HOWICK

MT. ROSKILL

POSSIBLES vs PROBABLES
<u>**Playing with Carlaw Park Scoreboard Signs**</u>
Jonty Valentine

On my way home one day, I cut through the now-derelict Carlaw Park. It was hard not to feel some regret walking through this place. What had once been the hallowed grounds of Auckland Rugby League Football had become a cheap car park. Noticing that the old scoreboard shed had been left open, I decided to have a peek inside, despite the imposing Lion Red lion guarding the door. To my surprise, I found dozens of old scoreboard signs—not just the numbers, but team names as well. Some were hanging from nails in the exposed studs of the walls. Some had been stacked carelessly in the corner. And some were being used as a bed/floorboards by the homeless guy (who was luckily out) who lived there with an opossum (who was in). This unassuming building, which looked more like an old farm tool-shed, was hardly befitting its original purpose. It was hard to imagine it was once the *anchor*[1] for the ground's activities, and the state of the art in flexible signage technology of its day.

With some persuasion, the Auckland Rugby League let me take what was left of the signs. Transporting them was no small feat. Made from 1.5 millimetre thick (heavy) steel sheets, the name signs are 1680 x 430 millimetres in size and the number signs are 350 x 430 millimetres. The signs were painted on both sides, either in black text on white or in black on yellow. (Yellow, it seems for test team signs).

Initially I thought the signs were just great examples of vernacular typography that could be re-made into a typeface. (I'm still working on that). The letters on each sign are different in size, but all are kind of the same font, which looks like an early Grotesk—although some are a more Humanist sans serif (with a definite nod to Gill Sans in POSSIBLES for example). All the letters are in upper case. Sometimes they look condensed, and sometimes they look extended. This reminded me of drawing titles in my school exercise books as a kid. In what was my first test as a graphic designer, it took a while to learn to anticipate how much space was needed for each letter. Until I mastered this trick, I would always run out of space and have to cram in the last two letters.

But something else attracted me to the signs: the system they composed. It occurred to me that this set of signs offered a great site for a structural analysis using semiotics. So, feeling a bit like a weekend anthropologist more than a graphic designer, I wanted to play out, to put together, to read for myself the secrets of this typographic signage (sign) system.

PARADIGMS vs SYNTAGMS

The signs provide an index to all the teams that have faced each other across the field at Carlaw Park over the years. Because the majority are for Auckland 'club teams', it appears at first glance to be a list of Auckland suburbs. As a group, however, the signs list the pantheon of Auckland Rugby League teams, from great local teams like PONSONBY and GLENORA, to the internationally renowned visiting club teams like S[T] HELENS (England) and EASTERN SUBURBS (Sydney), to the main League playing nations like GREAT BRITAIN, FRANCE, AUSTRALIA, and NEW ZEALAND. This is the *paradigmatic* dimension to the signs.[2] The possible paradigm sets implied in a particular group of signs may be categorised as 'club teams', 'national representative teams', or 'international test teams' for example. As a whole, the signs represent a rugby geography that, like political geography, exists on the local, regional, and international level.

Adding to the complexity of the signage system was the decision to paint the signs on both sides. Although it can't be verified, I assume that this was a deliberate cost-saving (and space-saving) measure. Because the signs are painted double sided (i.e. a team name is painted on both sides of the metal sheet), they require a subtle, simple logic in manufacture and in reading. The team name on one side must never be able to play the team that is on its reverse side. Clearly this system was carefully worked out because there is no repetition of names in the signs. This produced some strange and illogical partnerships within a sign:

> NEW ZEALAND and OTAHUHU
> FRANCE and GLENORA
> MAORI and ELLERSLIE, etc.

The proximity of the names (as signifiers) on each sign was initially confusing because it implied that they should be somehow related. Perhaps I jumped to this conclusion because of preconceived notions of what should be found on the 'other side of the coin' or the 'flip side of a record'. In the Carlaw Park sign system, however, the names on either side of a sign are unrelated (as signifieds), which points to the *syntagmatic* dimension of the signs.[3]

Syntagmatic relationships are created in the pairing of signs, whether it is numbers to team names, numbers to numbers, or team names to other team names. For example, when numbers are put together with team names, they modify the names' significance (i.e. the sign changes from denoting the 'winner' to denoting the 'loser'). The numbers themselves conform to the scoring *syntax* of Rugby League (e.g. four points are (now) awarded for a *try*, two points for a *conversion* and one point for a *drop goal*). The most interesting syntagmatic relationship, however, is that between team names.

