

UNA REY

# The Nemesis and The Muse: *E. Phillips Fox's Cook and Daniel Boyd's Pirates*



*Here, in this jolly-boat they graced,  
Were food and freedom, wind and storm,  
While, fowling-piece across his waist,  
Cook mapped the coast, with one eye cocked for game.<sup>1</sup>*

As the Australian poet Kenneth Slessor wrote in *Five Visions of Captain Cook* (1931), the Admiralty man had many facets. In Australia in 2020, the nation marks the much anticipated and maligned sestercentennial of James Cook's arrival on the eastern shore of the continent, and the legacy of colonisation is yet to be reconciled 250 years on. Such anniversaries in the settler-nation's calendar are always testy times, bringing conflicting ideologies and unfinished business under telescopic focus, salting unhealed wounds on one hand and spicing up nationalist sentiments on the other. The first Australian centenary of 1888, leading up to the Federation of the six colonies into the nation-state of Australia in 1901 was a celebration of the latter – blue skies, golden summers and fair skin. By comparison, the 1988 Bicentenary and the re-enactment of Governor Arthur Phillip's First Fleet seemed tasteless, parting the waters for the postcolonial reckoning still shaping the nation today, (often at the behest of Indigenous contemporary artists).

The long shadow of the 1988 legacy falls across the formal ambitions of the sestercentennial. While part of a larger multi-nation, four-year commemoration of Cook's first 'Voyage of Discovery' to the Pacific (1768-71), the Australian government contribution of \$50 million pledged in 2018 seemed a gesture of excess. Would it be a Cook salute, or would it seek further atonement for the catastrophic consequences that *HMS Endeavour* later rendered on Australia's First People? Among a raft of official and more informal events and exhibitions, a planned commemoration of Cook's landing at Botany Bay on 29 April received the most press, as if signalling the way forward. Billed as "The Meeting of Two Cultures 2020", it entailed a significant upgrade of Kamay/Botany Bay National Park,<sup>2</sup> the unveiling of three commissioned commemorative installations by Indigenous artists and a program of "immersive, educational and evocative truth-telling experience through... events and interactive storytelling."<sup>3</sup>

How can a nation make twenty-first century sense of this eighteenth century "meeting of two cultures"? Since 1988, some artists have been proclaiming their answer: rewrite the myths to privilege the other side of the story, "the story from the shore,"<sup>4</sup> to name another 2020 project by filmmaker Alison Page and the National Museum of Australia.

As it happened, the truth-telling in Kamay/Botany Bay never occurred, cancelled due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The political poster artist Chips MacKinolty caused a stir with his Cook-postage stamp image, *The First Pandemic: Commemorating 250 years of Colonial Virus-COVID-1770*, but the corollary was not lost on the public: British colonial possession in 1770, British 'boat people' crashing sovereign borders in 1788 and a sea of troubles ever since. Or as Indigenous artist and curator Brook Andrew's 2020 Biennale of Sydney public program read,

*... we challenge the dominant narrative that the arrival of a British sailor [Cook] who pillaged his way across the Pacific is a more impressive story than the 60,000 years of continuous history of Australia's Indigenous people... On 29 April First Nations artists will take centre stage... in the historic Sydney Town Hall... to flip this flawed history... as we debate, "to cook Cook or not?"<sup>5</sup>*

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*We Call Them Pirates Out Here*

