

RECKONING WITH HISTORY: COLONIAL PASTS, MUSEUM FUTURES AND DOING JUSTICE IN THE PRESENT

RCMC Annual Conference

30 Nov – 1 Dec 2017

Under a simmering climate of pointed challenges to enduring structures, modes, and symbols of inequality and oppression, calls to decolonize institutions have become insistent. Ethnographic museums have not escaped such criticism. Viewed by some as being 'too colonial' to change, there have even been calls for their closure and the return of collections to originating communities. Here, one is reminded of Ann Stoler's powerful argument that our current, *differentially* shared condition of 'duress' is largely imparted by an enduring 'colonial presence'. This presence, she observes, overflows simple narratives of rupture or continuity with the past. Instead it persists insidiously, if partially, in operations and structures that efface longer histories of exploitation, inequality, imperialism and violence. It is these enduring presences within institutions that publics now protest.

What then is to be done about the (ethnographic) museum? Many museums now openly acknowledge their troubled historical constitutions and are working in earnest to contend with their pasts in order to better understand how to serve their diverse publics and endure into the future. But they have also actively sought to distance themselves from what they consider to be a 'finished' colonial history. In fact, it may be this implicit claim of colonial closure and rupture that has opened up museums to renewed accusations of being relics of and monuments to the very past they now disavow. Rather than insisting on what some would call a *false break* with the colonial, what if museums openly and critically attended to the ways in which they or part of their collections persist as a colonial afterlife? What future possibilities might this open up for museums, and the ethnographic museum in particular?

The collections themselves may suggest some of the most promising and also problematic areas for this kind of work to be wrought. The assembly of ethnographic collections has rarely been singular or straightforward; they trace various histories of global interaction - colonial, scientific, missionary and other - that have given shape to our present moment. Attending to these traces could be important for developing more historically contingent understandings of our present, particularly how we engage with the past in the present. Moreover, the ever insistent question of returning cultural objects reveals the complex, murky range of legal and ethical statuses conveyed by 'the colonial' with which we must contend: while some objects were acquired under clearly dubious circumstances, the majority were collected in 'legitimate' ways under colonial occupation as gifts or purchases, or through scientific study that conformed to the laws at the time. The question of how to reckon with the colonial in the present, then, also becomes a question of how to reckon with its enduring capacity to evade contemporary legal and ethical enclosure.

If we seek to refigure the museum and collections work in such a way that remains attendant to the ethical concerns of the present, then the museum must undertake a series of reckonings – with history, with colonial durabilities, and with a certain habit of looking away that can no longer be justified by a claim of innocence.

The 2017 Annual RCMC conference, RECKONING WITH HISTORY, therefore, will host a set of discussions around questions of how to imagine the future of ethnographic museums and collections in fashioning a postcolonial present.

Programme

30 November 2017 – 9:30am – 4:00pm

Panel 1. On Being Attendant: Curating Colonial Histories in the Museum

Signaling a growing effort to make colonial histories more present, several ethnographic museums across Europe have recently presented or are planning exhibitions that lay bare their colonial genealogies. In 2017 alone, museums in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands will open both temporary and permanent exhibitions on colonialism, with new exhibitions planned for other major institutions such as the Rijksmuseum in the coming years.

This turn comes in response to increasing critique from diverse quarters - from originating communities to activists and academics - for institutional change. And while this new attention is a positive development and opportunity, it yet raises a set of questions around what exactly museums seek to accomplish with this kind of colonial reckoning, around its possibilities and its limits. If this call to attend to colonial histories is in fact a call for museums to refashion a sense of moral engagement with the past in the present, then how can this engagement be rendered in museum exhibitions or indeed, through museum work itself?

We might suggest that museums are particularly well-positioned to explore the basis of this moral engagement and contend with it in and through the public sphere. But reckoning with the colonial in museums and collections may require nothing short of a radical shift in museum work and public engagement. What does and should this new work look like?

How are museums reimagining and re-presenting their relationship to the colonial past? What status does the colonial hold in museum work and display? For instance, does colonial history serve as a prefatory exhibit to the museum experience, or does it 'bracket' the exhibitions throughout? How thinkable is the ethnographic museum as a historical museum? And in what ways is 'the ethnographic' or 'the colonial' productive or obstructive figure in this work?

Confirmed Speakers

Mille Gabriel (Curator, National Museum of Denmark)

Hieke Hartmann (Curator, Deutsches Historisches Museum & Larissa Förster (Humboldt University)

Claudia Augustat (Weltmuseum Wien, Austria)

Rossana di Lella (Pigorini, Italy)

Simone Zeefuik (Decolonize the Museum)

Panel 2. Collections under duress: Shifting Concepts

Arjun Appadurai (2016) has noted that if non-European objects have generally been made to tell stories about distant places and cosmologies, their journeys of displacement, relocation and rehabilitation have remained largely untold. Rather, such objects are made into 'testaments' to fixity, of both Europe's superior figure and a variety of *others* as its always belated shadow. But if we shift our focus from origins and endpoints to the journeys in between, how might ethnographic collections reveal more complicated stories about colonial relations, un/intentional trajectories and transformations? Moreover, how might attending to objects *in transit* lead us to a richer and more nuanced understanding and conceptual vocabulary of the colonial conditions of their production and their affective possibilities in the present?

