had hitchhiked to Bolivia from Spain, or taken a bus the whole way. Marcelino, an alcoholic travel writer from Madrid, author of the *Rough Guide*, began to describe an experience of his in Peru; how during a ceremony of some sort or other, he had seen the Indians decorate their cars to look like altars. They laid out offerings on the bonnets and even seemed to be praying. I joined in at this point with a Fuegian anecdote, the story of my visit to the Salesian mission near Rio Grande. The priest I had wished to interview about the mission's history was too busy to see me, so I left without learning anything. As I walked through the car park I caught sight of him, in full ceremonial dress, blessing the cars of weary travelers! The mysteries of automobile benediction had us all laughing and sparked off more tales of backwardness and naïveté from whatever other travelling elsewhere people could remember.

### **Method: of garbology**

*What am I doing here?* It would be dishonest not to add that my field work was itself a bit of a joke. That, at least, was what I told people in these hotels, in between other jokes, parties, hangovers and occasional undirected and unrelated reading in provincial libraries. Why not spend a few months overseas at The End of the World, ha ha ha, to party around and get paid for it? I was watching

surrealists watch eggs on top of Fuegian television sets! I was doing research on Benetton advertisements, giving reader-response surveys to ozone blind sheep! I was writing an ethnography of sacred shopping and liminal experience at the Ushuaian Surty Sur supermarket, focusing on the Dantesque banner adorning its threshold: ‘*El Placer de Comprar!*’ The Pleasure of Shopping!

I remember occasionally meeting people who, on hearing such rubbish, would look at me quizzically, not playing along, but rather *holding me to my words*, treating me as if I really meant what I was saying. The discomfort that *that* entailed was uncanny, for it forced me to wear the fact that on some level I did mean what I was saying. Such an uncanny feeling only reinforces my resolve to explore precisely this realm of anecdotal, throwaway rubbish. Indeed, the fact that I am throwing myself at these awful travel anecdotes, the throw-away end of anthropology to be sure, suggests to me the seriousness of my endeavour. Things are thrown away with reason. Of the rigidly positivist discipline of economics, Donald McClosky writes that it is in the jokes which economists tell while getting drunk after conferences, that one can detect a certain crisis of faith in the methodological postulates to which they perforce subscribe.<sup>47</sup> My intoxication with the trash of anthropology seems set, however, to uncover a certain displaced faith behind the empty subject of my own undisciplined movements.

The shores of the Beagle Channel, where archaic middens are found alongside rusty beer cans, offer a perfect place for investigating exactly those bad jokes and stupid anecdotes which a rigorously academic method would leave in its wake. To prefigure this technique, I want to steal a gem from an overblown passage in Lévi-Strauss’ famous tourist-hating *Tristes Tropiques*.<sup>48</sup> In attacking the vulgarity of modern beach culture, the anthropologist laments for the solitudinous sublimity he can now only find in peopleless mountains and alpine heights. Yet while declaiming against the ‘villas, hotels and casinos’ that now clutter our coasts, Lévi-Strauss characterises, albeit only to denigrate it, the very terrain to which I wish to descend: ‘Beaches, where once the sea offered us the products of its age old tumult, an astonishing gallery of objects which showed that nature always belonged to the avant-grade, are now trodden by hordes of people and serve only for the arrangement and display of nondescript rubbish’.<sup>49</sup> Such modernisation is now apparent along the increasingly disenchanting shores of the Beagle Channel too. Yet these same shores make Lévi-Strauss’ metaphor seem curiously upside-down. For beached rubbish has its own random aesthetic of ‘arrangement and display’, and its own surreal appearance, as anyone knows who stumbles upon a discarded Coke can—*Coca Cola, la bebida de fantasia, hecha en Chile*—outside of Puerto Williams, along the mountain-edged coast once inhabited by the world’s ‘most primitive inhabitants’. Forget the ‘age old’ rocks and sentimental sea shells. The notion of the beach as an instantaneous ‘avant-garde’ gallery applies with far greater cogency to the random pop-art deployment of ‘non-descript rubbish’ like ‘the drink of fantasy, made in Chile’.<sup>50</sup>

