

**GROUND
TRUTHING
EXPLORATIONS
IN A CREATIVE
REGION PAUL
CARTER**



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Paul Carter
North Melbourne
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Introduction

Topographers

Native informants give the anthropologist first-hand information about their people. They help the scientist sort out the religious beliefs, the organising principles of the language, the social structures, the economy. It has always struck me as fanciful to imagine that Indigenous people care about our questions, let alone indulge the colonialist attitudes that inform them. Still, I remember my surprise when I read in a collection of essays on this topic that in most cases the authoritative accounts of native tribes that populate library shelves are based on the testimony of a single person, usually interrogated through an intermediary translating, with who-knows-what reliability, questions and answers. I was even more astonished to read the assertion that in other cases the native informant did not exist at all but was a fanciful projection of the outsider.

These observations came back to haunt me when I decided to write a book about a region – the Mallee in Australia. What is true of people is also true of places. Short of living in this remarkable country all my life – interviewing a significant

number of its residents and exploring a significant part of its territory, assembling an encyclopaedic knowledge of local details unknown to the global public – what right had I to presume to capture its character? It's true that even a comprehensive acquaintance with a tract of country, its human and natural history, is vulnerable to the law of exceptions. But at least oversights and inaccuracies would be honest mistakes and not the result of a cavalier determination to warp a complex and intricate cultural pattern into a self-serving theory of sorts.

Firstly, *Ground Truthing* is not a regional study: it is an essay about regions. It is not intended as a new synthesis of facts available elsewhere. It doesn't try to compete with these. It is a search for the creative principles that bring regions into being. The aim is to make a case for the primary value of regions in an epoch of globalisation, to invert the present hierarchy of spatial politics, and to show why it is 'regions all the way down'. It is to demonstrate why this insight is essential if we want to secure the future of places and sustain them.

Dissatisfied with speculative accounts of other countries, Michel de Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, called for 'topographers' who would provide first-hand accounts of places they had really visited and knew intimately. He wasn't calling for a more detailed, larger scale, description of countries already surveyed by imperial explorers, but for a different kind of knowledge with a different approach to the definition of knowledge. For Montaigne, the trouble with educated or self-important observers is that they generalise – 'they are prone to add something to their matter, to stretch it out and amplify it.'¹ If they were writing about the Mallee, they would no doubt be tempted to characterise it as a distinct region that they are free to interpret according to their interests.

Government-appointed scientists and planners exemplify this through their descriptions of the Mallee: the Mallee is a region of biodiversity; it is a region with a distinctive population profile; or, it is a region with specific environmental problems.

Each of these descriptions is wedded to a theory – a theory of region and a theory of rationality. Instead, Montaigne wrote, ‘I would like everyone to write what he knows, and as much as he knows.’ Instead of geographers, he would have liked to have had ‘topographers’ – ‘for a man may have some special knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or a fountain, who in other matters knows only what everybody knows. However, to circulate this little scrap of knowledge, he will undertake to write the whole of physics. From this vice spring many great abuses.’²

Ground Truthing is a topography in Montaigne’s sense. It is confined to what I have come across for myself. As far as possible I have tried to exclude what ‘everybody knows’. The reason this is plausible is that the ‘special knowledge’ I found as I pored over certain story-lines or sought to follow them up in the field, is that the Mallee is a creative region. Beneath the rational surface of roads, nodal towns – and their corollary, statistical information about the climate, the annual yields, the cyclical fluctuations in the narrative of regional development – is an underlay of unedited anecdote, a fine capillary system of interconnected words, places, memories and sensations. These are a portal to the underworld of the Mallee, to its dark writing where the region’s creative powers can be plotted.

