

ASA Conference 2021

RESPONSIBILITY

Online, 29 March - 1 April 2021

Under the theme [“Responsibility”](#), the ASA Conference for 2021 will be hosted by the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, but will take place online from 29 March to 1 April 2021. The Call for Papers is closed. [Find out more on the conference homepage.](#)

Selected panels:

Panel Evid04: [Many are the pities of history: animals, plants and other forms of life in the historiography of the Global South](#)

Convenors: Mark Harris (University of St Andrews); Nádia Farage (University of Campinas)

Short abstract: How did colonial administrations conceive of responsibility in the context of Southern colonial histories? How did the colonised conceive of the world that sustained them? By focusing on responsibility towards other species and environment, our ambition is to encompass dissident and critical voices.

Long abstract: The colonial histories of animals, plants and other forms of life remains an incipient area of research in historical anthropology. Indeed, the historical anthropology that has flourished since the 1980s has been successfully devoted to the struggles of socio-diversity, especially in the colonial histories of the South. Biodiversity has not received the same level of attention. As a rule, biodiversity was treated as “landscape” in historical narratives, the passive background against which the tragedy of colonial history had taken place. Nevertheless, recent studies are challenging the trend and pointing out that histories of biodiversity, species loss and environmental degradation, are tied up with the loss of sociodiversity, and are interwoven with the histories of colonial exploitation. This panel invites researchers seeking to revise Southern colonial histories in order to highlight the relevance of other species and/or inter-species relationships in the colonial process. How did colonial administration conceive of responsibility? How did the colonised conceive of theirs and the world which sustained them? Furthermore, focusing responsibility towards other species and environment, our debate will encompass critical and dissident voices. In particular, we would like to focus on the limits of evidence in answering these questions. What kinds of evidence are being used? Assessing environmental histories and the specific contribution anthropology can bring to such a review, the panel will welcome case studies of species’ resistances or alliances which altered, if only for a brief time/space, the course of exploitation – be they flowing rivers, impenetrable forests, flies or uncontrollable wildlife.

Panel Irre04 [Fictional anthropologists and questions of ethics](#)

Convenors: Gavin Weston (Goldsmiths College); Mwenza Blell (Newcastle University); Jamie Lawson (University of Bristol)

Short abstract: This panel will engage with fictional anthropologists as a way to talk about the responsibilities of anthropologists. Through literature, films, TV, comic books and computer games we will explore the ethics of writing, research and the relationship between fictional and real-world anthropology.

Long abstract: There is a rich history of fictional anthropologists in literature, TV, films, comic books, and computer games and within anthropology there are interesting spaces where anthropology and fiction intersect (Narayan 1999). Anthropologists such as Laura Bohannon (Bowen 1964) have lightly fictionalised their own lives, Michael Taussig oscillated between fiction and documentary in *The Magic of the State* (1997) such texts show ways in which the boundaries between ethnography and fiction might be stretched. Fictional depictions span from quite accurate to radically unrealistic and everything in between. The resulting fictional anthropologists and fictionalised anthropology allow for constructive conversations about anthropological ethics and responsibilities. In films, the preponderance of anthropologists in horror and sci-fi films (Weston, Lawson, Blell & Hayton 2015) provide safe avenues for discussion of anthropology's relationship with colonialism, issues of representation, informed consent and a host of other issues. In other spaces fictionalised accounts of anthropological fakery, sexual relationships in the field or colonial complicity allow us to explore ethical issues, irresponsible behaviour, poor conduct or failures in research in hypothetical ways that open up safe spaces for conversation. What lessons about colonialism lurk in the pages of Ian M. Banks' *Culture* novels? Can we learn about fieldwork relationships from Alfred Molina in *Species*? What does *Midsommar* tell us about PhD supervision? These questions and many more are opened up through fictionalised anthropologists. Taking the approach that anthropological fictions are good to think with, this panel will explore what anthropological fictions can show us about the ethics.

Panel Irre08 [Taking responsibility for the past: heritage ethics in an era of cultural protectionism](#)

Convenors: Daan Beekers (University of Edinburgh); Markus Balkenhol (Meertens Instituut); Duane Jethro (Humboldt University Berlin)

Short abstract: Narratives about cultural heritage, conventionally linked with expectations of conviviality and peace, are increasingly marked by identitarian politics. Asking 'what are heritage ethics today', we investigate the moral underpinnings of dominant and subaltern heritage claims under this conjuncture.

Long abstract: What are heritage ethics today? Early narratives about cultural heritage, as espoused by UNESCO among others, were driven by ethical concerns such as conviviality, peace and universal value. These concerns have shaped key themes in twentieth century heritage studies, from the great debates about cultural and human rights, tensions between universalist ambition and particularist interests to questions of representation and ownership of cultural property. Heritage as an ethical concern has come under new pressure in the twenty-first century with the rise of nativism and cultural protectionism, manifest as populist politics, Trump's 'America First', Brexit, Islamophobia and colonial nostalgia. Heritage claims are increasingly integral to identitarian politics, exclusionary narratives and nativist claims of belonging. By asking 'what are heritage ethics today', we want to investigate if and how the moral underpinnings of heritage claims, both dominant and subaltern, have changed. To what extent are the ethical undercurrents that flow through discourses and practices of heritage – the responsibility to recognise and care for certain 'pasts', the moral imperative to remember, the emancipating or even redemptive potential ascribed to cultural heritage – shifting under this

new conjuncture? How do today's heritage dynamics shape and potentially alter collective notions of rights, morality and entitlement? And does this entail a shift from universalist to particularist 'goods'? This panel seeks contributions that ethnographically illustrate these complexities and contradictions, including cases where heritage claims are considered to have gone 'too far', to be immoral or irresponsible, or those where sometimes problematic heritage claims are neutralised as ethical.

