The Art of Speaking at that Place:
Pau Carter’s Golden Grove and Mythopoeic Practice

The Line of Design

To cultivate an environment is, as the word topography suggests, to write its landscape. And to write is no metaphor: the Greek, Latin and Anglo-Saxon words for writing come from roots whose primary sense is to scratch, to cut, tear and to dig. The ploughshare furrowing the field is a mighty pen. The agrarian capitalist’s picturesque hill and dale is a neighbourhood already grooved by nature; the resulting relief is a kind of vivid braille.¹

When sociologist John Carroll lamented the West’s lack of mythic gravitas in 2001, he juxtaposed the superficial concerns of modern life – consumerism, self-obsession – with the “deep structures” of cultural mythology. We are, he cried, “dying for want of story”. Urban alienation and environmental loss support Carroll’s claims against the western world. For him, they signify the vacuity of our cultural dreaming, the lack of “great foundations” that enable and ground collective identity.² Carroll provides a useful point from which to elaborate Paul Carter’s understanding of the relation between story and place. While Carroll’s and Carter’s mutual concern for the sustenance of environments and communities centres around the role of cultural narrative, their visions of story-in-the-world are profoundly divergent. Where Carroll sees absence, Carter identifies a politics of speaking. It is not from the lack of story that our places suffer, he argues, but rather the kind of stories that bring them into being.
As an innovative philosopher of public space, Carter has written extensively on what he calls “the sickness of the urban scene” in the globalised West — the profound lack of poetic interest that currently characterises its public spaces. He suggests that the places set aside for public passage and convergence offer little towards either social or environmental wellbeing, and are largely uninviting and uninspiring, flat and absent of dynamic force. But Carter is an artist as well as a writer. His public artwork seeks to both critique and renovate the role of poetics in public space and consequently in the domain of cultural imagining. His attention to human relationships with outside milieux emerges in a potent praxis of voicing and creating. Carter’s ambition is to tactically re-engage discourse in a mythopoetic process of civic and environmental regeneration. He begins with the notion that the places in which we live are mythic as much as material productions, and ultimately offers a radical reappraisal of public space and the possibilities of its “writing”. Inspired by Giambattista Vico’s notion of the poetic, or mythic, origins of human society, as well as Indigenous Australian understandings of place, in which landscape is not “seen” in a picturesque tradition, but narrated, Carter contends that places are the invention of story. Storytelling is a techne that gives material shape to the world. This paper will discuss this key proposition of Carter’s theoretical writing and design work, and discuss his current project Golden Grove as an incidence and exploration of a mythopoetic approach to public art and its significance to public space.

The question of what public art can do, in the context of placemaking in Australia at present, returns us to Carroll’s warning of a storyless, and as a result, a “treeless” world. It seems that in our cities today, the concreted clearings in which most public art resides suggest a post-natural, disconnected, and disconsolate time for cultural poetics. In Melbourne’s Docklands area, for example, high-rise apartments overlook a recently installed arrangement of public art projects that — despite the commissioning body’s intention to “well-integrate” these artworks into the urban design — appear as isolated imaginings, out of dialogue with the smoothly surfaced landscape. Carter’s concern for public space is this failure to enable the discursive conditions that sustain both communities and environments.
While the planet slowly warms and water systems die, our common places grow more muted and unresponsive to the ground from which they emerge. Such stories-made-material cannot arrest or attend to our unfolding ecological disaster.

Carter writes against a flow of sustainability rhetoric that posits environmental ignorance, poor planning and the disengagement of humans from “nature” as the focus of redress. He proposes that environmental well-being is not simply a question of individual practices and appropriate regulations: it is fundamentally a matter of cultural invention. This is not an argument for nature as cultural construct — as a representation or symbol of cultural tropes. Instead, the institutions, structures, and horizons of our world comprise the alphabet of a common mythos, a culture’s social, political and economic self-image. The reservoir, the fence-line, technologies of mining and greenhouse emissions: these all constitute storylines of the Cartesian fantasy that dominates western culture. It is to these that Carroll’s call for narrative foundations appeals, stories that write the world in terms of linear time, discrete individuals, and quantifiable measures. The “silent” façades of capitalist culture actually speak these mythic lines of descent that Carroll himself pursues.

