

In the exhibition *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* Ruth Buchanan presented 50 years of collecting at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Aotearoa New Zealand. This show had one core question: where is power centred? Through asking this question Buchanan and the institution encountered celebratory moments of risk and experimentation at the same time as coming face-to-face with the ways in which individual perspectives are encoded into institutions, and society at large, to form what is recognised as important and valuable. The project has made visible what Audre Lorde describes as the problem of the “mythic norm”. The symposium, *Uneven Bodies*, acted on the imbalances exposed in the exhibition and invited discussions on considered approaches that weave in and out of the institution in order to recalibrate the ways in which we produce, engage with and shape collections. The content is gathered together in its entirety for this reader and acts as a transcript of a live event and holds onto that liveness through the variety of forms and tones taken in each of the papers. At the same time, each contribution offers in its own way a template for how we can imagine collecting for the future; full of mutated spaces we don't yet know how to move in, full of powerful languages we still need to learn how to speak, together.

Uneven Bodies

(Reader)

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Aileen Burns &
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In Dodie Bellamy's essay 'Barf Manifesto' included in her collection *When the Sick Rule the World* we meet decimation. She carries out a close reading of Eileen Myles' poem 'Everyday Barf'. She starts the essay at Myles' birthday party and describes the totally abject scene of the writer attempting to break open a piñata in the shape of a pony:

. . . the piñata is giant, practically the size of a real pony, 3 feet tall. I cringe as Eileen raises the hammer, the pony all pink and white and dumb, its eyes unsuspecting. Eileen lurches forward and whacks the pony's midriff, she pounds it and pounds it until a hole gapes in its belly, she yells "take that, you fucking piece of shit pony," throws down the hammer and rips it in two with her bare hands, candy spills over the couch, the floor, the coffee table . . .

Bellamy describes this scene as breaking something in her, her rendition of the scene did something similar to me. Bellamy goes on to describe her presentation at a conference on writing and feminism being interrupted by bouts of intense vomiting, spending the conference not inside with the other speakers and panellists but on the couch outside watching reruns on the television in the lobby between visits to the bathroom. Then:

The last month of my mother's life I got sick at her house and was puking for hours, and my mom got upset, thinking it was somehow her fault, and I'm all no no no bleh it's not you, it's me, my fucked up body.

And later:

'Everyday Barf' says so much. It says too much. Meaning is so surplus it decimates form—or is it the other way around, form is so viscous it beats the fucking pony of content to bits.

Conversely, in the poem 'E Waka' J. C. Sturm describes a scene of subjective restitution despite the complex setting of the poem. The poem describes one of the many waterfront celebrations held in 1990 throughout Aotearoa New Zealand to mark the 150 years since the signing of the foundational document Te Tiriti o Waitangi | The Treaty of Waitangi. This document was signed at Waitangi by representatives of the British Crown and by some, not all, rangatira Māori. The document is bilingual and there are differing understandings of its contents; restitution in relation to the document and the many crimes carried out in its name continue today. Subsequently, any marking of this document through celebration, in 1990 and today, is fraught and powerfully contested. The narrator describes attending one such

occasion where all the attendees are waiting for the arrival of "paddles or sails depending on who you are". The poem's final stanza reads:

I could hardly believe what I saw
And wanted to weep. The pākehā
Man beside me, hairy and turning pink
Cried out, my god, aren't they beautiful!
Aren't they wonderful, look at them go!
And straightened up, standing tall
As an admiral taking the salute.
I felt browner and stronger
Than I'd ever felt before
And so beautiful, so wonderful
I didn't know what to do
With myself. I was flushed too
But it didn't show on me
Like it showed on him. Suddenly
He looked at me, startled, like
He'd just noticed what I was.
What do you think, he demanded
Come on, say something.
They are rather wonderful, I agreed
Trying to sound modest and looking down.
But I was really looking at
The beautiful brown of my hands
And standing as straight and tall
As I could, just like him.

