
From the moment that nonpresence comes to be felt within speech … it had already begun to undermine and shape ‘living’ speech, exposing it to the death within the sign. ¹

Materialising late among the various events that commemorated the 250th anniversary of the departure of the HMS Endeavour,² the exhibition ‘Reimagining Captain Cook: Pacific perspectives’ at the British Museum in London takes place in the period of the voyage itself, ending on 4 August

2019. On this day in 1769, Cook was mid-Pacific. He reported that he witnessed a presentation of music and dancing on the island of Raiatea. He observed that despite the performers’ dress being ‘neat, decent, and well chose’, ‘neither their Musick or Dancing were at all Calculated to please a European’.3

The Museum’s introduction to the exhibition proposes that ‘In the Pacific, Islanders continue to remember the encounters that occurred, reimagining them in artworks which reflect on their impact’. The wall text suggests that it will be the interrelation of artworks, significant objects and images that will ‘reimagine Cook and the impact of his voyages as complex, contentious and unresolved’. The words promise to skew the perspective of Cook’s viewpoint.

Cook’s journal, and those of Sir Joseph Banks, accompanying naturalist and botanist, and Sydney Parkinson, botanical and natural history artist, alongside materials collected on route as well as the drawings of John Webber, which were published in the form of engravings for the admiralty’s official account of the third voyage, seem to inevitably provide the starting point for exhibitions. The British Museum exhibition, arranged in seven sections, each a place where Cook landed, is no exception. The impressions of indigenous cultures and first nation peoples, in the form of contemporary artworks, remains subordinate to the narrative of Western enlightenment in which exhaustively written testimonies, the inventory and the actual relic, are considered pre-eminent guarantors of datum. Ultimately, artworks are enlisted to legitimise, rather than destabilise, the authority of Western visitors, who were supposedly engaged in an honest quest for knowledge and seeking détente. This review will consider how the juxtaposition of artworks, artefacts and information, in the form of caption texts, works against the agenda of ‘reimagining’. Curatorial arrangements reinforce the official Cook narrative, validating it within the Museum’s stabilising regimes.

Cook’s own words are promulgated in an antechamber, even before the visitor enters the exhibition proper, through the display of published editions of the official account of the voyages. These are derived from Cook’s handwritten, daily English language travel journal. A caption notes their significance in making Cook ‘a fixture in the pantheon of British heroes to this day’. With an aura of objectivity, precision and rationality, Cook’s assessments are met with before the reflections of Pacific cultures, including those of artists whose work is in the current exhibition. These expressions employ many distinct languages and visual forms, presenting relatively subjective and elusive interpretations of the past events. The methodology of Cook’s visits, and their later more

3 James Cook, ‘Captain Cook’s Journal during his first voyage round the world made in H.M. Bark “Endeavour” 1768-7: A Literal Transcription of the Original Mss. with Notes and Introduction’, edited by Captain W J L Wharton, RN, FRS Hydrographer of the Admiralty, eBooks@Adelaide, University of Adelaide, 2016, chapter 4
violent aftermath, was exactitude – the topographic over the experiential, the complete survey of the circumnavigator over the partial view of the local.

In the introductory text to the exhibition, Cook’s voyages are labelled ‘extraordinary’, with this exhibition ‘charting the enduring legacies of his encounters with Pacific peoples and indigenous Australians’. Cook was a cartographer. It seems the exhibition will unfold in a manner consistent with ‘his’ legacies. Encounters are subject to ‘charting’, a word tinged with the command of the Admiralty. Cook’s purpose was to map, to bestow shape and sense on the extraordinary, to align it with order. Piecing together a definitive world map suggested that Cook’s mission was to acquire universal knowledge. The ensuing colonial expansion and exploitation of the regions that Cook exposed to a British and European purview tell of other aims.

Also in the lobby space, as a prelude to the exhibition, two previous British Museum exhibitions are highlighted. A copy of the current exhibition poster is next to archive copies of the posters for ‘Captain Cook’s First Voyage Around the World’ (1968) and ‘Captain Cook in the South Seas’ (1979). According to the label, the contrast with these earlier exhibitions reflects ‘how approaches and attitudes to his voyages have changed over time’. Without any indication of scale or content, it is difficult to know; the design of the posters is all there is to see. Their genuineness establishes the importance attached to archival activities; the holding, cataloguing and showing of original materials is rehearsed throughout the exhibition, deployed as an assurance of veracity and neutrality.

