What exactly is that great Territory lifestyle?

Lecture for the Northern Territory Library
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I heard an interview with British philosopher Alain de Botton in about 2001 when his book *The Consolations of Philosophy* first came out and he said something like (to paraphrase) *I was motivated to write this book because I thought, what is the point of studying philosophy if it can’t be used to help you live your life* – what one reviewer called ‘trying to get things right’.1 Well, part of the joy of studying history for me, is to look at the past as a way of understanding where we are in the present.

We hold beliefs and assumptions that are linked to the idea of us as Territorians – in this paper I want to look at how we were and how we are and make some comments about why we craft the particular narratives we do about living in the Territory. I do not want to imply, by the way, that this is something confined to Territorians. All people construct a mythology about place that gives meaning to their lives and provides the justification for their life choices. Unpicking some of the substance of that mythology provides indicators to some of the fears and aspirations of the people who hold those views.

Even in a world where people are increasingly moving to cities, Australia has one of the most urbanised populations on earth.2 But how do we see ourselves? Apart from the outback mythologies, if Australians were to look at the identity in 2011 it would probably start at Sydney. In fact for many people living overseas, Sydney is metonymic for Australia – the Opera House – the Bridge. This urbanisation flows back to the regional. In Australia, the state capital city is the centre of government and where most people live. The capital cities write the script for the story of the state as a whole, notwithstanding the fact that many people outside the city space live very different lives and have different economies.

In the Territory though, it is possible to argue that the situation works is in reverse. While it may be assumed that Melbourne is iconic of Victoria or Sydney of New South Wales, it is probable that when people think of the Territory, it is in terms of the regions outside Darwin, rather than Darwin. In fact it is not unusual for Darwin to be thought of as a way to somewhere else, rather than a destination in its own right. Darwin used to be called Australia’s *Front Door*; a term used by Douglas Lockwood as the title of his history of the town.3 Such a philosophy is still current: the Welcome to Darwin website from Tourism Top End notes that Darwin: *is the perfect base from which to explore the natural treasures of World Heritage-listed Kakadu and Litchfield National Parks as well as the Tiwi Islands...*4
Tourism literature emphasises the modernity and informality of the city, but much of Darwin's mythic construction borrows its imagery from the rest of the Territory or wider historic events. While Darwin hotels mostly bear the branding of national or international chains, the backpacker lodges are: Air Raid; Banyan; Barramundi; Dingo Moon; Froghollow; Gecko; Melaleuca; The Joss House.5

Historically Darwin has probably always borrowed identity from greater Territory outback legends. In the South Australian period of administration of the Northern Territory, non-Aboriginal population figures were low. There were some scattered settlements along the Overland Telegraph Line and in Central Australia on the missions and in the pastoral industry, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century period, most of the Territory's immigrant population was concentrated in the Top End, boosted mainly by the arrival of Chinese miners who took up diggings in the Pine Creek/Yam Creek areas.

In 1898 Banjo Paterson published his wonderful description of Darwin (then called Palmerston) in the Bulletin. He described an exotic multicultural capital of the north that became a famous evocation of Darwin. But Paterson also noted the parochialism – where the residents' conversations focussed on cyclones, the head of the public service and news of a buffalo shooter from Oenpelli. Even by the end of the nineteenth century he pointed out that Darwin residents had a particular idea of themselves at odds with the reality. It's all talk and drink, said Paterson, They don't do anything else to speak of, yet they have a curious delusion that they are a very energetic and reckless set of people.6

For most of the twentieth century, at least before World War II, if Australians ever thought about the Northern Territory at all, and it was not a usual destination for either business or holiday, it was most likely as an idealised place of outback masculine-splendour and romance. For this we can thank Jeannie Gunn’s much reprinted We of the Never Never, first published in 1908, and such a staggering best seller that it became the defining metaphor for the Territory.7 So if people imagined the Northern Territory in this period at all, and this includes people living in Darwin, it was as a Top End pastoral station full of colourful characters, both black and white. Elsey Station, where We of the Never Never was set was a long way from Darwin, but it didn’t stop Darwin gaining some of the reflected mystique associated with outback life and a true Australia.