Places are made after their stories; and stories have authors (even when the authors did not intend it). Place names are an instance of this. Three place-making stories in *Ground Truthing* correspond to Montaigne’s ‘river’ or ‘fountain’: the vision of a reafforested Mallee that haunts the poetry of the Wimmera–Mallee poet John Shaw Neilson; the identity of a Wotjobaluk man known as ‘Jowley’ (or ‘Mac’), whose life is a lacework laid across a widening abyss of colonial amnesia; and the secret motives of pastoralist and entrepreneur William Edward Stanbridge, in collecting unique Aboriginal art and knowledge that now seems to be the basis of cross-cultural reconciliation. To these three creative lives are added the unique environmental

topographer, John Wolseley; other artists including Philip Hunter and Harry Nankin; and writers of the rank of Gerald Murnane and Alex Miller.

It is an all-male cast but the manner of the narration is feminine. The French classicist Nicole Loraux made a remarkable discovery about the Metroon, located in the heart of the Athenian agora. Why, she asked, was the building dedicated to the preservation of the laws of Athens uniquely presided over by women? The answer, she concluded, was that the building allowed writing to appear. It was the creative matrix without which the collective wisdom (and conscience) of the Athenians would be lost. Women were excluded from framing legislation but they provided – presided over – the impressionable surfaces but for which writing left no trace.³ So with *Ground Truthing*: what I have done is to deepen the stories – not to generalise them, as if the idea were to extend the Mallee’s territory – to groove and regroove them deeper, showing how they spring from an impressionable ground. The ground is not passive, it is the generative matrix of an understanding that exists solely at that spot – situated, timely and often rubbed out.

To consider creatively and bring out the palimpsestic nature of the region, I have imagined the stories as crisscrossing tracks. Instead of telling them one after another, I have broken them into pieces, and even risked a certain amount of near repetition – as happens when you approach a crossing place from another direction. The object of looking at the same matter from different points of view is to suspend a preoccupation with hurrying to the vanishing point of a single, unifying argument. Creative regions are polyhedral and the trick in narrating them is to return to various passages between the connecting points, looking not only at the tracks of those who went before, but at your own impressions which now form part of the landscape.

What is the future of places in a time of cultural, economic and even environmental globalisation? It is not to compete with one another for a more prominent servitude on the world stage.

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It is to reconnect to the regions where they belong. But the regions are creative assemblages that exercise care at a distance; they are poetic cobwebs where the interest is generated along the threads linking place to place. Regions considered like this are oceanic, waves forming in them spread to the edge of a collective dream. This is why the sea-like Mallee, magnificent but marginalised, matters beyond its region. Inside the Mallee is a reflection of the world. By looking into this reflection we gain a sense of what the world could be if we recollected, imagined and reinvented it.

I. Real Worlds

Ground truthing redefined

Ground Truthing began with a photograph a friend emailed me. It showed her standing in front of a clearfelled hillside. Her message ran ‘ground truthing?’ She is an ethical investment analyst. A woodchipping company thought she might like to see, first-hand, a ‘sustainable’ forestry operation. Their chutzpah has to be admired. The efficiency – the completion – of these logging operations is assessed from the air. Photographs document the operation and ensure that no corner of forest – old growth or plantation – remains standing that has been earmarked for levelling and carting away. To check that the pixels don’t lie, and to identify any anomalies or unexplained variations in the photograph, investigators are sent into the area on foot. Using a GPS to locate themselves, they check what the photograph looks like on the ground – not whether it is true, but whether it has been correctly interpreted.

The military were the first to command the resources of aerial photography for high quality imaging. Aerial imaging did not simply provide better information: it was a pre-vision of

invasion. Tiled together to form a continuous mosaic of fields, winding rivers and sprawling crater-like conurbations, it paved the way for risk-free bombing raids. Post-attack, it allowed anything that had escaped destruction to be identified so that ground truthers in ‘mopping up’ operations could destroy it. Remote sensing leads to desensitisation, it seems. Or, rather, it opens a new chapter in cultural narcissism that, unless checked, seems hellbent on self-destruction. The photographs of the atomic blast over Hiroshima ‘used the same energy (blast of heat and light) to simultaneously represent and renovate (destroy) the landscape.’¹ This is merely a version of the reality that aeroplanes see only what they need to see, the ground projection a reflection of their aerial interests. You look at the earth in this way in order to *go in*.

