Monumentally Kitsch:

The Decommissioned Captain Cook Statues of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia

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Abstract: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and global reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 reorientated activists, the media, and scholars worldwide toward the meanings associated with colonial statutory. In Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia, this reorientation coincided with the 250th anniversary of navigator Captain James Cook's first Pacific voyage. The number of Cook monuments in these settler-colonial nations evinces that Cook is an historical figure with an outsized legacy. This article examines the histories and fates of two particularly unusual Cook statues, one in Tūranga (Gisborne), Aotearoa, and one in Cairns, Australia. Amid so many Cook monuments, why have these two statues alone been taken down? This article argues that statues celebrating colonial figures can be seen as falling within the genre of kitsch, but that these two statues are extreme examples of kitsch aesthetics. Their obvious embodiment of kitsch and provocation of mirth in viewers proved pivotal in the decommissioning of these antipodean statues in 2019 and 2022. The fates of the statues called "Crook Cook" and "Nazi Captain Cook" analyzed in this article indicate that the aesthetics of colonial statues can be as significant a factor in their removal as the historical behavior of their subjects.

Keywords: Captain Cook statues, Statue decommissioning, Kitsch, Cairns, Gisborne

Spectacular instances of activists toppling statues to communicate dissatisfaction with historical and contemporary politics have accompanied the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) since 2013. In Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia, statues have also at times become flash points for protest, but the actual procedural removal of statues has involved little spectacle. Few statues in Australia and Aotearoa have "fallen"; what is notable about those that have been officially removed is how discreet and consultative the decommissioning has been. This article focuses on two statues of renowned British explorer Captain James Cook, examining the ways their unusual aesthetics influenced their removal.

Until May 2022, a deteriorating statue of Cook appearing to give a Nazi salute could be found on a major highway through Cairns, a city of more than 150,000 people in Far

North Queensland, Australia (fig. 1).At a colossal 9.7 meters in height, the statue's size, shape, and salute made it both memorable and remarkable.[1] The meanings associated with "Nazi Captain Cook" (as locals humorously called it) shifted and multiplied across its fifty years on Sheridan Street. By June 2020, amid a global pandemic and the reinvigoration of BLM, the statue's unsavory characteristics culminated in a First Nations–led petition for its removal. In Tūranga (Gisborne), Aotearoa, another statue of Cook had been removed from public view in 2019 (fig 2). With a fifty-year history of complaints from *iwi* (members of the local tribe), its removal was also associated with BLM.[2] These statues are linked by their common age, aesthetic challenges, quiet decommissioning, unenthusiastic reception by local institutions, and association with a figure whose legacy only partially reflects his historical actions. Both incited amusement in locals and visitors, and both are unusual among antipodean statues in being removed in the wake of BLM.

In this article, we use the peculiarities of the Tūranga and Cairns statues to explore the significance of aesthetics in the wider statue wars. While debates about Cook's role in British imperialism and subsequent settler colonialism are complex, the removal of these two statues from public view has resulted in Cook statues featuring disproportionately among antipodean statue decommissionings. This is even more remarkable given public expressions of affection for these statues and their roles in regional tourism. That local institutions have declined to provide them with new sites for display is particularly notable given the ongoing active memorialization of Cook and his voyages, including the Australian federal government's recent investment in the Cook historical tourism pilgrimage site of Cooktown.[3]

"Crook" Cook and "Nazi" Cook

As Cook's first landing site in Aotearoa in 1769 and the place where members of the *Endeavour*'s crew killed nine members of local *iwi* Ngāti Oneone, Tūranga has long claimed

significance in Aotearoa's Cook commemorations. The town site was acquired by the Crown in 1868 and given the name Gisborne in 1870; it remains a significant port and population center.[4] The history of Cairns parallels that of Tūranga. Cook landed in Trinity Bay in 1770, and the town of Cairns was established in 1876. Tourism has long been important to its economy, supported by natural attractions including the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree Rainforest.

In 1906, Tūranga raised its first Cook monument, an obelisk placed at Cook's landing site to celebrate a typically colonial view of his life and achievements. Seen as a response to Cook monuments long established in Australia, the obelisk had to be hastily reworked after being conscripted as a South African War memorial.[5] Other Cook monuments followed, including the Crook Cook erected in 1969. This statue was not intended to provoke merriment; it was a bronze cast of a statue originally commissioned for Auckland's Captain Cook Brewery during the 1880s as a tribute to Cook.[6] The original was thought to be derived "from the best known [Cook] portrait in existence," with "workmanship [that] ha[s] given entire satisfaction."[7] Its commissioning seemed to provide a suitable monument for a city that held a special place in Aotearoa's Cook bicentenary, principally celebrated by Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent).[8] In the immediate aftermath of the statue's unveiling, the paleontologist and ornithologist Charles Alexander Fleming reflected that enthusiastic celebrations of the bicentenary of the *Endeavour*'s landfall by the government and populace "firmly established James Cook as the outstanding national hero in the history of this young country."[9] Despite the intentions of those who paid for the statue, local enthusiasm may not have run deep. While photographs in *Te Ao Hou / The New World*, a magazine published by the Māori Affairs Department, captured Māori individuals and culture featuring prominently in the bicentenary celebrations, Fleming observed signs of apathy at the statue's unveiling

ceremony, describing it as being greeted with only moderate fanfare from "die-hards" rather than the Pākehā community at large.[10]