The poster for ‘Reimagining’ reproduces in full the painting *Cookie in the Cook Islands* (2008) by New Zealand artist Michel Tuffery. The actual work is displayed nearby, also in the anteroom. The image is ambiguous. It depicts a stern-faced Cook, in a raised position above a bay where his ship waits at anchor. His face, flanked by yellow hibiscus, the national flower of Hawaii, is transmogrified with Polynesian features. The landscape, too, is in a state of transition; sky and sea are painted black, omens of a gathering storm. The image is an individual’s vision; ‘Cookie’’s relationship with Tuffery is interpersonal. The other posters also show artworks, but cropped details. In the earlier poster, the prow of William Hodges’s graphic of a Maori war canoe; in the later one, the figure of Cook in British naval uniform from John Cleverley’s painting, *Death of Cook* (1784). The significant difference between the designs is that the earlier visuals evoke larger civic and national affairs, of which there is only a partial view; the current poster shows something in its entirety, but something subjective. Cook prefaced his journal account of New Zealand with the remark ‘many things are founded only on Conjecture, for we were too short a time in any one place to learn much of their
interior policy’. The historic posters report on the confrontation Cook, as an agent of the state, has with other civic cultures. The current poster implies that ‘Pacific perspectives’ will individualise Cook. He is now a discrete agent, his meetings mediated through personal bellicosity, eliding his role as an imperial agent or colonial scout.

The exhibition is in Room 91 of the British Museum, a relatively tiny cubicle that is almost the furthest point from the main entrance of the megalithic Museum. A further caption beneath the posters reads ‘the objects collected in Cook’s voyages are scattered across the world’s museums. Here, at the British Museum, some are on display in Room 1, Enlightenment’. The words refer the visitor across the Museum’s vast holdings back to its very first room. To arrive at the threshold of Room 91, or to return to Room 1, visitors will be guided by curiosity, navigating with detachment, enjoying the experience of the collections according to a personal, non-aligned agenda; the reimagined Cook conforms to this benign mode of exploration.

The foundation of the British Museum, in its original location in Montagu House in 1759, just a decade before Cook set out, indicated the beginning of an era of acquisitiveness, both ‘charting’ and chartering. In this period, European dominance was developed through voyages of discovery. ‘Discoverers’ noted abundance as well as location, providing data for succeeding commercial and national interests, getting natural resources, labour, and territorial rights by means of oppression or

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4 Ibid, chapter 4
obligation. Legislators and commentators, such as Edmund Burke, critiqued the systematic exploitation, but it suited the interests of the state. Acquisitive practices – short of slavery – went mostly unchecked for the next century, allowing the new Museum to swallow up the material found, traded and seized. After accession, items could be arranged and classified, illustrating Edward Said’s observation that, ‘Cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.’

In ‘Setting Sail’, the first section of the exhibition, an explanatory caption for a work by the Maori artist Steve Gibbs, *Name Changer* (2016), quotes the artist: ‘Everything we did was the complete opposite of their norm. The reality, however, is that Cook and his crew were the ones out of sync.’ The spirit of these sentiments is perverted in the arrangement of the surrounding display. Gibbs’s work is on paper, in landscape orientation. A red line of words bisects the composition horizontally. They are the Maori names of places renamed by explorers. In white, surrounded by deep ultramarine, traditional Maori patterns fill the top half. The lower section shows the inverted silhouette of a sailing ship, also white against the same blue, and a circle, like a full moon. Below, in

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the same zone of the display case, making a visual relationship with this moonlike circle, is a chronometer, a tool for ensuring perfect synchronicity. The caption informs the visitor that the HMS Endeavour had the latest scientific equipment. The display case also includes a hand axe, an example of the western items traded or offered as gifts. It is a shockingly crude item, displayed in a slightly raised position, associating it more closely with Gibbs’s artwork than with the other items in the case. These include two outstandingly crafted utilitarian objects from New Zealand: a wooden paddle and a club. It is difficult for the visitor not to be perplexed by the relationship of the contemporary artwork and the historical artefacts. Together they show the encounter of radically divergent craft practices, from the precision fabrication of handmade scientific instruments, and the refined craftwork of the traditional Maori items, to the brute functionality of the axe. Gibbs’s work, too, is rugged; it is unframed, executed on a paper that has a rough surface and natural deckle edge. The display locates sophisticated and polished items in one zone, and groups the coarse surfaced and roughly made in another. A caption affirms ‘objects traded’. The proper home of the rudimentary tool is proximate to the local artwork, dramatising its exchange with admirably made utilitarian items that now belong in the Museum’s inventory. The roughly made axe is a jarring indicator of unequal trade. The item does not belong here. It was made to be exchanged or to be gifted – to be somewhere else.
The presence of the artwork brings to mind the heterotopias of Michel Foucault. The museum itself, the ‘universal archive, … within a single place’ is among his examples of sites that embody and idealise other places, while being remote and entirely closed. The Museum’s sealed vitrines intimate a secondary level of inconspicuous segregation, as noted by Foucault:

Other heterotopias, on the contrary, have the appearance of pure and simple openings, although they usually conceal curious exclusions. Anyone can enter one of these heterotopian locations, but, in reality, they are nothing more than an illusion: one thinks one has entered and, by the sole fact of entering, one is excluded.

In the next part of the display case, the hegemony of museum methodology, above the routines of the indigenous cultures it catalogues, is tangible in the display of a bundle of Tahitian bark cloth. The label provides an anecdotal explanation of its significance. It was presented as a gift to Cook’s team, constituting a mark of respect. The label notes, ‘The fine white bark cloth was reserved for people of high status … On one occasion they (Cook’s crew) left several bales on shore. Offended, islanders paddled out in a canoe to re-present the cloth.’ In the exhibition, as if to sustain and justify the historic underestimation of the material, it appears to be dumped on the floor of a display area, massed with other objects of diverse origin and status, variously described in labels as ‘precious’ or ‘finely woven’. It is impossible to judge the relative importance of the individual items, or their intended function as tribute, gift or trade. Everything’s worth is only as supporting evidence. The importance of individual objects within their specific culture is flattened. It is difficult to avoid concluding that the objects are curiosities. They belong to unfathomable, and so irrelevant, value systems. The Museum visitor regards the items as trinkets and trophies.

Although not highlighted in the exhibition, some gifts, such as bark cloth, were later traded for other items; a more conscious denial of the honour the gifts represented, intended to build trust with unaccustomed visitors. To secure its historical account, related in accompanying display texts, the Museum fetishises the tangible relic. In contrast, the photograph and the reproduction connote temporary states. They do not lend permanence to or guarantee the validity of other texts. Alterations of scale and photographic blur suggest that the subjects of optical reproduction can be distorted and misinterpreted. These subjects are not accessible for scrutiny, and so are tangential to a comprehensive account. The effect is visible in the exhibition, particularly in the small scale used for representations of activism. Harry Penrith’s performance, Burnum Burnum planting an Aboriginal

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7 Ibid, p 336
Flag at Dover (1988) is shown as a small photo, squashed at the bottom of a display featuring Cook tourist attractions, below larger original posters. Similarly, a diminutive snapshot of the statue of Cook in Cairns, embellished for Australia day 2017 with a placard reading ‘Sorry’, is propped up below Vincent Namatjira’s painting James Cook – with the Declaration (2014). The painting’s manner, loosely reinterpreting Nathaniel Dance’s portrait of Cook from 1775–1776, also identifies it in the zone of reproduction, suggesting that it is a less dependable referent than the surrounding ethnographic objects.

The presentation of Tupaia also deploys notable variations of scale. Tupaia was a Ra’iātea-born navigator and spiritual leader who joined the Endeavour in July 1769 under the sponsorship of Sir Joseph Banks.8 Diagrams and paintings by Tupaia from the British Library are all shown as reproductions. His A Maori bartering with Joseph Banks (1769) is seen enlarged, poster size, highlighting the flattened ‘folk art’ style he adopted, modified from Western pictorial conventions. Since joining the Endeavour a few months before, Tupaia had acquired competence in watercolour painting. His collaborative ‘Map’ (catalogued as Chart of the Society Islands with Otaheite in the centre, July–Aug 1769), a

8 ‘what makes him more than any thing else desireable is his experience in the navigation of these people and knowledge of the Islands in these seas; he has told us the names of above 70, the most of which he has himself been at. The Captn refuses to take him on his own account, in my opinion sensibly enough, the goverment will never in all human probability take any notice of him; I therefore have resolvd to take him.’ Joseph Banks, The Endeavour Journal of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768–1771, University of Sydney Library, 1997, p 170
diagram showing the relative positions of numerous islands and island clusters, blending indigenous oral and haptic navigational methods with Western cartography, is considerably reduced in size, embedded in the text of an exhibition graphic. The effect is to amplify unsophisticated aspects of his pictorial language and marginalise his analysis and rationalism.

