

## Cloak

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The title of the project, *Cook's New Clothes*, immediately calls to mind the fable of the 'Emperor's New Clothes'. Penned in 1837 by Hans Christian Andersen, it is the story of an emperor so obsessed with fine clothing that he is hoodwinked by two weavers into wearing nothing, that is, an invisible cloak which is no more than a confidence trick. The fable is commonly invoked as a shorthand for the crowd mentality that can be involved in collective beliefs, but it also contains another moral subtext. A dark sort of justice is secreted in the story, as the Emperor is ritualistically punished for committing the sin of vanity. Far from a figure of grandeur, we are encouraged to see him as blubbering and grotesque, denuded by the clever weavers who escape from the scene triumphant. Andersen himself was steeped in Danish Protestantism, and the story performs the premium this theology places on depth. A metaphysics of depth maintains that the truth of things lies not in clothing nor coverings of any kind, but in the biological self beneath them.<sup>1</sup> It is one which positions the individual body as the unmediated point of access to a Christian God, a move which simultaneously strips social ritual of its spiritual power.

Yet a denuded Cook is nowhere to be seen and the project turns on what is unmistakably a ritual. Here I focus on the first of these in which I also participated, the *Procession for Tupaia* which travelled from the National Maritime Museum in London to the River Thames on 22nd September 2018. Building on Vogt's rich ethnographic account in Chapter Ten, I reflect here in more detail on what Carroll calls 'the central object of *Cook's New Clothes*' which is also the centrepiece of this procession. It is a cloak which takes the design of an eighteenth-century British naval uniform—replete with a string of golden buttons—but this design is subverted by the material from which it is made, namely, a luxuriant dingo fur sourced from the Pacific (see Fig. X).<sup>2</sup>

We start the procession from Queen's House, a smaller building adjacent to the Museum. Having been prevented from taking the path which runs straight from this building down to the water, Carroll and her collaborators direct us there by an appropriately circuitous route, along traffic-filled roads and tourist-lined walkways. Onlookers pause in their tracks to consider us quizzically, no doubt presenting as we do a curious scene, with our luminous battle flags aloft and the cacophonous dirge coming from upcycled instruments. The cloak is deep in the belly of this procession. 'To return to a time, to proceed to the boat...trying to give back what was stolen',

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<sup>1</sup> For a further elaboration of depth metaphysics and its place in Christian theology see Dumont (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Fig. X being an image of the cloak?

Carroll's voice trails over its image in the film thereof, shrink-wrapped in plastic and suspended from a pole like prey from a hunt.<sup>3</sup> Alongside this central object the procession also contains a secondary object, indeed a second cloak which travels closer to the front. Laid on a stretcher carried by two women who wear the impassive expressions of undertakers, this second cloak looks rather like a sheepskin—although in place of wool it is fashioned from thin strips of white and neon plastic (see Fig. X).<sup>4</sup> Once we have all arrived at the dock a catamaran canoe out in the river is given the signal to approach. Its conjoining platform is embroidered with colourful textiles and chalk, and with great deliberation Carroll passes the first cloak from the dock to this platform, where it is received in the outstretched arms of dancer Kiril Burlov. Burlov then departs the canoe while the cloak remains, surrounded by offerings of fruit. As the crew gradually dig the boat away from the shore in a long steady arc, Burlov is ceremonially dressed in the second cloak, and with this leads us all on a merry dance back to the Museum.

We learn that the dingo cloak is intended as a gift for Tupaia. To reiterate, Tupaia was a Ra'iatean priest who boarded the *Endeavour* in Tahiti. Despite being of indisputable importance to the Pacific leg of its journey—contributing essential skills of navigation and translation—after his premature death in the Dutch East Indies he was not honoured with a funeral, and this neglect has continued into the contemporary commemoration of the voyage. Vogt elaborates beautifully on the ritual qualities of the procession, but it is worth adding that Carroll imagined this as a particular kind of ritual—half protest, half funerary rite. Holding a belated funeral for Tupaia is to protest his absence in the memory of the *Endeavour*, but is also seeks to redress this historical wrong, or as Vogt says, 'to mourn an absence not by filling it but by processing it through collective enactment'. In considering the procession as a funerary rite the cloak takes on a particular symbolic resonance. We know from the diaries of Joseph Banks that covering was an important part of Pacific mortuary practices at the time of Tupaia's death. He notes with curiosity how islanders would assiduously cover their dead with what appeared to be 'fine cloth'. For the Maori in particular, dingo fur would have been a rare and high status fabric, the finest of cloths, and to present Tupaia's dead body with a dingo skin cloak, is to honour him by syncretizing Pacific idioms two hundred and fifty years after the fact.