The connection between Cook and Crook Cook has long been queried, and concerns were expressed even during its installation. The plaque designer commented that the statue was "wrong," and the prime minister noted that the likeness's authenticity was in doubt. Similarly, during a royal visit Prince Charles reportedly "remarked that Cook looked like an Italian admiral" as the statue's uniform and hat were inaccurate.[11] An explanatory plaque added to the statue in 1999 concluded: "Since October 1969 the statue has been a source of delight for photographers and a source of embarrassment for historians. Who is he? We have no idea!"[12]

Shortly after the Crook Cook was installed, Cairns received its notable Cook statue. Originally installed in October 1972 on Sheridan Street, at no time was it received by the public as a "serious" colonial statue. Designed and built for Alan J. Ferguson, the proprietor of Ferguson Refrigeration, it was closely associated with his Captain Cook Motel.[13] In 2006, a friend of the artist, Chris Pigeon, reminisced that the statue's pose was drawn from E. Phillips Fox's 1902 painting of Cook's landing in Botany Bay, in which Cook "was known to have held out his hand in a gesture of 'stop' to some Aborigines with spears."[14] The statue was imposingly large, eye-catching, and described in the *Cairns Post* as "controversial" from its first mention.[15] It was undeniably kitsch.

Kitsch Aesthetics and Colonial Statues

The concept of kitsch as an aesthetic category emerged in Germany in the later nineteenth century, spread widely in the early twentieth century, and remains contentious in its application. The art critic Clement Greenberg promulgated the concept of kitsch in a 1929 essay; he identified it as the art of the urban proletariat and described it as mechanical and formulaic, declaring: "Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their

money—not even their time."[16] Similarly, the philosopher Tomáš Kulka, in his description of kitsch as an aesthetic category (rather than a sociological, historical, or anthropological one), deemed it "artistically deficient," often "sketchy, cheap, . . . artistic rubbish—the very opposite of *chic*," and usually articulated in negative terms despite its mass appeal.[17] Accordingly, Kulka developed conditions for a working definition: "Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions . . . [that are] . . . instantly and effortlessly identifiable . . . [but] . . . [do] not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes."[18]

Categorizing particular objects as kitsch is problematic. The museum theorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that the category is slippery and the value assigned to particular objects can fluctuate or flip between kitsch and quintessential good taste.[19] In her formulation, any group powerful enough to define the standards of its society can designate items as kitsch, whatever their inherent qualities. While definition is difficult, the psychologists Stefan Ortlieb and Claus-Christian Carbon, in their reading of Kulka, argue that for an object to qualify as kitsch, it must have "content charged with positive emotions," "immediate identifiability," and "a perfectly conventional manner of representation." They explicitly include "patriotic sentiments" among the emotional range that kitsch images and objects inspire.[20]

The category of kitsch lies in the eye of the beholder and postdates much colonial statuary. While those erecting traditional commemorative statues did not intend their monuments to be kitsch, the definition is readily retrofitted. The media scholar Marita Sturken, analyzing the emotional responses that kitsch tourist disaster-site souvenirs inspire, noted that kitsch objects can "be seen not only as embodying a particular kind of pre-packaged sentiment, but as conveying the message that this sentiment is one that is universally shared."[21] This is the function not just of the souvenirs she analyses but of

commemorative statues as a group. Their forms are "mechanical and formulaic" in accordance with kitsch aesthetics, and they serve to enforce common community sentiment toward the past.[22] The education scholar Catherine Lugg has articulated the political potential of the limited and predictable emotional register of kitsch. While great art requires the viewer to consider and construct meaning, kitsch's "facile use of symbolism" conveys an intended meaning expeditiously.[23] Traditional statues of colonial figures are imposing rather than thought-provoking. As the historian Alex von Tunzelmann noted, statues are largely ignored by the general populace; their physical presence is significant but their symbolism is necessarily superficial and does not engage passers-by in a quest for meaning.[24] Colonial statutory falls within the parameters of kitsch and its political traditions, despite the intentions of its funders and the respect accorded it within city landscapes.

Crook Cook and Nazi Cook were not intended to be kitsch, but they easily fit within that category. Crook Cook was cast from an existing statue and its lack of resemblance to familiar images of Cook mean that its claim to respectability comes from being identified as a traditional celebratory male figure, in a traditional pose, cast in the traditional statue material of bronze. Despite its cheap materials and lack of artistic merit, Nazi Cook was considered a serious monument by its creators. The statue's pose and the artist's intent associate it with a significant image of Cook by a reputable artist, one that is sufficiently canonical to be repeatedly reworked to provide commentary on settler colonialism.[25] Nazi Cook is also archetypal of the category the Australian historian Amy Clarke has dubbed "Big Things," or "oversized three-dimensional representations of food, animals, household objects and people, commonly made from fibreglass and concrete, and cast in bright colours." Most predominant in settler colonial nations, Big Things first appeared in Australia during the early 1960s and continue to be established. One function is commercial—to sell local produce or promote local businesses—but another is sociocultural.[26] Nazi Cook is a kitsch Big Thing but also a

statue intended to celebrate a historical figure. Together with Crook Cook, Nazi Cook demonstrates the potential for the status of statues to slip between the categories of quintessential memorial and kitsch object.

