GeoHumanities
Royal Holloway, University of London
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Centre for the GeoHumanities

Newsletter No. 13
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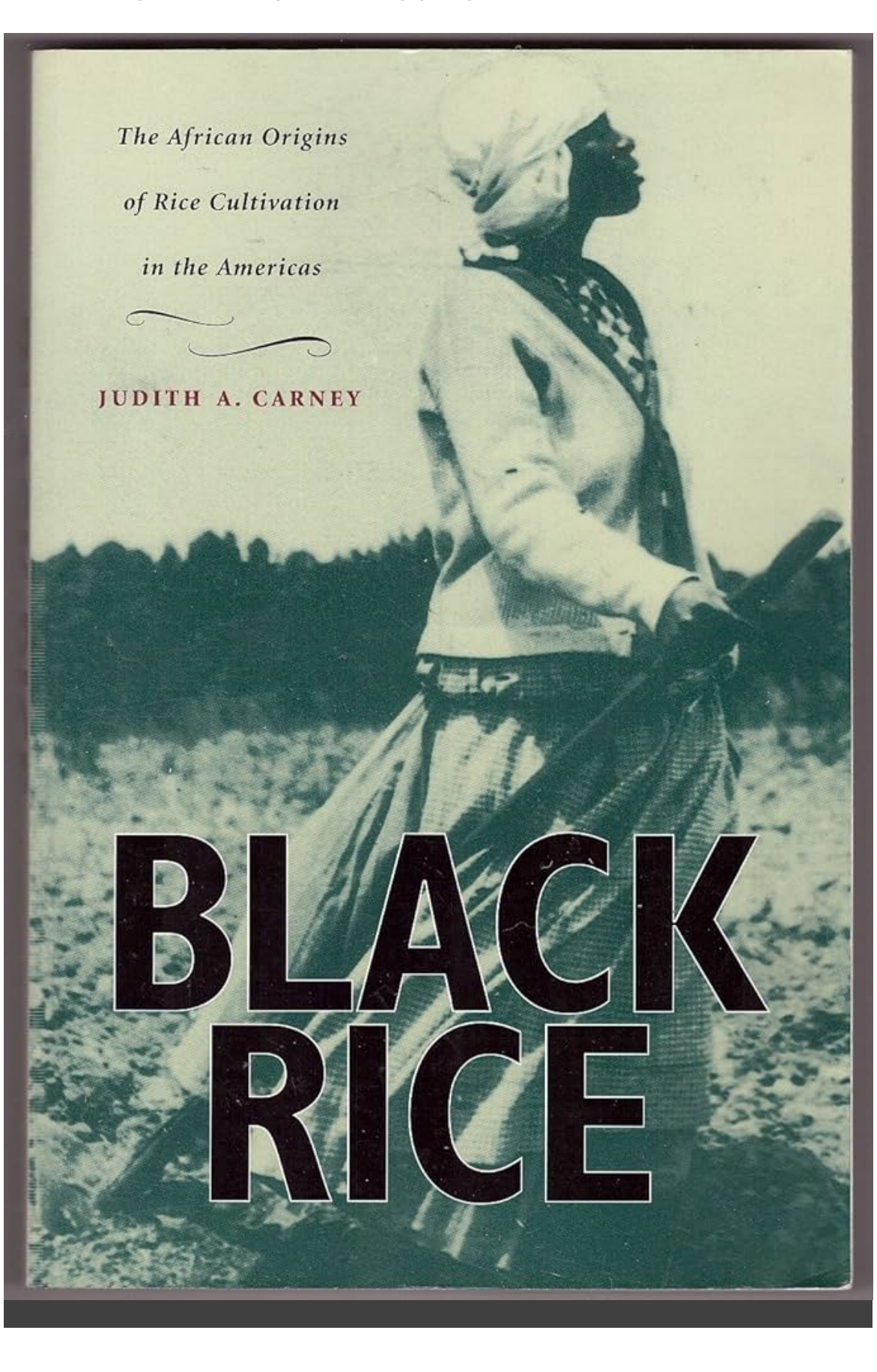
Centre for the GeoHumanities

Welcome to the thirteenth edition of the Centre for the GeoHumanities newsletter. Please get in touch with us at geohumanities@rhul.ac.uk if you have news you would like to share or would like your work featured.

7th Cosgrove Lecture

The 7th Cosgrove Lecture will be delivered by Prof. Judith Carney (UCLA) on the subject '***Planting Resistance: Botanical Legacies of the African Diaspora***' in collaboration with the British Academy.

6:00 pm, Tuesday 28th May | Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew



In the 21st century, the expansion of large-scale industrial agriculture across tropical landscapes in the Americas is threatening an Afrodescendant food system that has long prioritized agro-biodiversity and agroecological practices. These practices emerged during the plantation era of transatlantic slavery, when the enslaved leveraged subsistence precarity for the right to food plots, independent production, and partial autonomy over their labour. Historical continuities connect this much-ignored food system to agricultural practices maintained to this day in many Afrodescendant farming communities. Places exemplified by the plants, cultural knowledge, and social memories of these communities can be considered biocultural refugia - extending a concept from European heritage landscapes to tropical environments in the Americas.

This lecture is a free event, open to all. It will be followed by a reception.

