

The Ethics of Rural Place-Making

Public Space, Poetics, and the Ontologies of Design

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—PLACES

Ned Kelly's boot is large and worn. Fibreglass emerges from behind the faded black paint. I am standing in the main street of Glenrowan, a small town with large mythologies, 220 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. It was here in the Glenrowan hotel that the bushranger Kelly and his gang made their final stand against the law in 1880. Now, over a hundred years later, their iconic presence dominates the town's thoroughfare, Gladstone Street, and, more pervasively, its public identity. Replica cottages and a railway station from the period have been constructed and a trail of plaques leads visitors to key Kelly sites. A stretch of museums, gift shops and 'period' tea houses greet us as we roll into town, although several of these have 'For Sale' signs attached. Amongst this stands the six-metre-high Ned Kelly, veiled in his trade mark armour, gun at the ready. And his boot is worrying me. The fibreglass interior unsettles the narrative being told here. It makes me think about the limits and the affordances of stories and their relations to material worlds.

I recall a recent declaration made by the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment that labelled the Mallee communities of Northern Victoria, around Swan Hill and Mildura especially, 'pretty close to Australia's first climate change refugees'.¹ Glenrowan is in the picturesque Victorian High Country:

all shimmering rivers, grazing cattle and alpine vistas. It is topographically and spatially distant from the Northern Victorian Mallee environment—a flat and sparsely forested corner of the state. But Ned’s boot takes me there. The lands around Mildura and Glenrowan share some similar histories, despite their physical differences and distinct agricultural contexts. As Deb Anderson sketches out elsewhere in this collection, the semi-arid Mallee was systematically cleared for dryland cropping and rearing sheep in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though the River Murray that flowed through Mildura ensured that this region was also known for its fruit and vegetable production. But at this time, in 2009, the tacky fibreglass boot belonging to Ned references common experiences of (neo)colonial place-making that are brought into relief by the environmental and social effects of climate change registering across southeastern Australia. This experience of place-making bears a relation to the production of public space in these regions, to their capacity for sustaining diverse political and sociocultural discourse. The predicted exodus of Mallee communities is as much to do with the failing of discursive space—as public space—as it is the outcome of weathers, environments and instrumental practices.

A glance at the range of literature available at any of the shire offices around the Mallee gives a sense of the emotional and financial anxiety in the region. Years of low rainfall and poor crop yields has meant that farming families are leaving the land; the rate of farmer and youth suicide has risen and depression is widespread. With economic prospects bleak, communities are losing their youth to the cities or regional centres. Members of the shrinking Wycheproof community made the pointed gesture, in July 2009, of offering out a rental farmhouse for \$1 a week in a bid to increase town numbers.² The impacts of land clearance, lost top soil and rising salinity levels have long been an issue here, but drought—always a feature of life in the Mallee—is growing in severity. The Murray–Darling Basin is recording its lowest levels of inflow on record, prompting the Murray–Darling Basin Authority to warn that ‘water for critical human needs could not be guaranteed forever’ in this region.³ The High Country, also part of the Murray–Darling Basin, is facing similar challenges. Multi-generational farming families are leaving the land here, too, and social suffering, though little reported in the national media, is familiar to its communities. A council worker from Tallangatta, near Lake Hume, told me in February 2008 that

the region was seeing one farmer suicide every three days. Young men were deliberately driving into trees.

I do not want to draw equivalences here. Shared histories and experiences link these places, but their singularity remains, and in a rationalised account of place as a geographic and chronologically refined construct, Ned's boot bears little relation to stressed Mallee landscapes. On a poetic register, however—in the realm of stories—these connections gain insight and political possibility. Thinking poetically illuminates the ways in which material forms and designs narrate sociocultural and environmental stories that make manifest political, economic and ontological visions. In the Mallee, as in Glenrowan, these visions since colonisation have historically invested in a discourse of liberal reason, with its concepts of ordered ecology and calculable relations. Yet the chink in Ned's paint contests the authority of such designs on the world. The boot's sense of failed mythology—the inadequacy of this one story to discursively sustain a town—challenges rational logic as the structuring principle behind place, and communicates the need for alternative ways of responding to rural environmental and social stress. One of these, I suggest, is an ethics of place-making that consciously performs poetic connections, as a strategy of postcolonial environmental politics.