Many Cooks

Crook Cook and Nazi Cook are not the only Cook statues in Aotearoa and Australia, where Cook commemoration has made his legacy larger than life. Cook and his ships visited Aotearoa repeatedly for extended periods, while his engagements with Australia and Tasmania were much more limited.[27] A map of Cook memorials reveals twenty-three monuments in Aotearoa, in contrast to ninety-four in Australia.[28] The connection between Cook monuments and history is complex; in Aotearoa, five monuments are distant from sites Cook visited, and a number of sites that he visited do not host memorials to the navigator.[29] In Australia, most Cook monuments are only loosely connected to his historical activities. Cook's visit was significant in the later establishment of a convict settlement on the lands of the Eora Nation (now Sydney), but while Cook monuments are concentrated in the state of New South Wales, the *Endeavour* anchored in Botany Bay for only eight days. In contrast, ten of Cook's eleven Australian landings occurred in the region that is now the state of Queensland, a state with far fewer Cook monuments.[30]

Cook monuments abound because Cook is an historical figure with an outsized legacy. Between 1768 and 1779, the three Pacific voyages he captained made Cook a symbol of Europe's Enlightenment, a status cemented by reactions to his death in Hawai'i.[31] His legacy is most emotionally significant in white antipodean settler societies. In Aotearoa, Cook monuments are present in the nation's three largest cities (including the capital) indicating that Cook has been co-opted as a national symbol. Cook's voyages are at the center of popular histories that envisage the Australian continent as terra nullius and Cook as a "founding father."[32] The abundance of Cook monuments makes clear Cook's role as a mythic

rather than historical figure. This is best demonstrated in the city of Melbourne, Victoria, a region unknown to Cook. In 1934, the so-called Cook's Cottage—which only has a tenuous connection to the navigator—was painstakingly relocated from England and reconstructed in Fitzroy Gardens.[33] Similarly, several Australian Cook memorials are more than three hundred kilometers from the coast, and most coastal memorials commemorate his passing rather than engagement with local people or place.[34]

In Australia, Cook has also become strongly associated with settler colonialism from Indigenous perspectives. The anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose identified the significance of Cook in Aboriginal stories from northern Australia, largely from regions unvisited by the *Endeavour*. Those stories clearly associated Cook with the settler colonial project, using him to critique the disaster of colonization.[35] It is a theme that Rose returned to often, analyzing the structure of one such story to reveal the sophisticated use of Cook as "the archetype of all early Europeans."[36] She was clear that Cook remained a man to her Aboriginal informants; he neither entered the dreaming nor became a deity.[37] The Indigenous scholars Max Brierty and Stephen Muecke have noted that, from their perspective, Cook has in fact entered "whitefella" dreamings. "Cook and the *Endeavour*," they argued, "rotted away and turned into popular culture performances, memories, tourist trinkets, nation-building monuments: the stuff of dreams."[38] They concluded that Indigenous Cook stories are a response to Cook's use within the settler colonial project as a symbol of modernity, scientific rationalism, and the potential for the British Crown to claim ownership of Country{Australian usage in this context requires capital letter} despite the long tenure of Traditional Owners{Australian usage requires capital letters}.[39] This accords with Margo Neale's examination of the use of Cook as a recurring motif by Indigenous artists and Kate Fullagar's praise for the strength of historical assessments of "the afterlife of Cook in the Antipodes," and serves to explain the plethora of Cook monuments scattered across eastern Australia.[40]

These many monuments and commemorations may therefore be conceptualized within the broader paradigm of what Erika Doss describes as "prejudicial public art." Countless statues commemorate historical figures whose achievements have recently undergone major historical and historiographical reinterpretation, and the associated public art has become "[a] visible yet often ignored social and cultural problem." Doss argues that increasing media attention has meant that the public must "grapple with its meanings and messages, and take histories, memories, and ideologies that it embodies to task."[41] In the antipodes, statues of Cook feature prominently in this process of interpretation and reinterpretation.

The Fate of the Two Too Kitsch Cooks

Crook Cook and Nazi Cook are both expressions of the desire to find in Cook an enlightened founding figure for a new nation, but neither is recognized as a respectable colonial statue. Despite Crook Cook's more conventional appearance, its installation came at a time when shifting local demographics and changing national politics made statues of colonial figures increasingly controversial.[42] The Gisborne District Council repeatedly considered whether the statue should face decommissioning, with the views of local Māori becoming increasingly important. By the 1990s, concerns about the statue were not restricted to its artistic merits.[43] In 1994 and 2000, new Cook statues were purchased and unveiled in Tūranga—the latter without the support of Te Runanga o Turanganui a Kiwa, an organization established in 1986 to represent *iwi*.[44] With their more familiar depictions of Cook, the new statues raised the question of what to do with the old one. In 2001, the *Gisborne Herald* reported that the "saga" of Crook Cook was "still baffling council," as criticism from *iwi* increased.[45] Barney Tupara, the spokesperson for Ngāti Oneone, noted that his community "had never supported the placement of the statue on its sacred mountain." Councillors were reportedly presented with a suggestion for "crook Cook" to be "chopped up in pieces, melted and the bronze used

to make a more suitable statue."[46] However, a headline proclaiming the "end nigh for hill's 'imposter'" would prove to be nearly two decades premature.[47]