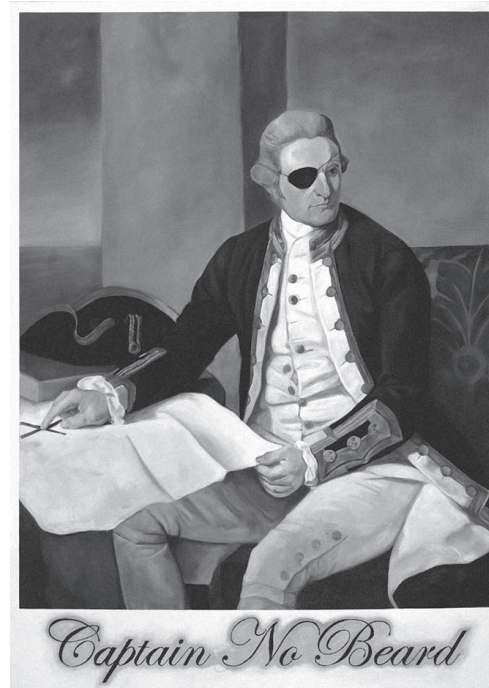
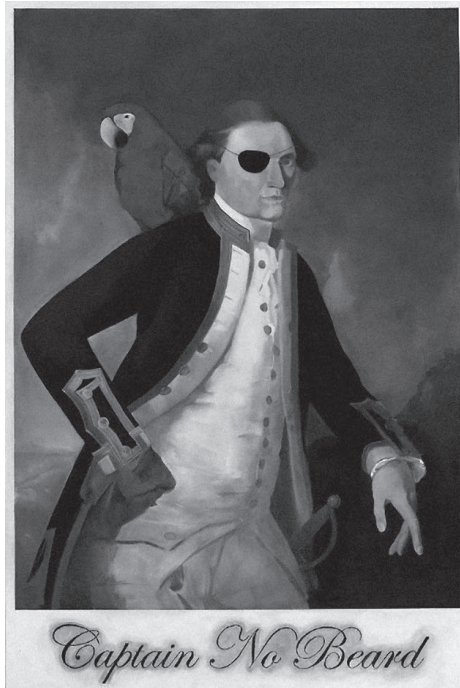
Daniel Boyd's painting *We Call them Pirates Out Here* (2006) is a popular portal to this proliferating linguistic and visual discourse, and it came some years ahead of the sestercentennial tide. A humorous flag-burning exercise, the work de-commissions a canonical icon in the settler-nation story: Emanuel Phillips Fox's *The Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770* (1902), commissioned to mark the Federation of Australia in 1901. By law of attracting opposites, these two 'psycho-pendant' paintings by Fox and Boyd made over a century apart continue to demonstrate the power of myth – and its creative and temporal unravelling. Put another way, each painting reinforced the potency of the other, both the nemesis and the muse that make us look again at history.

"Cook," penned Slessor, "was a captain of the Admiralty/When sea-captains had the evil eye."<sup>6</sup> Embracing this ever popular swashbuckling theme, Boyd's *We Call them Pirates Out Here* is his most ambitious in a series of appropriation paintings made between 2005 and 2007 in which portraits of colonial Empire heroes were wittily dethroned. His first quarry was John Webber's *Portrait of Captain James Cook RN (1782)*, acquired by the new National Portrait Gallery in Canberra for \$5.3 million in 2000. With support from private benefactors, the 'foundational' acquisition attracted public criticism, especially from Indigenous communities offended by the Cook "discovery" narrative. When patron Bob Oatley expressed the sentiment that "Australia is the greatest nation in the world, it has everything and it has a future... but often people don't have a true sense of our history,"<sup>7</sup> he was not being ironic.

Boyd's first Cook after Webber, copied from a gallery postcard, became *Captain No Beard* (2005). The portrait's aristocratic formality and masculine force (hand hovering above his hilt) is shifted sideways to caricature. He repeated the subject, *Captain No Beard* after Nathaniel Dance's famous portrait of Cook. Additional paintings of *Governor No Beard* (2005) (Governor Phillip after Francis Wheatley), *Sir No Beard* (2009) (Joseph Banks after Benjamin West) and *King No Beard* (2007) (King George III after Nathaniel Dance) all brandish the signs of lawless, trophy-hunting pirates, the parrot and the eye-patch, along with more sinister tokens of slaughter: skull necklaces and a decapitated Aboriginal head in a specimen jar which Boyd modelled on himself. Implicated in this gruesome subject is the colonial practice of collecting Indigenous human remains, in this instance the Eora resistance fighter Pemulwuy who was killed by the British in 1802 and held in the private collection of naturalist and botanist, Joseph Banks, who accompanied Cook on his 1768-71 voyage.<sup>8</sup>

That such dark histories can be explored through spirited parody by Indigenous artists demonstrate conciliatory performances within a self-reflexive art world; it's a case of knowing your patron and the self-immolating desires of your audiences. Boyd shares with a cast of Indigenous artist peers in this task, and his readily accessible appropriations have found safe harbour in Australia's public institutions, further reflecting the nation's earnest efforts to decolonise and reconcile. But it was a very different set of self-aggrandising desires that shaped the Australian nation at the dawn of the twentieth century when Fox constructed his grand history painting, *Landing of Captain Cook*, the key ingredient in Boyd's signature Cook.