Tupaia’s observations of the affairs of the Endeavour, rendered with attention to detail in a frontal, frieze-like schema, are placed beside the technically sophisticated, engraved images that are mainly based on the work of John Webber, the official artist on Cook’s third Pacific voyage. In one instance, comparison is actively encouraged. A detail from a Tupaia painting is presented side by side with an engraving by J K Sherwin of Webber’s *Young Woman of Otaheite Dancing* (1784).

In many instances, the contemporary art pieces chosen, seen in conjunction with the officially sanctioned art produced to illustrate Cook’s activity for Western consumption, prompt comparison. The shallow space and traditional stylistic tropes of works such as Simon Gender’s *Captain Cook in Australia* (2018), John Pule’s *Entanglements* (1997), Matthias Kauage’s *Captain Cook’s Ship bringing*
*Passenger(s) to PNG* (1988) and Aloi Pilioko’s *Cook* (1981), all correlate Oceania with handcraft and folk art – unsophisticated, insular and unpolluted by contemporaneousness. Captions such as ‘Cook is now famous in the Pacific even in places he never travelled to’ and ‘Gender … likes to paint world events’ foster an impression of naivety and simplicity. The artistic commentaries lack precision and dwell on a distant and illusory past. An annotated diagram accompanies Pilioko’s work; it infers that the audience needs help to decode the work’s stylisation, despite a thorough explanation provided in the descriptive caption.

Approximately concurrent with ‘Reimagining’, the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Queensland, Australia, gave a different view of art from the region.9 The Triennial conceptualises the spatial interrelations of the Pacific from the viewpoint of the global south, conceiving the purpose of its artists as urgent and relevant. In the British Museum, the choice of

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9 ‘The 9th Asia Pacific Triennial Of Contemporary Art (APT9)’, Queensland Art Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), South Brisbane, Australia, 24 November 2018 – 28 April 2019
works seems quaint – presumably made to embrace a specific geographic range. Strangely, the most significant item, displayed in the most central position, and highlighted in the exhibition publicity, is not an artwork but a Tahitian mourner’s attire, probably garnered by Cook in May 1774. Accompanying labels provide information regarding Banks’s participation in a funeral ceremony,\(^{10}\) Cook’s keenness ‘to acquire such a valuable and powerful costume’, and an anecdote about the costume’s intricate and prolonged conservation. The captions draw attention to the artefact’s function in ritual performance, the staging of Cook in the exhibition as an independent agent, making acquisitions according to personal enthusiasms – and the status of items belonging to the museum, subject to a regime of care and stabilisation.

\(\text{\textit{Reimagining Caption Cook: Pacific perspectives}}, \text{\textit{exhibition view with the Tahitian Mourner’s attire, photo by Andrew Stooke}}\)

Eight of the fourteen contemporary artworks shown have been acquired by the Museum. These join eighty other exhibits, leaving just six things on view that are not owned by the Museum. The visitor is unaware of these hidden exiles, unaware of what has long-term relevance in the historical narrative, and what remains supplementary to that narrative. The institution decides. Some phenomena, such as performance and oral means of cultural dissemination, are most often left out, \(^{10}\) Banks’s journal for 1769, 10 June, describes the event (Banks, 1997, op cit, p 149)
anathema to the museum’s practices of elucidation – owning, classifying, caring for and arranging. Writing about Tupaia’s map, Anne Di Piazza and Erik Pearthree articulate an alternative to the exhibition’s ‘charting’: ‘The centre point (or island of departure) where the navigator imagines himself is a subjective coordinate, unlike the coordinates in Cartesian space where islands hold positions which are defined absolutely not in relation to the presence, in the same space, of the epistemic subject.’11 With subjective coordinates, reimagining Cook would be a different exhibition, relevant to the complex and contentious relations of places to past regimes of exploration and acquisition. ‘Pacific perspectives’ reminds us that such a destabilising critique, a Pacific Perspective, is much needed – but remains far off.

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