

**CALL FOR PAPERS:**

***'A difficult and intricate history':***

***Reckoning with the legacies of colonial material collections in Aotearoa New Zealand***

*Waipapa Taumata Rau University of Auckland*

*June 25-26, 2026*

**Background**

Recent years have seen growing scholarly and public interest in the role of colonial conflict (e.g. 'the New Zealand Wars') in defining New Zealand settler society and underpinning the social and economic disenfranchisement of iwi Māori. As part of this shift, collecting institutions have initiated projects that have begun to reckon with their colonial inheritance, notably *A Different Light: Early Colonial Photography in Aotearoa New Zealand* based on the collections of the Auckland Museum, Alexander Turnbull Library, and Hocken Collections, and *Te Ata o Tū: The New Zealand Wars collections of Te Papa* – both published in 2024. In the same year, Auckland Museum launched the refresh of the New Zealand Wars gallery, as *Atarau: Stories of the New Zealand Wars*. Recurring questions of these various projects revolve around how 'the New Zealand Wars' have been remembered and commemorated since the putative end of military events in 1881, and the role played by materials and visual cultures, taonga and objects.<sup>3</sup> This is not a new discussion: Dominion Museum ethnologist Augustus Hamilton, speaking in 1903, admitted that he was reluctant to acquire materials relating to colonial conflict; 'as a rule, very undesirable to the curator of a museum, being "documents" bearing upon a very difficult and intricate history'.<sup>1</sup> Today, we recognise such collections not as neutral spaces of dead artefacts sequestered from public life but active in how individuals, groups, and societies create, legitimise, negotiate, and challenge colonial legacies.<sup>2</sup>

**Focus**

In light of these different investigations, and a decade after the publication of the ground-breaking *The Lives of Colonial Objects* (Dunedin, 2015) edited by Annabel Cooper, Lachy Paterson, and Angela Wanhalla, it is now timely to bring into conversation expert perspectives from a range of disciplines, institutions, and practices on the histories of material collections and the role of these collections in remembering and understanding colonial legacies. We invite researchers, curators, and artists working with different forms of 'material culture' (especially held in library, museum, and gallery collections and archives) created, collected, distributed, reimagined, and displayed in response to or as part of practices of colonial power and in Aotearoa since the nineteenth century, to a workshop on *June 25-26* at the *University of Auckland Waipapa Taumata Rau*.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'A Library of Imperfect memories' in *Te Ata o Tū*, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to Patrizia Battilani, Maria Giovanna Belcastro, Krzysztof Kowalski and Teresa Nicolosi (eds.), *Dissonant Heritage: Concepts, Critiques, Cases* (Bologna: University of Bologna, 2024), 3-15, 4.

Core questions for us in this workshop are: How have theories and approaches to material history changed in the last decade? How has the field moved (or not) from work such as *The Lives of Colonial Objects*? To what extent has a particular framing (e.g. 'colonial' or 'New Zealand Wars') constrained/opened us in thinking about collections? What does a method of 'difficult', 'unruly' or 'dissonant' collections look like? What is the value in thinking about collections themselves historically, as layered with meanings by individuals, groups, institutions, and dominant narratives over time? How can we interrogate/challenge the institutional domain of 'collections' by considering the role of sites, and of taonga held in family and whānau archives?

Collections and object-based topics might range from the local, regional, national, and global in scale, and include:

- How individuals and groups responded to colonial power, especially its violence in various forms (whether as victims, survivors, perpetrators, or observers) in ways that filtered, mediated, memorialised, obscured, and erased violence through material objects; and how these practices, socially, might be expressed across a range of 'cultural media': textual (such as soldiers' diaries), spatial (cartographic mapping), material (collecting or collection-making), visual (painting and photography), and oral (waiata, family stories);
- How collections reflect shared patterns and practices in the making of collective identity, legitimising narratives of settler colonial occupation, and authorising institutions: for example, filmmaking, the creation of exhibitions, heritage movements, the development of literary genres and styles, trends in historiography and museology, etc, that filter the legacy and aftermath of colonial violence, in ways that reinforce (but also destabilise) settler colonial structures;
- The role collections (and collecting institutions) themselves have played in perpetuating, or challenging, the colonial inheritances embedded within them and the objects they contain, especially how collections can be exposed and interrogated in our present moment through the work of critical research and activism, through the lens of contemporary art, for example, across different practices and platforms (we are interested in how artists and activists reflect upon and address the legacies of conflict in persistent and resistant ways);
- How different practices and approaches to collections allow us to glimpse broader cultural formations of 'commemoration', 'historical remembrance', and 'memorialisation' which draw on multiple media, scripts, and languages of memory to arbitrate colonial violence and its ongoing ramifications.

While focusing on collections and objects, we encourage broader conceptual discussion of 'history', 'heritage', 'memory' across 'personal', 'social', and 'cultural' registers, as well as a broad understanding of 'colonial conflict', encompassing the New Zealand Wars but also allowing the possibility of other interpretations of colonial legacies that are attentive to materials. We are interested in presentations that are based on the initial stages of object and collections-based research as well as more advanced, substantive findings. To develop our discussion, workshop participants will also be asked to read select texts as we continue to

hone methodologies around memory, dissonance, and materiality – further details will be shared once abstracts have been confirmed.

## **Outcomes**

The workshop has two intended outcomes. First, we are interested in publishing an edited collection with AUP that reflects the scope and substance of the workshop and our interests in material collections and colonial legacies. We look forward to essays, based on the workshop presentations and subsequent discussion, which will broaden our understandings of colonial culture, its violence, and offer new avenues of collaboration and investigation. The volume will also include vignettes of artists and their practices in response to colonial legacies in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. It is this richer historical and methodological work that will then inform future research and workshops.

Second, we hope to use the workshop to launch an interdisciplinary network of scholars working in collections (both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’), with an explicit emphasis on the role of historical disciplines in curatorial practice. We want to explore a methodology of ‘dissonance’ which can be applied to historical collections in a range of settings and contexts in Aotearoa and beyond. Collections may be ‘dissonant’, ‘unruly’ or ‘difficult’ due to their relation to settler colonial violence, but also in unexpected ways, revealed, for example, through issues of provenance, institutional histories, and the pursuit of contemporary reconciliation. A key goal is to develop a network of expertise around the handling, interpretation, and display of ‘contested’ or ‘dissonant’ materials, across textual, spatial, visual, and oral sources, including how to surface dissonance in collections – and face up to the discomfort that this might provoke.

*Please send an abstract of approximately 400-500 words to [rowan.light@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:rowan.light@auckland.ac.nz) with a 50-word biography by March 7.*

Ngā mihi

Jane Davidson-Ladd,  
Lucy Mackintosh,  
Paul Diamond,  
Rebecca Rice,  
and Rowan Light

*Workshop convenors*