Carter explains that the colonial clearing of the Australian landscape was the design of enlightenment logic that, in its pursuit of certainty and order, sought to eradicate spatial and auditory ambiguity from an unfamiliar environment. The coloniser’s pursuit of blank space — the fantasy of settler society — flattened a textured and “uncultivated” landscape into the one-dimensional Cartesian line of reason. This attempt to master the unfamiliar and remodel the contours of the land, by separating territories, parcelling agricultural blocks, and mapping coastlines, resulted in the imaginary death of a complex ecology. This material imprint of a philosophical position — the Cartesian reverence for the continuous line of thought — actually dematerialised the multi-dimensions of a living environment, collapsing everything into the representational form of the linear line, and systematising both human and environmental history. Static and univocal in its one-dimensionality, this line — as a design on the world — cannot accommodate dynamic ecologies or, in a more abstract
sense, wandering and impromptu encounters. It does not lead out to
the other and, writes Carter, "enjoys no choreographic relation ... no
friction ... no suffering, no incision, no bleeding". In the Cartesian
imaginary, the coloniser's line sits heavily upon the ground. Here,
there is no discourse; it is the line alone that can "speak".

In Australia, techniques of deforesting and tilling inscribed this
anthropocentric vision of human separation from, and control over,
the environment onto the land. Agential power, the power of making,
was credited to the human world alone, and the land transformed
into the stage for a multiplicity of cultural signs. Carter describes
this as the theatricalisation of the environment whereby, conceptually
compacted and physically cleared in a new cultural vision, the non-
human world was reduced to signifying a human story, yielding to
translation and both physically and psychically affording uninhibited
movement for the coloniser through space. Place-naming advanced
the laying out of the one-dimensional line. It re-imagined the land as
clear, "announc[ing] a new field of operational interest" for the
colonising body. As Carter explained in The Road to Botany Bay, a
name is a self-perpetuating poetic creation. Names construct an
environment necessary to sustain their own story. They do not
describe what is there, but speak from the outside, naming the
material world through "the semblances of things known or near at
hand" — that is, prior knowledges and histories. Colonisers found
legitimacy in imagining a ground that had no capacity to answer back
or contest the lines drawn upon it, and their stories became founda-
tional.

The authoring of a non-dynamic relation between the coloniser
and the Australian environment ensured that bodies-in-space were
regulated kinetically as well as poetically. Movement is central to
Carter's understanding of place-making, and more broadly to the act
of poetic invention. It is crucial to the telling of stories, to the design
of things, and relies upon the recognition of ourselves as spatially
situated in the world: to walk, to speak or to make means to intuit a
range of potential encounters and poses. It is to always project our
bodies forward in time. "Our instant capacity to measure intervals, to
judge proximities, to assess the scale of things" evidences what Carter
calls an “eido-kinetic environmental awareness.” We are “placed” through our negotiations of a spatial field. The achievement of a cleared land, or *tabula rasa*, therefore relied upon the suppression of this eido-kinetic awareness. The removal of bush, the levelling of ground, and the construction of roads as straight lines of passage correlated to an ideology of progress and individualism that discouraged, or even prohibited, untimely meetings between self and other. Culturally, this meant a diminished capacity for kinetic variations and the resulting remaking of place. As the sole agents on a colonial stage, humans are destined to move as isolated units, propelled by internal dynamics alone. There is no room for an uncertain place on the ground. Consequently, to trip up and lose one’s footing is to display an individual “evolutionary unfitness,” rather than admit to being caught up in the world. Carter’s analogy of a billiard table, upon which balls roll in straight lines of passage, “hitting” each other only to shoot off and away, is effective. What this cultural story promoted was a community that interacted as passing projectiles, unmarked by the moment of encounter. Here, “no convergence of interests could ever be discovered: no dimples, folds or slopes remained in the social field where different folk might ‘roll’ together or significantly depart.” As the environment suffered from the dematerialised line, so did community.

According to Carter, the design implications of the *tabula rasa* characterise our public spaces today. Built on Cartesian lines, the modern city regulates the flow of people via its pathways, traffic lights, and crossroads. Impromptu entanglements of bodies are discouraged, indeed pathologised, as if we “have no business morphing into each other.” In the places set aside for common gathering and repose, a predominance of smooth façades and linear forms — regularly spaced benches, segmented walk-ways, and the plinth-raised monument — create a trackless environment upon which passing traffic leaves no mark. The bodies that challenge the supremacy of the linear line — wanderers, the homeless, and the unauthorised artist, for instance — are pushed to the margins of these public spaces. Recalling the colonial fetish for blankness, much urban design sees its mark as original and, as a result, the poetic range of public space is
impoverished. Single-dimensioned stories dominate. In the colonial mode, this is the solo voice of historical account, the one line from which the future has proceeded. In an era of global capitalism, the signs of consumerism monopolise public speech. Obscured in the silences written into these places is the metabolism of a sustaining and sustainable world. Our public spaces are losing their capacity to transform.