The statue's kitsch aesthetics served to endear it to locals, with the *Gisborne Herald* declaring it a "tourist icon" in 2001 precisely because of the merriment it provoked.[48] According to John O'Hare, the heritage advisor to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, the council "sensibly . . . decided to keep him where he was—particularly as the 'Crook' Cook was becoming a tourist drawcard in his own right."[49] Like the council, the community believed the statue had value; a 2002 Gisborne community poll established that, out of nearly one thousand respondents, only approximately 10 percent supported the statue's removal.[50] Support for monumental kitsch has similarly preserved the Boll Weevil Monument in Alabama, United States, as amusement at a monument celebrating an agricultural pest serves to silence concern about the racial implications of a woman in neoclassical garb (who holds aloft an oversized beetle) celebrating an agricultural industry founded on racial inequality.[51]

In Aotearoa, widespread support for Crook Cook's removal began to overwhelm community enthusiasm for its kitschiness by the 2010s, although the discussion was complicated by the claim of the historian Christopher Paxton that the statue was indeed a depiction of Cook.[52] A 2016 *Gisborne Herald* editorial argued: "Our statue will always remain the Crook Cook because of his mismatched uniform, but also the maligned Cook—over . . . the unfair focus of anger by some at what followed Cook's historic voyage."[53] Within the Māori community there was ongoing concern; a new spokesperson for Ngāti Oneone, Nick Tupara, voiced support for the statue's removal.[54]

Broader public opinion had shifted when the *Gisborne Herald*'s 2016 reader poll asked: "Is it time to replace the 'Crook Cook' statue on Titirangi-Kaiti Hill?" In a significant shift from the 2002 poll, 77 percent of 532 voters agreed that the statue should be removed; 31 percent believed the statue should be replaced by one of Māori chief Rakaiatane; 30

percent, with Rakaiatane alongside an accurate depiction of Cook; and 16 percent, with an accurate depiction of Cook. Yet those who voted against removal believed that "'Crook Cook' was just as much a part of Gisborne's heritage as the real Cook."[55] The affection that some Pākehā felt for the statue increasingly derived from its kitschiness. The local journalist Gordon Webb voiced the view that "even if the present statue is an imposter (and there is doubt about that), it has been part of local folklore for almost forty-seven years. Such an identity ought not to be removed in haste."[56]

Crook Cook would finally be decommissioned in 2019, following acceptance of the Future Tairāwhiti Committee's October 2018 recommendation by the Gisborne District Council.[57] Mayor Meng Foon had responded to accusations of "trying to hide Captain Cook" by noting that Cook had "been dead a long time" and that Ngāti Oneone should decide "what's going to go on their mountain."[58] Upon its fiftieth anniversary, the statue was vandalized in protest against settler colonialism.[59] When another Cook statue in Tūranga was spraypainted with "THIS IS OUR LAND" and "THIEF PAKEHA," Councillor Meredith Akuhata-Brown publicly described the incident not as vandalism but as "activism" that was provoking necessary discussions about the history of Aotearoa.[60] Crook Cook was ultimately relocated to the Tairāwhiti Museum and placed in storage, probably bearing out Tunzelmann's observation that "a collective groan goes up from curators" at the suggestion that controversial statues be moved to museums, as most "don't have the space to amass large, undistinguished collections of discarded statuary."[61]

In parallel to the history of Crook Cook, Nazi Cook quickly became a recognizable symbol of Cairns tourism, appearing on postcards for Cairns and even Cooktown (located farther north).[62] As Far North Queensland's national and international tourism intensified across the 1980s and 1990s, the statue remained a feature of the town. A 1998 letter to the *Cairns Post* claimed that it was prominent in tourism brochures circulating in Britain.[63]

Across the decades, this statue's unusual aesthetics would become a source of media commentary, and no attempt was made to tone down its garishness. A 1973 photograph of the Captain Cook Motel captures the statue colored a bland grey—perhaps undercoat in preparation for painting—with its paintwork becoming more eye-catching over time.[64] Nazi Cook featured in David Clark's 2004 work *Big Things: Australia's Amazing Roadside Attractions*, a tourism guidebook that describes all its subjects as "kitsch," "pathetic," "works of art," and "plain bizarre," provoking either love or hate in onlookers. His account was itself even outsized; he described Nazi Cook as fourteen meters in height and "built to withstand cyclones" from "reinforced concrete."[65]

