

Natural Histories of Home

Where does home begin? For the nonindigenous in settler nations like Australia, there is first of all the imagining that there was a beginning that could come to count for all time as to why we were now at home, here, on someone else's land. This is the story that sits behind and organizes the "white possessive logic" detailed by Aileen Moreton-Robinson¹ that includes a practice and belief that white Australians possess the land. This possessive imagination can be said to have begun with Captain James Cook, who took possession of "many situations" up the eastern coast of Australia but who finally, on the point of his departure forever from mainland Australia, took possession of the entire east coast that he had mapped, on an island off the very tip of Australia now called Possession Island. That particular Captain Cook who left us his story was only one of many Captain Cooks, and that island was not the first island to know a Captain Cook. Let me tell you about another island. An island that isn't an island anymore. An island right in the heart of Sydney, a mere five minutes by ferry from the Opera House, that is also a naval base

and a museum, joined to the mainland now by an artificial isthmus, and it's here that one Captain Cook died.

Another Island (Garden Island)

We know this Captain Cook who died on Garden Island from one of the many Indigenous Australian stories that feature Captain Cook. These stories are known as the Cook sagas, and they come from northern and central Australia via their tellers, Paddy Wainburranga, Joli Laiwonga, Hobbles Danaiyairi, and others on behalf of the Rembarrnga, Ngalkgun, and Yarralin peoples, through recording and dissemination by Chips Mackinolty, Penny McDonald, and Deborah Bird Rose.² These different stories tell many nuanced accounts of Cook, but most have some idea of two laws: Cook's law—oppressive, unprincipled, and immoral—and the true or Dreaming law that is based on and assumes Indigenous Australian ownership of land. In the telling of these sagas, numerous white figures (missionaries, pastoralists, and protection officers) appear as Cook figures, continuing his law. In this sense, Cook is not understood to be dead but very much alive in the form of all his followers who continue to “make themselves strong”³ through the exploitation of indigenous labor, land, minerals, and knowledge. This sense of Cook as a process of perpetual reproduction differs from historical efforts to freeze Cook in a particular moment, to insist he is dead when he continues to be highly productive, very much alive in Australia.

Perhaps the best known of the Cook sagas is that told by Wainburranga and Laiwonga, titled by Mackinolty as “Too Many Captain Cooks.” This saga begins with the good Cook from Mosquito Island (another tiny island, just off the big mainland of New Guinea on Milne Bay) who travels all about the place with his two wives and who knew not to interfere. He came to Sydney Harbour to build his boat, and he made Sydney Harbour but not Sydney Harbour Bridge. He did build a bridge, but it was just a “blackfella bridge out of planks first time.”⁴ The devil lived on the other side of the harbor and was able to start seducing Cook's two wives because Cook was always working. The devil who was also Satan got the two wives to help hide him so he could kill Cook and take the wives away. In Wainburranga's story, Cook and Satan eventually fight hand to hand, and Cook kills the devil and throws him into a hole, the hole now known as the Cahill Expressway. That was

temptation defeated. Cook then went back to Mosquito Island, but something happened and he was speared by his relations. So he came back down to Sydney Harbour, where he died of his wounds and was buried on the island known as Garden Island. It was on Garden Island that Prime Minister John Howard met U.S. President George W. Bush in 2007 because it could guarantee the highest level of security. The ships that defend Australian territory are sent to be repaired at the Captain Cook Graving Dock on Garden Island so that Australia can never be invaded by sea—again. At the naval base entrance, the sign reads, “It is a condition of entry to these premises that all persons present upon request, any vehicle, bag, briefcase, or other container for security inspection on entering and leaving the island.”⁵ On the other side of the island, you may land by ferry, walk along a small, fenced section of the shore, and visit the museum outside the official gates. It is said that the first tennis court in Australia was built here.

After this old Captain Cook—the Cook who resisted temptation, the Cook who knew the law—came all the new Captain Cooks. As Wainburranga puts it:

They just went after the women. All the New Captain Cooks fought the people. They shot the people. The New Captain Cook people, not old Captain Cook. He’s dead. He didn’t interfere and make a war. That last war and the second war. They fought us. And then they made a new thing called “welfare.” . . .

They wanted to take all of Australia. They wanted it, they wanted the whole lot of this country. All the new people wanted anything they could get. They could marry black women or white women.

They could shoot people. New Captain Cook mob!⁶

You hear in Wainburranga’s acute legal diagnosis, his epic poem, the expansive scale of the destruction that was wrought. This is a myth of good and bad Cooks in which the bad Cooks are still on the loose. The great power of Wainburranga’s story is that he articulates the possessive force of the new Cooks. This force maps and names but also shoots and legalizes—literally transforming through a possessive rite one thing into another—the east coast of New Holland into Australia, a silencing into a discovery, the presence of people into an absence. All the weird magic of colonialism that makes those colonial stories last; all that giving in to the temptation to possess this place against the law.