Of course, benign, civil applications of this technological relay also exist: not everyone going in is calibrating destruction. The contraction of hundreds of square miles of jungle to a roomful of aerial footage accelerates the discovery of lost civilisations, while agronomists, noting a growing plume of salt or the dieback where last year’s wildfire went through, detect the patterns our posterity will inherit. Bringing closer our culture’s long-held fantasy of enjoying a one-to-one or indexical control of the earth’s surface – in which the difference between what is represented and the representation is finally eliminated – ground truthers can be seen as the last representatives of an old order, rather like regular church-goers in an image-worshipping culture. Before long the need to check the data will have disappeared: the ground plane and the plan will have annealed into a single thing. That is, the ambition to reduce the world to an instrument of utility will be met by the graphic representations used to achieve it. There will no longer be any need for correction. The world will be corrected when it corresponds to what can be seen through thin air.

Ground Truthing began with an image that might have been transposed from the trenches of World War I. At the time, I was

in the Mallee (a semi-arid inland region of Victoria) (Figure 1) trying to reconnect stories of interest to the places where they had come from. What, I wondered, would an arable farmer make of the term ‘ground truthing’? What kind of operation would a community, worried about lengthening drought, imagine it described? With what irony might pastoralists dealing with dune creep, with the pestilence of dust storms and other after-effects of deforestation, savour the expression and throw it back at you with a request to explain? For that matter, what did the words conjure up to me?

Running to ground stories told about the first inhabitants of the region, or following in the footsteps of poets and artists who had tried to represent this anomalous region, I was engaged in a ground truthing of my own. But it was nothing you could detect from the air – any more than you could see the farmer squatted on his haunches crushing a clod of earth to dust in his fist, or the shopkeeper wiping for the third time that day the ominous red silt, deposited, Vesuvius-like, on her window sill; any more than you can measure the psychological impact of the glittering gypsum that saline groundwater precipitates round the salt pans – its twinkling water mimics living, but is, in fact, closer in temper to the little mirrors Robert Smithson set up in the Yucatan, advertising the existence of non-sites.

The more I thought about it, the more I came to feel that the attempt to give the term ‘ground truthing’ a narrowly technicist sense represented a kind of *conceptual* ground truthing. The phrase conjured up a diversity of cultural landscapes, human topics and associations, but, in being recruited for an instrumentalist discourse of resource management, these had been eliminated. Any depth of poetic association had, as it were, been clearfelled. Stephen Muecke writes, ‘In the Aboriginal science of tracking, following up someone’s footsteps means “knowing” them.’² In this notion, the ground is a medium of performance, where you can read the spatial history of a society. It is the complexity of the impressions the ground materialises

