

SESSION PROPOSAL:

Association of Critical Heritage Studies Conference 2018

Title:

Decolonising Heritage: Border Thinking, Border Practices

Session convenor:

Nick Shepherd (Aarhus University)

Scope:

This session sets out to do two things. The first is to pick up on contemporary energies around the legacies of colonialism and the idea of decolonisation. Indeed, one of the surprises of the last few years has been the return of the colonial as a key term in critical analysis, fifty years and more after formal political decolonisation in many parts of the world. From #RhodesMustFall to #BlackLivesMatter, and from xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe to the resurgence of Indigenous identities in Africa, Australasia and the Americas, it is clear that the entangled legacies of colonialism are far from over. How have these legacies been expressed in heritage practices and discourses? In what ways have conceptions of heritage been shaped by colonial worlds of practice? What would it mean to talk about the coloniality of heritage itself? In other words, what would it mean to turn the gaze back on heritage practices and discourses, and to understand them not only as a product of modernity, but of colonial modernity, with all that that entails in the way of historical legacies and unrequited energies?

The second broad intention of this session – in keeping with the conference theme – is to engage with conceptualisations around “border thinking” and “border practices”. As articulated in the work of decolonial thinkers like Walter D. Mignolo and Gloria Anzaldúa, border thinking becomes a defiantly creative act that challenges boundaries and dichotomies, and attempts to think inside and outside of accustomed frameworks and categories. Not so much geographical as conceptual and epistemological, the border runs through social worlds and subjectivities, policing our sense of who we are in the world, and situating us in relation to the big power discourses of colonial modernity: racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and the war on nature. In their terms, border thinking becomes an act of epistemic disobedience, and a defiant attempt to turn categories and hierarchies back on themselves, to find new ways of doing, being and thinking.

Heritage as concept edges us in the direction of thinking about the rooted, the essential and the authentic. One of the values of border thinking for heritage practitioners lies in refusing this push towards essentialization. Rather than positing an absolute outside – a safe space from which to review the project of colonial modernity, untouched by forces of colonialism and development – Mignolo posits a constitutive outside; that is, an outside constructed by Western modernity in the process of constructing itself as inside. To inhabit this outside is to inhabit a world of women, blacks, mestizos, migrants, the non-heteronormative, the anti-capitalist, the anti-ecocidal, and the surplus populations of the global south.

This session invites and encourages contributions that find points of resonance with any of the formulations outlined above. We would love to hear from scholars, curators, creative artists, activists, practitioners, and anyone else working around coloniality and formulations of heritage. We would also love to hear from persons using queer theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, decolonial thinking, Fallist thinking, and the like, in their approach to heritage. An emphasis on border practices invites a focus on performance, embodiment, and the materialisation of new approaches and fresh thinking.

An explicit intention of this session is to result in a published volume of papers, and participants will be encouraged to rework their papers to the point of formal publication.