



Mana Moana in the UK's year of  
Captain Cook

A conversation

by Ahilapalapa Rands, Jo Walsh

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*This year is the 250th anniversary of Captain Cook's departure from Plymouth in the UK into Moana-Nui-A-Kiwa, the Pacific, announcing the first foot fall of a European presence there. For many, this moment signifies the beginning of colonisation in Pacific waters. But in the UK, significant exhibitions and programs are taking place to mark, and often celebrate, this historical moment.*

*London-based artist Ahilapalapa Rands and cultural producer Jo Walsh have been, in their own respects, organising ways to interrupt the major narratives in the telling of Captain Cook's history, his legacy, and how he's represented and instrumentalised through history. In the following conversation which took place in London in August 2018, they talk about two exhibitions. The first is Tūhuratanga – Voyage of Discovery at the British Library, produced by Jo and featuring the photography of Crystal Te Moananui-Squares. The second is The Oceanic Reading Room project which Ahilapalapa developed for an exhibition in Whitby, Yorkshire. The conversation is also framed by their individual experiences of working with the British Library in developing content (Jo) and participating in public programme events (Ahi) of their exhibition James Cook: The Voyages.*

AHILAPALAPA RANDS      Shall we start with some *whakapapa*  
(geneology)? *Nō whea koe Jo?* (Where are you from?)

JO WALSH      *Kia ora*

(Thanks)

*Ko Pūtahi tōku maunga*

(Pūtahi is my Mountain)

*Ko Wairoro tōku awa*

(Wairoro is my River)

*Ko Ngātokimatawhaorua tōku waka*

(Ngātokimatawhaorua is my Canoe)

*Ko Ngāpuhi tōku iwi*

(Ngāpuhi is my Tribe)

*Ko Ngati Whakaeke tōku hapū*

(Ngati Whakaeke is my Subtribe)

*Ko Te Kotahitanga tōku marae*

(Te Kotahitanga is my Ancestral House)

*Ko Jo Walsh tōku ingoa*

(My name is Jo Walsh)

*No whea koe Ahilapalapa?* (Where are you from Ahilapalapa?)

AR      *He uri ahau o Moana nui a kiwa.*

(I am a descendant of Oceania.)

*Ki te taha o tōku Māma, ko Hawai'i, ko Whiti, ko Hāmoa, ko*

*Tongarewa, ko Kōtirana ōku Ūkaipō*

(Through my Mother, Hawai'i, Fiji, Sāmoa, Tongarewa and  
Scotland are my homelands)

*Ki te taha o tōku Pāpa, he pākehā ahau nō Īreni, nō Ingarangi hoki*

(Through my Father I am Pākehā (New Zealander of European  
descent), originally from Ireland and England)

*I tīpu ake au kei te tai tokerau, no reira kei te mihi ki ngā tangata  
whenua o Matapōuri, Te Whānau o Rangiwhakaahu.*

(I grew up in the east coast of Aotearoa (New Zealand) therefore I  
acknowledge the tribe Te Whānau o Rangiwhakaahu and give my  
thanks to them.)

*Ko Ahilapalapa Rands tōku ingoa*

(My name is Ahilapalapa Rands)



*James Cook: The Voyages*, installation view, British Library, 2018. Image courtesy of the British Library.



*James Cook: The Voyages*, installation view, British Library, 2018. Image courtesy of the British Library.



*James Cook: The Voyages*, installation view, British Library, 2018. Image courtesy of the British Library.



Cook's Chart of New Zealand, British Library Board. From *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018.



Dancing Girl and Chief Mourner by Tupaia, British Library Board. From *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018.

AR What brings us into this conversation are recent events we've been a part of while both working in London.

JW It's been a challenging, emotional ride working with institutions in the UK on events marking the 250th anniversary. It's difficult bringing our Pacific cultures to institutions for the first time because many of the stakeholders within them don't know who we are, where we've come from, and that we exist. The projects that we've been working on are trying to influence how we are perceived today, and that's been a priority for us. To have people view *Tāngata o Moana nui a kiwa* - (the people of Oceania), as people who are living, breathing and contributing to society. Not just some far away idea of a people that exists to create a backdrop for a British historical narrative.

