

## EARTH MATTERS IN THE MUSEUM

Symposium

28 September 2017, 2-5pm

RCMC

Leiden, The Netherlands

Daily dispatches from across the globe appear to confirm the suggestion that precarity has become the defining condition of our time - extreme weather, melting ice caps, devastated ecosystems, resource exhaustion, mass displacement and migration. The looming figure encompassing this global moment is the Anthropocene: the epoch of humans as a (catastrophic) geological force. It is a term that stresses both the culpability and fragility of modern humans, but also exposes our radical interdependency on other seemingly 'distant' beings and species. If the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene does not implicate all humans equally, it does dramatically indict those who have relentlessly and recklessly pursued modernization and progress under the conceit that people could dominate, manipulate and exploit other humans and non-humans without any negative consequence to themselves or humanity in general. Needless to say, many species, habitats and humans have not fared well under this modernizing regime, and they are forcefully speaking and acting back. Only now, faced with the accumulating calamities of the Anthropocene, are we (who have fared decidedly better) beginning to understand that our existence is and has always been inextricably tied to theirs.

If the exhibition, *World of Feathers*, currently on show at the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures: Africa Museum implicitly raises questions about the thorough enmeshment of humans with other beings and planetary entities, the workshop, *Earth Matters in the Museum*, takes up these questions more explicitly.

In this discussion, we seek to foreground ethnographic collections, as we believe they provide a unique window into a global history of human engagement with the earth and its inhabitants. The collections compose the Anthropocene through both its figure and shadow. We want to explore, for example, how these collections track material and visual histories of environmental destruction through colonial trade,

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resource extraction, commerce and development. On the other hand, we question how collections might also document many non-industrial practices that involve multispecies cooperation and world-making. If these objects have rarely been queried and framed as such, what histories and possibilities of collaboration and resistance might they thus reveal? Thinking through such objects and collections may help us learn to live more creatively with our shared planetary condition, and also to imagine more ethical ecological relations. We therefore invite a diverse group of researchers and activists to help us think through the power of material culture in fashioning new modes of relating more cooperatively to the earth.

### **Program and Speakers**

2:00pm - Introduction: Prof. Wayne Modest

2:10pm - **Prof. Kyle Powys Whyte** (Timnick Chair in the Humanities and Associate Professor of Philosophy and Community Sustainability, Michigan State University)

2:30pm - **Dr. Rolando Vázquez** (Assistant Professor of Sociology, University College Roosevelt, Utrecht)

2:50pm - **Prof. Katja Kwastek** (Professor of modern and contemporary art history, Vrije Universiteit)

3:10pm - **Dr. Genner Llanes Ortiz** (Assistant Professor of Archaeology, Leiden University)

3:30pm - **Interview with Dr. Robert Janes** (Editor-in-Chief, Museum Management and Curatorship/Adjunct Professor of Archaeology, University of Calgary) via skype

4:00pm - Discussion

5:00pm - End

## Abstracts

### *Back to the Future: An Indigenous Perspective on the Unfolding of History, Colonialism and the Anthropocene*

*Prof.dr. Kyle Whyte*

The anthropocene often means a time period when human collective actions—capitalism, industrialization, colonialism—have profound environmental impacts. Journalists, scholars, writers, scientists and leaders have sometimes approached the anthropocene as a dystopian, post-apocalyptic future of species extinctions, rampant pollution, climate destabilization, and the permanent destruction of certain ecosystems. Yet a growing number of Indigenous voices are challenging this narrative of human history. This presentation will tell, from a North American Potawatomi (Neshnabé) scholarly perspective, a different narrative of human history. This narrative highlights Indigenous histories of constant transformation, which, in a deeply ironic sense, downplay the rather dramatic portrayals of anthropocene dystopias in academia and the media. Indigenous peoples often view their histories as involving many societal apocalypses, which actually serves to ground Indigenous ethics of reciprocal responsibility for environmental protection. The presentation will reflect on the implications of Indigenous perspectives on the curation of Indigenous environmental histories and futures, especially the responsibilities of curators whose institutions and collections are implicated in colonialism.

Professor Kyle Whyte holds the Timnick Chair in the Humanities at Michigan State University and teaches in the Departments of Philosophy and Community Sustainability. He is Potawatomi and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. His work addresses moral and political issues concerning climate policy and Indigenous peoples, Indigenous conceptions of history in relation to the anthropocene, and the ethics of cooperative relationships between Indigenous peoples and climate science organizations.

*Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing Material Culture*<sup>1</sup>

*Dr. Rolando Vazquez*

What is at stake in decolonizing the anthropocene is our relation to earth, and the dignifying of relational worlds. The task of decolonizing the anthropocene brings us to a three-folded path: to understand modernity's way of worlding the world as artifice, as earthlessness, to understand coloniality's way of un-worlding the world, of annihilating relational worlds and, to think the decolonial as a form of radical hope for an ethical life with earth. Material culture can become a site for thinking and transforming our relation to earth and to other worlds. Ethnographic collections can become a site for listening to alternative ways of being with earth.

*Metonymic objects and entangled infrastructures*

*Prof.dr. Katja Kwastek*

Objects in ethnographic collections are often scattered remnants of complex entangled infrastructures. Curatorial efforts to 'make them speak' usually seek to provide the necessary context via exhibition design or educational means. Katja Kwastek will discuss how contemporary art can offer different approaches, especially through highlighting how artifacts as well as *other* snippets of information can be deployed to metonymically point to the complexity of their multilayered, often cross-historical historical and geopolitical contexts.

*The political aesthetics of companionship: some perspectives on earth and Indigenous arts*

*Dr. Genner Llanes Ortiz*

For many centuries (if not millenia), Indigenous peoples in the Americas developed a pragmatic and aesthetic politics which posed the idea that the land, or Earth, was not just the stage for human endeavours but an important protagonist of history, too. Known by several names such as kipaktli, áayin kaab or

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<sup>1</sup> Based on article: Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing the design. DESIGN PHILOSOPHY PAPERS, 2017 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2017.1303130>

pachamama, the land always figures in Indigenous political aesthetics as a companion, as either a motherly figure or a wondrous creature, ... or both. The regeneration qualities of the land were revered and propitiated through sophisticated representations and practices which involved corporal as well as material oblations. In this talk, I reflect about the importance of these practices in relation to contemporary artistic practice and political mobilization by Indigenous groups and individuals, and wonder about what hints these could impart to earth-conscious museum and heritage practitioners.