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Resist and assert – Indigenous work in GLAM

Lauren Booker (Garigal)

Introduction

Since 1788, collecting institutions have been implicated in the colonial project of Australia and, still today, institutional collections contain masses of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ cultural material, information and knowledges. Many of these collections were formed from the exotification, surveillance, assimilation and attempted genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples under the guise of anthropological research and government “protection” policies. Collecting institutions are inclusive of galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) across both public and private sectors. These include any galleries, libraries, archives and museums embedded in the tertiary education sector, such as a university-based archive or discipline specific museum. Collecting institutions are complicit in, and responsible for, many colonial and assimilatory acts of surveillance, misrepresentation and removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestors and cultural and intellectual property.

These contested sites of collection, research and display have long been critiqued and resisted by communities, artists, scholars and GLAM workers, who face the ongoing repercussions of collecting institution practice both old and new. In Henriette Fourmile’s “Who Owns the Past? Aborigines as Captives of the Archive” (1989), she says: “To Aboriginal people, the key to our historical

¹ The term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander refers to First Nations/Indigenous Nations within Australia and the Torres Strait Islands, to whom the collections, actions and practitioners discussed in this essay are connected. The term Indigenous is also used interchangeably with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. I want to recognize that there are varied preferences for terminology – Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are two that refer to the many nations across the continent and the surrounding seas.

and cultural resources and therefore to our cultural and historical identities is firmly clasped in a white hand”.

Fourmile identifies the power and power imbalance held in collecting institutions. To this day, radical divesting of that power and transformative change across collecting institutions is yet to be seen (Thorpe 2019). As Indigenous GLAM workers, scholars, artists and activists raise awareness of the complicity of collecting institutions in the ongoing colonial project, what was once an undisturbed site of privilege and fictional neutrality is now being prised open and laid out for questioning. In recent years there have been international movements such as Decolonize this Place, Museum Detox, Museums Are Not Neutral and Rhodes Must Fall, led by the voices of Black, Indigenous and People of Color organizers formulating numerous ways to disrupt the violent colonial narratives and practices of collecting and research institutions. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and allies have been pushing back against the colonial project of collecting institutions through scholarship, arts practice and policy advocacy. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance and critique in relation to collecting institutions is far from a new practice. I pay my respects to those people who have laid the path and those who continue to surge forward that have enabled my reflection to take place.

This essay aims to question the application of decolonizing methodologies to collecting institutions in Australia, by illuminating coloniality within the GLAM sector, and identifying Indigenous-led resistance work being done in those spaces. It pays homage to those individuals and communities that work to resist and redefine these spaces formed by colonialism and collecting. This is by no means an exhaustive review of coloniality in collecting institutions, nor of the resistance work taking place: it is rather a very small portion.

There are many threads that are still being woven or that I do not mention, and I draw attention to the issues of academic writing forever having gaps and exclusions. I extend this essay as a personal response to the consideration of decolonization as I navigate colonial structures within and around me. I will draw upon my personal experiences as an archivist and researcher, in a body born of colonization, within the academic and collecting institution sector. As I investigate the viability of applying decolonization praxis to collecting institutions, I cannot surely say that decolonization of collecting institutions is possible. I ask myself – can there be transformative change driven from within collecting institutions and is decolonization the right term for this radical change?

Many policies and guidelines have been enacted at both government and collecting institution sector level, recognizing complicity in traumatic colonial histories that continue to negatively affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples today (ATSILIRN 2012; HREOC 1997; ICA 2019; Janke 2018). There has been, and continues to be, significant work in recognizing these policies and guidelines, as well as enabling restitutions, reparations and repatriations in Australia. However, many structural changes still need application and advocating for. In this essay, I would like to specifically consider and highlight Indigenous resistance to the continuing colonialism of collecting institutions, and the work done to apply and advocate for structural change. I see Indigenous resistance across collecting institutions presenting in radical and beautiful ways, in quiet and sorrowful ways, but most importantly in self-determined ways of enacting agency of voice, body, past and future.