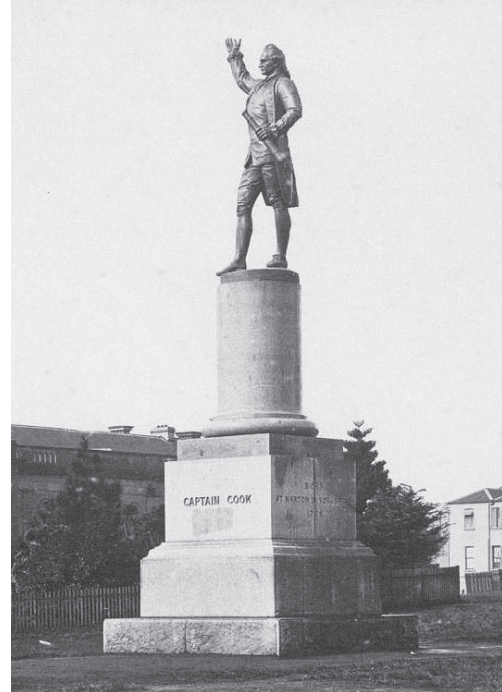
Emanuel Phillips Fox's brief for the National Gallery of Victoria's Gilbee Bequest came with clear instructions and cloudy paradoxes. The painting had to celebrate a precise moment in Australian history with "historical accuracy" and a sense of theatrical occasion, but it had to be painted in England.<sup>9</sup> A star pupil of the National Gallery School in Melbourne, the young Fox had already sailed to Europe in 1887 in the Antipodean conventions of his day. He studied at illustrious Parisian ateliers, practiced *en plein air* on The Continent and immersed himself in the cosmopolitan, expatriate community in St Ives, Cornwall. Like Boyd, he too had had an earlier audience with



Cook, creating *Captain James Cook* (copy of Nathaniel Dance original in the Greenwich Hospital) in 1891 before returning to Melbourne the following year. His induction into French Impressionism may seem contrary to the nation's Anglophile sentiment and its nationalistic public commission, but Fox's international credentials paid dividends and he duly returned to England in 1901 to take up the Cook assignment.

Before leaving Australia in March 1901, Fox made extensive landscape studies and measurements at Kurnell in Kamay/Botany Bay—at much the same time as the first ever re-enactment of the Landing, performed as part of the Federation celebrations. In the interests of authenticity demanded from empire history painting, he executed several studies of Aboriginal men at the nearby settlement of La Perouse (named after the French explorer Jean François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse, who in 1788 encountered the First Fleet several days after its arrival, but never made it home to France). Back in London, Fox studied eighteenth century period dress before finishing the painting at St. Ives, among Australian expatriate artists including Will Ashton, who apparently posed for the figure of Cook.<sup>10</sup>

Gallery Trustees endorsed Fox's Federation picture's subject of a "glorified conquest" that upheld the values of Empire, while it conveniently truncated the messy convict genealogies born of the First Fleet in 1788. It locks in the framework for the White Australia Policy and guarantees British Australia's birthright, primary goals of Federation. Under pressure, Fox took no risks, keeping with modern history painting traditions established by Benjamin West in the time of Cook (West's groundbreaking at the time populist *The Death of General Wolfe* [1770] shares the 250 year birthday in 2020);



the *Apollo Belvedere* is referenced in the stature of Cook and Banks as “a device of ennoblement” and art historian Ruth Zubans further suggests the maritime-genre painter Charles M. Paddy’s pirating picture *Marooned* (c. 1899) as a likely compositional template.<sup>11</sup>