A world of local invention

Visited *Nearamnew* to look at surface figure 2... These fields of carved stone have the same visual appeal as horizontal shelves of coastal rocks, minutely pocked, ridged, scored and grooved. The throughlines of writing are anamorphically warped... You walk across this lightly variegated surface: what do you see? It is like a fossil field of mythform, drawings, designs, ribbons of text, lightly marked water courses... prints and tracks. It is as if you stumble across the birthplace of tracks.\(^19\)

The amnesia of urban design affirms the imaginative hold of the empty page, and this is the counter-point for Carter’s public art practice. In the logic of much urban planning, public art is something that is put *into* a place. It occupies the last blank space on the civic master plan, to be filled as if it were the final adornment of a fully dressed body. On the other hand, the mythopoeic approach to placemaking at work in Carter’s *Golden Grove* insists that the ground is active in discourse. The materiality of story is thus double-fold: while myth can write the world into being, myths themselves are materially grounded. It is not simply the human that writes and the environment that is inscribed; rather they are entangled. Against the mythic status of the dematerialised line and the single voice of history, a mythopoeic practice views collective story, or cultural mythos, as processural and incomplete, irreducible to a unitary point of view. Moreover, in Carter’s theory of mythopoiesis, stories emerge in acts of discursive exchange. They localise and speak the place of encounter.
The centrality of discourse to Carter’s work reflects its critical position within the realm of public space. As he has elaborated, the ancient agora, the historical model for public space in western culture, was laid out as a place for public speaking. The ideal of democratic community is embedded within this: it is through the public speech-act that the will of the people is heard, and conversely where the notion of a democratic state becomes an object of discourse. But Carter also reminds us that the word “agora” refers to the people who come together in a place to speak or to listen: that is, the “back and forth” of talk, and the gathering and dispersal — the rhythm — of crowds, are interdependent. Discourse, in this reckoning, is an improvised choreography of time, ground and body. Public space thus does not merely provide the place for speech to occur, it is itself the invention of discourse, a field of possible social relations that begins in — and cannot precede — the “meeting and momentary knotting of two or more tracks”. Despite the physical, demarcated provisions for public space in our communities, its nature is essentially ephemeral. The failing of public space is the delimitation of this processual, transitory quality that renders place open, always unfinished, alive to inscription that, because of its discursive origin, will “bear witness to its own erasure”.

Carter’s environmental design work is attentive to this concern, seeking to spatially enable public speaking that is, as Stengers has it “par le milieu”, situated and entangled with its particular surrounds in a constant renewal of discursive relations. His designs bring forth the condition of public space as, ideally, a place of “other speak” where a plurality of non-hierarchical, interweaving and discontinuous voices lead out to possible futures. He configures the speech act as uncontainable, always caught up in other moments of speaking, and provisionally grounded in the mobile engagements of the body-in-the-world. Carter’s challenge to the status of the Cartesian line in our cultural imagination and cultural poetics is thus a challenge to the limits of representation in the work of public art culturally authorised to signify a one-dimensional story.

Mythopoiesis is the art of speaking at that place, and because of this, it is always “par le milieu”, never claiming an authoritative,
above-ground stance. A technique and a disposition, mythopoiesis, operates in the exclusions of our dominant place-myths, recollecting what is forgotten to enable the making of new stories of place. These stories will be "artificial" in the sense that they bear no linear genealogy and yet, grounded in history, they carry the possibility of reinvention. A mythopoetic artwork does not materialise out of nothing, emerging, fully formed, from the human imagination. Instead, mythopoetically produced stories emerge provisionally. They have no source as such, but come into being through the process of their telling, as the polyphony of an environment is presented or brought forth (rather than represented or revealed) through the encounters of the ongoing life of a site. Reimagining what is already there, mythopoiesis eschews the blank page and the vertical archive of history. The ground is approached not as a palimpsest, but as a scattered surface of human and environmental histories — the immaterial, incomplete stories and traces repressed by mono-vocal accounts of place.

Golden Grove, a yet-to-be-constructed artwork integrated into the redevelopment of the public domain of the Darlington Campus, University of Sydney, illustrates the grounded, yet perpetually unfinished nature of mythopoeic design that instates an ethics of public speaking at the heart of sustaining environments. Golden Grove is at once a recollection of a place coming into being, and a new name for place. It gathers together, in an incomplete way, various histories of the ground on which the Darlington Campus sits, and its interplay — and incommensurability — with the history contained in the name. As Carter discovered, “Golden Grove” was the earliest recorded non-indigenous name for the site, and as such was instated as a place-myth that, far from the desired one-dimensionality of the line, was predicated upon a shadow ecology of other names, places and presences.