GLAM, memory institutions, collecting institutions

I recognize the historical inter-institutional nuances that blur when discussing galleries, libraries, archives and museums as a combined whole. The merging, intersecting and boundary drawing of galleries, libraries, archives and museums into a singular talking point (the “GLAM sector” or collecting institutions) has undulated between support and critique over time (VanderBerg 2012). Galleries, libraries, archives and museums are also sometimes referred to as “Memory Institutions”, defining the four institutions as places of personal and collective heritage preservation that speak to national identity and shared narratives (Robinson 2012). In this essay, collecting institutions are purposefully combined into a singular topic of discussion as sites that directly affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, through issues of power and control (Fourmile 1989; Russell 2001), and tools of colonial propaganda and silence (Dodson 1994; Harkin 2019). However, it is important to recognize each of these institutions – galleries, libraries, archives and museums – as having distinct disciplines and histories that inform them. Therefore, when viewing the Indigenous-led work and resistance that takes place in each of these four types of institution, there will be different policies, pressures and practices to navigate. This essay experiments with discussing these institutions as a combined whole, in order to consider them as a sum of their foundational colonial parts and ideals. I do this to illuminate the institutional connections to their shared function in the colonial project. Referring to function over form (collecting institutions, rather than

GLAM), and colonial and imperial intent over notions of neutrality (collecting institutions, rather than memory institutions), assists in recognizing that under all the sector rhetoric there remain interconnected collections, structures and functions that need to be considered. In positioning collecting institutions as a sum of intentions and actions that often conflate colonization with a concise and reconciled national identity, I show that the intentions of the institute are less important than the structural damage they can enact. Collecting institutions are not neutral windows into colonial power of the past; rather they maintain colonial power that can still be exercised in the present. Before I begin to discuss movements of resistance against the colonialism of collecting institutions, there is a need to identify where and how colonialism resides in these structures.

Colonialism and the collecting institution

Colonial collecting institutions aim to strengthen colonial power and identity by creating and controlling Eurocentric ideals of Indigenous inferiority to bolster white supremacy (McKemmish et al 2011; Russell 2001). Australian and international collecting institutions have amassed monolithic collections focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Cooper 1989) and are based on ideals that exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency and voice (Russell 2001).

As purveyors of status quo with claims and agendas of neutrality, collecting institutions are tools of colonial power assertion, othering and silencing. These functions are so deeply entrenched in the historical structure of the collecting institution that the problematization of coloniality in collecting institutions often splits sector opinion, with some critical of the changing paradigm (Hunt 2019; ICOM 2004). The changing paradigm aims to identify coloniality in collecting institutions, problematize it and strategize ways to resist and renew institutional forms and functions (Kassim 2019; Sentance 2018). By imperial and colonial design, the collecting institution is a repository of representations of people, place and knowledge – that at its origin sought to center whiteness, often in line with supremacist intentions to prove whiteness as superior.

In Australia, collecting institutions have attempted to define Indigenous Peoples by distinguishing difference and inferiority to the settler-colonial project. Many nations across the continent were often homogenized into a pan-Indigenous Other, relegating dynamic peoples, places and knowledges into the

constantly diminishing past (Russell 2001). Lynette Russell (2001, p. 3) identifies this as the “homogeneity paradigm” of settler-colonial representations of the “sameness” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, aiming to proliferate obsolescence.

Many collections that currently exist outside of Australia were aimed at favoring the settler-colonial state to export a state-determined representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as a past that has been superseded. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have worked tirelessly in innovative ways to advocate for Ancestors and cultural materials held overseas to return to communities and Country; from accessing collections to forming foundations of new artists work in both revitalization and institutional critique (for example the work of Mutti Mutti/Yorta Yorta/Boon Wurrung/Wemba Wemba artist Maree Clarke, Waanyi multimedia artist Judy Watson and Yuwaalaraay artist and designer Lucy Simpson), to advocating through writing and curatorial practices (Andrews 2017; Gumbula 2009; Moulton 2018). The ongoing institutional control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral remains, cultural material and records is a traumatic and paternalistic dislocation from Country and community that is directly connected to the colonial foundations of the institution.

If colonialism is both the cause, and the ongoing effect, of the collecting institutional paradigm, decolonization must be an action resisting that which is colonial, but also enabling the figuration of something new. Decolonization is not just critical awareness of the colonial structure; rather, it needs to also be a proactive “divesting of colonial power” (Smith 2012, p. 101). For the collecting institution sector to consider its ability for “decolonization”, there needs to be consideration of how land, identity and power, as foundational tenets of colonialism, are engaged with. In the settler-colonial state where the physical institutional structure is relatively immovable, and with the onset of the digital “GLAM” space becoming the new normal, how can colonial paradigms of land, identity and power be movable?