In particular there were all kinds of mythologies about Aborigines living in the Territory, some framed by the construction in We of the Never Never about Aboriginal personalities, characteristics, customs and not usually flattering. Other people believed there was a danger that Aboriginal people might die out altogether. That said, it is safe to say that not many people knew much about this region. In the pre-war period, for example, geographers asked if it was even physically possible for white people to live in the tropics without suffering moral, mental or physical decay.8
Like many mythologies, both of these could prove a justification for future actions or policies. In the first case believing Aboriginal people were not going to be around for long provided a justification for moving onto Aboriginal land without having to sign a treaty or make any kind of financial reparation. Alternatively, this belief could be used to argue the case for increased intervention into Aboriginal peoples’ lives – to set up ration depots or mission stations. Similarly, if you believe that white people could not physically cope with living in the tropics, it becomes a good reason for breaking with Commonwealth policy and arguing for the need to bring in indentured Chinese or Pacific Islander labour to do all the hard work.

We don’t have good hard data about Aboriginal populations in the Territory, but evidence suggests that Aboriginal people comprised the majority of the civilian population until at least around about the early 1950s. A census taken by the Northern Territory Administration in 1934, which counted people against place, arrived at a figure of about 18,000 people living remotely, employed, in camps or just around settlements. This was at a time when the Australian, European and Chinese population was about 5,000. In other words, the non-Aboriginal population was only about 20% of the total. In the nineteenth century there were many more Chinese than Europeans, but the new Commonwealth policy of restricting Asian immigration had slowed this down almost to a standstill. If you want to talk about Europeans only, the percentage would have probably been less than 15% of the population. So while commentators in the pre-war period talked about the multicultural population of the Northern Territory, they were actually talking about that small minority population, which administered most of the civil, judicial and legislative framework that governed everyone else. In the pre-war period, the Territory's population was mostly monoculture, and it was Aboriginal.

But while most of the Territory's population was Aboriginal it's easy to forget just how British the settled part of Australia was over all, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, and organised civic life in the Territory was no exception. Matthew Steven’s recent history, Contact Zones, tells fascinating stories of Darwin organised cricket matches, tennis, swimming carnivals, race days and football. ‘Sport’ he wrote, was ‘as an essential agency in building a ‘British community’’. The majority of soldiers who enlisted for the First World War from the Territory were British or Australian born.

Darwin’s Chinese population was most highly visible in Cavenagh Street Chinatown where by the mid-1920s Chinese-run businesses had become the mainstay of town’s failing economy. But increasingly these individuals were Chinese in identification rather than birthplace. The adoption of the White Australia Policy had effectively strangled Chinese immigration and of the families living in Darwin and the Top End, only the family elders had been born in China – by the decade before the War most Darwin Chinese were Australian born.

Fannie Bay Gaol prison records show that in the early 1930s, perhaps contrary to expectations, most of Territory prisoners were British or Australian born, with a
small number coming from elsewhere in Europe. Most of those born in Australia came from Melbourne, incidentally, and very few were born in the Territory. Aboriginal prisoners made up a little over 35% of the total with Chinese at about 5%. To put this into some kind of modern context, while the majority of Australian prisoners in the recent period are also Australian or British born, prisoner data suggests a much greater diversity in the population in Australia in the 1990s than in Darwin in the 1930s.

But this Anglicised take on Australian society fits the pattern elsewhere. The majority of Australians identified Britain as home, even if they had never been there and Territorians, and Darwinites were no exception. Australians read British authors, stood up for the British national anthem as their own, celebrated religious festivals and holidays in accordance with northern hemisphere traditions and in education, language and identity, saw themselves as part of the great British family of the Commonwealth. This is not to say that there was not also a strong national identity, but in the pre-war period, this was seen as complementary to, rather than in opposition to the British homeland. The settler community of the Northern Territory, that is to say the dominant, governing, newspaper writing, legislation framing, administering population, in the pre-war period, was predominantly British-Australian in outlook. By the end of the decade of the 1930s this was gradually changing. Charles See Kee was one of the first Chinese appointed to the public service, but even then, he was not considered eligible for admission to the wardroom mess at the Government Hostel.

