

BECOMING AN ANTIRACIST EDUCATOR

The Life and Work of Timothy J. Stanley

Edited by Nicholas Ng-A-Fook and Mark T. S. Currie



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Banalities and Multiplicities: Applying Tim Stanley's Work in and Across Places

Bryan Smith

Historians are divided. Industrious, thrifty and merciless described his business philosophy. Paternalistic but well intentioned has been the judgement on the contract labour issue. Controversy has plagued the name of Robert Towns both during and after his lifetime. Detractors called him "Godfather of the slave trade." His reputation would have been more substantial without the unfounded rumours of "Blackbirding."

[Plaque adjacent to statue of Robert Towns, Townsville,
Queensland, Australia]

In the central business district of the city I call home—Townsville—stands a rather inconspicuous statue, one memorializing the namesake of the city Robert Towns. The cementing of Towns into the natural landscape is not surprising, significant as he is to the local area. However, as with many settler communities, the writing of the settler city into existence through the name of a colonial figure is not without controversy (Sullivan & Sullivan, 2020). To understand the specific contest, and the diametrically opposed perspectives encoded in the plaque, some historical context is necessary.

During the nineteenth century, the colony of Queensland was home to a network of plantations, an unusual development but one that nonetheless shaped the settlers' relationship with production in the area (Griggs, 2000). Within this context, the racial discourse of the

space helped settlers articulate a particular logic of labour: The oppressive, tropical context of Queensland was linked imaginatively and scientifically to physiological conditions and understandings about and for racialized white bodies (W. Anderson, 2003; Robinson & Wilson, 2008). Combined, these two settler colonial logics gave rise to a belief that the survival of plantations and agriculture broadly required racialized non-white bodies, particularly those from the South Sea Islands, peoples “almost always regarded by their European counterparts as biologically inferior beings, and thus perceived to be highly exploitable as a labour resource, and cheap to employ and sustain” (Hopkins-Weise, 2002, p. 37). With the arrival of the White Australia policies, and the concomitant calls for the expulsion of non-white peoples from the continent, the Queensland Government actively sought to protect the recruitment of labourers from the South Seas on the premise that this freed up white settlers to do the important political and skilled work needed (Megarrity, 2006). Despite this plea, the Commonwealth, shortly after its formation as an invader state, largely expelled racialized non-white South Sea Island labourers in the hopes of cementing white place-making.

I begin with this rather terse history to provide crucial context for the epigraph. During the nineteenth century, the practice of “Blackbirding”—a term that “became parlance to describe the coercion and exploitation associated with slavery and endemic in the way islanders were recruited, especially at the outset”—was a critical part of bringing labourers into the Queensland economic sphere (Cheer & Reeves, 2013, p. 246). For some, Blackbirding was classified as a form of bondage akin to slavery (Mortensen, 2000), a means of skirting the criminalization of slavery across the British Empire. In 2000, the Queensland Government (2000) acknowledged as much, noting that many South Sea Islanders were ultimately treated like slaves. As one might be able to now infer, the man commemorated via the placard and statue in the epigraph was instrumental in this history. Indeed, the first ship chartered to bring back South Sea Islanders labourers was the *Don Juan* by Robert Towns. In defence of the recruitment of labourers, Towns (1864) was quick to defend the practice, noting that his own relationship and those under his employ with the “industrious, tractable, and inoffensive race” of South Sea Islanders was to be respectful (p. 3).

My interest here is less with Towns’s actions specifically (for his complicity in practices of enslavement are under contention) and more on the subtle yet persistent commitment to a vision of public memory

wherein Towns's name is crystalized into the racial and historical geography of the area, therein cementing his place into the material and symbolic history and future of the area. For me, the toponymic effort on the part of the city, and communities like it across Australia, raises a series of questions about race, geography, and history, and their complex entanglements through everyday naming practices. In what follows, I discuss how Tim's work has been particularly helpful as I work through both how to operationalize place-naming as a critical pedagogical tool of antiracism and decolonizing work and further tease out how racial formations use everyday backdrops as a mechanism to normalize white place.