This is to propose an ironic and even self-defeating notion of *salvage ethnography*, a science that works by scavenging through the rubbish which does not usually make it back home in one’s cultural baggage.<sup>51</sup> Take the following throw-away line from the Australian anthropologist Sir Baldwin Spencer, the archetypal salvage ethnographer, author of *Wanderings in Wild Australia*.<sup>52</sup>

Spencer travelled to Tierra del Fuego in 1928, to search for the ancient origins of European Man, only to catch, in the corner of his eye, the primitive constitution of the civilised commodity. Writing to his English friend R. R. Marrett from Punta Arenas, where he is waiting for his ship to leave, Spencer describes his haphazard digs at the archaic Tehuelche middens which line the shore.<sup>53</sup> The ethnographer fossicks among these primitive Patagonian kitchens, travelling back in anthropological time, ‘while the steamer’, travelling in the opposite direction, ‘was loading frozen mutton which you probably buy and appreciate under the designation of “Best Canterbury”’.<sup>54</sup> Thus the salvage ethnographer witnesses the nature and origins of Europe at the End of the World.

Patterns of ‘arrangement and display’ also structure the trashy travel anecdotes which I related above. Many of these throw-away tales seem to rely, for their display, upon a certain chronological framework: the developmentalist schema through which underdevelopment and primitiveness make sense, and allow one to laugh at the backward. This same temporal scaffolding is apparent in many of Chatwin’s incongruous juxtapositions. The photograph which accompanies his text, of a 1920s Dodge in contemporary Welsh Patagonia, derives its anecdotal significance from the way it situates the European past in the Patagonian present. Such trashy images may have a twentieth-century avant-garde appearance to them, yet they structure the weirdness and naïveté of the Other through one of the most powerful meta-narratives of nineteenth-century cultural science—racial recapitulationism. It requires all the ‘homogenous empty time’ of bad evolutionary science to place their ‘primitive’ present in our past.<sup>55</sup>

I shall write of garbage and the philosophy of history much more within the course of this project. For the moment, I want simply to recall the avant-garde tactics of one of the foremost philosophers of either phenomenon. In his *Passagen-Werk*, Walter Benjamin sought to write the history of the nineteenth century not as it was, but rather *as it had been forgotten*, by focusing on what he termed the ‘trash of history’.<sup>56</sup> In my Fuegian work, I want to write of precisely those throw-away moments which would otherwise slip from the critic’s fingers. I want to present the Tierra del Fuego travel project, *as it would be forgotten*, as trash.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The article you are reading is a slightly revised version of the first chapter of my book *From Here to Tierra del Fuego*. Copyright 2000 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Used with permission of the University of Illinois Press.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Lucas Bridges, *Uttermost Part of the Earth, Indians of Tierra del Fuego*, New York, Dover, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Milicent E. Selsam (ed.), Kingswood, The World’s Work Ltd, 1913, p 149.

<sup>4</sup> James Clifford, ‘On ethnographic allegory’, in *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, Experiments in Contemporary Anthropology*, James Clifford and George Marcus (eds), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p 112.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p 41. These are some of the reasons why the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism characterised the international tourist industry, back in 1984, as ‘a violation of human rights’. Malcolm Crick, ‘Tourists, locals and anthropologists: quizzical reflections on “Otherness” in tourist encounters and tourist research’, *Australian Cultural History*, 10, 1991, pp 10.

