Decolonising Poetics. Paul Carter Talks to Roberta Trapè Interview Conducted by email in June 2021

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In such influential publications as *The Road to Botany Bay. An Essay in Spatial History* (2010), *The Lie of the Land* (1996), *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (2008), *Meeting Place: the Human Encounter and the Challenge of Coexistence* (2013) and *Decolonising Governance: Archipelagic Thinking* (2018) Paul Carter[1] (born in the UK in 1951) has explored the conceptual underpinnings of colonisation and the preconditions of decolonisation. A postcolonial poetics informs a prolific public art and radiophonic output reported in books like *Material Thinking: the Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (2004), *Ground Truthing: Explorations in a Creative Region* (2010), *Places Made after Their Stories: Design and the Art of Choreotopography* (2015) and *Amplifications: Poetic Migration, Auditory Memory* (2019). Carter is resident in Melbourne where he is Professor of Design (urbanism) at RMIT University.

ROBERTA TRAPÈ   In our previous interview, we pursued two strands: a revisionist ethnography of colonial encounter and their contemporary application in urban design.

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[1]   In a previous interview (Trapè 2014) Carter and I discussed publications in which Carter explores the dynamics of colonial encounter and their lessons for postcolonial place-making. In this interview, we discuss the transformations of these themes in his recent writing. I am profoundly grateful to Paul Carter for granting me the interview.

PAUL CARTER   Yes, rather disparate fields of enquiry but held together perhaps by the idea that in both cases communicative spaces are being designed, zones where (optimally) social performances incorporating difference are modelled.

R.T.   Obviously this is a highly personal synthesis, suggestive of the artist/writer as much as the historical ethnographer or urban designer.

P.C.   Personal but I would like to think not wholly eccentric.

R.T.   In your forthcoming book, *Translations*,[2] you suggest that the key to linking an interest in the colonial past to the practice of designing new urban meeting places may be the experience of migration. How does that work?

P.C.   Yes, migration as, essentially, poetic migration, you know, the perennial task of translating across differences, in the process discovering (often painfully) what cannot be successfully carried over. Moving from Italy to Melbourne, forty years ago now, my first impression was that English did not 'fit', a discourse able to map sense of place was lacking. Where had it gone? Assuming that Australia's first and sovereign peoples were at home, why had their cultures of making sense made so small an impression on white settler consciousness? Early colonial wordlists (renderings of different Aboriginal lexicons in English) offered a clue: occasionally poignant, invariably semi-mythical, they documented a white society largely talking into its own mirror.

R.T.   A historical scene that, if I am not mistaken, inspires one or more of your works for radio.

P.C.   Yes, works that, I am happy to say, are now available again through the initiative of the UK journal, *Performance Research*.[3]

R.T.   A communicational impasse that, nevertheless, had poetic possibilities?

P.C.   Yes, I was struck by the extent to which the new migrant arriving in Australia experienced an interpellation similar to that documented in the colonial wordlists. At that time cultural critics like Nikos Papastergiadis and Sneja Gunew were making the case that this censorship of the radical Other – of the possibility that migration and migrants might change the white settler *episteme* – was structurally analogous to the tactics of subjugation that characterised original colonisation.

R.T.   So that, to pick up one of your favourite ideas, the politics was in the poetics.

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2   Carter 2021.

3   Carter 2020. This publication of ten scripts produced mainly in the 1980s and 1990s includes free links to the original radio productions.

P.C. Yes, that 'original colonisation' goes on repeating itself unless the discourse of invasion is confronted and alternative discourses of coexistence found. This is why, in *Decolonising Governance*, I introduce the concept of 'metaphorical competence', broadly speaking, a capacity to engage with Indigenous knowledge systems without any expectation of 'translation' into the language of western planning. I link mis- (or non-) translation to poetic illiteracy. The idea is that the decolonisation of environmental governance is inseparable from the capacity to understand story-telling.[4]

R.T. Which, in your terms, as you set out in *Meeting Place*, is performative.[5]

P.C. Yes, theoretically, the meaning of the encounter in which differences are constitutive is found in the generation of social and communicational protocols through the performances themselves. In the place-making work you referred to, I conceptualised public spaces in a similar way, in terms of exploratory choreographies. In *Translations*, the metaphor is modified somewhat, and I describe my creative encounter with public spaces and the enigma of public communication in terms of dramaturgy: public artist as public space dramaturg.