—RURAL PUBLIC SPACE

There is an ambiguous, though frequently articulated, relation between place and public space. Commonly, place is often understood to provide the material context for public space and its attendant politics. This association has been increasingly drawn as analyses of the 'fate of place' under forces of global capitalism have highlighted the correlate impacts of neoliberalism on communities and environments.⁴ These include the turn to privatised relations, institutions and infrastructure, the sharp distinction between human agency and environmental passivity, and the transformation of complex ecological networks into discrete units of exploitation and transaction. Brendan Gleeson captures this perspective in his study of Australian cities, *Australian Heartlands*: 'The legacy (of neoliberal economics) is hard, and hardening ... Money, or 'techno fixes' won't acquit the soaring debts, which include increasingly divided, antagonistic and insecure communities; and mounting ecological dysfunction and resource uncertainties.'

‘Without public space’, he surmises, ‘we’re left with clubland—a landscape of insiders and outsiders’: a description that casts particular light on the predicted population displacements of climate change.⁵

But this association is also made because public space is frequently defined as topographical, relating to sites and geographically defined places, incorporating non-human environments, which offer the conditions for public formation. As a result, and especially as the infiltration of private interests into public space has become a feature of regular commentary—for instance, the developer-driven construction of residential areas that incorporate parks and walkways and shopping precincts (what Gleeson calls ‘communal’ spaces, predicated on ‘exclusive notions of membership’, including class and wealth),⁶ and the corporate sponsorship of public precincts (the Optus ‘wall’ at Federation Square, Melbourne, for example)—the place-based nature of much public space debate, in turn, appends broader discussion of ‘the public sphere’, and its concerns with public speech and participation, to material questions of designed and built environments.

As the examples above indicate, however, discussion of public space is almost exclusively trained on urban contexts: ‘rare are analyses that take rural space ... as public’, admit Setha Low and Neil Smith.⁷ As Gleeson implies, this is because ‘cities are the centre stage of Australian life, and have long been so’.⁸ Not only are cities the centrepieces of supra-government but as concentrated hubs of population, they are seen to provide the multitude necessary to *perform* public space in its idealised (and geographically located) understanding: an unending swarm of ‘strangers’ who are constantly exposed to the possibilities of meetings and exchange. The Greek *agora* is often cited (with the proviso of its acknowledged exclusion of women and slaves) as an early model of such a space, which has been subsequently extrapolated as central to a functioning democratic state. In rural towns of limited populations, and where most neighbours are known to each other, how can this continual (re)enactment of ‘unscripted meetings with strangers, including new cultures and social identities’ be realised?⁹ This latter point, of the (again, ideal) heterogenic character of public space brings to mind the associations of rural regions—in contrast to the city—with demographic homogeneity, in terms of ethnicity, age and, in agricultural areas especially, profession: a view that Geoffrey Blainey scathingly accuses of revealing a ‘profound ignorance’ of rural realities

among urban Australians. For Blainey, such assumptions reinforce a country that exists as 'two separate nations'—the coastal cities and 'the places far away'.¹⁰

Of course a raft of ethnographic (and theoretical) work on rural and regional populations in Australia has also pointed out the diversity of experience and the shifting populations of rural Australia that render this image erroneous. Unlike Blainey, whose analysis articulates spatial and cultural divisions, this work seeks to embed 'the rural' in dynamic networks of local, regional and global.¹¹ Nevertheless, rural public space remains under-theorised.

Kurt Iveson also limits his discussion of public space to the city, but his analysis of the ways in which publics are produced gives useful insight into the ambivalence in any attempt to define public space in terms of geographic limit. Iveson's key point is that the topographic definition of public space overlooks what he calls 'a procedural approach' to public space: this is the idea, advanced by public sphere theorists such as Clive Barnett and John Urry, that public space transcends geographic bounds and is generated, instead, in ephemeral or invisible contexts of gathering that are enabled by new, and often virtual, technologies. Iveson is cautious not to claim the ascendancy of the 'screen' over the 'square'. Instead, he pursues an unsettlement of geographic and technoscience certainties in our understanding of place. Rather than arising through one forum or another, he argues, publics 'have no proper location'.¹² This does not mean that public space is immaterial. Iveson suggests that particular material configurations—beyond the geographic coordinates of place—produce different forms of space, and that these 'offer different possibilities and opportunities for public action'.¹³