For further details and to reserve your place, go to the British Academy events page

A complete list of the previous Cosgrove Lectures is available on the Centre website: audio and visual recordings can be accessed for most of them. Go to www.rhul.ac.uk/cosgrove

Upcoming Events

Cultivating the Plant Humanities

Dr Yota Batsaki, Dumbarton Oaks

5:30 pm Thursday 9th May 2024 | Founders Lecture Theatre, Royal Holloway

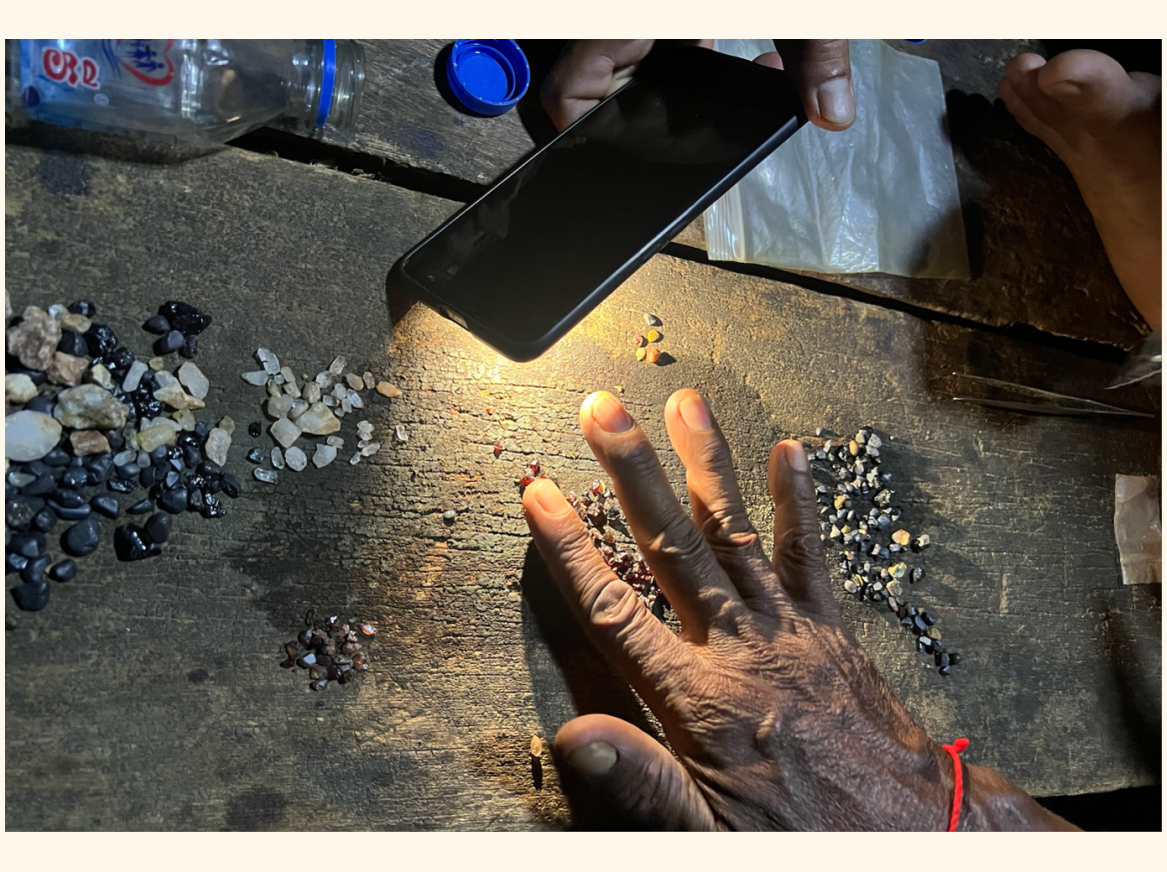
Dr Yota Batsaki is the Executive Director of Dumbarton Oaks, a Harvard University research centre, museum and historic garden located in Washington DC. Her talk will describe the Plant Humanities Initiative at Dumbarton Oaks as an example of how plant-focused projects and collections can stimulate research and public communication around humans, culture, and the environment.

This lecture is a free event organised by the Centre for GeoHumanities, and open to all. It will be followed by a reception.

To reserve your place, go to the Eventbrite booking page

Research Highlights

Think Deep: Project Update



Sorting a day's finds, Samlout, Cambodia, ethnographic fieldwork with Cambodian research team led by Long Ly Vouch

The Think Deep team led by Harriet Hawkins have been developing fieldwork in a range of sites, including speculating on sand mining in Singapore; developing an Earth Art practice in Italy and the US, considering underlands in Mongolia and Iceland; exploring myths of depth and stone in Norway and the UK, and working with a range of UK depths from caves to swimming pools. As part of a subproject exploring artisanal gem-mining in Cambodia we have recruited Cambodian artist Neak Sophal to make new work on the history and contemporary practice of mining in Pailin in NW Cambodia. We have also begun the process to commission emerging artists across South-East Asia to develop existing projects or start new projects on the subsurface.

Recent project highlights including; the touring of the exhibition Hollow Earth, recently at the RAM in Exeter including Flora Parrott's textiles and mixed media work ; Una Hamilton Helle in collaboration with Verity Birt has released a series of three pod-casts exploring Deep England and Will Jamieson has just had a new piece on Extracting Sovereignty published with e-flux . The next six months will see fieldwork drawing to a close, the launch of UK focused creative commissions, and the beginning of a new residency with Milan-based visual research agency Studio Folder who are going to collaborate on the compilation of work that has emerged from the project.

