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Workshop: Representing Violent Pasts: Museums, Colonialism and Environmental Degradation

Memory & Heritage Network of Utrecht University

Ecologies of Violence (ERC)

10 April 2025, Utrecht University

Report by Flora Lehmann



*Photograph from the exhibition "The call of the O'o: Nature under pressure"
at the Allard Pierson museum (photos: Allard Pierson museum).*

Workshop Report

Representing Violent Pasts: Museums, Colonialism, and Environmental Degradation

10 April 2025, 13h15 – 17h00, Drift 25 – 301

Description:

On 10 April, the Memory & Heritage Network of Utrecht University and the ERC project Ecologies of Violence: Crimes Against Nature in the Contemporary Cultural Imagination (EcoViolence) hosted a workshop on the representation of colonial and ecological violence in museums. This workshop was organized by Sofia Lovegrove, PhD candidate in the EcoViolence project. It was aimed at scholars within the fields of memory and heritage studies and cultural practitioners (such as artists, curators and museum educators), who are working on or interested in the topic of ecological violence and its complex entanglements with other forms of violence – such as colonialism and genocide –, both in the past and in the present.

The workshop began with a word of welcome by **Dr. Susanne Knittel** and **Dr. Gertjan Plets** and a short presentation about the two projects they are currently leading, respectively: EcoViolence and Colonial Legacies of Universities: Materialities and New Collaborations (COLUMN).

Presentations:

Curators and artists (more information about the speakers at the end of this document) presented recent and forthcoming exhibitions addressing the nexus of artistic and participatory work and archival and collection research (including photographs, historical books and natural history collections).

Vincent van Velsen and **Miguel Luis Peres Antunes dos Santos** presented their exhibition and ongoing project *Soengoe Kondre / Submerged Heritage*. Born out of an exploration into van Velsen's own familial heritage and a critical reflection on how displacement narratives are remembered, the exhibition and accompanying

special commissioned film (which was screened during the workshop) explained how Maroon communities (mainly Saramaka and Ndyuka Maroons) were forcibly displaced by flooding in 1964, brought on by the construction of the Afobaka dam. Claimed to be a necessity in the name of progress at the time when Suriname was transitioning to full independence, the construction of this dam led not only to displacement but also to entire ways of life being destroyed. The exhibition and film juxtapose archival images and footage of the disaster from Dutch national archives against family archives, oral histories, and lived impacts and expressions of relation to the lost land. The friction between these testimonies draws attention to the coloniality of archives and the power structures which still govern how we remember and who remembers (and importantly, tells) history.

Curator **Myriam van der Hoek** presented the recent exhibition *The Call of the O'o: Nature under Pressure*, which was shown at the Allard Pierson in Amsterdam. This exhibition aimed to address how humans have historically related to (and still relate to) nature, centring on the extinct Kauai O'o. The exhibition, which followed along the thematic lines of collecting, naming, changing, interweaving, and extinction, shed light on how Western perspectives of nature have been historically shaped by practices such as mapping and cataloguing, publishing, and taxonomic classifications, following the Western scientific paradigm. This presentation drew attention to the challenges and advantages of working with a Dutch archival collection, and some of the potential methods for establishing sustainable curatorial practices.



Exhibition The Call of the O'o at the Allard Pierson, Amsterdam. Photo by Flora Lehmann.

Curatorial advisor **Inez de Ruiter** presented an upcoming exhibition at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, *Suriname. Bezielde Natuur / Suriname. Animated Nature*. This exhibition, which aims to push audiences to rethink how they conceptualise and relate to nature, is centred around the message that *if we take*

care of nature, nature will take care of us. The exhibition will be built around a reconstruction of a *kapok boom*, or kapok tree, a biodiverse tree which is both spiritually and environmentally important to Indigenous and Maroon communities in Suriname. This presentation addressed some of the major challenges in representing ecological violence through curatorial practices, particularly given the mission and target audience of this institution. With a main audience demographic of children aged 5-12yo, the larger difficulty stems from toeing the line between recognising and reconciling the past and working to prioritise and protect the future.