Fox’s seamen-adventurers are caricatures of the genre, enthusiastically escorting their Lieutenant (yet to be promoted to captain) Cook to the upper crest of the beach to make his seminal, flag-planting gesture. With its high-keyed cobalt blue sea and sky, the robust naval explorers are heroically silhouetted against the elemental magnificence of the Australian landscape. The *HMS Endeavour* bobs in the background and two longboats bridge the watery passage, but the primary action is Cook’s enigmatic gesture. Standing in the centre of a triangular tableau capped by a billowing red ensign, Cook is a gleaming figure in white, his loins centring the composition as if to stake his patriarchal authority. The tension between the three figures aiming their muskets toward two Aboriginal men in the far right-hand distance (to which Banks, on Cook’s left, points) is animated by a circular movement generated by the pointing of Cook, Banks, the guns and the spears. In consultation with Cook’s journals, Fox’s chosen moment is the third shot fired by the visitors. Cook’s outstretched arm, a classic regal gesture signifying magisterial power, is often interpreted as a pacifying command, a symbol of the enlightened leader’s humanity, but the gesture is open-ended. Is Cook’s command to shoot or not? And what of his gaze, along his own arm, as scholar Golnar Nabizadeh concludes, in a “triangular visual loop,” creating “a metonym for the colonial project’s march through time.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps intentionally, Fox leaves the question hanging, though Cook’s journal was clear: keep firing.

Indigenous Australian artist Julie Gough, who addressed Fox's *The Landing* in her 2001 installation, *Chase*, suggests that Cook is sleepwalking, metaphorically blind to his actions and his environment. But if Fox's depiction of Cook with outstretched arm has had people guessing—the late Indigenous Australian artist Gordon Bennett appropriated it a century later in *Notes to Basquiat (Death of Irony)* (2002)—Fox's source is Webber's *The Death of Captain Cook* (1784), which depicts Cook signalling to his Marines for help moments before he was stabbed in the back by Hawaiian natives. This mortal reference adds another dimension of mystique and tragedy to the image.

If there are ambivalent and esoteric meanings in Fox's painting, Boyd takes the very different and direct approach of satire. Appealing to ones' artistic and social peers was and remains a matter of importance and hitting the cultural *zeitgeist* was as much a defining principle of contemporary art practice for Fox and as it is for Boyd. Boyd's artistic rites of passage seek different honours and audiences to Fox, as his pastiche of Fox's practice indicates. A practitioner of the postcolonial school of revisionist histories, and popular culture, *We Call them Pirates Out Here* takes its title from the soundtrack of the Wes Anderson film *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004). Whereas Fox faithfully renders historical figures (while modelling from friends), Boyd inserts his own social network, ostensibly implicating contemporary audiences in the original act of colonisation, and by design, the reconciliatory aspirations of twenty-first century Australia.

Eclipsing the scale of Fox's original, Boyd's work emulates the aesthetic of the postcard from which he made a number of his 'pirate' copies. To reinforce his point, Boyd incorporates a white border with the work's title written in faux-Edwardian copperplate script across the gutter of the canvas. The postcard/painting imitates an ironic souvenir representing the 'wildlife' out here in the Pacific, as gang-ho, colonial bounty hunters. In Boyd's heraldic vision, a hybrid 'Jolly Jack' flag replaces the British Navy's ensign, no mistaking Cook's marauding pirate insignia, the black eye-patch eye repeating the skull's empty socket. For a gestalt flash the rippling skull elicits the anamorphic skull of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), crystallising the landing party's failure of cultural diplomacy.

As a recent art school graduate, Boyd would have been well-versed in the colonial art historical conventions of 'propaganda/settler' imagery and its current revisionism, hence the import of his touristic missive. It was Boyd's intention to one day send his Cooked-up pirates back to England as if serving a summons for crimes committed against Indigenous Australians; the wish was realised in 2018 when the painting was included with Fox's *Landing* in *Captain Cook: The Voyages* in The British Library, one of the mother country's sescentennial's exhibition programs. More effective from an institutional perspective was Boyd's three-month residency at The Natural History Museum in London, researching the First Fleet collection in 2011. Archival research by Australian Indigenous artists in the Empire's collections has become a regular, mutually instructive endeavour and something of a professional rite of passage, offering unique perspectives from the other side.<sup>13</sup>