The connection of land dispossession to collecting institutions

The invasion and violent colonization of Australia and the surrounding seas, motivated and supported by legal fictions and racial supremacism, disregarded the sovereignty of over 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders nations (Behrendt 2010). Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015, p. xi), Goenpul

woman from the Quandamooka First Nation, asserts that this understanding of Australia as uninhabited and, subsequently, a possession of the Crown was established through the “possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty”, which continues to pervasively dictate the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the nation state. Collecting institutions have played a key role in the act of possessing and transferring ownership of everything that could be collected and re-categorized: cultural materials, language, Ancestors and records pertaining to families and individuals. Galleries, libraries, archives and museums have held the legislated power to determine definition and display of collections and proliferate negative representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples whilst built on unceded lands (Russell 2001).

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Australia implemented multiple violent, paternalistic and eugenics informed policies intended to dispossess and assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (HREOC 1997). These policies were applied by state governments and included forcible removal of Indigenous children from families, the forced relocation of many people from their Country to reserves and missions or to other Peoples Country, and restrictions regarding cultural practices and languages (HREOC 1997). Connections to Country include language, stories, knowledge, cultural materials made from the land, and the ability to be physically present on that land with kin. The interruption and oppression of Indigenous self-determination via legal fictions, exploitation and genocidal government policies were not only documented by collecting institutions in Australia, but also sustained and supported by collecting institutions as sites of surveillance, regulation and national identity (Harkin 2019).

To aid in the settler-colonial project in Australia, collecting institutions have either benefited from and/or directly worked for discriminatory government policies, amassing collections about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples that exclude self-determined authorship (Russell 2005). For example, state archives amassed collections created under state government’s “protection” policies – such as the Aborigines Welfare Board (Harkin 2019). The Bringing Them Home report highlighted the importance of access to government and non-government records for Stolen Generations survivors and their families, drawing public attention to the ongoing trauma and barriers presented by archives and recordkeeping for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (HREOC 1997). Museums across the country have relied on researchers and collectors, both academic and amateur, to build their collections and have engaged in the international trade of Ancestral remains for study and display (Turnbull 2017). Libraries and archives have substantial collections of linguistic

documents containing Indigenous languages. They have become important repositories for Indigenous language revitalization projects (Thorpe & Galassi 2014) in returning documentation to communities to assist in repairing what successive government policies attempted to destroy.

Collecting institutions across Australia are implicated in national histories of racism and social injustice through the collections they hold and the collecting practices that built them. The disconnection of Peoples' power to self-determine their own identity and representation is aided by long histories of collecting institutions making decisions without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples driving those decisions. The conversation of decolonization in the collecting institution sector is one that directly relates to Indigenous self-determination regarding all decisions made in connection to Country and identity; and Country and identity are present in all collections.

Decolonization in the collecting institution requires the re-centering of land/Country and a total divestment from state power towards Indigenous self-determination. The requests for repatriation of Ancestral remains and cultural materials to communities and Country, for example, are not only about reparations; they are also an assertion of self-determination in the colonial collecting paradigm (Fforde 2002). Furthermore, they are enacting Indigenous connection to Country. The call for decolonization of collecting institutions is complex; however, at its core it is a recognition of the colonial power held by collecting institutions, its disruption and the re-centering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination of identity and Country.

Decolonizing methodologies and the collecting institution

Decolonization . . . is now recognised as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power.

Smith 2012, p. 101

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's foundational text, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), stated that decolonization is a necessary continual resistance of colonial power and practical assertion of Indigenous sovereignty. Smith (2012) recognizes decolonization working on two fronts – state focused resistance and assertions of Indigenous sovereignty. Decolonization has become increasingly referred to as a goal for the collecting institution sector, and it is a key focus that often

features in the titles of Australian collecting institution sector conferences, symposiums, seminars, papers and tertiary classes. However, this raises questions on how many of these discussions on decolonization and the collecting institution sector are actually organizing state focused resistance and assertions of Indigenous sovereignty, and how much just remains metaphorical, as Tuck and Yang (2012) notably warned against.

Perhaps, the conceptualization of decolonization within the collecting institution sector sits in parallel with the conceptualization of social justice as “always a process [that] can never fully be achieved” (Duff et al 2013, pp. 324–325). However, with this in mind we can turn to Tuck and Yang (2012) and their clear position that “Decolonization is not a metaphor”. There should be careful consideration of delineating between what is a decolonization conversation and what is a social justice conversation (Tuck & Yang 2012). Tuck and Yang (2012) aim to turn statements into action, where decolonization is about the fruitful return of Indigenous lands and recognition of sovereignty, rather than the conversations over semantics or impacts.

