Review Essay: Discussing Settler Colonialism's Spatial Cultures

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Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*. Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2010 (317pp.)

Libby Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2010 (180pp.)

Racial and spatial ideologies coalesced to form part of the bedrock foundations of settler colonialism. They allowed and encouraged settler populations to keep colonised peoples at an arm's length at all times, though what this entailed was never consistent across the board (in some places, this inspired the segregation and re-ordering of urban spaces, and in others it led to the relegation of 'undesirables' to mission stations, reserves, townships and Bantustans). They also supported the attempts of settlers – with their other arm, we might say – to meddle with the lives of colonised peoples in a number of ways (including a whole range of civilising, Christianising and Europeanising activities, which led to the mobilisation of some communities and to the immobilisation of others, and to the relative autonomy of some and dependency of others). Space and race, therefore, made a world – or even several worlds – of difference in the settler colonial scheme of things. And they continue to do so today.

The two books here under review outline the discursive and structural ways in which Indigenous peoples are spatially and racially situated within (and at the same time, separated from) the designs of

settler collectives. They do so from very different angles. Penelope Edmonds's *Urbanizing Frontiers* is a comparative and transnational historical study of two urban sites of the British Empire (Victoria, British Columbia and Melbourne, Victoria). It explores the relationship between the expansive and urbanising drive of settler colonialism and the oppression and suppression of Indigenous peoples. By contrast, in *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*, Libby Porter presents a commentary on a 'spatial order' imposed by settler colonisers, and presents detailed case studies of protocols currently in place for state conservationist bodies in southeastern Victoria, Australia. True to the title, the book has a pragmatic purpose: to demand that the spatial culture of settler colonialism is unravelled and deconstructed, in order to strengthen Indigenous claims to settler space (in particular, sacred sites and reserve lands).

These are books with very different aims and disciplinary foci. One is about the manifestation of power in nineteenth-century settler cities, the other about the contested nature of planning around Indigenous peoples. And, on the surface, there is a dauntingly striking contrast between the spaces with which the authors concern themselves – cities (the most radically transformed places in the settler geography) and reserves/parklands ('untouched' places according to the settler mentalité) – yet there seems to be a significant degree of congruence between them. Indigenous peoples were removed from both, shunned or locked out. Settler cities could only rise out of land from which native inhabitants were thoroughly displaced and then kept aside in order to keep the cityscape 'tame'.[1] Similarly, national parks and nature reserves, at the initiative of the settler state, required first of all the removal of any Indigenous presence if they were to become the 'untouched' pristine wildernesses to which settlers could 'return'.[2]

Both sites, therefore, have a lot to tell us lot about the spatial strategies and cultures of settler colonialism. By alerting their readers to the damage that space inflicts upon Indigenous peoples, both Edmonds and Porter create awareness about an important element of settler colonialism's past, and at the same time, also raise important questions about the present-day politics of Indigenous struggle. Together, but in their own ways, their scholarship offers the same implicit – and very important –

suggestion: that we need to understand the ways in which Indigenous Others are *spatialised* under different discursive, economic and temporal conditions, in a manner similar, perhaps, to the fruitful ways in which scholars investigate how people become *racialised* within various settler colonial orders.

'Invasion is a structure not an event', writes Patrick Wolfe.[3] The sheer resilience of the various regimes under which Indigenous peoples have found, and continue to find, themselves oppressed and disempowered, supports his claim. In their own ways, both Edmonds and Porter lend support to it too. Edmonds, in the conclusion of her book, argues that '[in order to] see the colonial structures of segregation, dispossession, and reclamation that continue to mark the postcolonial landscape, we must reject any suggestion of a break between the past and the present', while Porter in the first line of hers proclaims that 'Indigenous struggle against colonisers has always been present'.[4]

Edmonds illuminates many urban relationships, but never from the actual perspective of Indigenous people, sidestepping the 'methodological challenge that all historians encounter when writing about colonialism'.

> It is not possible for me to know or to be able to thoroughly interpret Indigenous people's experiences in nineteenth-century Melbourne and Victoria. Instead, as a way forward, and in line with [Henri] Lefebvre, I chart the generative historical and social processes through which social spaces and geographies of exclusion were created. Through this process of reclamation, I seek to re-Indigenize historical understandings of the settler-colonial city.[5]

And this she does, by providing a devastating indictment of the urban biopolitics of settler colonialism and their *effects* on Indigenous society, rather than undertaking the sensitive (and hazardous) job of reconstituting Indigenous voices. Although the subalterns, in this book, do occasionally speak, Edmonds never forces them.