The war really made a difference to Australia and to the Northern Territory. Before the war, the whole of the Territory's tiny isolated European settlements contained not many more than 5,000 souls in total – most of whom lived in Darwin. The war brought massive disruption to the town. The civilian population was evacuated and replaced by an estimated 100,000 service people based in town or passing through. Aboriginal people from all over the Territory found paid employment at work camps adjacent to the military bases. After the war – in Darwin what the bombs hadn't destroyed the military did by sheer numbers. Darwin's old Cavenagh Street Chinatown virtually gone. We had also learned to look to America rather than Britain.

But along with the destruction, the war brought an improvement in transport and communications: the Stuart Highway, a good water supply, power, airstrips and upgrade of the share facilities at the Darwin airport. By the 1950s more Australians than any other time previously in Australia history – either as a result of military service or post-war tourism – had a direct experience of the Northern Territory.

The day after the war with Japan ended, the Commonwealth assented to the Darwin Lands Acquisition Act with the outcome that the Commonwealth government resumed all the freehold lots within ten miles of the town. Delay and inactivity characterised this period as the Commonwealth debated whether or not Darwin should be totally rebuilt. It was not until August 1951 when the Commonwealth
post-war plans for a new design for the city of Darwin were finally abandoned and the rebuilding could begin. Even so, the Commonwealth owned all the freehold titles that it leased back. Far from the freedom and romance of the outback, Darwin people lived under tighter control than just about any other city in Australia – the Canberra of the north.

But in the sunshine and prosperity of the post-war period, it didn’t seem so. About this time Neville Shute penned the defining mythology of the Northern Territory in his iconic 1950s novel, *A Town Like Alice*. It didn’t matter that the novel wasn’t set in Alice Springs, wasn’t about the Territory at all in fact, but it described the romance felt by a kindly, elderly, invalid, deskbound lawyer for the young woman disenchanted with post-war England who fell passionately in love with the anti-authoritarian, virile outback hero in Malaysia and Queensland.

If ever there was a metaphor for post-war Australia this was it. England was pale, hungry and weakened by war. Australia was masculine, sexy and brave. Because of the title of the book, the Territory was the lucky beneficiary. Darwin was even luckier because it was not even remotely like Alice and even less like Shute’s flattering imagery of the outback. Darwin had been bombed, almost flattened for more than 18 months of Japanese aerial raids and even more significantly, was a town where the major industry was and always had been, the public service.

But Neville Shute was well-loved and widely published throughout the Commonwealth. Young British newcomer to Darwin Judy Opitz remembered she: *had read every book he had written about Australia... I wanted to live in the outback.*

Although when the *Ten Pound Poms* tried to find out about Darwin, the officials at Australia House in London didn’t know where it was.

So Darwin’s population boomed after the war. People poured into the town housed in makeshift structures created opportunistically through re-use of military materials or buildings for other purposes. Not just people coming back home after the war but newcomers too. People made do in places like the old Vestey’s meatworks buildings at Bullocky Point, Parap Camp or Night Cliffs Camp and other huts, shacks or any other roof they could find to camp in. Unmarried public servants lived in other places left over from the war, like *Belsen* in Smith Street.

The Commonwealth had a new policy for Aborigines (actually begun in 1937 but interrupted by the war), which among other things controlled the work, property, movements, and personal lives of all persons deemed to be Wards. The policy, whose architect was the influential Minister for the Northern Territory Paul Hasluck, would colloquially be referred to as *normalisation*. The aim was the make the Territory like the rest of Australia. This was a hard policy to pursue even in Darwin where there were better mechanisms to enforce it than anywhere else. Most people in Darwin were young, drank heavily and partied. When Aboriginal people were prevented from legally drinking, it resulted in an escalation of Aboriginal incarceration.
In Darwin most people had to share accommodation, usually with at least another family. Many households did not have electricity, private access to water or sanitation. Chinatown had been destroyed and city planning was haphazard. The Darwin City Council was only reinstituted in 1957. The cost of living, and building houses was about 50% more than it was in the south. The biggest industry was the public service and the biggest cash inflows came from government spending on infrastructure with mining, pastoral and tourism lagging behind. But the dominant mythology was that Darwin was socially progressive with boundless economic opportunities.

