

Call for Participants
Decomposing Archives:
Nurturing Critique and Disruption within Natural History Museum

13-15 March 2025

Feminist Autonomous Centre for research
Athens, Greece

In what ways do relationships between people and their environments become embodied by collections and archives? How might historical representations in museums and ethical engagements with these sites impact long-term visions of institutional responsibilities and roles? Such critical questions about the kinds of narratives, futures, and relations that can be produced by museums are becoming increasingly relevant, given ongoing disputes between former colonial empires and colonised communities over stolen artifacts and ancestral remains. These questions are only just making their way into natural history museums, despite the longstanding entanglements between colonialism, capitalism, the transatlantic slave trade, and natural history collecting. If natural history institutions shape how we conceptualize and record histories of both land and labor, then they must be met with a critical approach that acknowledges the “double fracture” between colonial and environmental histories of damage (Ferdinand, 2019). Emerging from our ongoing work and challenges as researchers within Berlin’s Museum für Naturkunde, this 3-day workshop offers a space to mutually develop skills, arguments, and perspectives for interrupting reproductions of colonial procedure within natural history institutions.

In both the collections of natural history museums as well as the archives associated with them, we find knowledge that could only be produced through the work of enslaved or coerced laborers. While some of these archives contain objects with an acknowledged blurring between their “cultural” or “natural” status, they primarily contain biological specimens that are seen as representations of past ecologies—apolitical and aperspectival. Yet we are always involved in the production and reproduction of our environments. The work needed to travel, capture, kill, collect, transport, and preserve so-called “specimens” has always been situated within economic and social circumstances. Natural history’s role in mapping and evaluating value for aspiring empires and colonial powers is such that these archives are also reflections of how multispecies relationships become translated into potential scientific and economic value for (often far away) nation-states. If natural history is supposed to reflect relationships between the living and dead, then it must also account for historical abuses, exploitation, and resistance to power by humans and nonhumans alike.

This workshop seeks to create an imaginative space where participants can bring together diverse traditions of knowledge to create histories of the land, ecologies, and relations that make our everyday lives possible. In doing so, we reify that historical narratives created by museums in their current iterations are not inevitable, but a particular display of power relations, which can be destabilized by internal and external interventions as well as by collection histories and practices. In sharing our understandings of these political ecologies with one another, we attend to the forms of resistance practiced both locally and

internationally. How might we see anti-oppressive teaching methodologies, dockworkers' strikes, and demands for housework wages as part of the same collective ecologies that sidewalk weeds, mold slimes, and so-called invasive species live within? In other words, how can we tie together a diversity of resistance practices in our specific contexts, without flattening differences?

Although the primary focus of this workshop is natural history museums, the first day will look at power structures that operate in museums in general, and the ideological biases that form the basis of the narratives they propagate. The focus will be on the entities such as people, groups, technologies, political structures and so on that have sustained the power differentials in museums, and how they have shifted over time as the Western imperial powers have lost some of their colonies. This part of the workshop will also include discussions on power when it takes the form of resistance to the colonial authority. These different dimensions of power will be explored by participants by applying the intersectional feminist framework created by Patricia Hill Collins—Matrix of Domination—to three different museum collection data (1990). By closely looking at three digital museum collections, we will work together to highlight the power structures present within museums, and the power operationalised by the colonised population to fight against these injustices – exploring traces of resistance towards the colonial violence that these museum collections can allude to, despite the biases, when read ‘against the grain’.

Following this, our second day of collective reading, writing exercises, and reflective exercises will explore connections between the politics of our daily ecologies and the museum environments where collections reside. In particular, this part of the workshop will emphasize developing a place-based awareness of ecological relationships through individual and collective reflections. We aim to consider how institutional and collection environments are influenced by relationships of power, including state violence and capitalist valuations. Additionally, this aspect of our workshop will prepare participants to connect ecological processes of collapse and decay with the potential of institutions, states, and oppressive relations to be undone.

Finally, the third day of this workshop will offer participants a series of collective writing prompts and practices, grounded in decolonial feminist and queer approaches to museum scholarship and archival practice. We aim to provide a space for mutual critique, but also simply a time to sit down in warmth with friends and comrades—and write. One priority of this proposed workshop, and of both our research efforts, is to highlight how intersectional feminist and decolonial perspectives can impact work with collections, natural history, and ecological relationships more generally. We hope to discuss the limits and possibilities of our own positions as researchers within a state-funded institution, and promote a lively discussion between participants about the relationship between feminist scholarship and collection access.

We aim to facilitate more critical conversations about natural history collections in a way that supports both our and participants' research questions (whether personal or academic). As such, we welcome short abstracts, up to 250 words, detailing either a collection, museum, ecological setting, or personal tradition of knowing that you would be interested in exploring during this workshop. In particular, we welcome abstracts that take a creative view on what can be considered an ecological archive/data, employing anti-racist, feminist, and

anti-colonial perspectives. This abstract is a chance to let us know what questions and perspectives are bringing you to this workshop. If you wish to provide this information via another format, please reach out to us using the emails below.

To submit an abstract, please use this form: <http://tiny.cc/DecomposingArchives>

Call for Participants closes: 15 Feb 2025 (11:59pm)

Decisions: 26 Feb

Confirmation of participation: 2 March

Programme Finalised: 5 March

Workshop takes place: 13-15 March 2025

6-9 pm on 13.03 and 14.03

12-3 pm on 15.03

Fees: There are no fees to participate; participants are asked to support FAC (an autonomous, community-based research centre) by becoming a member: feministresearch.org/join

More information: Please email elaina.foley@aya.yale.edu (Elaina) or info@feministresearch.org (FAC).

Code of contact: FAC is an antiracist feminist, LGBTQI+ affirmative space and the participation of trans, intersex, non-binary, queer, lesbian, bisexual, and gay people in the seminar is encouraged. No TERFS. Please read and commit to FAC's code of contact: feministresearch.org/code-of-contact

Organizers:

Sara Akhlaq, *doctoral student in Humanities Data Science and Methodology at Technische Universität Darmstadt*

Elaina Foley, *von Humboldt research fellow at Museum für Naturkunde*