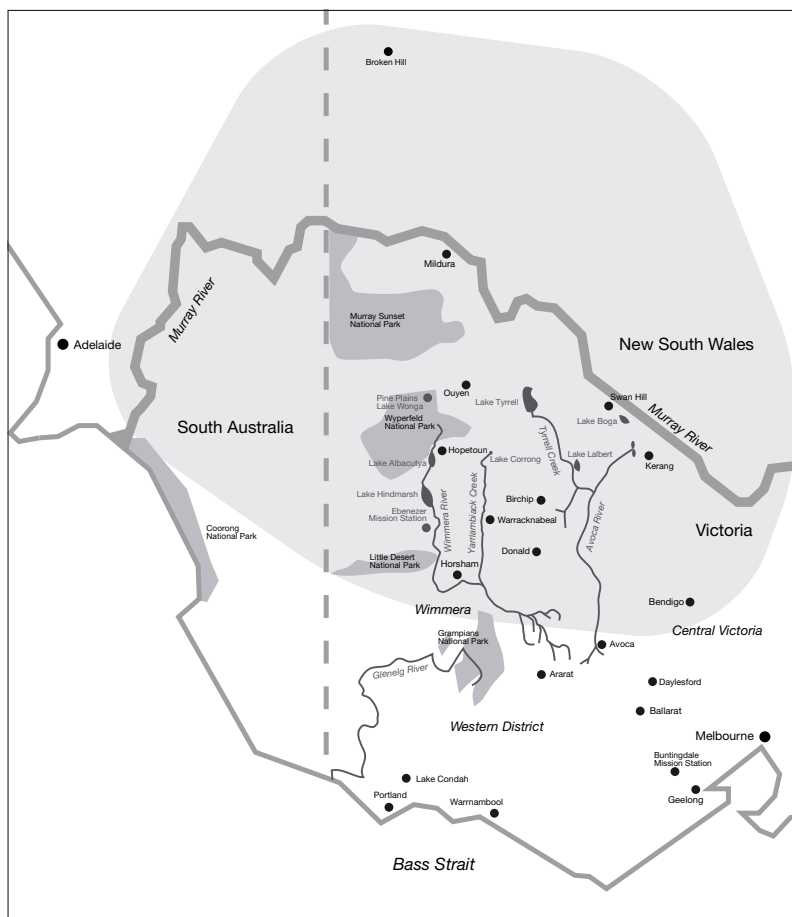


Figure 1. Mallee bioregion.

The Mallee is characterised by undulating sandy plains, few surface water bodies and low elevation. Its dominant flora are various species of multi-stemmed eucalypt that spring from an underground lignotuber. Mallee-like environments occur in Western Australia (Roe Botanical District) and south-eastern Australia. In the latter area – covering parts of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria – the Mallee is interpenetrated by the Murray–Darling river system, a kind of Nile in Egypt phenomenon that baffled early explorers. The duplication of Mallee management authorities (and maps) caused by three state boundaries is worth study in its own right.

and holds that constitutes the truth, not the clearing away of these. There is something else that is also important about this remark. To know the truth of the ground in the way the tracker does means to walk *beside* the tracks. If you walk in the tracks, you can, at least in detective stories, elude your pursuer. But the tracker cannot afford to destroy the inscription being read; therefore, leaving behind an unintentional trace of passage that cannot be eliminated.

This simple fact refutes the cultural fantasy of a scientific truth cleansed of the bias of the observer. It shows that truth-finding involves a contract between observer and observed, and to tear this up is not even desirable. The ground is not a proposition whose truthfulness can be tested. As Wittgenstein memorably put it, 'If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true nor yet false.'³ To engage in ground truthing is to undertake an enquiry, as Martin Heidegger recognised, into the grounds of Being: how do we understand anything when we do not know the nature of the ground we stand on? It is to discover the ethical basis of the relationships we forge: what is their reality? Are they compatible with the world we move through – or are they shallowly ideological and ultimately unsustainable? And what is the 'real world' that is the analogue of the ground whose truth we solicit? Are its rondure, its elemental diversity and its fallen topography of deserts, reefs and jungles relevant? Or is it the Ypres-landscape of a world violently clearfelled that stands to reason?

Because we are ground- rather than sky-dwellers, in these questions the term 'ground' shifts between a literal and a metaphoric usage, regardless of our present technological fantasies. Thought that identifies knowledge (and power) with the achievement of a rational *terra firma* – with cut-and-dried definitions and their corollary, instrumentalist scenarios for planning the future – is an act of intellectual aggression towards the environment of thinking (recollection, imagination and invention) in general. It treats the humid, life-giving zones of

creativity as swamps and morasses when their impressionability, their weakness, their lack of territorially-effacious boundaries constitutes their strength. The desiccation of the planet may be partly due to anthropogenic environmental practices, but it is legitimated by a dry thinking that assumes that the only good ground is dry and flat.