Taking Possession

For the nation of Australia, possession as named by one of the new Cooks, James, is marked by an island: Possession Island. This is the island where Cook reportedly carried out the following:

Notwithstand I had in the Name of his Majesty taken possession of several places upon this coast I now once more hoisted English Coulers and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast from the above Latitude down to this place by the Name of New South [*Wales* written in above] together with all the Bays, Harbours Rivers and Islands situate upon the same [*same* crossed out and *said* inserted] coast . . . after which we fired three Volleys of small Arms which were Answerd by the like number by [*by* crossed out and *from* inserted] the Ship.⁷

Everything is claimed, even the harbors like Sydney that he hasn't seen and the rivers, the bays, and all the islands. There is a pre-echo of Wainburanga's rhetoric here. Taking women, marrying anyone, shooting, wanting anything they could get—rivers, bays, harbors, islands. Was Cook comforted by this expansionist rhetoric? Finally, had he done enough? This tiny island, just off the tip of Cape York, bears a huge representational burden. An *island* symbolically securing a whole coast and so eventually a continent. An island! But as Paul Carter goes on to explain for Cook, this island was not peripheral to his navigational journey but “stood as a symbolic centre, a jewel crowning his outline of names.”⁸ And it was here Cook “took” possession—here that in the *taking* of possession he recognized that possession was already in the hands of others. But the ambivalence of that possession is silenced, and only the story of securing the land travels and is reproduced, again and again.

The Comfort of Possession

In 2007, Company B, a small Sydney theater group, put on a play called *Toy Symphony*, written by Michael Gow. The main character, Roland, is suffering perhaps some lifelong distress about what is real and what is writing, and he is asked by his therapist to remember a moment when he was perfectly comfortable, joyful, open. He remembers a scene (which comes to life on the stage) from his primary school at Como within the Shire. (This

is the Sutherland Shire, which includes Botany Bay where Cook landed in 1770 and also Cronulla Beach, site of the Sydney race riots in 2005.) In this scene, his richly voiced third-grade teacher stands behind the earliest version of the overhead projector and shows slides of the history of Como. This history begins with Captain Cook, who after observing the transit of Venus came to explore the east coast, thus paving the way for the founding of Como. We can experience the palpable pleasure the small boy feels in the semidark, with the soothing rattle of plastic overheads and his perfectly reliable primary school teacher recounting, again, how his world, his home, has come into being. “And Cook went to observe the . . .,” she says and is shouted over by the excited boy ending her sentences, “TRANSIT OF VENUS,” and she goes on, “and he came on to,” and the boy again, “BOTANY BAY, BOTANY BAY,” and the teacher goes calmly on. And we know it is an “again” because the boy keeps bursting across her listing of Cook’s travels. He already knows; he is possessed by knowledge. She hears his excitement, she knows he knows, and she continues quietly, repeatedly, comforting him with Cook.⁹

Island Possession

Possession seems never to have been an easy word. It seems always to have held within itself ideas of violence, settlement, and transfiguration. Cook “possessed” various islands and “situations” in his voyages in the name of the king, but the most usual use of the word in his journal was to designate items of property. In turn, these items often appear in relation to stories of finding bits and pieces from his ship or crew in the hands of indigenous peoples. That is, Cook brought not only possession but also theft, for how else could he insist that property existed unless it has the possibility of being given to, sold by, or taken by others? This originating, expansive word is then taken to the island—Possession Island. *Island* with its seeming isolation, *island* in its separation from land by sea. But islands are also doubled movements, as they are created and contained within the sea. As Gilles Deleuze tells us, “Geographers say there are two kinds of islands”—the continental and the oceanic. The oceanic form from coral reefs and underwater eruptions, and the continental are separated from a continent, “born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture; they survive the absorption of what once contained them.”¹⁰ Possession Island is continen-

tal. The oceanic island reminds us that the earth is still there, alive, active, erupting; the continental island reminds us that “the sea is on top of the earth.” “Humans cannot live, nor live in security, unless they assume that the active struggle between earth and water is over, or at least contained.” So “that an island is deserted,” Deleuze argues, “must appear *philosophically* normal to us.”¹¹ The deterrence of islands is also doubled. Islands remind us simultaneously of the sudden eruption of the other into us and of the swamping of life that leaves us isolated and marooned from the other that is so necessary to know we are a self. Islands suggest unanticipated emergence and isolation. Islands *should* deter people.

To come onto Possession Island is to find what white possession has done in its writing over of the place’s earlier names, Bedanug and Tuidin. Here there is active deterrence. A set of prohibitive symbols beneath the legend: Possession Island National Park—no shooting, no dogs, no fires; watch out for crocodiles. Each warning insisting that habitation of the island is prohibited. Without a gun no larger mammals or reptiles to eat, without a dog no friend to please, without a fire no cooking of food and no way of warning the crocodiles to stay away. So no traditional practices are to occur here, no official reconnection of this island with its neighbors and peoples. But these signs are also a warning to the white escapee, for they forbid exactly the things Robinson Crusoe had: dog (remember, he even had cats), guns, and fire. That bourgeois Crusoe, still needing his wrecked ship as a bank of tools to render his island habitable, that Crusoe, as Deleuze notes, who should have been eaten by Friday. These signs insist that officially only the perpetual reenactment of Cook’s path will be allowed. Officially we must only come across for a moment, confirm where we are by looking, and reconfirm the island’s importance—in relation to Cook’s navigational trajectory, to the mainland, to the whole of Australia, right to this very point beyond the tip—as possessed. And these reenactments do occur in the helicopter flights from Horn Island that deliver people to the tip of Cape York, set them down to enable them to add one more stone to the cairn, and on the way back over the island they buzz the Cook monument—that thing beyond all land, the possessor of Possession Island. But what is official up here? What vehicle could stop any nighttime campfires when the tide has gone right out and the rocks ring us? Who will know if a turtle is taken or a crab collected or oysters eaten? In this place local knowledge makes ordinary all those European fantasies of the self-producing island cornucopia.