Both of these writers through their extraordinarily visceral, perhaps even brutal, texts produce a deeply moving friction, where writing, the body and society consume and re-image themselves. Here, the fragility of daily life, our differences and the hegemonies that have shaped us come to the fore. At the same time, we are also asked to consider what would it take to access what we need? How are our abilities to speak, be seen, view, move, create, even to think shaped by authoritative forces and forms of regulation, sometimes enforced from the outside, sometimes oddly reproduced and/or generated within ourselves? How could we shape them anew through the penetrating of language, of space, of bodies and where they meet? All of this matters, when we understand that the way the body inhabits all complex spheres of life always spans both the so-called public and the so-called private, that these two fields are inextricably bound to one another. An experience that happens 'out there' will impact deeply on our view of 'in here'. These 'body poems' posit the physicality of reflection and critique front and centre, and cut into the ways in which we build relationships through the body, through writing and language, through art and *into* the institutions and the institutional frames that hold/constrain this activity, these relations. One deeply complex sphere where the layers of holding and constraining must be considered is the space of the collection. If the 'body poem' logic is applied here, if this hammer-meets-pony event is translated into an institutionally held collection of art, what

would it take, really, to recalibrate its trajectory, spill its contents all over? How can an institution become a container for all of that, those rendered barely visible by history, those who require adjustments in order to engage with the content and those who simply want to gut such structures from the inside out?

These are many of the considerations that shaped the development of the exhibition *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* which formed the departure point for the symposium *Uneven Bodies* which is documented in this volume.

The exhibition presented 50 years of collecting at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and sought to disobey many of the norms associated with the showing and thinking through of collections, rather I prioritised the manifestation of friction. The exhibition was a space to reflect on the arc of the collection itself—rather than individual artworks or artists—and subsequently came to represent joy and experimentation, as much as the damage and pain caused by its linguistic and architectural limitations. Placing the mechanisms used in constructing collections per se under a sharp scrutiny, the exhibition sat with the paradox that a collection is, that lived experience is.

In the exhibition, the mechanisms, limits and potential of language were highlighted through its use in close relation to architecture. Each of the museum's five galleries was dedicated to one decade, and each decade was assigned a set of linguistic categories. These categories held concepts of identity formation open and enacted them, often uncomfortably, through a limiting system of key wording—language used to categorise us as individuals: our gender, our ethnicity, our place of origin; language that privileges particular points of centre: hands, legs; language used to compress our work as artists into single lines of thought: political, erotic; language used to articulate our position in a linear concept of time: living, no longer living; and language that acknowledged its own inadequacies: exception.

Despite the categories' almost absolute inability to describe us, or artists' work, they captured the discomfort of the supposition that a collection exhibition could ever be exhaustive or that a collection exhibition could ever be an accurate mirror of the complexities of the power lines that go into their own making. It was through these categories that we came face-to-face with the deployment of language in the process of canonisation and other history-making. This deployment can be liberating or marginalising. Here, its use did both, allowing work to come together in unexpected ways at the same time as revealing many of the imbalances in this

(and other) collection(s). The disproportional underrepresentation of women, Māori, Pacific and other minority artists is absolute. This is the paradox too, of collections, of lived experience, at some point someone (We? Us? Them? They? I?) *decided* to use and reuse many of these damaging patterns of language and selection.

It is in this moment where we are pushed and pressed by the consequences of these processes of institutional holding/institutional constraining that the invitation offered by the category exception becomes crucial—crucial to the logic of the exhibition, crucial to the positions presented at the symposium and now presented here in this reader, and crucial to how we construct our institutions in the future. Exception was the only category that repeated in the exhibition, appearing in all five of the galleries, swelling and shrinking, acting like a small spore caught in the museum’s throat. Setting its own terms of engagement, it was a glitch within the institution by quietly insisting on its own importance, it was an active decoding of what Audre Lorde refers to as the dangerous concept of the “mythic norm”. The exception is the unpredictable body—pulsating—not perfect, not flawless, not even really free, but a body nonetheless, multilayered, expansive, where skin, bone and flesh are in motion. In many ways, therefore, the collection becomes an object of the dynamic and contested relationship between the body, power, language and the archive, and a container for the contradictory process of constructing and perceiving a collection as much as it becomes a container for the contradictory process of constructing and perceiving a self. The exhibition and the contents of the symposium are an attempt to break (open) these mechanisms and begin to reimagine the regimes and parameters under which our concepts of self are narrated, obliterated, ignored or made anew.