As state-funded forces guard inanimate statues of dead white men in parks, gardens and civic squares under fear of Black Lives Matter rallies, Fox's *Landing*—a likely icon for retaliatory violence—lies safely out of sight if not out of mind at the national Gallery of Victoria, while Melbourne's other galleries and museums enter (at the time of writing) their second COVID-19 lockdown. According to one long-term curator, the painting was an awkward moment in an increasingly embarrassing narrative, until the agency and creative investment of Indigenous artists and curators began to take effect in the 1990s. But for all the political changes brought about since Federation, Australia remains a constitutional monarchy with a British sovereign. The ongoing

project for the multicultural nation is not a single landing site but a cross-cultural meeting which is still playing out in the contemporary cultural imaginary.

On the horizon line of Boyd's *We Call them Pirates Out Here* a plume of smoke rises into the dark sky, a signifier of Aboriginal hearth and homelands—the human habitation countering the fiction of *terra nullius* (empty land) by which Cook claimed the continent on Queensland's eponymous Possession Island on 22 August, 1770. Though the doctrine of *terra nullius* was overturned in the Australian High Court in 1992 with the Mabo ruling, questions of sovereignty and constitutional recognition are still far from complete.<sup>14</sup> While Fox's picture gives clear evidence of Indigenous occupation, his Aboriginal subjects are presented in hostile animation, noble savages brandishing their weapons as if they have no language and no civilised or social claim on the land. The bark huts nearby only serve to reinforce the sense of itinerancy and primitive technology, whereas Boyd's smoke signals a perennial domesticity and millennia of firestick farming the land.

If there is a mysterious ambivalent element in Boyd's painting, it's the substitution of the two resisting Aborigines with two passive native grass trees, *xanthorrhoea*. Boyd is teasing out the once-common name 'black-boy' given these graceful—and fire-dependent—plants by the colonisers. The tall flower-spikes resemble spears and the foliage of dense needles shimmers like ceremonial garb. Anecdotally, 'black boy' comes from an Aboriginal word "*barga*" for boy; however, the Latin *xanthorrhoea* is now considered the respectful term. Boyd creates a proxy by way of the grass trees, returning the colonial gaze that conflated Indigenous people with wild nature while suggesting the absurdity of Fox's ostentatious pictorial re-enactment of a botched greeting in which Cook misread all the social and cultural signals: as if a Don Quixote, tilting at trees.

Parodying colonial officers launched Boyd's art career, though a few years later his aesthetic style shifted from realist copy to grisaille dotting and video, employing more subtle facsimiles of modernity's icons. But there's another 'black boy' who Boyd owes a debt to, and one painting in particular from Gordon Bennett's cornucopia of Cook-critical works that sings out from the archive. *Metaphysical Landscape (To the sound of cicadas no.3)* (1990) presents a black and white pointillist view from the shore, looking through a screen of casuarina and flowering *xanthorrhoea* to the *HMS Endeavour* as it approaches landfall. The master of this gaze is unequivocal, and Bennett was a master of the hybrid, art-historical appropriation style in which Cook and his documentarians held high rank.

Fox died in 1915 as a new myth was being born on a foreign shore, of the Anzac legend of Australian sacrifice for 'King and Country'. But the Pacific explorer he commemorated so dutifully has a long tail. Ironically, it is Indigenous artists who are writing the contemporary myths of Cook, as far afield as Central Australia where the figurative painter Vincent Namatjira, great grandson of Australia's first Indigenous art celebrity Albert Namatjira (1902-1959) won the lucrative Ramsay Art Prize in 2019: a free-standing double-sided portrait, *Close Contact* (2018) which features his self-portrait on one side and Cook, from Fox's *Landing of Captain Cook*, on the reverse, literally "shoulder to shoulder... unambiguously ambivalent... obverse and reverse renderings of a double-sided vision of our shared past," according to curator Lisa Slade.<sup>15</sup> Such perennial engagements with Cook's complex legacy have, somewhat ironically, promoted his iconography within the national (and the Pacific) psyche: tight white trousers, gold-rimmed tricorne hat and right hand raised in a sign of divine power. As the eighteenth century "Daemons in periwigs,/doling out magic" demonstrated, it's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.<sup>16</sup>