What does it mean that this island seems to have at least two other

names, Bedanug and Tuidin? Perhaps one from the mainland peoples and one from the island peoples? What kind of name does that make Possession? A third-place name? As Moreton-Robinson puts it so tellingly, “The right to take possession was embedded in British and international common law and rationalized through a discourse of civilization that supported war, physical occupation, and the will and desire to possess. Underpinning property rights, possession entails values, beliefs, norms, and social conventions, as well as legal protection, as it operates ideologically, discursively, and materially. Property rights are derived from the Crown, which in the form of the nation-state holds possession.”¹² We make as we take “possession.”

But the kind of white possessiveness that Moreton-Robinson sees people being encouraged to invest in is here ambiguous at best. To be white on Possession Island would be to starve. To constantly call up the importance of Cook in this place would put you against the reality of an almost complete area of native title. To think of ideas of discovery as foundational would be to deny not only what you would see day after day but what you would feel as a minority group, as “European” here. Non-Indigenous Australians practice possession—we walk, talk, buy, and sell within possession. But the actual naming of an island—naming something that is meant to be natural, intrinsic—throws too sharply into relief its shadow. It reminds us how far from Perth, from Melbourne, from here, from there was Cook’s path. How did this small island make all of Australia a British possession and then a possessive nation?

Islands of the Mind

This island might also be the real. It might be that which cannot be seen except in difficult, fraught glimpses—it may be the “impossible” of Jacques Lacan that does not belong to the wishful nor to the unconscious and yet pulls those constructions toward it. It has the force of existence. At first reading, the island is simply the national unconscious and needs to be properly interrogated as such. Cook used language to bring forth his place as a named certainty and at that point gave white Australia an unconscious. This is the “chapter of (our) history marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood.”¹³ But as Lacan suggests of the individual, the truth can be rediscovered, for it will be written down elsewhere, in monuments, archives, traditions, and the traces preserved by the necessary distortions to keep the

falsehood alive. The trace that lies in the act itself “took” possession, meaning possession was taken from another. The archive shows us Cook knew the land belonged to others as “we” (the white nation) still know it. Through this naming, this “linguaging,” the nation is granted something like an unconscious (the distorting falsehood) that leads to the national need to confirm our “reality” of possession. This is a daily, naturalized practice, the ordinariness of which belies the uncontrolled, unlawful things it is. A part of the ordinary confirmation of possession is the concomitant domination of the white human over plant, animal, sea, and sky through the language that defers an ultimate meaning and orders our knowing into an us and other through the naming of place. This island is simultaneously a confirmation and a question: Why Possession if we already possess? So mostly we disappear this place. For this is a fight against truth, against the censoring of the unconscious, and so the island does not appear—not on our daily national weather maps or on most maps of Australia or in our consciousness—a reality beyond navigation, a symbolic center of nation/home that we will not see, or more accurately we see and forget, see and forget. Possession Island is a naming that could reveal the very structure of colonial language and cease the hysterical symptoms of obsessive ownerships and reenactments that maintain the national mythology of total possession. This is the legacy of Cook—a national unconscious—and an unconscious both names and forgets. And names because it fears that it might forget.

But something that Cook brought is not all the island is. It is also itself. A being outside, beyond, and before Cook’s claim. How to write that?

Going to the Island

Possession Island begins on Horn Island (the airport island of the Torres Strait) at 2 a.m. when Susan turns on the light to check the time, then at 3:40 a.m. when I wake for no reason. Perhaps it is the drone of the air conditioner keeping us awake—in the middle of winter we still need air-conditioning like the thin-skinned southerners we are. And then at 5 a.m. we wake up properly to be at breakfast as we had been told to be by 6 a.m. But at 6 a.m. everything in the dining/bar area is in the murky grayness of shutness except for two casually business-suited men in aquaculture, one from Thailand, one from Canberra, who are waiting with their rollaway bags and mobile phones for something to happen. We are meant to leave at 6:45, and at 6:30 a not very communicative woman emerges and begins

laying out breakfast things. We rush through our Just Right and cornflakes and run for the minibus, worried about missing it.

The time arranged to meet Tony Tisaye at the wharf was 7 a.m. to catch the tides. We have no idea where the wharf is, having flown in late the night before, and time is ticking as we wait for the bus to go. It is 6:45 and suddenly the bus IS going. The driver is the same quiet woman who laid out breakfast. We scramble on and travel exactly two minutes around the corner to the wharf. No one had suggested we could have walked. It is not assumed you would want to in the heat, and perhaps they are right. Even in drizzle we are hot. At the wharf we wait for a while, always half-worried we have somehow managed to miss our boat. The boats at the wharf are pink and purple, and the surrounding sea is aqua blue even as the clouds come over. We reread the crocodile warnings.

Deleuze imagined some extraordinary people who might be able to rival the original movement of the island drifting AND erupting, continuity AND invention. But what are these movements? Everyone in these straits it seems fishes. There's always a boat or a wharf or a movement. People ride across water to arrive at other water, from one island to a temporary, boat-limited settlement on the surface. Thin lines are cast off wharves, rocky outcrops, and anything left over that sticks into the sea, anywhere the ocean is close enough to practice an almost islandness. No one here needs the security of the mainland that Deleuze presumes—the mainland is too far from the fish.