While the Cairns Cook was a private concern standing on private land, its public positioning nevertheless inspired public discussion about its value and fate. The first such discussion occurred in the *Cairns Post* when the Captain Cook Motel went up for sale in 1989 and concerns were expressed about the statue's future.[66] In 2006, when the Captain Cook Backpackers Hostel was set to be demolished, the landowner reportedly offered the statue free for removal.[67] The property manager Danny Betros commented that "it would be a shame to destroy it," adding, "We'd rather give it to the Cook Shire or Cairns City Council for the Esplanade."[68] Betros linked concern about the statue to concerns about local heritage, as did others. Cairns mayor Kevin Byrne recognized the dual nature of concerns about the statue when he refused calls for the city to accept it, saying: "It might have some historic value but it certainly doesn't have any aesthetic value."[69] Similarly, the local politician Desley Boyle recognized the tension between the statue's heritage value and its form, writing in the *Cairns Post*: "I've always thought the statue to be the height of kitsch. But it is a landmark and is part of the variety of Cairns."[70]

An intriguing facet of the 2006 threat to the Cairns Cook was the involvement of students from the Cairns campus of James Cook University (JCU), who sought to reimagine

the statue's position in the city's streetscape.[71] Speaking with the *Cairns Post*, JCU Student Association president Janine Aitken suggested relocating the statue some thirteen kilometers away to a prominent roundabout on the Captain Cook Highway near the campus. Aitken claimed to have secured in-kind support from local builders, crane operators, and transport companies; she also expected the pro-vice chancellor Scott Bowman to be supportive.[72] When, months later, the statue was again offered to JCU for free, Betros thought that it would be "highly unlikely" for the statue to be removed to the campus "because of bureaucracy."[73] Indeed, despite support from Boyle and the desires of the JCU Student Association, the *Cairns Post* implied that the University Council deliberately kept leaving plans for the statue's relocation off its meeting agendas.[74]

By 2020, the statue had multifaceted meanings, many associated with concerns about settler colonialism. An *ABC News* item reported that for some residents it represented a welcoming herald to the city and for others, an unknown highwayman, buccaneer, or pirate, while others again interpreted it as re-creating an historical event with Cook gesturing—perhaps benevolently, perhaps threateningly—toward Aboriginal peoples.[75] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives on the statue were also beginning to appear in mainstream media, drawn from social media sources.[76] During the 2010s, media commentary had shifted from describing the statue as an "icon" to acknowledging that it had become "infamous," with its unusual hand gesture increasingly described as a "Nazi salute."[77] On January 26, 2017, the statue was adorned with a sign reading "SORRY" in an Australia Day protest.[78] Forthright calls for the statue's decommissioning came in June 2020 when First Nations woman Emma Hollingsworth created a digital petition on Change.org entitled "Tear down the Captain Cook statue in Cairns!"; addressed to the Cairns Regional Council, this petition attracted nearly twenty thousand signatures. Hollingsworth described the statue not

as “Nazi Captain Cook” but as “Captain Crook,” more boldly envisaging it as “a symbol of colonialism and genocide” that constituted “a slap in the face to all Indigenous people.”[79]

The statue would finally be removed in May 2022 in an act of quiet decommissioning as JCU again sidestepped becoming associated with the statue. Fifty years after it was first erected, the Captain Cook statue was removed from Sheridan Street to make way for JCU’s new medical education precinct. Public discussion mentioned that JCU had commissioned an engineering report in 2006 that was used to argue that the statue’s removal would be unsafe. Online commentary in response to *Cairns Post* articles noted that the statue was removed without structural damage in 2022, raising the possibility that the 2006 reports had highlighted engineering concerns due to reluctance to accept the statue.[80] Neither relegated to a museum nor placed on formal display, Nazi Cook was purchased for one dollar by Martin Anton, a demolition contractor who “didn’t want it to be bulldozed by someone.”[81]

For some Cairns residents, the statue’s removal left a sense of emptiness. In September 2022, the *Cairns Post* reported that the local artist Munganbana Norman Miller had called for “a new statue to fill the void of the Captain Cook statue as an act of reconciliation.” He proposed a big boomerang, having already designed a dot-painted boomerang measuring 5.5 meters by 3 meters for the Munganbana Reef and Rainforest Regional Art Gallery. Miller promoted a big boomerang to recognize Indigenous tourism’s great significance to Far North Queensland, while noting that of “all the big icons around the nation, none represents Aboriginal heritage.”[82] Miller’s big boomerang proposal for Cairns’s outdoor tourism landscape has not yet been embraced. Clarke concluded that Big Things “serve as indicators of the values held by the communities who constructed, maintain and visit them.”[83] Thus, while both the Cairns Cook and the proposed big boomerang are clearly kitsch, they also serve as commemorative statues.

