

Paul Carter:

Polyhedral: Recycling Boundary Ecologies

Abstract

Foregrounding the extent to which 'place' remains resistant to the politics and poetics of 'network culture', this essay approaches place as a boundary ecology rather than as an instance of cultural invariance. It calls on readers to think about attempts to actively recycle cultural 'debris' or 'waste' through an ethics of passage instead of the kind of instrumentalist statics that prevents the development of an ontology of mobility. Conceding that such a capacity to inhabit passage is compromised by the eschatological language used to communicate the implications of environmental disaster, as well as by languages of consultation that (conceptually) empty place of any creative power to incubate alternatives – events, modes of relation –, the essay stresses the mythopoetic techniques that produce places as knots or nodal points within a network of passage. The designer's task is to create the hinge mechanisms that render such boundary ecologies inhabitable imaginatively, and by materialising the nexus between creativity and change to alter our position vis-a-vis our ethical responsibilities as citizens of a shared biosphere.

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Relevant Publications:

- Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.
- Parrot. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research. Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Publishing, 2004.
- Repressed Spaces: The Poetics of Agoraphobia. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.
- The Lie of the Land. London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996.

A concept resistant to the politics and poetics of 'network culture' is *place*. In these remarks the counter-intuitive idea of place *as network* is explored. A network identified as a distinct location has to meet certain qualitative criteria. The volume of information flowing through it is unimportant. What counts is the quality of the information, its poetic potential to generate new meanings at that place. Information that communicates poetically makes use of signs that are polysemous. Figurative language, visual symbols and other media of aesthetic expression exhibit fields or inter-communicating regions tied together by an associative logic that instrumental reason discounts as subjective or tied to interests. However, the recognition that mythopoetic processes have a distinct architecture, topography and topology has heuristic consequences. It enables data that claim to be monosemous (without ambiguity) to be identified as 'nutrient deficient' in terms of sustaining the information community. Filtering can also operate positively. Qualitatively defined regions or networked places may provide a creative matrix in which abandoned cultural material reattaches itself to living traditions. Cultural 'debris' or 'waste' is recycled and acquires new meanings, collection and recollection contributing to the humid conditions in which invention flourishes.

Place is used here in the context of urban and landscape design. Even a short history of place is impossible here. The salient point is that an anthropological notion of place dominates place-making design discourse. In establishing the criteria and nominating the signifiers that will constitute the definition of place, whether in restoration, adaptive reuse or new place-making projects, a cultural reductionism operates. Our centralist bureaucracies colonise place-making opportunities as onerously as professional anthropologists used to reify other cultures. It has been difficult to recognise that 'different cultural formations ... were not an invariant structure, that they might have circulated with other alternatives, their application depending on the interpretive authority of particular actors.'¹ Yet at least a post-ethnographic perspective is now making this possible. By contrast, democratic societies remain bound by an idea of culture that is inflexible, monosemous and powerful in proportion to its susceptibility to representation. Academics bemoan the perpetuation of colonialist mentalities

abroad but, in the arena of public space design, the prescriptive impositions of planners, designers and architects embody a will to subjugation quite as repressive as anything practised in colonial times.

Community consultations ahead of major urban design initiatives replicate the situation in which ethnographers, missionaries and colonial administrators used to interrogate compliant 'native informants' about the local cultural conditions. Anyone who has been involved in these sessions knows that participants may have 'widely different perceptions of what [is] said, what things mean,' and that any occasion for place-making may be 'not so much an occasion for conformity as for temporary consensus building.'² But this opportunity to improvise new social ties, to negotiate intercultural reconciliations and other provisional accommodations goes undocumented. The goal of these ritualised consultations is to establish the themes that will represent the heritage of the site. Authentic place-associations are sought, even when the destruction of the inherited structures, their physical and ecological relationship, is planned. In this ghoulish context, the public finds itself invited to provide copy that will furnish the tombstone for what has disappeared. In this sense, all government-auspiced public art is collaborationist, and tends to accelerate the very amnesia it purports to resist.

