

CfP: Imperial Lives Conference

Discussion published by Carl Deussen on Monday, December 12, 2022

Date: 30.-31.3.2023

Place: Online

For reasons of greater accessibility and sustainability, the conference will be held completely online.

After years of struggle, deflection, and hesitation, ethnographic museums are increasingly accepting the need for decolonization. Often, this is framed in terms of diversity and empowerment and with a special focus on creator communities and their diaspora. We agree: the victims of imperial violence and their descendants need to be at the centre of any fruitful decolonization process.

However, this leaves a momentous gap: what about the creators of the museum, the collectors who often violently amassed the collections, as well as those who are implicated in their legacy today? Whose acts of perpetration, violence, transgression, betrayal, superiority, exploitation, and misunderstanding lie at the foundation of the museum? When it comes to the actors in question and their agency, what prevails is often absence or a retreat into abstraction, both in academia and the museum.

The **“Imperial Lives” conference** wants to widen this perspective and offer a complementary approach: it aims at exploring ways of overcoming this colonial aphasia by focussing on the concrete, often messy biographies behind the institution “ethnographic museum”. We propose that the encounter with the personified past of empire – the biographies of imperial collectors – creates a space of unsettlement in which the personal implication of all members of a post-imperial democratic society can be explored and collective memory transformed.

Ethnographic museums, as one of the most visible sites of imperial continuity, offer an exemplary field for the exploration of imperial perpetration and implication that goes beyond the bounds of anthropology – especially when it comes to the interaction with broader audiences. This is why the conference will focus on both research and narration, inviting transdisciplinary perspectives from history, cultural, and literary studies as well as artistic, journalistic and activist practices.

We call for contributions addressing issues of biographic knowledge generation and representation, including questions such as:

- How can biographic approaches to the legacy of empire contribute to the decolonisation of ethnographic museums?
- What may be the archival foundation for biographic approaches to the imperial past? How can imperial personas be portrayed if the only archival material available was produced by themselves? What is the role of ethnographic collections as archives?
- What kind of biographies are suited for such decolonial biographic research?
- Who should be doing this research? How does the personal situatedness of the researcher affect the outcome?
- What forms of representation, what narrative strategies should be used to depict imperial biographies?
- With museums as the sites of a society's collective memory: Which narrative approaches are fruitful contributions to the "work of remembrance"?
- What is the relationship between historical factuality and biographic fiction, especially concerning the archival inequalities of empire?
- In how far can artistic research and practice enrich modes of biographic display?

Conference language: English

There will be a recording of all papers, keynotes, and panels.

We are inviting scholars from the fields of:

ethnography, anthropology, literary studies, historical science, cultural studies, museology, art history, arts (e.g. fine arts, film, literature etc.), provenance research, journalism.

CfP:

Please hand in your abstract of max. 500 words (in English, + short bio) until 2023/01/30 via:

<https://tinyurl.com/abstract-imperiallives2023>

For any questions, feel free to get in touch via mail@imperiallives.com

Research project “Wilhelm Joest and the Intimacies of Colonial Collecting” (Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, 2019-2023):

www.museenkoeln.de/rautenstrauch-joest-museum/Wer-ist-Joest

Cooperation: Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Köln; transdisciplinary platform Contemporary&

Related date:

January 30, 2023