

**VISUALISING EVERYDAY COLONIAL COMMEMORATION:  
DIGITALLY MAPPING SETTLER-COLONIAL COMMEMORATION**

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**Abstract**

In this paper presentation, using the example of a small Australian city, I argue that the naming practices that give form to local cartographies serves to render colonial dominion over space and the past seemingly part of the natural spatial order. Inspired by Maoz Azaryahu's (2009a; 2009b) notion of the "city-text" – the idea that the toponymic (street naming) selections in a community narrate a particular historical story of the past – I explore how settler contexts use and create mapped space as a commemorative stage, one where colonial might is written into the spatial backdrop of everyday life. To illustrate this, I present a web based map that plots out and surfaces the colonial naming and "city-text" of Townsville, Queensland to demonstrate and critique the symbolic and material normalisation of settler conquest and what historian Tim Stanley (2009) calls the "banality of colonialism" in everyday life. Further, I argue that this has meaningful consequences for how we anchor historical narrative into place; by writing conquest into every (literal) corner of the urban landscape, place comes to glorify European efforts at dispossession and the resultant Indigenous "ontological homelessness" (Moreton-Robinson 2003; Watson 2009).

## **Colonial Lines**

In 1788, Admiral Arthur Phillip commanded the First Fleet – the 11 ships that transported the first permanent European settlers to the “Southern Land” (ie. Australia) – into a small cove halfway up the island’s eastern seaboard. In a letter from the 15<sup>th</sup> of May that year to Lord Sydney, Phillip described it as, “the finest harbour in the world, in which a thousand sail of the line may ride in the most perfect security” (Commonwealth of Australia 1914, 18). Making landfall, Phillip, his fellow sailors and the convicts on the various ships encountered the Gayemagal peoples, the local Indigenous community. In that same letter to Sydney, Phillip describes the relationship as largely cordial; in his words, the Gayemagal peoples engagement with the British was one of, to use Phillip’s language, “curiosity” that resulted in him developing a “much higher opinion” (25) than the one he formed out of James Cook’s recollections from nearly two decades earlier. However, this acceptance of the Gayemagal people was undermined later at dinner when their “curiosity made them very troublesome” (25). To provide a sense of safety against this encroaching curiosity, Phillip, “made a circle around us. There was little difficulty in making them understand that they were not to come within it, and they then sat down very quiet” (25). This moment, Denis Byrne (2003) argues, is the first racial demarcation on the island and the beginning of what they call a “nervous landscape,” one where lines served to pacify settler anxiety about the perennial threat of the Other.

Beginning with Phillip, Australian history is a story of lines. While obvious examples such as The Black Line – the line of armed settlers in Tasmania that moved south to corner and slaughter Indigenous people on the island – stand out as stark historical examples, the use of lines is an essential political and imaginative tool to normalise the disavowal of colonial violence by drawing into existence emptied space for settlers to make anew (Veracini 2008). My interest however is with the lines that guarantee settlement’s perpetuity through their translation into banal artefacts of colonialism (Stanley 2009). Extending Denis Wood’s (2010) argument that maps are argumentative in their framing and creation of space, I want to explore how the pervasive lines of our communities – our streets – are commemorative mechanisms that glorify the white possessive logics that normalise colonial disavowal and reinscribe white settler dominion over space (Moreton-Robinson 2015). First, I want to explore how maps are a powerful narrative medium that benefit from their instrumentalist positioning in the public geographic imaginary. Second, I will demonstrate this at work with reference to one small Australian city’s toponyms, arguing that the mundanity of street naming powerfully serves to claim ownership over space and its historical terrain.

## **Cartography as Narrative**

In 1770, Captain James Cook arrived on the shores of *Terra Australis Incognita*, the Unknown Southern Land, and began the process of laying down new names for the areas that he had “discovered” for the British. Much like Europeans in North America who emptied the landscape in their imaginations as a way of legitimating new cartographies of the space (Harley 1992),

Cook began the, as of now, more than two century long process of using the lands as a poetic medium to create a particular space that wasn't so much discovered as it was made in the eyes of the Europeans (Carter 2010). Blinded by a colonial logic that presumed the island was emptied – “a void that needs to be filled” as Veracini (2010, 190) puts it – of civilised peoples and geographies, Cook and his followers took the created emptiness and rendered it knowable through inscriptions of settler histories and cultures into the symbolic and material circumstances of the island's geography (Said 1978).