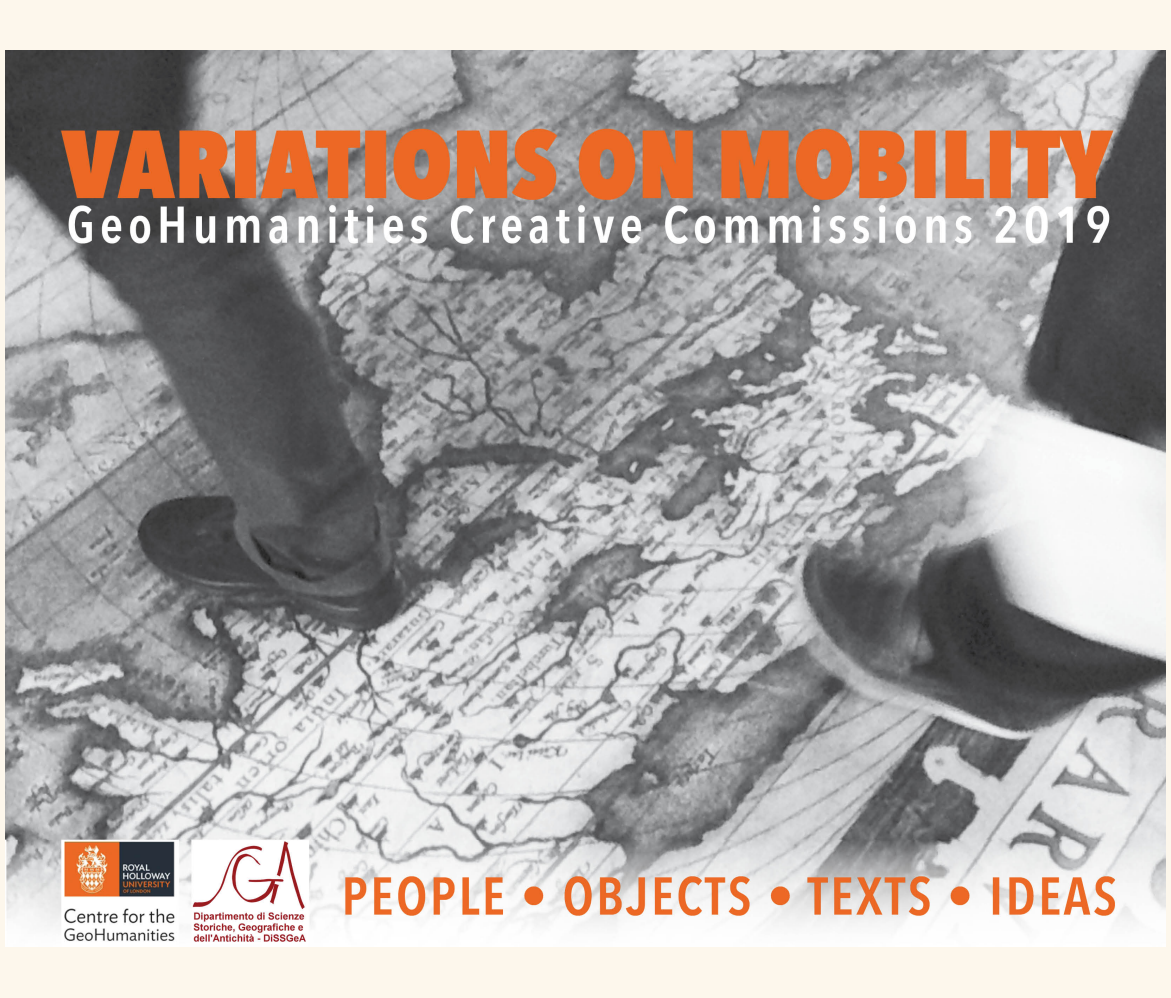
For more information about the Think Deep project, go to the project website.

Partnership with Museum of London: Urban history, fashion and modernity

The Centre for the GeoHumanities has a longstanding research collaboration with the Museum of London, the largest urban history museum in the world. At the heart of the collaboration has been a series of collaborative PhD projects, supervised by David Gilbert and senior curators at the Museum, all funded by the ESRC and AHRC. In the early 2000s, Toby Butler experimented with locative sound files, taking the Museum's oral history collection out of the archive and into the landscape. Toby was followed by Ellie Miles, whose PhD project focused on the making of the Galleries of Modern London, a complete reinterpretation of London's modern history in a series of galleries that opened in 2011. Two further collaborative PhDs drew upon David Gilbert's interests in the urban geographies of fashion and also involved Felix Driver's expertise in collections-based research. Bethan Bide's PhD project in the mid-2010s was an outstanding example of the potential of the Museum's substantial fashion collection as a research resource. The PhD was a multi-dimensional study of fashion in London in the post-war age of austerity, with a distinctive focus on making and mending clothes, and on the patina of use and wear. Finally, Jihane Dyer's recently-completed PhD project examines the use of clothing in urban history museums, exploring the different ways that the Museum of London has approached the relationship between fashion and urban modernity. Both Bethan and Jihane were co-supervised by Beatrice Behlen, senior curator in fashion and decorative arts at the Museum.

The collaboration with the Museum of London goes wider than these specific projects. David Gilbert has served on a series of Advisory and Academic Boards at the Museum. He was one of the main academic advisors for the Galleries of Modern London, helping to shape its underlying principles and organisation, particularly in bringing deeper understandings of the importance of imperialism and consumption cultures for the story of the modern city. The Museum has also hosted events and conferences associated with Royal Holloway research projects, notably the *Fashion's World Cities* conference in 2006, and the *Look of Austerity* conference in 2015. The Museum of London is currently closed while it both moves site and completely reorganises its collections and displays. It will reopen at West Smithfield in 2026, rebranded as the London Museum. David Gilbert has been a member of the Academic Board giving detailed advice and commentary on these changes since 2016.

Creative Commissions


VARIATIONS ON MOBILITY
GeoHumanities Creative Commissions 2019
Centre for the GeoHumanities
PEOPLE • OBJECTS • TEXTS • IDEAS

Creative Commissions is a creative arts commissioning programme supported by the Centre for the GeoHumanities in collaboration with partners within and beyond the University sector. Since 2017, there have been three rounds of the programme, led by Sasha Engelmann, devoted to 'Creating earth futures' (2018-19), 'Variations on mobility' (2019-21) and 'Creating diasporic worlds' (2022). Attracting applications from a total of nearly 150 people, these rounds resulted in twelve collaborative artistic projects undertaken by teams of artists and academics. As well as supporting the creation of new works, the commissions have built capacity in the GeoHumanities, created spaces for vibrant discussion and furthered dialogue on what the GeoHumanities might become.

A distinctive feature and ethic of the Centre's Creative Commissions programme is its emphasis on work 'in progress' rather than finished outputs; in the course of their work, each collaborative team has authored a series of 'progress posts' documenting the evolution of dialogue, practice and participation. The programme has also been impactful, reaching diverse public audiences through in-person showcases (for example at Raven Row Gallery, London), online events and an exhibition in central London (at the Cyprus High Commission, pictured here) attended by hundreds of visitors. Importantly, collaborations supported by the programme have grown into longer-term endeavours, from co-authored books to feature length films and new bodies of artistic work.