AR                    We could describe for people back home, and people who aren't in London what *James Cook: The Voyages* has been like because *that* has been the first of three major institutional shows that are scheduled in London this year. Following this, the National Maritime Museum is launching the *Pacific Encounters Gallery* in September and the Royal Academy's blockbuster *Oceania* exhibition opens around the same time.

JW                    A major part of the items in the exhibition - historical writing and documents, illustrations of cartography, anthropological pictures, diaries and journals that come from Cook's three journeys through the Pacific - are already held in the British Library collection. The rest is externally-sourced content including excerpts of Lala Roles' film *Tupaia*, material from the interviews she did as well as borrowed items from collections such as Cambridge, the Royal Collections, the Natural History Museum and a few others including the National Portrait Gallery in London.

AR                    The exhibition, curated by Laura Walker and William Frame, is laid out as a series of rooms divided by subtle changes in wall colour: pastel blues and purples for rooms associated with either of the three voyages and a dark brown for rooms associated with England. What's interesting for me is that one of the first entry points is going through the 'Enlightenment' room, which sets out to frame the worldviews of England and Europe at the time of Cook's voyages. This is important as these were the driving forces behind imperialism, colonialism and this empirical arms race emanating from Europe and spreading across the rest of world, ultimately driving the desire to explore the Pacific in the first place. I appreciate that as the unintended entry point- enabling us to do a 'reverse anthropological' study on European culture at that point in history. The language used throughout the exhibit feels very careful to me. After 250 years of active propaganda backing white supremacy and this idea that colonisation in the name of civilisation and progress is inevitable, we now see language like "this is European science" or "this is from a European perspective" or "artifacts held in this collection are not



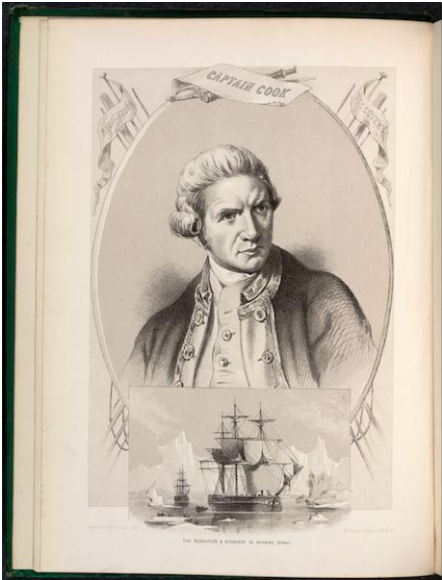
neutral in their point of view”<sup>[01]</sup> which I appreciate, but I also don’t think is enough to counter all of the misinformation and miseducation that we’ve been subject to globally.



David Attenborough in the exhibition *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018. Image courtesy of the British Library.



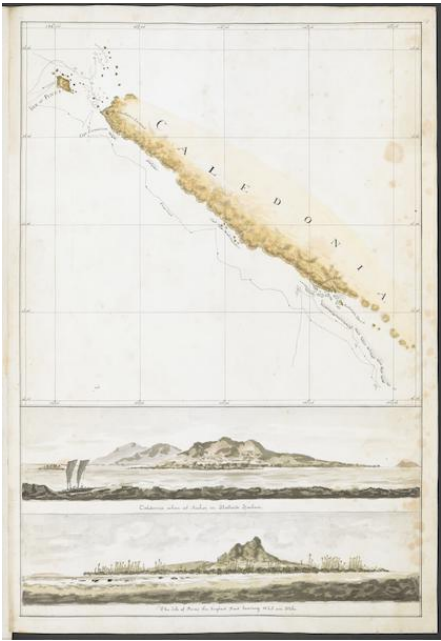
Banks and a Maori by Tupaia, British Library Board. From *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018.



Portrait of Captain James Cook (1728-79), British Library Board. *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018.