CONNOTATION vs DENOTATION

Within the system are implied pairings of teams that can possibly play each other. These pairings become *fundamental oppositions*[4] when these teams are paired for a match:

> NEW ZEALAND vs AUSTRALIA
> CANTERBURY vs AUCKLAND
> PONSONBY vs OTARA, etc.

However, my favourite are the more poetic and provocative oppositions like:

> RED vs BLUE
> HOME vs VISITORS

Also:

> PAKEHA vs MAORI
> NEW ZEALAND vs THE REST
> And best of all:
> POSSIBLES vs PROBABLES

These last examples have an additional *connotative* meaning that other signs do not.[5] Although I may never find out who THE REST were, it seems most fitting to me that *We* should play them—NEW ZEALAND vs THE REST. This pairing of signs points to the fundamental dynamic of competition—US vs THEM—that underlies all team sports. Practically speaking, THE REST must have been a useful sign to have *in the shed* for surprise match-ups. But it also points to a higher *mythical* order of significance. In imagining the POSSIBLES vs PROBABLES, and NEW ZEALAND vs THE REST, I can't help feeling disappointed that I didn't also find signs for the famous Lévi-Straussian oppositions, such as, GOOD vs EVIL and PRIMITIVE vs MODERN, or a Premiership matching of the Durkheimian SACRED vs PROFANE.

MAORI

PAKEHA

ELLERSLIE

M⸁ WELLINGTON

THE BEST IN 1991

Within the group of signs there is also a hint of totemism. As in many sports, rugby teams often choose a beast, a bird, or a plant as a symbol. I did come across the JUNIOR KIWIS sign, but unfortunately the Australian KANGAROOS, and the British LIONS have been lost. (The FRENCH are nicknamed *les Chanteclairs*, after the Cockerel on their jerseys). It seems that the totem *du jour* for Rugby League is an animal. In contrast, the international Rugby Union teams have more commonly gone with plants (e.g. Silver Fern, Rose, and Thistle, etc.). This pattern illustrates the underlying logic of totems whereby the relationship of teams should be analogous to the relationship of the totems—Lions can't play against Roses. This logic is complicated, however, by the New Zealand Rugby League. They are in the unique position of having a symbol that signifies all three kinds of totem; the KIWI is both a bird and a plant. But a Kiwi is also a bird that seems more like a beast (its feathers are fury and it can't fly). And in a fourth symbolic reference, Kiwi also refers to the people of New Zealand—we are Kiwis. In the collection of signs from Carlaw Park, it is not the totem but the place of origin that is most commonly chosen to signify the team.

DIACHRONIC vs SYNCHRONIC

So far my analysis has been *synchronic*; I have mapped the sign system as though it were in a fixed state. The danger of this kind of analysis (for some at least) is that a snapshot, no matter how revealing or perfect, is necessarily dislocated from its time. In addition to abstracting the Carlaw Park signs from history, I have removed them (physically) from their original context to play with their syntagmatic relations on my living room wall. A *diachronic* analysis, on the other hand, would not remove a sign system from the 'field of play'. Instead, it would consider the sign system's evolution and the changes in each sign over time.[6] This dimension of the Carlaw Park signs can be explored by considering the history of the park and the surrounding city.

A diachronic analysis of the system of signs in this context reveals another reading. There are historical and social connotations to the Auckland club teams that a synchronic analysis will not reveal. For example, PONSONBY and RICHMOND (Grey Lynn) are the last remnants of the old stronghold of inner city club teams. These neighbourhoods used to be the 'rough' parts of Auckland before the exodus of the working class to SOUTH Auckland in the 1960s. Ponsonby R.F.C. will be read more ironically today due to the change in affluence of its namesake suburb. What has happened here is that the referent has changed. The name PONSONBY is a static signifier, but what it refers to is dynamic.

The suburb of PARNELL that surrounds Carlaw Park was also once a working class neighbourhood. The ground is still bordered by railway lines on one side, and an (unsafe at night) wooded reserve on the other. It faces a major arterial route with a constant stream of traffic. In spite of this, Parnell is now one of the most valuable areas of real estate in Auckland. The main road, Parnell Road is now a required stop for all tourist buses coming to the city. The last hints of the road's past colour, the Working Men's club and the Pool Hall are now surrounded by diamond jewellery boutiques and art galleries for Auckland's nouveau riche property developers. Once the process of gentrification began, the Park's days were numbered. In 2004, the inevitable happened and the Park was condemned. Plans were put forward for its redevelopment as downtown business offices and an exclusive retirement village. The homeless residents are due to be cleared out and the graffiti-covered grandstands bulldozed within the year.

