In the Context of Australia, is it Now Time to Remove Statues of Captain Cook?

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The statue debate must ultimately end with the removal of colonial figures from public spaces in Australia. Across the world, this debate about what is to be done with statues that reflect 'dark' histories is one characterised by extremes. On one side, the demand for the complete removal of statues and other racist or colonial iconography, and on the other side aiming to preserve these monuments of controversial historical figures. Statues of 'colonial invaders' promote an Australian national identity and memory that omits the violent acts committed by these figures and rather constructs a false image of heroism. It has been argued by preservationists that these statues should remain for a combination of aesthetic, educational and historical reasons – however, the preservation of this heritage only preserves a fraction of Australia's overall history. This debate is after all not about the statues themselves, instead, these statues become symbolic of broader social, cultural, and economic issues that reflect the lasting effects of these figures that still permeate society today. In an Australian context, it is time to remove these statues of 'colonial invaders', including James Cook.

These statues present an image of heroism within the colonial narrative without recognising the colonial violence that these men promoted and committed. Broadly, the statues of colonial leaders in an Australian context are "a foil to help erase colonial violence and replace it with tales of virtue and heroism" (Maddison 2020). The creation of "a foil" (Maddison 2020) is evident in the example of the Captain Cook 'Discovery' statue in Sydney. The statue's inscription reads

‘Discovered this territory 1770’ – completely omitting over sixty-five thousand years of Indigenous history on the Australian continent. Similarly, the statue of Lachlan Macquarie in Hyde Park, Sydney is inscribed with the words ‘He was a perfect, gentleman, a Christian and supreme legislator of the human heart’. This inscription completely ignores Macquarie’s “role in advancing the invasion of Dharawal and Gundungurra territories to the west of what is now Sydney” (Maddison 2020) which “led to the Appin Massacre, in which Indigenous people were either shot or driven over the edge of a gorge to their deaths” (Maddison 2020).

Leaving these statues in public places constructs colonial invasion in Australian heritage as largely heroic and places these figures on a pedestal rather than critiquing and carefully considering the role they played in the darker parts of Australia’s history. Ndletyana and Webb note that memorialisation “is primarily about legitimising the present, not recalling the past” (Ndletyana and Webb 2016: 100), thus, these statues function to defend colonialism and its continued effects in the present. Further, the landscape of public memorials including statues “provides no opportunity for historical context” (Perkins 2017), and it is not the appropriate domain to start and continue meaningful discourses surrounding Australia’s colonial past and its continued effects in the present. Also, attempts to alter the inscriptions on these statues such as the statue of John Batman at the Victoria Market where “an additional 2004 plaque… apologises to Indigenous people” (Perkins 2017) do not solve the root issue. Altering these statues does not solve the colonial histories that are perpetuated through these acts of heritage. In fact, by reconsidering the image that these statues construct it is seen as necessary to “consider new directions, a revision, a criticism” (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 16) of the ways these figures function within the heritage of modern Australia. Therefore, in the context of Australia, it is necessary to deconstruct these images of colonialism through the removal of these statues.

The main arguments against the removal of colonial statues – including of Cook – are based on aesthetic, educational and historic reasons. In terms of aesthetics, "those wishing to preserve [these statues] may argue that they are great works of art that have a great deal of aesthetic value" (Timmerman 2020: 4). However, the counterargument to this is that the social and political consequences both within and outside the heritage sphere of celebrating these 'colonial invaders' overwhelm any aesthetic value that bronze statues of these men hold. Another argument has been put forward for the education quality of these statues. Many have claimed that these statues are "part of our history" (quoted in Maddison 2020) in which there is "much to be proud of" (quoted in Maddison 2020), but it must be considered which parts of Australian history are being celebrated. Former Secretary of State of the United States Condoleezza Rice noted statues are necessary to "be able to remind people" (quoted in Timmerman 2020: 5) of 'dark' histories. However, this begs the question as to whether public spaces are the place to explore complex and emotionally fraught events.

In terms of value, it has been argued that these statues are integral to Australian heritage; it must be questioned whose heritage these statues purport. Perkins highlights that "[o]f the 250-odd memorials, statues and memorials… only a dozen were not 'dead, white, men'" (Perkins 2017). Further, even though Australia has over sixty-five thousand years of Indigenous history, "Indigenous people are not present" (Perkins 2017) in our national tangible heritage. Those who are against the removal of the statues on heritage grounds "say that doing so is erasing history" (Lowery 2019: 29), but it must be asked: "whose history?" (Lowery 2019: 29) and "what processes should we use to agree on which history we remember?" (Lowery 2019: 29). The current tangible heritage in Australia only seems to remember nearly exclusively those of these 'colonial invaders'. The first statue of an Aboriginal person was only erected in 2006 which is "a life-size bronze likeness of Sir Douglas Nicholls, a Yorta Yorta campaigner… and his wife Lady Gladys Nicholls" (Perkins 2017), therefore the statues that occupy Australia's public spaces only reflect a small fraction of the

nation's history in its tangible heritage. Thus, the arguments put forward by preservationists for statues to remain on the grounds of aesthetics, educations and historic reasons fail to consider the converse effects of these monuments, and the minute fraction of Australia's history that is recognised and reflected in these monuments.

Finally, the statue debate is not necessarily about the physical statues themselves. Instead, these figures are symbols of the lasting social, cultural, and economic effects that these colonial figures have had on Australian society. When considering the statue debate in an Australian context, it is helpful to look at similar situations in both the United Kingdom and other former colonies including South Africa. In a comparison between the statue debates in the UK and South Africa Knudsen and Andersen note that it is not possible to "fight structural racism without challenging visible symbols; however, on the other hand, and importantly, that gesture is far from enough" (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 26). Meaning, that to confront the broader social, political, and economic issues faced by First Nations people as a result of the colonial invasion of Australia, the symbols and figureheads of colonialism must be confronted. Knudsen and Andersen continue to express that "demythologizing whiteness is considered a part of a bigger decolonial struggle" (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 10) and the first step in this is to physically remove 'colonial invaders' from their pedestals and to take down the statues. The act of memorialisation "is always linked to the needs of the present, personal and especially mediated collective memories" (Marschall 2019: 1094), and in the present, these statues have become symbols of the injustice and the lasting effects of colonialism. In an English context, the call for statues of colonial figures to be removed including the controversial statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College at Oxford University aided a call for the broader decolonisation of other aspects of the university. In addition to calling for the "removing [of] colonial iconography in Oxford" (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 22), students called for the removal of "the intangible heritage of Rhodes" (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 22) in the form of trusts and scholarships, and "the need to improve black

and ethnic minority representation in academic staff" (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 22) and the further inclusion of "more non-Western and non-male authors" (Knudsen and Andersen 2018: 22). Therefore, in the English context, the statue debate provided a vehicle for the broader decolonisation of Oxford University to be brought to the table. Ultimately, the statue debate is not only about the statues themselves, rather, these 'colonial invaders' serve as constant reminders of the lasting effects of colonialism and the British invasion of Australia.

In conclusion, the statue debate undeniably should call for the removal of colonial iconography including statues from public spaces, in an Australian context. These statues construct historically inaccurate 'heroic' figures while failing to recognise the violence committed by these 'colonial invaders'. Those calling for the statues to remain on the grounds of aesthetics, educational or historical reasons fail to recognise that colonial iconography only represents two hundred out of more than sixty-five thousand years of Australian history, while it makes up the vast majority of Australia's tangible heritage. Ultimately, this debate is not necessarily about the physical statues, but rather how these statues have become symbolic of the lasting legacy of colonial rule across Australia. The statues, including those of James Cook, must fall.

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