I could see applications of this idea in the Mallee – a region covering approximately 3 million hectares, occupying the dryland cropping areas of north-west Victoria, southern New Southern Wales and eastern South Australia, and roughly corresponding to the bounds of an ancient sea. Formerly, the lower stretches of the ancestral Murray–Darling river system would have been submerged within a major lake stretching south to incorporate present-day Lake Tyrrell.⁴ The radiating patterns of sand ridges are geomorphological relics of the sea's long shrinkage. The water history of the area is complicated, and I won't even try to summarise it here, except to point out that the phenomenon of waterlogging, or soil salinisation due to a combination of unsustainable land clearance and over-irrigation, is the Mallee equivalent of the forest environment degradation that current tree logging practices induce.⁵ In the field, the Mallee may be exceptionally dry⁶ *but it looks as if it could be wet* – could harbour inland seas. The Mallee has an oceanic appearance, wide horizons, an undulating ground plane and ample evidence of former floods. In other words, the Mallee promotes humid imaginings: it suggests that within the visible field there may exist an inner region that is very different, that is fertile, incubating change and visions of other states.

This paradox, that the driest of countries might be the most fertile in incubating poetic geographies, became the strange attractor of the stories I was collecting – about poet and Mallee worker, John Shaw Neilson, about a Wotjobaluk man, Jowley, whose names and history are disputed, on Indigenous starlore; and on the field practices of the extraordinary artist John Wolseley (Figure 2). It suggested another approach to ground truthing.

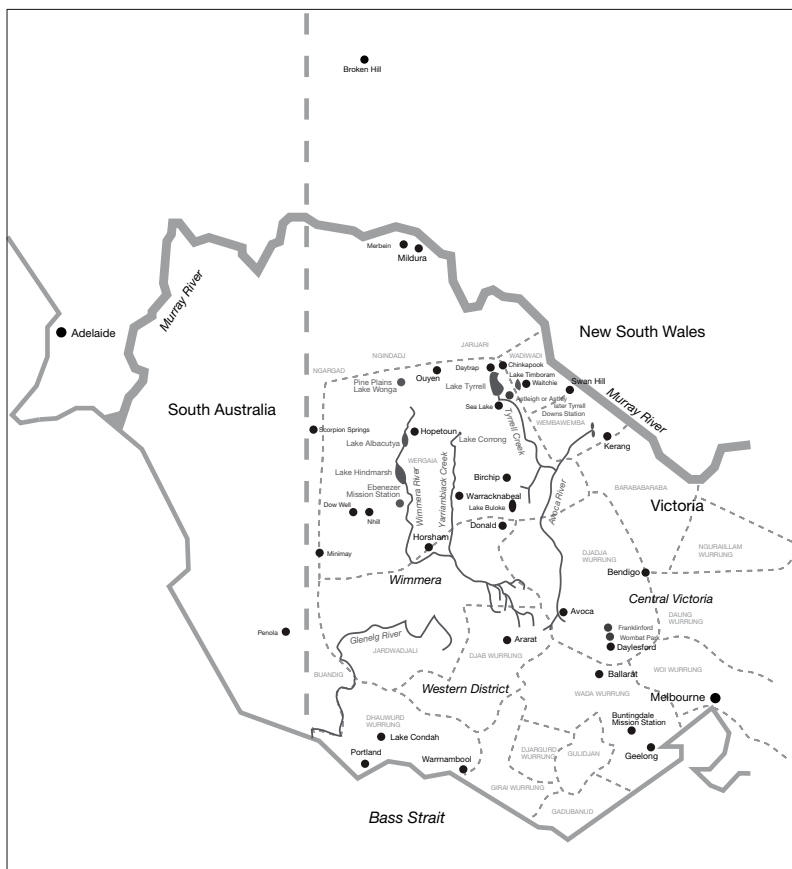


Figure 2. Mallee places and peoples.

Over 70% of Victoria's mallee vegetation has been cleared. Cereal and coarse grain cropping, with some livestock rearing, dominate the dryland areas. The impact of these practices is reflected in growing salinity, soil erosion and bio-depletion. The economic value of formerly disparaged mallee eucalypts is now being reassessed as they possess exceptional properties of salt and carbon absorption. The Mallee is scantily populated, a mosaic of national parks and scattered country towns (generally under 5000) strung out along the rail system servicing Melbourne, which, on the map, look like the radiating branches of a mallee eucalypt. Archaeological evidence suggests that over the last 20,000 years or more Indigenous peoples have occupied the Mallee tidally, following alternating periods of wet and dry.