Born in Cairns in 1982, Daniel Boyd would have known the tourist town's big Captain Cook, a gauche concrete sculpture with a phallic, outstretched arm, standing in the lineage of Australian 'big things' – bananas, pineapples and prawns. Like the more robust bronze and marble statuary of masculine endeavours which punctuate public places and now look devilishly misguided, this one has been the subject of 'removal' campaigns. If nothing else, it may be where Boyd first learned to laugh at folly.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Slessor, 'Five Visions of Captain Cook', *Collected Poems*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, HarperCollins Australia, 1992; <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47089/five-visions-of-captain-cook>

<sup>2</sup> The agreed Indigenous name for the local area is Kamay (or Gamay) from the Dharawal language

<sup>3</sup> Sutherland Shire Council, 'The Meeting of Two Cultures Program', NSW State Government; <https://www.sutherlandshire.nsw.gov.au/Community/What39s-On-in-the-Shire/The-Meeting-of-Two-Cultures-2020-Programme>

<sup>4</sup> National Museum Australia, 'The Message—the Story from the Shore', National Museum Australia; <https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/endeavour-voyage/the-message>

<sup>5</sup> *Biennale of Sydney, 'Nirin-Wir'*, Sydney: City of Sydney, 2020, p. 20

<sup>6</sup> Slessor, 'Five Visions of Captain Cook'

<sup>7</sup> Brian Dale, 'The Quiet Australian', National Portrait Gallery; <https://www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/2/the-quiet-australian>

<sup>8</sup> Cara Pinchbeck, 'Sir No Beard: Daniel Boyd', Art Gallery of NSW; <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/378.2012/>

<sup>9</sup> Two paintings were created from the Gilbee Request. The other commission went to John Longstaff, whose work finally completed in 1907 celebrated the heroic but fatally flawed mission of Melbourne's inland explorers Burke and Wills

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Zubans, *E. Phillips Fox: His Life and Art*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 1995, p. 99

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100

<sup>12</sup> Golnar Nabizadeh, 'Of Rabbits and Pirates: After-Images of E. Phillip Fox's Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770', *Adaption* 9 no.1, 2015, p. 39

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Boyd, *Daniel Boyd: The Law of Closure*, Dan Rule (ed.), Melbourne and Sydney: Perimeter Editions, 2015, p. 70-71

<sup>14</sup> First invoked in late-nineteenth-century international law, *terra nullius* is a legal concept that in special cases gave colonisers sovereignty over occupied territory. For centuries, the European "law of nations" paradigm had accepted that states could acquire territory through conquest, or through treaties with existing occupants or, in the case of unoccupied land, through the "Discovery Doctrine". In order to explain how European sovereigns had acquired colonies like New South Wales, which had clearly been occupied at the time of colonisation and had neither been ceded by its indigenous inhabitants (through treaties) nor truly conquered by the coloniser according to international law, jurists adopted the term *terra nullius* to extend the meaning of unoccupied land to include "barbarous country", territory occupied by "backward" or "uncivilised" people, or "territory practically unoccupied". In this way, *terra nullius* emerged as a legal concept that gave colonisers sovereignty over occupied territory if, as it was claimed, the inhabitants were not united permanently for political action within the European comity of nations, and so lacked statehood. As it often does, the law made explicit or conscious what had long been implicit or taken for granted when Lt. James Cook invoked the conditions of the Discovery Doctrine when he claimed New South Wales for the British Monarch; thus, the concept of *terra nullius* sharpened rather than overturned long held beliefs regarding the cultural and legal superiority of the European nations and their rights of sovereignty. In 1992, the Indigenous activist Eddie Mabo won a long-running case in the High Court of Australia known as The Mabo Decision, in which the Meriam people of the Murray Islands, in the Thursday Island group, were awarded the first Australian example of Native Title, on the basis of their long and continued occupation of the place being recognised by the common law as having survived alongside the British Crown claims of sovereignty

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Slade, 'Reframing Cook and his legacy through an artist's lens', *INDAILY*, 28 May 2020; <https://indaily.com.au/opinion/2020/05/28/reframing-cook-and-his-legacy-through-an-artists-lens/>

<sup>16</sup> Slessor, *op cit.*