



*Nature – Culture – Ecologies: Heritage in Transcultural Contexts.* Graduate School Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship, Rostock University, 11.09.2014—13.09.2014.

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## **Nature – Culture – Ecologies: Heritage in Transcultural Contexts**

During its eighth interdisciplinary symposium, the Rostock graduate school brought together international scholars and experts concerned with the transcultural practices and narratives of preservation of cultural and natural sites figuring as “world heritage”. The symposium set out to offer an ecocritically informed perspective on natural and cultural heritage sites and the discourse of regarding them as worth being preserved.

STEPHANIE WODIANKA (Rostock) stressed the fact that the concept of “preservation” can be approached from different perspectives (historical as well as cultural-semiotic) and that “heritage” narratives and practices often connect “facts” and “fictions”. By way of illustration, she presented a transcultural comparison between maritime cranes in Rostock and an art project consisting of the installation of a “fake” dock crane in Zurich. The example led to a reflection on the aesthetic and functional intervention of dock cranes in the constitution of maritime heritage and the ways they trigger not only historical, but also artistic imagination.

GESA MACKENTHUN (Rostock) revealed the intention behind the conference’s poster – the photo of an old oil drill in Ecuador that at first sight resembles a kind of totemic figure, in part because of its tropical forest surrounding. The antique technological device evokes romantic representations of exotic artifacts and architecture and thus captures the ambiguities between imperial myth, modern economic practices in the global south, and the resulting precarious status of nature – entangled

histories that the conference would face.

In his keynote speech, “Stewarding the Disputed Future: Tribal Legacy, National Patrimony, Global Heritage”, DAVID LOWENTHAL (London), emeritus professor of History and Geography, boldly elaborated on the tribal patrimonial claims worldwide and their tensions with different national identities. He noted that global heritage management leads to important political questions that cannot be approached without attending to both natural and cultural forms of tribal legacy and its influence on the construction of nations and states. Global certification of heritage sites is thus an extremely delicate issue that often makes the “nominated” places and peoples more vulnerable to different types of economic and political mistreatment. The importance of heritage management, concluded Lowenthal, lies not only in the fact of it being a vehicle to the past, but also in being an essential part of society upon which the future will be built.

The presentations on Friday started with a talk by RONNIE ELLENBLUM (Jerusalem) on “How Climatic Disturbances Affect Civilizations”. He presented a critical approach to the way natural-historicist methods read the relation between climatic disturbances (extended droughts, cold spells) and the societal upheavals that often follow in their wake. Against the 30 years error-ratio in most archaeological data gathered in order to establish the relation between natural and social destabilizations, Ellenblum wondered how much of our history would re-

main inexplicable if the humanities would accept such an error ratio. He presented an empirical study of the Medieval Climate Anomaly (10th and 11th centuries) and an ongoing analysis of the Roman Climatic Optimum (4th B to 3rd AD) that were informed by more detailed proxy archaeological data, with an annual and even monthly resolution. He forcefully argued for environmental history to include the archival findings of social historians in order to explain causalities between natural disasters and transcultural violence, taking the destruction of the Jewish library in Baghdad in 1055 as an example.

The social anthropologist and art historian PETER PROBST (Boston) took up a more symbolic approach to the ideas of heritage and preservation in his talk "The Gift of Heritage and the Values of Exchange: Lessons from Nigeria and Elsewhere". Behind his provocative suggestion of looking at heritage practices as a form of gift exchange there was the central question of whether "heritage" relates to a truly valuable remnant of the past or whether it is rather a contemporary practice by which the past comes to matter in the present. By drawing on specific fieldwork data gathered in West Africa and Europe, Probst presented a model based on Marcel Mauss's concept of the gift. He viewed world heritage to operate within a "gift logic" that mobilizes moral and material values between two main axes: unborn to dead (on a symbolic, ritual level) and UNESCO to state parties (on an institutional level).