Further rounds of Creative Commissions are being planned, creating new opportunities for creative experiment in the future. For details of the three rounds supported so far, go to www.rhul.ac.uk/geohumanities/creativecommissions

Recent Activities

Plant humanities and botanical collections

Botanical Theatre, University of Padua

This workshop held in Padua on 15 April was organised by the Mobility & Humanities Centre for Advanced Study at the University of Padua, in collaboration with the Centre for GeoHumanities. It is the latest in a series of collaborative events organised between the two Centres, reflecting the vitality of our continuing partnership. The themes of the workshop – plant humanities and botanical collections – coincided perfectly in the extraordinary venue, a nineteenth-century lecture theatre in the botanical museum, adjacent to Padua's historic botanic garden. Prior to the workshop, this was the atmospheric setting for the showing of a film, *Goethe: the life of leaves*, written and directed by Denis Brotto. Visitors to the botanic garden in Padua will encounter the story of Goethe's interests in plant morphology through the story of 'Goethe's palm', a specimen of *Chamaerops humilis* dating from 1585 which the philosopher saw on his Italian journey in 1787 and which is still going strong today.

The workshop programme included discussion papers looking at interdisciplinary collections-based research (Felix Driver, Royal Holloway), the redesign of Padua's historic botanical museum (Elena Canadelli, Padua), the reactivation of biocultural archives (Luciana Martins, Birkbeck), interspecies relationships made visible in the herbarium (Tiziana Beltrame, Padua), research in an extraordinary algae herbarium (Claudia Addabbo, Padua) and the research challenges and opportunities of working across herbaria and archives (Luca Tonetti, Padua, and Diego Molina, Royal Holloway). The day concluded with a discussion of the creative potential of research in the Plant Humanities led by Yota Batsaki (who is talking about the Dumbarton Oaks Plant Humanities Initiative at Royal Holloway on 9 May: see above, Upcoming Events).

Doing philosophy with plants

Over the last fifteen years, a distinctive field concerned with plants has emerged within philosophy. This emergent field of plant philosophy provided the focus for this innovative workshop held at Royal Holloway on 18-19 April, organised by Judith Bastie, a visitor from the University of Paris Université Paris-Cité, and hosted by Daniel Whistler of the Centre's Steering Group. The speakers included Olga Cielemęcka, Quentin Hiernaux, Isabel Jacobs, Vanessa Lemm, Edward Thornton, Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod and Finian Worrall. Their subjects ranged from the forest as a weapon and as resistance, through Soviet plant philosophy to plant imaginaries in Nietzsche, Sartre and Humboldt. In the best traditions of the geohumanities, the workshop also included an outdoor element devoted to the phenomenology of vegetal life.

In considering what philosophy can bring to plants, and what plants can bring to philosophy, the workshop addressed a number of big questions. In what ways is philosophy even able to talk meaningfully about an object so foreign to it, and even to human thinking? What is the historical relationship between philosophy and botany? Is the emergence of plant philosophy a symptomatic and epistemologically significant event? What are the theoretical and political implications of some of the various approaches to plant philosophy currently on offer? And what pitfalls should be avoided at this crucial moment in the constitution of a new domain of philosophical knowledge?

Unearthing multispecies intellectual history

Diego Molina (centre) speaking at the University of Aarhus.

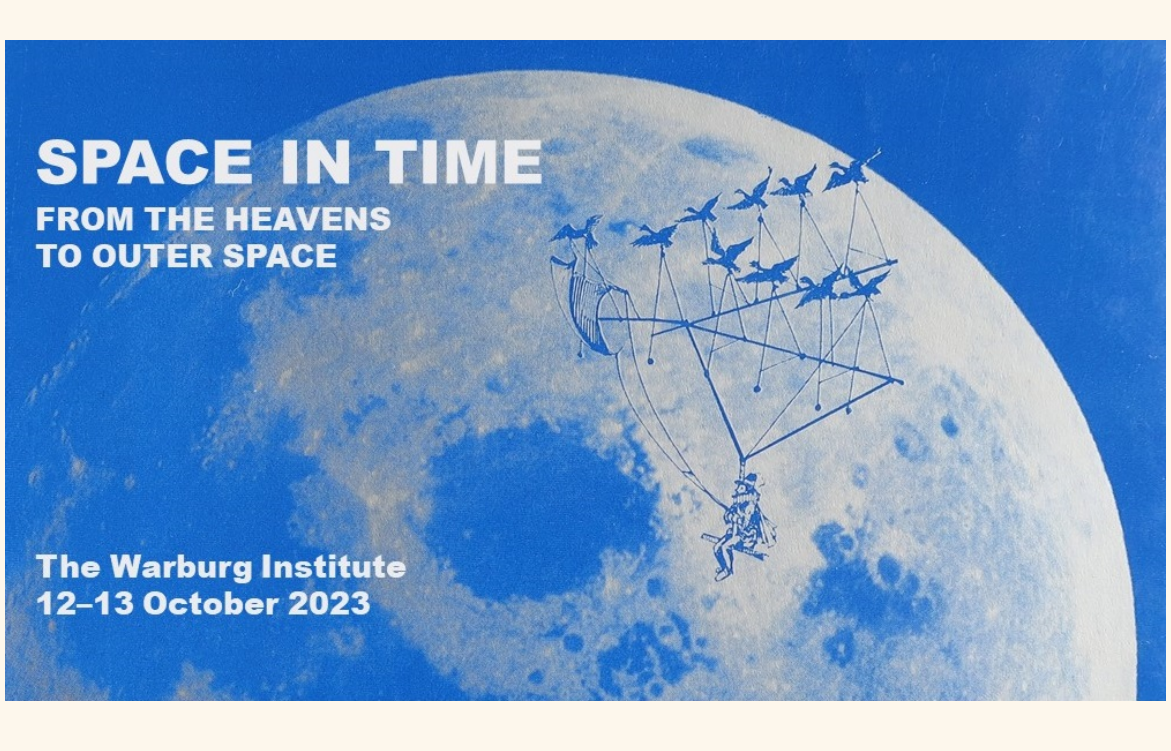
In November 2023, Diego Molina was an invited participant in the *Unearthing Multispecies Intellectual History* workshop held at the University of Aarhus. This event, organized by Aiko Honda and featuring the esteemed presence of Anna Tsing, convened scholars from diverse backgrounds worldwide. Over the course of three days, attendees explored the historical significance of non-human actors in shaping various epistemologies and forms of knowledge.

