

# Transnational Island Museologies



Materials for discussion

Edited by  
Karen Brown, Jamie Allan Brown  
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**ICOFOFOM** ICOM  
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**ICOFOM Materials for Discussion**

# **Transnational island museologies**

## ICOFOM MATERIALS FOR DISCUSSION

This publication brings together papers submitted for the 47th symposium organised by ICOFOM under the theme Transnational Island Museologies, to be held at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, 5-7 June, 2024.

The Materials for Discussion collection brings together, in an inclusive spirit, contributions selected for the symposium in the form of short articles, to prepare the ICOFOM Symposium. This publication has been made available before the symposium, in a very short time frame. In spite of the care given to the publication, some mistakes may remain.

ICOFOM Study Series and Materials for Discussion General Editor: M. Elizabeth Weiser (Ohio State University)

The Transnational Island Museologies International Conference has been funded by Shared Island Stories, a project selected by the European Research Council (ERC) and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) with reference EP/X023036/1. It is coordinated by the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews.



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ISBN: 978-2-491997-84-7

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Published by ICOFOM, Paris, in 2024

# Table of Contents

## Introduction / Introducción:

*Karen Brown, Ana S. González Rueda*

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Transnational island museologies 9

## Papers/Textos:

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### Part I: Indigenous and traditional knowledge, environment, and intergenerational transmission

Sanctuary after the storm: A toolkit of repair work for Caribbean museums 16  
*Holly Bynoe*

Indigenous and African Traditions on Islands in the Sea of Bahia / Brazil 21  
*Heloisa Helena F. G. da Costa*

Croatian Coral Centre Zlarin: Building the future on the knowledge of the past 25  
*Ana Katurić*

Reimagining museums as bridges for intergenerational environmental knowledge and current challenges: A case study of Na Bolom 30  
*Patricia Lopez-Sanchez Cervantes*

Intercultural memories and construction of historical sense amongst current practitioners of the ancient Mesoamerican rubber ball game 34  
*Carolina Guerrero Reyes, Jairzinho Panqueba Cifuentes*

From Lochboisdale, South Uist, to Boisdale, Cape Breton 39  
*Fiona Mackenzie*

What could museums learn from the ancestral knowledge of the peoples from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta? 43  
*Laura Felicitas Sabel Coba, Peter Rawitscher, Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona del Pueblo Kággaba (OGT)*

Sustaining heritage in the island of Lesvos (Greece): Community museums and their impact 48  
*Alexandra Bounia*

Ecomuseum Te Fare Natura: Rebuilding Indigenous futures 53  
*Leilani Wong*

Unlocking Nahua cosmovision through machine learning 58  
*Javier Pereda, Alexander Sanchez Diaz, Patricia Murrieta Flores*

The cultural heritage of New Caledonia: Climate change and sustainability challenges in the safeguard and valorisation of historical buildings <i>Cinzia Calzolari</i>	64
Tides of transformation: How young changemakers are redefining the role of museums and heritage organisations to address the climate emergency <i>Jamie Allan Brown</i>	69
Our present is their past: Intergenerational heritage and adaptation to climate extremes on the coast of Northern Peru <i>Althea Davies, Nina Laurie, Tania Mendo</i>	75
Rising rooted: Exploring opportunities for reactivating traditional environmental knowledge to increase plant awareness <i>Hannah Reid Ford</i>	80
Preserving Mediterranean heritage in a changing climate through digital cultural landscapes <i>Sharon Pisani, Alan Miller</i>	84
<b>Part II: Hidden stories, entangled spaces: thinking through transnational coastal and island museologies</b>	
Ocean as pathway: From museum collections to contemporary creations <i>Karen Jacobs</i>	90
Insular aesthetics and the shifting contours of contemporary Caymanian art <i>William Helfrecht</i>	94
Les mouvement des vagues: Du potential de curation décoloniale avec le format de l'installation <i>Clémence Foisy-Marquis</i>	99
Travelling (Hi)stories: George Nuku's reworking of colonial maritime illustrations <i>Clémentine Debrosse</i>	103
Museums in Puerto Rico exhibiting human remains of their own culture: An analysis of three institutions <i>Alejandra Núñez Piñero</i>	107
How museums remember: Charting a Puerto Rican object history <i>Amanda J. Guzmán</i>	111
Collecting Indian Ocean islands: Material culture and the limits of colonial knowledge <i>Sarah Longair</i>	115

