TROPENMUSEUM AFRIKAMUSEUM MUSEUM VOOR VOLKENKUNDE RESEARCH CENTER FOR MATERIAL CULTURE

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

RCMC Annual Conference
30 Nov – 1 Dec 2017

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

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 – 6:30pm

9:30 Coffee and Tea
10:00 Welcome and introduction by Wayne Modest (Head of Research Center for Material Culture)

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

Chair: Chiara de Cesari (Assistant Professor of European Studies and Cultural Studies, University of Amsterdam)
10:20 **Louise Sebro & Mille Gabriel** (Senior Researchers/Curators, National Museum of Denmark)
10:40 **Heike Hartmann** (Curator, Deutsches Historisches Museum) & **Larissa Förster** (Postdoctoral Researcher, Humboldt University)
11:10 **Claudia Augustat** (Curator, Weltmuseum Wien, Austria)
11:30 **Rossana di Lella** (Curator, Museo delle Civiltà, Pigorini, Italy)
11:50 General discussion
12:30 End

Lunch 12:30 – 13:30

Panel 2. Collections Under Duress: Shifting Concepts

Chair: Wayne Modest (Head, Research Center for Material Culture)
13:40 **Premesh Lalu -** *Revisiting the Deaths of Hintsa*

14:00 **Philipp Schorch** - *Reckoning with history and refocusing the ethnographic by zooming in on the muliwai*

14:20 **Mirjam Shatanawi** - *The Netherlands and Islam: on the in-betweenness of collections*

14:40 **Christine Chivallon** - *Archives, traces and memory. Living memory of slavery in Martinique*

15:00 General Discussion

16:00 End

Coffee & Tea Break

16:30 **Gerbrands Lecture: Tony Bennett** (see separate programme)

18:30 **Reception**

19:30 **End**

1 December 2017 – 10:00am – 5:30pm

10:00 Welcome by Stijn Schoonderwoerd (General Director of the National Museum van Wereldculturen)

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

Chair: Wayne Modest (Head, Research Center for Material Culture)

10:05 **Ana Vrdoljak** - *The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Revisiting International Law and Museum Collections*

10:30 **Catherine Lu -** *Decolonization, Decentering, and Disalienation: Strategies of Redressing Structural Injustice*

10:55 **Wouter Veraart** - *Moving beyond legal limits. A reflection on law's absence in current debates on the future of colonial cultural objects*

11:20 **Charlotte Joy** - *Heritage justice: confronting the present in the past*

11:44 General Discussion

12:30 End

12:30-13:30 Lunch

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

Chair: Henrietta Lidchi (Chief Curator, National Museum for World Cultures)

13:40 **Margaret Urban Walker -** *Injustice Past, Justice Present in the Post-Colonial Ethnographic Museum*

14:05 **Ann Rigney -** *Apology and Doing Justice*

14:30 **Ciraj Rassool** - *Anthropology, African history and decoloniality*

14:55 **Closing Keynote: Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie -** *Visualizing Resilience*

15:25 Q&A

15:45 End

Coffee & Tea Break

16:00 Closing Discussion (with General Audience): What Next?

Chair: Wayne Modest (Head, Research Center for Material Culture)
Simone Zeefuik (Decolonize the Museum)
Jos van Beurden (Associated Researcher, VU Amsterdam)
Marens Engelhard (Director, National Archives of the Netherlands)
Sumaya Kassim (Writer and researcher)
Rajkamal Kahlon (Artist)

17:30 **End**

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?

Louise Sebro & Dr. Mille Gabriel, National Museum of Denmark
Dr. Larissa Förster, Humboldt University **& Heike Hartmann**, Deutsches Historisches Museum
Dr. Claudia Augustat, Weltmuseum Wien, Austria
Rossana di Lella, Museo delle Civiltà, Pigorini, Italy

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?