Presentations at the workshop explored a wide array of themes, ranging from the embodied memory of ethnobotanical practices in Latin America to the environmental history of pigs in Germany and the role of whales in religious practices in Vietnam. These various presentations sparked vigorous debates about the potential acknowledgment of plants and animals agency in the formation of knowledge systems, as well as the challenges in conveying emotions tied to the multispecies phenomenological experience.

The active participation witnessed during the workshop foreshadows promising future collaborations among its participants and hints at the potential for inter-institutional interactions in the coming years.

Read more about Diego Molina's research on plants, memory and botanical knowledge below (see "In the spotlight").

Space in Time - Conference Report



The international conference ***Space in Time: From the Heavens to Outer Space*** , co-convened by Veronica della Dora, took place at the Warburg Institute on 12-13 October 2023. Speakers from 14 countries across 4 continents presented new research in the long and global cultural history of space beyond Earth, from the ancient heavens to modern outer space. While space history is a vibrant field of study, extending across the humanities and social sciences, it is often approached along familiar geographical, disciplinary, and period-based boundaries. In particular, the field's predominant interest remains in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially the period of space exploration following the launch of Sputnik in 1957. Yet this is nonetheless preceded and underwritten by a rich cross-cultural history stretching as far back as the human imagination itself, much of it yet to be written. Pushing against conventional temporal, spatial and disciplinary boundaries, *Space in Time* offered a forum for new, encompassing perspectives in the histories of art, astronomy, cosmology, geography, literature, philosophy, religion, science and technology, and intellectual and cultural history at large.

The event was co-organized by Dr Vladimir Brljak (English, Durham and Warburg Institute), Prof. Veronica della Dora (Geography, Royal Holloway Centre for the GeoHumanities), Dr Stamatina Mastorakou (History of Science, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), and Prof. John Tresch (History of Art, Science, and Folk Practice, Warburg Institute). It included a keynote lecture by Frédérique Ait-Tuati (History of Science, CNRS).

Geohumanities / Victorian Studies: Work in Progress

Senate House, University of London

On 12 March 2024, staff and postgraduates from the Centre for GeoHumanities met with a group from Royal Holloway's Centre for Victorian Studies (CVS) for an afternoon of intellectual exchange at Senate House, University of London. Given recent new appointments, and wider developments in the field of nineteenth-century studies, it seemed an opportune moment to explore some of the ideas and approaches that connect our two Centres. The afternoon was organised into two sessions: 'paper worlds' (concerned with the material and colonial geographies that shaped the practice of writing and collecting) and 'planetary ecologies' (concerned with politics of environmental engagement, from nuisances to photo archives).

Speakers included Yasmin Akhter, a PhD in the English Department ('Life-writing from the inter-imperial void: Emily Ruete in exile'); Frankie Kubicki, formerly a PhD in Geography and now curator at the Dickens Museum ('A paper world: researching Kew's paper collections'); Briony Wickes, lecturer in nineteenth-century literature ('[On Victorian nuisance: rift and recycling in the nineteenth-century city') and Bergit Arends, former PhD and more recently a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Courtauld Institute ('Activating archives: photography and ecology in the Anthropocene'). They were joined in discussion by a group of staff and postgraduates interested in finding common ground between our Centres.

And common ground we certainly discovered, whether in the materiality of the archive, the aesthetics of the more-than-human or the challenges of re-thinking place and the planetary within the humanities. Many participants clearly took pleasure in talking across disciplines and indeed across Schools, even within the hallowed if slightly faded halls of Senate House, Orwell's model for the Ministry of Truth in *1984*.

