

Ibis and the city: Bogan kitsch and the avian revisualization of Sydney

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## Abstract

The Australian White Ibis (Ibis) (*Threskiornis molucca*) is one of three endemic ibis species in Australia. In a short timeframe beginning in the 1970s this species has moved from inland waterways to urban centres along the eastern and southeastern seaboard, Darwin and the Western Australian southwest. Today Ibis are at home in cities across the country, where it thrives on the food waste, water resources and nesting sites supplied by humans. In this essay we focus on Sydney to argue that the physical and cultural inroads of ibis, and the birds' urban homeliness, are resignifying urban surfaces and the multispecies ecologies in which contemporary Australians operate. We explore how the very physical and sensory presence of ibis disrupts the assumptions of many urban Australians, and visitors from overseas, that cities are human-centric or human-dominant, non-hybrid assemblages. We also introduce to this discussion of disrupted human expectations a cultural parallel, namely, the recent rise of ibis in popular culture as an icon-in-the-making of the nation and as a totem of the modern Australian city itself. This trend exemplifies an avian-led revisualization of urban spaces, and is notable for its visual appeals to ibis kitsch, and to working class or 'bogan' sensibilities that assert their place alongside cosmopolitan visions of being Australian. Sometimes kitsch ibis imagery erupts across the urban landscape, as occurs with many ibis murals. At other times it infiltrates daily life on clothing, on football club, university and business logos, as tattoos on people's skin, and as words in daily idiom, confirmed by terms such as 'picnic pirates,' 'tip turkeys' and 'bin chickens.' The essay uses a visual vignette methodology to chart ibis moves into Sydney and the realms of representation alike and thus to reveal how new zoöpolitical entanglements are being made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**KEYWORDS:** Australian White Ibis; Ibis; Bin chickens; bogan; kitsch; Australia; urban revisualization; avian recombinant ecologies

It is an **Autumn** morning in Sydney, Australia's most populous city. I drive south down my street, turn right and brake: an Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis Molucca*)—

henceforth Ibis—is sauntering ahead of me.<sup>1</sup> I proceed past the train station and stop at the traffic light in between my suburb’s two schools. Ibis are nesting ungainly in the two palm trees at the high school to my left. I arrive at work and open an email from a colleague who is on maternity leave. Walking with her daughter that morning, she had turned the corner in one of Sydney’s harbourside suburbs and stumbled on a photo shoot involving three people dressed as Ibis. The email contains the jpeg proofs of that encounter. Later that morning, a friend sends me a text; she has just photographed an Ibis mural above the front door of a terrace house in Alexandria, an inner-city suburb. That afternoon, I am sitting in a committee meeting at my university, which is located at the southern edge of Sydney’s Central Business District. Sipping tea from my ‘bin chicken’ mug, I am distracted by the Ibis flying past the window. I’ve counted fourteen in thirty minutes. On my way home I turn off the main highway, which bisects brutally my suburb, in order to do a u-turn that will take me back to my street. I see a congregation of Ibis at the water fountain in the car park near the river, where a number of backpackers have parked their rental vans for a short stay, one that will also provide local Ibis with ready food scraps.<sup>2</sup>

Such encounters with Ibis—a day in the life from one of this essay’s authors—are unremarkable in Sydney, and in other Australian cities along the eastern and southeastern seaboards, and increasingly in Darwin and Perth. Yet a generation or two ago the presence of Ibis in Sydney as highly visible, and visually compelling, urban inhabitants was rare. The scholarly consensus is that Ibis began moving to the coast from the Australian interior in the 1970s and 1980s, that migration impelled by drought and the degradations of inland waterlands and river systems (Ross, 2004; Martin, French and Major, 2007; 2010). In some cases—Healesville Sanctuary in central Victoria in the 1950s; Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney in the 1970s—small colonies of uncaged Ibis were introduced as a conservation measure (Ross, 2004; Dooley, 2018; Tatham, 2018). These birds also took advantage of the food riches left by wasteful humans, as well as new roosting and nesting sites and water supplies, to be found in the city. By the early 2000s Ibis were being noticed by inhabitants and visitors alike as integral to the cityscape of Sydney and other Australian municipalities. Today, the very physical and sensory presence of ibis—a large bird ranging up to 75 centimetres in height, and up to 5.5 kilograms in weight—confronts the assumptions of many Sydneysiders, and visitors, that cities are human-centric or human-dominant, non-hybrid assemblages (Whatmore, 2002; McKiernan and Instone, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> The Australian White Ibis is one of three endemic ibis species in Australia, the others being the Straw-necked Ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*) and the Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), the latter the most widespread ibis species in the world. As the Australian White Ibis’s scientific name implies with its referencing of the Moluccas, that species is also found throughout eastern Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. A related dwarf subspecies is found in Solomon Islands. While this essay concentrates on the Australian White Ibis—the ‘bin-chicken’—it is of note that the Straw-necked Ibis is also increasingly seen in urban environments, notably in the Australian north and in South-West Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Alongside congregation, other collective nouns for ibis are wedge and stand.