Revisiting the Deaths of Hintsa

Professor Premesh Lalu, University of the Western Cape

What does it mean to engage in an effort to step out of the shadows of the colonial archive? How might the colonial archive limit our efforts at constituting a postcolonial episteme as a work of thinking ahead? These questions animated an earlier work on the killing of the Xhosa king, Hintsa, in 1834 and the mission to return his skull in 1996, with the onset of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Neither a history that lends itself to a discourse of truth, nor simply one that sustains a notion of reconciliation, I propose to explore how, in the controversy surrounding the death of Hintsa, we might rethink the colonial archive and nationalism by way of the problem of the problematisation of race. With this question, I mean to specifically ask how the critique of colonialism might offer itself as more than a repetitive negotiation with neo-colonial benevolence. To the extent that the discourse of history locks us in a wager with the colonial archive and nationalism, I wish to inquire into whether the museum formed around a colonial inheritance offers a different orientation to a postcolonial episteme.

Reckoning with history and refocusing the ethnographic by zooming in on the muliwai

Dr. Philipp Schorch, State Ethnographic Collections Saxony

One of the key anthropological questions remains: How can we co-create knowledge across boundaries? This is a methodological question which, at first sight, seems to solidify the orthodox self-other-juxtaposition. However, Hawaiian scholar Manulani Meyer speaks of the *muliwai*, a place where fresh water and salt water meet; where the river flows into the sea. It is a habitat where marine life congregates as the muliwai ebbs and flows with the tide, changing shape and form. Metaphorically, the muliwai is a location and state of dissonance where (and when) two elements meet, but it is not 'a space in-between', rather, it is its *own space*, a territory unique in each circumstance, depending on the size and strength of the river, the width of the opening, and the strength of the rain. Rather than being a threat to its inhabitants, this living, breathing, and changing muliwai is a source of life and potentiality. Methodologically, I want to argue, anthropological inquiries seem most meaningful if they capture and open the locations and moments of the muliwai as the own space of potentialities arising from in-

between worlds, which might be considered in ontological, cultural or other terms. Anthropology's main concern, however, should not be how it (re)defines the perceived difference *of* others – e.g. in cultural or ontological terms – but rather how the anthropological inquiry *itself* is done *with* them. In this paper, I draw on a collaborative ethnography in the doing, which attempts to refocus ethnographic museums through Oceanic lenses and set course towards the muliwai, the own space in-between people, things, places and knowledge across their global connections – past, present and future.

The Netherlands and Islam: on the in-betweenness of collections

Drs. Mirjam Shatanawi, Research Center for Material Culture

The point of departure of this paper is the idea of different types of museums, including the so-called universal museum, as a discursive chain. In other words: what goes in the glass case in one museum, goes out in another. In the 19th century, when museums in the Netherlands transformed from multidisciplinary cabinets of curiosity into institutions that became more and more specialized, processes of inclusion and exclusion started to unfold. In the course of this development, western and non-western objects that once were exhibited together now became separated. Museums for western culture, among them museums of European art or antiquities, and museums for non-western cultures, like Asian art museums and museums of ethnology, started to function as communicating vessels. In the Saidian sense, each type of museum was showing a self-image of Europe.

This paper will examine this development and what it means for museums today. The main emphasis will be on Middle Eastern and Islamic collections. Made up of objects from 'in-between' regions, the destiny of these collections have illuminating stories to tell on how identity and culture are defined and negotiated.