We know where the island is, and we have Tony take us in his fast boat with a promise of food, swags, and tents for the rain. The “we” is my partner, Susan, and me. Susan is important here in the Western folklore of islands, *Suzanne and the Pacific*, the *Lovely Susan of Palm Tree Island*.¹⁴ So we know where we are going, but we do not know when or how. When Tony comes, Susan worries about the boat and the supplies. It seems small and unfull for all that we might need for our single night on the island. And the sea from inside the boat looks big. Will we be all right? There are more squalls moving in, and it is darker for a moment than before. Tony does the mock exaggeration: “Hey, if we get lost, we’ll be crocodile food,” and his quick punch line, “Only joking.” We get in the boat.

To approach the island from the sea is to move toward a rounded shape, the pleasure of that approach, of coming across rather than into something and then landing clumsily but completely onto sand as if we have fallen from the sky. The island as a whole island has been in my mind for a long

time, and when we arrive it takes up a wholly sensational existence. It refuses writing and description, never becoming small enough in memory to be seen and recorded with the words that would vivify it. It remains intensely, sensorially concrete. I can't make up an idea of this place that can fit in my forehead, which is how Elaine Scarry says we remember.¹⁵ I remember something else.

Waiting for Memory

This is how I remember it. My mother has a terrible headache and goes to bed. I don't think anyone else is there in the beginning. She vomits, and I take away the bowl. I am sixteen and surprised I am not revolted by my mother's vomit. Something clicks at that moment about how easy it is to do this. Tip the vomit out, clean the bowl, and bring it back with a towel. Go fetch a glass of water. These are things my mother had done for me, things she had done for all her six children. I believe the final moment I saw her conscious happened then. I brought in a glass of fresh water that follows vomit like morning does night, and as I left she looked across at me, puzzled and wondering. I have always thought that she must have known she was to die and wondered about me—as a child, the kind of child I was, would think. I don't think I was particularly egotistical, I just assumed that when my mother looked at me, she thought of me. Now I think that look went through me, placed me as a human, liminal banner through which began a path or a process that she was joined to, knowing and not knowing. I suspect a kind of languor within the pain she must have been in. Was she already at the point where the pain and blood flooding her brain releases the endorphins, and it all quietens and the eyes soften in that release and I have my mother's final look, I think, of love—the look all middle distance. When the ambulance came, when I saw her unconscious in the hospital, when my brother-in-law phoned to say she was dead, I still had faith in that look. She was still alive for me, wondering what might become of me.

The island also remains in the middle distance. It quietly farewells fantasies of possession, of infinite belonging, and instead persists. Even now I can't remember Possession Island as an island. It refuses to become memory as one would usually understand it—as a set of brief vivid snapshots, momentary experiences, a single flower, a patch of rock. It is instead a presence. It is connected to but not the same as standing at one end of the long, long paddock of the not-quite ruins of Birkenau and feeling most pro-

foundly things fall into place. There, there was thin-clad shed after thin-clad shed stretching away from the gas chambers, across a wide, long expanse of green grass where so many people had been and where all the words of another, European unconscious fell out and could be seen—in place. And I was left with a look. Knowing I could look, knowing I was one part of what remained. That as an Australian of a “settled” nation things had been put in place for me. This island too remains. It does not resolve itself into piecemeal remembrance, but like a wide, wide-angle shot remains completely across the mind. On it Australia falls into place. There are hardly any words about it but those two: “Took possession.” An understated unconscious that lurches out, peels across the mind, and remains. A presencing. A persistence.

Here national possession seems not merely incommensurate with lived Indigenous Australian sovereignty but ludicrous. The journey into the heart of whiteness finds not an ultimate barrier, the original fence to domesticate the wild, but a small island, a national park: no dogs, no guns, no fires, watch out for crocodiles, and—the other mark of national possession—the Cook monument.

The Monument

The monument depends on its contextualizing language. Physically it looks faintly military—its squat, boxy cement shape a mixture of flag base and machine gun mount or gun pillbox. It feels defensive. Its peeled white paint and rusted front pole suggest an uncared-for public convenience. But the first written plaque is clear and clean. The words well spaced, eyes to front, staring into the uncaring sea: “Lieutenant James Cook RN of the *Endeavour* landed on this island which he named Possession Island and in the name of his Majesty King George the Third, took possession of the whole eastern coast of Australia from the latitude 38 degrees south to this place.”¹⁶ This place. On the side is a more detailed set of particular acknowledgments. The ship’s crew who built it, the bicentenary committee who funded it, the historical society that initiated it, and the bishop who blessed it. And here we learn that this is also a monument to the defacement of the first: “[The] Torres Strait Historical Society initiated reconstruction of this monument after the original cairn, erected by the federal government earlier this century, was vandalised.” Fiona Nicoll has written about the ways in which indigenous sovereignty works as a “public secret” using Michael Taussig’s