Archives of natural history

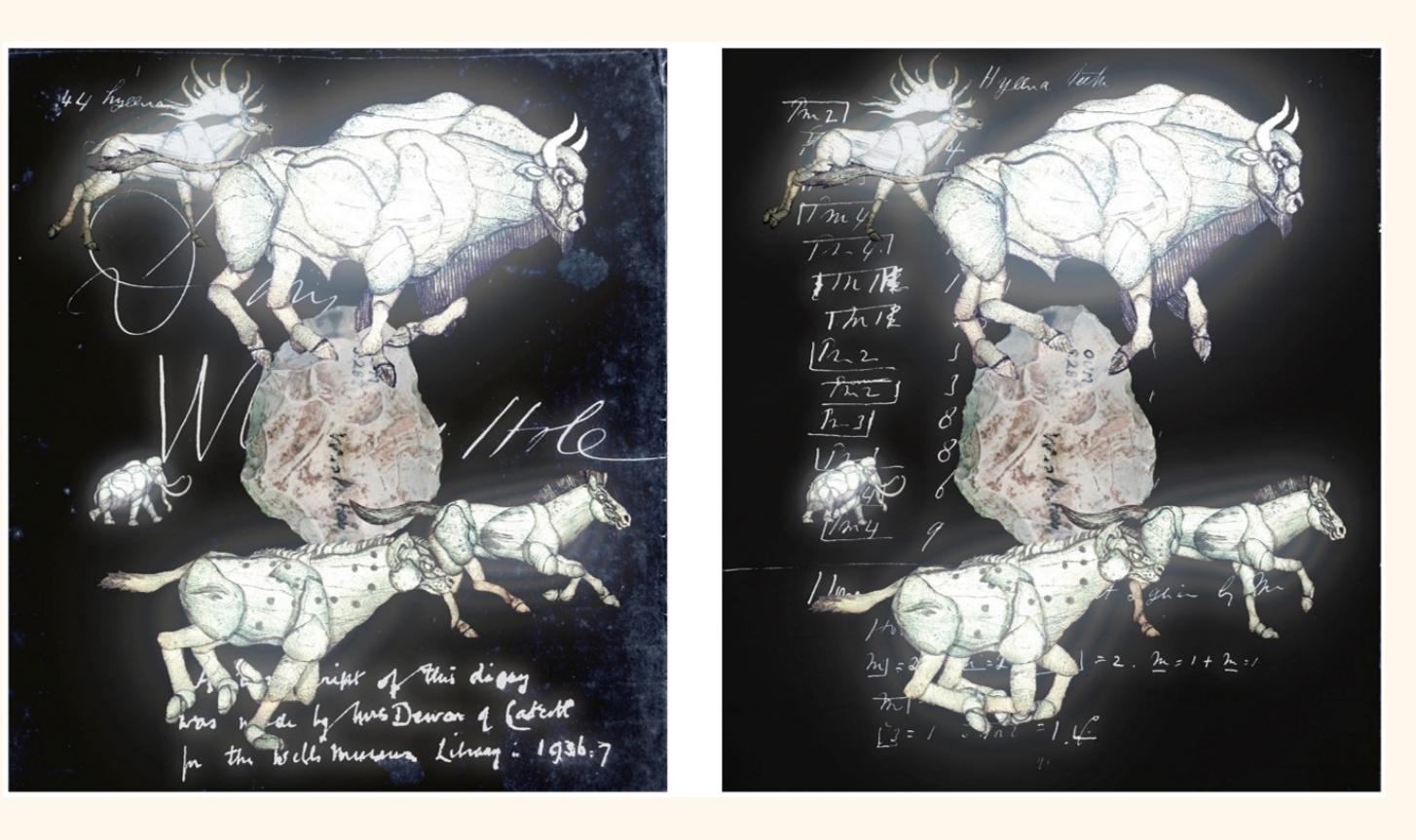
The theme chosen for the Spring 2024 term of seminars convened by the London Group of Historical Geographers – Archives of Natural History – spoke to wider issues in the GeoHumanities and beyond concerning the role of humanities research in natural history collections. Five speakers, all of them working in various ways on collections as sites of exchange and encounter, presented work in progress on a topic which is very much of the moment – in natural history museums, botanic gardens and many other kinds of collections including ethnographic collections where specimens living nature have been transformed into an object for science. The title of the series, borrowed from the journal edited by Anne Secord and published by the Society for the History of Natural History, was reinterpreted as a way of thinking about 'archives' which embraces specimens and artefacts, indeed living collections, as well as books and manuscripts. For humanities scholars, working between object collections and documentary sources, especially in the context of natural history collections, poses its own challenges and opportunities.

As a theme, natural history is not new to this seminar series, co-convened by Felix Driver and Innes Keighren of CGH in collaboration with Miles Ogborn (QMUL) and Margot Finn (at UCL), and hosted by the Institute of Historical Research. More than twenty years ago, the same group convened a series entitled Natural Histories which featured Doreen Massey, Bruno Latour, Sarah Whatmore, Jan Penrose and Mark Jenner. Then the term worked to signal the metaphorical, philosophical and political aspects of 'nature'; but now, we were concerned more specifically with the material remains of a colonial-era global project that has left its mark on collections across the globe, and their reactivation in projects of research and engagement for our own time. We also had the benefit of far larger, more diverse and more international audiences, enabled by the hybrid format of the series. Diego Molina (Royal Holloway) and Martha Fleming (of the Natural History Museum at Copenhagen) took herbaria as their focus; Rosa Dyer (of Birkbeck and the Pitt Rivers Museum) and Cat Madruga (of the Berlin natural History Museum) explored aspects of the transformation of nature in ethnographic and zoological collections, respectively. Finally, Rachel Utting (Scilly Isles Museum) presented a compelling account of her research across archives and specimens on the culture of collecting associated with the Pacific whaling trade.

Summaries of all the papers are available on the Institute of Historical Research website, and podcasts of some of them may also be accessed through the IHR site. Members of the Centre interested in receiving notification of future seminars in the series – which are held across the three terms of the academic year can subscribe for free at https://lghgseminar.wordpress.com/subscribe/

Exhibitions

The Cave Hunters and the Truth Machine



No. 7: Big Beasts Stalk The Mind of Sir William Boyd Dawkins. Copyright: Sean Harris.

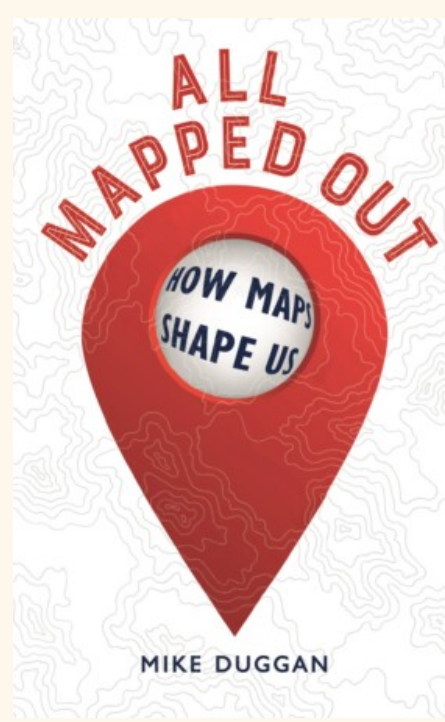
The Cave Hunters and the Truth Machine, an exhibition now open in the gallery space of the Emily Wilding Davison Building at Royal Holloway, is a collaboration between the Geography Department's Professor Danielle Schreve, a palaeontologist working on Ice Age mammals and climate change, and Sean Harris, an independent visual artist and film-maker. The exhibition tells how the discovery of fossils of Ice Age animals from the eighteenth century to the present day has informed us about climate and environmental change, evolution and how animal communities respond to change. The project is supporting research and public engagement into long-term and abrupt climate change, evolution and biological extinction.

Danielle and Sean have been collaborating for seven years. Most recently Sean exhibited a work entitled The Conference of the Birds: Curlew & Great Auk in the Senedd in Cardiff. Previously their collaboration has resulted in other digital animations involving partnerships with various arts and conservation organisations. These include a previous version of The Cave Hunters and the Truth Machine for the Eyeview Festival, Torquay (2019), Udfil (2022) with Loggerheads Country Park, Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB; and Homotherium (2021) with Creswell Craggs.

