

# Trading Places?

## Empathy in Material Culture and Critical Methodologies

**CCLPS Postgraduate Conference 2018**

**SOAS, University of London**

**18th-19th June 2018**

What is the value of empathy? Through what means, and to what ends, do transactions of empathy take place? How might empathy be mobilised productively in processes of knowledge formation across popular, political and academic discourse? When does the experience of empathy become an end-point in itself and when might it act as a catalyst for further social engagement?

Empathy - perhaps most simply understood as the 'ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes' - has gained currency in recent political, cultural, and critical discussions that seek to map and understand our interactions in an interconnected yet fragmented world. Tracing circulations of empathy in *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (2014), Carolyn Pedwell identifies empathy as a 'Euro-American political obsession'. It has also become something of a 'research obsession', with the concept being subject to repeated redefinitions, rephrasings, and even rejections. In *Against Empathy* (2016), Paul Bloom argues that we are living in a world with 'too much empathy' urging against the sentiment as a form of humanitarianism that lacks rationality. Yet popular discourse - e.g. literature, social media, film - continues to encourage us as social actors, scholars, producers and consumers to be 'empathetic citizens' in our personal and political lives. Desires to foreground empathy as a transformative social force risk overlooking the economic and political structures that define the material means through which empathy is carefully cultivated and distributed as a form of capital.

This interdisciplinary conference seeks to trace the ways in which empathy is articulated, experienced and exchanged as a commodity around the world. As well as focusing on empathy as a research object, it will also explore how empathy might be practised as a methodological tool in academic and non-academic contexts.

Papers at this year's conference will come from postgraduate research students across the humanities and social sciences, exploring a variety of geographical regions, time periods and comparative perspectives. Topics include:

- literary circulations of empathy
- empathy in industries of activism
- the economics of empathy
- empathy in conflict
- empathy in postcolonial studies
- empathy as a decolonising tool
- worldings of empathy
- empathy and intersectionality
- empathy in the Anthropocene
- empathy and non-anthropocentrism (ecocriticism, the post-human, etc.)
- empathy through social media
- empathy through visual artwork
- curating empathy in cultural institutions
- methodologies of empathy
- manipulations of empathy

**To register, visit the CCLPS conference website: <https://empathysoas.wixsite.com/2018/register>**