The positions gathered here squeeze at our expectations and patterns of understanding. Drawing from a diverse set of practitioners working across the cultural sector in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, the contributions discuss considered approaches to collections that weave in and out of the institution. Organised in thematic chapters that reflect the structure of the symposium, position papers are bookended by a keynote-style contribution. In some cases the material is presented as a direct transcript of an oral presentation or a document of a lecture, while other contributors have opted to adapt their presentation to reflect the change in context, whether that be from a live moment to printed matter, or from a pre-COVID-19 world to the state of pandemic. Prof Linda Tuhiwai Smith expands on her groundbreaking work in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, connecting this with our

current global situation; Megan Tamati-Quennell introduces her approach to developing one of Aotearoa New Zealand’s first dedicated Māori and Indigenous collections; Wharehoka Smith discusses the complex relationship between his practice and the public sphere; Leone Samu Tui introduces the Pacific Collection Access Project out of the Auckland Museum which undertook the recategorisation of thousands of items from the Moana Nui a Kiwa region; Gabi Ngcobo offers a detailed reflection on her work with the collection of the Javett Art Centre at the University of Pretoria, South Africa; Tina Barton and Jenny Harper are in conversation about the highly controversial deaccession of an artwork by Colin McCahon in 1999; Dr Amber Aranui provides insight into the process of repatriation in current museological practice with a particular focus on repatriating human remains; Eloise Wallace and Steve Gibbs outline the challenges faced when engaging in a temporary repatriation of taonga from the British Museum to Gisborne, Aotearoa; Jo Walsh introduces her work into and against the exhibiting of taonga in cultural institutions in the United Kingdom as part of the In*ter*is*land Collective; Dr Clémentine Deliss argues for alternative institutional structures where access to collections is based on radical forms of conceptual intimacy; Samoa House Library introduce their artist-run library located in Auckland, Aotearoa; Lana Lopesi develops her approaches to the non-archivable; and Wanda Nanibush argues for Indigenous sovereignty within and beyond the institution. *Uneven Bodies* becomes an unruly body and, like the category exception in the exhibition it interrupts, picks at these questions of agency, visibility and politics.

Writing this foreword now, from within a COVID-19 close-close life, there is a necessity to reassess the ways in which certain standardised infrastructures draw out or exaggerate our capacity to be strong; to feel weak. If the core question for this project was ‘where is power centred?’ I hope that we can start to answer this question more fully, differently, together, carving out something that tells us how, where and with whom we want power to be situated 50 years from now. The positions gathered together here offer a compelling access point to reconsider business as usual as we all try and understand our own unpredictable bodies within the communities in which we live.

DECOLONISING CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS—
AN URGENT, NECESSARY,
CHALLENGING YET HOPEFUL
JOURNEY BEYOND COLONIALISM

Prof Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Cultural institutions are deeply implicated in the making and sustaining of colonialism as a structure of power and control and as the guardians of national culture/s. Cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, are like other knowledge institutions, such as universities and schools, in that they consciously protect, create, sustain, reiterate and store the cultural memories, motifs and artefacts, national stories and mythologies, and the attendant discursive apparatus that supports concepts of 'culture'. They are protectors and interpreters of national cultural meaning and identity. Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural institutions are deeply invested in the colonial project and play a key role in socialising, educating and training current and future generations. They shape our discourses and conversations about culture and identity, history and curriculum, and how we as peoples of Aotearoa see ourselves in relation to each other, to nature and to the world. Despite decades of efforts to decolonise cultural institutions the transformations needed are still slow and incremental. In light of the ethnic disparities highlighted by COVID-19, and then the #BlackLivesMatter movement that has exploded out of the pandemic, questions have again resurfaced and become urgent about colonialism and systemic racism. These questions have brought to the foreground the role of institutions as structures of systemic racism, inequity, and colonialism. In terms of Aotearoa New Zealand's institutions of colonialism it is timely (it is always timely) to ask yet again, 'What is the role and purpose of cultural institutions in a decolonising imagination?' and 'Is there a role and purpose for cultural institutions in a decolonised future?'