ideas on defacement: the public secret that can be defined as “that which is generally known but cannot be articulated.” He asks: “Then what happens to the inspired act of defacement? Does it destroy the secret or further enhance it?”¹⁷ His example was the naked statue of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip installed as part of the National Sculpture Festival in Canberra in 1995 that was then beheaded, the double defacement that he believes led to a reinforcement of the public secret of monarchical power in Australia. But what of this Cook example? A defacement officially recognized in a plaque recording a monument’s (now only ever partial) restoration, never replication? Is this the historical continuation to the original opposition to Cook at Botany Bay? Is it in this small sentence, in small writing on the side of this raggedy monument, that indigenous sovereignty is quietly named aloud? Reconstructed, monument, earlier, vandalized. The monument looks toward the northeast and so toward the island of Mer. Eddy Mabo’s Mer, where the idea of Australia being a land occupied by no one, possessed by no one before Cook, was proven legally to be incorrect. What is now known as the *Mabo* decision was begun by three people (including Eddie Mabo) from the Murray Islands (of which Mer is the largest) asking the High Court of Australia to declare that their possession, ownership, and occupation of their land had not been extinguished by colonization.¹⁸ Although their plea was not entirely accepted, the case resulted in a legal and moral breakthrough—Australian common law recognized a form of native title. Where such title had not been extinguished, “native title reflects the rights that the laws or customs of the Indigenous inhabitants give them to their traditional lands.”¹⁹ This was the first true recognition in Australia of a “before” Cook having a continuance in Australian law. The success of the case partly depended on the very clear markers of possession and continuous occupation that the small island of Mer could provide. Tony tells us Mer is one of the most beautiful islands, rich and bountiful—“It makes you happy just to go there.”²⁰ Mer that began to undo the state of possession—Dispossession Island?

My failure to make memory of Possession Island is connected perhaps to a failure to imagine. Scarry makes a lovely case for the ways in which imagination and the flower are interrelated.²¹ Her flowers are soft, near translucent, filmy—not the solid felt of the Australian flannel flower or the engaging force of the banksia but a specific geographical imagining that arises from the cool climate and wet sclerophyll in the relatively new and mud-based soil of her country, the United States. Those flowers are the

right size to fit in our foreheads, the right softness, the right innocence of culture. But how do we imagine here? All of us who have grown up with the solidly defined, baroque curlicues of the banksia and the flashing metallic sheen of the eucalyptus leaf that have left their mark on us? How do we describe the force of this imagining we have learned to call nature but is the worked-on, storied-up place of indigenous occupation?

Trees

I went to Possession Island to find a tree that I knew could not be there. This is the tree painted by John Alexander Gilfillan and turned to print by Samuel Calvert. It is the ordinary, possessionary tree—shading the conquerors, providing their food, and extending its limbs over the coming domain of the British in Australia. The great Australian imaginary. This print is based on one of the few known paintings, originally presented to the Royal Society of Victoria in 1859 (the original now lost), that directly



Figure 1. Samuel Calvert after J. A. Gilfillan, *Captain Cook Taking Possession of the Australian Continent on Behalf of the British Crown, AD 1770, Under the Name of New South Wales*, 1865, nla.pic-an7682920, National Library of Australia

celebrates and commemorates “possession.” The original painting was titled *Captain Cook Taking Possession of New South Wales, 1770* and the print here is titled *Captain Cook Taking Possession of the Australian Continent on Behalf of the British Crown, AD 1770, Under the Name of New South Wales*.

Sir Joseph Banks describes Possession Island as particularly barren,²² and Cook refers to the small party that went ashore, so this depiction is not a realist effort but it may have come to operate as a kind of national evidence. Ian Hacking suggests that at this time in the 1860s memory and commemoration were “part of the secular drive to replace the soul with something of which we have knowledge.”²³ With the installation of this painting in the national galleries and reproduced as a widely circulated print, the nation could see and know that “we” possessed. Partly through the circulation of this image an idea of the nation as arising from a rational line of development from then to now, from possession to national polity, was established. Thus the belief in possession comes to be painted into knowledge. This image of possession is then rerecorded, circulated, and displayed. The detail in this painting is extraordinary and reads like a catch-all claim to both possession and occupation. There is Cook lifting his hat in honor of the king, but we also see what looks like a settlement underway with stores landed, food being prepared, accounts being written, local food being butchered, marines in order, sentries posted, and a band playing. As an overdetermined moment in history, this is Cook easily occupying the center of sight and directing all potential disorder into place. We look at him; we do not think of him looking at others or us. The Indigenous Australian trio stripped of all the remarks Cook made everywhere of their defiance are shown cowering in the face of this event, the man blocking his ears to gunfire, the women looking away, one robed and with a cockatoo on her shoulder, perhaps suggesting some prelapsarian relation between nature and human now broken. Tupaia, the Tahitian Cook described as “a man of infinite service, a very intelligent person, Shrewd, Sensible, Ingenious but proud and obstinate,”²⁴ is here depicted as a raggedly dressed black servant offering drinks. The print promises the panoramic illusion: to show us everything. Such is the all-encompassing power of Cook—to simultaneously occupy and settle the Australian continent as the title of this print suggests. Not an island or a coast but in 1865 a continent. In 1889, the print was reproduced with a new title, *Captain Cook Proclaiming New South Wales a British Possession, Botany Bay 1770*, and in this version, the three Indigenous Australian people depicted have been expunged. Ever after in

the books we have been able to find (and studying histories of popular culture comes with the particular difficulty of knowing we will not be able to find all the possible places this print has been reproduced) no indigenous people appear, whether in pictorial guides to Australian history or the 2006 book *Events That Shaped Australia*.²⁵ The constant repetition of the work embeds it more and more in a nonexistent reality. We know nothing like this happened according to anyone, but it becomes an unmovable marker of age. Its very strangeness is suggestive of some possible historical fact, and the removal of any indigenous presence also gives an odd perspective to the painting. For now the painter and the viewer share their perspective with the Indigenous Australians as people who may have looked on. Gordon Bennett's *Possession Island* (1991), combining Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* and this print with a centering of Tupaia,²⁶ shifts the dynamic of how we perceive the print. Still the almost original with no Indigenous Australians gets reproduced in yet another glossy history book aimed at children in 1992 under the heading *Journey of the Great Explorers*.²⁷ The confusion about whether this fantasist print depicted Possession Island or Botany Bay only adds to the unlimited sense that all of the land, all of the natural world, was once taken entirely.