I write these notes in a hotel room at the recently-opened Darwin Waterfront. I look down at a site where I have been invited to design a 'cultural facility' that will secure the development's 'sense of place'.³ The site is a rectangular, and therefore artificial, peninsula extending into a shallow water lagoon protected on all sides by crocodile-proof wharfs and pontoons. The mildly sloping peninsula lawn is indistinguishable from any suburban park in northern Europe. The spur-winged plovers have noisily colonised it, carrying on their vernacular courtship rituals. Later, sunbakers spilling over from the Wave Pool will transpose flirtation into the human domain. But what, apart from these thinly inscribed tracks of migrants and tourists, constitutes the identity of this recent extension

¹ Myers 7.

² Myers, op.cit., 8, with reference to a meeting of Pintupi elders which the anthropologist attended.

³ My design studio Material Thinking has been commissioned by the Darwin Waterfront Corporation to develop a 'vision' for the site that will incorporate a cultural facility, an open-air performance space and associated designed environment.

into the tideless salt water? The colonisers set up camp in a shallow bay at the foot of the escarpment.⁴ They chose a site flanked by two low coastal outcrops. In the century and a half since these rough beginnings, the bay has been modified beyond recognition. The mangrove swamp has been eradicated; the two hills removed for industrial and security purposes respectively; and land fill has inexorably extended the old water line seawards. A handsome curving jetty dominates the sea view. And now a residential-commercial complex of no great architectural merit has been erected. What is 'sense of place' here?⁵

In western thinking *place* and *sense of place* occupy different but related discursive regimes. The genealogy of place is traced back to terms such as *topos* and *chora*. In this conception places are conceptual spatial containers or operative voids. They are the raw material of planning. Sense of place theories have their origins in the modern invention of landscape, and its picturesque theorisation. In one derivation sense is associated with French *sentier*: mobile, where place is static, sense of place emphasises qualities of orientation and, path-making. In the latter case 'A social-experiential orientation emphasizes meanings that are created as people interact with a place and with each other in a place, developing connections to the place.'⁶ However, these respectively quantitative and qualitative conceptions of place are also related. 'Sense' may accrue to place through its human usage but the place remains logically prior to its interpretation. Interpretation may be imaginative - Thomashow argues that developing a 'place-based perceptual ecology' is the basis of learning 'how to move beyond that place and explore the relationship between places', explaining that 'you practice biospheric perception by virtue of three interconnected pathways - natural history and local ecology, the life of the imagination, and spiritual deliberation.'⁷ However, even in this formulation of place as a network of relationships potentially global in its outreach, the idea that place may be a verb

twinned with displacing, in which other alternatives are embedded, is not entertained.

The site below my window - and the window view - are enduring forms of acts of placement predicated on displacement. They are works of passage that disguise their environmental presumption, illustrating the privileged position of the imaginal in the western construction of reality. What is seen is less significant than the construction of a view point and a view. To understand what had to be left out to achieve this identification of place with its model is not to recover archaeologically an older, more authentic habitat. It is not another act of virtual reconstruction or projection. It is to begin the work of remarking passage. A critical sense of place is one that develops tools for calibrating the *sentiers* said to lend places their experiential drag. The pathways may be physical grooves, representable in plans, but they signify because they bear poetic associations, rhythmic, kinaesthetic, metrical and ultimately poetic dimensions. They are discursive in the etymological sense. In this case, what is called place emerges where *sentiers* meet, intersect, interfere with one another or cancel each other out. Place is not a meeting place of stories - themes that the heritage lobby can restore and reinterpret - but an arrest, or filtering, of passage.