R.T. Returning to metaphors, the subtitle of *Decolonising Governance* is 'archipelagic thinking': how are the two phrases related?

P.C. Postcolonial human geographers have long recognised the relationship between different territorial conceptions and different traditions and cultures of governance. In general (although not inevitably), archipelagic distributions of powers promote power arrangements that are 'horizontal' or pluralised while traditionally continentalist sovereign states have organised social and spatial relations hierarchically and concentrically. I suppose you could say that in many of today's geographical archipelagos socio-political relations involve a kind of dramaturgy. We are also familiar with Glissant's archipelagic poetics: as political figures, archipelagos are composed of essentially interdependent units – in this sense there are no islands in the archipelago. Well, this combination of distance and nearness places exchange, and the negotiation of exchange (physical, economic, cultural and symbolic), at the heart of co-existence. In such realms of constitutional difference, metaphorical competence will be at a premium. From this perspective, the 'local knowledge' possessed by Indigenous groups changes its valen-

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4 Carter 2018a.

5 Carter 2013.

cy. It is no longer a subset of (western) universal knowledge but generative of principles and practices of exchange applicable more widely: the amalgamation of local knowledges into creative regions is a feature of decolonised governance.

R.T.   You referred before to the way in which the experience of colonisation is to some degree shared by the migrant, but, surely, there are significant differences, after all…

P.C.   Yes, after all, migrants, like generations of colonists (and who is to say where one becomes the other) are uninvited 'guests' on unceded land.

R.T.   In an earlier exchange, you referred to the discussion in *Translations* of sovereignty in terms of a new transactional politics characterised by 'creative migrancy'. Is this part of your answer?

P.C.   These are large questions. Let me make two points, one practical, the other ethical. They are no doubt related. The practical point concerns the nature of the creative encounter explored in *Translations*: broadly speaking, I characterise my radio work, my cultural writing, dramaturgical projects and public art as 'dirty art'; by this I mean that they are contextually generated, improvised responses to 'real world' situations. They are not driven by some aesthetic or formal agenda. I make no strong distinction between creative practice, ethnography, sociology or indeed the dramaturgy of public space design. That is, as a migrant practitioner, I seek not to take the ground for granted but aim to 'work my passage' in terms of developing metaphorical literacy. The second point is ethical and refers to the everpresent origin of the migrant in another place. As you know, in Australia the key feature of Aboriginal sovereignty is a connection to the 'ancestors' mediated through attachment to 'Country'. The first step in the migrant's self-examination is similar: resisting the assimilationist pressure to bracket off the past, a reconnection to our own ancestors is essential. We were talking about the personal before yet, in *Translations* at least, this merges into 'autoethnography' where the important personal narrative of origins is not autobiographical but historical. There are important chapters in *Translations* about the impact of rapid modernisation (notably through land enclosure and the mechanisation of labour) on my forebears. The contingency of one's own arrival, and the hidden stories that lie behind it, are what I call symbola, half objects in search of a host; but obviously, for these symbola to find their other halves and 'fit', creative agency also has to be ceded.

R.T.   Can you give an example?

P.C.   An Aboriginal colleague and I recently formed a cultural consultancy. We met through Yagan Square, a major inner urban

redevelopment in Perth driven by a strong reconciliation agenda: as a Noongar Elder, he was one of many providing cultural advice; I was engaged in 'dirty art', in this case the exploration of cross-cultural placemaking stories important in shaping Yagan Square's public art program. In *Translations*, I describe one of our subsequent collaborations where a three-way mediation of different relationships to Country depended on the exchange of stories. These stories related to the tragic loss of children – to a contemporary event in which, as our shared stories found, generations of suffering were contained. In the context of a new identity politics orthodoxy that, in my view, confuses decolonisation with pre-colonisation, our creative engagement with incommensurable realities produced, I think, a new, rather more complex discourse of place-making, one that allowed all of us to broaden our definition of the 'ancestors' and to acknowledge our tangled historical destinies.

R.T.   How much can be extrapolated from a single instance? Particularly where the transaction you describe clearly depends on trust having been established between the convening parties.