KARL STEEL (New York) returned to the Middle Ages with a paper on "Whose Middle Ages? Race, the Human, and the Medieval Heritage". He used the history of the failed colonization of the Vikings in North America to illustrate the notion of "bad heritage". Steel suggested that in the 21st century the cultural analysis of Viking sagas provides an understanding of a part of America's heritage and identity. He explored the ambivalent attitude in Canada, the US, and in Europe, to the failed Viking settlements as a model of collective identity, as well as to internal violence as one of the Viking story's elements. Ranging from a critical reading of the sagas to recent documents of popular culture (a Newfoundland tourist brochure, films), Steel suggested that the fantasies of the "Nordic origin" are still virulent: both as ways of naturalizing class as a surrogate of "race" and as part of the mythology of American white supremacism.

In her talk "Indigenous Knowledges and Ecology in North America", KERSTIN KNOPF (Greifswald) engaged with a critique of Western ecological knowledge and its hegemonic role. Drawing on the Canadian

Inuit Zacharias Kunuk's ethnographic film *Qapiranga-juq* (2010), Knopf presented her reflection on how the Inuit perceived and conceptualized the signs of climate change. She proposed to regard "indigenous knowledge" as a valid alternative to Western scientific knowledge for assessing the ecological hazards. Knopf stressed the necessity of "indigenizing the academy" and thus dissolving the unequal power matrixes that still drive knowledge systems on a global scale.

JÄRGEN VOGT (Buenos Aires) closed the day with "Ecological Conservation vs. Big Oil: The Case of Yasuní, Ecuador", a talk informed by his journalistic research as correspondent in Latin America. Vogt discussed the difficult path of the environmental politics of Ecuador, under President Rafael Correa and environmental minister Alberto Acosta, in managing the controversial project of extracting oil on the margins of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve. Correa's attempt to prevent global oil companies from extracting oil in the reserve came at a price: he asked the world community to compensate his state with the sum of 3.5 billion US Dollar for leaving the natural environment intact as part of the world's natural heritage. The plan failed and Correa recently opened Yasuní for oil extraction – a decision with catastrophic effects on the environment and the indigenous population. Only few states (like Sweden) contributed significant sums to the fund to save Yasuní and its inhabitants; the case is a blatant example of global environmental hypocrisy.

The last day started with a Skype-presentation by GUILLAUME BLANC (Paris), "Nature for Some, Violence for Others. Compared Histories of Canadian, Ethiopian and French National Parks". Blanc compared the histories of three natural parks: Fourillon (Canada), the Cevennes (France) and Simien (Ethiopia). He analyzed the interrelation between the preservationist politics of natural parks and the reinforcement of a nationalist meta-narrative. Despite the inherent differences of each context, Blanc suggested that in the three cases the respective states exert a two-fold form of violence on the traditional populations of these regions: a concrete form of violence, by expelling traditional dwellers and attracting tourism, and symbolic violence, by imposing new definitions of natural purity on those landscapes which formerly were only "nature" and afterwards, due to complex politico-economic interests, became national parks.

With her paper "Naturalizing Culture in the Pyrenees: Heritage Processes in Rural Contexts", CAMILA DEL MARMOL (Barcelona) presented her research on the

naturalization of rural culture in the Catalan Pyrenees (with Ferrn Estrada as co-author of the paper). Drawing on previous fieldwork and an analysis of the cultural politics in the Pyrenees, Delm showed how rural forms of architecture, food production, handicrafts and traditional forms of exploitation of natural resources were being fostered and even prescribed by politico-economic local authorities in order to attract tourists. The effect, suggested Delm, was a displacement of the local concept of *cultura* to an idealized conception of *nature*, an equation through which a naturalizing epistemology conditions and homogenizes the whole spectrum of local cultural practices.

In her paper on *The Multiple Ecologies of Malian Nationalism*, CHARLOTTE JOY (London) presented an ethnographic investigation of Djenn, a World Heritage site in Mali. She revealed the important role that the UNESCO-driven architectural and ecological characterization of Djenn played in the construction of the Malian State identity. Joy criticized the incommensurability of academic and institutional representations of seemingly crystallized times and cultures, and advocated a closer regard for the lived realities of the people who are being affected by such practices and discourses.

