



# Indigeneity and Visual Sovereignty Rendition, Heritage, Vision

*An International Conference at the !Kwa ttu San Cultural Heritage Centre, Cape Town, South Africa, 27-28 April 2023.*

This is a call for papers for a conference hosted by the SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture at the University of Johannesburg in collaboration with the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria, the Department of Language, Literature and Intercultural Studies at Karlstad University, the Department of Cultural Sciences at Linnaeus University and the Photography Legacy Project.



## Theme

Indigenous culture and identity have emerged as social categories of marginalization in historical processes of nation building around the world. This holds true for colonial times as well as for today, when nation-states are reinventing assimilationist policies and practices under labels such as post-conflict unity (South Africa) or a multicultural tolerance conditioned on minority acceptance of majority regulations (Sweden). Yet, indigenous peoples' organizing and voicing of social and political contention are forces to be reckoned with, not least due to their continuous exposure of the unfinished business of nationalism: cultural homogenization.

Language has traditionally occupied an important place in attempts to homogenize, as well as in the critique that such attempts provoke. The scholarly literature on nations as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) probes the power of language to engineer social cohesion on a large scale. Contributions in anthropology and linguistics pay close attention to the role of language for indigenous culture (for recent examples in the case of Southern Africa, see Grant and Tomaselli 2023; and in the case of Northern Europe, see Joks, Østmo and Law 2020). While this work ranges from studying to promoting indigenous languages, it also and often implicitly tends to centralize language in the conceptualization of culture itself, leading, in turn, to the claim that language loss equals culture loss, and that language preservation and revival are key to the survival of cultures and of peoples.

However, a pictorial and multimodal turn across the humanities and social sciences in recent years has contributed to positioning language in a wider field of cultural and communicative practices (Curtis 2010; Bateman 2014; Cox, Irving and Wright 2016). This conference aims at exploring the implications of this turn for an understanding of indigeneity in present day Southern Africa and Northern Europe. It gathers scholars of indigeneity in those two world regions to engage in conversations about visual renditions of indigenous peoples in archives, museums, print-, audio-visual and social media, tourism and education, and to assess the role of

such renditions in perpetuating stereotypes or in challenging colonial imageries and counteracting the persistence of a racialized social imagination.

We borrow our key concept – visual sovereignty – from scholarship that expands the notion of sovereignty from legal discourse and political philosophy. *Visual* sovereignty stems from a cultural studies interest in the ways in which Native Americans challenge visual depictions of themselves through "a creative act of self-representation," and advocacy for "indigenous cultural and political power both within and outside of Western legal jurisprudence" (Raheja 2007:1161, and see Raheja 2015; Stirrup 2020). Visual sovereignty as an ongoing project of gaining access to the means and resources of self-representation sits right at the center of current debates in the field of visual culture. A sovereign control of the realm of visual representation might appear utopian at best and utterly futile at worst in a context of digital image sharing and what seems like a growing proportion of the pictorial in practices of intercultural communication, within and across nations. Claims to a visual sovereignty of certain peoples, indigenous or not, thus relate in tangible ways to debates in contemporary photo theory on photographic commons and a shared right to images, albeit conditioned on a civil contract involving obligations and responsibilities of both producers and users (Azoulay 2008).

- What do present-day approaches to indigenous history and culture in visual scholarship look like, and in what ways do they contribute to new understandings of colonial social relationships beyond language?
- If the concept of visual sovereignty originates in a North American context, where a legal framework is in place to guarantee Native Americans a certain measure of territorial sovereignty, what merit would it have in critical analyses of other places, on other continents, where indigenous subordination and political subjectivity have different histories, and where present day jurisprudence looks different?
- What future collaborations can potentially emerge in an inter-continental conversation between people who study the link between indigeneity and visual culture in Southern Africa, Northern Europe, and beyond?

Call for papers



## Panels

We aim to sort papers on these and related questions under three different yet complementary labels, and discuss them in three separate panels:

The first panel will center on *rendition*, as opposed to *construction* of cultures and social identities invented, as it were, in narrative and discourse, and also as opposed to *representation*, since the complexities, contradictions and incommensurable qualities of any culture resist representation, independent of modality. The notion of rendition as proposed here thus aims at striking a balance between the extremes of essentialism and arbitrary constructivism, locked, as they often are, in an unresolved tension in both cultural theory and political practice.

The second panel will deal with heritage, as the practical engagement in the present with history and historical artefacts such as visual artwork and archived photographs. Heritage in our project also includes scholarly analyses of the historical trajectory of indigenous peoples' place (or placelessness) in colonial and nation-state projects of Southern Africa and Northern Europe.

The third panel, finally, will assemble papers under the label of vision, as strategies for coping with, resisting or changing the status quo of majority-minority relations. Such a wide focus on social agency could include political organizing for change, as well as inventive entrepreneurship in cultural tourism and other business ventures.

## Proposals

Presenters are invited to offer a 20-minute paper in response to this call. Papers should be on material that has not already been published, and prospective presenters will be asked to develop the paper into either a book chapter or a journal article should it be selected for inclusion in a publication.

Please submit your proposal with "Indigeneity and Visual Sovereignty" in the subject line, and send it to the conveners Staffan Löfving – [staffan.lofving@kau.se](mailto:staffan.lofving@kau.se) – and Shanade Barnabas – [sbbarnabas@uj.ac.za](mailto:sbbarnabas@uj.ac.za) – by **17 February**. Attach a single Word document with the following information:

- A title for your paper
- An abstract of between 200 and 300 words
- A short biography of about 200 words including your current affiliation
- Your contact details, i.e., email address and a phone number

Applicants will be notified of decisions by **24 February**. Presenters will not be charged a conference fee and can choose to present online or join the conference at !Khwatlu in which case they will need to organize and pay for their own travel costs and accommodation.

## References

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- Bateman, John 2014. *Text and Image: A Critical Introduction to the Visual/Verbal Divide*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Curtis, Neal (ed.), 2010. *The Pictorial Turn*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Grant, Julie and Keyan Tomaselli (eds.), 2023. *Rethinking Khoe and San Indigeneity, Language and Culture in Southern Africa*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Joks, Solveig, Liv Østmo and John Law 2020. Verbing *meahccá*: Living Sámi lands. *The Sociological Review Monographs*. Vol. 68(2) 305–321.
- Raheja, Michelle H. 2007. Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and "Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)" *American Quarterly*, Vol. 59(4) 1159–1185.
- Raheja, Michelle H. 2015. Visual Sovereignty. In Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andreas Smith and Michelle Raheja (eds.), *Native Studies Keywords*. Pages 25–34. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Stirrup, David 2020. *Picturing Worlds: Visuality and Visual Sovereignty in Contemporary Anishinaabe Literature*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.