Her argument is coherent and sensible, but is one that steers clear of mundane interchanges. Processes, more so than one-off events, take centre stage in the book. Even her 'settler-colonial city', she wants to stress, is a '*process* rather than a site of colonial modernity': a process brought to life by the unglamorous hunger of settler capitalism, and given momentum by triumphalist discourses of bourgeois metropolitanism and Anglo-Saxon expansionism.[6] Crucially, as well, the settler city is a process that continues, in a number of ways, up to the present. 'Our present-day cities are sites shaped by settler colonialism, its violence and vicissitudes, its shared spaces and cross-cultural moments', Edmonds writes.[7]

Edmonds's analysis commences in the early-nineteenth century, the moment when 'Melbourne' and 'Victoria' mushroom out of land secured from Indigenous people, courtesy of settler law and its oversights. Then, by interrogating travel accounts, newspapers, municipal council reports and police records, Edmonds is able to identify a widespread ambivalence felt by settlers of both communities towards the confronting presence of Indigenous Others. It did not take long for Indigenous spaces to become universally and vehemently scorned by city dwellers and observers. As Edmonds puts it, 'Aboriginal spaces were presented as uncivilized and savage, as madness materialised' – and so they would be presented for a long time to come.[8]

Perhaps the most crucial effect of this discursive strategy was its contribution towards the transformation of the Indigenous person into someone deviant and out of place – someone *not native* to the space (or idea) of the settler city.[9] This scandalising (dis)placement of Indigenous peoples – characteristic of what Lorenzo Veracini would term a 'transfer' enacted in order to strengthen the settler position at the top of the social pecking order – was part of an extensive discursive repertoire that was racist and patronising towards Indigenous peoples, and which should, by now, be quite familiar to historians of settler colonial locales.[10] What Edmonds's book reminds us, however, is how powerfully these ideas emanated from the *cities*, at a time when the settler project was at its most decisive in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and destruction/replacement of their societies.[11]

This is partly why Edmonds argues for a redefinition of perhaps the most contested idea in settler colonial historiography: that of the frontier. Not only was the settler city complicit in the practice of settler colonialism, Edmonds argues, but it was also a key site of contact and contest. And the 'Indigenous' presence was never totally eradicated. As she writes:

> Dispossession was a spatial and ideological practice that operated in both urbanizing spaces and the hinterlands. The settler-colonial project sought to remove Indigenous peoples from the land and, concomitantly, to regulate and partition them in the streets. Thus we must rethink notions about the 'frontier'. Dispossession was a dynamic that only increased over time as the exigencies of racialized space hardened and as the new settler-colonial geography was shored up internally and externally.[12]

The frontier is not simply 'a distinctly non-urban geographical space that sits somewhere out in the country or borderlands', because, as her research shows, 'towns and cities [were] vital sites of contestation' as well. 'The frontier must be reimagined', she argues. And how so? As 'sites of racialized spatial contestations', which were 'mosaic-like – mercurial, transactional, and importantly, intimate and gendered'.[13]

An analysis of settler colonialism as an explicitly gendered process is also a crucial element of Edmonds's thesis. She synthesises the works of other scholars with a few insights of her own, and sets out to produce a narrative in which women receive more than just 'small walk-on parts' (although she is decidedly careful not to overplay the gender card).[14] What gender dynamics best reveal in the settler locales analysed in *Urbanizing Frontiers*, I feel, is the clash between conflicting models of colonialism. This is especially so when we look at the ways in which racialised discourses of gender arise according to the changing necessity of social/racial mixing at different stages in the settler city's growth. And in this respect, white women make all the difference.

It is well established that the presence of an equal gender ratio – and a large degree of heteronormativity – among the invading community is a fundamental tenet to the 'purest' forms of settler colonialism. A 'pure' type of settler colonialism – the term I slightly modify from D. K. Fieldhouse's framework in *The Colonial Empires* (1965) – signifies a situation in which white woman and white man advance hand-in-hand with white, native-born family in tote, contributing at the same time to a settler *society* that denies Indigenous presences and a settler *economy* that has freed itself from its reliance on Indigenous labour.[15] Until this utopia is realised, however, the labour of Indigenous people – usually men – can be quite helpful, as can be the sexual services of Indigenous women.

