



WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Museums, Ethnographic Collections and Indigenous People: Repatriation, Problems and Perspectives

Organizer: Renato ATHIAS, Anna BOTTESI

E-Mail Address: renato.athias@ufpe.br

Abstract: This workshop seeks to debate papers in the field of anthropology on the main current issues that are related to ethnographic objects from the indigenous peoples of the Americas that are found in national museums, in the Americas and in Europe. Most of these objects are part of ethnographic collections that were looted from the lands of original peoples in the Americas. In recent years, indigenous peoples have been debating this issue and expressing their interest in being able to participate in the collaborative process of museological documentation and even curating in museum exhibition spaces, as well as proposing the repatriation of these objects to their places of origin. There are several ongoing requests for repatriation of objects and remains held in national and international museums. From a critical perspective, demands for repatriation of indigenous purposes often include a nationalist logic according to which some are considered the true heirs of the artifacts – while others are disinherited. Are these artifacts specifically heritage and do they belong to the “heritage of humanity” or to local communities? Where should the limit be drawn? Is it even possible to draw that line? It is possible to be politically correct in all situations. Therefore, this working group intends to advance the debate in both the fields of anthropology and museology on how to guarantee greater participation of indigenous peoples in this process. Works that can point out elements that museums generally of a national nature can appropriate in order to promote decolonization in their exhibition spaces will be welcome. Papers that analyze the naturalized discourse on the connection between matter, place, object and origin, and the idea that objects have a “home of origin”, as well as the different angles of the discourses on restitution that are invoked in the debate on repatriation.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 3 | Room 4

Sonja Ruud: Collective writing as an everyday act of resistance and a social practice among people with migration backgrounds living in Brussels

Karolina Sikora: Cultural heritage as a human right - Theory and Practice

Martha Cerny, Natscha Cerny Ehtesham: Insights into Decolonizing and Indigenizing Efforts at Museum Cerny.contemporary circumpolar art

Anna Bottesi, Metre Jesiel Santos do Santos: Should the Puratig that was stolen be given back? Critical notes on the restitution of a cursed object.

Domingos Barreto, Renato Athias: Themes and Perspectives on the Virtual Museum of Indigenous Peoples of Rio Negro

SESSION PAPERS

Collective writing as an everyday act of resistance and a social practice among people with migration backgrounds living in Brussels

Sonja Ruud

Migrants arriving in the EU are frequently obliged to “tell their stories” in administrative settings in order to prove the legitimacy of their asylum claims in the eyes of the state. These procedures typically impose specific formats in which narratives must be described and documented, and frequently pressure people to recount traumatic experiences. In this context of bureaucratic violence, collaborative civil society initiatives centered around creative writing offer spaces for migrants to tell stories – of all kinds – on their own terms.

Such projects have both political and social implications. Firstly, they center participants’ agency to choose what they want to write about and how. Often, the writings that emerge from these projects constitute far richer and more complex accounts of mobility than those accepted by national governments, and frequently contribute to contesting not only the bureaucratic criteria by which individual states judge asylum claims, but the legitimacy of the nation-state itself. In other cases, participants opt not to write about their migration experiences, but rather to situate themselves and their work outside of the category of migrant by which they are habitually labeled. In both instances, the everyday practice of writing becomes a form of political resistance. At the same time, the collective nature of such projects often makes them generative in a social sense, establishing relationships, solidarities, and communities which transcend state-centric notions of citizenship.

This paper explores the burgeoning phenomenon of collaborative writing workshops for people with migrant backgrounds living in European cities, focusing on case studies from Brussels, the bureaucratic center of the EU. It examines the practices of two distinct civil society projects bringing together writers with diverse linguistic backgrounds and legal statuses – one associated with established literary institutions and the other a more grassroots initiative with an explicit feminist and decolonial agenda.

Cultural heritage as a human right - Theory and Practice

Karolina Sikora

In recent years, the social dimension of cultural heritage has gained significance, resulting in substantial recognition of the human right to heritage; a right that has not been explicitly regulated in international law. In this presentation, based on Indigenous peoples' example, I wish to analyse the construction of the right to heritage and map the connections and disconnections between and within cultural heritage law and international human rights law frameworks. Based on the ethnographic research among the Izhma Komi of the Russian North, I will point out what the human right to cultural heritage may mean in practice. I will refer to the tradition of the mid-summer Izhma Komi festival "Lud", which was listed as an element of the intangible cultural heritage in the Komi Republic.