*James Cook: The Voyages*, installation view, British Library, 2018. Image courtesy of the British Library.



View of Balade Harbour, New Caledonia by William Hodges, 1774, British Library Board. From *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018.



Mouth parts of a squid, specimen from first voyage, Royal College of Surgeons. From *James Cook: The Voyages*, British Library, 2018.

JW                      A trend I’ve encountered in certain institutions is the lack of consultation when they are looking at another culture from within their own structures. Either that, or the process

comes far too late to bear any meaningful influence in the way that things are put together. I don't feel like the British Library did any real consultation that would affect the way they created the exhibition because they left it as an afterthought.

AR                    We saw the results of this play out with the public programming that accompanied the exhibit. The opening event featured Sir David Attenborough as keynote speaker and the whole time I'm thinking 'don't let me down David, don't let me down' and then there's this line about Cook "he was a great navigator, a great astronomer, and, I think, a great man" and you can feel the whole (white) audience breathe a sigh of relief, like 'ok this part of British History we don't have to feel bad about'. Then he follows with "there was violence on both sides" and it's like 'wow David, wow.'

The various panel discussions organised by the British Library acted as a testament to the mentality that birthed and maintained a figure like Captain Cook. The 'Why was Captain Cook killed?' panel was bizarre (he was notoriously killed by Hawaiians in Hawai'i). While the discussion dealt with this complicated, fascinating moment of our shared histories, it featured and was chaired by only British anthropologists so all substance was taken from it. This is a *distinctly nuanced Hawaiian* event and yet the British Library still decides to hold a conversation like that without including voices from the Pacific.

JW                    Through these experiences I now also know that crediting and asserting authority and the whakapapa to the source of knowledge is incredibly important to any of our practices going forward. Inside that *kōrero* (discussion) about Hawai'i and James Cook, one of the speakers stated that she'd been studying Hawai'i for 30 years, yet she was unable to pronounce any of the Hawaiian words correctly. For me the center of someone's culture and knowledge comes from the language.

AR                    Those moments are frustrating but also harmful because it does support the idea that you can speak on behalf of

people, and there is a long legacy of the harm it causes on the people that are being spoken on behalf of.

## Tūhuratanga – Voyage of Discovery at The British Library, London - Jo Walsh and Crystal Te Moananui-Squares

AR                    *Tūhuratanga* is a beautiful example of how you can work from outside and inside a big institution to create agency for the *taonga* (ancestral belongings) that are held inside it, and for people that are related to the *taonga*. Can you talk about how the project came to be?

JW                    Through extensive work in community consultation carried out with the National Maritime in the development of the *Pacific Encounters Gallery*, I was introduced to the British Library to help them bring together articles from Pacific people for their online media platform. This led to the project with the Learning and Education team to produce a photography exhibition that responded to *James Cook: The Voyages*. I had been following Crystal for a while, and her work with our Māori communities, particularly the *Kōhunga Reo* (Māori early childhood centre) here in the UK and was excited about the prospect of working with her on a project that would document this particular moment in time in London, through her thoughtful eye.





Apolonia and Luka, Grandparents, from Wallis and Futuna, photographed at their leaving party, after spending four years in the UK. They returned to Wallis and Futuna to fulfil the custom of taking home their bones. © Crystal Te Moananui-Squares, 2018.



Jerome, cultural practitioner & artist, Māori / Ngāti Maniapoto ki Raukawa, Ngāti Kahungunu, Aotearoa (New Zealand) with Taonga Pūoro: Māori musical instruments that take their sounds from nature and are connected to spiritual practices and oral histories. © Crystal Te Moananui-Squares, 2018.



Hanalee, human & performing artist, Mangaia, Rarotonga, Samoa and Aotearoa (New Zealand). Hanalee is a new-generation, mixed-race Pacific Islander. © Crystal Te Moananui-Squares, 2018.

AR                      What were your motivations for the project and what form has it taken?