I Have a Stalker and Her Name Is Victoria

In 2018, I was living in Toronto, not all that far from Queen Street, a major east-west thoroughfare through downtown that serves both as a space of the city's cultural cache and as a commemoration of Queen Victoria, the reigning British monarch during Canada's formative nation-state building years (Wise & Gould, 2011). Later that year, I moved to a new place, a few hundred metres closer not just to Queen Street but also Victoria Street, the two streets running parallel in the downtown area. The key difference between each place, however, was that the former was in Toronto and the latter was in Townsville, two cities separated by 15,000 kilometres yet articulated together historically through the British imperial project of conquest and "civilization." In each locale, there is a "deliberately engineered forgetting" of British colonial place-making power, a presumptively innocent yet methodical effort to write two far flung places into the same story of British colonial ambition in such a way that often eludes conscious consideration (Stanley, 2009, p. 144). In each context, city planning, as a colonial *technology of power* (Jackson, 2018) that is shaped by its *colonial culture* (Porter, 2010), comes to make place a medium for narrative transmission, one that extols the virtues of the colonizer all while Indigenous ideas of place are rendered ontologically homeless (Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Watson, 2009). The consequences of this are hardly symbolic. As Brian Casemore (2008) suggests elsewhere, place gives rise to who we are as subjects and my story, despite the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, remains necessarily dependent on my relationship to naming practices that persistently connect me to colonial projects of dispossession, theft, and invasion.

Speaking to the role of mapping in the colonial venture, Brian Harley (1992) reminds us that a critical component of drawing new lands was “engulf[ing] them [Indigenous Peoples] with blank space” (p. 531). Once the lands were emptied of spatial understandings in the eyes of the colonizer, cartographers could begin to write their own geographies and through its subsequent representation, make an argument about how space ought to be conceived (Wood, 2010). In settler contexts, this practice of blanking a map serve(d/s) to create the conditions for satisfying the anticipatory geographies that were “based on the perceived possibility of ultimately transforming existing environmental conditions” (Veracini, 2010, p. 182). Such writing help(s/ed) to pacify nervous anxieties about the racial Other while also superimposing metropolitan ideas of logically organized space through the cadastral system (Byrne, 2003). Stanley’s (2009) work reminds us that efforts such as these are hardly incidental but critical acts of racist place-making that represent white settler “occupation of the territory as natural, proper and just, and above all, something to be taken for granted” (p. 144). As a result, the writing of maps and the toponymy used to render it intelligible become a wallpaper of dominance that obscure the imposition of ontologies of place and the patterns of violence, themselves rendered normal through the spatial denials of colonial cartography (Grant & Stanley, 2014). Naming Townsville as such, for example, and drawing a colonial epistemology of space upon said lands writes an argument and narrative in favour of colonial history into the material and symbolic domains of the community, normalized through its simultaneous omnipresence and uninspired presence at every literal street corner.

While I focus here largely on one specific work of Timothy Stanley, I have been profoundly shaped by the call to look at the quintessentially ordinary, particularly as it gives form to and organizes the translation of space into settler place. This work of Tim’s has proven to be a critical part of much work that I do, drawing my attention inwards at the white possessive logics that rationalize dominion over the political and physical terrain of place through its justification as common sense (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). It is easy to interrogate settler invasion as a monolithic enterprise that is understood as an abstract force but what Tim does here is powerfully remind us that colonial control works as a condition of life in place itself, becoming so ordinary that its commemoration and remembrance is “semantically

displaced” in favour of its functional and ostensibly apolitical readings in everyday discourse (Azaryahu, 2009).

