

captain cook | chased a chook

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Captain Cook
Chased a chook
round and round
the history book¹

Captain Cook has been marked again and again as culturally and historically significant. Even mentioning his name risks a set of responses: The Great Navigator, The Original Invader, The Marker of Modern Australia and The Discoverer. One of the challenges to think history ‘experimentally’ was to consider how and why and if we could redeem aspects of the past which have fallen outside what has been monumentalised as historically significant. But equally, how could we make new kinds of interpretative spaces within well circulated and official histories such as those which simply leave Cook as a ‘discoverer’ of Australia? The challenge in attempting to interrupt Cook as only a historical figure is that he already works through replication and chaotic proliferation that solemnly monumentalise him with a fake reason and at the same time popularise him in delirious rhyme. He is the figure represented through statues and ‘discovery sites’ that invent him as a foundational national figure and he is displayed and circulated through banal activities such as Captain Cook cruises and take away shops. As Chris Healy suggests of the multiple experiences of ‘Captain Cook’s Cottage’:

Nevertheless, they have been linked by the name of Captain Cook, a name which refers us not to an actual historical figure but to an enduring icon, a huge network of narratives, images and ceremonies that seek to articulate a common reference for Australian historical culture: in the beginning was Cook.²

The commonality and repetitiveness of Cook may therefore be considered a part of the on-going invention of the 'historical' Cook as an always incomplete effort to install Cook as the 'original' Australian. But perhaps some of the ways we learn Cook that fall outside narrative and outside orders of reason may constitute an affective remnant of an embodied knowing that there was, and is, a 'before Cook'. Those remnants could disrupt the ways in which Cook is understood as national origin and historical figure and let us experience instead the nonsense of Cook, in the present.

How *does* history work? A set response following Foucault and White might be that history is a particular discourse produced through a set of power/knowledge relationships that privilege ideas of development and evolution which has as its indicative form the historical narrative. As an entry point to analysis, particularly a textual one, this is generally helpful but limited in how clearly it lets us see that history also works through people and things to produce a force of knowing that makes itself at home in specific skin. The kind of making at home history that put Chook and Cook together. The children's rhyme is personal and provisional. It changes over time. It lets us experience historical figures in realms such as the cellular and lets us improvise play with a particular immediacy. Here we might understand the Cook rhymes as merely another, more intimate, technology of learning to be 'at home' and so easily familiar with Cook. But perhaps some of the rhymes also go beyond that? There are many chooks to Captain Cook—here are some:

Captain Cook chased a chook
All around Australia
When he got back he got a smack
For being a naughty sailor

Captain Cook chased a chook
All around Australia
He lost his pants in the middle of France
And found them in Tasmania

Captain Cook chased a chook
All around Australia
The king of France
Kicked him in the pants
And made him do a Chinese dance

Captain Cook, the dirty old chook
Went sailing down the river.
He caught his cock on a rock
And ate it off for dinner

Captain Cook chased a bare bum chook
Up the Swanee River
Struck a rock, broke his cock
And crushed his balls to sugar

Captain Cook discovered a chook
He called the chook 'Australia'
It laid an egg, so they said,
And he called the egg 'Tasmania'

Captain Cook the bare bum chook
Went sailing round Australia
And coming back, he let a crack
And thought it was a failure