A sense of place that did not suppress the act of placing (and its cognates - displacing and replacing), that did not subjugate acts of becoming at that place in the name of an ideology of cultural invariance, would not explore 'the relationship between places', but the phenomenon (the ethics and aesthetics) of relating - the mythopoetic techniques that produce places as knots or nodal points within the network of passage. This proposition is not merely theoretical. It is put forward in the context of figures like Bruno Latour advocating *passage* as a conceptual cure for the kind of instrumentalist statics that prevents the development of an ontology of mobility.⁸ In general, the study of relationality - and all that goes with the logical physics of the in-between - is predicated on end places, stable destinations between which the psychological and historical dramas of becoming are played out. The new rhetoric of passage dispenses with these end points - with the consequence that all is flux and any model for stable change is lacking. The possibility of a mythopoetic orientation to the flux, one that calibrates passage

⁴ The early colonial history of the site is conveniently available at www.cdu.edu.au/newsroom/origins/edition1-2007/origins1-2007-waterfront.pdf where historian Kathy de la Rue's article 'On the Waterfront' can be accessed.

⁵ The delivery of a 'sense of place' was a repeated demand of community consultations held in 2004 and 2005.

⁶ Farnum, Hall & Kruger 1.

⁷ Thomashow 14.

⁸ See discussion in Carter 2008, 266-267.

through the identification of polysemous events (and/or places), is a corrective to an anarchic vision that, strictly speaking, defies marking, remarking and therefore communication.

In poetry metre stabilises flux: metre is a design on rhythm. In any case certain patterns are filtered from the field of change so that there emerges a thick boundary, and the reconfiguration of passage as a hinge place where change is institutional and exhibits stable forms. These reflections begin to elicit what 'sense of place' might mean outside my window. Community consultations held five years ago found that people wanted certain stories told. They also wanted a meeting place. The inference was that a new public space should be designed that incorporated such themes as Indigenous Dreaming narratives, colonial accounts of first contact and settlement, evocations of the pearl shell and pearl economy, together with symbolic representations of various non-human attributes (biodiversity) and human characteristics (multiculturalism) of Darwin and the 'Top End' generally. A parody of this wishlist would be a functional 'meeting place' (incorporating informal performance facilities) staked out with symbolic representations of the grand narratives said to define Darwin's identity. Such a theatrical mix would successfully preserve the ideology of cultural invariance, and empty the site of any creative power to incubate 'alternatives' - that is, to incubate the possibility of anything taking place or happening.

Sentiers give passage sense, just as passage scores places. Here, the first clue to the arrangement of things is the successive walls normally relegated to the status of scenography: the window, the jigsaw of divisions across the hotel grounds, the breakwater, the handsome curving wharf, the horizontal coastline of the Cox Peninsula with its refineries, and the horizon itself - I say 'itself' but the horizon is also seven-shelled with mother-of-pearl cloud laminations climbing into the dusky evening. If you Google Earth the region, passing from one scale to another, you discern that the geographical forms exhibit a Mandelbrot-like tendency to reproduce essential characteristics at different scales. The generalisation of this is a coastline that is not a line at all but an arrangement of permeable passages - promontories sinking to form necklaces of islands, the emergence of straits, alternative passages and new permeable barriers - spits, banks and shoals - created and uncreated by tidal fluctuations. At progressively smaller scales, the archipelago effect

is reproduced in the constitution of coastal flora - the aerial root system of the mangrove swamp is a field of stakes that supports a colloidal medium (mud) able to stabilise land-sea relations. The oyster that finds a home in this humid environment carries out its own filtering operations. The *branchiae* or gills leach the salt water for nutrients and occasionally by a kind of fertile oversight admit grit that a process of nacreous inhumation transforms into pearl.