P.C.   Perhaps the novelty of the position set out practically in *Translations* and a little more theoretically in *Decolonising Governance* is that governance, and all the related issues of sovereignty, are performative: the law is not laid down but repeatedly reaffirmed, adjusted and modified – essentially an endless process of interpretation. Evidently, and tragically, law in the western sense is incapable of thinking and acting poetically; where the ground is not given (or has been taken away), protocols of communication must reflect on the prior dissolution of trust, the breakdown of meanings. From the perspective of 'metaphorical competence', the old 'myths' are not suppressed but critically and creatively scrutinised; the law as a flexible but binding social arrangement able, for example, to sustain goals of cultural and environmental biodiversity, is negotiated mythopoetically. One effect of reviving a practical transactional poetics is, of course, to break down the human/non-human binary. Biodiversity is, as they say, a 'whitefella' word.

R.T.   I am struck by the emphasis you place on orality, on the political potential of metaphorically competent engagements across difference to foster new environments of coexistence. How can these, presumably precarious, understandings ever acquire the force of law?

P.C.   At a community level, customary law already operates in this way. But in focusing on the poetics of decolonisation, the primary mechanism of change is sought in the way we conduct and represent ourselves. As important in this respect as orality is *aurality*, an awareness of the essential role played by lis-

tening. *Translations* is, in some way, a sequel to my 2019 publication *Amplifications*.[6] In that book I describe a sense-making process that is echoic. Echoes define the migrant condition; echoic mimicry is a primary technique of sense making where the ground is not given; and, in *Amplifications*, I illustrate how these pragmatic realities can generate historically revisionist works of sound art.[7] But the implications of this characteristically migrant persona are not only aesthetic but ethical; and, I would argue, in 'dirty art', where the materials are constituted by the trace in them of what has been silenced, the two considerations fuse into one.[8] Any authorial voice is diffused and dispersed, while, internally, the structure of the work is echoic all the way down, a fact that implies an aesthetics of listening that is ethical.

R.T.   Listening, but also the historical traumas of silencing and forgetting, as in the sound installation «The Calling to Come»…

P.C.   Certainly, listening is selective and in a Foucauldian sense disciplined to extract from the noise of communication those sound signatures that close the circle of semiotic exchange. The elimination of auditory environments as incidental to making sense is a persistent theme in *Amplifications*, a book that is ideally read in conjunction with *Absolute Rhythm*. «The Calling to Come», reprinted in *Absolute Rhythm*, was an echoic dialogue designed for the entrance of a new museum in Sydney.[9] It was based on language notebooks dating from around 1790, an echoic mimetic amplification of these that opened a door into the colonial unconscious. It was 'dirty art' in the sense that it added a new dimension to a piece of functional public infrastructure. But, yes, it invited museum visitors to experience the trauma of a listening fraught with misunderstanding that in the end cast over the future the filter of silence.

R.T.   In the creative history you have written in terms of ethnographic encounters, the experience that linked them, migration, has a great poetic power, the phenomenon of arrival from outside. Can this be found in white Australia's political theory and practice?

P.C.   As you know, white settler Australia is built on the legal fiction that Australia, like post 1066 England, is in the gift of the

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6   Carter 2019.

7   Carter 2019. See also Carter 2018b.

8   A conveniently accessible illustration of this is the performance script «Cooee Song» reproduced in *Absolute Rhythm* (Carter 2020, 55-74). Carter's production of this work is also available at `http://performance-research.org/absolute-rhythm.html`.

9   «The Calling to Come», *Absolute Rhythm* (Carter 2020, 149-64).

Crown. The notorious doctrine of *terra nullius*, the notion that Australia was unowned at the time of British colonisation – it was obviously occupied – mirrored the home situation. One of the corollaries of this bizarre Platonic fiction is that Australia was not colonised from outside; rather, it acquired British sovereignty. In this myth, the entire drama of arrival from outside has no theoretical or practical significance. The result is a 'hypothetical nation' characterised by ghost belonging.[10] In denial of its origins, it cannot recognise Aboriginal sovereignty. One of the arguments of *Translations* is that, as perpetual outsiders, defined by their relationship to their origins, migrants may act as a historical circuit-breaker. But, in my view, the mechanism of this will not be formal changes to the constitution unless these are linked to a collective reflection: «the labour of living together will be recognised in concomitant acts of cultural productions; if the new polity is to be grounded poetically, these works are likely to be dirty, uncensored histories remembered in the relived experience of migration».[11]

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[10] See the important discussion in Nicolacopoulos, Vassilacopoulos 2014, 25-34.

[11] Carter 2021, 250.