Collecting ambiguity: Material objects and the afterlives of empire on the Island of Ireland <i>Briony Widdis, Emma Reisz</i>	119
L'Inventaire du Patrimoine Kanak Dispersé: Une base de données au service d'une muséologie transnationale <i>Marion Bertin and Marianne Tissandier</i>	124
Reassembling the fragments - Scotland and the Caribbean <i>Heather Cateau</i>	128
Forget us our debts: Memory, forgetting and museums in a pearling community <i>Henry Harding</i>	133
Vers une mémoire en perpétuelle construction: L'art et l'histoire de Terreur blanche sur Lü Dao (Taïwan) <i>Chuchun Hsu</i>	137
Curazao y la esclavitud en el Caribe. Del patrimonio memorialista a la musealización de identidades modernas <i>Inmaculada Real López</i>	142
Memory and heritage practices of the Greeks of Gökçeada (Imbros) Island in Turkey <i>Gönül Bozoğlu</i>	146
Taking good care: Race, class and colonial violence in Scottish galleries <i>Lisa Williams</i>	150
Museum reflections on three islands, where islands are rare and precious – Slovenia between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea <i>Branko Šuštar</i>	155
Bio-cultural heritage of Sunderbans: A tale of transnational coastal and island museology <i>Indrani Bhattacharya</i>	160
Indigenous wisdom and entangled histories in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands <i>Sakshi Jain</i>	165
Turtle politics and the Sarawak Museum <i>Ayesha Keshani</i>	170
Paddling to Onrust: Cultural heritage preservation and ecological development in the Historical Island Onrust, Jakarta Indonesia <i>Ary Sulistyono, M. Ismail Fabreza, Teuku M. Rizki R., Nofa Farida Lestari, Sriwulantuty Rizkiningsih</i>	175

### Part III Capitalism and Slavery

Introduction <i>Heather Cateau</i>	182
Enabling historiography: The responsibility of the archivist as conduit <i>Lorna Steele-McGinn</i>	187
Historiographical afterlives of <i>Capitalism and Slavery</i> and the Williams theses <i>Stephen Mullen</i>	193
Teaching and learning with and through <i>Capitalism and Slavery</i> <i>Diana Paton</i>	198
Street names and built landscape: Scottish colonial imprint in Barbados <i>Henderson Carter</i>	203



# **Our present is their past: Intergenerational heritage and adaptation to climate extremes on the coast of Northern Peru**

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This paper draws on prize-winning collaborative research aimed at recovering intergenerational knowledge about how to manage the El Niño phenomenon in arid desert environments.<sup>1</sup> Since 2019, researchers from the University of St Andrews and the Peruvian NGO PRISMA have been working in northern Peru with the Sechura School Board and desert-located schools to understand how livelihoods are managed when flooding occurs periodically because of the El Niño phenomenon (Laurie et al., 2023). Currently, El Niño events occur approximately every four to seven years starting around Christmas time<sup>2</sup>, and they last for several months. Each event has a significant impact in the northern coastal area of Peru because during El Niño years heavy rainfall inundates the dry coast from the direction of the Pacific Ocean. This is a reverse to the usual pattern of precipitation as normally the coastal plain is in the rain shadow of the Andes. The El Niño phenomenon is the main driver of the world's weather systems and climate change is making its effects more intense and frequent. It is therefore an important agenda to understand where it is having the most impact and to identify any contexts in which it can bring associated livelihoods benefits (Seiner, 2001), since most existing literature focuses on disaster narratives arising from adverse El Niño impacts on infrastructure, health and economy (French et al., 2020; Yglesias-González et al., 2023).

## **El Niño: a phenomenon of opportunity**

Archaeological and environmental evidence indicates that desert communities in the north of Peru have adjusted their production systems to cope with periodic El Niño rains since pre-Colombian times. These include the development of canal systems designed to use both scarce rainfall in normal times and extreme rainfall during El Niño events to irrigate crops, along with short-term occupation to make use of fishing resources created by El Niño flooding (Caramanica et al., 2020; Goepfert et al., 2020). Focusing on living memory in the contemporary period, our research indicates how,

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1 AHRC 2019–2022 ‘Fishing and farming in the desert’? A platform for understanding El Niño food system opportunities in the context of climate change in Sechura, Peru’ - AH/ T004444/1AH.

2021-2022: El Niño a phenomenon with opportunities: learning history and valuing community assets for an empowering digital curriculum in northern Peru AH/V012215/1.

