Where are the Stories? Long Distance Rail Travel in Australia

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Abstract

As implied by the title of this talk, long distance rail travel in Australia has generated few stories compared with other countries despite Australia having some of the longest rail journeys in the world. In addition, the title suggested that such rail travel is involved in creating and contesting certain kinds of problematic spacialities. The recent completion of the Alice Springs to Darwin section of the north-south transcontinental rail track has fuelled expectations about a renaissance of the long distance train journey. In this talk, accounts in Australian travel writing of long distance rail journeys are placed alongside associated representations in tourism promotion. Such a juxtapositioning not only suggests the multiple authenticities of disparate types of “travel” discourse, but also allows insights into the meanings of contemporary long distance rail travel in an era dominated by both the automobile, particularly four-wheel drive, and mass air-travel. It is suggested that the fantasy of long distance rail travel has a specific inflection in modern Australia, one that resonates within both the changing iconography of the “outback” landscape and the on-going search for a national identity. From Bruce Chatwin’s bitter critique, in his classic book The Song Lines, of survey work for the Alice Springs to Darwin rail, to Howard Jacobson’s brief but scathing account, in The Land of Oz, of travelling across the Nullarbor on the Indian-Pacific, long distance rail has seldom received a sympathetic treatment in Australian travel writing. This makes a sharp contrast with the nostalgia and hype so prominent, for example, in the texts of tourist promotion. However, it is argued that the extreme tension between these modalities of despair and celebration, offers crucial insights into recent struggles over Australian identity, particularly within the context of a post-Mabo and post-Bali milieu.