Many Cook Monuments in the Decade of Black Lives Matter

The years 2019 and 2020 marked a watershed for public, media, and scholarly concerns about the commemoration of Captain James Cook. The 2019 decommissioning of Tūranga's Crook Cook dovetailed with debate over the commemoration of Cook's 1769 visit. By chance, the 250th anniversary of Cook's voyage along Australia's east coast coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, followed by the reignition of BLM in June. While the politically motivated vandalization and decommissioning of statues has a long history, BLM protests in Britain and the United States focused on figures associated with slavery and colonialism.[84] The June 2020 toppling of a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston during BLM protests in Bristol recentered media commentary around the commemorative landscape of imperialism in Britain and its former empire. Such media attention facilitated Australian Indigenous scholars' efforts to publicize the violent colonial and imperial foundations of memory making in settler colonial nations and to advocate for a radical truth telling through public history and heritage.[85] In parallel with contesting the hagiography of imperial figures within the commemorative landscape, discussion of underrepresentation of women and First Nations people also took place.[86]

Despite BLM activism in the antipodes, very few antipodean statues have fallen or been decommissioned. In Aotearoa, a statue of John Fane Charles Hamilton, who died in 1864 during the New Zealand Wars and has a city named for him, has been removed as a direct result of public distaste. Originally erected in 2013, his statue was removed in 2020 over safety concerns arising from threats to tear it down during a BLM protest. The statue is unlikely to be reerected, with the city's mayor Paula Southgate noting it would be a target of vandalism.[87] In 2020 a statue of Captain Cook in the town of Marton was briefly boxed (in case of attack by BLM protesters) before the local council and *iwi* decided to leave it in place while correcting its plaque.[88] In December 2023, the Reserve Board in Whanganui resolved

to remove a nineteenth-century memorial promoting an historically problematic view of the New Zealand Wars.[89]

In Australia, continuing Indigenous activism has raised critical awareness about the meaning behind much public commemoration. The Indigenous scholars Bronwyn Carlson and Terri Farrelly have emphasized the extent to which statuary celebrates not only settler colonialism but also the massacre and genocide of Indigenous peoples.[90] In Melbourne in January 2024, a Cook statue was cut off at the ankles, a Cook monument broken, and a statue of Queen Victoria attacked with red paint.[91] A second Melbourne Cook statue was felled in February.[92] In Hobart, a statue of Tasmanian politician and surgeon William Crowther, who stole the skull of Aboriginal man William Lanne from the Hobart General Hospital and sent it to the Royal College of Surgeons in London, was slated for removal following a First Nations–led campaign and a council vote. It earned an official stay of removal but was cut off at the ankles in May 2024 just before its official decommissioning was announced.[93] As Carlson and Farrelly alluded, much more debate, defacing, and protest has taken place than felling, decommissioning, or formal updating in Australia. While statues of Cook have been vandalized and some commemorative plaques have been updated, the vast majority remain in place.[94] This may reflect the more complex history of Cook, who was neither a slaver nor directly a colonizer, and whose statues are attacked because of his mythic significance rather than his historical actions.

That mythic significance meant that during 2019 and 2020, historians in Aotearoa and Australia publicly debated how to interpret the events of the *Endeavour* voyage and what weight to accord Cook in the historical record. In Aotearoa, the government sponsored significant commemorations under the banner of "Tuia 250" that engaged in consultation with local Māori at each of Cook's landing sites, with *iwi* empowered to refuse to allow the replica *Endeavour* to land. Protests took place during some commemorations, and Cook's

actions and legacy were subject to extended analysis.[95] In 2020, Australia's pandemic-stifled Cook commemorations also witnessed some reassessment of the voyage.[96] In June, Cook commemorations became entangled with BLM protests and Cook statues acted as sites to debate histories of settler colonialism. Australian police formed a protective cordon around a prominent Cook statue in Sydney's Hyde Park while attempting to disperse a BLM protest that contravened pandemic protocols. Shortly afterward, the statue was graffitied with slogans concerning genocide and colonization.[97]

The two statues that are the subject of this article are unusual. They do not fit neatly within the traditions of colonial statuary; significantly, both became sources of mirth despite the credentials of the historical figure they supposedly depict. In the antipodes, the kitsch statues finally proved neither funny enough nor serious enough to attract sufficient support to remain in place.[98] All Cook statues have reason to be contentious given the violence associated with Cook's Pacific voyages, the mythic weight attached to his journeys, and the near coincidence of the 250th anniversaries of his landings in Aotearoa and Australia with BLM protests. More formal memorials have attracted graffiti, have been a matter of public debate, and, in 2024, have been cut off at the ankles—but are scheduled for restoration.[99] Only the kitsch Cooks are gone for good, indicating possible roles for aesthetic judgement and ridicule in the statue wars.

Conclusion

Captain Cook and his voyages remain larger than life, with monuments to his legacy prominent in Aotearoa and Australia. In 2020, the coincidence of the 250th anniversary of Cook's time in Australia, the onset of the pandemic, and global reignition of BLM drew the attention of activists and the media to local commemorative sites. While protests occurred, the removals of a public Cook monument in Tūranga and a private Cook monument in Cairns were ultimately peaceful. Yet these decommissioned Cooks do not fit neatly into analysis of

the significance of the BLM movement in the decommissioning of statues. At the time of writing, only one colonial statue other than the two kitsch Cooks has been removed from public display in Aotearoa or Australia in response to BLM, with two others slated for removal. Protest, vandalism, and discussion are certainly taking place, but official action is slow. In addition, while BLM activists have periodically targeted Cook statues, Cook's legacy as a whole is sufficiently complex that his approximately 117 antipodean statues do not seem to be considered urgent targets for removal.[100]