In this essay we are interested in how Ibis have become active agents in the revisualization of Sydney's urban spaces via what we would like to call an Ibis kitsch sensibility. By this we build from David Atkinson who calls on critics 'to rethink kitsch as the pursuit of simple, unthreatening, mundane pleasures, as an elective aesthetic rather than an empty category of artless, imitative bad taste' (2007: 524), and thus as a dynamic mode of 'ordinary' production. Our intention here is to acknowledge that Ibis visibility is not just a matter of 'seeing' Sydney with Ibis emplaced inside the city. Ibis visibility, we argue, is linked to an Ibis narratorial agency that also informs the various, often ambivalent, cultural threads about, references to and representations of Ibis that the human denizens of city space are now producing daily. This cultural phenomenon has evolved with vigour since the early 2000s (Dulaney, 2018: 201). The trend is notable, as well, for its visual appeals to Ibis kitsch or working class, 'bogan' sensibilities, and to cultural interpretations of Ibis that assert deep human connections with Ibis ordinariness. Sometimes kitsch Ibis imagery resignifies urban surfaces, as happens with many Ibis murals. At other times it infiltrates daily life on clothing, on football club and business logos, as rashly chosen tattoos on human skin, and as daily idiom, hence the popular alternative names for Ibis such as 'bin chicken.' Ibis, we argue, now exemplify a recombinant ecology-in-visual-formation as witnessed in and from Sydney and other Australian cities (McKiernan and Instone, 2016; Rotherham, 2017).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: Australian White Ibis in flight (Sydney, 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> That Ibis-centered ecological transformation of cities such as Sydney was debated intensely during the November-December 2017 national vote for Australia's most popular bird, jointly organised by Guardian Australia and Birdlife Australia, Australia's premier ornithological organisation and the publisher of *Australian Birdlife*. The Ibis was an early leader in polls; but the species was beaten by a few hundred votes in controversial circumstances by the Australian Magpie (Foster, 2017; Dooley, 2018).

Ibis in cities such as Sydney may appear to be thriving ‘opportunistic invaders,’ to use Ian Rotherham’s description of the winners in an ever-evolving recombinant ecology (2017, 2). However, they complicate that narrative by being at once ‘native’ *and* ‘exotic’ players (Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006) in a revisualization process that arises from heterogeneous conviviality. The recent rise of Ibis in popular culture as a national icon-in-the-making, and as a totem of the Australian city (Allatson and Connor, 2018a; 2018b), also impels us to rethink Ibis as key agents in an avian-centred revisualization of Sydney. After assessing Ibis moves to ‘bin chicken’ status, and hence Ibis charisma in relation to kitsch and ‘bogan-ness,’ we conclude with a selection of vignettes about Ibis ‘liveliness.’ This is Van Dooren and Rose’s term for an animal-centered ethnographic method of storytelling based on performative vignettes that aim to ‘give others vitality, presence, perhaps “thickness” on the page and in the minds and lives of readers’ (2016, 85). While this methodological approach ‘might start with [Clifford] Geertz’s understanding of man [sic] as “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,”’ it inevitably ‘insist[s] that humans are not the only beings suspended in such a way and that no one—no group or species—ever spins alone’ (2016, 85). Accordingly, the selected vignettes ‘spin’ Ibis moves into Sydney and the realms of quotidian cultural representation. Our aim is to reveal something of the new visualizations of urban space that zoöpolitical entanglements (Wolch, 1998) between Ibis and humans are enabling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in ways that are not being replicated elsewhere in the world.