2 El Niño refers to celebrations of the birth of Jesus around this time and the phenomenon was first named in this way by Peruvian fishers in the 18th century.

in contrast to dominant disaster narratives about the negative impacts of El Niño in the driest and most economically marginalised parts of the Sechura desert, El Niño is often seen as an opportunity. Working with intergenerational oral histories generated through a student-led story telling project (Bell et al., 2023) we have documented how fishing and farming communities in the desert capitalise on temporary increases in water availability during El Niño events. The students produced videos, stories, artwork and music to illustrate the benefits to farming and fishing that El Niño rains can bring and developed these into their own community museum, Sala FENCO,<sup>3</sup> in Daniel Alcides Carrión school, in Mala Vida, Cristo Nos Valga, Sechura (Figures 1-2). Their work, much of which was carried out under lockdown during COVID-19 via online classes, was aligned with specific competencies in the Peruvian curriculum. It provides an example of an innovative initiative that aligned with the Ministry of Education’s emergency programme, “I work at home”, and was awarded a series of high-level Education and Innovation national prizes by the Ministry of Education (Laurie et al., 2023). A bilingual teaching resource for secondary teachers in the UK, hosted by the Royal Geographical Society, was also produced using the material generated by students (Healy et al., 2023)<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 1. Opening ceremony for the school museum, Sala FENCO, in May 2022. Photo © FENCO 2 project team, 2022.

3 FENCO: a contraction of the Spanish project title, fenómeno con oportunidades, that is, a phenomenon with opportunities.

4 <https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/el-nino-phenomenon-of-opportunities/>



Figure 2. Sala FENCO display panels: each has a QR code with associated explanatory video material produced by the students, May 2022. © FENCO 2 project team 2022

## From storytelling to museums as productive spaces for resilience planning and knowledge exchange

In 2023, the interdisciplinary collaborations between St Andrews' Schools of Geography & Sustainable Development and Art History that had underpinned the community museums aspect of the outreach work with Daniel Alcides Carrión was extended into a new project, Making museums productive spaces for climate adaptation. This project brought together expertise in Peru

and Costa Rica on climate change and cultural heritage. The main objective was to enhance the ability of the community, museums, schools and local stakeholders to manage the effects of El Niño flooding by developing the capacity of museums to act as spaces that could enable climate action and network regional heritage actors to support local development.

The work developed several strands of engagement. First, interactive training and capacity-building workshops were held with schools and the municipality, focused on the potential of museums as learning spaces and on evaluating risks to cultural heritage. Risk management workshops were led by Samuel Franco (Director of Casa K'ojom, a Guatemala-based organisation specialising in preservation of cultural heritage) and involved regional municipal government representatives, the regional ministry for culture, the local education authority (UGEL), education and health NGO PRISMA, teachers and pupils from a local school, and local tourism and culture representatives. These focused on “first aid for cultural heritage” and “risk management for cultural heritage conservation and sustainable tourism”. Second, visits were organised to Chusis, a municipal government-run archaeological site in Sechura, which has a small visitor centre/museum displaying finds from previous excavations and also a sediment profile which may hold evidence of past El Niño flood events. This sediment section is located near to a cemetery that had previously been excavated, revealing a number of tombs with bodies and associated artefacts. Student curators from the Daniel Alcides Carrión Sala FENCO museum visited Chusis for the first time to understand how their contemporary experience relates to the longer timeframe of the artefacts on display in the museum. Third, an exploratory visit by a palaeoecologist on the research team (Davies) sought to assess whether sediments in the eroding soil profile are suitable for environmental analysis, which could allow climate responses in the archaeological past to be connected with current climate adaptation issues (Figure 3). Finally, as part of the field-based component of the risk management workshops, led by Samuel Franco, participants from the heritage sector generated the first cultural heritage risk evaluation for the archaeological site of Chusis.





Figure 3. The arid-adapted vegetation on and around Chusis archaeological site has developed within a mix of erosional and depositional features, which demonstrate the closer intercalation of livelihoods and flood risk and the potential for palaeoenvironmental analysis to reconstruct flood history. Photo © A.L. Davies, 2023.

## **Reflection: Student curators and the importance of museums as productive spaces**

The emphasis that this collaborative work on El Niño as a phenomenon of opportunity placed on resilience and participation has allowed us to explore real-world issues at the intersection of society and environment, geography and sustainability. The socio-economically marginal communities involved in this work struggle to leverage wider recognition of climate threats to cultural heritage, which are secondary to infrastructure issues – the main concern nationally and politically at a regional level when intense El Niño inundations occur. This emphasis on built infrastructure can downplay the importance of cultural heritage and social capital which provide the knowledge and relationships which support the adaptive practices that are key to resilience. By supporting networking between disaster response experts, heritage personnel and communities (via highly engaged school teachers and pupils), this work demonstrates the potential of museums to act as a focal point for learning and knowledge exchange. The museum visit provides an inspiring space for children, sparking questions on past health and experience of living with climate variability, which have informed our ongoing interactions with the school and future collaborative research plans.

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