Still with a focus on Africa, ROMEO CARABELLI (Tours) presented an analysis of the attempts to include Casablanca in the World Heritage list in his talk *Casablanca or the Gene of Transcultural Pragmatism: From the Invention of a Twentieth-Century Town to the Invention of a Twenty-First-Century Cultural Heritage*. Merging his background in architecture, geography and cultural-historical analysis of an initiative called *Casamemoire*, Carabelli outlined the main points of the patrimonialization process of the Moroccan economic capital. From a critical perspective, he noted the fact that the process was led by an enlightened elite which foregrounded a neoliberal model of development for the city, thus leaving aside the only liberal model or other alternative forms of valorizing the heritage of Casablanca.

WAYNE MODEST (Amsterdam) was the last speaker of the conference. In *Museums, Heritage and International Development* he presented an investigation forged on the interface between anthropology, history and museology and focusing on the relation between Jamaican material culture and the discourses of race, class and Jamaican identity. By looking at specific traditional objects which were requested back from museums such as the Smithsonian or the British Museum, Modest stressed some of the mechanisms for the construction of

the Jamaican imaginary by certain elites that racialized national belonging while disguising class struggles.

The final discussion set out with short interventions of David Lowenthal, Stephanie Wodianka, Gesa Mackenthun, and Anbal Arregui. The discussants evoked some critical points that had been raised during the symposium. As Lowenthal pointed out, *heritagization* always takes place between the confronted tendencies of conserving and demolishing. He stressed the importance of viewing heritage policies as articulations of present needs and concerns, and he invited us to pay more attention to the aspect of suffering in the processes of collective commemoration. Stephanie Wodianka suggested heritage processes to be highly transcendental issues, since they will condition the form and format of the future both in a material and ideological manner. She furthermore pointed out that heritage must be analyzed at different levels: from the intimate forms of living conservation initiatives to the more general, (trans-) cultural dynamics involved in such processes. Gesa Mackenthun reflected that, as some papers suggested, heritage politics is often ambivalent about the presence of humans; it entertains a complex relationship between the living and the dead as when living populations are evicted from their homelands in order to honor the memory of some imagined ancestral culture. Likewise, the ideal of natural heritage celebrates a restored *pristine* state of nature at the cost of human presence and ecological development, leading to a certain ghostliness of heritage sites. She referred to the fact that various papers addressed the complex temporality of heritage discourse: which particular cultural moment is being preserved at which particular time, and for how long does heritage have to be preserved until it becomes obsolete? At last, she emphasized the need to ask whose narrative voice prevails in heritage discourse, who possesses superior power of speech in the global contest for heritage. Anbal Arregui raised the question of whether heritage and ecological conservation operate through similar and non-evidential logics of power. He also reminded us of the necessity to consider the politics of erasure that inevitably seems to accompany many conservation attempts. The question whether and how heritage can be decolonized, raised towards the end of the discussion, points toward future debates on the entanglements of *heritage* and *ecologies* from a transcultural perspective debates that will hopefully be conducted in a similarly interdisciplinary and congenial atmosphere as in Rostock.

#### Conference Overview:

David Lowenthal (University College London), *Stewarding the Disputed Future: Tribal Legacy, National Patrimony, Global Heritage*

Ronnie Ellenblum (Hebrew University Jerusalem), *Analyzing Collapse. How Climatic Disturbances Affect Civilizations*

Peter Probst (Tufts University), *The Gift of Heritage and the Values of Exchange: Lessons from Nigeria and Elsewhere*

Karl Steel (Brooklyn College, CUNY), *Bad Heritage: the Vikings in North America*

Kerstin Knopf (Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald), *Indigenous Knowledges and Ecology in North America*

Jürgen Vogt (tageszeitung, Buenos Aires), *Ecological Conservation vs. Big Oil: The Case of Yasuná,*

Ecuador

Guillaume Blanc (Université de Versailles), *Nature for some, Violence for Others: Compared Histories of Canadian Ethiopian and French National Parks.*

Camila del Moral (Universidad de Barcelona), *Naturalizing Culture in the Pyrenees: Heritage Processes in Rural Contexts* (Camila del Moral and Ferran Estrada)

Charlotte Joy (Goldsmiths, University of London), *The Multiple Ecologies of Malian Nationalism*

Romeo Carabelli (Université François Rabelais, Tours), *Casablanca or the Gene of Transcultural Pragmatism: From the Invention of a Twentieth-Century Town to the Invention of a Twenty-First-Century Cultural Heritage*

Wayne Modest (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam), *Heritage in Transcultural Contexts*

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