## From Ibis to Bin Chicken

It would be tempting to dismiss the Australian White Ibis as a ‘trash animal,’ a ‘freak,’ a ‘grotesque’ species, and even an ‘alien’ species (Nagy and Johnson, 2013; Holm, 2012; Stevens, 2018; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Lidström *et al.*, 2015). For many Australian urbanites Ibis is a bio-invasive species, a feral pest, a fly in, fly out opportunist and scavenger, an unwelcome space invader—now aligned with the abject geographies of human waste. This valuation, however, is challenged by other residents who’ve rallied to the defence of the Ibis as an ‘Aussie battler,’ insisted on valuing the Ibis’s resilience and skilful adaptation to urban life as refugees from drought (Dulaney, 2018), and treated the bird with empathy and respect. Ibis clearly attract strong differences of opinion given their enormous success in adapting to new urban environments since the 1970s, a relatively short period of time. Ibis are now more abundant in Sydney than they are in their original inland habitats, notably the threatened Macquarie marshes in interior New South Wales. Frequently found around rubbish bins tugging at the plastic bags that enclose human rubbish and waste, Ibis have acquired various nick-names—bin chicken, tip turkey, dumpster diver, flying rat, picnic pirate. Many Sydneysiders, in fact, wrongly read Ibis as an introduced and by implication alien and unwanted species, unaware of their simultaneous native *and* immigrant status, or their protection under the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act of 1974 (Legos and Ross, 2007). These names and readings of Ibis are suggestive of their insider/outsider status in Australia’s largest city and the ambivalent attitudes that many human inhabitants have towards Ibis in the city.

How non-human animals are culturally valued and represented is intimately connected to their emplacement—the spaces they inhabit and the places in which humans and other

species encounter them (Haraway, 2008; Wilson, 2016; Bull, 2011; Philo and Wilbert, 2000; Jones, 2000; Bull, Holmberg and Asberg, 2018). Unlike other urban wildlife in Australian cities, such as the brushtail possum that makes nocturnal appearances in homes and gardens across the country, the Ibis assumes such a highly visible urban presence that the species appears to be uncontained. Their multiple, diverse and often unpredictable pathways through the city are largely unrestricted. Ibis turn up in outdoor food courts in Sydney's Central Business District, rubbish tips across greater Sydney, shopping centres, city apartment blocks, public parks and gardens, river banks, playgrounds, schoolyards, university campuses, inner-city laneways, carparks and streets, the steps of the Sydney Opera House. Ibis are highly mobile and confident birds. They are not at all fazed by human proximity. Due to that ecological backdrop there are many ways of understanding and relating to Ibis: a native animal; an invasive pest (McKiernan and Instone, 2016); an animal-out-of-place; a climate-change refugee; a sacred bird with a compelling historical back story (Allatson and Connor, 2018a, 2018b)<sup>4</sup>; a recycling labourer; a scientific object; an object of local government containment; a vector of disease and filth; an urban co-resident; for some people, a pet of sorts<sup>5</sup>; for others, a source of wonder. None of these categories alone captures the affective and cultural specificities of Ibis and the processes by which they have taken-up residence in many Australian cities and in the urban imaginaries of their inhabitants. Nor do those categories begin to indicate the extent of the representational and visual impacts and changes that Ibis have generated across cities such as Sydney.



Figure 2: An Australian White Ibis in the restaurant of the Royal Botanic Gardens (Sydney, 2009).

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<sup>4</sup> That back story relates to a history of naming the Australian White Ibis the Sacred Ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*), the bird species regarded in ancient Egypt as an embodiment of the god Thoth. For a time in the 1970s and 1980s the Australian White Ibis was reclassified as the Sacred Ibis. Today, however, it is regarded as a close relative of that species, though the 'sacred' affiliation still resonates for many older Australians (Allatson and Connor, 2018b).

<sup>5</sup> The popular Australian facebook group, the Ibis Appreciation Society, provides a daily chronicle of Ibis-human interactions. A number of contributors post updates of Ibis who visit their homes for food.