As part of the winning “Fertile Ground” landscape design with the architects Taylor Cullity Lethlean and John Wardle, Carter’s Golden Grove responds to the key themes of the overall project which are in keeping with the current tenure of the space: learning, growth, exploration. But in his mythopoeic work, these tropes are neither fixed narrative lines, nor points of orientation for the meaning of the design. They function rather as “throughlines”, paths for improvised wandering and poetic gleaning that both artist and public stumble upon. Carter’s diary note concerning a visit to Nearamnew, his public artwork at Federation Square, Melbourne, speaks of both the figurative and literal meaning of this sort of “stumbling” in which stories are found rather founded. These findings are arbitrary, but not in the sense of chance or whim. Grounded, they cluster around the name of the place, a scattergraphy of otherwise unrelated fragments of histories that, brought into discourse, produce a new story there. Carter’s design technique is not to proceed in linear fashion, but to work outwards from Golden Grove, in all possible directions, with the poetic connections that emerge incrementally and often surprisingly. Golden Grove both materialises and performs the ambivalence of what is in a name, and the impossibility of following a straight historical path into and out of any location.
Allied with fertility in Grecian mythology, *Golden Grove* was the name of a First Fleet supply ship, and the title taken for the land that is now the Darlington Campus by the settler William Hutchinson, who intended to establish market gardens on the site. The University’s pedagogic role and its motto (or guiding story), “though the stars are changed, the spirit is the same”, is invoked by the star constellation of the Pleiades, also known as the “golden grove”. This constellation was classically associated with navigation, or leading out, and also with wisdom through the figure of Maia, one of the seven sisters of the Pleiades. And, in the same vein as the University motto, the Pleiades are narrated and renamed by cultures all over the world, including Indigenous Australia. It also reminds us that while the construction of the Darlington Campus meant opportunity and agency for generations of students who came here, for the residents of Darlington and adjacent Redfern — with its significant Indigenous population — who were dispossessed by the campus’ construction, it spoke of different things.
For Carter, the poetic question of “what’s in a name?” recalls a pre-existing network of place-stories that diffuse the colonial origin of Golden Grove. The two headwaters of Black Wattle Creek, which runs out to Sydney Harbour, comprise part of this groundscape. Making a visual “golden grove” when in bloom, the black wattle tree occupied an important role in the local ecology and culture of the traditional Eora people. The waters of Black Wattle Creek are associated with Eora women’s wisdom and their social and environmental relations: it is a site for female knowledge and social leadership outside the paradigm of the western university tradition. Female empowerment (the Pleiades, it should be remembered, are also known as the “Seven Sisters”) is both a poetic throughline and a pragmatic concern for Golden Grove. The brief of “Fertile Ground” gives attention to the issue of women’s safety on campus. In its current state, the Darlington grounds are especially unfriendly to women at night. Concealed walkways surrounded by the bare, unwelcoming plaza of Maze Green in which few ever gather, alienate and threaten (and of course, not just women) and, far from reflecting the ideals of the university as leading out to new knowledge and to discourse, in fact replicate the general condition of contemporary urban public space.

Comprising three elements — a ground design, lighting installations, and poetic text “contractions” — Golden Grove poetically and functionally contributes to the physical improvement of the campus’ public domain as sociable and safe: effectively, as a sustaining place in which different individuals can wander, gather and discourse. Its ground design component comprises a significant part of “Fertile Ground”. In distinction from the artwork as add-on to landscape design, where (as in the Docklands development) public art is called on to bring the “sense of place” to a built environment, Carter’s Golden Grove works through and across (or, as Carter terms it, “parasitises”) the “Fertile Ground” design. This is a different sense of integration — a kind of conversation that, in its process, materialises the stories of the site as a mode of physical remaking. These stories are not added on as an afterthought. They become the ground that orients design. The discursive history of the Darlington Campus is thus woven into the new architecture of place. Here, the requirement
to redevelop Maze Green, to open up new and more welcoming pathways across the site, is met by Carter’s design, which recalls a prior landscape of mobile presences as a template for future community-making.