What can be extrapolated from Iveson's claim for the uncertain location of public-ness is that public space is defined by a (potential) openness to *elsewhere*, and consequently by an inherently discursive capacity that renders space continually unfinished and politically active. Michael Warner also defines public-ness in discursive terms which suggest the temporal and dynamic materiality of public space. His point is that publics are called into being by an entrance into discourse—'a public exists only by virtue of address'¹⁴—thus rendering public space always fluid and ephemeral. And it is the multiplicity of discourse, its multi-vocal capacity, which matters. As he explains, 'No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium ... texts themselves [do not] create

publics, but the concatenation of texts through time'.¹⁵ Warner's caveat, however, is that publics, though mutable, have necessary limits. The accessibility of discourse is contingent because an 'addressee' is already capable of recognising itself as such. Public discourse thus makes a double move, soliciting the arrival of strangers while pursuing a self-identifying audience. This performative capacity, the ways in which publics are sought and constituted, belongs to the world of poetics. Discourse in this light is a form of design, an imagined *and* material exercise in 'world making'.¹⁶

To return to the question of rural public space in light of these arguments, the role of place takes on different potential. Publics may not be tied to geographic coordinates, but places are still crucial to the formation of public space. They provide contexts for public-ness, for exchange and gathering, not as physical sites (though they may be), but as an intersection of poetic structures. Place *designs* are discursively produced and enacted—they are a mode of material storytelling. Whereas Iveson's cautionary approach to any place-based definition of public space infers that discourse proceeds from place, a materially performative view of discourse suggests an inverted chronology. Ned's shoe is not a story that emerges directly from the chronological history of a place: it is one manifestation of a design that enables and constrains the becoming of that place. If this is the case, then the emergence of public space is clearly related to traditions of place-making, and their capacity to generate politically dynamic and inclusive environments (both symbolic and physical). This renders the challenge of making rural places, in a context of environmental change and social stress, at least a partially poetic one.

—POETICS AND PLACE-MAKING

In Australia, processes of colonisation were material and ideological. The activities of non-indigenous settlement—the gradual movement of the frontier, the clearing of land, the construction of bureaucratic, economic and domestic boundaries—bore a modern vision that positioned the industrious settler subject against an environment, and its original inhabitants, associated with passivity and unproductive natures. When the surveyor A. J. Skene arrived in the Mallee in the mid nineteenth century, his impressions record 'a scrubby, sandy waste, almost entirely destitute of fresh water and grass, and therefore unavailable to human industry'.¹⁷ The unsuitability of the Mallee environment for modern agricultural economies was

registered as a challenge for design. The irrational 'scrubby' waste would be remade through the logic of order and progress.

Carrie Tiffany's 2006 novel *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* articulates this process, whereby the 'swerves and undulat[ions]' of the Mallee environment became rationalised under flat horizons of wheat.¹⁸ Set just prior to World War II, the novel tells the tale of the Better Farming Train which toured Victoria through the 1920s and 1930s, showcasing modern farming practices to rural communities and enticing urban dwellers to a life on the land. The novel's heroine, Jean, recalls the train's journey as an exercise in establishing a 'truly modern society':¹⁹

Here we are arriving at some tiny siding, just a few neat-edged buildings and their sharp shadows ... Sometimes a grateful farmer, or his son, will run a length beside us, waving his hat and grinning and calling out, 'Three cheers for the Better Farming Train', as if we are going to war. In those few days at Balling East, or Spargo Creek or Bendigo we make a place like somewhere else. Somewhere new...²⁰

More than a critique of the colonial or modern gaze, this is an account of design as an ontological practice, as the materialisation of a particular imaginary that is world-shaping. The train line that ushers in modernity; the farm land laid out over indigenous ecology; the roads that thread towns together; the right angles of city blocks—these are strategies of place-making that narrate and generate particular relations between humans and environments. They produce ways of being—modes of ecological comportment and practice. *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* cannot, of course, stand outside this reading, as it adds to the discursive life of the Mallee. In this way, the novel articulates its own poetic complicities in the constitution of place.

There is an increasing recognition among design theorists that the ontological capacities of design have been traditionally obscured by instrumental reason: 'The Western professionalisation of design ... has been linear and decisionist,' writes Tony Fry. 'Until very recently, the consequence of what human centredness took from, or imposed upon, environments and ecologies was just not taken into account—expediency ruled.'²¹ There are evident correlations between the privileged distinction between nature and civility in Western culture (the polis as the touchstone of a linear move away from irrationality), and design's tendency to

see its work as non-discursive, as a fixed imprint on the world without ongoing consequence. Crucially, this predilection overlooks not just the ways in which human and non-human lives are clearly entwined (as the social and environmental stresses of climate change make increasingly difficult to deny) but, moreover, it positions design—as a practice and a mode of imagining—outside a realm of ongoing relations. To reclaim the ontological capacity of design is to acknowledge its poetic and material actancy as a narrator and producer of ecological arrangements and complicities. This situates design as a profoundly ethical practice—‘designed things go on designing’²²—that is not a resolute form of world-making productive of singular reality but, after Annemarie Mol, participates in the enactment of *multiple* realities, made manifest through its technical *and* poetic aspects.²³