Notwithstanding the truism that many animals live with and alongside humans in cities, often in large numbers, few animals across the globe have gained the kind of nation-wide attention and cultural notoriety accorded the Australian White Ibis in Australia.<sup>6</sup> In the words of Sean Dooley, editor of *Australian Birdlife*, Australia's main ornithological magazine, Ibis have "captured the Zeitgeist" (2018: 47). Or as Michael Dulaney argues, Ibis have evolved into a 'cult hero':

you may have noticed the humble Australian white ibis going through an image makeover in the last five years. It has transformed from being considered a nuisance in the city, reviled and despised as a dirty and smelly menace of the commons, to a kind of cult hero—a re-imagining that emerged from meme culture, where ibises are masters of trashiness, icons of the self-deprecating and ironic humour of aligning oneself with things associated with garbage. (2018: 202)

Indeed, there is a definite trend toward what elsewhere we call the Ibis cultural 'juggernaut' (Allatson and Connor, 2018b), evident in an ever expanding spate of Ibis memorabilia, clothing and accessories, artefacts, murals, art and craft works, films, songs, tattoos and other cultural representations. The bin chicken juggernaut, those authors claim, is a dynamic cultural sign that while Ibis may generate visceral disgust in many urbanites and visitors, the birds are also being regarded by many locals as an affectionate and productive locus of affiliation.

## Ibis charisma and kitsch bogan-ness

One way of understanding these Ibis-centered cultural developments is to regard Ibis as active city-making agents. As Van Dooren and Rose (2014) point out, animals 'story places' differently to humans. How humans experience, perceive and locate ourselves in the city is also transformed through the encounters we have with non-human others. Ibis, to draw on Jamie Lorimer's notion of nonhuman charisma, is a 'catalyst' species, able to elicit affective investments that are then mobilized within political assemblages (Lorimer 2007, 2015). Lorimer is interested in how 'flagship species' embody certain aesthetic, ecological and/or corporeal characteristics that enable them to leverage affective human investments, such as sympathy and empathy, in relation to conservation initiatives and environmental governance. As he puts it: 'Nonhuman charisma can best be defined as the distinguishing properties of a nonhuman entity or process that determine its perception by humans and its subsequent evaluation' (Lorimer, 2007: 105). While flagship species embody qualities that trigger strong emotional responses—'cute and cuddly' like the giant panda; 'fierce' like the tiger—the term 'flagship species' can also include abject

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<sup>6</sup> A notable example from North America of a species that has long attracted human attentions and inspired an array of cultural representations that rival Ibis is the coyote (Flores, 2016). And China, of course, has the example of the giant panda, a species that has been used for ideological purposes since the establishment of the People's Republic of China as a symbol of nationhood and Chineseness (Songster 2018).

organisms that elicit less anthropomorphic investment. Such organisms, Lorimer argues, can be both ‘awful’ and ‘awesome,’ their charisma revolving around an alterity that may nonetheless elicit in humans a sense of ‘respect’ for their complexity, wildness and autonomy (Lorimer, 2007: 105). Ibis clearly embody a nonhuman charisma that, as Lorimer posits, is regarded widely as both ‘awful’ and ‘awesome,’ hence the Manichean reception of ‘bin chickens’ in Sydney and elsewhere.

That said, Lorimer’s interest is directed at the mobilization of nonhuman charisma in relation to human conservation politics. Here we want instead to propose a much wider mobilization of Ibis charisma. While encounters between humans and Ibis in Sydney may be found wanting by some residents, the increasing cultural visibility of Ibis across media and cultural forms suggests a more complex affective landscape of identifications and dis-identifications, one that interacts with a relational politics of class. A sense of that affective landscape is evident in a tweet dated September 24 2018, which captured the contemporary Ibis cultural zeitgeist succinctly by recommending Ibis ornaments for the Australian domestic garden:

One of my collaborators has released a new project:  
<https://oldmatetheibis.bigcartel.com/> Forget Pink Flamingos, Old Mate the Ibis is proper kitsch for a sunburnt country. Made to order in original vanilla and dirty old bin chicken flavours. Check them out!’ (Instasquid, 2018)

But what might a ‘proper kitsch’ signify for bin chickens in Australia today? Here we want to position our response to this question in the wake of recent critics who have recognized in kitsch a productive category for understanding often overlooked and underestimated quotidian ordinariness.<sup>7</sup> And, as we argue below, we want, as well, to interlock this approach to kitsch with a critical understanding of ‘bogan-ness,’ a complex, controversial mode of being, and being seen to be, Australian that appears to have found in Ibis an avian avatar.