Another Tree (Mangrove)

I found another tree. Not a tree of possession but a mangrove tree, *Rhizophora stylosa*. A hint of the island as real. You know it by its aerial roots (pneumatophores), which come up for oxygen where there is none in the muddy, sandy tidal flat. This particular species stands against the waves by use of its prop roots circling out and holding it up until it looks like it walks on a thousand stilts. *Rhizophora* literally being the transmitter and the bearer of the root. These are roots that don't simply dig down and hold on but take up the sea, shed the salt, and breathe. Aerial roots grow straight up into the air to breathe through special pores that repel water and salts. These are called *lenticels*, a name eerily related to *lens* and *lentil* (little lens), a tree breathing through faux eyes. But these roots not only snorkel for air but save it, scuba-like, in reservoirs called *aerenchyma* that keep the tree breathing even underwater when high tide washes over all. And in the *Rhizophora*, the roots loop out and down as well to anchor the tree further and extend the domain of its breath. Up above, the salt from the sea has been absorbed and channeled into leaves for storage, and these leaves



Figure 2. Mangrove tree, Possession Island, Australia, 2007, photo by Katrina Schlunke

eventually fall, tear-like, to the ground. This tree is completely in between water and land. It will die without regular freshwater washouts, but it will not thrive in freshwater alone.

The roots hold the sediment that nurtures crabs and mollusks, enemy and friend alike, and stabilize the windblown side of the island even as it calls on the high energy of the sea to rise and fall through its arbor of roots. It is not really in opposition to anything. It keeps its young to itself, nurturing them to early adolescence. The seeds germinate while still attached to the mother tree, who feeds the sprouting seed until a stem and sometimes a root is formed. Then the weanling falls in its insulated pod into the sea. There it travels for months, surviving underwater adventures even, until enough water is absorbed in its bottom part to make it move vertically. Then it starts to expand its stem and roots until it forms a lodging with land and grows more roots, slowly pushing itself out of the water completely, gently, to start again the process of working with the waves and the sediment—becoming island. The mangrove draws humans to it for what further food it might support, to take the crabs that destroy its seedlings, the bark that is used for ulcers and other conditions, and the humans leave the take-out cups that wash up into the tree's roots. Beyond language.

For Scarry, “The felt experience of imagining, the interior brushing of one image against another, is the way it feels when two petals touch

one another.”²⁸ But why not another experience of imagining? The natural histories of Captain Cook, the real that happened all the time outside his languaging of place? The brushing of water and root, wind and sand, polystyrene and human hand? The moments of potential place within the mangrove tree, reaching straight up for air out of possession? This tree with no heartwood, no darker heart where waste is stored in other trees, stiffening their strength. There is instead a system of densely distributed veins and arteries that carries its nutrients around and around, easily able to avoid damage to its outer shell by simply taking another route, never having to send back its multiplying waste. The mangrove seems all production, always establishing relations between land and water, always creating through constant differentiation and wholly within water, wind, and sand. Drifting AND erupting, continuity AND invention. If we follow the wood, we find other trees.

Botany Bay Tree

At Botany Bay, where Cook also landed and also made a claim, although without any proclamation (Cook writes only of “hoisting the English Coulers”²⁹), there was another tree. This would have been one of many trees worked on by the local Eora peoples. They used the trees to produce many different weapons and tools, but from one particular tree they made a certain shield, and that shield was held up to stop Cook landing. That shield is now suspended in a cabinet over British soil.

Cabinet 96, almost at the end of the Enlightenment Gallery in the British Museum, contains that shield, a remnant of a long-dead tree and a reminder of the culture Cook walked into to claim, that he called *nature*. Unlike so many of the objects in their cabinets in the British Museum, this story is written on a card—this shield is properly narrativized, if you will. Its title is “Bark Shield,” and the object description reads as follows: “The bark shield below was one of the first Australian objects to arrive in Britain. In April 1770 Captain Cook and his officers attempted to land on Australia’s south-east coast. When two men of the Eora tribe tried to stop the landing, one was wounded by gunfire and dropped his shield. First contacts in the Pacific were often tense and violent.”³⁰

The Enlightenment Gallery is both reflection and reenactment. Unlike the other galleries, this one both reflects the histories of museums and shapes our reenactments of those histories as we look and walk among its

static, calling displays in a particular way. It has row after row extending vertically and horizontally of cabinets containing things. Bought things, stolen things, small things, big things—all seemingly contained within their gilt-edge, glass display cases. But there is also a collective straining of these things as their sheer numbers recall the excessive desire to see, touch, and own the exotic that so shaped the expansive colonizing imagination of the eighteenth century. It was the difference of the things themselves, the way in which they were set against and within English culture, that ensured the value of them and that is carried on in this gallery, where the connections are not so much about true origins as their arrival in Britain. Above the shield there is some New Zealand green jade, including four New Zealand clubs in the shape of hand paddles that have written on them, “Brought by Captain Cook.” *Brought* as in brought up, born into life, so that Cook is noted as would be the composer of a musical piece. In the cabinet next to the shield are three boomerangs, one from the Clarence, one from Maitland, and the third from Port Jackson, New South Wales. Nothing is said about these items—how they came to be here, who they came from, and why. Nothing is said about any of the items, including the shield, in their own terms. There is no account of the tree it was made from or of its usual usage—there is no Indigenous Australian/Eora interpretation.