Archives, traces and memory. Living memory of slavery in Martinique

Dr. Christine Chivallon, CNRS (National Center of Scientific Research), France

This presentation seeks to engage with the wide-ranging debate on the 'archival turn' by exploring the archive's potential to tell 'something of the past'. It sets the results of anthropological fieldwork in Martinique on the memory of slavery into dialogue with the theories of the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant and the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. From very different perspectives, both writers suggest that memory is the womb of the historical condition. The 'traces' of living memory supplant archival documents, allowing access to the imprint left by past events whose presence today is to be found in expressions of remembering. The descendants of participants in a nineteenth-century anticolonial uprising in Martinique interviewed in my work on the memory of slavery allow us to question these concepts in the situated field of memorial practice. Their experience testifies to a memory bound to the recollections of this originating scene of violence, while demonstrating how access to the archive gives the latter new life, infusing it with the subjectivities and emotion that it is its role to exclude. On the other hand, the problem of the anthropologist's writing of this experience remains unresolved since it of necessity operates a transformation, itself becoming an archive, thereby compromising, as it does for Glissant and Ricoeur, the aim to let memory feed the process of discovery of 'traces' of the past.

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?

The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Revisiting International Law and Museum Collections

Professor Ana Vrdoljak, University of Technology Sydney

Whenever discussion turns to the formation of the collections of the 'universal' museums established during the 19th and 20th century, there is the inevitable conclusion: 'It was legal according to the law at the time'. According to whose law? That of the conqueror? The law of war was changing and looting was not sanctioned under these new rules. The law of the peoples from which it was taken? There was and remains little cognizance that these peoples always had their own laws and customs.

This paper challenges this perennial conclusion concerning the legality around the acquisitions contained in museum collections. First, I will consider that a time when European museums are finally casting a critical eye on their colonial/imperial past and the circumstances which led to the formation of their vast collections, it is important to recall international law was complicity in these same processes. International lawyers and legal historians today are also seek to face this past and its implications for the discipline today. Second, drawing on the work of Avishai Margalit, I consider how these critical examinations of the past inform processes of recognition and reconciliation through the ideas a decent society and the ethics of memory. Finally, I examine the intervention of indigenous peoples in contemporary international law to explore how museums and the societies in which they are located may facilitate the efforts peoples whose cultures are represented in their collections to realise effectively human rights recognised as applicable to all.

Decolonization, Decentering, and Disalienation: Strategies of Redressing Structural Injustice

Professor Catherine Lu, **McGill University**

This talk is based on considerations raised in my book, Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), about how to redress and halt the reproduction of colonial structural injustice in contemporary social structures. I develop three broad strategies of transformation: (1) Decolonization involves creating international political conditions that support structural dignity and nonalienated agency for those who continue to be vulnerable due to contemporary structural injustices derived from historical colonialism. (2) Decentering involves repudiating the marginalization of non-European modes of knowledge, discourse and political practice, as well as assessing social institutions, such as museums, from several vantage points, opening space for critical examination of disjunctures between international, domestic, and local receptions of dominant practices. (3) Disalienation is a strategy for the oppressed and marginalized to build up capacities for nonalienated agency, a necessary condition for their effective and meaningful participation in struggles for justice.

Moving beyond legal limits. A reflection on law's absence in current debates on the future of colonial cultural objects

Professor Wouter Veraart, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Current demands for the return of colonial cultural objects are generally held to be extra-legal or beyond the reach of the law. This paper interrogates this situation. Why is it, that the law does not seem to be applicable to cases of colonial injustice? This contribution aims to move beyond the usual discussion of statutes of limitation and the passage of time. Interrogating notions of captivity and dignity with regard to the Benin bronzes, it connects the absence of applicable law in the present to law's complicity in violent takings of colonial cultural objects in the past. The legal invisibility of the colonized peoples at the time of colonialism, repeats itself in the present time, in which claimants are, again, confronted with the inapplicability of law. However, when debating reparations, the colonial legal structure which enabled the current predicament of the Benin bronzes and other cultural objects cannot be left untouched.

Heritage justice: confronting the present in the past

Dr. Charlotte Joy, **Goldsmiths University of London**

This paper will explore the relevance of recent work at the International Criminal Court and at UNESCO to illuminate the debate around museums and restitution. The conflation of the destruction of people and the destruction of things by the ICC and UNESCO poses a difficult ethical dilemma for museums. Whilst the ICC, UNESCO and museums can all be seen as part of an inter-connected cosmopolitan elitist project, the 'heritage logic' animating the ICC and UNESCO shares many common features with demands for restitution. By pinpointing how the relationship between dignity and material culture is legally determined in the present, we can discern why applying this present standard to the past creates so many challenges for museums.