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<sup>7</sup> For a collection of key modernist takes on kitsch see Dorfles (1969). For useful overviews of kitsch as a disputed critical category in modernist and post-modernist aesthetic history, and as an aesthetic that continues to merit critical revision, see: Calinescu, 1987; Binckley, 2000; Santos, 2006; Allatson, 2007a; Atkinson, 2007; Holliday and Potts, 2012.



Figure 3. 'Old Mate the Ibis, proper kitsch for a sunburnt country.'

As an aesthetic category that originated in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, where it referred to mass-produced replicas of expensive goods, and to artistic representations meant to evoke sentimental affect, kitsch has attracted a great deal of critical attention, much of it disdainful. For many modernist critics, kitsch was the antithesis of high art, and of authenticity. For some of those critics, kitsch was yoked to the regalia and symbolism of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism (Broch, 1969, 2002; Greenberg, 1961; Rosenberg, 1962; Friedländer, 1984). Matei Calinescu, however, regards kitsch as a misunderstood characteristic of modernity itself, and argues that dismissals of kitsch have been formulated in denial of its history as 'one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics' (1987: 232). Despite that conceptual elusiveness, anti-kitsch sentiment continues to be elaborated, one example being *The New Aesthetics of Deculturation: Neoliberalism, Fundamentalism and Kitsch*, by the German philosopher Thornsten Botz-Bornstein (2019). This text is notable for Botz-Bornstein's conflation of deculturation (cultural loss and destruction) with a 'vulgar' kitsch sensibility that he claims is akin to 'aesthetic fundamentalism' and responsible for such phenomena as the rise of 'selfie' culture and of the sorts of 'fake news' popularized under the US Trump administration.<sup>8</sup>

There are, however, critics who have rejected readings of kitsch as crass consumption and reassessed kitsch capacities for managing daily life in ways that move beyond its implication in cultural hierarchies of taste and value, or high (art, value) and low (kitsch, ersatz, vulgar, imitative, banal) (Atkinson 2007; Binkley 2000; Bourdieu 1984). Renewed critical interest in kitsch has seen a questioning of the persistent binary distinction between high and low culture, and a revaluation of the 'popular' as a worthy subject of critical investigation. However, as Sam Binkley points out, the aesthetic of kitsch has tended to be subsumed into the literature around popular culture and its mass

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<sup>8</sup> Botz-Bornstein's use of deculturation is also a critical misreading of the broader critical tradition of transculturation, in which deculturation exists in a dynamic contrapuntal relation with neoculturation and acculturation (Allatson, 2007b: 229–232)



consumption (2000). Binkley rejects the elitist denigration of kitsch as ‘trash culture.’ He proposes instead that there is a ‘unique’ aesthetic to be found in kitsch that, ‘far from representing a failure of the creative will, must be understood on its own terms for the aesthetic world it unfolds’ (Binkley, 2000: 134). Herein, he argues, lies the appeal of kitsch: ‘Kitsch tucks us in, making a home in the repetitive fabric of imitative cultural objects, producing a sense of belonging in a rhythmic pattern of routinized experience’ (Binkley, 2000: 142). Noting that kitsch appears to be an aesthetic of ordinariness, David Atkinson builds on Binkley to propose that ‘kitsch is neither vulgar nor ironic, but simply an elective aesthetic whose easy and immediate pleasures help people get by in their daily lives’ (2007: 525). Also reclaiming kitsch as a category of quotidian production, Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts posit that ‘There can be no kitsch as such, we argue, but only activated kitsch, kitsch pressed into particular service: doing kitsch’ (2012: 31). And while kitsch ‘retains the capacity to make some of us livid’ (2012: 36), the authors emphasise that kitsch engages with its historical moment to render the quotidian more bearable and comprehensible (2012: 31).

