

IMAGINING 'AUSTRALIA': PAUL CARTER'S MIGRANTOLOGY

Ian McLean

In 'The Provincialism Problem', an influential article written in 1974, Terry Smith argued that Australian artists were trapped between 'two antithetical terms: a defiant urge to localism...and a reluctant recognition that generative innovations...are determined externally' (56-58). The impertinent nativist must in the end become the ingratiating mimic of an imperial order. What hope, then, is there for a purloined identity; for a subject who is not a subject? Rather than answer this question directly, Paul Carter re-framed or re-bordered it, and, in doing so, disclaimed both nativism and imperialism. For him the loss of and nostalgia for home that both shared was the lure for a better way of living. Instead of being a province, 'Australia' became a potential site of redemption in which the movement of migration and colonisation is not merely 'an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival', but is 'a mode of being in the world' ('Living in a New Country' 100-101). This mode of being was, by implication, of a very different order from that staged by traditional Western ontology.

Carter transformed the failure of immigrant cultures, their hybrid mimicries, prejudices and blindnesses, into a liberatory aesthetic which sourced its power in a phenomenology of the body rather than in a politics of place. For him, this phenomenology was a poetic negotiation between the subject's sensory resources and the spectre of language or culture. Here spatiality is not mapped, as if it were a stage surveyed by the cartographer's imperious eye, but is something fluid, as if traced by the movement of the body. Space, for Carter, is excavated by the movement of bodies; it is a history, not a geography. And so he supports those who combat the 'Cartesian viewpoint' by a guerilla writing which apes the 'inherent shiftingness of the environment', lives and breathes within its folds and textures like a fish swimming in water so that 'writing about dissolves back into the trace of, and so becomes the slipstream of a history, a tail that still wags, is the pulse itself' ('Events of Today' 6-7). This is, I suggest, a type of spirituality based on metaphors of immersion rather than transcendence, baptism rather than resurrection, oceans rather than mountains.

Carter's antecedents are those romantic/modernists who rejected the Cartesian neo-classical prospect for an intimate occluded space. Carter called it 'an interstitial view'. Like a hinge, its cubist perspective folds the world into being, undoing the stiff erections of language, or at least of that imperial language which has, for so long, held Euro-Australians in its gaze. Carter conceives this folding and undoing in terms of Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh in the world', his ultimate ambition being more than a Derridean deconstruction of colonialism. He hopes for a radical Rousseauian subversion of language in order to return to 'an environmental logic' that is immersed in the presentness of a lived space (*The Sound in Between* 128). Acutely attuned to the rhythms and textures of intimate and immediate experience, he seeks the interstices of wind and rushing water and his own murmurings as 'the occasions of speech'.

While Carter acknowledges that his 'attempt to give mimicry a respectable meaning' can

be counted as the 'achievement of a post-colonial identity', his ambition has wider horizons than the 'historical or political'; it is to access a spirituality, a mode of being. 'In the end', he argues, 'his aesthetic "implies a poetics" which, in turn, "implies the world we would like to inhabit'. Carter did more than alleviate the symptoms of colonial and migrant melancholy, he upturned its morbid constitution, casting migrantology as an agent of spiritual regeneration. The migrant's movement away from home is Carter's prescription for a new spirituality. 'I am beginning to see', said Carter, 'that our culture's disparagement of movement is at the root of many ills'; 'The problem is not to preserve differences but to devise new movements between them' (*The Sound in Between* 21-22).

In turning the symptoms of homelessness into a cure, Carter imagined the ideal world as a vast ocean, a primordial space without limits. For him the first step towards being is leaving the closed space of home for the open sea. This is because being is a transport between differences, a hybrid entity made from translations, doublings and discontinuities. He approvingly cites Edward Said's notions of 'travelling theory' and 'contrapuntal perspectives', elevating them to an aesthetic which he calls 'post-colonial collage', as if to deliberately distinguish it from the perspectival regime of the European cartographers whom, he claims, orchestrated the invasion of Australia.

Against the eloquence of European literature Carter juxtaposes the stilted exchanges and mimics of colonial societies where poetry has lost its transcendental function:

[It] refuses to lie down and become a semiotic system...silently transporting meaning from one place to another. Instead it disrupts the linear exchange of ideas, insisting on the confusion of sound, the independent logic or illogic of purely phonetic contrasts and coincidences. ('Post-Colonial Collage' 195-96)

For Carter, such confusions of postcolonial collage are the unwinding eddies of an ur-language that traces the interdependencies of space, time, body and words. In recovering 'the spaces between words, the formative intervals of sound', Carter argues for migrantology as a spiritual quest which returns us to the 'latent' 'deeper poetics' 'suppressed' 'within the ritualised performances of language'. He claims that this is liberatory because it makes us 'the subject of language, not its object, the actor not the acted upon, the singer not the silence' ('Post-Colonial Collage' 198).

