

SEAN STURM AND STEPHEN TURNER

INTERSTICES SPINOZA

To see or be seen? The grounds of a place-based university

Prophecy

Spinoza, as the Dutch Ambassador to New Zealand, Rob Zaagman, reminded us in his welcome to the Arts of Spinoza + Pacific Spinoza, Interstices Under Construction Symposium held in Auckland in May 2017, radically undercut received wisdom, orthodox religion, and the political status quo. In the spirit of this radical Spinoza, we ask after the grounds of knowledge in the place now known as “the University of Auckland” (or Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau). We take as our starting point the *literal* grounds of our University, which not only provided the site for the symposium’s discussion about Spinoza and the Pacific, but which also establishes the parameters of what counts as knowledge through the grounding provided by its faculties, schools, and disciplines. We ask about the University’s provenance, about the grounds it has secured for its functions—teaching, research, and service—and about the “built pedagogy” of its architecture and environs (Sturm & Turner, 2011). To do so, we read into the University the history of its own construction, in order to get at the grounds of university-based knowledge more generally.¹ The remit that Spinoza gives us to do so is partly supported by the University of Auckland’s own aspiration to world excellence, which makes it a university just like any other aspiring world-excellent university, one which can stand in for the university in general, for the “idea of the university” today (Newman, 1996; Jaspers, 1959; Habermas, 1987). Indeed, the world-excellent university opens itself to the generic drive of all-inclusive or “transcendental capitalism” (de Caeter, 2002: 273). We argue that the optics of a Spinozan radical enlightenment enables us to ask after the grounds of knowledge, to ask what the university makes visible, and what, at the same time, is occluded by this visibility.

In “The Tyranny of Transparency”, Marilyn Strathern argues that, in the university today, “visibility as a conduit for knowledge is elided with visibility as an instrument for control” (2000: 309). But the university is not simply a producer of knowledge, it is also an instrument of its control, one that establishes what can be known and how it comes to be known (Foucault, 1981: 94-95). The apparatus of the university, to borrow Gilles Deleuze’s (1992) description of Foucault’s *dispositif* (apparatus), is an “optical machine”: it is “made of lines of light [...] distributing the visible and the invisible, giving rise to objects which are dependent