This is just a small sample of the collection of rhymes about Cook that you can read in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at the Museum of Victoria. Or you could find some of them more easily in *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* by Turner, Factor and Lowenstein.³ The records of the Australian Children's Folklore Collection tell us when these were collected but not how long they have been in circulation. Two are marked as being from the thirties and a smattering from the early sixties but the majority are from the late 1970s, the two hundredth anniversary of Cook's landings on Australian shores. They probably began much earlier and have been adapted with changes in slang overtime. As June Factor says, 'it's generally impossible to date such transient and ever-changing verbal folklore exactly'.⁴ One small example might illustrate this point. The lines 'And coming back, he let a crack. And thought it was a failure.' Crack here might be the 1960s American slang meaning 'have a go' that may have arrived in Australia in the seventies; that is, Cook had a go and thought it was a failure. It might also be crack as in fart, the usage of which dates from the 1300s in England with no official record of ever arriving in Australia except I remember it being used in my primary school, or perhaps it is crack as in a shortened form of cracking a fat meaning to have an erection, an apparently original Australian expression dating from the 1960s. How do we decide which of these fits best with a joke on failure? And what would our decisive linguistic dating produce? A failure of the historical? Further proof that children's rhymes are difficult nonsense? Trouble perhaps? As E.P. Thompson suggests, the 'historian has got to be listening all the time'.⁵ Thompson's constant listening is to hear the irreducible difference of the past but mine is also to hear the da de da de da dee da of Cook who keeps his quiet, white, untouchable face at a modest historical distance. That is, while the sight of Cook might posit Cook in homogenous linear time, the sound of him in rhyme brings him into the embodied present insisting that the past is one part of the present through unreasonable invention.

It is this sound and play that familiarises Cook but also makes him available to excessive use, excessive response, and so to being rendered into a form that is unable to be easily reconciled to the national historical project when he is so immediately heard.

The most recorded of the rhymes is:
Captain Cook chased a chook
Right around Australia
He lost his pants
In the middle of France
And found them in Tasmania

I think this childish rhyme works as both anecdote and sensual catalyst. Approaching Cook through the foolish, sometimes obscene, fantasist rhyme joins me to the desires of other counter historians to disrupt history by their use of anecdotes. As Gallagher and Greenblatt put it:

Outlandish and irregular (anecdotes) held out the best hope for preserving the radical strangeness of the past by gathering heterogenous elements—seemingly ephemeral details, overlooked anomalies, suppressed anachronisms—into an ensemble where ground and figure, ‘history’ and ‘text’ continually shifted.⁶

What is at stake in these efforts is to catch ‘flashes of the real’; things outside the borders of formal history but still knowable although never in a complete way. The flashes of a real that we have in these rhymes connect us simultaneously to Cook and the teaching of Cook as an indivisible event of history. These rhymes have one of the elements identified by Gossman as the kind of anecdote which might ‘challenge the historian to expand and revise established’ forms of a historical situation; that is, these rhymes are ‘excluded from the official history record’.⁷ But in another sense these rhymes are too ephemeral, too purely a result of play to be granted even the status of ‘counter history’. What they do instead is remind us that certain historical figures are always known through small events and that those events become matter of factly lodged in a bodily experience. At the same time, at the level of providing alternative information about Cook, the rhyme suggests Cook might be nonsense. Everyone once learnt that Captain Cook discovered Australia, everyone knows that is nonsense. The real of Indigenous sovereignty makes a nonsense of so much national history making, a nonsense we catch at the corners of our ears in the bouncing childish rhyme. But non-Indigenous Australia knew discovery made perfect sense for a project of forgetting Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous Australia has shown at different moments that Cook’s careful records of uniform Indigenous indifference and opposition can be usefully utilised for their own histories of continuous opposition to white arrival.

What is known of Cook then is usually highly constrained and doubly constructed. In the rhyme, however, he spills out into a barely clad, disorganised figure driven by the force of following and finding. But this following and finding is not activated by the measurement and sustained knowing that is enlightenment science but rather the chasing of the domestic, perhaps, it is implied, headless, chicken. Energy without explanation. The rhyme of an in-between orders suggesting a carnivalesque moment where ‘navigation’ and ‘exploration’ are disordered pursuits of a rhyme without a reason. ‘Naturally’ a Cook rhyme is ordered into nonsense and we know that that order is based upon histories, philosophies and practices of development where the child is produced through constraint and excess. To undo that ‘natural’ ordering of the childish Cook rhyme and translate it into an historical source is to be challenged ourselves in our ways of knowing and writing the past.