FULL TIME

The scoreboard signs index the history of Rugby League games in Auckland, from long standing local rivalries to legendary international test matches: "Carlaw Park will for ever be part of rugby league folklore as old timers and historians recount great days such as the dramatic one-off test against the 1951 Frenchmen, John Ribot's heartbreaking try to win the second 1985 test for Australia, or how the Kiwis picked themselves up to win the third test by 18-0 a week later."[7] Carlaw Park was the spiritual home of Rugby League in New Zealand up until the WARRIORS and the New Zealand Rugby League moved to North Harbour and then south to Mt Smart Stadium in 1995.

Although the joy of discovering such poetic names in such an unlikely site has not faded, my preference is still to read the signs at *face value*. To quote Lévi-Strauss, with apologies for taking this a bit out of context: "My problem was trying to find out if there was some kind of order behind this apparent disorder—that's all. And I do not claim that there are conclusions to be drawn."[8] My interest in these signs was not only in the POSSIBLE and PROBABLE, but also the IMPOSSIBLE and IMPROBABLE pairings that are revealed through play.

1. Roland Barthes (1987) explained how the linguistic message (for example, a label next to an image in a book) acts to anchor the possible meanings or the "floating chain of signifieds" of a sign: "At the level of the literal message, the text replies—in a more or less direct, more or less partial manner—to the question: what is it?" (39). In this case, the scoreboard also replies to the questions: who is playing? And who is winning?

2. "*Paradigmatic* relations, which determine the possibility of substitution, are especially important in the analysis of a system. The meaning of an item depends on the differences between it and other items which might have filled the same slot in a given sequence."
Culler (1975:13)

3. "*Syntagmatic* relations bear on the possibility of combination: two items may be in a relation of reciprocal or non-reciprocal implication, compatibility or incompatibility."
Culler (1975:13)

4. Culler (2006) explains the importance of *oppositions* for Claude Lévi-Strauss in the study of the language and logic of myths: "In isolating fundamental oppositions, such as raw-cooked, day-night, sun-moon, and many of more exotic and unexpected sorts, Lévi-Strauss is describing codes: sets of categories drawn from a single area of experience and related to one another in ways that make them useful logical tools for expressing other relations." (33)

5. The Possibles and Probables do also of course simply *denote* the opposing teams who take part in the trial game for the New Zealand representative team. I couldn't track down the origin of the use of these terms. But it is an old idea used in England for picking representative Rugby and Cricket teams. The Probables are always the A Team and the Possibles are the B Team. The closest North American equivalent to this may be Shirts vs Skins. Although not for a serious and official occasion (in fact, for exactly the opposite), and not as ambiguous, the names for the opposing teams of Shirts and Skins are as loaded as Possibles and Probables.

6. Culler (1985) defends Ferdinand de Saussure against charges from his critics that he prioritised the *synchronic* over *diachronic* study of language: "It has been suggested that in distinguishing rigorously between these two perspectives and in granting priority to the synchronic study of language, Saussure was ignoring, or at least setting aside, the fact that a language is fundamentally historical and contingent, an entity in constant evolution. But on the contrary, it was precisely because he recognised, more profoundly than his critics, the radical historicity of language that he asserted the importance of distinguishing between facts about the linguistic system and facts about linguistic evolution, even in cases where the two kinds of facts seem extraordinarily intertwined." (35)

7. This is an excerpt from the "Venue Information" entry about Carlaw Park from the website *The World of Rugby League*. (http://www.rleague.com/db/venue/carlaw_park/index.php) retrieved November, 2006.

8. Lévi-Strauss (1978:12). This excerpt taken from a longer discussion of how Lévi–Strauss became interested in the system, the *order* and *meaning* of what initially seem to be *arbitrary, meaningless, absurd*, and *'fanciful'* mythical stories that are common all over the world.

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Signs

POSSIBLES // MT ROSKILL	**PROBABLES // HOWICK**	**MAORI // ELLERSLIE**
PAKEHA // MT WELLINGTON	**NEW ZEALAND // OTAHUHU** (Y)	**THE REST // ST HELENS** (Y)
FRANCE // GLENORA	**JUNIOR KIWIS // PONSONBY** (Y)	**SYDNEY // EASTERN SUBURBS**
QUEENSLAND // GOLD	**CANBERRA // MT ALBERT**	**WAIKATO // UNIVERSITY**
RED // PAPAKURA	**BLUE // MANUKAU**	**VISITORS //**