

Tracey Banivanua Mar¹

Tracey Banivanua Mar, a Melburnian of Fijian (Lauan), Chinese and British descent and Associate Professor at La Trobe University, was a pioneering and profoundly influential historian. Her untimely death, just short of her 43rd birthday, was from a cancer that she fought against with characteristic courage, positivity and humour. It came when an increasing number of historians across the world were discovering in her work new possibilities for telling alternative colonial histories and finding within those stories new ways of understanding the colonial world at large. The politics of her background and location shone through in everything that she wrote. 'As an Islander living, researching and writing from Wurundjeri country in Melbourne, Australia', she explained, 'connectivity amidst the many and varied diasporas of Oceania, seemed a natural and historically accurate frame of reference'.²

Tracey's University of Melbourne PhD won the Dennis Wettenhall prize in Australian History. It underpinned her first book, *Violence and Colonial Rule*,³ which was shortlisted for two New South Wales Premiers' prizes for History in 2008. The book used archival sources ranging from legislative debates to police and court records to reconstruct the regimes of violence which underpinned the 'recruitment' and 'employment' of labour from Pacific Islands in Queensland's sugar plantations. But, tellingly, it also revealed a determination to view such regimes from the perspective of the people caught up in the business as labourers (including Tracey's relatives). Tracey's empathy for her Islander subjects, and her determination to uncover the ways in which they resisted and altered the systems by which they were governed and exploited, were the starting points for a publishing career that proved prolific and inspirational, even as it was tragically condensed.

With a co-edited collection with Julie Evans demonstrating Tracey's versatility in considering different colonial formations also under her belt, Tracey launched into a second phase of publishing productivity.⁴ In *Making Settler Colonial Space*, edited with Penny Edmonds, she blended the conceptual insights of settler colonial studies (which she had learned from her friend, supervisor and mentor Patrick Wolfe) with a close attentiveness to the different conditions of colonialism in sites distributed around the Pacific rim. She learned about these different, but interconnected conditions, as much from her engagement with Indigenous studies as from the colonial records.⁵ She turned her attention to the role that stories and 'performances' of cannibalism played in the colonial imagination of Fiji in a series of articles that contributed profoundly to our understanding of modes of colonialism, enacted by both coloniser and colonised, in the Pacific.⁶ A chapter in her close friend Kalissa Alexeyeff's co-edited *Touring Pacific Cultures*, on 'cannibal tourism', was especially beautifully and compellingly written.⁷

Thereafter Tracey's work continued to both identify and express its own solidarity between Pacific Islander, South Seas and Indigenous Australian, and Maori communities. With great humility and respect for her historical subjects, she demonstrated how oral histories could be merged with scrupulous and painstaking archival research. She consistently looked not just for the agency, but also for the fine-grained, individual circumstances of particular colonised people. From the record of their actions in resisting, appropriating and responding to colonialism's violence, could be found aspects of their lives otherwise hidden from the archive. She utilised her particular talent for empathy with her subjects to show how incipient networks were created between Pacific, Aboriginal and Maori peoples first to anticipate, and then to work around and within, the structures of colonial governance from the early nineteenth century onwards.

Tracey's 'Imperial Literacy' article provides a fine example of her approach and style.⁸ She set her analysis in the years 1838 and 1840 and in three places, Tahiti, Narre Narre Warren in Melbourne, and Waitangi in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Her exquisitely written narrative wove together Queen Pomare's attempt to secure Queen Victoria's consent for the British to offer her people 'protection', Billibellary's withdrawal of cooperation between Wurundjeri and British authorities, and a group of Maori chiefs' refusal to sign the Treaty of Waitangi. She argued that 'these seemingly isolated moments of protest constitute the observable tip of a wider process underway within many indigenous communities in the late 1830s and 1840s'. With a 'shared expression and conceptual basis' they constituted mobilisation to preserve aspects of sovereignty in the face of a looming colonial world. "Because of the frequently counter-imperial, suppressed or subversive nature of indigenous political activity", she wrote, "it is difficult to explore with certainty the extent to which it was informed, politically conscious or global. At the best of times, tracking transnational networks and circuits is an archive-intensive project that thrives on physical or hard networks through which the transmission of people, bodies and kin, ideas, discourse and information can be tracked ... But the empire's indigenous webs tend to flash in and out of the archival record. The links, connections and networks we seek to track were often subversive, frequently interrupted, and deliberately kept private from the imperial record. With such fleeting appearances ... sometimes only inference and the imagination, albeit consistent with available empirical evidence, can foreground indigenous peoples' historic thoughts, emotions, desires, anger and intentions ..." The British colonial humanitarian experiment, at its height of influence in the late 1830s, was planting discursive seeds on which indigenous leaders freely grafted their own translated meanings ... These discourses were ... articulated in a common language that indigenous political leaders like Queen Pomare, Billebellary and the Maori elite further refined ... to articulate the new threat that the colonial era posed, and the foundations on which indigenous people wanted it to proceed".⁹ This articulation, Tracey brilliantly labelled 'imperial literacy' – something never before accorded to indigenous peoples as a transnational phenomenon.