What the removals of Crook Cook and Nazi Cook indicate is the underappreciated significance of aesthetics when managing statues of colonial figures. All colonial statues can be classified as kitsch, given that they are intended to be easily recognizable, have conventional forms, and elicit predictable emotions. However, public discussion of their place and of potential decommissioning rarely touches on their aesthetic merits. In contrast, the physical appearance of Crook Cook and Nazi Cook proved central to discussions about their removal. Colonial statues have traditionally been intended to engender respect for existing institutions and pride in national achievements, but these two statues instead elicited merriment. While mirth is an emotion often associated with kitsch, it is not sought by those installing heritage infrastructure. By regularly triggering laughter, these two Cook statues were uniquely vulnerable to removal; local institutions, including councils and a university, did not intervene to prevent their removal or provide them with an alternative site for display. Perhaps recognition of the limited aesthetics of colonial statuary might make laughter an effective weapon in the ongoing statue wars.

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Figure 1. "Nazi Captain Cook," the statue of Captain Cook outside the Captain Cook Motel on Sheridan Street, Cairns. Photo by Fosnez, May 12, 2007. Wikimedia Commons.

<Fig. 1 Alt text>An oversized, physically deteriorating fiberglass statue of man in eighteenth-century dress with right arm raised.

Figure 2. "Crook Cook," the statue of Captain James Cook in front of Poverty Bay on Kaiti Hill, Gisborne, May 19, 2014. Photo by Schwede66. Flickr.
<Fig. 2 Alt text>A bronze statue with plaque that concludes, "We have no idea!"

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[1] While reports of the statue's height vary, this height was recorded during its removal. McCarthy, Murray, and Newton, "Calls to Replace the Captain Cook Statue."

[2] Neilson, "George Floyd Protests."

[3] This funding includes $1.2 million to commemorate "Reconciliation Rocks" as the site of a significant meeting between Traditional Owners{Australian usage requires capital letters} and members of the *Endeavour* expedition. Cook Shire Council, "Cooktown's Reconciliation Rocks Recognised."
[4] Soutar, "East Coast Places."
[5] Skinner, "Obelisk for Captain Cook."
[6] Wallace, "'Crook Cook'"; Paxton, "Likeness of Captain Cook?"
[7] *Auckland Star*, "Evening Star."
[8] Ballantyne, "Toppling the Past?," 3.
[9] Fleming, "James Cook Bicentenary Celebrations," 189.
[10] *Te Ao Hou,* "Cook Bi-centenary Celebrated," 32; *Te Ao Hou,* "Royal Visit 1970," 34; Fleming, "James Cook Bicentenary Celebrations," 192.
[11] Wallace, "Gisborne's 'Crook Cook'"; Webb, "Part of Local Folklore." Webb records Prince Charles's comment as occurring during the 1970 royal tour, while Paxton suggests it occurred in 1983 (Paxton, "Likeness of Captain Cook?," 11). **{Au: Wallace, "Gisborne's 'Crook Cook'" not in ref list; should this be "'Crook Cook'"?}**
[12] *Gisborne Herald*, "Cook Statue Still Crook."
[13] Rigby, "Cairns Historian."
[14] O'Grady, "Statue Regarded"; Fox, *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770*, 1902, oil on canvas, 192.2 × 265.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/5576/.
[15] *Cairns Post*, October 7, 1972.
[16] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 39–40.
[17] Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 2–3, 6–9, 19.
[18] Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 37–38.
[19] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 259.
[20] Ortlieb and Carbon, "Kitsch and Perception," 4.
[21] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 22.
[22] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 19, 26.
[23] Lugg, *Kitsch,* 4.
[24] Tunzelmann, *Fallen Idols*, 3, 5.
[25] Schlunke, "Memory and Materiality"; Fullagar, "Remembering Cook, Again," 623.
[26] Clarke, "Making a Mark," 239.
[27] Brennan, "Cook, and His Place in the Australian Imagination."
[28] Cook memorials include plaques, statues, parks, and gas lights. Brennan and Stevenson, "Australasian Cook Monuments."
[29] Brennan and Stevenson, "Australasian Cook Monuments."
[30] Cilento, "Sir Joseph Banks, F.R.S.," 157.
[31] Williams, *Death of Captain Cook.*
[32] Reynolds, *Dispossession*.
[33] Antonello, "Memorialising Captain Cook in Lonely Places."
[34] Brennan and Stevenson, "Australasian Cook Monuments."
[35] Rose, "Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins."
[36] Rose, "Saga of Captain Cook," 62.
[37] Rose, "Worshipping Captain Cook," 44. The dreaming is part of the Aboriginal worldview, particularly relating to creation.
[38] Brierty and Muecke, "Magic of Captain Cook," 8.
[39] Brierty and Muecke, "Magic of Captain Cook," 13–16.
[40] Neale, "'Out-of-Country'"; Fullagar, "Remembering Cook, Again," 622.
[41] Doss, "Elephant in the Room," 6.
[42] In 1971, 25.3 percent of the Poverty Bay region's population (which included Gisborne) identified as Māori in the census; by 2018, 52.6 percent of people in the Gisborne census region were of Māori ethnicity. Soutar, "East Coast Region"; Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, "Gisborne Region."
[43] Ballantyne, "Toppling the Past?," 4.
[44] *Eastland Sun*, "Rival Threatens Italian Cook Statue"; Walsh, "Cook Statue Unveiled."
[45] Gillies, "Crook Cook Saga."
[46] Dobson, "Tupara Has Possible Remedy."
[47] Mills, "Sword Raised."
[48] Dobson, "Italian Gentleman 'Tourist Icon.'"
[49] O'Hare, "'Crook' Cook a Monumental Rook."
[50] Dobson, "Italian Gentleman 'Tourist Icon.'"