The latter phenomenon – the exploitation of Indigenous women – is something Edmonds identifies under the dim streetlights of settler cities. As she puts it, 'the sexual exigencies of colonialism required "immoral" spaces, just as racial purity required "moral" spaces'.[16] More than just a moral clash, I would be inclined to argue that what Edmonds illustrates in this example is evidence of a clash between two separate colonial configurations, or 'projects' – in each case, between initial forms of colonialism (be they small-time settlements or fur trade outposts) and what was just around the corner (a purer form of settler colonialism). Historically, 'immoral spaces' were usually more prevalent in societies of mostly male *colonisers* compared with gender-balanced societies of pure *settler colonisers*; in other words, the type of occupation under way (or, to be more specific, the type of colonists recruited for that occupation) seems a key determinant when it comes to the line between 'moral' and 'immoral' sexual encounters with the colonised.

Of course, this clash between colonial configurations, and the way this is reflected in colonial discourse, differs from place to place. Indeed, the two regions featured in *Urbanizing Frontiers* are quite illustrative in this respect. In Canada's Pacific Northwest, where 'fur trade colonialism' was the dominant model to begin with, colonisers required fundamentally different things of Indigenous society to what later settlers would.[17] When, after an anxious wait of about forty years, British Columbia was replenished with white women settlers from the 1870s onwards, and the (mostly male) Aboriginal workforce gradually came to be considered 'valueless in the labour market',

discourses of gender and race came to be articulated in very different ways.[18] This testifies the transition the region was making from colonial or 'protocolonial' outpost to burgeoning settler society – a transition that the Port Phillip District made far more rapidly.[19] By contrast, its first colonisers were predominately pastoralist settlers and merchant capitalists, with white women (mostly native-born) comprising a significant and growing part of the population since the first decade of the administration's establishment.[20] Crucially, settler capitalism took hold and patterns of Aboriginal exclusion became more widespread in Melbourne relatively quicker than it did in Victoria or Vancouver (and 'immoral spaces' became fewer and fewer).

As Edmonds does not gloss over some of these and other 'structural and discursive differences between southeastern Australia and the Pacific Northwest Coast', her book will be of interest to historians and urban critics specialising on both Melbourne and Victoria.[21] But *Urbanizing Frontiers* is by no means a parochial text, and is situated within a transnational framework. It engages with both postcolonial and settler colonial studies, scholarship on whiteness, gender, race and space, urban studies and Pacific studies.

Urbanizing Frontiers also has a few things to say about the contemporary politics of Indigenous struggle. The image of the late-nineteenth century settler city Edmonds presents will be startling to readers with an eye on the present. It is pacified, but awkward towards the *ongoing* presence of Indigenous people and the counter-narratives they present; its settler population, white and orderly, growing more irrational with fear about the *imminent* possible presence of unwanted 'guests' (Chinese immigrants) with every decade of the nineteenth century. This settler city, a place uneasy towards both Indigenous and exogenous Others, one might point out, has barely changed.

Elsewhere, Edmonds is more frank about the parallels and continuities of settler colonial conflict in the cities. The strongest example in this regard is her reminders about the Black GST ([stop] genocide, [recognise] sovereignty, [sign] treaty) protest camps set up in Melbourne city in 2006. As she writes:

> The King's domain is not only Wurundjeri land, it is also close to the site of the first Aboriginal mission in Melbourne. As we have seen, 160 years ago the same council used municipal measures and police to push Aboriginal people from the cityscape. Victoria's Premier Steve Bracks argued that it 'was the council's duty to manage the land under planning laws and [by the] community services committee' and stated that the camp would soon be disbanded. In a manner evocative of colonial attempts in the 1840s to get rid of Native camps, the premier continued, 'We're talking to them and letting them know that they can't stay on permanently and the tents and the caravan and the fire have to go'.[22]

Indigenous peoples, today as they have always, pose a serious problem for settler cities: their very presence interrupts utopian ideas of lawful possession and humanitarian conquest, bringing the moral foundations of settler society into dispute.

Edmonds makes the present day an important reference point, but above all, her book is a piece of historical scholarship. By contrast, in *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*, Libby Porter does just about the opposite: she makes history her reference point, and engages with the present politics of Indigenous rights in a more 'head-on' way. Her compassionate and partisan stance is admitted in the opening pages – 'I indicate a viewpoint, an "interest" instead of dispassionate interest' – and remains inescapable right throughout the text.[23] This is refreshing, and in no way detracts from her argument about space and the current Indigenous predicament.