Home Is Where Exclusions Happen

Growing up, I spent most of my time in the “new market” for Toronto, a community whose current name of Newmarket makes no illusions to the city’s place in the history of the area. Newmarket is hardly as new as the name would imply; home to the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Anishinaabe Peoples (Town of Newmarket, 2019), the lands have long been places through which people have lived, traded, and engaged in the making of goods and livelihoods. Yet, what I identify as my hometown presents itself as an extension of Toronto’s history (the “old market”) and firmly situates itself in the burgeoning state project; in Grade 8, I have vague memories of learning about the community’s early years, not as an area with thousands of years of history but as one sprouting from the intrepid efforts of Quaker pioneers. For years, this became an uncontested and dormant knowledge of my hometown.

The story of Newmarket, as with other white invader places, is a production and consequence of a carefully curated narrative, one that articulates race and space and one that serves to normalize projects of racism (Kobayashi, 2003; Razack, 2002). As Stanley (2011, 2014) has argued across his scholarship, racisms are comprised of three practices: racializations, exclusions, and negative consequences, which arise from said racialized exclusions. Further, he contends that states are critical institutional apparatuses that “play a key role in organizing [these] racisms and in licensing inherited racist practices” (Stanley, 2016a, p. 10). In my work, making sense of the complex webs of toponyms that cohere to create normalized stories of “us,” I’ve come to appreciate how the state’s investment into its self-justification is both written into the spaces it claims dominion over just as it racializes the linguistic terrain of communities, excludes non-conforming languages of place, and does so in such a way that has powerful negative consequences. In this regard, Stanley’s work has proven malleable and constructive to my understanding of how the (re)assertion of invader power, even in moments of Indigenizing or broadening the cultural language of place, is a function of state power to racialize space as a medium to glorify and normalize its own historical presence (see Rose-Redwood, 2016; Tucker & Rose-Redwood, 2015). As he

reminds us, the grand narrative that serves as the historical currency of the state “is widely reproduced and appears to explain the world as it is” (Stanley, 2000, p. 82). What better medium is there for doing this work than the naming practices of communities that literally explain how the world is organized just as it (re)makes it? Newmarket, for example, is not mutually intelligible as anything else, just as the street names that extol the Quaker and settler history become the only intelligible language of place, just as they racialize the town’s cartography and history, exclude the histories of others, and enact negative consequences in denying the place of spatial epistemologies and ontologies that both complement and precede it.

Conclusion: Nuance Across Contexts

Prior to working with Tim, much of my thinking on racism and the political and cultural work that normalized racism as a structuring logic of everyday life was still quite nascent. In discussions with him and through my engagements with his work, I was able to develop a mode of theoretical thinking that has proven critical in my own development as a scholar. In this respect, Tim’s work has proven foundational to the kinds of thinking that I want and need to do now.

In moving to Australia, one of my original concerns was the applicability of my work to a context that sprouted from the same metropolitan centre but diverged through a history specific to that place. In part, that concern was born out of Tim’s argument that an anti-essentialist approach to racism is necessary to avoid reductive and ahistorical readings of racism’s political, cultural, and pedagogical impresses (Stanley, 2014). Working in this context, I was struck by the familiar echoes of British ontological, bodily, and epistemological violence and the respective patterning of white supremacist thinking that bears powerful similarities. Yet, I am always reminded that the application of “Canadian thinking” about colonial and racist formations in Australia might be easy but remains fundamentally context blind. The everyday languages of racism (Hill, 2008) and the historical narratives of white victimization in the face of an oppressive landscape and threats of abhorrent violence are similar in form but distinct in their application to projects of exclusion and their (un)intended consequences (Curthoys, 1999). Australia may appear similar, but its specific efforts and developments of racist state formation have necessitated and resulted in dissimilar and varied racisms and

mechanisms to guard the white state. It is this recognition, drawn from Tim's work on the specificities of the contexts of racisms that speaks through my continued understandings and adaptation to unfamiliar contexts of racialization, exclusions, and their varied consequences.