If the usual figuring of Cook in his navigational, visiting state is that of the removed figure—the figure wholly produced and understood within a colonial nationalist politic—then these rhymes demand a shift in our proximity. For Meaghan Morris, the embrace of a critical proximity to our objects of study is something required in this contemporary moment of globalisation. I also think it is an important technique when negotiating so-called historical figures that continue to produce contemporary effects in a postcolonial cum settler cum occasionally multicultural culture. Morris also uses the anecdote but hers is a personal anecdote that she sees as ‘an allegory of this “proximity”’. She uses this term not only in the sense of establishing a position of nearness to a problem or an object of study but also in the sense of translatively trying to ‘(address) a mixed audience...’⁸ I think this offers a challenge to how we might tell history where we are not only trying to be ‘got’ by an audience but are attempting to translate the multi-temporal effects of ‘historical’ figures. Bringing Morris together with Gallagher, Greenblatt and Grossman reshapes the ‘anecdote’ as both the marker of what is left out of history and a practice of communicating histories that presumes an inchoate past in a heterogenous present. How can thinking through the past using the anecdotal Cook rhymes become a different style of communicating in the present? How might a kind of breathlessness (the sonic marker of intimacy) be translated onto the written page? You are a mixed readership—how can I shift my proximity to Cook and also to you so you can experience what doing history differently might do?

Let me show you how close I can be to Cook. This is my personal anecdote. I learnt my own version of one of these rhymes in kindergarten. It went:

Captain Cook chased a chook, right around Australia,
He lost his pants in the middle of France
And never came back to find them.

I knew this rhyme when I was six or seven, when the losing of ones pants had a particular hold on me. I had been entrusted with the delicate task of being an underpants monitor. This

meant that when some other child had wet their pants, it was my role to go to the spare underpants drawer in the large kindergarten room and bring them to the relevant teacher under a promise of never letting it be known to the other children who had wet their pants that day. (I am sure therapy will reveal the weeing child as myself but for the moment this is my memory.) When I heard, then, that Cook has lost his pants I knew where to find them. I was really as close to Cook as one could get, delivering under trust his fresh and dry (although certainly not new) underpants. And given that I thought France was an Australian town I always assumed that because of his embarrassment he could never come back here. I didn't learn from the rhyme the suggestion he had been playing with and in France, England's chief colonial rival in the Pacific. And neither did I hear the other oppositional joke that Cook the great navigator blundered clumsily about and even lost something—he who was famous for 'losing' so few of his men.

To me at seven, the rhyme was about an accident. The losing of one's pants, an inextricable part of the unspeakable wetting of pants. By high school it dawned on me that this rhyme might be intended as sexual innuendo—Cook was doing something in France that required taking your pants off beside peeing. But what was sex compared to the exquisite childhood tortures of negotiating bodily functions barely under our control?

I feel, even in the style of telling this tale, something like Bataille's narrator in *Story of Eye*⁹ as I hear a certain preposterous pseudo-scientific style of explaining certain ridiculous pornographic impulses. I am thinking of the woman and her eyes and eggs fetish. And here I am thinking fresh pants and urine and Cook. I am not certain if Morris meant quite this close. Quite this style of anecdote. But rhymes are ways in which we drive into our bodies ways of knowing that stick with a particular kind of exuberance. Captain Cook chased a chook, lost his pants in the middle of France. Think of the plague story contained in ring a ring a rosey, a pocketful of posey and we all fall down dead, laughing and getting up again. Cook chasing a chook, losing his pants in France, us laughing, connecting, knowing all too well what it might be like, to lose your pants—in France! Laughing, anxious, relieved. And there is Cook right next to us, right within us as a memory; our very own Cook. This is where the rhyme releases for me a flash of the real. A flash of the ways we don't know how we know our national, personal Cook. I catch a taste of the schoolyard, some squirming impatience and a desire to laugh hysterically. Laugh so hard I might wet my pants. With Cook.

Foucault once broke into laughter. 'Laughter that shattered ... all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things...'¹⁰ He was responding to one of Borges's fabulist fake definitions and his laughter left him uneasy, filled as he was with a vision of a disorder 'in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in

the dimension, without law or geometry, (a vision of) the heteroclitite'. But this vision of the past as madness, as the release of all possibilities as present without sequence, is also what the 'truly sensational' anecdote, according to Gallagher and Greenblatt, should do. 'By emitting flashes of a horrific outside to any conceivable historical order, puts one beside oneself, momentarily beyond a merely cognitive relation to ones' task.'¹¹ Here Gallagher and Greenblatt seem to appreciate that to find an outside of historical order is to encounter temporality itself and that perhaps any encounter with temporality is with our own writing selves in time.