Besides the business of reconciling discrepancies between digital photographs taken from the air and ground features, and besides the potentially fascinating constructions that farmers, small business people, planners and others might place on the term, ground truthing had a poetic sense: it was the history of a region told through its story-lines, its poetically-defined pathways. It was an account of a place made after its stories, a documented retracing of the creative tracks whose crisscrossing (invisible from the air) produces the polyhedron of places that lends any region its identity.

Here, though, I ran into a sand drift. The Mallee – this paradoxical country where the invisible seemed to stand in full view inside the visible, that seemed to play out the tragedy of our fantasy of total control and to present itself as a reflective mirror in which to begin to write the second, and true, history of coming from somewhere else and learning how to belong – this country was itself a product of ground truthing. Historically, white knowledge, occupation, administration and management of the Mallee have followed the operational logic of the survey. The most striking example of this is the creation of a north-south fenceline marking the boundary between Victoria and South Australia, cutting directly across what governments now refer to as the Mallee bioregional landscape – similarly, New South Wales and Victoria use the Murray River as a state boundary. Early surveys, conducted to facilitate the orderly (and taxable) closer settlement of the Mallee, now look like black-and-white sketches for Google Earth's mosaic of digital photographs. One reason why we might be tempted to call those Landsat images 'landscape photographs' is because the colonial landscape is a product of the same grid-coordinated celestial viewpoint. Convergence and eventual unification look preordained in their initial resemblance to each other (Figure 3).

All present descriptions of the Mallee – scientific, administrative, sociological and environmental – use aerial imagery

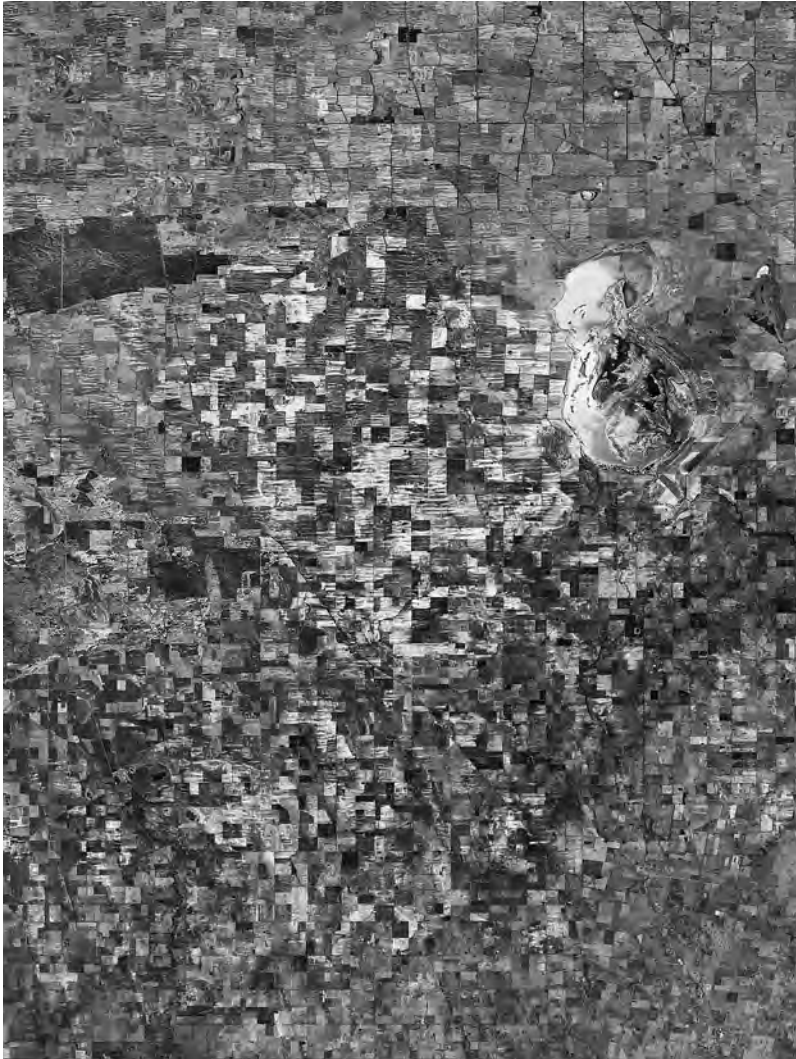


Figure 3. Lake Tyrrell and settlement mosaic.