While Carter is deeply suspicious of interiority and a priori truths, he does not escape their conceptual hold. In undoing the spatialised logic of Western discourses which made the world into a picture, a map, migrantology reveals a priori lived temporality of being in the world—what Carter calls the 'pre-semiotic realm', where history is returned to space, and space to history. And it is a *return*, a loss restored, a paradise regained. He calls it the 'first journey', when space still retains that innocence before knowledge stages the theatre of place ('Plotting Australia's Explorer Narratives' 10). Like Merleau-Ponty, Carter posits an anterior wholeness, a chiasmic watery consciousness prior to the differentiation of the senses and of language—a pre-semiology centred in Carter's own poetic sensibility.

If Carter seeks a redemption from the language which he so ably ministers, he does not believe that 'the "pre-semiotic realm" escapes from the logic of signs' (*The Sound in Between* 128). The pre-semiotic is not Eden; language has already inaugurated the fall. If postcolonial collage 'opens windows on to natural environments', it is a nature that is historical, a nature in which is coiled the poisons of culture. Thus Carter minutely delineates the texts of exploration and settlement of Australia, but at the same time seeks to outflank or exceed their textualities. Acknowledging that the poison of language detaches 'signs from their origins', his critical purpose is to undo this undoing by substituting the semiotic rule of oppositionality with a poetic sensibility which retains 'the prior chiaroscuro of spacetime' ('Events of Today' 5-6). In paying 'attention to the sensational textures that form the perceptual bedrock of signs', in 'straddling this border between sound and sense' (*The Sound in Between* 128), he hopes to uncover the pre-texts of semiology. Thus the value of Carter's phenomenology depends largely on the ways in which he occupies these border zones—what he called the 'quality' of 'travelling' (*Road to Botany Bay* 103). While he has intelligently and

beautifully traced the latitudes of such border zones, their oceanic spaces and pregnant absences, to my mind this field he skirts remains blurred. It is unclear whether Carter seeks a multiplicity of borders, or a borderlessness; if he is a border-phobe or border-phile. So what is the source of his urge to dissolve differences, to be like 'the body of a swimmer woven into and out of the body of water', to be like 'an interior which has no outside—the kind of world inhabited, say, by the blind' ('Events of Today' 5)?

A psychoanalyst might suggest that Carter desires a transcendence which culture or language cannot secure. Like Julia Kristeva, Carter seems to believe that the abject 'third' fatherless place of exile makes possible a new 'true' love outside of the paternal circle (148–158). What Luce Irigaray said of Merleau-Ponty can also be said of Carter: he 'alludes to intrauterine life' (152). The 'pre-semiotic' which he seeks is equivalent to what Freud characterised as 'pre-Oedipus'! In the context of Carter's subject, the 'pre-semiotic' can be conceived as the memory of the maternal sojourn that inaugurates all colonialist discourse, be it nativist or imperialist. Here the mother's body is an 'uninscribed territory', a *terra nullius* which, said Gayatri Spivak, the 'imperialist project' had to imagine in order to fulfil its desire to inscribe, map, possess. And it is exactly this moment, the 'first journey', which most interests Carter, and for which he longs.

The 'first journey', argued Carter, can be traced in the journals of Australian explorers. If, like Spivak, Carter understood the 'worlding' of colonial migrations as a 'texting' (Spivak 1), he discriminated between its textings, arguing that the 'travelling epistemology' of Cook and most of the nineteenth-century explorers were pre-texts for the texts of Empire, and, as such, map a path for the dismembering of Empire. In this vein Carter distinguishes between the travelling narratives of the 'first journey', in which the choice of tracks, campsites and namings 'conjured up' space ('Invisible Journeys' 36), and the scientific instruments of conquest and settlement that, in plotting the contours of this originary space, gave it form and meaning, bent it into a mythography ('Plotting Australia's Explorer Narratives' 22–23).

Discovery de-territorialised the world, returning it to an ocean, to a blank sheet, so that the colonial powers could re-territorialise it, re-inscribe their mythology on the world. It is this rubbing out, this return to blankness, which Carter elevates to both a critical and spiritual realm. Yet, ironically, these 'first journeys' are also the essential prelude to conquest and colonisation. This strain, evident, for example, in Carter's discussion of the exemplary discoverer, Cook, is not resolved.

Carter argues that Cook 'inaugurated Australia's spatial history'. Unlike Bernard Smith, who defends the modernism of a Cartesian Enlightenment (in *European Vision and the South Pacific*), Carter believed that 'it was not Bank's imperial gaze, passive and static, that later explorers and settlers borrowed when they made their way into Australia, but the open-coded, imaginative vision of Cook'. Cook was not just a 'foundational figure' of Australian exploration, but of a migrantology which, said Carter, 'stood at odds with the aims of imperialism'. Cook's texts function under the sign of the feminine; which in the Lacanian scheme means that they are not really texts at all. Their investigations are pre-semiotic, pre-oedipal. The 'essence' of Cook's 'texts', wrote Carter, 'was that they did not sum up a journey, but preserved the trace of passage'; 'the sense in which places are means, not of settling, but of travelling on'; 'Cook's un-cumulative, un-centred maps and travelling journal retained the possibility of multiple futures, endless journeys, arrivals and departures' (*Road to Botany Bay* 31–33). Likewise, the textuality of Australia's explorer narratives falter: they never proceed happily towards a 'longed-for denouement', 'but consist of a multitude of fragmentary asides...which struggle inconclusively for definition and dominance'. Thus a continent becomes an ocean in which one could only sail 'from absence to absence without ever reaching home'.