Approaching Porter's book after reading *Urbanizing Frontiers* encourages us to view the spatial partition of Indigenous peoples in the cityscape as just one example of how the spatial orders of settler cultures have worked against settler colonised peoples everywhere. The very act of planning, 'the social practice of spatial ordering' (and all of its pernicious effects), argues Porter, 'is not just complicit in, but actively reproduces, social injustice for Indigenous peoples' – and hence her reason to pursue

> a genealogy of planning, not an anthropology of Indigenous people in settler states trying to influence planning decisions [... but] an exploration of planning's 'spatial cultures' as I will call them, of the 'us' that is a wider civic body of people grappling with the ongoing contemporary endurances of colonialism's culture.[24]

Porter argues that the constant drive to plan – to order, to re-order, *ad infinitum* – evident in the designs of cartographers and the relentless criss-crossing of lines through native space, should also be identified as a discourse that relates and reproduces power relations. Using a familiar mix of Foucauldian and postcolonial theory, Porter argues that the discourse and practice of planning has created a hierarchisation of space that traps Indigenous subjectivities (and is hence antithetical to Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy). Planning, and the sheer existence of things planned, reproduces settler privilege by informing a complex spatial culture – something she defines as 'the range of ways of thinking about, and living, space', and informs the ways in which a whole range of technological, discursive and epistemological tools contribute to the oppression of Indigenous peoples in settler societies.[25]

This argument, an ambitious attempt to 'open up new modes of thinking about culture, colonialism, and planning', arises out of a somewhat eclectic presentation and methodology, which sees her manoeuvre (sometimes awkwardly) between discourse analysis, postcolonial theory, the philosophy of space and her own empirical research.[26] Starting out with an incisive and sensitive introduction, Porter then presents a selective account of the recent politics of Indigenous struggle in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, before proceeding to compile a theoretical platform from which she can deconstruct the Lockean concept of property along with a handful of quotes of early male settlers apportioning their 'new' land out with their eyes. Then, in the remaining half of the book, Porter provides a detailed critique of the accommodation of Aboriginal claims in Nyah Forest and Gariwerd National Park (in southeastern Victoria, Australia). Here Porter takes aim at state conservation bodies, whose logic, she argues, is guided by a spatial

culture that fails to credit Aboriginal understandings of order, space, preservation and sacredness.

Working out what exactly these Aboriginal understandings are in the first place requires Porter to remove the postcolonial feather from her interpretative hat, and undertake localised ethnographical studies.[27] By making reference to the data collected in her interviews and participant observation, she makes the claim that it is up to conservation entities to at least *try* to understand what an Aboriginal spatial culture might look like, for there is much for settlers to learn. In the meantime, argues Porter, we require a complete reform of Anglocentric institutional structures and naming protocols, and, above all, the positioning of Aboriginal demands equally alongside ecological goals in their organisational plans. This advice is timely, but not all that radical or revolutionary; rather, the novelty of Porter's work lies in the means by which she reaches this conclusion (by providing a compassionate and careful analysis of the protocols employed by state conservation bodies in Victoria, Australia, interspersed with the perspectives of local peoples).

Theory is what Porter uses to stitch her book's somewhat disparate components together, but some of the material she chooses is somewhat problematic. For instance, her reproduction of poststructuralist and early postcolonial theorists of the late-1990s/early-2000s is useful, and adequately complements her own stance on the ethics of planning; yet other parts are somewhat incoherently arranged and seem to lack purpose. In particular, her fleeting hooksian argument in the dying pages for 'locating our radical politics in an ethic of love' is just baffling for a book of this type.[28] More importantly and regrettably, it might be the case that the sheer density of much of her theoretical content has meant that she has locked out her two most important target markets: policy analysts/designers (the people with the ability to make the changes for which she asks) and Indigenous peoples (the people about whom, and for whom, she writes the book in the first place). This is surely a questionable trade-off. It is also a somewhat ironic one, for in mounting a campaign against settler understandings of space and order that are ignorant of Indigenous understandings, she has herself produced a piece of literature about space for a mostly non-Indigenous readership.

It is unclear what scholars based outside of Australia – whether of planning, conservation, architecture, Indigenous policy, sociology or history – will make of the case studies in *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning*. Hopefully this will not deter too many international readers, for the book does have significant merit, and communicates on several levels about planning, discrimination and the dilemmas of space. Perhaps the most important argument in *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning* is for 'new conversations' in and around Indigenous politics. Briefly, but very perceptively, Porter suggests that the fight for special recognition and citizenship-based rights, operating as it does within the stubborn *nomos* of the settler sovereign order, has been slow to translate into real benefits. In her summary, Porter writes:

> I am advocating ways of recognizing the domain of the Indigenous polity within planning, either within or outside legal forms (both are possible), to enable different kinds of practices to become available. *This does not necessarily have to be a formal, legal recognition of Indigenous rights.* I say this, cognisant that such a statement may appear to be letting settler states 'off the hook' of the hard work of legal recognition. This is not my intent at all – that legal recognition is crucially important. Instead, I do not want to let settler states 'off the hook' of recognizing the Indigenous polity in everyday ways in state-based planning, in the absence of that legal recognition. Our 'recognition' of multiply constituted polities, Indigenous and others, can occur in a myriad of everyday ways. It can constitute some of the 'thousand tiny empowerments' [Leonie] Sandercock suggests for locally based orientations to justice.[29]

Although Porter does not elaborate on what all of this might entail, it is not all that hard to guess. We need greater consultation with Indigenous peoples in matters regarding the layout of the settler societies that surround them. We also require a level – or a number of levels – of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy over the

ways in which both private and state capital continue to (dis)organise Indigenous spaces.

In sum, then, Penelope Edmonds's *Urbanizing Frontiers* and Libby Porter's *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning* contribute to an understanding of the structural characteristics of settler colonialism, and as such, should be well received by scholars in a consolidating field. From their own very different perspectives, Edmonds and Porter show how conceptions of space affect Indigenous peoples in categorically coercive and life-altering ways. In settler colonies, spatial ordering is a racially discriminative process (or, we might frame it the other way around, and say that racialisation is a spatially determined process). The authors, by studying the interrelation of these two processes in a framework that is conscious of the many differences that exist between various colonial formations through time and space, have innovated a new way to understand the power dynamics of settler colonialism. And, if we read their arguments close enough, the books conceal hidden arguments for a new discourse of Indigenous rights and a greater recognition of Indigenous voices in conservationist organisations, city councils and all levels of government. These are valuable additions to an expanding literature on settler colonialism.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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NOTES

[1] For reflections on the recent transformation of segregated settler city into 'untamed' and contested social space, see Alan Morris, *Bleakness and Light: Inner-City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999); Martin J. Murray, *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[2] For a detailed connection between national parks and Indigenous removal in the context of the United States, see Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York and Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1999). For Australia, see Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Carving Wilderness: Queensland's National Parks and the Unsettling of Emptied Lands, 1890–1910', in Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds (eds), *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 73-94.

[3] Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, 4 (2006), p. 388. He also writes: 'It is both as complex social formation and as continuity through time that I term settler colonization a structure rather than an event' (p. 390).

[4] Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2010), p. 238; Libby Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2010), p. 1.

[5] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 18.

[6] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 239.

[7] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, pp. 238-9.

[8] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 198.

[9] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 243.

[10] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 33-52.

[11] Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', p. 388.

[12] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 202.

[13] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, pp. 5-6.

[14] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 16.

[15] D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires, A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), pp. 58, 250-64, 372. Fieldhouse defined 'pure settlement colonies' as those places where neither Indigenous nor plantation/slave labour was a requirement for the economic viability of the colonial configuration.

[16] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 224.

[17] Harold Hickerson, 'Fur Trade Colonialism and the North American Indian', *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 1, 2 (1973), pp. 15-44; Edward Cavanagh, 'Fur Trade Colonialism: Traders and Cree at Hudson's Bay, 1713-1763', *Australasian Canadian Studies* 27, 1-2 (2009), pp. 85-94.

[18] Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); John Lutz, 'After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 3, 1 (1992), pp. 69-93, quoting A. A. Harvey from 1871 (p. 71).

[19] For a definition of the fur trade as 'protocolonial', see Cole Harris, 'Towards a Geography of White Power in the Cordilleran Fur Trade', *Canadian Geographer* 39, 2 (1995), p. 132.

[20] J. C. Caldwell, 'Population', in Wrav Vamplew (ed.), *Australians: Historical Statistics* (Broadway: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987), pp. 27-8.

[21] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 217.

[22] Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, p. 236.

[23] Porter, *Unlearning*, p. 6.

[24] Porter, *Unlearning*, pp. 2, 13.

[25] Porter, *Unlearning*, p. 43.

[26] Porter, *Unlearning*, p. 48.

[27] 'The purpose of the research was not to document the lifeways, beliefs, and culture of Indigenous people in Victoria, or elsewhere. This book does not constitute an anthropological study of Indigenous polities and practices in Nyah, Gariwerd, or any other place, and I have no claim to the validity or otherwise of land title claims, or of the veracity of expressed knowledge about place presented

in this book. I appreciate the sensitivity of these questions, as Indigenous people now work, under very limiting rules of proof, to establish their connection to land through the systems and structures established by dominant non-Indigenous cultures' (Porter, *Unlearning*, pp. 6-7).
[28] Porter, *Unlearning*, pp. 157-8.
[29] Porter, *Unlearning*, p. 155. My emphasis.