This reformation of my relation with Cook through an exercise of proximity moves Cook from an all too well known order into an environment that is not entirely explicable. It is excessive, hysterical. It is truly 'sensational' as it posits us in a world where we are once again aware of the senses even if they too are disordered. The Cook rhyme partly through its rhythm, partly through performed proximity, partly through its visceral reason changes how we might know the past and so how it must be written and told. It shakes an order of knowledge and releases the intimate, eccentric and affective. Cook and chook, pants and France.

But history is not just about my relation to my figure of interest; it is also about how I can tell you, show you, perform this experimental historiography cum textuality. So let me now try this tactic of proximity and the power of the rhyme with you. I know nothing about you except that you might be watching a screen or holding a printout of this journal (the true aficionados will be flicking through a hard copy) but let me try the proximity of rhyme to see if that lets us experience the hearing and so the making of academic histories—differently.

You had a look at Captain Cook
Until you came to anecdote
there you lost your cool
said 'that fool'
and completely lost your goat.

Or another:

If knowledge has a kernel
It's in the academic journal
A secret place
A wild space
Where thoughts become external

These are silly, poor efforts to amuse you. Adult to adult, writer to reader the contemporary version of these childish rhymes may only gain the rolling of eyes, the faint squint of furrowed brow. It lacks the incitement that playing with a national icon has, to pull in scatological detail or replace an historical figure with what happens to you for these are deeply

banal rhymes. But perhaps it is this ridiculous effort to try and touch you that might scratch a little way into you experiencing Cook not simply reading him. How to move you to a relation with my rhyme so that you sense something outside of historical order that is vital and visceral in Cook? That knowing Cook might be to know a very silly walk, to laugh hard and to sigh at a bad effort to directly address you. So what I am giving you now is a new experimental strategy in undoing monumental history; take a textual risk—make it rhyme. Let the rhyme with its necessary crude rhythm draw you closer to what you are looking at, let the rhyme slightly change how we always hear the past, how we see what appears in front of us. If Lyotard's cry to undo the grand narratives was 'release difference',¹² mine is 'release the ridiculous'. Find new texts, learn our own capabilities to render experimental forms or to sense anecdotal forms of the past, for history cannot hold them all within its own form. Discover who rhymed before. Bring something back to life that has been buried in the already overdetermined structures of national history making and its politics.

My second claim for these rhymes was that they work as sensual catalysts. Catalyst with its scientific stasis, remaining the same while it causes change in others, may seem a very stationary metaphor for a form that changes its vocabulary and vigour with each taught generation. But these rhymes do change the history around them. These rhymes let us HEAR this past. Captain Cook sounds like this: da de dah da de dah, dah de dah de dah dah. This is a very simple rhythm and it invites clapping or tapping. Tap de tap tap de tap. A whole language teacher might ask you to substitute words, Captain Cook chased a cook, Captain Cook was a crook, Captain Cook was a sook and they might laugh with you at what the changes produced. There is a history here of Cook being a sound and sounds might sharpen certain sorts of Cook sites. Think of the silence of those monuments and Cook always standing alone. Cook as a set of deaf dates staring at us. But also Cook as the original breaker of Indigenous law. The play of Cook as chook or crook giving us some sense of the viral, aural power of Cook to keep on spawning destructive possibilities in a political environment that enables this to happen. Cook's lasting fugue, Cook's constant echo. And perhaps we might understand more why the proliferations of Cook as take away cafes, as convenience stores, as Bunnykins mugs and beer mats and fountains don't necessarily disperse his power when dispersal was how he may first have come to us. If Cook was the site of some of our earliest improvisations, our fiercest play with the crudest and rudest of rhymes we could think then of, how we can disinter those libidinal forces to make up new Cooks that are not about beginnings but about the recognition of the Cooks within and the possibility of reconciliation beyond.