JW                      Our motivation came from who we are today, how amazing *Tāngata o Moana Nui a Kiwa* (People of Oceania) are, everyone's very different yet we can all stand shoulder to shoulder in relation to that diversity. Raising the exposure of voices from the Pacific and having a platform here in the UK, particularly during this period of time, was important to Crystal and I.

The British Library is massive. In the centre of the building stands 'The King's Library', a tower of books that belonged to King George III. Our exhibition space looks over this collection which was initially in the receiving library of King George III, so it's highly likely that the reception of James Cook and his presentation to the King of the taonga collected during his voyage, took place in that library *in front of those books*.

*Tūhuratanga* is the first independently commissioned photography exhibition with the learning department of the British Library in over 15 years so we feel very privileged to be a part of that.

Initially we were asked to respond directly to the *James Cook: The Voyages* exhibition. We worked with Pacific communities here during workshops, and just generally having a chat with people. Through this dialogue, we found a nice thread that would respond to the main exhibition by prioritising relationships between contemporary Pacific people and the objects and *taonga* contained within the exhibition rather than taking Captain Cook's voyages as a theme. Starting from this relationship we decided to take the route of a series of portraits seeing as we, contemporary people of the Pacific Ocean, are the most relevant response to *James Cook: The Voyages*. Specific objects or *taonga* from the exhibit were selected by Crystal and I as *kaupapa* (foundation) to which we associated the people photographed to capture that essence in the portraits.



"James Cook named Niue, where we are from, the Savage Isles - we like the idea of calling our portrait Savage Smiles." Jess, August, Justeen, Grayson & Gavin Fanau (Family) from Niue, Scotland & Aotearoa (New Zealand). © Crystal Te Moananui-Squares, 2018.



Crystal Te Moananui-Squares, *Tūhuratanga – Voyage of Discovery* at The British Library, London, 2018. Produced by Jo Walsh. Image courtesy of the artist.

AR I went to have a look yesterday, finally! I like how process-based this project has been. It's important that each portrait and each person involved is in direct relationship to one of the artifacts in the exhibition. It throws light onto something we already know is true - that we are always linked to these things. It's placing *taonga* and *tangata* (people) in a *kōrero* (dialogue), providing context, inviting you as the viewer to dive in and think about how they are in relationship to one another. The process was

as important as the end result. It was about *kōrero*, it was about *wānanga* (discursive gatherings), it was about creating spaces for Pacific people to come together and discuss and reflect what *James Cook: The Voyages* means. Those spaces are exactly the kind that we need to be creating, especially in the UK.

The series of portraits stretches along the walkway towards the members room and each one portrays either a single or a group of people of the Pacific. There's this beautiful ordinariness to everybody, rejecting the practice of Pacific people being used as objects. When you go into the British Library there's all sorts of historical, anthropological drawings of Pacific people that are displayed at the moment with no context around them so they are totally exoticised objects. This exhibition breaks that apart however because it consists of people self-actualising in whatever way they want to be represented. That was refreshing to see.

JW                      It's also useful for these institutions to learn about how we stand with our ancestors and how our ancestors are us, and how we are the embodiment of our *taonga* and how the *taonga* is us. Through things like these portraits it becomes very obvious that art makes it easier to have those conversations than to say or explain what that is.

## The Oceanic Reading Room at the Whitby Library - Ahilapalapa Rands

JW                      What is *The Oceanic Reading Room* and where is the project located?

AR                      *The Oceanic Reading Room* is an artist commission housed at the community library of Whitby. This is a beautiful coastal town built up on cliffs with a winding river cutting through its middle and opening into the North Sea. It's famous for a few things. Bram Stoker set his novel *Dracula* (1897) there: "In a storm a ship crashes into the cliffs and there are sightings of a large black

dog running up the 199 steps toward the old abby...” It also has a long history being part of the whaling industry and is where Cook did his apprenticeship as a seaman. Whitby is currently going through an identity revitalisation, leveraging this history and connection to Cook as a marker of what this town is, restoring a monument to him and commissioning a large floating museum which is a lifesize replica of the *Endeavor*, the first vessel Cook took to the Pacific.