Insights into Decolonizing and Indigenizing Efforts at Museum Cerny.contemporary circumpolar art

Natscha Cerny Ethesham, Martha Cerny

Museum Cerny.contemporary circumpolar art, based in Bern, Switzerland, houses one of the world's most comprehensive collections of contemporary circumpolar art. With over 1500 artworks from the 1960s to the present, the collection highlights the artistic expressions of communities from Canada, USA (Alaska), Greenland, Northern Europe (Sápmi), and Russia (Siberia).

The collection features sculptures crafted from local materials such as stone, ceramics, antler, whale bone, walrus tusk, and mammoth tusk, as well as rare batiks, lithographs, drawings, paintings, wall hangings, baskets, clothing, and photographs. Each piece tells a profound story, showcasing the essence of Arctic realities, including animals, people, communities, spirituality, and contemporary challenges. Many of the artworks address the impacts of colonialism and environmental changes, serving as powerful testaments to the richness and resilience of circumpolar cultures.

Contemporary circumpolar art acts as a cultural bridge, raising awareness about the interconnected global context and urging self-reflection and responsible actions for future generations.

Founded by Martha and Peter Cerny, a Swiss-Canadian couple, the Museum originated from a profound passion for preserving and showcasing the unique cultures of Indigenous Peoples from the Arctic. Over the past 30 years, it evolved into a space for cultural exchange and mutual learning, organizing exhibitions and related activities nationally and internationally, and providing a platform for Indigenous voices to be heard and celebrated.

As non-Indigenous founders, the Cerny family is committed to the ongoing journey of decolonizing and indigenizing the Museum. This involves learning from global developments, providing insights into institutional changes, seeking feedback from peers, and expanding networks. The goal is to cultivate collaborative and meaningful opportunities that benefit everyone involved. By amplifying Arctic voices and fostering

cross-cultural understanding, the Museum continues to contribute to the preservation and empowerment of circumpolar cultures.

Should the Puratig that was stolen be given back? Critical notes on the restitution of a cursed object.

Anna Bottesi, Metre Jesiel Santos dos Santos

The puratig sa'awy is a sacred object belonging to Sateré-Mawé people. It is oar shaped and has inscriptions engraved on both side of the upper part representing the people's stories. On one side, there are the stories of good, while on the other, the stories of evil. At the moment, three puratig exist in Sateré-Mawé Indigenous Land Andirá-Marau: one by Andirá River (municipality of Barreirinha), another by Marau River and the latter by Manjuru River (both in the municipality of Maués). Recently, as part of a research into the collection gathered by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira during the Viagem Filosófica (1783-1792), one object was identified by the Sateré-Mawé as being one of their puratig, and precisely, the one that was stolen in the past and cursed. The elders of the communities actually knew about the existence of this object on the other side of the ocean for centuries. However, it was not until the 1990s, when some pieces from the Ferreira collection (preserved in Portugal) were exhibited in Manaus, that images of the puratig began to circulate and the Sateré-Mawé became aware of its current location in the Museu da Ciência in Coimbra. This presentation aims at discussing the presence of the puratig in Portugal and on some issues related to how it should be treated in museum spaces. Specifically, we want to raise a debate about the possibility of its repatriation by asking the following questions: is the puratig to be returned or not? If the answer is yes, to whom? And, what actions are needed to remove the curse? If not, why is it better to keep it in Europe? If accompanied by an adequate explanation, is it possible to show it to the public in the museum or would it be better to keep it out of sight?

Themes and Perspectives on the Virtual Museum of Indigenous Peoples of Rio Negro

Domingos Barreto, Renato Athias

Summary: This presentation seeks to give an overview of the main themes and perspectives of a virtual museum built for the indigenous peoples of the Alto Rio Negro Region. We are dealing with the issue of the virtual repatriation of ethnographic collections from these people who are found in Europe. Many of these objects that are in museums are not known to the indigenous peoples here. The main activity of this museum is to make known the wealth of these objects that were removed from our lands in the 19th century. This presentation seeks to deepen these two aspects of our virtual museum.