Lake Tyrrell is 23 km long and 11 km across at the widest section. Low islands of aeolian gypsum and clay make up 35 km² (or 30%) of the total area. The juxtaposition of swirls and squares, of two geometries in this image is logical as well as physical: is the pattern of cultivated squares an artefact of pixellation? Consider the equivalence of terms in this definition of 'pixel' adapted from Wikipedia: in colonial digital/agriculture imaging, a pixel (or picture element)/ farm (or 640 acre block) is the smallest addressable screen/administrative element. Pixels/farms are normally arranged in a 2-dimensional grid and are often represented using dots or squares. Each pixel/farm is a sample of an original image/plan.

as their primary data base. The objection to this is not that it produces coarse-grain information, but that it suspends any question of what the Mallee might be: the Mallee is for these purposes nothing more than an operational plane. The question of the ground, or grounding, of the truth conveyed in the aerial images is suspended. To see the Mallee, or any administrative unit of land in this way, is already to change it. The data that the images yield are strictly graphic overwritings of a ground plane that for all practical reasons is discounted as a *tabula rasa*. To read these representations is always preliminary to writing them out with new inscriptions. Any design that the land might have on us, any indication that the land writes back through arabesques of self-organisation, finds no place in the orthography of planning. Planning imposes its design on the land because it presupposes the land has no design on us.

To take a recent proposal: the development of an integrated catchment management plan for the Murray–Darling Basin. The object was to reverse the above-mentioned negative environmental impacts of the administrative divisions, to develop ‘a whole-of-catchment approach’ that commits all partners (governments, communities, private and public interests) to take account ‘of the relationships between natural systems, including land, water and other environmental resources’ in their decision-making. This sounds promising, except that anyone wanting to participate in this initiative will need to master what Edward Said called ‘the language of the State Department’⁷. Nowhere is there provision for standing still or listening; for storytelling or recollecting; for a Keatsian *Gelassenheit* that allows the sand to drift over one’s toes or the water to glide by. The framers of this document rightly realise that, in the world in which they operate, things are getting daily worse. Not-action is inaction. In this conceptual environment even values are modes of future-proofing or risk-minimisation: ‘We will take a visionary approach, provide leadership and be prepared to make difficult decisions...’⁸

Although this statement is tempered with others affirming such values as respect for ‘the living knowledge of indigenous people’⁹, it might, in most respects, have been written by an early colonial explorer/administrator (Major Mitchell, say). The transition from territory (defined by state boundaries) back to region (water catchments are the geographer’s basic regional unit) disguises the fact that the region thus regained will continue to be treated territorially, as a ‘resource’ to be ‘managed’. Jean-Luc Godard once remarked that ‘the making of political films should be complemented by a political way of making films (regarding the way they are produced).’¹⁰ The same applies to regional government: to have it, you need to develop a regional way of governing – and that is ruled out so long as the region is treated as groundless – or, what is the same, as an operational space incapable of looking after itself.

If this thought was developed, it suggested that regions, far from being a subset of the nation or, even more generally, ‘the West’, represented a different theory of place-making. If regions were places formed of dark writing, that supplement of traces of wonderment, they could not be assimilated to the vast, and ultimately, global clearing foreshadowed in post-Enlightenment logic. They would always remain localised. To be localised is not to be smaller or less able to generate connections. On the contrary, it is a feature of creativity that, like ethics, it manifests itself concretely. As ‘forming situations’, corresponding to what Einstein referred to as ‘science in the making, science as an end to be pursued,’ which is ‘subjective and psychologically conditioned’¹¹, regions solicit material thinking.