While there are families in Darwin, whose members frequently claim Aboriginal or Chinese descent, who have lived in Darwin since the early days of the foundation of the town most of the population is short-term. In the Territory, there has always been a high level of transience of the population. From the beginning of the Commonwealth administration of the Territory, employment service was by contract rather than permanent relocation. Commonwealth employees sometimes did stay on longer, but the majority were based in the Territory for 2 or 3-year contracts, returning to other postings in the south after this time. The population increased but the figures don’t give you a good idea of the actual number of people who came here because people were coming and going all the time.

Darwin, which seems destined to endure a cyclical history of destruction and reinvention was to enjoy yet another massive change. Just as the city was settling into the ordinariness of a tropical public service town in the 1960s and 1970s, in 1974 Cyclone Tracy ripped the city apart. The rebuilding brought other changes, including Self Government to the Territory in 1978, and a whole new population of incomers arrived to reinvent their own Territory experiences. For whatever reason, probably economic, it has been the settler perceptions that have dominated the mythologies that frame the Territory.

In the short period since Self Government the Territory has enjoyed remarkable political stability. From 1978-2001 the Country Liberal Party held government. Following the election of the Labor government in 2001, the ALP has held power ever since. Both parties have enjoyed a long run in office and both identified as having a unique relationship with the region. The Country Liberals created the flag, the colours, and the official endorsement of a unique form of dress pioneered in the 1950s - Territory rig as well as a number of other projects, including the construction of a rail link between Alice Springs and Darwin, which effectively constructed both how we perceived the Territory, as well as positioning their party, the CLP, as the natural party of place. The link between the CLP and the Northern Territory flag is best described as proprietal, one academic noted.

When Labor took office in 2001, in the early days as very new governments sometimes do, it followed the CLP imagery, for a time using the flag, colours, badges and railway as assiduously as its predecessors. Slowly though, Labor began to develop branding of its own, for both the Territory and also Labor’s role in the
region, and it began to focus not on colours, designs or logos but something much less tangible, *lifestyle*. Labor was ultimately successful in framing the terms of the debate and the CLP now speak about *Territory lifestyle* about as often as does Labor.

Both were highly effective marketing and branding exercises and quite closely connected. For the CLP, they were creating a political identity of Territorian out of the ether. Up until this point, it was hard to say even who a Territorian was. In putting together the trappings of office, the CLP gave the Territorian a name, a flag, colours, a Territory costume (*Territory rig*), a cause (the railway) and even an enemy (Canberra). The ALP badging is a natural extension of this idea. *Lifestyle* is the pledge by government which seeks to enshrine the rights and privileges attached to that role of *Territorian*.

But it’s not all marketing here. Marketing strategies work best if they can tap into existing tensions, anxieties and beliefs. In part, the conscious and unconscious mythologising about our lives and place in the community is a way of rationalising the life choices we make. Both constructions of *Territory* and *lifestyle* are strong assertions of support for life choices made. As noted earlier, the evidence suggests that Darwin’s population, at least from the twentieth century onwards, has probably always been highly transient. 36

There was an advertising jingle from the 1980s that used to be played on the local radio station. The lyrics went something like this:

*Life at the Top*
*On the go, never stop*
*and we wouldn’t swap…*
*even if we could swap…*

*Life on the go,*
*the way that life ought to be,*
*Let’s raise a glass and drink to the Territory.*

*Pour me a cold one,*
*Best beer ever sold one,*
*Long tall draught NT,*

*There’s all kinds of beer*
*but the kind that we like is*
*That beautiful draught NT*
*a taste of the Territory*

*We wouldn’t swap, even if we could swap…* Because of course, the poignant aspect of this jingle is that many people do swap given the opportunity. Some people who come here do like the place and stay, but most people come to make money and then go back home, and it has probably always been like that.
Prime Minister Paul Keating was supposed to have once said, *The best view of Darwin is from 40,000 feet in the air on your way to Paris.*\(^{37}\) It didn’t need to be true because it was what most Australians believed anyway. But it’s not a useful metaphor to sustain a town. The old saying, you have to be *mad, mercenary or missionary* is usually taken to apply to working remotely rather than to living in Darwin but again, it’s not flattering. It is preferable to believe in the *Territorian*, who better any other Australian, holds the true values of freedom and privilege assimilated through their contact with the place. Since most people live in Darwin, arguably Darwinites are the exemplar of the Territorian. Darwin borrows the mystique of the wider Territory but it also writes the script.

