

***Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display.* Conal McCarthy. New York: Berg, 2007. 264 pp.\***

Reviewed by Shawn LaneBull

*Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display* is an in-depth investigation of how the Māori people have been portrayed in exhibitions. Conal McCarthy pursues this history in both a chronological framework as well as in, as the author states, a Foucauldian genealogical manner. This dialogue creates a useful roadmap for the text as the reader moves back and forth between the examined occurrences of “exhibition” and the utility of the text as a critique of exhibition practices writ large. Overall the text is an excellent introduction to the practices of cultural display, its socio-political impacts, and, particularly, the cultural repercussions of communication and performance through exhibition in relation to the Māori.

McCarthy’s implementation of a standard chronological method is effective in charting the manner in which the Māori have been displayed over time and in relation to the more current politics of how the National Museum of New Zealand has followed the ebb and flow of cultural display trends through their multiple guises. From the curio to the artifact and beyond, McCarthy looks at how dominant narratives—first those of colonialism and then nationalist ones— influenced the ways in which Māori objects and the culture they were taken to represent were considered. Taking a step back from the period in question allows the author to also examine how the currents of science, ethnology, art, and politics have impacted the exhibition of Māori culture. For example, the consideration of how an item’s value shifts when framed as art versus when it is considered as craft or as ethnological specimen, or how the election of Māori people alters the museum and gallery nomenclature, subsequently changing the perception of the item from curiosity to *taonga*.

The Foucauldian genealogy is less obvious, but no less useful as a methodology. McCarthy describes the spaces in which the displays are located and accompanies these descriptions with images when possible. Side-by-side with these snapshots are the connections between the objects under the gaze and the people associated with them. That is to say, the people who have donated, sold, been pilfered from, and/or consumed the production of the objects. In the context of the Māori people they occupy not only the first category but often are also to be found in the second. McCarthy establishes a dialectic that frames the tension between the heterogeneity of “Māori” perspectives, while also chronicling their perceived homogeneity by multiple colonizers.

The strength of the book is found in its characterization of the complexity of the issues raised and explored in each of the book’s sections. Portraying a singular cultural “them” is difficult, even more so is accounting for the changing dynamics existing between the imperial and the colonized. McCarthy captures the tension between both the *Pākehā* (non-Māori New Zealanders) and the Māori as well as within the two groups. The chapter covering the time period from 1991 to 2001 is an excellent example of how the exhibition of Māori culture is dynamic, changing over time depending on whether it is being represented through the lenses of the dominant

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culture or within frameworks derived from the culture being displayed. Specifically, McCarthy shows how bifurcation of the historicization of the nation of New Zealand enables the exhibition of the Māori people as equal in import to non-Māori as well as fosters representations of the Māori as contemporary subjects.

Complexity comes with its own issues to be analyzed. In my reading of the situation, McCarthy comes up short in two ways. The first is in the, sometimes superficial, treatment given to “orthodox traditionalism” in favor of the more contemporary treatments of the Māori culture without the provision of any explanation of the reasons motivating at least a portion of the Māori population’s desire to maintain their ancestral ways (p. 47). The second is the decided lack of broad applicability of the work to those outside of New Zealand, which is only a deficit when considering the implied value of the work offered in the title.

These less attractive attributes are easily overlooked when considering McCarthy’s cultural-historic focus. This focus can be “heard” through the utilization of the Māori language as a means of demonstrating the gulf between cultures. Similarly, when McCarthy considers the values of the objects on display through the subjects who are provided or denied agency through the practice of exhibition, the languages that construct the trajectories of the power dynamics are critical for a sustained engagement with the effects of the intersecting cultures of exhibition.

*Exhibiting Māori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display*, is a text that should be considered for undergraduate courses as well as graduate courses. It is written in a vernacular that is free of academic jargon, allowing easy access to the more important issues while also presenting the aforementioned tensions in such a way that they can be discussed by students on multiple levels. McCarthy’s multifaceted approach also leaves more experienced students with space for further exploration.

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