I suggest that a key component to the potential involvement of collecting institutions in engaging with conversations around decolonizing is to focus on providing radical transparency around institutional parameters of what can and cannot be achieved in regards to divestment from colonial and state power. The collecting institution itself may support a specific community or individual's decolonization aims and practices, but the deeply embedded foundations of colonial power make me question if decolonization as applied to the institution itself is an achievable goal. Many of the actions that could be labeled as destabilizing colonial power in a collecting institution would actually fall under the *minimum standards* of Indigenous rights as laid out in United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

As a site and tool of colonialism, collecting institutions will never be able to fully engage in decolonization efforts without radical reconsideration of governance, form and function. This is not to say that collecting institutions cannot continue to have these aspirations, and more importantly, support the rights and goals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, whether that is decolonization, treaty, reparation, repatriation or Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights. Ho-Chunk Nation scholar Dr Amy Lonetree asserts that to engage a museum in the decolonization process is to recognize the museum as “a means for repairing colonization's harm” (2012, p. 171). Furthermore, Lonetree (2012, p. 27) sees the potential for transformation of museums into “sites of conscience” by recognizing the specific harm and ongoing

grief perpetrated by museums' colonial paradigm and engaging in decolonizing methodologies to support the healing practices of Indigenous communities. New means and methods of supporting healing goals may be found by engaging in the truth-telling of institutional involvement in colonial and assimilatory histories, as well as continuing to support the Indigenous voices that are resisting and asserting sovereignty.

Self-determination and the collecting institution

Decolonization practices and principles are global in nature but are ultimately undertaken at the local level. For example, UNDRIP is a guiding document that recognizes how collecting institutions have contributed to the oppression of Indigenous self-determination internationally, whilst needing specific enactment locally. UNDRIP has set a global mandate for the understanding and support of Indigenous Peoples' self-determination in the access, care and control of their own cultural knowledge, heritage and intellectual property. Australia was one of four countries to delay ratification of UNDRIP until 2009; however, since then many institutional policies, protocols and guidelines have utilized the UNDRIP as the basis for commitments to rights-based practice. Key to UNDRIP is the mandate for Indigenous self-determination to all areas of life – political, cultural and social (UNDRIP 2007).

Specifically, in relation to collecting institutions, Article 11, Article 12 and Article 31 reference the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination over access, protection, maintenance, development and control of materials and knowledges held in collecting institutions, as well as repatriation of stolen Ancestors:

Article 11

Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.

Article 12

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.

Article 31

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

UNDRIP 2007

There are a growing number of projects, policies and programs across Australia that reflect the collecting institution and research sector's recognition of specific Indigenous communities' rights and needs surrounding access, care and control of collections as asserted by UNDRIP. Collaborative initiatives between communities and the collecting institution sector are beginning to consider what is needed to facilitate the divestment of decision-making power from institutional control. Some examples of this collaborative work include: the support of community specific access conditions for digital archives (Christen, Merrill & Wynne 2017); digital returns and localization of collections (Ormond-Parker & Sloggett 2012); repatriation of Ancestral remains from museums (Poll 2015; Fforde, McKeown & Keeler 2020); and access to records for people affected by past government policies that, for example, removed language from people and children from families (Thorpe & Galassi 2014).

Guidelines and policy advocacy that aim to intervene with business-as-usual have begun to set precedents in how collecting institutions must consider ICIP, Free Prior and Informed Consent and repatriation. These include *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries* (Janke 2018) and the movements of ICIP rights and Indigenous Data Sovereignty. On paper, it seems like momentum is building for collecting institutions to directly take responsibility for colonial and assimilatory complicity and to address the requests and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. However, this momentum remains at the will of the institutions themselves and would have to take place while the Australian Government continues to ignore refusals and block requests from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Davis 2018). It would have to take place whilst there continues, for example, to be the poisoning of water in the NT by fracking (Hoosan 2018), the planning and implementation of sacred site destruction for the building of

highways and the mining of Country (Djab Wurrung Heritage Protection Embassy 2020; Wahlquist 2020); and the continued brutal injustice of Aboriginal deaths in custody (McQuire 2020). The collecting institution sector has a long way to go in seeing the interconnectedness of their form and function and the daily violence of the settler-colonial state, and perhaps this may be something that is never arrived at fully. Furthermore, this cannot be the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander GLAM sector workers alone to take responsibility for shouldering all the advocacy work whilst also engaging in their work and community roles.