Taking such reclamations of kitsch seriously, we want to link this notion of kitsch to readings of Ibis as an avian ‘bogan.’ As noted earlier, bogan is a highly charged Australian term, often an insult, for someone from the working class, and who may display newly monied or aspirational middle-class sensibilities, in what Penny Rossiter calls ‘a classed, and classing, phenomenon’ (2013: 82). Rossiter’s readings of the bogan very much speak to the affective value of, and the heterogeneous representational outcomes centred on, the kitsch sign ‘bin chicken.’ Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work on ‘affective economies’ and the ways in which certain terms become ‘sticky’ (Ahmed, 2004), Rossiter argues that ‘in the cultural phenomenon of bogans and anti-bogans we usually find not intense class hatred, war and disgust, but a form of contempt that is sometimes spiked with love’ (Rossiter, 2013: 81). Bogan-ness, Rossiter states, has a cultural specificity that is often overlooked if it is only seen as a term of derision and contempt: ‘There is something so very ordinary about this affective economy ... [that] ... in Australia privileging disgust, along with distaste and hatred, may saturate the affective terrain in a way that obscures the complexity of “bogan”’ (Rossiter, 2013: 90). By this she means that bogans and bogan-ness may well be targets of affective contempt, but those targets may also be sites of pleasure, pride and affection: ‘laughter and mockery have a special role to play’ in how Australians actually make sense of class, contempt, vulgarity, and quotidian ordinariness. As a ‘bogan-bird’ with its own bogan names and crass habits—notably, bin chicken and its propensity for ‘bin juice’—the Ibis, too, has become a target of human contempt, while at the same time attracting mockery, good humour and even a palpable commitment to cross-species affiliation. This targeting at once animates and shadows Ibis rewildings of Sydney urban space and Ibis entries into the realms of cultural representation as the species assumes an urban role as a dynamic agent of bogan-kitsch ordinariness.

## Ibis vignettes of bogan-kitsch ordinariness

From a plethora of recent Ibis cultural representations available to us, we have selected six images that demonstrate the ‘spinning’ of Ibis bogan-kitsch stories as evidence of the

extent to which Ibis have revisualized and resemanticized Sydney urban spaces and city-sider consciousness. The affective surfaces that these vignettes move between include: the unexpected sight of humans channelling Ibis in a harbourside suburb; the side of an inner-city terrace building; the interior of a university shop selling bin chicken mementos; the cover image (a crocheted Ibis) of the magazine designed for Sydney Craft Week; and the home-made tattoo on the skin of a young Sydneysider. The first image and vignette, however, derives from a kitsch Australiana-laden event held in Sydney in August 2019.

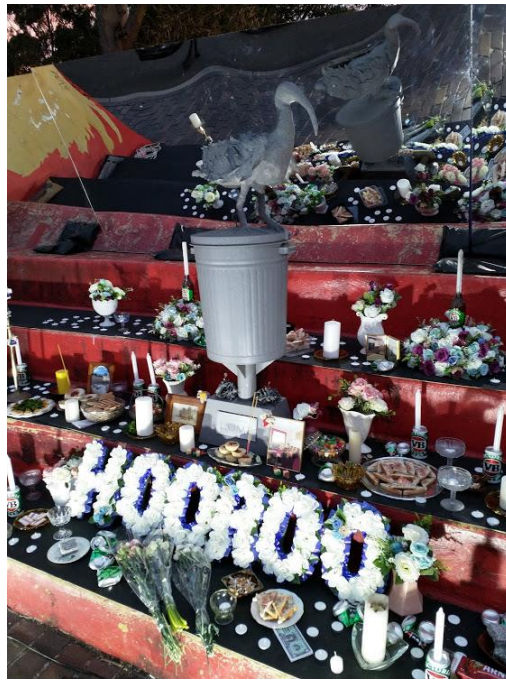


Figure 4. Bin chicken altar, Edge Festival (Sydney, 2019).

