Session Name: ***Arboreal Heritage and Ecologies of Violence***

Session Proposer: Colin Sterling, University of Amsterdam; Esther Breithoff, Birkbeck, University of London

Session Abstract: Against the backrop of rapid climate breakdown and ongoing debates around the need to decolonise conservation practices, trees, forests and other arboreal worlds have emerged as key sites of memory, resistance and contested heritage. This curated session explores emerging perspectives on "arboreal heritage" with a focus on Indigenous knowledge systems, landscapes of violence, and the extractive foundations of museum collections. Aligning with the ACHS 2026 theme *Tūhono – Weaving Relational Heritage Spaces*, the session asks how trees and forests are intimately bound up with diverse heritage imaginaries and processes, whether in-situ (in landscapes and ecosystems) or ex-situ (in collections and arboretums). In particular, the speakers explore the entanglement of human and more-than-human agencies in contexts marked by histories of colonialism and conflict, and the sometimes problematic projection of "native" and "indigenous" onto aroberal worlds. From the "red zones" of former battlefields where forests grow over toxic scars to the "sedimented ecologies" of museum collections and infrastructures, the session explores the different ways in which arboreal heritage both encodes and resists legacies of violence. How can indigenous knowledge reframe our understanding of biocultural collections held in colonial institutions? What are the ethical stakes of reparative heritage in forest landscapes shaped by decades if not centuries of conflict? By bringing together perspectives from contemporary archaeology, critical heritage, memory studies, and museum studies, this session proposes a relational ethics of repair that acknowledges the agency of the arboreal. In doing so, it challenges the boundaries between cultural and natural heritage, advocating for a multispecies justice alert to the profound interdependency of humans and forests.

[NOTE: This proposal of two sessions is for a "curated stream" as defined in the CFP]

Presenter 1

Name: Susette Goldsmith

Organisation: Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka

Position: Adjunct Research Fellow

Primary email: sgoldsmith@quill.gen.nz

Biography (max 50 words): Susette Goldsmith is adjunct research fellow at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka where she completed her PhD. She is of Māori and Pākehā descent. Her research explores ways of perceiving, interpreting and safeguarding natural heritage in Aotearoa for which she received the RNZIH's national Garden History Medal for 2026.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Challenging Authorised Arboreal Heritage Discourses in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington

In contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand trees have been active in forging links between the past and the present in powerful ways, transcending received evaluation methods and establishing a new rhetoric of arboreal indigeneity. This paper focuses on an orchard of native karaka Corynocarpus laevigatus planted in 1999 on the reclaimed land of Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington's waterfront to acknowledge the people of Te Aro Pā who were forced off their neighbouring land in the 1890s by Pākehā settlement. In the Māori world view nature, people and the land are inextricably intertwined. These flourishing trees in their Anthropocene habitat represent a living heritage that is steeped in history and symbolic significance and tightly bound to the identity of Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. The proposition here is that these are not heritage trees but trees as heritage that boldly challenge the assumptions of the authorised arboreal heritage discourse and quietly celebrate the everyday.

Presenter 2

Name: Sofia Lovegrove

Organisation: Utrecht University

Position: PhD Candidate

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Biography (max 50 words): Sofia Lovegrove is a PhD candidate working at the intersection of critical heritage, memory and museum studies with a focus on colonial histories, decolonial and reparative practices, and the environmental humanities. Her PhD is part of the ERC-funded project *Ecologies of Violence: Crimes against Nature in the Contemporary Cultural Imagination*.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Archives of Ecological Violence: Colonial entanglements of biocultural collections in Europe.

In this paper, I apply the notion of "ecologies of violence" as a framework to explore how botanical collections created during colonial times and currently kept in museums and botanical gardens in Portugal and the Netherlands represent ecoviolence. My analysis follows the double meaning of the verb to represent: first, through their institutional and provenance histories, I examine how these collections embody ecoviolence; and secondly, I explore how recent museological, artistic and collaborative practices depict and make legible the historical, structural and discursive entanglements of violence against humans and against nature (or ecological violence). I aim to show how these collections bear witness to past ecologies of violence and how critical engagements with them today address issues of responsibility, implication and repair.

Presenter 3

Name: Esther Breithoff and Layla Renshaw

Organisation: Birkbeck, University of London; Kingston University

Position: Senior Lecturer (Breithoff) and Associate Professor (Renshaw)

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Biography (max 50 words):

Esther Breithoff is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Archaeology and Heritage, UKRI Future Leaders Fellow, Deputy Director of the Carena Institute of Sustainable Archaeologies and co-editor of the Journal of Contemporary Archaeology at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research focuses on conflicts, waste and the environment across human and other-than-human worlds.

Layla Renshaw is an Associate Professor at Kingston University, London, where she teaches forensic archaeology and anthropology. Her research focuses on post-conflict investigations, and the relationship between human remains, forensic evidence, and memory. Her current projects examine both the commemoration of war dead and the enduring environmental legacies of conflict.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Arboreal Heritage as Living Memorial: Commemoration, Conservation and Ethics of Care in Times of Change

Following the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917, a scarred battlefield was transformed into a curated memorial park commemorating Canadians killed in France. Large-scale plantings of pines and imported Canadian maples were central to this process and continue to shape Vimy Ridge as a landscape of remembrance and mythmaking. Recently, climate change has impacted on the trees planted at the site, destabilising traditional assumptions that memorial landscapes are permanent and timeless. Tree decline and replanting initiatives unsettle expectations of "authenticity" and continuity, while the introduction of imported and climate-resilient species has exposed the problematic projection of "native" and "indigenous" onto arboreal worlds. This paper argues that such landscapes are not stable commemorative settings, but active living multispecies assemblages produced through interactions between humans and more-than-humans: with visitors, vegetation, animals and institutional regimes of care, repair and regeneration continuously reconfiguring the meanings attached to this revered place.