- <sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, 'Pilgrimages as social processes', in *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974, pp 166–231. For one such application of Turner to travel, see Michael Pearson, 'Travellers, journeys, tourists, the meanings of journeys', *Australian Cultural History*, 10, 1991, pp 125–133.
- <sup>7</sup> Julie Marcus, 'The journey out to the centre. The cultural appropriation of Ayers Rock', in *Aboriginal Culture Today*, Anna Rutherford (ed.), Sydney, Dangaroo Press, 1988, pp 254–274.
- <sup>8</sup> Marcus, 'The journey out to the centre' p 268. See also Michael Taussing's comments on Turner in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man, A Study in Terror and Healing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p 442.
- <sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction*, London, Penguin, 1978, p 95: 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power'.
- <sup>10</sup> Marcus, 'The journey out to the centre', p 254.
- <sup>11</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p 69.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p 32.
- <sup>13</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Truth and power', in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Paul Rabinow (ed.), London, Penguin, 1984, p 75: 'The political question ... is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is the truth itself'.
- <sup>14</sup> See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p 59, on the genealogy of the confessional: 'Western man has become a confessing animal'.
- <sup>15</sup> The etymology passes from the Latin *discurrere*, 'to run about, to run away', through the French *discours* to the archaic English meaning of 'a treatise, a speech, a sermon'. *Chamber's Etymological English Dictionary*, A M MacDonald (ed.) Edinburgh, W. W. Chambers, 1961, p 173.
- <sup>16</sup> Foucault, 'Truth and power', especially pp 74–75.
- <sup>17</sup> Alan Samagalski, *Chile and Easter Island: A Travel Survival Kit*, Melbourne, Lonely Planet, 1987, p 235.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p 235.
- <sup>19</sup> The 'travellers' bible' is the ironic phrase used to describe the *Travel Survival Kit: Israel*, in *COLORS: A Magazine about the Rest of the World/Una Revista sobre el Resto del Mundo 8: Religion*, September, 1994, p 118.
- <sup>20</sup> Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, London, Picador, 1977, p 77. The Virgin of Luján is, as Chatwin explains elsewhere, the 'patron of travellers', p 50.
- <sup>21</sup> There has been a great boom in such travel literature in recent years. For a recent account of a Tierra del Fuegian trip, instancing, with less skill, many of the features I here note in Chatwin's work, see Pico Iyer, *Falling off the Map: Some Lonely Places of the World*, London, Johnathan Cape, 1993, pp 35–59. '[N]ot surprisingly' notes Iyer, Ushuaia 'looks like a mirror image of Isafjörður or the other eerily silent Icelandic fishing towns around the arctic circle', p 56. Bill Bryson's *Neither Here nor There*, London, Picador, 1996, derives much of its humour from his pointless 'just to say I've been there' trip to this northern town. Poles apart, both Ushuaia and Isafjörður reveal the potential self-absence of a travelling culture that is scarcely serious about what it might find at the end(s) of the world.
- <sup>22</sup> On the 'I-witness' see Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World, from Renaissance to Romanticism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, pp 51–87.
- <sup>23</sup> Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, p 182.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p 83.
- <sup>25</sup> Bruce Chatwin, *What am I Doing Here*, London, Johnathan Cape, 1989.
- <sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The death of the author', in *Image-Music-Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1977, p 147.
- <sup>27</sup> Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, p 35.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p 130. This is a fun game. Compare the entry I found in the Dictionary: '*anemakōna* a. Restless in disposition. Restless, not staying still, or at home, given to wandering about from idle curiosity or sinful pleasure. Wanton, dissatisfied, lewd'. Reverend Thomas Bridges, *Yamana-English Dictionary*, Ferdinand Hestermann and Martin Gusinde (eds), Buenos Aires, Zagier & Urruty Publicaciones, 1987, p 24.
- <sup>29</sup> Eric Michaels, 'Para-ethnography', in *Bad Aboriginal Art, Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*, St Leonards, Allen and Unwin, 1994, p 174. In this article Michaels reviews Chatwin's *The Songlines*.
- <sup>30</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p 3.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p 82; see also p 5.
- <sup>33</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'How did Marx invent the symptom', in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso, 1989, p 29, referring to Karl Marx, *Capital, a Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, London, Dent, 1974, p 47: 'They do not know that they are doing this, but they are doing it'.
- <sup>34</sup> For one of the better analyses of the controversy, which I regard as a debate without merit, see Henry A. Giroux, 'Consuming social change: the "United Colors of Benetton"', *Cultural Critique*, Winter, 1993–1994, pp 5–31. Benetton jumps at the chance to 'defend' its work in Ingrid Sischy, 'Advertising taboos, talking with Luciano Benetton and Oliviero Toscani', *Interview*, April, 1992, pp 68–71. Such 'defences' have their own staginess. Critique does not harm these people. The very controversy over their techniques is grist to the mill (or rather, wool to the sweater). See, if necessary, the book Benetton published to showcase (!) these critics: *What does Aids have to do with Sweaters? A Hundred Love-Hate Letters on Benetton Advertising*, Oliver Toscani (ed.), Rome, Arnoldo Mondadori, 1993.