You can join Danielle, Sean and historian Karolyn Shindler for an evening of talks around their collaboration on 16 May, in the Windsor Building at Royal Holloway. The exhibition will be open before and after the lecture and there will also be a special animation projection on the study terrace on the roof of the Emily Wilding Davison building afterwards. To reserve a free place, go to the booking page.

New Book

All Mapped Out
By Mike Duggan



Cultural geographer Mike Duggan's new book *All Mapped Out*, just published by Reaktion, offers a unique approach to maps, exploring how they have shaped society and culture. Maps go far beyond just showing us where things are located. The book is an exploration of how maps impact our lives on social and cultural levels. It takes readers on a journey through the fascinating history of maps, from ancient cave paintings and stone carvings to the digital interfaces we rely on today. But it's not just about the maps themselves; it's about the people behind them. It shows how maps have affected societies, influenced politics and economies, impacted the environment, and even shaped our sense of personal identity. Mike Duggan uncovers the power of maps to shape the world and the knowledge we consume. This is a unique and eye-opening perspective on the significance of maps in our daily lives.

Mike Duggan is a former postgraduate in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway, whose PhD on everyday mapping practices was undertaken in collaboration with Ordnance Survey. He is a Lecturer in Digital Culture, Society and Economy in the Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London, and a Director of the Living Maps Network.

In the Spotlight

Dr Diego Molina, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, RHUL

Diego joined the Centre in November 2022 to work on a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship on The nineteenth-century ornamental exchange: plants and urban spaces in Europe and the Andes. This project, which involves collections-based research and fieldwork in the UK, Europe and South America, explores the emergence of a transatlantic market in ornamental plants in the wake of urban expansion during the nineteenth century. Analysing the business of plants from a global perspective, Diego reinterprets the role of so-called 'plant hunters', botanical gardens and urban planners as key actors in an extractive industry built upon informal colonial relationships working both ways across the Atlantic. The research shows how selective access to ornamental tropical plants led to a 'controlled tropicalisation' of European cities such as London or Paris, while the introduction of plants from other parts of the world including Europe and Australia led to new ecologies and urban forms in already biodiverse Andean cities such as Bogotá and Quito. The project helps us to see how distinctive trends in the aesthetics of urban planning entailed a redistribution of global biodiversity unparalleled since the era of the Columbian exchange.

Originally trained as a biologist and now working within the environmental humanities, Diego is also a visiting researcher at Kew Gardens, where he spends much of his time in the herbarium and the archives. With Christina Hourigan, he is co-convenor of the Plant Humanities reading group linking Royal Holloway with Kew postgraduate researchers. In parallel with his exploration of the transatlantic movements of plants, he is intrigued by the possibilities offered by biological collections and unconventional historical sources in understanding non-human environmental histories. For example, he has recently been exploring how the historical construction of the modern city facilitated encounters between plants (as photosynthetic organisms) with photographic devices and how these luminous encounters help us to understand wider changes in the ways people built and inhabit spaces in both European and Andean cities.

Dr Caroline Cornish, Humanities Research Coordinator, Kew

Caroline writes: "As Humanities Research Coordinator at Kew, I'm responsible for facilitating interdisciplinary research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. I'm the first point of contact for anyone wishing to undertake research here in what we term the Plant Humanities. We're looking for research proposals which align with Kew's own objectives, which use Kew's collections as sources, which engage with Kew's spaces, both physical and digital; or which are informed by collaboration with Kew's expertise in science, horticulture, and public engagement.

"I was thrilled to take up my job as I've been conducting historical research of my own at Kew since 2005. My work has centred on the Economic Botany Collection at Kew, a former museum collection documenting in material form Kew's scientific engagements with the world since the mid-nineteenth century. The history of the Kew Museum was the subject of my PhD in Royal Holloway's Department of Geography, supervised by Felix Driver; with Mark Nesbitt we went on to look at the re-circulation of Kew specimens and artefacts in the Mobile Museum project. In 2020 we received one of six grants under AHRC's 'Where next?' call, which invited researchers to make a compelling case for funding in a defined area of scholarship. The resulting report, "Plant Humanities: Where Arts, Humanities & Plants Meet" was published by AHRC in 2023.

"Interdisciplinary research is growing rapidly at Kew: this year we have 15 PhDs – that's about 15% of all the PhDs being undertaken at Kew. The disciplines represented include history, geography, anthropology, literature, fine art, and ethnobotany. Most of our PhDs are AHRC collaborative doctoral awards. We also work with universities to develop large research projects and we are committed to providing post-doctoral opportunities. Last year Kew was one of a group of organisations in the culture and heritage sector, led by the V&A Museum, which was awarded a block grant to fund early-career fellowships. In this scheme, Kew received two fellowships: for Dr Aparajita Mukhopadhyay for a project on 'Mediating Imperial Science: Economic Botany and Agrarian Ecology in Colonial South Asia'; and for Dr Marleen Boschen, who is investigating 'Future Ecologies of Art: Exploring Kew as a site for past, present and future artistic collaborations'. The Plant Humanities provide the umbrella theme for these and for much else that we do here. From Accounting to Anthropology, and from Garden History to Geography, Kew has taken a decidedly cultural turn."