In Australia, as in other settler-colonies, this process of creation was guided by and made possible by virtue of the map. As a tool that normalised the rendering of Indigenous spatial ontologies as homeless through their displacement and denial (Moreton-Robinson 2003; Watson 2009), maps provide(d) a document for settlers to write a new homeland into existence. Critical in this venture was the drawing of communities into being, communities bounded by lines that demarcated space as exclusive of its surroundings. Through this, the local maps of Australia came to work together to normalise a “preferred reading” (Hall 1997) of the island, one that birthed into existence a new and powerful spatial imaginary. This, however, only considers the process of settler place-creation as a “meso” level by focusing on communities as a whole. In what follows, I look to how an 18<sup>th</sup> century Parisian import (Azaryahu 2009a) – the commemorative street name – gets used at a hyper-local level to serve the needs of Indigenous dispossession and settler nation building via three symbolic and political properties of street naming.

### **Street Naming and Colonial Possession: City-Text, Heroism and The State**

First, streets articulate and exist relationally to form what Maoz Azaryahu (2009a) has called the “city-text,” the state's vision of the past written into the naming practices of a community that can be read as a narrative text. The city-text, they argue, “presents a particular mapping of space and time” which “represents not only a version of history but also commemorative priorities and hegemonic discourses in different periods” (Azaryahu 2009b, 463). While the text certainly changes with time, that its anchored in place via hegemonic discourses has ensured that colonial commemorative priorities have been large guarded against large scale challenges. The result has been the normalisation of a rather coherent political and cultural identification that is anchored in place (Palonen 2008)

Second, the narrative of place is anchored in commonly held notions of heroism (Smith 2018). The permeation of heroes and heroic events, connected as they are to the grand narrative of the state, allows for the city-text to envision and communicate a particularly powerful view of the past in the cityscape that can elude conscious registration and critique. This is not to suggest that this notion of heroism exists beyond critique at all times. As Derek Alderman (2002) reminds us, street names are “memorial arenas,” but even so, heroic narratives enjoy a particular durability in the geographic imaginary given the normative circulation of grand narrative History.

Third, the city-text is an artefact of the state whose vested interest will be in its political and historical preservation. As Azaryahu (2011) argues, street naming is a, “measure designed to regulate and control urban space by the authorities” (30), a process that benefits from “semantic displacement,” that is, the displacement of commemorative meaning in favour of the functional one (Azaryahu 2009b). Further, the state will present street names as a natural reflection of common commitments to the past, a process that serves to “obscure, and hence fetishize, the unequal power relations that all-too-often underpin the naming process” (Rose-Redwood and Alderman 2011, 3). Through its guarding of the narrative woven through the text and its capacity to anchor this narrative into the functional realities of the community, the state is able to cement its commemorative imperative into the grounds we walk and move without it seeming so, normalising histories conducive to state control and legitimacy. In settler contexts, Rose-Redwood (2016) argues, “the utter ubiquity of colonial place names has had the effect of *normalizing* the colonial imaginary as the taken-for-granted order of the discursive universe through which neocolonial modes of being-in-the-world are experienced” (194).

### **Mapping Townsville’s Settler Toponymy: Topomapper**

To see how these three principles of toponymy – its narrative form, its heroic mythology and its utility as a means of normalising settler state power – work, I look to the example of the small Australian city of Townsville. I do so not to suggest that Townsville is exceptional (quite the opposite in fact) but rather, that the city is a reflection of the common “white possessive logics” (Moreton-Robinson 2015) that are normalised throughout settler toponymic landscapes. For this paper, I draw attention to one particular pattern as demonstrative of settler toponymy: the spatialization of the centre/periphery divide inherent to settler-colonialism (Donald 2009; Weenie 2008). To do so, I use a custom map that I’ve built (<https://bryanabsmith.com/topomapper>) to speak to and analyse the patterns of settler city-text writing in Townsville and five suburbs (boroughs): the city centre, North Ward, South Townsville, Belgian Gardens and the West End.