Funerary rites are encompassed within a broader category of ritual known as 'rites of passage'. These rites of passage (among which we can also include weddings, childbirth, and initiations) minister significant social transitions in the lives of their protagonists. They do this by

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etfhJXsvwTE> (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Insert/reference to image of second cloak?

playing on the distinctions between social and biological life and death. An initiation rite, for instance, puts the initiand through a period of social death, i.e. one in which they become symbolically invisible to the community, which then paves the way for their social rebirth as an initiated person. A funerary rite does the opposite. In the wake of the protagonist's biological death, it inaugurates their new social life as a figure of memory, who then plays a continuing role in living relationships. To hold a belated funeral for Tupaia is to retrospectively honour him, but it is also to hope for the beginning of his new social life, in which he plays a more significant role in contemporary relationships. In the context of decolonisation Tupaia is also a metonym for countless others subject to this kind of erasure. While it is a commonplace that the period of European expansion was one of extreme physical violence, less frequently described are its practices of extreme symbolic violence. The systematic destruction and plunder of treasured ritual objects was performed not only to smooth the process of Christian missionizing, but in a deeper sense to strip these communities of their spiritual resources. 'To return to a time, to proceed to the boat...trying to give back what was stolen'. The *Procession for Tupaia* obliquely confronts this history of symbolic violence—a history in which European museology is impossibly implicated—and the enduring social death it imposed on its victims.

There is a scene in the recent *Black Panther* blockbuster, which similarly speaks to this history.<sup>5</sup> N'Jadaka, a descendant of the mythical African kingdom of Wakanda, is seen standing in a thinly-disguised British Museum.<sup>6</sup> He is gazing at a series of African masks staring out from a glass box, as a security guard stands silently by. Shortly he is approached by a well-meaning museum employee who gladly furnishes him with details of their provenance. To this detached academic description N'Jadaka responds with a cool political lesson on the coercive methods through which many of these objects were acquired, before smashing the glass and seizing the valuable Wakandan axe that he and his co-conspirators had come for. The key moment though, is when, having successfully completed the heist, he also takes one of these masks, not for its re-sale value but just because he is 'feeling it'. We then see him wearing this mask in a subsequent scene. N'Jadaka is a morally ambiguous character who ends up being sacrificed towards the end of the film, but this seizure of the mask conveys something of the spiritual power invested in these objects—a power not reducible to their exchange value—or as it would be called in the Pacific, 'mana'.

Rites of passage conclude with symbolic gestures of incorporation, marking the

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<sup>5</sup> Coogler (2018).

<sup>6</sup> In the film it is called 'The Museum of Great Britain'.

sanctification of their protagonists by the ritual. These frequently entail forms of sartorial display and ornament. Masks, cloaks, headdresses, feathers, beads slung round the neck and hair woven with string, are just some of the things that re-incorporated persons might be adorned with.<sup>7</sup> The final rite of entry into the ancient German secret society of Beserkers for instance, involved the ritual donning of a wolf-skin, signalling the fact that the ritual had conferred upon the wearer some of the spiritual properties of the wolf.<sup>8</sup> So it is to some degree with the dingo. To be cloaked in dingo skin is to take on its powers of protection. In Tupaia's time dingos would have been common hunting partners and guard dogs, perhaps even living blankets on colder nights—and these properties are conferred through contact with the fur. Indeed there are still old Australian fables about the capacity of dingo hair to heal the sick. Covering Tupaia's abandoned body with dingo fur simultaneously sanctifies him with its protective capacities, rescuing him at last from the naked horror of social death. It seemed appropriate that throughout the procession it never stopped raining. Covering with water is another method of incorporation, and London's grey sky played its part with a timely baptism.

The title of the larger project is however *Cook's New Clothes*, not Tupaia's. It actively interpellates Cook and the regime of settler colonialism that the *Endeavour* opened up. Yet despite this title Cook is not being repositioned as the Emperor of Andersen's tale. He is not ritualistically humiliated, left naked and shuddering on the embankment. Instead Cook, delicately presented by the blanched figure of Kiril Burlov, is dressed in a cloak of his own, the plastic sheepskin that links him to some of the material legacies of the modernising process, namely the plastic waste that now gathers on the shores of these islands. With this too Carroll is referencing a Pacific idiom, one holding that it is cloth which weaves together social relationships. This emphasis on cloth, one that Carroll and her collaborators extend through the concept of sartorial cosmopolitanism, considers surfaces to be meaningful. In contrast to the Christian metaphysics of depth it is a metaphysics of surfaces inspired by different cosmological precepts. When the procession was re-enacted in Plymouth with the cloak removed from its seal, we hear that the participants started spontaneously howling like dingoes. Whether consciously or not, some of the properties of the animal had been transferred. This is perhaps what a bold museopiracy can achieve. Inhabiting these institutions piratically rather than submitting to their deadly bureaucracies, we might all find a howl—a noise somewhere between joy and pain—rising up in our throats.

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<sup>7</sup> This is a vast literature but see Eliade (1958), Turner (1967), and Van Gennep (1977) for some of its key contributions.

<sup>8</sup> Eliade (1958, 83).

## References

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