It’s an interesting place but I found it hard to say yes to this project. I was invited to create an exhibition which would open during the Captain Cook Festival. The way the council was facilitating and framing the wider festival was completely celebratory - this man is a hero. So I felt really, really conflicted about it. Do we engage, should I bring our people and our stories into this space that’s inherently unsafe because it isn’t including or acknowledging our histories and realities in any other space except my work, and can my work hold that? Eventually I decided I would because the idea of the festival rolling on without our voices irked me.

JW                      Where did the idea for this project come from?

AR                      It’s a little bit reactionary.

The organisation that invited me, Invisible Dust fosters collaboration between artists and scientists. On board the *Endeavor*, there were artists and scientists and there was this collaboration happening as they were sailing around collecting over 30,000 specimens and making biological drawings. If you look at it from that perspective, it’s a groundbreaking example of collaboration that forever changed the West’s understanding of the natural world. From my point of view, it’s problematic, because it implies that everything that happened during and as a result of those voyages was worth it. That everything else is a footnote to this western need to know, catalogue and dominate the natural world. It also erases the pre-existing indigenous sciences and knowledges of the natural world. From where I stand, in terms of Cook’s voyages, peoples of the Pacific are the main event.



Ahilapalapa Rands, *The Oceanic Room*, 2018. Whitby Library, UK. Commissioned and organised by Invisible Dust. Photo: David Chalmers.



Ahilapalapa Rands, *The Oceanic Room*, 2018. Whitby Library, UK. Commissioned and organised by Invisible Dust. Photo: David Chalmers.



Ahilapalapa Rands, *The Oceanic Room*, 2018. Whitby Library, UK. Commissioned and organised by Invisible Dust. Photo: David Chalmers.

JW                      How did you bring our voices into *The Oceanic Reading Room*?

AR                      I thought that a way to counter and interrupt that framing would be to bring as many Pacific voices into that space as I could, through books, video interviews, drawings and *whakatauki* (proverbs). The exhibition was held at the Whitby Library, an amazing, friendly, community space, I felt like it was the only place that could host this content. Using the majority of my production budget I bought the Whitby Library a permanent selection of our Pacific literature. There are over 60 publications in the collection which varies from children's books like the stories of Maui, decolonial authors like Haunani-Kay Trask and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, to poetic prose from Karlo Mila and Albert Wendt. This is one of the pillars of the project that hopefully has a legacy to it.

The other was a video work called *Pacific Perspectives* (2018) which features interviews from 20 people from around the Pacific, bringing in opinions and reflections on Cook and the Pacific. I was very conscious of not censoring people's perspectives during editing. People shared intimately and were vulnerable with me during filming so I wanted to honour that. This element of the show really stands out in Whitby, where usually Pacific people are represented in early anthropological drawings at the Cook Museum and that's about it. Suddenly you've got this big screen of contemporary Pacific faces saying: this is what I think about Cook, here I am, I exist. That was quite a lot for locals to see. The final



element of the exhibit was an interview with Dr Kiana Frank, a Hawaiian microbiologist. I had been a fan of her instagram @labhuiofrank for ages because of how accessible and fun she makes the microbial world and how linked it is to hawaiian creation stories and ways of understanding. Through this project I was able to connect with her which is really special. In our interview, she is sitting in front of an ancient Hawaiian fish pond that's currently being revitalised, and is talking about art and science and how actually, in Hawai'i, those two industries have never been siloed like they are in the west, they completely rely on one another and that is how we've been able to pass on all the knowledge we have, through oral histories, through dance, through chants. Some of that data is over 900 years old and we're still able to access it because we've managed to memorise it through our art and material cultures. So that's cool, it says: well, it's different for us, this art and science collaboration has always been happening.

JW                      Having accompanied you to Whitby for this exhibition, I'd just like to comment and say that Whitby Library (although I know they do appreciate your contribution), they need to know that the taonga they have is exceptional. Not only the voices of these 20 amazing individuals from throughout the Pacific but some of the new books adARded to the collection. The space itself is painted in a bright royal Hawaiian yellow with big red beanbags, it's very bright, some big screens and palms. The books were the center of the space. It was about inviting people in, getting them to pick up those books. It's phenomenal to walk into a space and see those writers and collections of academic work somewhere that isn't in the Pacific.