Roundtable discussion



After the presentations, the event transitioned into a roundtable discussion and open Q&A session. This provided a platform for speakers and participants to delve into the larger cross-disciplinary theme of the workshop and to discuss collaborative methods between the curation of and research on environmental violence.

Sofia Lovegrove moderated the discussion with the four speakers, opening with a reflection on the overlap between presentations. The roundtable addressed the nexus of historiography and environmental violence along four central themes: narrative, audience engagement and pedagogies, and the issue of implication.

The first line of discussion was about narrative and the ethics of representation. For all of the speakers, there were certain complications in addressing the environmental issue due to multiple (both overlapping and opposing) narratives around ecosystem destruction. This issue complicates both historical-based (using collections and archives) and future-oriented research. The sheer amount of

materials that have been created and collected from and tailored to a specific, Western-centric perspective during colonial times, makes it difficult to construct an alternative vision of the connection between humans and nature —one which decentres the Western nature-culture divide, towards epistemologies of relationality and nature-human entanglement. The counterpart to this mass of historical material is the relatively small and less researched source of archival and oral materials from displaced, oppressed, and Indigenous communities impacted by environmental destruction—this disparity was made clear by speaker Vincent van Velsen and his archival research for *Submerged Heritages*. Working from this smaller pool of materials also presents a challenge in representation. Representations often lean into the marginalisation and oppression of these allegedly precarious “others”, both human and more-than-human—however, this tends to produce a simplified, victimhood narrative. Modern curatorial practices, then, are burdened with the responsibility to creatively represent human communities, as well as plant and animal communities in an affective and relational way, but also give voice to their agency, resistance and resilience.

This line of discussion led into the second main strain, around audiences, reception and pedagogies. Inez de Ruiter and Myriam van der Hoek, both curating from institutional archives and collections, faced constraints in their choices based on expected audience demographics and the mission and vision of their respective institutions. While the age range of expected visitors differed between their institutions, both exhibitions cater to a mainly Western audience, which affects how the role of colonialism in ecological violence is represented. In the case of the Allard Pierson, an important challenge was how to alert audiences to the current climate crisis while activating visitors to think about their role in this crisis without losing hope about the future. Solutions included using questions, rather than statements, to let visitors form their own ideas, and adding an interactive panel at the end where visitors could write down their answers to questions such as: what gives you hope? In the case of Naturalis, an ongoing consideration is how to address complex and at times violent histories in a way that is suitable to the main target audience of the museum and this institution’s mission to focus on promoting and

teaching biodiversity, without glossing over topics such as the colonial origins of the collections. One possible solution includes adding extra narrative layers through other media such as an app or an accompanying publication, for those visitors who are interested in knowing more about these topics.

Vincent van Velsen and Miguel Peres dos Santos experienced audience reception differently. Their exhibition and film were presented both in the Netherlands and Suriname, sometimes to an audience comprised mostly of the historically oppressive class, and other times, the historically (and, in some cases, ongoing) oppressed communities. The difference in reception from audiences along this scale draws attention to the issue that arose in the first part of the conversation — namely, about how to represent the communities most devastated by environmental violence in a way that reflects the nuanced and multilayered reality of those communities, as well as their agency and resilience.

The final discussion points of the roundtable revolved around the issue of (representational and institutional) implication. Here, the speakers talked about the material implications of these exhibitions and strategies for sustainable curation—for example, Myriam van der Hoek (Allard Pierson) mentioned that the choice was made to reduce external loans to a minimum, so as to reduce the ecological footprint of transportation. Other ecological considerations involved thinking about the display cases and whether to print leaflets. The creators of *Submerged Heritage* discussed the materiality of photography and the challenges of working with potentially problematic materials, such as photographs taken by Dutch individuals during colonial times. Inez de Ruiter discussed how a lot of the collection at Naturalis comes from colonial expeditions which went to Suriname to map the territory for future exploitation. Poignantly, she summarised a central friction and irony in the curation of heritage connected to colonialism: the specimen collections are directly linked to the exploitation of Surinamese land, but we use them for an exhibition on the protection of nature.