Despite the call for decolonising museums and other cultural institutions often being viewed as just an aspect of 'culture wars' the word 'culture' is not what is important here. Cultures are made by cultures, by people, by society and communities regardless. Culture will always be created and sustained wherever people live. The critical word is 'institution'. In the United States the #BlackLivesMatter movement reacted to systemic racism by the police after yet another shooting of a Black man, George Floyd in Minnesota. The police are identified as an 'institution' of systemic racism and police shooting as an example of institutional racism and the culture of police. In other words, systemic racism is institutionalised in the police force which, as units of police men and women, develops a 'culture' that supports and legitimises racist acts against Black people. However, this specific moment of #BlackLivesMatter is built upon a longer history even than the #BlackLivesMatter movement itself which began after the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012. In South Africa and the United Kingdom, for example, the police as an institution and the

symbols of slavery, racism and colonialism were quickly connected through the long history of Black activism against the police in the UK and the #RhodesMustFall movement that began in Cape Town, South Africa in 2015 but has travelled to the UK focusing on the colonial history of Sir Cecil Rhodes, Oxford University and universities in general. Of course, here in Aotearoa, the Tuia 250 commemorations in 2019 commemorated the arrival of Captain James Cook. Indigenous peoples worldwide and Māori in Aotearoa have our own histories of activism in relation to racism and colonialism. Racism is understood very much as an instrument of colonialism used to justify oppression. Māori have a long history in Aotearoa of protesting against injustice and racism and a long history in contesting what cultural institutions do in relation to Māori culture, history and knowledge. Aotearoa New Zealand's public institutions have mostly been forged in and from our colonial story and to some extent can all be seen as cultural institutions from the police to the prison system, health to education, the arts to sciences. They are all responsible to some degree for making meaning, for protecting and interpreting cultural and social meanings. They can also be seen as part of the deeper structure of a colonial system in which each performs specific roles that ultimately contribute to the colonial project.

What is different about the Aotearoa New Zealand context is the role of the Treaty of Waitangi as a relational contract between the Crown and Māori that ensures a mechanism for ongoing dialogue and also for creating new cultural meanings. The Treaty of Waitangi says two significant things about cultural meaning and the work of public cultural institutions; the first is about tino rangatiratanga and the second about citizenship. The tino rangatiratanga principle in Article Two empowers Māori to keep on creating culture and mātauranga, sustaining and building upon the legacies passed down to us from our tūpuna. The second principle in Article Three says Māori are full subjects and citizens and have rights to be treated equitably in the way institutions are envisioned, governed, and managed and in the equity of benefits that flow as outcomes. Both principles provide cultural institutions with a dynamic, a platform and a set of principles for reimagining themselves and what they do.

Of course, there are many contexts where cultural institutions have tried, both voluntarily and because they have been forced to, and are currently trying to implement change. There is already a body of knowledge (known variously as Treaty work, anti-racism work, bi-culturalism work, decolonial work and kaupapa Māori work) which speaks to how challenging this work is for institutions and for the people who work in these institutions. There are specific curricula

and professional development tools that are necessary for institutions taking on this work such as understanding the Treaty of Waitangi, colonial history and racism as well as also understanding white privilege and fragility. There are examples of the small victories that need to be celebrated as providing new spaces and opportunities for new practices to emerge. It would seem logical to accept that Pākehā people can not do this work by themselves nor can it be done by those whose careers are seen as part and parcel of the institution. Many institutions are predominantly Pākehā and attempts to engage Māori in the work and in the institution have led to a range of diverse processes and outcomes some see as tokenistic and others as a start but insufficient. Personal discomfort and organisational disruption are an inevitable part of a change process. Change that destabilises colonial power will be disruptive but that needs to be seen alongside the risk of not decolonising which is potentially more destructive. Not decolonising as an explicit refusal to change will invite the ongoing questioning and community activism that has brought us to the global crisis ignited by #BlackLivesMatter. Not decolonising as an explicit refusal to confront colonialism and racism will ultimately emblazon an institution in bright lights as racist and colonial and ultimately irrelevant.

I have argued elsewhere for decolonising methodologies as a way to both critique colonial knowledge systems and to provide ways for Indigenous knowledge and ideas to be part of imagining new ways of doing research and thinking about knowledge. Decolonising is only partly about dismantling colonialism. It is also partly about restorative processes for addressing and healing the past. It is partly about the reclamation of Indigenous Māori sovereignty. These things then create new spaces for imagining a different future. Decolonised cultural institutions have roles in each of these aspects of decolonising. They must lead and model forms of dismantling. They must practise restorative and healing processes. They must support the reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty. By being committed to these actions they might be better prepared to imagine a decolonised future for cultural institutions.