The story of this shield’s use was well recorded by the key journal writers of the *Endeavour* voyage. There is an engraving by T. Chambers after the drawing by Sydney Parkinson of the shield coming into use at Botany Bay at the moment of Cook’s arrival.

This is the shield of which Cook the captain says:

We then threw them some nails beads &c a shore which they took up and seem’d not ill pleased in so much that I thout that they beckon’d to us to come a shore but in this we were mistaken for as soon as we put the boat in they came to oppose us upon which I fired a musket between the two which had no other effect than make them retire back where bundles of thier darts lay and one of them took up a stone and threw at us which caused my firing a second Musquet load with small shott and altho’ some of the shott struck the man yet it had no other effect than to make him lay hold of a Shield or target to defend himself emmediately after this we landed.³¹

This is the shield of which Charles Green the astronomer says: “One of them under cover of a shield, approached the boat and threw his gig, and in return was wounded with shot. They now fled.”³²



Figure 3. T. Chambers after Sydney Parkinson, *Two Natives of New Holland Advancing to Combat*, 178?, detail, nla.pic-an9196443, National Library of Australia

This is the shield of which Banks the botanist says:

In this manner we parleyd with them for about a quarter of an hour, they waving us to be gone, we again signing that we wanted water and that we meant them no harm. They remaind resolute so a musquet was fird over them, the Effect of which was that the Youngest of the two dropd a bundle of lances on the rock at the instant in which he heard the report; he however snatchd them up again and both renewd their threats and opposition. A Musquet loaded with small shot was now fired at the Eldest of the two who was about 40 yards from the boat; it struck him on the legs but he minded it very little so another was immediately fird at him; on this he ran up to the house about 100 yards distant and soon returned with a sheild. In the mean time we had landed on the rock.³³

This is the shield of which Parkinson the painter says:

We attempted to frighten them by firing off a gun loaded with small shot; but attempted it in vain. One of them repaired to a house immediately, and brought out a shield, of an oval figure, painted white in the middle, with two holes in it to see through, and also a wooden sword, and then they advanced boldly, gathering up stones as they came along, which they threw at us. After we had landed they threw two of their lances at us; one of which fell between my feet. Our people fired again and wounded one of them; at which they took the alarm and were very frantic and furious, shouting for assistance, calling *Hala, hala, mae*; that is, (as we afterwards learned,) Come hither; while their wives and children set up a most horrid howl.³⁴

Everyone who comes to look at this shield must see the front, see the view that Cook first saw, but it is behind these holes where the arm held that we could see the decision to use this shield, marked by the rub between wood and arm, arm and wood. Perhaps the rub of the man who held this shield is hidden from view in case one skin might talk to another. What is it doing here at the end of the Enlightenment Gallery? It stars as the number one starting point for the child-focused, do-it-yourself tour called the Enlightenment Trail, with its constant instruction “Carry on collecting.” *Hala, hala, mae*—come hither. Come and help me. I come to cabinet 96 for three days running and sit in front of it. I can do this for a long time, as I can lean against the end of the horizontal display case immediately in front.

This is the fascination and the fury of this gallery and its subtlety in making of me both a participant in its history (I am fascinated with this shield, I am doing what hundreds of people have done over a hundred years—come to this museum to look at *exotica*) and an angry critic of what this practice has done to particular cultures, to particular things, and what it does to me. How do I know so well how to be here? Is this another kind of home?

I sit for hours. I am the perfected, over-Cooked subject of museological discourse. I wait. Even half hidden as I am, my stillness or the length of time I am there or the idea I might be looking at something that really matters attracts others, and they come and look with me. Some are quick. A glance and they're gone. Others hesitate and say, "What is it?" "The shield that was held up to stop Captain Cook landing in Australia," I say. No one asks a follow-up question. I am too intense—or this Pacific stuff too marginal amid thousands of things to see. To them, what is one more piece of colonial flotsam neatly boxed and displayed? To them, what is the only material marker I know of Cook's violence and Eora resistance?

I believe in sitting in silence anyway, but it is also a fallback position when in doubt. I don't know what I am doing. I am stuck. The research funds are ticking away, my travel diary will have to report—I did nothing. But sit with cabinet 96. If I had to choose a word, it might be *pray* for the state of that silence, for the style of the sitting, but the shield is no god and this place no church, although a certain sort of humanist might see it that way. This is a material artifact of original Eora-British contact. This is how home was made. It is a historical remnant of that moment of imperial history and simultaneously refers to fractured and continuing indigenous histories. There is much to mourn here. We could mourn the possibility of another kind of meeting that was more diplomatic than dictatorial, we could mourn the absence of this story from the histories that are so well established and repeated in school curricula, and we could mourn the lack of any national acknowledgment of Indigenous Australian sovereignty that this shield so simply evokes.