[51] Ohl, "Of Beetles and Men."
[52] Paxton, "Likeness of Captain Cook?"
[53] *Gisborne Herald*, "Cook Statue Still Crook."
[54] Dalrymple, "Time to Put an End to Blame, Vandalism."
[55] *Gisborne Herald*, "Mixed Views."
[56] Webb, "Part of Local Folklore."
[57] *Radio New Zealand*, "Controversial Statue of Captain James Cook."
[58] *Cairns Post*, "Captain Cook to Be Removed."
[59] Ballantyne, "Toppling the Past?," 3; Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions,* 5.
[60] *Radio New Zealand*, "Captain James Cook Graffiti Raises Necessary Kōrero—Councillor."
[61] Tunzelmann, *Fallen Idols*, 213.
[62] Murray Views Pty Ltd, *Greetings from Cooktown N.Q.*, postcard, ca.1974, Centre for the Government of Queensland, https://www.queenslandplaces.com.au/node/11193.
[63] *Cairns Post*, "Letter to the Editor," September 23, 1998.
[64] Lynne Clancy, "Captain Cook Motel, Cairns," slide, Centre for the Government of Queensland, 1973, https://www.queenslandplaces.com.au/exhibit/slide/lbc126; Murray Views Pty Ltd, "Greetings from Cooktown N.Q." The statue was repainted in 1985 and 2006. *Cairns Post*, June 14, 1985, 2; *Cairns Post*, "New Look for Cook."
[65] Clark, *Big Things*, vi, 16.
[66] *Cairns Post*, February 25, 1989, 47.
[67] Some sources describe the establishment as the Captain Cook Backpackers' Resort during the early 2000s. Clark, *Big Things*, 16.
[68] Dickson, "Cook's Last Stand"; Pulley, "JCU Students Bid for Statue"; O'Grady, "Statue Regarded"; Salseli, "Esplanade Ideal Place for Statue."
[69] Dickson, "Cook's Last Stand."
[70] Boyle, "Statue Had to Stay."
[71] In 2021, JCU Cairns campus was renamed Nguma-bada.
[72] Pulley, "JCU Students Bid for Statue."
[73] *Cairns Post*, "Captain's Statue Won't Be Scuttled."
[74] *Cairns Post*, "Cook to Stay in City"; *Cairns Post*, "Red Tape Scuttles Cook Move."
[75] Rigby, "Cairns Historian"; for further analysis see Fredericks and Bradfield, "Asserting Indigenous Agencies," 362.
[76] Hinchcliffe, "Infamous Captain Cook Statue."
[77] Rigby, "Cairns Historian."
[78] Bateman, "Captain Cook Statue Vandalised"; Curran and Ward, *Unknown Nation*, 194–204.
[79] Hollingsworth, "Tear Down the Captain Cook Statue!"
[80] Pedro the Elder, "Online Comment."
[81] Davis and Rigby, "Cairns' Gigantic Captain Cook Statue."
[82] Nicola, "It's Time to Think Big."
[83] Clarke, "Making a Mark," 253.
[84] Tunzelmann, *Fallen Idols*, 1.
[85] Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*; Carlson and Farrelly, "You *Can* Handle the Truth."
[86] Baguley, Kerby, and Andersen, "Counter Memorials and Counter Monuments."
[87] *Radio New Zealand*, "Hamilton Mayor Suffers from Abuse."
[88] Mitchell, "Marton's Captain Cook Statue."
[89] The Reserve Board is composed of Crown, iwi, and district council representatives. Ellis, "Whanganui War Memorial."
[90] Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*, 38.
[91] Carey and Sum, "Queen Victoria Monument Doused in Paint."
[92] Carey and Sum, "Queen Victoria Monument Doused in Paint"; Crowe, "Cooks' Cottage Statue Toppled."
[93] Podwinski, "Controversial Colonial-Era William Crowther Statue."
[94] Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*, 4–7, 75–103, 97–98, 134–35, 267; Scates, "Set in Stone?"
[95] Manatū Taonga—Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Tuia 250 Report."
[96] While Fullagar noted that COVID-19 "no doubt mercifully" cancelled most official Endeavour 250 events, historians and activists used the anniversary to critique Australia's relationship with the voyage ("Remembering Cook, Again," 625).
[97] Carlson and Farrelly, "Monumental Changes," 13.
[98] Ohl, "Of Beetles and Men."
[99] Gordon, "Toppled Captain Cook Statue."
[100] Brennan and Stevenson, "Australasian Cook Monuments."