### The Edge Festival

An Ibis lead re-wilding of the kitsch aesthetic is evident in August 2019 at the temporary memorial or shrine dedicated to a ‘memory of home’ at the Edge Festival in inner south Sydney. Drawing on working-class Australian vernaculars as well as cultural and aesthetic codes from Latin American practices of altar building, and even traditions associated with the Mexican Day of the Dead, the temporary shrine showcases the Ibis as a sacred symbol—evoking the Sacred Ibis of Classical Egypt—overlorded ‘Aussie’ culture, which is referenced through votive offerings of classic ‘Aussie’ food and kitsch objects. The result is a nostalgic homage to a very specific time and place: 1970s suburban Australia. Flowers and candles are interspersed with offerings of such ‘classic’ Australian food items as Iced VoVo biscuits, Chicko rolls, meat pies, Jatz crackers, sausage rolls, mixed lollies, vegemite, iced buns, and tins of Milo. A totem pole constructed from tiny koalas references the growing appeal of Australiana in the 1970s, and a framed photo of a suburban living-room suggests the shared pleasure of nights around the television. A funeral wreath of white roses shaped into the word ‘Hooroo’—now rather outdated slang for goodbye—celebrates and yet mourns the passing of a

specific class-based identity and culture: the aspirational Aussie battler or bogan. The bogan, as this altar expressively indicates, is at once a figure of mockery and affection around which distinctions of taste (high and low) are mobilised (Rossiter 2013).

How do we read the centrality of the Ibis in this shrine? Perhaps, rather like the Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Saints referenced in shrines in Mexico and other Latin American countries, the Ibis here is at once a patron saint and an animal totem, an emblem of quotidian, often disparaged ordinariness. Ironically, the inclusion of the Ibis as the visual centrepiece to the altar is anachronistic: the Ibis was rare in urban locations along the eastern seaboard in the 1970s, and was only beginning to migrate to Sydney in that decade. Nonetheless, the Ibis in this altar looms large over a denigrated cultural history of Australiana. It is not surprising that Ibis kitsch has flourished as an aesthetic with which to mediate and represent the presence of Ibis in Australia's largest city.



Image 5. Ibis photo shoot, Glebe, Sydney Harbour, 2019.

### Ibis photo-shoot, Sydney harbour

A co-worker on maternity leave wakes up early and decides to walk with her newly born daughter along the paths that snake around the harbour-shores of her suburb. She turns the corner and encounters a photo shoot involving a photographer and three people dressed as Ibis. It will always remain unclear if this is an advertising shoot, an art performance, a film in the making, cosplay. Nonetheless, much larger than their avian inspirations, these human approximations of Ibis are sending an unequivocal message: Ibis are key agents in the formation and signification of Sydney city surfaces.



Figure 6: Bin chicken mural, Darlinghurst.

### Bin chicken mural, corner Crown Street and Liverpool Lane, Darlinghurst

There are dozens of murals featuring Ibis across Australia's cities, a large number occurring in Sydney in suburbs such as the famous Bondi, in places such as Sydney University and North Sydney, and in inner city suburbs such as Alexandria, Waterloo, and in this case, Darlinghurst. One of the keys to the aesthetic success of these murals is how neatly they integrate with and speak to the surrounding streetscapes, particularly in relation to the bins that Ibis are notorious for feeding from. This roughly rendered bin chicken **by the well-known Sydney muralist Lister** now coexists with the bins belonging to the terrace home on which it is painted.



Figure 7: 'Official-Unofficial' Ibis paraphernalia, UNSW, 2019.



## When bogan-ibis rise in status

In early 2019, to note a salient example of the rise in cultural and arguably class status of bogan-ibis, the Sydney-based University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney) introduced a set of ‘Official-Unofficial’ Ibis paraphernalia, including plush toys, mugs, socks and t-shirts, for purchase as mementos on graduation days. Ibis are a notable presence on all campuses of the universities based in Sydney, as well as a good number of TAFE colleges. But UNSW clearly adjudged the Ibis cultural zeitgeist as a playful, but always already profitable opportunity for marketing and merchandising the university itself. Here, however, an aesthetic transformation of Ibis kitsch is evident; no longer implicitly evoking a bogan stickiness, the memorabilia for sale here have been, so to speak, de-boganized. The resulting products remain kitsch, but in forms that are soft, cute, cuddly, fun, and ultimately unthreatening. This de-boganized aesthetic shift might be explained by the fact that the main purchasing constituency for these ‘Official-Unofficial’ products are international, fee-paying students, who comprise a sizeable population within Sydney.



Figure 8: Bin chicken tea cosy, Sydney Craft Week, 2019.