From this point of view the alternative ground truthing to which *Ground Truthing* attends is a philosophy of creative regions. If it succeeds, it shows that the phrase ‘creative region’ is a tautology. A region imagined as a reflective space reaches out beyond itself and conceals within itself the space beyond. The Greeks referred to this spatial creativity when they conceived of the *chora*, or place of places, not only as a receptacle but

as a shaping chaos, as an opening that permitted the double movement of elemental separation and recombination. It seems likely that the Mallee also possessed its *chora*. In Indigenous Victoria, the Boorong of Lake Tyrrell were renowned as astronomers. It is said that they studied the stars through their reflections in the water. This is factually implausible, but regional histories, histories of creative place-making, interpret these folkloric fragments differently. They respect their insight into the relationship that exists between concrete situations and concrete thought.

As a reflective space, the Mallee recreates a relationship with the sky, as well as redefining the nature of regions. One of the axioms of place-based studies is that in order to know anything you need to be somewhere. If you want to meet ‘the perceptual challenge of global environmental change’¹² you begin by learning local natural history and ecology. ‘You begin to perceive patterns of change that stretch from soil micro-organisms to global energy budgets.’¹³ Thomashow argues that developing a ‘place-based perceptual ecology’ is the means of learning ‘how to move beyond that place and explore the relationship between places’ – a practice he calls ‘biospheric perception by virtue of three interconnected pathways – natural history and local ecology, the life of the imagination, and spiritual deliberation.’¹⁴ Not everyone is going to spend time studying the Mallee’s micro-organisms, but, insofar as Thomashow’s curriculum is consistent with building a ‘sense of place’, who could object?

My reservation is that none of these endeavours is able to renegotiate the relationship between local and global. The Mallee, considered as a creative region, on the other hand, can. These formulations of place still think of creativity as something that can be applied, a product of the observer’s interest. They impose ‘the life of the imagination’ on the ‘natural history’ of the place, annealing them together with ‘spiritual deliberation’ when it is the pathways inside the region that procure its character

– and which lead outwards. If there are regions *within* regions, why not regions *of* regions? If the Mallee can contain the whole world inside it, why not think of the world as a globally-scaled region – as the region of regions that contains within its creative *chora* as many arrangements (ecosystems, cultures, zones and bands) as may be. To think like this is to overcome the petrifying split between the local and the global. It enables the work of the topographer to resonate in the analyses of the geographer. The globalised world is no longer a metaphysical Geneva of gerontocrats presuming to hold in its hands the master plan of humanity. Henri Lefebvre reflects: ‘The creation (or production) of planet-wide space as the social foundation of a transformed everyday life open to myriad possibilities – such is the dawn now beginning to break on the far horizon.’¹⁵

But how will the management of space in the interests of a more equitably devised – and more genuinely sociable – global society avoid ideological uniformity? How might space work politically to differentiate as well as unite? I take seriously Lefebvre’s figures of speech, for there are regions within passages as well. If the future is to have written into it the creation of places, then the ‘horizon’ Lefebvre invokes needs to be understood not simply as a figure of speech but as the physical phenomenon the earth offers us of the limits to growth. The horizon is a region, and for any imaginable life form on earth, any culture, the horizon is the first region – and the number of them is clearly infinite.

If the earth – planet-wide space – can be imagined in depth and in rondure, then it is in wherever we stand, rest, dream and reproduce. The earth known in this way is also the nurturing region of regions but for which the arrangement of regions (of which the Mallee is one) would be inconceivable. In this nested regional topology you never come to the edge. Instead, like the Romantic travellers who contemplated the effect of circumnavigating the globe only in order to return where they had begun, you simply, in T. S. Eliot’s phrase, ‘know the place

for the first time'. The Mallee, like anywhere, is a doubled place: the physical region is shadowed by dreams of a destination never reached and fears of an unsustainable future on the 'horizon'. It is a global region, an indexical environment in which the conditions of place-making and place-loss can be studied with unusual clarity. The Mallee, in short, is also the world.