Another important point of discussion revolved around the implication of institutions such as Allard Pierson and Naturalis that hold natural history collections. We discussed how historically, such institutions are implicated in disseminating a Western worldview of nature as separate from humans and as resource, which has contributed to the current climate crisis. In this context, the question was raised: (how) could such institutions explicitly address this implication in their exhibitions and public programme? The roundtable closed with a summary of the challenges of communication between a research centre and a curating team, which linked back to a larger question of pedagogy and how the entwinement of colonial and environmental violence can be best represented.

After the roundtable, the panel opened up to questions from the participants. Researchers stemmed from several academic and artistic fields, with some in museum curation and archive work, and others researching cultural heritage across different fields and disciplines. Questions were focused on choices made in curatorial practice and archival research, and the speakers shared information about the dynamics of working in this kind of production. Interesting contributions were made about the ethics of Indigenous representation in the museum. The speakers reflected on the specific constraints and contexts they could piece together while working through archival materials created from a Dutch/Western perspective, during colonial times. Curators spoke about the ethics of using taxidermied animals or illegally acquired materials in an exhibition. For example, Inez de Ruyter's provenance research at Naturalis is focused on botanical research and materials that may have been taken from uncredited, Indigenous practitioners. Beyond the question of human contributions, Myriam van der Hoek's work at the Allard Pierson is complicated by the ethics and problematics of displaying animal taxidermy—and the underlying implication here that the animal is objectified and commodified to a point where it can be displayed without question—unlike, for example, a human mummy. An important question was raised about the use of colonial photographs – how can these be used as evidence of particular (violent) histories while at the same time problematizing the way in which they may reproduce the “colonial gaze”? Overall, participants took away a better

understanding of curatorial and creative practices, with special attention to the areas of research that receive higher scrutiny than others when being translated into the space of a museum.

There were thirty participants in attendance, each bringing their own perspective and network of contacts into the room. Overall, the workshop was deemed a great success by the participants, and the panel of four speakers created a multiperspectival yet coherent total for the discussion of this topic. In formal discussions and informal conversations over the course of the afternoon, new alliances were made across academic and museological organisations.

About the speakers:

Vincent van Velsen is Head of Exhibitions at Eye Filmmuseum. He previously held the position of curator of photography and contemporary art at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Van Velsen is a writer, researcher, critic and curator with a background in art and architectural history. He is a contributing editor at MetropolisM; associate curator at Metro54; and collaborator with the New Institute and Miguel Peres dos Santos on the Submerged Heritage project.

Artist, researcher, film maker and educator, **Miguel Luis Peres Antunes dos Santos** was born in Lisbon in the late seventies, before moving to the Netherlands at the turn of the millennium. With a background in photography and video, his educational trajectory includes a Bachelor in Fine Arts and a Master degree in Artistic Research. He currently lectures at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, where he also leads the Audiovisual Design Department. His research focusses on the construction and deconstruction of colonial narratives through audiovisual design.

Myriam van der Hoek works as a curator of the history of science at the Allard Pierson, which holds the heritage collections of the University of Amsterdam. Previously she worked at the print room of the Rijksmuseum and at a rare book

seller. She is specialized in early modern print techniques and the role of illustrations in scientific publications.

Inez de Ruiter is a collection specialist and curatorial advisor at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, currently focusing on provenance research of colonial collections from Suriname. She obtained her master's degree in Museums and Collections at Leiden University and has since collaborated in several ERC-funded research projects tracing the provenance of South American collections in European heritage institutions.

Sofia Lovegrove is a PhD candidate in the EcoViolence project. Her research and work lie at the intersection of cultural memory, museums and critical heritage studies and decolonial critique and practices. Within this project, Sofia focusses on how museums and heritage institutions are implicated in and represent environmental degradation as violence, and how they engage with the multidirectional links between ecological violence and colonialism. For the past six years, her work as a cultural heritage practitioner has focused on (representations of) the colonial past and issues of identity, belonging, equity, inclusion and international cooperation, and on strategies for addressing the afterlives of colonialism in the present through memory and heritage practices.