Ethnographic objects with their stretched-out histories, layered relations and multiple registers of value surely complicate, if not completely undermine, totalizing dichotomies of us/them. Instead, they open up to ongoing histories of connection, at times violent, intimate, convivial, oppressive, emancipatory, collaborative, combative, sympathetic, transformative, and so on. In short, objects reveal that what lies between 'us and them' is an entanglement that refuses a certain kind of foreclosure. And yet our conceptual vocabulary often falls short in the task of disclosing the varied complexities of such entanglement. How does the colonial transform concepts of gifting, exchange, migration, sharing, and responsibility? (How) can we develop a new vocabulary for addressing these relations and interactions that bears a sense of responsibility to the past, and also to claims for justice in the present?

Confirmed Speakers

Premesh Lalu (Director of CHR and Deputy Dean for Research and Post-graduate Studies in the Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape)

Philipp Schorch (Head of Research and Exhibitions, State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony, Germany)

Mirjam Shatanawi (Curator - Middle East and North Africa, RCMC)

Christine Chivallon (Visiting Fellow, Kellogg College, Oxford University/ Passages Research Center, University of Bordeaux)

4:30pm - Adriaan Gerbrands Lecture: Tony Bennett

1 December 2017 – 10:00am – 5:00pm

Panel 3. Beyond Legal Limits – Law, Ethics and Responsibilities

Museum collections comprise a bewildering variety of objects acquired during the long period of European 'colonialism': those bought or gifted; looted; acquired legally but under conditions of coercion, duress or possible subterfuge; with unknowable provenance; on indefinite loan; donated by private collectors; and so on. Museums therefore require an equally complex framework for reckoning with the complexity of relations that effectively assembled these collections, as well as the radical contingency of colonial afterlives that persist in contemporary legal limitations and possibilities, and the desires and situations of contemporary stakeholders.

To better understand these collections and the historical relations out of which they emerged, several museums have started to develop rigorous and systematic provenance research programs and ethical guidelines for initiating dialogues for the return of certain objects. This work has also coincided with the publication of several new studies that call for a more bold address of the colonial past in the *collecting practices* of the museums.

While such programs mark out positive and productive new directions, they can only contend with a limited number of objects, namely those that can be assigned a firm provenance. But it is those objects that lack clear provenance that often present the biggest difficulties. How then do we develop an ethics that also encompasses those objects that exceed our current instruments (law) and categories (provenance)? What ethics can contend with objects that were legally acquired (at the time) but under morally dubious circumstances? Similarly, what historical conditions might demand an ethics of return or equivalent beyond the legal? Can we rethink certain categories themselves? For instance, how might we rethink provenance beyond the singular anchors of ownership and origin? How might we think ideas of sharing and responsibility with an explicit attention to both historical and current inequities in power and resources?

Confirmed Speakers

Ana Vrdoljak (Professor of Law, University of Technology Sydney)

Catherine Lu (Associate Professor of Political Science, McGill University)

Wouter Veraart (Professor of Law, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Panel 4. Reckoning with the colonial: Thinking through concepts of debt, responsibility, blame and justice

Collecting practices that gave birth to ethnographic collections in Europe may have been multiple and varied, but they all largely emerged under European colonial aspiration, rule and expansion. How then do we reckon with the colonial and its enduring presence not only in material objects, but also as erasures, blockages and oversights? The category of the colonial in museum work perplexes and taxes certain attitudes towards and relationships between law, ethics and responsibility, especially across time. If we cannot 'judge the past', then we also cannot ignore the profound impact the past may still effect on the present. How can museums move into the future, caring for a difficult past in such a way that fosters respect rather than victimization, repair rather than continuing rupture, cohabitation rather than exclusion? In short, how can museums develop a sense of moral engagement with the past in the present (Attwood & Foster 2003)?

To begin with, we might need to develop a better practical and conceptual vocabulary for dealing with colonial durabilities, and in particular the ways in which some resist closure. What ethical, moral and philosophical work must museums first do in order to transform colonial presence into a more productive platform for shared responsibility and repair? Is repair even possible? If not, what then *is* possible? For instance, if a moral engagement between past and present must acknowledge violence, and thus the moral burden of that knowledge (Rose 2004), then does not this moral burden also demand that museums hold the memory of that violence within the public presentation of their histories and collections? Can considered philosophical explorations of concepts such as debt (Ricoeur), blame and injustice (Fricker), responsibility (Levinas) and ignorance (C. Mills) help us to rethink issues of museum ethics and moral responsibility with respect to the colonial past? How might such ethically anchored frameworks open up possibilities of transforming museums into more responsible and reparative institutions, or pressure changes in laws to become better instruments of justice?

Confirmed Speakers

Margaret Urban Walker (Professor and Donald J. Schuenke Chair of Philosophy, Marquette University)

Ann Rigney (Professor of Comparative Literature, Utrecht University)

Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Professor of Native American Studies, University of California, Davis)

Closing Keynote: Saidiya Hartman (Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University)

Works Cited:

Arjun Appadurai, Dictionary of Now #4: Sharon Macdonald, Tony Bennett & Arjun Appadurai – THING, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 10 October 2016.

Attwood B and Foster SG (2003) Frontier conflict: the Australian experience. National Museum of Australia Press

Rose DB (2004) Reports from a wild country: Ethics for decolonisation. UNSW Press.