The non-dynamic, non-discursive and seemingly irrevocable designs of modernity upon settler Australian environments had thus to imagine reality as given: narrating the land as passive, and its original inhabitants chronologically positioned outside the future, the designs of an instrumental culture registered their mark in the ground as one-dimensional rather than a dynamic and relational impression. Discursive patterns and responding voices had to be continually suppressed. This inheritance is self-fulfilling. It means that the solutions put forward for unsustainable places overwhelmingly replicate current conditions: technologies or policies are mobilised to fix a problem, rather than to enter into a relational ecology of stories, materials and effects.

Paul Carter is a designer who explicitly links the condition of public space to the poetic making of place. His critical and creative engagement with the Western legacy of the profession points to the world’s un-mappable movements and mutable matrices of connectivity as the underside of instrumentalism. This is what he calls the ‘dark writing’ of the world: the phenomenological, ambiguous and profoundly interdependent ‘thisness of things’ that can not be apprehended by linear reason.²⁴ These thoughts build upon Carter’s early writing (*The Road to Botany Bay*, 1987; *The Lie of the Land*, 1996) in which he traced the poetic colonisation of Australia via technologies of design, such as maps, place names, and territorialisation strategies. Modes of place-making, these poetic techniques were performative: they inaugurated imperial history. The stories they authored enabled ways of reading place that imposed a vision of *elsewhere* onto a ground imagined as clear. What this

meant in practice was that settler Australians set about remaking the land—redirecting rivers, clearing land, and establishing agriculture—as if environments of the southern hemisphere were no different to those of the north. The narratives that oversaw this activity were ones that we recognise today (myths of ‘golden soil and wealth for toil’, for example: the story of unlimited land to be mastered and made productive) but—like Ned’s shoe—are beginning to lose their integrity.

Thus for Carter, practices of narrating and reading the land and practices of making place are one and the same. His starting point for a discursive account of public space is the multiple historicity of places: ‘nowhere emerges silently’.²⁵ Carter returns to the icon of linear thinking—the literal line of design, the line that sketches out or plans a vision for place—to refute the future-oriented nature of planning and urban design discourse. Far from one-dimensional, as the map or plan might suggest, this line is imbued with past and future stories. It is a trace of other traces—or as Carter puts it, journeys. It recalls and connects to other bodies, other movement forms, in space: ‘The architectural drawing ... is the offspring of the artist’s hand and eye. It materialises a yet earlier idealisation ... The lines on the map, the outlines of the urban place, may pose as the minimalist representations of pure ideas, but they contain within them a history of earlier passages.’²⁶ In this view, design doesn’t create anything new; instead, it recollects what is already there in unprecedented form. The linear traditions of design imagine their mark as originary because they take no account of this prior presence. They eradicate the lived bodies, the momentum of change, and the spaces of encounter and entanglement that constitute the dynamic multi-dimensionality of the world.

Carter’s alternative approach to place-making, tested out in his creative practice, is to put back what the line imaginatively erases. It is to engage in dark writing. This mode of place-making is poetically derived and highly performative. It seeks to conjure up *and* enter into the material ‘matrix of multiplicity where (we) belong and excel’ via a constant allusion to absent presences.²⁷ Carter identifies precedent for his practice in the poetic traditions of Indigenous Australia, in particular those demonstrated by the Papunya Tula movement. The drawings of Papunya Tula, at once ‘plans, or maps of place, *and* traces of passage’, demonstrate a non-linearist concept of place, and a performative and immersive concept of place-making.²⁸ But ultimately his work finds its rationale in Western culture’s own

traditions of (repressed) dark writing—the spaces where the ‘this-ness’ fleshes out the lines. The point most pertinent for this essay is that, in Carter’s practice, non-linear connections are advanced, not only as meaningful, but as actively and (when performed) continually giving form to public space. His creative methodology is consequently an enactment of the ways in which places come into being. The creative installations undertaken by Carter in recent years, loosely categorised as public art, landscape design and poetic installation (for example, *Relay*, 1998; *The Calling to Come*, 1996; *Golden Grove*, 2008), share a common investment in the capacity of the work to generate connections poetically and kinaesthetically as a mode of recollection. These are forms of design that refuse an outside to place.

