

PUTTING A CAP ON RACISM LOUIS AGASSIZ AND THE CANADIAN ARCTIC

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There are some eighty places in the world named after Louis Agassiz, who was thought of until recently as a great scientist, but who in reality was one of the most important racists of the 19th century. Of all the places named after him, there is probably none bigger than *Agassiz Ice Cap* on Ellesmere Island in the Arctic North of Nunavut Territory (Canada). It is half the size of Switzerland, where Louis Agassiz was born in 1807. The pristine 21,500 square kilometres of snow and ice in the Qikiqtaaluk Region were originally named *The Chinese Wall* in 1883 by James Booth Lockwood (1852–1884) of the *Lady Franklin Bay Expedition*. That Arctic expedition was led by Lieutenant Adolphus Greely (1844–1935) and promoted by the *United States Army Signal Corps*. According to the 9th Report of the *Geographic Board of Canada*, the feature was re-named *Agassiz Glacier* in 1910, after the pioneering thinker of anti-black racism, segregation, and Nazi racial hygiene (who was then still thought to be a great glaciologist). Today it is known as *Agassiz Ice Cap*. In 2021/2022, Haitiano-Swiss-Finnish artist Sasha Huber worked on a project to un-name and thus clean *Agassiz Ice Cap* from its association with crimes against humanity. Due to major problems of accessibility (distance, harsh local weather conditions, costs of air transportation, few landing possibilities), Sasha Huber abandoned her project, which had been developed in the context of her «You Name It» exhibition at Toronto's *Power Plant Con-temporary Art Gallery*. The following text is the product of my collaboration with Sasha Huber in the preparation of the *Agassiz Ice Cap* project.

The Canadian north, particularly the Nunavut archipelago, is littered with place names that bear testimony to that particular European colonial ruthlessness with which explorers, scientists, politicians, settlers, captains, financiers, industrialists, and the military dealt with what they considered pristine and uninhabited lands. They came from England, Ireland, Scotland, Canada, France, Norway, Sweden, the USA, and Denmark; they named islands, peninsulas, gulfs, channels, lakes, straits, and inlets after themselves, their friends, their sponsors, or their royal families. The almost exclusively male list could be prolonged considerably: James Lancaster (1554–1618), Francis Jones (1559–1622), Henry Hudson (1565–1611), Robert Mansell (1570–1652), William Baffin (1584–1622), Luke Foxe (1586–1635), Robert Bylot (17th century), William Coats (d. 1752), William Baker (1705–1770), William Cornwallis (1744–1819), Henry Bathurst, 3rd Earl Bathurst (1762–1834), John Barrow, 1st Baronet (1764–1848), King William IV. (1765–1837), William Hyde Wollaston (1766–1828), Edward Griffith (1767–1832), Robert Dundas, 2nd Viscount Melville (1771–1851), Felix Booth (1775–1850), Murray Maxwell (1775–1831), Henry Kater (1777–1835), John Richardson (1787–1865), Robert Peel, 2nd Baronet (1788–1850), William Edward Parry (1790–1855), Jane, Lady Franklin, née Griffin (1791–1875) Edward Belcher (1799–1877), Francis Egerton, 1st Earl of Ellesmere (1800–1857), Queen Victoria (1819–1901), Francis Leopold McClintock (1819–1907), Elisha Kent Kane (1820–1857), Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823–1887), Joseph-René Bellot (1826–1853), Amund Ringnes (1840–1907), the Prince of Wales, the later Eduard VII. (1841–1910), Ellef Ringnes (1842–1929), Axel Heiberg (1848–1932), Otto Neumann Knoph Sverdrup (1854–1930), Robert Edwin

Peary (1856–1920), Fridtjof Wedel-Jarlsberg Nansen (1861–1930), Louis-Philippe Brodeur (1862–1924), Ivar Fosheim (1863–1944), Queen Maud of Wales (1869–1938), Hans Adolf Victor Baumann (1870–1932), Hans Peder Steensby (1875–1920), Sverre Helge Hassel (1876–1928), Knud Johan Victor Rasmussen (1879–1933), Prince Oscar Fredrik Wilhelm Olaf Gustaf Adolf, later King Gustaf VI Adolf (1882–1973), Charles Marius Barbeau (1883–1969), George Tingley Makinson (1903–1986), David Haig-Thomas (1908–1944), Ralph Moody Hall (1923–2019), Queen Elisabeth II. (*1926), and Charles Philip Arthur George, Prince of Wales (* 1948).

A toponymic orgy that lasted for nearly three centuries.