When I first saw the sign out at Kurnell on my way to the Botany Bay (landing place of Captain Cook) which advertised 'Captain Cook's Take Away'—I struggled to hear something.

Nothing. I grimaced. Saying 'oh good grief' wasn't enough. But this state of perturbation only shifted somewhere useful when I chanted *sotto voce* 'Captain Cook ate barbequed chook', 'Captain Cook ate barbequed chook...'

But rhymes are only one way in which Cook became a part of people's lives, only one way in which he is directly experienced as a child. The other is that of formal instruction. A part of the current primary school curriculum in New South Wales is that students will learn about 'Explorers'. The documents on Captain Cook carefully scrunched down to what a third classer might easily learn are titled 'The Discovery of Australia by Captain James Cook in 1770'. In the larger module the seven- and eight-year-old children are set tasks on explorers of Australia. (The exact version of this task may change from school to school.) In 2006 one of their assessment tasks took the following shape:

'Early explorers of Australia with a choice between Hartog, Tasman, Dampier or Cook.' Children must first name the explorer, their date of birth and death if known, their country of birth, background information e.g. family life, childhood, before they became an explorer and provide an illustration. Second, the child must say what their explorer discovered (making sure the events are in order and that you include an illustration of his ship), Third the child must mark the explorers voyage on a world map and finally the child must prepare a 1–2 minute oral presentation about the explorer, using the most important information from the assignment.

I like this task for its utter familiarity—for it making me realise how close it is to much of the work I seem to have been doing but which culminates for the child in a two-minute oral presentation—the performance of mastery, the corporeal display of reason. It reminds me of just how early, with what reward and within what bodily order is this sometime pleasure of getting it right and being wholly approved of for doing so. I am probably writing to a reader who was also a child who got their Cook or his updated equivalent right. We who managed our tongues and our bowels and our emerging graphic skills to stand up properly and speak of Captain Cook. The child is particularly warned to get the order right of what happened but also to include an illustration so that we can practice through our lines of history how far we are away from that and then see the difference before us. The rhymes show us a way of refusing this performance of Cook, of refusing to remain in control or well mannered. Or perhaps the rhymes are made up because we are also made to be controlled and well mannered in our school room delivery; a simple proof of where there is power there must be resistance. Let us now look at three different books that have been used with children at different times describing the landing of Cook.

From *James Cook 1770–1970*, Bicentenary Commemorative Booklet:

The [Aboriginal] children were splashing in the water, or playing at hunting among the bushes and trees. When Cook and his men came ashore, and tried to make friends with them, they were afraid and shy. Coloured beads and mirrors were left near the huts but they did not touch them.¹³

From *Aboriginal Children's History of Australia*, 1977:

Long, long ago Captain Cook sailed to look for a good place to start a little mission. He sailed around the world. He sailed to the nearest place to stop. When he stopped he saw this place and he knew it was a good place to build a mission. After, he got in a little boat and rowed to the shore. When he got out of the boat he walked towards the beach. He went further and further in the bush. Suddenly a spear came swooping through the bush and nearly got him. So Captain Cook ran back. He was very frightened of us. It was black Aboriginals coming towards him with spears, sharp pointed spears. Then Captain Cook went rowing back to his ship.¹⁴

From *Voyage with Captain Cook*, 1985:

The children [that is Malcolm and Alex who have gone on this adventure with Captain Cook] watched a few of the sailors fishing with lines over the side of the ship. Large sting rays were caught and cooked for food. The sailors on land tried to talk to the dark skinned people but they ran off into the bush. They didn't seem very happy about the ship being there.¹⁵