These stories of passage that makes a difference could be multiplied. They are essentially sites where the flux is inscribed with significance, where media incubate embryonic forms. The structure of these forms is hingelike, jointed, constitutionally doubled and asymmetrical. Their philosophical counterpart is Parmenides' figure of a gate filled with gates. Their historical counterparts are the mimetic performances improvised wherever Europeans encountered non-Western peoples: an archetypal instance occurs a few kilometres north-east of where I write. The *Beagle*, in which Charles Darwin circumnavigated the globe, was subsequently deployed as a coastal survey vessel. The great theorist of hybridisation was not part of the survey that encountered Larrakia people near here. He was not witness to the spectacle of English officers 'dancing for their lives' at the foot of a cliff on which, at least in the melodramatic lithograph prepared for the publication of Stokes's journal, Indigenous warriors furiously brandished their spears. This absence did not prevent the naturalist's name being appended to our section of coast (and subsequently to a town). But the point is that the antics of the officers and the naming practices of their captain are related acts of place-making.⁹ In both cases, a mere coincidence is exploited. Wickham's reasons for commemorating a former *Beagle* passenger *here* remain inscrutable: perhaps he perceived in the potential harbour an analogue with the collecting places that Darwin favoured. Here was a geographical hollow where debris, or overlooked data, accrued, a bay where passage had slowed down and sedimented, providing the evidence (for those who could interpret it) of change.

⁹ The illustration referred to here is reproduced in my *Dark Writing* on page 64. The 'third voyage' (1837-1843) of the *Beagle*, to survey the coasts of Australia was under the command of John Clements Wickham. Wickham named Beagle Bay and Port Darwin with the *Beagle's* previous (second) 1831-1836 voyage in mind in which the naturalist Charles Darwin circumnavigated the world.

In any case, a discourse of passages is one that continually renews itself, in the absence of a fixed grammar (or invariant culture) continuously filtering the environment for indications of intention. The site of the Larrakia encounter became known on the map as Adam Bay, a mythopoetic acknowledgement of the fact that coastal communication was *adamic*, representing a vernacular re-enactment of Logos as Creator. What signified in these tense exchanges was not any content - the trading of agreed signifiers - but the tidal momentum of the desire to communicate. In these situations the traditional, anthropologically-sanctioned relationship between place and place name is inverted. Place names are compacted stories or myths of place-making: the deplorable effect of colonisation, we are told, is to uncouple names from their places - 'What people thus lose is the relationship between the stories and the particular portion of the ground.'¹⁰ In this case, names/place-names like Darwin and Adam Bay, obey a different, future-oriented associative logic, one in which the attachment of a signified to the signifier lies in the future, and the value of the name resides not in the place it conjures up but in the opportunity it creates to imagine settlement.

The phases of this proleptic toponymy might be compared to the first stages of the oyster's life in which motile larvae begin to develop a foot, seeking out places where they can moor themselves (initially with hairlike fibres) and eventually attach themselves. Similarly, the over-determined cultural signifiers *Darwin* and *Adam*, articulated in a new context, throw off acquired associations and circulate freely; however, the fertility of their cultural associations is soon captured by the colonial imaginary, whose mythic techniques of self-legitimation rapidly endow them with a distinct location and originary authority. Perhaps it follows, to take the analogy a step further, that a critical place-making (in a postcolonial context) seeks not to reproduce the mythological narratives of founding but would attend instead to the noise that accompanied these efforts at translation - or, in oyster talk, it would ponder the grit that goes unattended and triggers off the reactive (and creative) formation of pearl. Translated into discursive terms, a recognition of the mythopoetic

techniques¹¹ that add value to passage is the basis of any incursion into the discursive domain likely to be sustainable, fertile in suggesting new *topoi* and topics.

There emerges from these Waterfront reflections an idea of place as a boundary ecology, as a filtration system in which flux is endowed with a network character, as if it could be imagined as a double figure integrating wall and way, fence and flow. The architecture of passage is characterised by knots where different story lines do not simply meet but entangle, hybridise or otherwise activate a principle of mere coincidence to improvise a chiasmatic or riddling formation. To riddle is to speak enigmatically, to veil senses: it is also to sift coarse material. The act of sifting works here to preserve data that do not conform, which for this reason hold the potential to attract new associations or revive old, neglected ones. In design terms data of this kind are forms that may look strangely familiar but which resist identification. Such forms serve as hinge works, mediating between different physical states, diverse story lines and cultures of settling. In the context of designating a boundary ecology poles have this function: stylised islands, mooring posts, palisades, sticklike figures, gills, nets ... they are twinned in this typology with hollows, bays, ears, shells and other sail-like receptacles materialising the history of passage. It is evident that these signatures of passage localise, materialise and connect, but the sense of place they might incubate does not replicate the 'place-based perceptual ecology' Thomashow advocates.