It is reminiscent of what happened when in the 1860s, German geologist Sir Johann Franz 'Julius' von Haast (1822–1887) explored New Zealand for coalfields and goldfields and examined geological structures with regard to railway tunnels. He did so in the interest of British and European colonial society and named over 100 places after British, German, Austrian, French, Australian, New Zealand, Danish and Swiss scholars, poets, sons of emperors, explorers and scientists (and also after himself and his son). He did so to endear himself to the name-bearers and to solidly locate New Zealand within white European, while at the same time ignoring the Māori perspective. He named one glacier after Louis Agassiz, of course.

It is no accident that the *Inuit Heritage Trust* has submitted thousands of requests for name changes or name additions to the *Toponymist's Office* of the Nunavut Government in Iqaluit. Will one day another request be added to the list? That of *Agassiz Ice Cap* to be un-named? Un-named because before it was thought fit to bear the name of a «scientific» racist, it did not have an Inuit name. It was nameless.

What does the demand for un-naming *Agassiz Ice Cap* have to do with the colonial history of Nunavut? What does Louis Agassiz, who is mainly known for spreading his theories of race and his anti-Black racism among the slaveholders of the American South, have to do with the plight of the Inuit people?

First, Louis Agassiz was probably the most successful proponent of polygenism, i.e. the influential theory that there is allegedly not one humanity with one single place of origin but that there were several mankind or «races», which originated in different places and which had to be put in a hierarchy. In that hierarchy, the *white* or «Caucasian race» was at the top, the Black or «African race» at the bottom.

Second, Louis Agassiz established the racist academic consensus at Harvard University in cooperation with Samuel Morton (1799–1851). Morton had collected a huge set of skulls («Black», «White», «Red», and «Yellow»). He poured lead shot into them to measure their volume, which he took as equivalent to the volume of the brain and as an indicator of intellectual capacity. Morton's data fit Agassiz's theories perfectly. In 1839, Morton classified races on the basis of cranial capacity, structural features, and phrenological features, and established that all Native Americans, except «the Eskimaux», were related, but both races were «barbarous».

«Whites», of course, were on top, «Blacks» at the bottom, and «Indians» in between. Agassiz contributed to *Types of Mankind* (1854), which Morton co-authored with the racists George R. Gliddon (1809–1857) and Josiah Nott (1804–1873). *Types of Mankind* was used to justify the slavery of Blacks in the southern United States and had an international audience.

In his research, Morton never mentioned three Inuit skulls with an embarrassingly high mustard-seed mean of 86.6 mentioned three years earlier in *Crania Americana*. Morton's aim was to depress their average below the «Caucasian» value for his final tabulation for «mongoloids». Morton found the «Esquimeaux» of Greenland to be «crafty, sensual, ungrateful, obstinate, and unfeeling; their mental faculties from infancy to old age present a continued childhood.»

This story recalls another, earlier story: Englishman Martin Frobisher (1535–1594), ruthless privateer and pirate, leader of the first English expedition to West Africa, seaman in search of gold, and explorer in search of the Northwest Passage, brought with him from his second voyage (1577) three Inuit who had been forcibly taken from Baffin Island: a man called Calichough, a woman called Egnock, and her child Nutioc. All three died soon after their arrival in England.

«What's in a name?» one may ask in the case of the settlement that had grown out of an Inuit fishing location to a Hudson Bay Company station and a US army airbase and early warning radar station. No wonder that on 1 January, 1987, the name of the municipality was changed from «Frobisher Bay» to «Iqaluit» – aligning official usage with the word ᐃᑲᓃᐃᑦ (*place of many fish*) that the Inuit population had always used. Name changes at times portend important historical and political events: In 1999, Iqaluit became the capital of the newly formed Nunavut territory with 85 percent of its habitants of Inuit origin.

The story of Martin Frobisher finally recalls another, later story. The only inhabited settlement on Ellesmere Island, where Agassiz Ice Cap is located, is Grise Fiord. Known as *Aujuittuq* in Inuktitut, this little hamlet is the northernmost community in Nunavut and Canada. Together with Craig Harbour, an abandoned settlement on the north shore of Jones Sound, 55 km southeast of Grise Fiord, it tells a story of relocation and discrimination that has its roots in the contempt that Agassiz, Nott, Morton, Gliddon, and other racists held for the «inferior races» or the «lesser breeds», as Rudyard Kipling used to call them in 1897 in his poem «Recessional».

In the 1950s, the *Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, acting on behalf of the *Department of Resources and Development*, moved some 90 Inuit to settle in Grise Fiord and Craig Harbour (Ellesmere Island) and in Resolute (Cornwallis Island). Most likely, the Canadian government intended to establish Canadian sovereignty in areas that had often been disputed and were of growing geostrategic importance. The Inuit were promised better living conditions and plentiful wildlife. They soon discovered that they had been misled and that promises had been broken. The *Inuit High Arctic Relocations* can without any doubt be called a dark chapter in Canadian history.