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'A Matter of History': Or What to do With an Empty Plinth

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I am a Wiradjuri man. My family is from Mudgee but I grew up in Darkinjung Country. I'm not a historian; I'm more of a history communicator. I'm a librarian and have worked in museums, archives and libraries for over a decade. I currently work at the Australian Museum as a First Nations public programmer and at the University of Sydney, both of which are on Gadigal country. I'd like to preface my remarks by saying that the views expressed here are my own and do not reflect either of my employers. In saying that, part of the work me and many First Nations people in museums or libraries engage in is often about getting visitors to memory institutions to interrogate public memory: in regards to history, what stories do they hear? Who tells these stories? What stories, and more importantly, *whose* voices are missing or disregarded? Whose voices and what stories are being privileged over them, and why?¹

Our hope is to get visitors to be constructively critical about public memory. But also to see how whiteness and the patriarchy can inform what museums preserve and how exhibitions are constructed and perceived. Part of this is also trying to get visitors to engage with brutal histories and uncomfortable facts. It is important to understand that those past injustices are connected to the injustices of now and that people do not live outside of history. We reside in its legacy and we need to reckon with brutal history so we can better understand the present and change it to be more just. However, this is often difficult.

I was recently involved in a museum program for university students where we discussed the Stolen Generations and intergenerational trauma. After the program a few students anonymously commented on their feedback forms that they felt like they were being reprimanded and made to feel bad for being white. I found this to be an odd response. We never assigned blame. We were just discussing a reality – an issue that affects many First Nations people. But some of these students chose to disengage because what we were talking about made them feel uncomfortable. I think this is ever-present in discussions around colonial statues. There's often a defensiveness. People feel the need to defend these statues, to defend inanimate objects. I believe this has less to do with history and more to do with an avoidance of the uncomfortable aspects of history.

I witnessed this in the last week. John Mackenzie, a Newcastle councillor, said he wanted to remove two plaques on the Captain Cook Memorial Fountain in Civic Park commemorating

his 'discovery of the East Coast of Australia'. He was going to put a motion up to remove them as they were historically inaccurate. This was met with a lot of social media outrage. Many said that the removal of this erased history. They did not understand or deliberately dismissed how this plaque itself erases history – how the plaque and the monument disregard more than 60,000 years of history, especially Awakbakal history in Newcastle. Or how the celebration of this event and this man hides the pain that they've caused, and still cause, and obfuscates the ongoing injustice that stems from this event. Or how often these monuments are part of privileging certain types of individuals while excluding many people, especially First Nations women, from the official national narrative.

I feel that many of these people aren't really defending history. These sort of discussions are ideologically driven. This is why many people even have trouble articulating why certain anniversaries or statues are important. For example, former Nationals deputy leader Bridget McKenzie, in attempting to explain why the country celebrates Australia Day on 26 January, said it was because it was the day James Cook came to these shores. The actual date was 29 April. Similarly, people will tell me that statues of James Cook need to be protected because he was a great man. But they can't tell me anything about James Cook besides the fact that he came to Australia on a ship called the Endeavour.

Another argument against the removal of statues is often that these statues can help tell the dark side of this country, the dark history of men like Cook, Macquarie and Brisbane. As they say, you can't change history but you can certainly learn from it. However, for all the statues and things named after Governor Macquarie, very few people are aware of his involvement in events such as the 1816 Appin Massacre. Colonial statues rarely do anything but glorify colonial figures and their actions, including the genocide of First Nations people. They have limited capacity for nuance in many cases. They were not built to be conversation starters or to be cautionary tales of white supremacy. In fact they do the opposite. They were built to solicit admiration, to celebrate colonisation and colonisers in spite of the suffering we First Nations people have experienced and continue to experience.

Many people defend statues, I believe, because they do not want to admit both the reality that Australia is built on injustice, and their potential complicity with this injustice. This could tarnish the White Australian self-image of innocence, and bring up feelings of guilt, and of course we do not want to feel guilt – it's uncomfortable. But avoiding truth and defending certain narratives to avoid it is in my opinion the antithesis of what history should achieve. There's that old saying: 'those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it'. Nevertheless, there are many non-indigenous Australians who do not want to learn from history because they do not want the guilt associated with that knowledge.

The defence of monuments to colonialism also begs the question: 'What do we as a society value?' What do we think needs to be protected and preserved? Just as the conversation on public monuments got reignited, Rio Tinto destroyed a 46,000 year-old cultural site in Western Australia, near the Juukan Gorge. Many commentators who jumped to the defence of statues of Cook were silent when it came to this outrageous act. This makes their apparent motivation of defending history feel hollow. This site and many sites like it contain so much more heritage and knowledge than any statue of Cook would ever be capable of imparting.

Recent images in the media of police surrounding the statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park during a small Black Lives Matter demonstration in Sydney, Gadigal country, were cruelly ironic. Throughout my life I've never seen this type of police presence at a First Nations sacred site. We were shouting: 'Black Lives Matter'. In response the state tells us that statues need protecting. I think it's important to ask questions about what matters to us. For me, community matters, not just individuals. And for me what matters are actions based on values rather than symbols or figures that we think embody them.

That leads us to what's next. What to do with an empty plinth if the statue is removed? I think it's a great opportunity to create space for more truth telling about this country. To figure out how we got here, how

talking about how different structures, different systems of power have come from this legacy of invasion. What does that legacy mean? At the same time we should also be restoring places, learning from country. There are lots of sites that need protecting. But also a lot of monuments that occupy stolen land. It would be great to have more opportunities to learn about that stolen land, to learn about the people who have a millennia of connection to our country. And in ways that may not just be monuments; in ways that we can look to country to learn from, learn about history, look to place, to learn about history without the need of statues.

I think we need to dismantle the system that the statues represent rather than just the statues themselves. At the end of the day, what the Black Lives Matter movement is really talking about, especially in Australia, is the need to overhaul the criminal (in)justice system. Many colonial statues are symbols of injustice. Removing them can be a symbolic way of saying that we want to step towards justice. But it can't just be the removal of the statue in and of itself. The goal is to make a more just society. And this is one of the first steps that we can do. So I'm going to finish on this quote from Reuben Rose-Redwood and Wil Patrick.² 'Whether colonial statues must fall or remain is not a matter of history alone, it is part of the process of the reckoning with the ongoing injustices of settler colonialism in the present.' I think that's very much what this is about. It's reckoning with settler colonialism and all the ways it manifests.

Endnotes

1. This commentary is an edited transcript of a talk which I gave at a History Council of NSW webinar on the statue wars on 20 July 2020.
2. Ruben Rose-Redwood and Wil Patrick, 'Why activists are vandalizing statues to colonialism', *The Conversation*, 18 March 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-activists-are-vandalizing-statues-to-colonialism-129750>, accessed 27 Aug 2020.