

CENTRE FOR SENSORY STUDIES



TALKING SENSE SEMINAR

(Dis)placing Affect: Cold War Narratives in Ethnographic Collections at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum

Sowparnika Balaswaminathan

Friday, 10 February 2023

12:00-14:00

Zoom Registration Link: bit.ly/3CJ2ege

Ethnographic collections at natural history museums are assemblages of awkward objects (Lehrer & Sendyka 2019). Embodying a combination of the scientific intention of their collectors, the imperialistic context of their translocation, and the colonial racism underlying the concept of cultural exhibiting, these objects tend to be narrativized with brevity even when the curatorial intent is to contextualize and problematize their heterotopic reality. Even more obfuscated are the affective components of these collections, which are elided partly because of the difficulties of locating the intimate in these objects deadened by classification, but also because of the extant curatorial emphasis on wonder and curiosity. In this talk, I juxtapose the intimate and the political in a particular ethnographic collection at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), and ask what narratives are made possible when ethnography is unanchored from its “culture area” setting, and if an emphasis on exploring the affective relations between cultural objects and their communities could open up anticolonial possibilities.

When the nation state of Tibet was invaded and occupied by the People’s Republic of China in 1950, the millions of refugees who found asylum in India had to find creative and grim ways to survive. In this, they were assisted by the New Delhi Charity Godown Society, a women-led philanthropic organization in India, that provided monetary assistance and infrastructural aid to Tibetan refugees by brokering the transfer of their heritage and religious possessions to museums and collectors. The NMNH was one of the institutions that acquired a collection, which is labeled in its catalogues as representing “Tibetan culture and religion”. However, in this paper I argue that the objects of this collection, when read with their associated archival materials, are also representative of the invasion and occupation of Tibet, a political act wrought with violence, and the distress of a fleeing people, an affective context mediating between the refugees and the world (Cifor 2016:8). Through an exploration of the correspondences between well-meaning members of the Godown Society, academically curious curators of the Smithsonian, and the consequent documentations in the National Anthropological Archives, I illustrate how an analysis of the affective components of such negotiations reveal the underlying political valences and relations emblematic of the Cold war era neoliberalism. Lastly, I contend that such close readings of archives could provide an anticolonial alternative to curation, which in turn could enable decolonial processes of recognition and repatriation.

Sowparnika Balaswaminathan is an Assistant Professor in Religions and Cultures at Concordia University, Montreal. She received a PhD in anthropology from the University of California, San Diego, and was a Peter Buck postdoctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC. Her work examines the politics of heritage, the ethics and aesthetics of artisanal labor, and religious art traditions in India.