## Crocheted bin chickens

In October 2019, the annual Sydney Craft Week launches with an homage to the bin chicken as its main marketing image: a crocheted bin chicken teapot cosy. Interestingly, this is not a new Ibis-kitsch trend. The maker of the tea cosy (who has an art exhibit attached to Craft Week) joins a growing band of people in Sydney and elsewhere who crochet or knit bin chickens for an ever-growing market. Perhaps the most well known crocheter goes by the Instagram post of ‘littlefelthouses.’ On July 18 2019 she posted a shot of her latest bin chicken creation: ‘Another Ibis. I am making another Ibis. I stop crocheting at this point and attach the legs. It means I can secure them inside so the bird is stable on it’s [sic] lovely long legs.’ One of her Instagram followers reacted with delight: ‘Hahahaha Sooo awesome !!! I love bin chickens so much such aussie icon they should be on the coat of arms LOL!!!’ Rather less effusively, littlefelthouses responded: ‘I’ve been quite surprised at the reaction. Lots of people love bin chickens.’

### Double-ibis homemade tattoo

On May 28 2016, Sydneysider ‘kincho’ tweets, ‘home job! It happened.’ This homemade tattoo on a friend of kincho, borrowed from a design by Chris Gaul, is a celebration of Sydney and features two Ibis posed on either side of a rubbish bin; one Ibis has a potato chip in its mouth (see figure 9). The image is sweetly affective and also recognizable as bogan-kitsch. As with the creator of the bin chicken tea cosy, these creators are not alone among makers of ibis tattoos. The trend is actually massive in Australia today. It extends from Schoolies’ (school leavers) celebrations in the Gold Coast and Surfer’s Paradise of Queensland to Sydney, and cities as far afield as Canberra, Melbourne and Darwin. Thousands of Australians—and international visitors seeking an enduring memento of their time in the country—now carry the bin chicken with them on their skin.



Figure 9. Double ibis home-made tattoo on Niklas Van Den Vlekkert, design by Chris Gaul (tweeted by kincho from Sydney, May 28 2016). Reproduced with Permission.



## Conclusion

Writing for a US audience in September 2019 in *The New York Times*, the Sydney-based journalist Damian Cave asserted that ‘Sydney has a rare superpower: It turns urbanites into bird people, and birds into urbanites’ (2019). He was referring to a host of species that happily and very noisily inhabit Australia’s cities. A striking feature of Cave’s article was that the Australian White Ibis was the only bird accorded a nickname: the bin chicken. Also of note, Cave’s depictions of an avian-dominated Sydney could just as easily apply to cities and towns across the country. And the Australian White Ibis is at home in many of them where it is also at the centre of visual reimaginings and resemanticizations of urban space. In May 2019 in Darwin, for example, there was considerable media interest in the design of a new ‘bin chicken playground’ featuring an ibis-shaped shade structure (Walls, 2019).

Ibis in Sydney, and other Australian municipalities, at once embody, effect and ‘spin’ numerous stories about the recombinant ecologies of Sydney, a city in which ‘no group or species—ever spins alone’ (Van Dooren and Rose, 2016, 85). It is perhaps difficult for those who are unfamiliar with Sydney to appreciate just how integral to city life the Australian White Ibis has become, and in such a very short time frame. As native birds that are also refugees from drought and environmental degradation in the country’s interior, Ibis have taken to Sydney and other Australian cities with a confidence that is noticed by residents and visitors alike as not simply notable, but remarkable. Few animals anywhere in the world are attracting the kinds of cultural responses that Ibis do today; equally few animals anywhere are transforming the visual look of the cities in which they now live as do Ibis. Even more remarkable is the way that the movements and spread of Ibis into and across Sydney have confronted many Sydneysiders, and city visitors, with the visual evidence that cities are indeed multi-species assemblages. Ibis-led revisualizations of Sydney’s urban spaces and the bird’s entries into the realms of cultural representation are entangled intimately with what we call ibis kitsch and associated ‘sticky bogan’ sensibilities that emerge from the affective ambivalences of belonging in Australia today. Indeed, the Australian White Ibis appears to be managing successfully and ebulliently a ‘becoming-ordinary story’ of bogan-kitsch rewilding in its moves from degraded wetlands into Sydney and other Australian cities, and into the realms of urban visualization.

## Image Credits

To be supplied.

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