What, then, does this 'absence' signify? The answers which Carter provides reflect the strain of discovery being, for him, a spiritual journey, a prelude to colonisation, and a means of dismembering it. On one level, Carter speculated that 'the non-temporal consciousness of space—the phenomenon of space as an infinity of directions—might be an essential ingredient

in the *psychic* occupation of the country'. Drawing on Freudian metaphors, he suggested that these explorer narratives resembled the repetition of dream states, the unconscious means 'of avoiding that deviation into adult responsibility', the 'psychic ambition' 'to defer homecoming as long as possible': 'The explorer sublimates his desire for arrival and finds satisfaction in the certainty of disappointment. The lack of any sign of ending provides the motive for going on....here travelling itself is the assurance of satisfaction...the goal itself'.

If Carter accurately describes the effects of the explorer journals, he misjudges their purpose. Their repetitions were not the unconscious means of 'avoiding deviation into adult responsibility', but, if we are to follow Freud, the psychic means of submitting to the rule of the father. As the pre-texts of *Empire*, they were its psychic foundation. But Carter wants to preserve for them an innocence and critical purpose which, like the surrealists' dream states, offers a type of enlightenment—or at least a therapy.

By advancing against the tide of narrative logic, by revealing the spatial dimension of temporal plot, a deviation that consists of recognising the strangeness of appearances—and hence the nostalgia for a more primitive state at the heart of the civilising process—the journals offer a fertile site of meditation ('Plotting Australia's Explorer Narratives' 14-27).

Carter discovers in the explorer narratives the antidote for the melancholy of human existence. There he finds the evocation of a space where one is free to be, a pre-oedipal space which is not yet a place; that is, not yet another's space. Because he wants to retain this spatiality as an empowering site for an individual's spirituality rather than a social contract, Carter's writing is peripatetic ('Events of Today' 6) rather than nomadic. It is grounded in a phenomenology which walks about in a *terra nullius*, or at least in an imaginary land whose inhabitants have either not imposed their rule on it, or their former rule has long since been foreclosed by new travellers. Thus Carter does not follow the Deleuzian nomadology of much recent Australian criticism, or an Irigarayan feminology, which map alternative logics to Western logocentrism. Rather, he yearns for an a priori realm. If Carter's *endeavour* is a boat without a flag, an anti-genealogy, his return to the intrauterine life of the first home and the first journey that it inaugurates is not a rejection of the father's home, but a regressive refusal to face its law. Carter's migrantology is not a return of the repressed, but a return to the repressed.

Carter's cure is radical. He even proposes that the similarities between Australian and European art 'may be mere coincidence', and exhorts that 'a post-colonial culture cannot escape from a dependent relationship so long as it continues to allow itself to be colonised by the vocabulary of that relationship'. I would argue that there is no cure, there is no *terra nullius*, and fathers don't go away. In turning away from 'the distorting mirror of the parental gaze' ('Culture of Coincidence' 50-51), Carter comes dangerously close to staging the nativism he disclaims. Carter's arabesques may elude the vocabulary of colonialism and come at 'Australia' from new angles, but the rhythms he composes do not escape the nostalgia of colonial melancholy.

However, whatever his spiritual aspirations, Carter's tracing of the textual mechanisms by which Australian colonialism was staged and restaged has unhinged its semiological basis. That 'Australia' is an effect of spatial histories, of synchronic not diachronic formulae is not surprising, because it has been staged by the desires of colonisers who sought to deny it its own history, temporality or plot. However, in hypostatizing rather than historicising this desire, Carter's 'spatial history' is in danger of inadvertently reproducing the 'Australia' which it deconstructs. If Carter rejects the imperialising gaze of Banks which garnered 'Australia' into the history of English empire, he remains, I believe, trapped in the spatialising regime of narcissistic regression. His is a rebirthing in the hope that this time around he might get the jump on birth.

In short, I doubt the historicity of Carter's spatial histories. If Carter has, better than anyone else, outlined the psychic constitution of 'Australia', he has not fully faced up to the ideological and historical import of spatial historiography also being a symptom of a colonised mind. To invoke migrantology as a pre-semiotic condition re-enacts the desire for

the foreclosure of European texts which always animated the most radical of nativist texts that he disclaims. Carter himself does not escape the horizon of coloniality which he so expertly plots around the discourses of modernity.

University of Tasmania

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Note

- 1 For a discussion of the pre-Oedipal, see Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother*, 1-13.