—BOTH HERE AND ELSEWHERE

On 13 February 2009, unofficially known as ‘Sorry Day’, a crowd of approximately 8000 people filled Federation Square, in Melbourne’s CBD, to bear witness to the government’s apology to the Stolen Generations of Indigenous Australians. Beneath the crowd’s feet was the undulating form of *Nearamnew*, Paul Carter’s public art work that composes the ground of the square. The work was commissioned to commemorate the centenary of Australian federalism—but, as Anne Michaels reminds us, ‘the way we commemorate is a kind of remembering but it is also a kind of forgetting’.²⁹ *Nearamnew* is an attempt to recollect these dynamics of memory and entanglement that lie at the heart of place-making and nation-building and, in turn, to materialise the present absence of dark writing into this space. It is an art work that enters into the performative choreography of place by recollecting past voices. These are not voices transposed from an historical record. Instead, they are poetic compositions, convergences of the historical lines—both human and non-human—that meet at this place, and can never be captured by purely representational practice.

The design form of *Nearamnew* is an analogue of federalism: a ‘tripartite’ structure of interconnecting local, regional and global registers—the plaza entire, a series of ground patterns, and cryptic carvings of text into the stone that, while taken from Carter’s poetic writings about the site, are not complete or fully decipherable. But federalism, in the work, is neither a finished project nor a discrete arrangement. It is an analogue itself for the inherent flux of relations through which

the world is constituted. *Nearamnew* poetically invokes an indigenous history of federalism to generate a neo-colonial concept of place and the drawing together of parts: the site of Federation Square was the meeting ground of the tribes of the Kulin nation, before their dispossession; the pre-settler ecology of the Yarra's creeks and tributaries enacted a kind of federal system; and in between the lines of a national chronology exist a multitude of histories of encounter and exchange. This discursive enactment of place-making is also creative: these stories are encountered, through their material traces on the stone plaza floor, as crowds gather and passers-by come and go. Bodies in space temporarily connect to and enter stories that belong to both here and elsewhere, and all of these are of this place. A mode of embodied relationality with distributed histories and places, these ephemeral connections must be constantly performed.

Carter describes figurative thinking as the association of 'formerly distant things on the basis of some imagined likeness. It is to draw together things formerly remote from one another.'³⁰ This is a tactic of design and an ethical process. On the plaza of Federation Square is a piece of the Mallee: Lake Tyrrell, a large saline lake, currently severely drought affected, informs the 'global' shape of *Nearamnew*. The design was derived by Carter from an Aboriginal bark etching collected in the Lake Tyrrell area during the late nineteenth century, and depicts the lake in flood. Now rendered in sandstone (from another place again, the Kimberley in Western Australia), the whorls of a re-watered Lake Tyrrell compose the kinetic lie of plaza; they collaborate in the choreographies of people moving through, and articulate a design in process—a design of a place coming into being.

What does it mean to draw connections—at once poetic, material and ephemeral—between Lake Tyrrell and Melbourne's CBD, or the Mallee and Glenrowan, connections that allow other connections to appear? *Nearamnew* suggests a way to think about the rural *and* public space in the context of an expanded understanding of design's material and poetic capacities. Carter's method returns place to public space so as to deterritorialise it. As the crowd coming together for Sorry Day moved across the surface of Federation Square, they became a public constellated across space and time, in a temporal gathering of bodies, stories, and ephemeral presences: the other crowds hooked up by televisual and internet broadcast around Australia and the world; the dispersed communities of

the Mallee; and the histories recalled in *Nearamnew's* design. These convergences and temporary entanglements enable a public space that takes form beyond (but does not transcend) the square and the screen, the rural and the urban.

Back in Glenrowan, Ned's boot is a reminder that stories bear material consequence. But it does not follow that the curtain has come down on Ned and his myth. Outside a theatrical paradigm, where we no longer imagine the environment to be a passive stage, the shabby boot reveals not a world in decline but one composed of hazy and interweaving lines, and in which we—like the boot—are always caught up. Place designs that depend upon environmental and cultural forgetting bear a responsibility for the failings of public space. They ignore the local ground, but also fail to see its relations with elsewhere—relations not imposed, but discursively produced. Place is as dynamic as space. Designs on rural places that neither neglect specificity nor refuse the ebb and flow of a world in entangled process will start from this point: that in order to make place, we must first ask who, or what, comes together here.

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—NOTES

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