



A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *Meeting Place: The Human Encounter and the Challenge of Coexistence*

by Paul Carter

In this remarkable and often dazzling book, Paul Carter explores the conditions for sociability in a globalized future. He argues that we make many assumptions about communication but overlook barriers to understanding between strangers as well as the importance of improvisation in overcoming these obstacles to meeting. While disciplines such as sociology, legal studies, psychology, political theory, and even urban planning treat meeting as a good in its own right, they fail to provide a model of what makes meeting possible and worth pursuing: a yearning for encounter. Carter offers novel ways of presenting the philosophical dimensions of waiting, meeting, and nonmeeting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Carter wrote the award-winning book *The Road to Botany Bay* (which received plaudits from Edward Said and Susan Sontag)—reprinted by University of Minnesota Press in 2010. He is an artist and designer whose best-known work is the 7500 metre ground pattern and inscriptions ‘Near-amnew’ at Federation Square, Melbourne. He is Professor of Design (Urban) at RMIT University, Melbourne; for more information about his creative interests, visit www.materialthinking.com.au.

PRAISE FOR *MEETING PLACE*

“Paul Carter’s commentaries on cross-cultural encounters have long been philosophically sophisticated and deservedly influential. His new book raises the question of what the value of meeting is, in whose terms. It takes us to the very heart of the histories of encounter and confrontation that have proven intractable for so long in Australia and elsewhere.”

— Nicholas Thomas, University of Cambridge

“Paul Carter’s latest foray into colonial and postcolonial encounters of peoples, epistemologies, and longings exposes what he foregrounds as a ‘meeting place’ of desired belonging and social union. It is an imaginative, referentially capacious, formally demanding, and theoretically inventive book.”

— Rob Wilson, University of California, Santa Cruz

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: *MEETING PLACE*

1. Western societies and Indigenous Aboriginal societies have very different ideas about meeting. Describe these differences. How does understanding the differences enable us to create forms of sociability or coexistence that contribute to environmental sustainability?
2. A distinction is made between encounter and meeting. What is it? How does it help us to understand meeting places performatively?
3. If, as the book argues, meeting places are not fixed locations but are potentially wherever people bump into one another, what does this say about the nature of public space? Is public space simply an effect of Eros, a force of turbulent attraction, or can it have a stable form?
4. Why does *Meeting Place* state a ‘meeting’ between such disciplines as sociology, anthropology or cultural studies? What goes missing when sociability is treated narrowly from inside such disciplines? How does *Meeting Place* pioneer a new approach to transdisciplinary knowledge?
5. *Meeting Place* is an example of the new ‘cultural writing’, part scholarship, part essay, part fiction. The author claims this style of presentation is essential in presenting the character of encounter. Why?
6. Meeting places are erotically charged. They can lead to sexual as well as political and legal transactions. What kind of erotic phenomena and behaviour does the author suggest contribute to the vitality of public space?

7. *Meeting Place* argues that the auditory offers a modality of communication and self-placing that vision cannot replace. How does an understanding of acoustic phenomena redefine what we understand by ‘others’ and by the social? (How, for example, might the phenomenon of echoes inform us about the absent members of society?)

8. The author compares the structure and content of *Meeting Place* to a city; he suggests that the book is partly an archaeology of earlier layers of writing; the narrative is organized like an urban parcours. How does this approach illuminate his subject-matter?

9. The sculptor Alberto Giacometti is an important figure in *Meeting Place*. He is also an important figure in Paul Carter’s earlier book, *Repressed Spaces* (Reaktion Books, 2002). In many ways *Meeting Place* is a sequel to *Repressed Spaces* and seeks to respond to that book’s analysis. Does knowing this aid your comprehension of *Meeting Place*?

10. The author is a public artist who regularly collaborates in the design of public spaces. He lives in Australia; and he also has a history of working in performance. Do you think these creative interests enrich the discussion of sociability or simply represent an individual bias?