In 2016 Tracey was awarded the Patricia Grimshaw Prize by the board of *Australian Historical Studies*. The winning article, 'Shadowing Imperial Networks', located itself in Sydney Harbour – a vantage point from which to look outwards, viewing the multiple connections that Pacific Islander, Aboriginal and Maori people maintained in order to 'shadow' subvert and counter the imperial networks that European and American powers were constructing in their shared region.¹⁰ In the judging panel's words, the article 'stood out for its innovative joining of colonial Australian and Pacific histories, through life stories of indigenous men, women and children, and the mobility generated by imperial trade and shipping networks'.¹¹

In her latest book, Tracey's powers as an historian of Indigenous people's networked negotiation of colonial authority were exemplified in fully matured form. Her *Decolonisation and the Pacific*, beginning with the story of her aunt, Bubu Taka, wonderfully captures colonial authorities' attempts to limit the possibilities of decolonization across the Pacific, and islanders' mobilization to expand those limits. In a review forum in this journal, marking the book's innovative impact, Tracey explained, 'This book has been a labour of love and respect for the generations of peoples, particularly Indigenous peoples, from in and around Oceania who have negotiated, dreamed and lived their ways through and around colonial limits'.¹² The range of Tracey's sources, both documentary and oral, is as astonishing as her geographical breadth. Above all she shows that Pacific islanders like her aunt never meekly accepted the infantilised roles prescribed for them by colonial authorities, neither during colonialism nor during the processes they initiated, which led to its demise. Antoinette Burton noted that in the wake of this book, 'It should be impossible ... to think of contemporary calls for global Indigenous rights without knowing that Ratu Seru Cakobau proposed Fiji's 'cession' in 1874 – or to talk about the United Nations Charter without grappling with

the 1945 All Colonial People's conference and its manifesto, *The Colonies and Peace*. Nor should it be possible to tell the story of the League of Nations mandate system without making the Samoan delegation and the racialized debate about status and belonging that surrounded it an integral part of that narrative'.¹³ As Tracey herself put it, 'the success or failure of decolonisation ... lay not in the flag-raising event of national independence, but in Indigenous peoples' anatomising of its meaning, their reconfiguration of it as a state of being, as a social and cultural structure that transcends borders and exceeds the constraints of colonial legal systems. It lies in their reformation of decolonisation as a stateless, albeit fragile and contingent form of sovereignty and independence, a "site of manoeuvrability" as Burton sees it, that agitates against the imperial and territorial limits of procedural decolonisation. This is an unconventional way of measuring decolonisation, and one that Burton notes in her review, "generates a new vocabulary that is highly portable", one that I hope captures the diverging paths of imperial and Indigenous projects of decolonisation'.¹⁴

Tracey will be remembered by those who knew her personally not just for the breath-taking quality of her scholarship, but for the lightness with which she wore that scholarship. She never took herself or her work too seriously. She was more passionate about making the world an incrementally better place through her actions and her personal relationships than she was transforming scholarly understandings of the past for their own sake. She was humble and generous to those around her. She dedicated time to her students' work, helping them to find the gaps in the sources into which they could step, and encouraging them to develop as responsible and empathetic researchers in their own right. Her wicked sense of humour was accompanied by a fierce determination to resist forms of patriarchal and colonial thought and practice. She took care to negotiate this resistance in a way that was sensitive to the feelings of those she opposed, although she always stood her ground. It is for these qualities too, that Tracey has proved influential among a new generation of colonial, Australian, Pacific and Indigenous historians. Those inspired by her work are attentive to the impersonal discourses of race, class and gender, but also to the irretrievably complex mixture of feelings and behaviours that are manifest in individuals negotiating their way through structures of power.