There is no easy line of development here that might suggest that the story of Cook has been settled once and for all. It is the reaction and presence of Indigenous Australians that gives all these extracts their 'hook', their point of action. In the first the Indigenous children are afraid, in the second the Indigenous adults force Cook back and in the third the 'dark skinned people' ran off not looking happy. In the most recent book 'the children' are actually on the trip with Captain Cook. In 'The Discovery of Australia by Captain James Cook in 1770; Notes for third graders' the arrival is managed thus: 'the Captain and his crew saw the aboriginal people [in bold] fishing on the shores. We don't know if the aboriginal people had seen ships and white men before or what they thought about these strange visitors to their land.' So Cook discovered, visited, was repelled, was a stranger to *their* land, worried, was refused communication, was frightened and failed in his efforts to offer gifts. Together these become something of the cacophony of past making but they come alongside the visceral, bodily training to pronounce upon Cook, to have only one story delivered in two minutes where we won't smell or taste Cook. The poop and pee of Cook is left to the rhymes as is the

smacking and running and loss of pants. The chookyness of Cook calls us, in its affective, animal, evocation to fail at history and to flounce into a fictocritical world where the madness of Cook can be seen. The madness that was the real of Cook, the madness that claimed a continent already occupied, the madness that teaches that still. What is outside these formations, these instructions, these monuments, these foundational efforts, is the usually unseen intimacies where we know Cook as a plaything, a figure of rhyme we have shaped to exorcise our childish taboos.

The rhyme as anecdote combined with the anecdote as a strategy of connection challenges both how we know the past and how we write a past. The particular rhymes of Cook remind us of the bodily order inscribed in history making and of the distance from our historical subject that comes with that order that will need to be challenged if we are to make histories that 'change the world'.¹⁶

What could we do as a nation, as experimental historians, if we went on releasing the ridiculous amid the madness? The vision of Captain Cook chasing a chook round and round the history book is as clear an image as I would wish for of the task of showing the relationship between making pasts through the anecdotal and the monumental. One a chased chook and the other, a certain kind of, closed book.

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1. All the rhymes that are referred to within this article have come from the Museum Victoria Children's Folklore Collection which includes several indexed boxes of children's rhymes. Thanks to Carla Pascoe for her assistance in accessing this resource.
 2. Chris Healy, 'In the Beginning was Captain Cook', *Australian Humanities Review*, <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/ahr/archive/issue-March-1997/healy.html>; see also Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997.
 3. Ian Turner, June Factor and Wendy Lowenstein, *Cinderella Dressed in Yella*, Heineman Educational Australia, Melbourne, 1978. Also see June Factor, *Childhood and Children's Culture*, Australian Children's Television Foundation, North Melbourne, 1985 and Kate Darian-Smith and June Factor (eds), *Child's Play: Dorothy Howard and the Folklore of Australian Children*, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, 2005.

4. Personal communication, 25 November 2003.
5. As quoted by Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, 'Counterhistory and the Anecdote', in *Practicing New Historicism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000, p. 54. Although direct quotes are duly noted, this entire volume is owed a much greater debt for educating me in what can be done within that wandering heading 'New Historicism'. There are some wonderful essays in this book that challenge us to think again and again about the past.
6. Gallagher and Greenblatt, p. 51.
7. Lionel Grossman, 'Anecdote and History' in *History and Theory* 42 (May 2003), p. 168.
8. Meaghan Morris, *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*, Sage Publications, London, 2006, p. 5.
9. Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1982 [1928].
10. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Random House, New York, 1973, p. xv. Gallagher and Greenblatt also use this anecdote for their discussion, p. 71.
11. Gallagher and Greenblatt, pp. 72–3.
12. Jean Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984.
13. *Captain Cook Bicentenary Commemorative Booklet*. V.C.N. Blight, Government Printer, NSW, 1970. This booklet was 'Presented by the Government of New South Wales on the occasion of the Bi-Centenary Celebrations of Captain James Cook's first landing on the east coast of Australia'. This is one of two booklets widely distributed in 1970 aimed, it would appear, at children; this one at primary school age and the other at upper primary or high school.
14. *An Aboriginal Children's History of Australia*, written and illustrated by Australia's Aboriginal children, Rigby, Adelaide, 1977, p. 7.
15. Des Hastings and Jill Carpenter, *Voyage with Captain Cook*, The Book I'm In, Lindfield, 1985, p. 18.
16. Greg Denning, *Performances*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996.