Instead of practising 'biospheric perception by virtue of three interconnected pathways', the wanderer in this networked place experiences the suspension of settlement, the creative and recreative potential of passage to produce out of chiasmatic events ambiguous settings. These offer creative templates not for the restoration of invariant cultural stereotypes but for things to take place. Staged here is the setting of exchange rates and the shadows cast by the processes of filtering, selecting, classifying and quarantining essential to the constitution of stable forms and identities. These are clearly choreographies with a global application, but they educate not by leading out from the neighbourhood but by marking and

¹⁰ Weiner 2001, but no further reference given in Thomas F. Thornton 31.

¹¹ Mythopoesis: a critical re-evaluation of mythic narratives, usually associated with periods of semiotic crisis or degradation. See the discussion in Carter 2004, 170-176.

remarking exploratory *sentiers* amid it. These sentiers are not paths yet. In fact, they may never evolve into signposted ways through the labyrinth: passage here will have the same oscillatory nature as breathing, always timed and placed, always expressive, relational, dependent and poised between inspiration and expiration.¹²

The capacity to inhabit passage, to recover the act of place-making - to make these interstitial activities constitutive in an environmental as well as creative sense - demarcates one function of art in the context of the eschatological language used to communicate the implications of climate change. It is not sufficient to use art instrumentally to show forth what environmental scientists seek to prove with numbers. The challenge is to articulate the common place these warnings are designed to defend. But the common place cannot be the flat plane of instrumental reason and its institutions. It must be composed differently - in the way sketched here as a region of gathered creative potential, analogous to a high pressure region in meteorology. The designer's task is to create the hinge mechanisms that render this boundary ecology inhabitable imaginatively, and by materialising the nexus between creativity and change to alter our position vis-a-vis our ethical responsibilities as citizens of a shared biosphere.¹³

If terms like *place* or *sense of place* can survive in this coastally-imagined arrangement of passage or hinge forms - of gates within gates - it may be in the transfigured guise of the *hedra*. This term, the third in the *chora, topos, hedra* triad, dropped out of use, it is speculated, because of its vulgar associations with the human rump or backside.¹⁴ The term *hedra* is associated with ideas of settlement. It is a thing properly placed or the proper place of things. In other words, it is a hinge term that expresses the doubleness of place when it is conceived as an act of placing. In contrast with

the planning orthodoxy (and its heritage counterpart), which imagines sense scored into blank surfaces, the location of the *hedra* is simultaneously a medium disposed to receive an impression and the impression made. Evidently, this act of placing cannot be thought in the abstract. Nor can it be thought in isolation: just as a track is always a multiplicity or field of impressions, indicating a double moment of arrival and departure, so the *hedra* is always *polyhedral*. The Platonic appropriation of this term is intriguing. It suggests a disposition to aggregate. But the thinking that sees connections is humid not dry. The figure that might be imagined forming between the pulsed artificial surf of the Wave Pool and the imperturbable band of sea beyond the wharf will not be a closed faceted geometrical figure but a thick boundary, a filter work encrusted, eroded, oddly recollecting, imagining and inventing the unsettling act of settlement.

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¹² Implicitly contrasted with design practices that produce Ersatz senses of place or, worse the anomie of placelessness, these emotionally-engaging networks of sentiers might aspire to be aesthetic counterparts of what Hokari refers to in Gurindji philosophy as the 'Right Way' - 'a geographical landscape as well as human behaviour. Morally is spatial as well as behavioural.' The design is ethical not because it successfully cites traditions associated with the place but because it rightly orients people, teaching them 'how to look after this created world.' (Hokari 216-217).

¹³ On the concept of 'boundary ecologies' in ecological discourse, see Forman 82ff.

¹⁴ See Algra 95. Hence kata + hedra (cathedral): to sit down.

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