Keith Camacho ended his contribution to the review forum on Tracey's book with some questions provoked by her approach: 'we can ... ask, why did Banivanua Mar pursue such a frame of analysis in the first place? What does she think about the relevance of Indigenous Studies more generally? And how might her study contribute to our understanding of contemporary Indigenous movements in Australia and the Pacific Islands, especially with regard to matters of gender and sexuality and the ongoing militarisation of the region?' It is a tragedy that Tracey's direct answer could only be so brief. She responded by re-articulating a central argument of the book. 'Both colonisation and decolonisation are imperial projects, but decolonisation is a concept that has been configured by Indigenous and colonised peoples as an elemental and intergenerational process – a stateless and manoeuvrable site of independence and sovereignty'. Tracey's ongoing work would have addressed these issues in much greater depth. It is fitting that Camacho himself continued 'That these and other questions have come to the fore merely illustrates the provocative nature of Tracey Banivanua Mar's social history of empire and Indigeneity. It is a landmark study that we should enthusiastically endorse and recommend. Let me be one of the first Native scholars to thank her for producing such a wonderful example of Pacific history'.¹⁵ Tracey was working on another book, which was to be characterised by her same 'ongoing and interconnected dialectic', as she put it, 'between the transcendent' mobilities of Indigenous peoples, and the consumption of territory by colonial and imperial powers. She told me about some of her work on Merri Creek and the Yarra River as we walked along its banks last year. It was to be just one, fascinating part of her larger ARC Discovery Project on *Land and Colonial Cultures: tracing Indigenous and settler transformation in the Pacific, 1850-1900*. She envisioned the book as a series of chapters on places and moments where Indigenous peoples changed the spaces of settler colonial cities through their resistance and

unwillingness to move. Extending her profound insight that, 'throughout the Pacific and along its rim, the dispossession of land in one place was frequently reliant upon the dispossession and displacement of bodies from another', Tracey was also developing a project on former British slave owners who brought new ideas of coerced labour as well as compensation money with them to Australia after the emancipation of Britain's Caribbean slaves.¹⁶ Prolific and busy as ever, she was also collaborating on a project with Melbourne Museum involving re-provenancing artefacts from across the Pacific. Each of these projects promised to be transformative. Through each of them, Tracey was ever more confidently articulating in her distinctive voice on an international platform. Planning for them was part of her strategy in finding hope despite her prognosis. In her response to her illness, she embodied all the defiance of the historical subjects whom she studied and identified with. Although she has now joined the ancestors of which she often spoke (and not always reverentially), the historical work that she had already published will continue to inspire. Indeed so rapid and wide-ranging was her published oeuvre, and so relevant was it to multiple constituencies of historians with different foci, that it will take some time for many of us to engage fully with all that she offered. As we do so, her reputation will only grow further, as one of the most accomplished and inspirational historians of the colonial, and especially the Pacific, world.

¹ This obituary has been a collaborative effort. I would like to thank most profoundly Tracey's very close friends Kalissa Alexeyeff, Kat Ellinghaus, Julie Evans and Penny Edmonds for their help in undertaking this difficult task.

² Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Author's response: transcendent mobilities', in *Adrian Muckle, Antoinette Burton, Helen Gardner, Keith L. Camacho & Tracey Banivanua Mar Decolonisation and the Pacific, The Journal of Pacific History*, 51 4, 2016, 451-462

³ *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2007.

⁴ Tracey Banivanua Mar and Julie Evans (eds), *Writing Colonial Histories : Comparative Perspectives*, University of Melbourne, 2000.

⁵ Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds, (eds), *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010.

⁶ For example, Tracey Banivanua Mar, "'A thousand miles of cannibal lands": Imagining away genocide in the re-colonisation of West Papua', *Journal of Genocide Research* 10, 4, 2008, 583-602;

Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Cannibalism and colonialism: Charting colonies and frontiers in Nineteenth-Century Fiji', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, 2, 2010, 255-81.

⁷ Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Performing Cannibalism in the South Seas', in Kalissa Alexeyeff and John Taylor, eds. *Touring Pacific Cultures*, ANU Press, 2016, 323-332.

⁸ Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Imperial literacy and indigenous rights: Tracing transoceanic circuits of a modern discourse', *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 37 (2013), pp. 1-28.

⁹ 'Imperial Literacy'.

¹⁰ Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Shadowing Imperial Networks: Indigenous Mobility and Australia's Pacific Past', *Australian Historical Studies*, 46, 3, 2015, 340-55.

¹¹ <http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/ah/patricia-grimshaw-prize-2016>.

¹² *Adrian Muckle, Antoinette Burton, Helen Gardner, Keith L. Camacho & Tracey Banivanua Mar Decolonisation and the Pacific, The Journal of Pacific History*, 51 4, 2016, 451-462.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*