
Report on *The Museum as Archive:* *Using the Past in the Present and Future*

Online Symposium Hosted by the Centre for Research on Colonial Culture, University of Otago, Dunedin, December 2021

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In December 2021, the Centre for Research on Colonial Culture at the University of Otago (Dunedin campus) hosted an online symposium, convening Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to talk about their work in and with museum and archival collections in the Pacific region. Held over three days, with morning and late afternoon sessions timed to facilitate maximum participation, attendees Zoomed in from Rapa Nui, Munich, New York, Honolulu, Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland, and Wellington. The symposium brought together practitioners, curators, artists, and scholars in a stimulating exchange that will continue into publication.

Co-organized by Miranda Johnson (Otago), Conal McCarthy (Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington), and Philipp Schorch (Ludwig Maximilian University), we traveled in our own “cosmological time capsule,” as Maia Nuku (Ngāi Tai) described her work of “unpacking collections” as Oceania curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Participants were invited to debate the different avenues, epistemologies, and ontologies through which the museum as archive in the Pacific region was conceptualized in the colonial past, can be rethought in the “postcolonial” present, and might be operated in the decolonial future. We reflected on the concrete practicalities and embodied dimensions of collection and archival work. Some participants offered meta-level discussion of the recovery of Indigenous concepts including *tā-vā* (time-space), frameworks and knowledge from archival traces, and translations across different media.

The ethical possibilities and dilemmas that attend “unpacking” collections was a key theme. Noelle Kahanu (University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa) discussed the issue of “reexposure” to harms of colonial collecting. This issue of reexposure, of past pain made present, is an often unacknowledged part of provenance work. Likewise, in a public panel, Leah Lui-Chivizhe (University of Technology Sydney) spoke about the difficulties of doing the decolonizing work of returning materials from museums to her community in the Torres Strait, when such work might entail renewed harm in the present. Sometimes, she pointed out, it is best to pause and reconsider than press ahead.

Others sought to “wake up” the “sleeping” manuscripts, as Megan Pōtiki (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Te Āti Awa) described some of the work she has been involved in, translating ancestral ideas from thoughts embedded in paper archives to the built environment of Ōtepoti (Dunedin). Other kinds of translational work include Auckland University of Technology academic Natalie



Robertson's art practice overlaying her photographs with historical images of the native fish Kōkā Hūhūa in the Waiapu River on the East Coast, enmeshing her viewer in a changing river system between past and present. We followed Tiffany Shellam (Deakin University Melbourne) as she helped reconnect a biocultural fish collection with Nyungar custodians in Western Australia, and we learned about the practice of recollecting dispersed Rapa Nui materials with Cristián Moren Pakarati (Rapanui Pioneers Society) and Diego Muñoz, a postdoctoral researcher at Ludwig Maximilian University.

A debate that continued across panels was the difference between “decolonizing” and “indigenizing” collections and collecting. In his contribution to the public panel, Jason Gibson (Deakin) pointed out that decolonizing does not disentangle the colonial and the Indigenous. Likewise, Paul Diamond (Alexander Turnbull Library Wellington) raised the question of whether it is decolonization or rather an establishing a “network of portals and nodes”—ways into and through collections—that should inform best practice for curators and archivists. As Lui-Chivizhe asked pointedly, is decolonization when museums no longer want our things? Albert Refiti (Auckland University of Technology) proposed that the shift from decolonizing to indigenizing means reading the archive with sympathy rather than against the grain. In a deeply sympathetic mode, I'u Tuagalu (Auckland University of Technology) entangled his audience in Samoan *gafa* as a historical concept and practice. This is the embodied capital-A “Archive” that Chris Ballard and Meredith Wilson (Australian National University Canberra) theorize in relation to the dynamic livelihoods and landscapes of Vanuatu, distinguished from lowercase-a “archival” collections extracted from lifeworlds and housed in the hard-edged architecture of formal institutions.

The symposium drew attention to urgent and complex issues about the promises and pitfalls of archival and museum collection work in the contemporary Pacific. This work is being conducted in relation to different ethical, philosophical, political, and intellectual values and movements—which are themselves being reshaped through collective practice. Rather than seek to order such diverse examples, some of which intersect, others of which run in parallel or diverge, co-organizers are now working toward an edited collection that addresses present practice as heterogeneous. The book will include work from some of the contributions at the symposium and will be coedited by symposium convenors along with Kahanu, Lui-Chivizhe, and Hirini Tāne (Takarangi Research). We aim to both record and provoke further exchanges about the practices and principles emerging from and surging across the sea of islands.