For those who have lived in Darwin for years, or who have come here yesterday, everyone needs a flexible metaphor to understand and make sense of our life choice. To understand and make sense of a place you need a simple message that is easily understood, rapidly assimilated and serves to identify and justify our actions. We are Territorians. We are not like anyone else. We are special.

If you look at the history, we have been asserting that identity of place, at least since the last century – and we continue to do so. It didn’t matter that for most of our history the majority of the Territory’s population has been Aboriginal. The people of Darwin weren’t seen as a tiny outpost of a minority ethnic group who ran things for everyone else – instead the town was seen as multicultural and exotic – and compared to the rest of Australia at the time, it probably was. The predominant cultural ideology, for the most part though, was within a powerful commitment to maintaining a way of life that was predominantly British in outlook. The major industry of the Northern Territory and Darwin has always been the public service – from the Overland Telegraph, to the North Australian Railway, to police, health, customs, transport and works, housing. But no one is going to write any books about the romance of the public service. Instead the outback themes of Jeannie Gunn and Neville Shute have allowed us to pretend that some of the romance and anarchy of the bush belongs with us in Darwin as well.

And actually it sort of does too. Being a Territorian means accepting contradictions. Even if we were British in outlook, at least Territorians knew Aborigines were also Australians and that Koepang was a lot closer than London. The fact that the Commonwealth in the post-war period had a serious policy to *normalise* the Territory shows that there was a bit of a dislocation between here and the rest of Australia. As well as the Commonwealth Emergency Intervention or the location of a nuclear waste dump, even today there are aspects of living in the Territory that are like nowhere else – the most powerful are probably environmental. When the mangoes are fruiting, the fruit bat screaming, the prawn trawlers in the harbour, the electric storms break in the build-up or the roads are impassable in the wet, there are a lot of reminders that it is different here.

That said, it is clear from even a brief historical glance at the past, that the Territory has generated a lot of mythologies about what we are like and why we are the way
we are. Most of them have to do with supporting the economy, the power structure, or as a way of just feeling good about our life choices. As I said earlier, Territorians are not unique in doing this; everyone does this to one extent or the other. That said, it doesn’t mean that it is not useful to look at some of the articles of faith occasionally and try and make sense of them. History is not a bad place to start.

Like many of the earlier mythologies, the idea of a unique Territory lifestyle, like our understanding of Territorian, doesn’t have much of an historical basis for construction and probably does not go back further than a generation or two. But like a sick patient taking a placebo and then feeling better, it is surprising how often, and for how long in its various forms, that the idea has worked.

The assistance of the Northern Territory Library is gratefully acknowledged: all staff but in particular John Richards, Louise Paynter, Ken Minogue – many thanks for your help.

3 The name he used for his history of Darwin: Douglas Lockwood, The Front Door: Darwin 1869-1969, Adelaide, Rigby, 1968. Anecdotally, I have also been told that in this period Darwin was sometimes referred to as the arse end of the country. This imagery again supports the notion of Darwin city as appendage/portal/exit to a larger entity.
7 The book sold more than 500,000 copies in Gunn’s lifetime and even thirty years after that, sales had reached an estimated 1,000,000 copies. I. Nesdale, The Little Missus, Blackwood South Australia, Lynton Publications, 1977, p. 81; Peter Forrest, “They of the Never Never” Occasional Papers (no 18). Darwin, Northern Territory Library Service, 1990, p. 10, viewed 26 June 2011.
9 Again, it is difficult to quantify, but based on census figures compiled by CLA Abbott on civilian residents of the Territory (excluding police, Army, Civil Construction Corps, Allied Works Corps, railway employees or members of the Civil Alien Corps) there were an estimated 1,528 civilians in 1944 which grew to 13,182 by May 1952. The Aboriginal population, which appeared to be declining in the 1930s, was an estimated 14,448 in 1941. The figures aren’t wholly reliable, but it is reasonable to assume that Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal civilian population figures for the Territory reached about 50:50 in about 1952. This was not the case in the towns, though. In Darwin, for example, in 1952 the civilian population was an estimated 7397, but the Aboriginal population was probably around about 1,000, data obtained through Commonwealth Record Series F1 including Items 1950/324

Population figures are taken from the Reports of the Government Administrator 1910-1940, bound copy, Northern Territory Library, Northern Territory Collection.