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?

Injustice Past, Justice Present in the Post-Colonial Ethnographic Museum

Professor Margaret Urban Walker, **Marquette University**

The ethnographic museum in the twenty-first century is a dense site for exploring issues of redress and repair for injustices, historical and continuing, that are posed by colonial pasts. There are moral questions about just (or unjust) and responsible acquisition, just (or unjust) ownership and control, and the just (or unjust) distribution of powers to present and represent the objects themselves or the communities that are invested in their representation. Beginning with the recently consolidated international framework for reparations, I extend the discussion to two core facets of justice that underlie obligations of repair, *accountability* and *reciprocity*. I believe that accountability has dominated in the formation of principles of just repair in European-dominated contexts while reciprocity remains recessed. Yet practices of reciprocity can directly confront not only the material exploitation and plunder, but also some of the moral insult of denigrating the agency and competence of previously colonized peoples, most so non-European peoples, that is at the center of colonial histories and that can continue to influence practice today.

Apology and Doing Justice

Professor Ann Rigney, University of Utrecht

Demands for apology and the public withholding of apology have become a regular feature of public debates about historical injustice without its being clear what a 'full' apology might actually entail. In my talk I will sketch the genealogy of the practice of public apology, critically engage with the narrative schemata of reconciliation that sees apology as an imagined closure, and then argue for its more modest significance as part of a larger dynamic.

Anthropology, African history and decoloniality

Professor Ciraj Rassool, **University of the Western Cape**

In arguing against the understanding of colonialism as prescribed time, this presentation will make an argument for approaching coloniality as epistemic and disciplinary, as incorporated into the very structures, classificatory order, and practices of the museum as locus of government and stewardship. In distinguishing between different disciplinary practices of anthropology, as tribe, race, exotic, 'non-European', and also as effort at substantive, empathetic cultural engagement, in European and African (and other Global South) settings, we will insist that its main record on the African continent is that it was an instrument of conquest. In considering the epistemic challenge of rethinking the anthropology museum, this presentation will ask about the potential of the history museum and history in the museum. This will require an engagement with debates in historical studies, including about the significance of African history, about histories and publics, the production and contestation of history, and the importance of rethinking authority and expertise. It is in such epistemic and disciplinary confrontations and contestations that the potential for the decolonial resides.

Closing Keynote: *Visualizing Resilience*

Professor Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (Daskigi/Diné), University of California, Davis

Tsinhnahjinnie's creative work bears witness over 30 years, documenting protest, establishing an archive of friends and family. The title of her talk Visualizing Resilience reflects her view that "Imaging ourselves is of utmost importance. It speaks to the core of envisioning self-determination. Imaging ourselves speaks to our children and on into the future."

Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie born into the Bear clan of the Daskigi, and a descendent of the Hvteyievlke band of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma. Born for the Tsi'naajinii (Black-streak clan) of the Dine' Nation. Hulleah was formally adopted in to the Keet Gooshi Hit (Killer Whale Fin House), and also adopted into the Lą̨xsgiik (Eagle Clan) of Metlakatla. Tsinhnahjinnie holds the position of Professor of Native American Studies at the University of California Davis and is Director of the C. N. Gorman Museum.

CLOSING DISCUSSION: WHAT NEXT?

Simone Zeefuik (Decolonize the Museum)
Dr. Jos van Beurden (Associated researcher, VU Amsterdam)
Marens Engelhard (Dutch National Archives)
Sumaya Kassim (Writer and researcher)
Rajkamal Kahlon (Artist)

For speaker bios, please see the event website: http://materialculture.nl/en/events/reckoning-with-history