In Carter’s design, the Pleiades’ role as navigators of the sky is mirrored on the earth. The nine nodal points of the constellation (the seven sisters and their parents) are to be situated throughout the campus, delineating a public domain that both spreads outwards and calls people in. Pathways connect the star-nodes, recalling the shimmering field of light that, upon observation in the sky, traces out the Pleiades constellation (thus defining the nodes in relation to each other), and suggesting the ephemeral nature of public space. These pathways that initiate new movement patterns into the space will be illuminated with a series of modulated light installations at night, fostering a sense of peaceful passage rather than one of discomfort or
surveillance (see image 2). It is intended that each node act as a point of double-orientation, for the body’s temporal movement through the site, and for its negotiation with the many, overlapping stories of this place. For history, here, is materialised — it is something to figuratively trip you up. The nodes are instances of storytelling, and will be integrated in various ways: as ground inscriptions, wall stencilling, sound installations and digital projections (see image 3). Each inscription, or “contraction”, is associated with the particular star-myth, the seven sisters and their parents, Atlas and Pleione, as Carter draws from their legends allegories of education, difference, migration, environmental history, and public speaking. But the contractions also reference, more directly, a local history of speaking on the site of the campus.

Woven into the inscriptions are fragments of the many voices of this ground, gleaned from oral transcripts, visual recordings and historical archives, as well as graffiti tags and other public writing found about the streets of Redfern, the Campus building, and also Fitzroy, in Melbourne — a gesture to the regional and global threads that run through the local. The “Merope” contraction is composed entirely of those moments of public voicing that are an act of design, of renaming the world. The stories that Carter composes here are both new and old: grounded in place, they are open to becoming. There are no spaces between the letters of the contractions. The text runs together, turning words into graphic patterns, or a different sculptural form, like the “fossil-field” that Carter intuits as he treads over Nearamnew. Without signposts or explanatory guides on hand, Golden Grove’s poetic inscriptions speak in a way that is not revelatory. Against an enlightenment tradition where signs connect directly to meaning, these inscriptions — or “mythforms” — do not purport to represent history: they will only ever be analogues of presence. In this ethics of public speaking, Carter’s words, like the name Golden Grove, come to voice through the approach and response of the passer-by. Discourse, in this model, is always unfinished and involves a continual turn to the unknown.

The contractions are not meant for translation or decryption but for walking, or moving, across. Stories here come into being via performance, literalising a connection between telling and making. A
future of local encounters, flaring and defusing, sustains the polyphony of place. In a retracing of previous passages, Carter’s choreography of Darlington’s Maze Green returns the capacity to wander, rest amongst, and be literally moved by the materialised immaterial presences that destabilise a cleared and rationalised ground. A restored landscape of variegated marks, traces and forms, ensures kinetic improvisation – a non-verbal discourse – between body and environment that both echoes and enacts the physicality of the speech. It is this performative aspect of mythopoiesis that exceeds semiotic arrest, and conveys a world outside of the one-dimensional line. The rhythm intoned by speech-in-the-making is the rhythmic pattern of our movements in, and with, the world.

As Golden Grove exemplifies, Carter’s public art practice asks that its community participate in producing the present meanings of place: that they contribute, fleetingly, to its ongoing inscription. His response to the plight of our contemporary public spaces, and to the ecological conditions that sustain creativity, locates the writing of public space as key to the discursive, and thus transformative, capacity of a cultural landscape. Against a trend for public art that is timeless, placeless and silent, and on which we can project our meanings rather than find them, the recovery of a history of local invention in the process of remaking place expands the line of our design on the world. Here, the artwork is not redemptive, but is instead caught up in ecological complexity and change. The criticism by some social commentators that much public art is imposed upon its community without consultation is perhaps a more pragmatic version of Carter’s point that without local stories communities and environments suffer. Out of the clearings of the enlightenment imagination, a mythopoetic approach to public space design repopulates the ground with a forest of stories that are always in the process of becoming a different place. At a time of both ecological and civic stress and as the world continues to flatten under its own treeless myths, this recognition of the relationship between historical forgetting, environmental destruction, and design returns to the work of art the real power of change.
ENDNOTES

20 Carter, “Other Speak”.
21 Carter admits that this ideal of course was never realised in the Agora – women and slaves in ancient Greece were physically and politically excluded from this space. “But it is not necessary to conclude from this that public space is therefore an ideological phantom,” he writes. “Rather, it is obvious that, insofar as it remains tied to the interests of the powerful, its design is incomplete”. “Designs on Public Space: Golden Grove”, Public Lecture, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, 1 May 2006.
23 Carter, "Other Speak" pp. 260, 261.
25 Carter, "Other Speak", p. 245.
29 Carter, unpublished project notes.
30 A University of Sydney survey reported that a high percentage of women who regularly traverse the Darlington Campus express this sense of physical insecurity.
32 Carter notes that the etymology of “stencil” is actually “star writing”. “Designs on Public Space: Golden Grove”.
35 Carter’s work frequently returns to, and explores, the poetic theme of the forest: for example, *Repressed Spaces* and “Designs on Public Space: A Fissure in Reality”, Public Lecture, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne, 15 May 2006.