- <sup>35</sup> For a short analysis, see Giroux's, 'Consuming social change', p 5–20.
- <sup>36</sup> *COLORS 9: Shopping*, November/December 1994.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp 69, 79, 31.
- <sup>38</sup> *COLORS 8: Religion*, p 116.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p 30.
- <sup>40</sup> *COLORS 9: Shopping*, pp 29, 65, 98.
- <sup>41</sup> The introduction to *COLORS 9: Shopping* smears the reader's face with a foretaste of Benettonian irony: 'You are what you buy. So we went shopping! ... We found out that everything (and everyone) has its price. Browse our catalogue. All goods are as described. Prices are reasonable. Your satisfaction is guaranteed', p 16.
- <sup>42</sup> *COLORS 8: Religion*, p 120.
- <sup>43</sup> See Andreas Huyssen's foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reasons*, pp x–xix, for a critical appraisal of the work. See also Zizek, 'How did Marx invent the symptom', pp 29–35.
- <sup>44</sup> Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, p 184.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p 28.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p 28.
- <sup>47</sup> Donald McClosky, *The Rhetoric of Economics*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp 30, 76.
- <sup>48</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, London, Penguin, 1976.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, pp 443–444.
- <sup>50</sup> Lévi-Strauss was, mind, no stranger to the pleasure of such incongruities. James Clifford describes him in war-time New York, in company with André Breton, Max Ernst and other exiled surrealists, as they search the city's various antique stores for *objet trouvé* 'survivals' of primitivist artwork. 'New York was perhaps Lévi-Strauss' only true "fieldwork"', Clifford comments, cattily casting a bit of 'the rhetoric of presence' back at the legendary pre-poststructuralist. *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1988, p 245. Lévi-Strauss himself wrote of a surreal experience he had at this time in the New York public library: 'under its neo-classical arches and between walls pannelled with old oak, I sat near an Indian in a feather headdress and a bearded buckskin jacket—who was taking notes with a Parker pen', p 237.
- <sup>51</sup> On 'salvage ethnography' see Clifford, 'On ethnographic allegory', p 112. For the *locus classicus* of the anthropological salvage mission, see Adolf Bastion's 'The Waning of primitive societies', in *Adolf Bastion and the Psychic Unity of Mankind: the Foundations of Anthropology in Nineteenth Century Germany*, Klaus Peter Koeppling (eds), St Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press, 1983, pp 215–219.
- <sup>52</sup> Sir Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, London, Macmillan, 1928.
- <sup>53</sup> Spencer cited by R R Marrett in Sir Baldwin Spencer, *Spencer's Last Journey, Being the Journal of an Expedition to Tierra del Fuego by the Late Sir Baldwin Spencer, With a Memoir*, R R Marrett and T K Penniman (eds), with contributions by Sir James Frazer and H Balfour, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1931, p 52.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p 52.
- <sup>55</sup> Walter Benjamin, attacking Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen* conception of history, in the 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in *Illuminations*, London, Fontana, 1973, p 252.
- <sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Konvolut N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]', *The Philosophical Forum*, 15 (1–2), Fall/Winter 1983–1984, p 5. I am indebted to Klaus Neumann, both for this reference, and an introduction to the ideas within: see his 'Finding an appropriate beginning for a history of the Tolai Colonial Past: or, starting from trash', *Canberra Anthropology*, 15(1), 1992, pp 1–19.