Research data conversation with John Richards research report, Territory Anzacs, Northern Territory Library, [http://www.territorystories.nt.gov.au/handle/10070/217054](http://www.territorystories.nt.gov.au/handle/10070/217054) viewed 6 August 2011. Territorians could not enlist directly from the Territory, so many left to enlist in Queensland or South Australia. A number of Aboriginal Territorians tried to enlist but were unable to.

The total number of European prisoners (that is, not identifying as Chinese or Aboriginal) in the period 30 October 1931 until 16 February 1934 was 257. Assuming that law-breakers are representative of the population as a whole, which admittedly is an assumption, the following figures emerge. The largest nationality identified as Australian (136), although in this period, only 6 actually came from the Northern Territory itself. Most Australians in Fannie Bay Gaol came from Victoria, and most of them came from the city of Melbourne (33 out of 40 represented whereas Sydney was only 17 out of 38, the rest coming from towns in outback NSW). The United Kingdom was the second biggest nationality after Australian in the gaol, 105 inmates came from there. This decade before the war had seen large-scale immigration to Australia from the British Isles and Darwin was sometimes the first port of call so not surprisingly, nearly as many prisoners came from Ireland, England and Scotland as they did from Australia as a whole (the Welsh must be more law abiding – or at least were not represented in this period). Other prisoners came from Belgium, Channel islands, Chile in South America, Greece, Malta, Norway, Palestine, Russia, Siberia or Sweden. The total number of European prisoners then was 257 of which 136 identified as Australian, 105 as originating from the United Kingdom, and a scattering of 16 others from various other countries listed. It is a reasonably assumption that this data reflected the broader demographic makeup as a whole – at least it is indicative. In comparison, by the 1930s, there were only 25 prisoners who were identified as Chinese but a further 163 prisoners (133 males and 30 females) who were identified as Aboriginal in this period. Notes compiled from records held by the Northern Territory Archives Service, Fannie Bay Gaol.


Adrian Welke and Helen J. Wilson, Darwin Central Area Heritage Study, Report to the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory through the National Trust of Australia (Northern Territory) Darwin 1993, p. xvi.
Speech by Prime Minister John Curtin, 14 March 1942


23 Welke and Wilson p. xvii.

24 Judy Opitz did indeed find the outback, marrying Tom Opitz and setting up Cooinda as a nature reserve and tourist venture in what is today part of Kakadu National Park and World Heritage Area, J. Opitz, Cooinda in Kakadu: the personal story behind it, Darwin, Judy Opitz, 1995 (1984), pp. 6-7. For a repeat of this anecdote and more detail about how Judy found her way to Darwin, see J. Opitz, An English Rose in Kakadu, Darwin, Edited and published by David. M. Welch, 2009, pp. 4f.

25 When Peter Spillett went to Australia House in London to nominate his wife-to-be to join him in Darwin, Australia House didn’t even know where Darwin was NTAS NTRS 226, Typed transcripts of oral history interviews SPILLETT, Peter TS 663, p. 11 (T.2)

26 Maisie Austin, Quality of Life, Darwin, Maisie Austin, 1992, p. 9.

27 Austin, pp. 10-11.


30 Paul Hasluck, ‘Pioneers of Post War Recovery’ Eric Johnston Lecture State Library of the Northern Territory, Darwin 1992 ‘... when I incurred Ministerial responsibility over the Territory in 1951 I thought that one of the basic needs of the moment was to accustom both residents of the Territory and Australians in other parts of the continent to regard the Territory in a more matter-of-fact way as a normal part of Australia inhabited by normal Australian people.’ [my emphasis] http://www.ntl.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/25055/occpaper28.pdf viewed 6 August 2011.

31 Arguably in the 1950s, this policy accounted for most instances of Aboriginal people coming into contact with the law. In Darwin in 1956, out of a total of 212 cases involving Aborigines in the police courts, 196 dealt with drinking liquor or methylated spirits. Mickey Dewar, Inside Out: A Social History of Fannie Bay Goal, Darwin, NTU Press, 1999, p. 83.

32 See Dewar, Darwin No Place Like Home, op. cit.

33 See Dewar, Darwin No Place Like Home, pp. 4-5.