Presenter 4

Name: Claire Qianyu Zhou

Organisation: Institute of Archaeology, UCL

Position: PhD Candidate

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Biography (max 50 words): Claire Qianyu Zhou is a PhD student in heritage studies at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. Her research examines plant lives in urban heritage sites,

focusing on multispecies memory, conservation politics and the lived afterlives of social change, with broader engagement in critical heritage studies and environmental justice.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Hiroshima Tree Around the World: Heritage Tree Listing and the Making of 'Lonely Gods'

This paper explores how heritage listing transforms surviving trees into what I call 'lonely gods': highly valued and morally charged symbols that are separated from their everyday living relations. Focusing on the transnational circulation of Hiroshima survivor tree seeds, it shows how practices such as ritualised reverence, spatial enclosure and seedbanking produce arboreal figures that are commemorated as if dead, despite being biologically alive. Drawing on multispecies ethnography with descendants of Hiroshima seeds planted at Kew Gardens (2021) and Oxford Botanic Garden (2023), alongside the 'mother' phoenix tree at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, the paper shows how memorial circulation both connects and isolates trees, people and places through uneasy memories of violence. Situating these cases within broader Western heritage tree listing frameworks, it argues for alternative arboreal heritage practices that allow listed trees to form lively relations, enabling violent pasts to be lived with through newly localised 'gods.'

Presenter 5

Name: Maria Suarez

Organisation: University of Amsterdam

Position: PhD Candidate

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Biography (max 50 words): Maria Suarez is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture as part of the Critical Heritage Ecologies research initiative. Her research project focuses on contemporary participatory art and heritage practices and their engagement in processes of social an ecological reparation, particularly in the context of post-conflict Colombia.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Art as Repair: Contemporary Art Practices and Coca's Contested Heritage in Colombia and Beyond.

This paper examines how contemporary artistic practices in Colombia and by Colombian artists have sought to repair relationships with the coca plant and reclaim its heritage, meanings, and ancestral uses. Through several mini case studies, I show how artists and members of Indigenous and peasant communities approach this plant through an artistic lens, while acknowledging the traces of violence and drug trafficking in Colombia that have shaped its transformation into cocaine. My aim is, first, to show how contemporary art navigates the complexities of the conflicting and contradictory legacies surrounding this

plant, and, second, to show how, as a field of experimentation, it facilitates an alternative engagement with coca: one that makes room for attentiveness to the plant's voice and agency.

Presenter 6

Name: David Francis

Organisation: UCL Institute of Archaeology

Position: Post-Doctoral Research Associate

Primary email: david.francis.11@ucl.ac.uk

Biography (max 50 words): Dr David Francis is a research associate on the PITCH (Petrocultures' Intersections with Cultural Heritage) project. He did his PhD on museum narratives at UCL and his postdoctoral research explores the dialogue between Chinese and European conceptions of heritage with a particular focus on Chinese minority-nationality identity and the botanic garden.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Climate-changed trees and carbon gardens: Reimaging the climate crisis in the Kew landscape

This paper uses Kew Gardens as a case study to explore the relationship between decolonisation and decarbonisation through its Carbon Garden and the broader Kew landscape. The Carbon Garden at Kew was created in 2025 as an exhibit to illustrate and encourage dialogue about the carbon cycle, but also to contextualise the impact of the climate crisis as articulated through Kew's landscape succession plan. Many of Kew's living collections – be they English Oaks (Quercus robur) or those that were brought to Kew through colonial extraction, such as the Sikkimese rhododendrons collected by Joseph Hooker in the 19th-century – will struggle to survive London's hot dry summers of 2050. The paper explores these plants and spaces provide opportunities to bring narratives of ecological extraction into dialogue with cosmologies from the Himalayas and Southwest China, which allow us to rethink and reimagine the climate crisis.

Presenter 7

Name: Maria Dragoi

Organisation: University College London

Position: PhD Candidate

Primary email: maria.dragoi.24@ucl.ac.uk

Biography (max 50 words): Maria Dragoi is a PhD candidate at the UCL Institute of Archaeology and the NHM. She studies the history of entomological science in the twentieth century and its ties to industry; and is concerned with the agency and possession of natural specimens in institutional spaces, particularly natural history museums.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Tsetse in Miombo Woodland: The Corruption of Traditional Ecological Epistemologies in Zambia

In 1906, the British South Africa Company (BSAC) attempted to ban *citemene*, a traditional form of woodland management and agroforestry in Zambia, claiming it encouraged the breeding of tsetse flies. *Citemene* was a nomadic 'slash and burn' technique used by the Mambwe and Bemba communities which yielded productive crop fields, but although well established and efficient, it came to be seen as problematic by colonial authorities. The BSAC weaponised ecological research to restrict *citemene*, claiming the method caused deforestation and 'polluted' the natural environment. This was a fabrication as *citemene* improved soil quality and reduced tsetse fly populations. Using archival correspondence and specimens from the NHM, I trace how ecological narratives were developed in the service of colonial goals. I frame the fly as a point of tension, questioning how the agency of a nonhuman actor impinged on economic drivers and shaped legacies of the region's natural heritage.

Presenter 8

The final presentation slot will be used for a more general discussion about the themes raised in this curated session stream, chaired by session organiser Colin Sterling