

Pre-Set Thematic Session proposal for Theme on:

Indigenous Voices: Communicating Peoples

(Conference on Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines, 16-18 November 2016, Cape Town)

Title:

Encountering Each Other: agencies, (im)possibilities, and reciprocities in dryland southern Africa – a sharing of co-created works and experiences

Names and affiliations:

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In this thematic session we seek to share experiences of long-term relationships and collaborations through which we have attempted to refract intractable postcolonial structures of inequality. We begin from a position that we cannot erase either History – that mesh of mercantile, colonial, apartheid and gendered trajectories structuring all our encounters – or the personal and contingent histories making possible present relationships, yearnings and endeavours. We ask: how do we work now from where we are in ways that both acknowledge and redress these shared pasts?

For those of us on the 'European' side of the equation, should we simply write ourselves out of the picture in acknowledgement of the violent pasts haunting present inequities? Or does this 'writing out' further discount the multiple agencies at play as ethnographic practice and co-generated materials participate in the ongoing making of worlds? Is it possible to work collaboratively to mobilise skills and resources, and to share voices and experiences that tend to be occluded, without falling into either naïve, liberal paternalisms or a perpetuation of problematic mutual dependencies? We sense that these are questions that many of us struggle with daily as we pursue a politicised ethnographic awareness and practice, questions that are heightened in the polarising dynamics so characteristic of the contemporary moment.

We thus start from recognising the impossibility of 'going back to the beginning' – to a place or time somehow unsullied by the power differentials of post-colonial and patriarchal contexts – to ask, and then what? Our response in this intervention is to share a triptych of loosely connected works, each of which seek to nourish recognition, restitution, proximity and empathy through various ways of remembering, telling and sharing stories. We draw inspiration from Michael Taussig's extraordinary meditation on *Mimesis and Alterity*, to approach our interventions as always participating in disjunctures and translations across multiple and variously (in)commensurable cultural worlds. And we see this activity as co-creating an imperfect and unsettled improvisation of continual cultural negotiation, so as not to give up on the possibilities of reciprocity and progressive change arising from engagement.

Our three experimental contributions are based on the following:

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1. *A shared history: repatriating, researching and curating San photographs with San communities*

Chris Low, Chris Morton and Stilvanus Ndumbu / !Khwa ttu (<http://www.khwattu.org/>)

!Khwa ttu is a San education and training centre 70kms north of Cape Town. It was started 16 years ago as a joint initiative between the leading San advocacy group WIMSA (Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa) and a Swiss not for profit, the Ubuntu Foundation. !Khwa ttu is currently developing exhibits with the San for a new !Khwa ttu San Museum. In this presentation, San members of !Khwa ttu, Dr Chris Low (!Khwa ttu exhibition curator) and Dr Chris Morton (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford), consider some of the issues !Khwa ttu faces in trying to represent and empower the San within the framework of a 'museum'.

One recent idea for a !Khwa ttu museum exhibit that we have discussed has come out of the chance finding of 137 anthropometric photograph boards of San men and women. The photographs had been in storage at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, for some years until Morton began researching them as part of a Leverhulme Trust funded project. The photographs were taken by Oxford anthropologist Joseph Weiner on a 1958 'Nuffield-Witwatersrand University Research Expedition to Kalahari Bushmen', and relate to research carried out in several locations around Ghanzi, Botswana.

In October 2016 !Khwa ttu and the Pitt Rivers Museum will take these photographs to the areas in which they were taken and invite some members of the San community to look at them and tell us what they would like to happen to the collection. We will invite and support San who can connect with the photographs to respond in ways of their choosing and offer to provide a platform for this response within !Khwa ttu museum as well as the Pitt Rivers Museum. Their response could form the basis for an exhibit that tackles the problematic interplay between colonial science, visual representation, and wider issues of race and culture in relation to the San of southern Africa.

The presentation will discuss the initial outcomes of this process of visual repatriation and indigenous curatorial engagement, and consider the museological implications both at !Khwa ttu and at the Pitt Rivers Museum of working with the San as part of a curatorial process that involves San people in making decisions about the interpretation and presentation of the collection.

2. *Outsider photography/insider ethnography - a KhoeSan cultural view?*

Rick Rohde and Siona O'Connell

This presentation summarises the outcomes of photography projects which took place in two small southern African villages: Okombahe in western Namibia, and Paulshoek in Namaqualand, South Africa. The former culminated in an exhibition of the work of sixteen individuals at the National Gallery of Namibia in 1996; the latter showcased photographs made by one young woman – Sophia Klaase – over a fifteen period and exhibited at the District Six Museum in Cape Town in 2013 (<http://sophiaklaase.ccaphotography.org/> and <http://fourthwallbooks.com/product/hanging-wire-photographs-sophia-klaase/>). In both cases, the photographers were amateurs with no training or exposure to traditions of visual representation.

The story of these photography projects delineates an experimental approach to writing ethnography. It is multi-vocal in the sense of incorporating diverse individual representations and narratives; it is dialogic insofar as some aspects of the project involved negotiation between myself (Rohde) and photographers relating to the interpretations of individual

photographs; it is reflexive from the point of view of the photographers, their subjects, and the public at large in response to the photographs mounted as an exhibition. Both the images and the photographer's comments on them open the possibility of rethinking the issue of distance and otherness, and directly address questions concerning cultural space, the sense of temporality and narrative authority. An attention to the process of the project as a whole, rather than to the photographs themselves, as artefacts, contributes to a resolution of some of the problems of writing ethnography and representing 'others'.

These two collections (or archives) of photographic images is a multiple, shifting text, embodying a variety of meanings and values depending on the context in which they are viewed, displayed and published. This is crucial, for the archive is not only the concern and domain of the academy and the state. The challenge is to acknowledge the everyday lives of rural society from which these photographs emerge, that have long been marginalised and excluded from mainstream culture.

3. *Developing Future Pasts Local* (nb. Presentation cancelled due to family bereavement).
Sian Sullivan / Welhemina Suro Ganuses / *Future Pasts* (www.futurepasts.net)

Our presentation will be based on processes emerging over twenty years' ethnographic research and relationships in west Namibia to develop a protocol for the local sharing of documentations from on-site oral histories and cultural landscapes mapping in a historical context of eviction. This ethnographic work has involved returning with now elderly Khoekhoegowab-speaking people (self-identifying as Damara / ≠Nūkhoen and ||Ubun) to former dwelling and other places. These sites are now located in a tourism concession in west Namibia that was progressively cleared of people in past decades. The research has involved recording place-names, childhood memories and other stories that emerge through this on-site oral history documentation, so as to reinscribe in the present past experiences and perspectives that receive little attention in written historical archives. In our presentation we will explore some of the difficulties encountered in interpretation, each of us sharing dimensions of this experience from our respective academic and indigenous positionalities. We emphasise in particular the time and commitment needed so as to negotiate, generate and resource materials that communicate specific cultural pasts whilst being relevant to present realities. Our presentation will draw on image, film and audio materials so as to evoke the dynamic places and temporalities of our collaboration.