New fields of critical thinking regarding the effects of colonization are also contributing to responses to international and sector mandates, such as Wiradjuri Professor Juanita Sherwood's work detailing the ongoing effect of colonization on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' health and wellbeing. Sherwood insists that in order to provide appropriate health-care for Indigenous patients, health professionals must have detailed knowledge of both experiences and intergenerational trauma felt by Indigenous Peoples in settler-colonial societies (Sherwood 2013). In line with this thinking, collecting institutions need to broaden their consideration of restitution and reparation beyond the scope of their collections, and look to the health of people as a key component of supporting and delivering on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Australian collecting institutions need to be further interrogated for their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' (inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander GLAM workers) health and wellbeing. There continues to be strong Indigenous voices advocating for and implementing Indigenous-led initiatives across collecting institutions. If decolonization is the divestment of colonial power, then the collecting institution sector needs to be radically transparent about the ways in which colonial power can be divested from in a sector that greatly relies on state support and legislated ownership of collection materials. Furthermore, if decolonization is being raised as a priority for a collecting institution, questions must be raised around who is driving this and how this aligns with communities' needs and goals. Going back to UNDRIP (2007), in which every article raised is only the *minimum* standard for Indigenous Peoples' rights internationally:

Article 43

The rights recognized herein constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the world.

Indigenous resistance and the collecting institution

Over the last two decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and sector workers have been engaging with the colonial foundations of collecting institutions through interaction with, and disruption of, the colonial narratives of collections. The list of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who critique, examine, engage and resist the collecting institution sector in the content of their work is long and ever growing, including the “Sovereign Acts” series by The Unbound Collective, and the “Spirit of Things: The Sound of Objects” by Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs. These artists, and many more not written here, are part of an international movement of First Nations Peoples from seas and lands globally, that address the collecting institution sector in their arts practice and work.

Two particular examples of artist works, those by Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones and Narungga activist-poet Natalie Harkin, expose and disrupt the colonial narratives of collecting institutions through direct intersection with collections and collecting practices. As discussed by Noongar writer Cassie Lynch (2017, n.p.), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists’ works are “epistemological disruptions” that can not only counter but rise above the “assumed certainties” in the colonization narrative. Importantly, the works of Jones and Harkin sit in displays of Indigenous sovereignty; of identity; of dynamism, of resilience; of un-apologetic truth-telling.

In Jones’ 2016 sculptural installation project “barrangal dyara (skin and bones)” for Kaldor Public Art Projects, 15,000 gypsum shields were created in multiple styles from across the southeast of Australia. These shields were laid out over the original site of the Garden Palace, in the now Royal Botanical Gardens in Sydney, an exhibition hall that burnt down in 1882 which contained Ancestral remains and cultural materials from southeast Aboriginal communities. The shields outlined the forgotten presence of the Garden Palace across 20,000 square meters, with kangaroo grass planted within what was the giant of the colonial collecting institutions in Australia.

“barrangal dyara (skin and bones)” was a response to the immense loss of Ancestral remains and specifically southeast Aboriginal cultural materials and knowledges held in the Garden Palace, and more broadly during the violence of the colonial and assimilation eras (Kaldor Public Art Projects n.d.). Jones described “barrangal dyara (skin and bones)” as an act of mourning and remembering Ancestors and Ancestral knowledge: “peeling the layers of skin back off this site and revealing these bones in the landscape” (Jones quoted in Sebag-Montefiore 2016, n.p.). That which has been buried and silenced in the

Australian narrative regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in relation to collecting institutions, is being brought forward for the public to consider their forgetfulness. In the opening of Natalie Harkin's "Archival Poetics" (Colonial Archive, Archival-Poetics 1) there is a prelude and a warning, notifying all to witness that which will be brought to light:

ATTENTION:
RECORD KEEPERS OF THE STATE
WE HAVE YOU UNDER SURVEILLANCE
WE HAVE YOU UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Harkin 2019, p. 7

"Archival Poetics" is structured in three parts to interrogate the archive; bringing forth its structure of racist and gendered violence, and how the experience of the state archive is woven into the personal. Harkin combines personal and institutional archival materials and intimate memories to identify the silence in the record and challenge the official historical narrative with a response. Nathan "Mudyi" Sentance, Wiradjuri man, librarian and museum educator, describes "Archival Poetics" as Harkin exercising a right of reply, highlighting its significance as: "assert[ing] the power that we First Nations people hold and have always held – a power that exists outside of colonial systems" (Sentance 2019, n.p.). This goes back to Smith's (2012, p. 101) description of decolonization of a "divestment of colonial power". "Archival Poetics" critically interrogates the colonial archive and the ongoing effects of what the archive both presents and represents; uncovering how the colonial archive as a site and a structure simultaneously holds truths and untruths, presence and absence. This is further explored by the work of The Unbound Collective, of which Harkin is a collaborator alongside Faye Rosas Blanch, Simone Ulalka Tur and Ali Gumillya Baker, in their "Sovereign Acts" series. Harkin (2017) takes up her responsibility and sovereignty as a Nurungga woman, by disrupting the officiated narrative whilst determining and weaving her own archive and story – for the past and future.