Panel Mora06 [Retrospective regrets and contemporary apologies](#)

Convenors: Jennifer Speirs (University of Edinburgh); Iris Marchand (University of Edinburgh)

Short abstract: Public acknowledgement of responsibility and apology for past policy decisions and actions about strategies of reproduction, adoption and kinship are often controversial, and raise issues for anthropologists concerning law, human rights, activism, and memory.

Long abstract: It has been suggested that we live now in an Age of Apology (Mookherjee et al 2009) which has ethical, social and political dimensions. Citing examples such as the Australian government's apology to the 'stolen generations', the indigenous children forcibly removed from their families as part of the policy of assimilation, the authors highlight 'the ethical pitfalls of seeking an apology, or not uttering it' and the varied understandings of apology and forgiveness across different social groups within the same state. Yet before apology there has to be acceptance of responsibility, and this is often controversial, with claims that today's citizens cannot be responsible for the actions of earlier generations, even if with hindsight and the passage of time it is acknowledged that those actions were wrong. Further, saying sorry in today's risk-averse environment can be seen as paving the way to demands for compensation and recourse to legal proceedings. This panel seeks to explore, based on ethnographic research, how different societies are dealing with retrospective regrets and claims for apologies. What kind of controversies or positive impacts result for those involved and for wider society? Are there rituals of revenge, celebration, forgiveness or reconciliation involved? How do anthropologists study and analyse the counterclaims and ambivalences inherent in saying sorry for past policies and actions? Are we able to remain neutral, and should we be so?

Panel Speak09 [Sensible museums: responsibilities of knowledge creation and narrative construction in museums](#)

Convenors: Nainika Dinesh, Susan Degan (University of Oxford)

Short abstract: Museums in a post colonial era have struggled with navigating the troubled histories of colonial collecting that inform most collections. From 'contact zones' (Clifford) to repatriation, this panel seeks to examine what it means to be an ethical museum institution in the contemporary world.

Long abstract: This panel seeks to unpack the theme of this conference: 'responsibility,' in the context of the modern-day museum institution. Ethnographic museums have particularly been criticised for the problematic arrangement and management of their collections but they - along with all types of museums - seem to only be gaining in popularity. We need to ask - how, then, can museums respond to the changing concerns of an ever-globalising public? Considering the difficult heritages for many of a museum institution's objects, we ask what responsibilities these museums have to the outside world. How is knowledge produced in the museum (museum ontologies)? Whose voices are heard? Who gets to organise collections, write labels, etc? What new and emerging methods of display may allow for new ways of knowledge construction and dissemination (i.e. Clifford's 'contact zones', or the 'sensory turn')? What responsibility does the museum as an institution have to the outside world? What responsibility does it have to the people from whom their collections stem (i.e. what does responsibility does

the British Museum have to Athens, or to India), and vice versa? Do museums have a responsibility to respond to crisis situations/be social activists? We encourage any papers thinking about the ways in which museum institutions (not micromuseums) have and could respond to calls to responsibility; as well as papers exploring where a museum's responsibilities come from and to whom they are directed.

Some panels include papers addressing historical issues that may be of interest to Historians of the discipline. We have selected this one:

Panel Speak14 [The limits of collaboration](#)

Convenors: Paloma Gay y Blasco (St. Andrews University); Mattia Fumanti (University of St Andrews)

Short abstract: The panel will assess the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative research as an outlook and a set of diverse practices in anthropology. We will explore the potential and the limits of collaboration, what it can and cannot deliver for the world and for the discipline.

Selected paper: [The Countess' diaries and Taonga Māori: Twenty-first century collaborations around nineteenth century collecting](#)

Author: Kirsty Kernohan (University of Aberdeen)

Paper short abstract: Collaborations around the context and care of Taonga Māori at the University of Aberdeen require engagement with Māori academics, weavers and families as well as 19th century diaries. This paper explores how competing narratives depend on one another in collaborations involving colonial legacies.

Paper long abstract: In the 1890s, Māori weavers gave taonga (treasures) to the Countess of Kintore on her visits to Aotearoa New Zealand. She took the taonga back to Aberdeenshire and donated them to the University of Aberdeen Museums. Since 2018, I have collaborated with Māori academics, weavers, and people with family ties to the taonga: we established links between the taonga and descendants of their makers, exchanged information about provenance, and sought to establish better care of the taonga in the museum. This kind of collaboration is best practice in museum anthropology and has a concrete impact on the way in which objects are understood and cared for. These collaborations were facilitated by reading the Countess' diaries. In this paper, I argue that this archival research is a form of collaboration. The Countess' control of the archival narrative forged the direction of our collaborations around the taonga: her decision to donate the taonga dictated their legal ownership; her choice of which names and places to record affected which taonga could be involved in connections, and her descriptions of collecting them provide evidence for the legitimacy of those acquisitions. Collaborating with the Countess was not an egalitarian process which celebrated her voice. Engaging with hundreds of pages of derogatory language and colonial rhetoric, I took an ethnographic approach which restricted, challenged and criticised her narrative. Nevertheless, subsequent collaborations have relied heavily on her words and experiences. These interdependent processes of collaboration illustrate the tangled negotiation of competing narratives in collaborations involving colonial legacies.