You can find out more about the work of Kew's interdisciplinary research team here: https://www.kew.org/science/interdisciplinary-research

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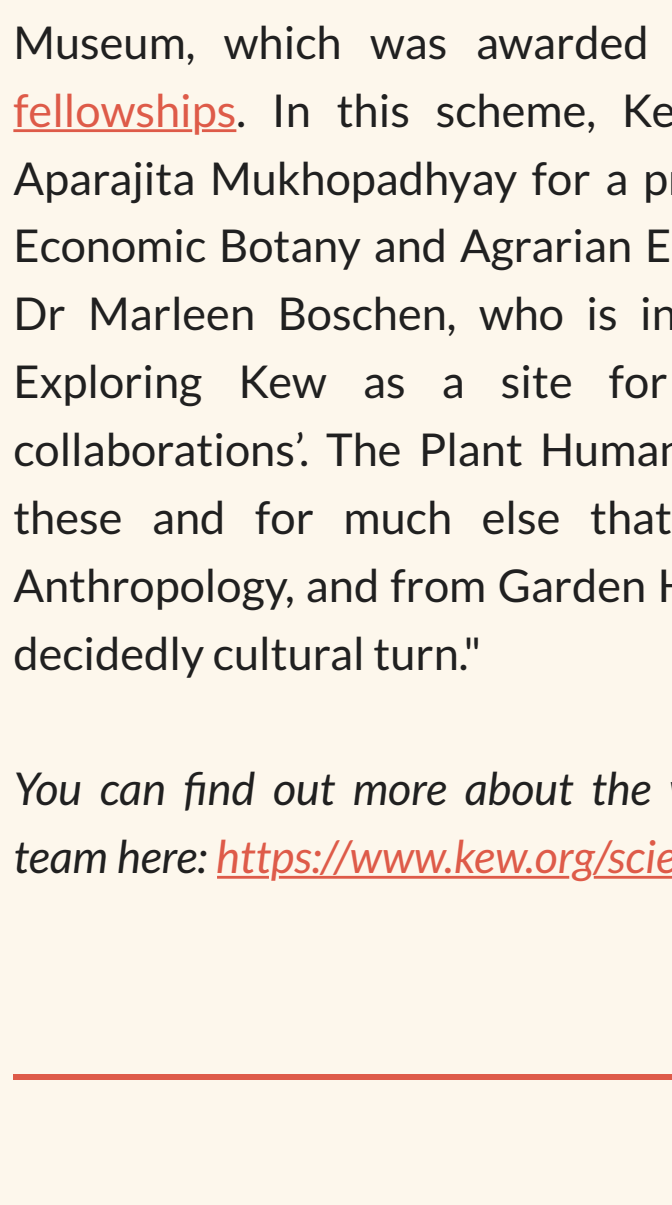
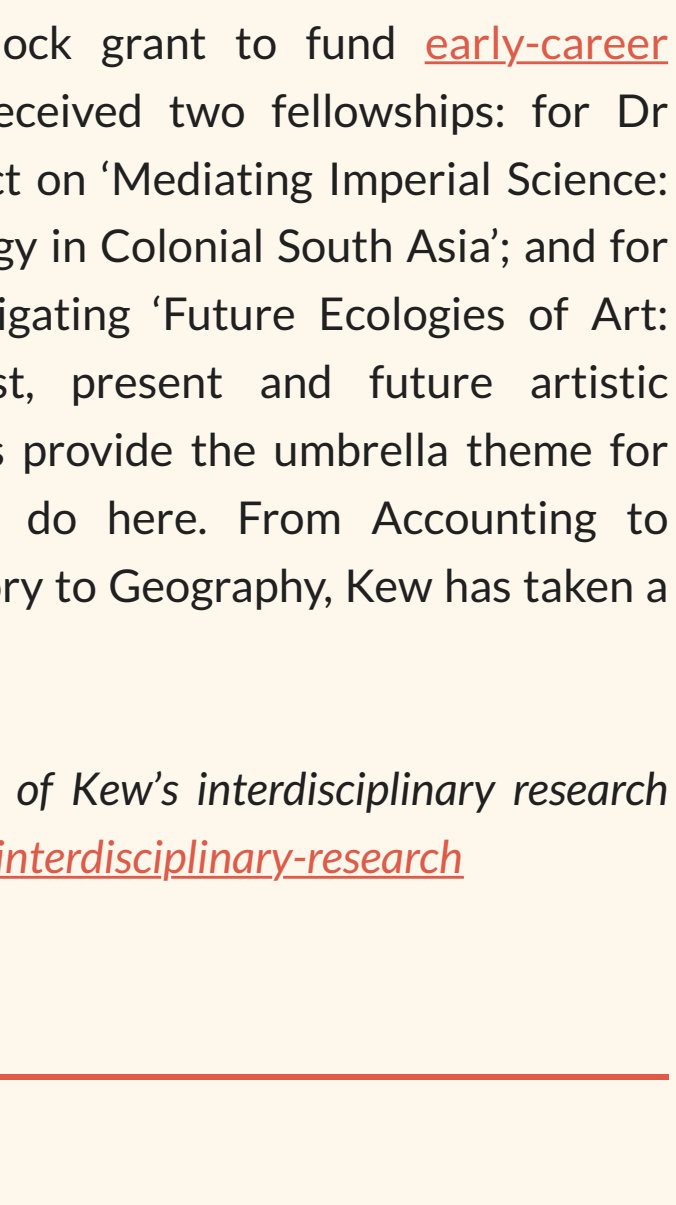
Visiting Researchers



Adam Lundberg is a PhD candidate in the Department of Human Geography at Uppsala University, Sweden. His research lies at the intersection of cultural and historical geography, and the theory and history of art. His dissertation explores questions of landscape, memory, and the diasporic experience in the wake of war, displacement, and the ongoing durabilities of colonialism and capitalism, focusing on the works of contemporary visual artists Yael Bartana and Michael Rakowitz. Beyond traditional interviews and observations, he employs participatory and collaborative methods to produce knowledge in collaboration with artists. During his visit to the Centre between February and May 2024, Adam will continue working on his dissertation, exploring how landscapes come to be re-placed, particularly through artistic hauntings, and what that means for the production and entanglements of landscape, art, and memory.



Dr. Guglielmo Monetti is our latest visitor from the University of Padua's Department of Historical and Geographical Sciences & the Ancient World. A classical philologist, he is currently working on a post-doctoral project focused on the representation of landscape in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. The ancient encyclopaedic genre is proving to be a fascinating field for the testing of the landscape paradigm, stretching from the traditional *locus amoenus* category to the landscape awareness encoded in Pliny's language. His other research interests include Latin philology, Neo-Latin literature, and the history of Classical studies. Guglielmo will be visiting the Centre for the GeoHumanities in April-May 2024.

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