### **Townsville’s Toponymy**

Similar to, for example, Toronto’s toponymy (Casagrande 2013), Townsville’s city-text centres the place of European exploration in the commemorative web of toponyms. Blanketing the central spaces of the city and reaching deep into the North Ward, the European explorer is commemorated in all but a small minority of streets and many of those that aren’t commemorative of exploration are thematically consistent (ie. three streets – Alexandra, Queen and Victoria St. – are all named for members of the (extended) British royal family). Others are what might be called “thematically adjacent” in that their name is derived from one imposed by an explorer (eg. Cleveland Terrace is named after Cleveland Bay, itself named as such by James Cook (Mathew 2008, 33)). In the North Ward and out in Belgian Gardens, there are three (total) streets named for Indigenous “words” – Parramatta Street, Orana Court and Yarrawonga Drive – but yet, their location and lack of meaningful context (there is, as of yet, a lack of information

available about the historical significance of these toponyms to the local Bindal and Wulgurukaba peoples) renders them less evocative. Further, we would be wise to consider their scale. In his consideration of street naming, Derek Alderman (2003) argues that the “scaling of memory,” the scalar prominence and process of selecting that prominence, contribute to the symbolic place in the larger city-text. Here, that these three streets are relatively small and/or in lower traffic areas, marginalises their commemorative place in the city-text.

Such a relationship between Indigenous toponyms and exploratory ones is, however, too reductive and fail to appreciate the thematic cognates that brace the settler mythology. Common in Townsville, for example, is the memorialisation of World War One casualties, evidenced in the numerous toponyms across the city. (Settler-)nationalism and war in Australia, various scholars remind us (Hoffenberg 2001; Holbrook 2014; McKenna and Ward 2007), exist symbiotically, evidenced here in the comfortable place of The Great War in the city’s commemorative text. This is perhaps not surprising given the place of the Anzac legend in Australia and its attendant credibility as an anchor for the nation’s “coming of age.” More locally, the city is both a garrison community and the metaphorical centre of the region of Australia (North Queensland) that served as the source of the first soldiers who went to fight (Townsville City Council 2018). Supporting the war remembrance are smaller thematic clusters that are largely congruous with the white, masculine Christian settler narrative of Australia. For example, not only is there is a collection of religious toponyms but there is a collection of rather uninspired toponyms in the West End that were chosen because they are ‘good Christian names’ — Harold, James, Margaret, Percy, William, Ernest, Sidney, Claude, and John (Mathew 2008). Taken together, the pre-eminence of toponyms directly commemorative of colonial possession and those that reflect its political, cultural and religious histories, serves to anchor settlement as the central cartographically enforced historical narrative. Further, the rather isolated and marginalized place of Indigenous toponyms symbolically and materially displaces Indigenous peoples and histories from the commemorative priorities of the city.

## **Conclusion**

Mark Monmonier (2006) suggests that geography and the mapping of space can name, claim and inflame, providing examples of egregious toponymic choices as emblematic of cartography’s ability to provoke and represent racist and sexist sentiment. While Monmonier is right to make such an argument, he understates the inflammatory work of mapping, focusing instead on the overtly evocative as the quintessential toponymic strategy of violence. Yet, the thieving imperative and obsession with remaking land (Tuck and Yang 2012; Veracini 2014) works precisely because it presents itself as mundane to the settler populace, beginning with what Brian Harley reminds us was the “dispossess[ion of] the Indians by engulfing them with blank spaces” (Harley 1992, 531). As I’ve argued here, naming practices help to claim and write into that blank space a mythology of white possessive logic grounded in an obsessive desire to narrate the accomplishment of white civilisation at every (uninspired) street corner. The city-text of our community, in this regard, does active work and we all deploy its language everyday. For this

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reason, we owe it to our social justice commitments to more consciously render obvious that which is ever so pedestrian.

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