Both Jones' and Harkin's works present methods of truth-telling that challenge ownership and the authority of colonial narratives, while asserting Indigenous self-determination over knowledges, histories and identities. The receptiveness of some Australian collecting institutions to engage with the truth-telling that Indigenous artists and GLAM sector workers bring to these spaces seems to be at a time when momentum is building towards institutional responsibility for institutional coloniality.

However, as discussed earlier, when one zooms out to look at the broader situation in Australia regarding Indigenous rights being upheld, this feeling of momentum seems uncertain. The more time I spend working in or around collecting institutions, the more I see institutional and government receptiveness as less and less important in the collecting institution sector. Jonathan Jones discusses this in his article “Lighting the Fire: Cultural Renaissance in the South-East”, where he highlights that: *“In recent times we have experienced a return to traditional practices in south-east Australia. . . . The rapid emergence of these projects, often around kitchen tables, schoolrooms and campfires, away from galleries and museums, is by nature intimate and remains largely undocumented”* (Jones 2014, p. 35, my emphasis). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are continuously highlighting the ongoing coloniality of collecting institutions and pushing back in resistance. They are not waiting for permission to enact Indigenous agency in the historical narrative and future direction of collections and institutional (mis)representations. I say this not to detract from the hugely significant work of policy change, but rather to highlight the daily work of revitalizing, reclaiming or resisting that Indigenous Peoples are doing regardless of collecting institutional support.

In the final part of “Archival-Poetics (Blood Memory, Archival-Poetics 3)”, we are brought back to the beginning, with another warning – that in these archival interactions, Indigenous Peoples are not guaranteed closure or easy endings (Harkin 2019). Harkin (2019) reminds us to breathe when we can and prepare for this possibility. “Archival-Poetics”, however, is also a love letter, dedicated to family and Grandmothers past, present and to come (Harkin 2019). It is in this act of responsibility of love and care in truth-telling that both Jones’ and Harkin’s work pushes outside of the colonial paradigm, as observed by Henrietta Fourmile that Aboriginal Peoples are “captives of the archive” (Fourmile 1989). “Archival-Poetics” and “barrangal dyara (skin and bones)” enact a responsibility to Country and kin in reconnecting stories, languages and knowledges that have been removed from place, People and practice. The resistance and disruption of the trauma, homogenization and decontextualization that collecting institutions proliferate against Indigenous Peoples are something that can only be realized with Indigenous People leading the work.

An assumed certainty of the colonization narrative was that there would be an eventual destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country and identity. Many collecting institutions had expectations that the collections they held were to be remnants and artifacts of complete cultural loss (Russell 2001). This, however, was and is not the case. Some of these same collections are now

being returned to Country and community, and others are being accessed for revitalization, reuse and resistance work (Andrews 2017; Jones 2014). In my opinion, this is where collecting institutions can focus their reparative action: through truth-telling and supporting the rights and goals of Indigenous Peoples, whether working internal or external to the institution, to determine the futures of collections. The question of decolonization as applied to the collecting institution must not descend into metaphor (Tuck & Yang 2012). Foundational elements of the collecting institution, in both form and function, are immutable characteristics of colonialism. It is important that the collecting institution sector becomes more reflexive and transparent regarding what transformative change can and cannot be done by a key site and tool of colonialism. Collecting institutions can be facilitators and supporters of an Indigenous-led decolonization aim and decolonizing methodologies; however, there needs to be critical engagement and disruption of any action that works to benefit institutional power rather than support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty. Collecting institutions are intrinsically linked to Country and identity – not only in their placement on unceded land or in their institutional histories, but also in the collections and stories that they hold. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, what is held in the collections' stores and stacks tells of Country, Ancestors, identity and future. As Yolngu elder and scholar, Dr Gumbula (2009, p. 1) said:

Everything is telling us who we are.