But *mourn* does not seem to be the right word in the face of this shield with its two eye holes and middle hole where a spear might have gone but now suggests a mouth. This is my second set of visits. When I first saw it two years before, seeing it had all the shock of Walter Benjamin's "flash of emergence."³⁵ It made me reconsider what can and cannot be said within museum narratives; it made me reluctantly consider where certain stories might be safe. I immediately felt certain that this shield should center any

Australian effort to map an “Australian history.” I was productively political around the shield with little success and sometimes with good reason. What was the fight for this shield compared to the need to have the bones of family returned and put to rest? The fact that there are human remains kept by museums that were gathered throughout colonial times reminds us of the literal ways in which collection literally haunts culture. Those are bones that museums dare not show but do not automatically, with apologies, return. Those are bones that are apparently brought up as a bargaining chip when something else is asked to be returned. Those are bones that speak. And where would this shield find its place in the Australian political regime that might say “sorry”³⁶ for a policy but not mention the foundational smothering that refuses the reality of indigenous sovereignty?

But still this shield stayed with me, and now I found myself simply still. In Benjamin’s terms, I seemed to have entered a state of “indolence of heart.” Instead of moving and creating in response to this remain, this cultured tree, I “slacken and linger.” In Freudian terms, my immovability in the face of the shield suggests I cannot remove my libidinal investment in the object that is so clearly marked by its casing and its date as being past, as being dead to me. In Freud’s terms, a fixation with this object is a perverse refusal of closure, a failure to see that this object is “historical,” not alive, not talking with me. This state is called *melancholia*, “a mourning without end,” and it results from the “inability to resolve the grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place or ideal.”³⁷ This is opposed to Freud’s mourning, where the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead—whereas in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present. But this is surely the response a non-Indigenous Australian must have when living within a so-called settler nation that has taken no clear steps to nationally acknowledge indigenous sovereignty, a nation that has taken no steps to resolve a past but merely denies it. To keep the past firmly alive in the present is therefore not pathological but creatively, intellectually, and politically necessary within this national context—it is home making.

To focus this melancholia through the “magnification and intensification of the object”³⁸ is to acknowledge that this shield, this cabinet 96, is not only able to express the multiple losses outlined but also to suggest its generative power that shifts the object temporally and spatially. These shifts occur as I write about it; as it is reproduced as a museum object in articles about its provenance; as an Eora man stands in the Metcalfe Auditorium in

the State Library of New South Wales and says, “We’d like it back but we’ve got to get some other things first”;³⁹ as it is gathered into the popular world as one more colonial curiosity; and as it remains the unassimilable object of one Australian imaginary. Another island of possession. This unfixed, multiple result would please Benjamin. In seizing the elusive history of my encounter with this relic, I allow other, lost pasts to step into the light of the present. But against Benjamin I do want to fix the incommensurate, authentic truth of indigenous sovereignty. Any nonindigenous response to past or present objects is done within the knowledge of that difference. But that truth is not one I would see as stopping anyone knowing the past in the present but is rather an ethical limit to white melancholia, even of a creative kind as outlined here. Indigenous sovereignty reminds me that a white subjecthood cannot fall entirely into the object of this shield, for fundamentally this shield belongs to others—others who live on and want it back. Without that acknowledgment, non-Indigenous Australians are drawn “out of the bounds of their own subjectivity to the point of succumbing to the enamoration”⁴⁰ of a dead imperial project. Without that acknowledgment, we become one more of “too many” Captain Cooks.

As a curiosity, this object has been used to irrevocably harm people as proof of certain sorts of classificatory systems, and as a curiosity, this shield has connected and protected peoples. This shield, I think, still carries the force of curiosity. It “curosofies” me as I sit with it face-to-face.⁴¹ This is not a transcendental moment nor an out-of-body experience—this is an immanent force. This is a postrepresentational idea about what this material ensemble of historicity, indigenous usage, imperial capture, and movable image could also produce. The shield should not be reduced to the same of me—my feelings, my representations. Presented as it is with its defensive side showing, we cannot see the hand traces that shaped and held it, but instead we have via its three holes a call to see a face, the ethical face that is the trace that could lead us toward “contingency and subversion.”⁴² Here we have then absorption and magnification of the object but also a point of irreducible ethics that participates in the production of immanent becomings that circulate with a peculiar force.

This writing is not about why something appears but how we can release the difference of this object so carefully made similar through numeration, through exhibition and display. As I would want to release the difference of the rhizomic mangrove that is always beyond imperial representation in its nonnature that was and is Indigenous Australian culture. Home making in

Australia for the nonindigenous is both a releasing of the difference amid the continuities and taxonomies that tried to secure possession in “our” name and the recognition of the force of multiple indigenous cultures that have already dictated that we will encounter that nature, that politics, and that imagining. A process of release and recognition is not the home making in which a secure home will ever be achieved—it is rather an at-homeness with the forces that made Australia a white colony but not an acceptance of them. The ultimate island home of total possession is found to be deserted, uninhabitable by “Europeans” through lack of local knowledge and through the decrees of national government—for a “national park” must always be absent of citizenry except as temporary visitors. The original marker of European and indigenous violence on which possession was founded is discovered not in the heart of the home that is the nation, but overseas in a museum, behind glass, and encased in a Western time-shifting naming—the Enlightenment Gallery. But the island and the shield don’t stay contained by the sea or the cabinet. The island carries its force of presence and harries the possessive imagination; the shield both contains and exceeds the histories of the moment that produced it as another item in a museum. They are both material temporalities that challenge any idea of a single environment or a past that is no longer present. Because of that lasting challenge, the island and the shield are pushed, consciously and unconsciously, far away. And in their wake are longing and forgetting and pretending.

Notes

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