What would your ultimate dream be for the community of Whitby when they interact with *The Oceanic Reading Room*?

AR                      During the opening weekend there was much more engagement than I had expected. People came up to me saying "I've been up all night since seeing the video, I need to see a map, where are you all from?!" There was one woman in particular who stayed and watched the whole video, and people in that video don't hold



back, there's very diplomatic voices and there's very frank voices that say "*Captain Cook's a f\*\*king idiot*" and things like that. She sat through the whole thing, an older community member. I made her a cup of tea and was talking to her afterwards, she was talking about how shocked she was. I was getting ready to deal with defensiveness and maybe being offended by some of the people's opinions, but she was shocked at the fact that they (Whitby locals) didn't know this history. She was worried about the direction that Whitby was taking, investing so heavily in memorialising Captain Cook. She then apologised to me and said "I'm sorry that we're doing this festival, I don't think we should be doing this festival in this way." That completely threw me. I was getting ready to receive the usual defensive or apologist one-liners but the fact that she saw and listened, and then said sorry, just went right to my heart. Ultimately, that is what I wanted. I wanted to use the library, as what I see is its truest function: as a host of knowledge and a facilitator of transformation through knowledge-sharing and understanding. Really that's what I want, I want someone, I want everyone, to go to that library, look at those books, look at our history, look at our politics, look at all these incredible struggles for self-determination and just listen. Just hear us.



JW

What's next?

AR                    There are two other big shows coming up in London as part of the year of Cook250 - The National Maritime Museums *Pacific Encounters Gallery* and The Royal Academy's *Oceania* exhibition. We will be working inside and outside of these institutions but more importantly, the other project that has developed between you and I and some other awesome Pacific people is the In\*ter\*is\*land Collective. We're excited to now have a space, which is housed at Raven Row in central London. We've named it MOKU, a Hawaiian word for island, and are using it as a hub and a homing beacon for any Pacific Islanders out there, and our friends, to come, gather and build our community, our strength and our stories. Both to have platforms that can interrupt dominant colonial narratives like the ones surrounding Captain Cook, but also to have a space to build, educate and explore things in relation to Moana Nui a Kiwa, our blue continent of Oceania, because we have so much more to talk about than that time Cook sailed a couple of boats over. Watch this space: MOKU.

### Footnotes

01. Quoted from wall text and introduction video at the start of the exhibition *James Cook: The Voyages*, at the British Library, 27 April - 28 August 2018.

### Biographies



Ahilapalapa Rands (Hawaiian, Fijian, Pākehā) is an independent curator, writer and artist from Aotearoa (New Zealand). She is driven to create and imagine alternative ways of exhibition making. Her multidisciplinary methodology is informed by issues relevant to Indigeneity and investigating ways that settler colonisation has and continues to inform narratives and power dynamics in the Pacific. Recent projects include: *The Oceanic Reading Room*, Encounters, Whitby Library and Invisible Dust, Whitby, 2018; *The Cookbook Project*, Invisible Dust and Sewerby Hall and Gardens, East Riding of Yorkshire, 2017/18; *lei-pā*: a curatorial exhibition in collaboration with Lana Lopesi presented by ST PAUL St Gallery, 2017; *Cold Islanders*, a group exhibition at Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, Hamilton, 2017; *Indigenous Arts Journal Residency*, The Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Banff, 2017.



Jo Walsh (Māori / Pākehā) is a London-based artist and arts producer, founding member of the SaVAge K'lub and connector of VIPs – very important Polynesians. Jo works with major institutions as a conduit to repatriation of histories, with a focus on increasing the activation of Pacific voices. She is the current Chairperson for the New Zealand Studies Network, UK & Ireland; Trustee to Maranga Ake Expressive Arts, Hokianga, Aotearoa; and a learning member of Ngati Ranana, London Māori Club.

