



Call for Participation
Deadline: May 15, 2023

**Summer session 2023:
Racialisation, Objectification, Dehumanisation: Missionary
and Merchant in the Mongolian Empire
(Palanga, Lithuania)**

Our CFP in Brief

This Nordic Summer University study circle [*Praxis of Social Imaginaries: Cosmologies, Othering and Liminality*](#), sets out to foster a platform for trans- and inter-disciplinary research rooted in the practices of reading, listening, and telling stories. Recognizing that trans- and inter-disciplinary research requires time and in-depth work in order to become truly fruitful, this study circle aims to provide room for these kinds of processes. The reading material at the center of our work is filled with depictions of cultures, peoples, lands and religious, artistic, culinary and sacred practices from times and places different from our own, while the people present in our circle come from different cultures and divergent relationships to research, artistic practice, and institutional structures.

In each symposium of our study circle, we think between the medieval past and present struggles, addressing cosmological differences in history and exploring futurity. The reading material central to our study circle is a series of medieval travel accounts, but our ethical and trans/inter-disciplinary approaches as informed by Indigenous research ethics guidelines. During this Summer Symposium, we will explore two different accounts of the Mongol Empire: William of Rubruck's *Itinerarium fratris Willielmi de Rubruquis de ordine fratrum Minorum* from 1253 and *The Description of the World* from 1300. The texts of this session will be of particular interest to students of economy, democracy, engineering and gender studies as well as our core group of religious, historical and artistic scholars.

We welcome applications from researchers, scientists, and artists, as well as students at bachelor, master, or doctoral levels. As a community investigating historical and living cosmologies, we are welcoming to Indigenous as well as artistic researchers (and others) who engage with spiritual practices. Our study circle is open to people of all faiths.

About our Study Circle

The Nordic Summer University study circle *Praxis of Social Imaginaries: Cosmologies, Othering and Liminality* invite all who are interested in joining our group to investigate the praxis of reading together, the praxis of listening and the praxis of telling stories. Welcome to join our cosmological artistic intervention!

This study circle sets out to foster a platform for trans- and inter-disciplinary research. By bringing people together from various different disciplines and fields into shared laboratories of praxis, we aim to create a transformational learning environment. In transdisciplinary research scholars create collaborations with artists and activists in ways in which all are equal partners in a joint endeavor to study and change complex problems. In interdisciplinary research, scholars come together with researchers from other fields than their own, in order to establish collaborations where complex phenomena can be approached from various angles at the same time. Both trans- and inter-disciplinary research requires time and in-depth work in order to become truly fruitful. This study circle wants to provide room for these kinds of processes. The central method toward that end is the reading of medieval traveling accounts. We follow European theological elites as they and their learned scholarly communities encounter “*Others*” on their borders as well as within their lands. We will also be studying the Indigenous epistemologies, relationships to lands, nature and cultures, and social change.

In alliance with the ethical guidelines of Indigenous research this study circle is guided by the principals of Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity and Consent that are formulated in the imagineNATIVE document *ON-SCREEN PROTOCOLS & PATHWAYS: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories* (2019) as well as the *OFELAS - The Pathfinder Guidelines for Responsible Filmmaking with Sámi Culture and People* (2021) by The Sámi Film & Culture Advisory Board. In the latter it is specifically articulated that culture, aesthetics, music, language, stories, histories and traditional cultural expressions are not things that can be the personal property of individual people nor given away as open resources. Rather, stories, languages, people, connection to space and place as well as specific crafts or arts are all interconnected and belong to a community which also includes ancestors and non-human kin (both spirits and animals). One of the aims of this study circle is thus to explore how we can approach historical documents and transdisciplinary research that respects Indigenous epistemological practices and wherein traditional forms of seeking knowledge are given space, time and resources.

The reading material at the center of our work is filled with depictions of cultures, peoples, lands and religious, artistic, culinary and sacred practices from times and places different from our own. Questions we envision will come up during the sessions are: *What happens when we practice standing, sensing and listening with another in our explorations? What can we learn from encountering worldviews and scientific perspectives different from our own? What are the various media through which we can engage with texts and stories written hundreds of years before our time? What do we do if and when we find passages that are disturbing to us? How do we remain ethically grounded in practices that open for dialogue and critical scrutiny yet do not shut down or close off the possibilities of learning from what is uncomfortable? And how do we do all of this together with people from various different fields of study and cultural backgrounds that also have their own perspectives and contributions to how we can learn and explore together?* These are some of the thematic questions we will pursue through-out this study cycle.

About the Summer Session 2023 in Palanga

When we arrived among those barbarians, it seemed to me as if I were stepping into another world.

The men surrounded us and gazed at us as if we were monsters.

- **William of Rubruck** (1248–1255)

In the early 13th century, a new military and cultural power rose in the East. Both Pope Innocent IV and some years later, King Louis IX of France sent out Franciscan friars as official envoys from Europe to reach the Mongolian court. William of Rubruck was the one who wrote the most expansive account of what he encountered on this journey. Geraldine Heng explains that what we see in these texts is how Mongols gradually became familiar aliens in less than a decade during these early missionary encounters. They transmuted “from the inhuman barbarians without civilised practices, mores, and customs described by the Pope’s alarmed ambassador into the possessors of rudimentary culture and ceremony.”^[2] As William of Rubruck lived with the Mongols, took part in their customs, and familiarised himself with their practices, his perspective of their ‘inhumanness’ began to recede. In this micro-history, Heng argues, we can instead see how questions of Christian practices, liturgies and questions of faith between Nestorians and Roman Catholics constitute a virtual race that predominates questions of ethnic differences.

Some 50 years later, another son of a Venetian merchant – Marco Polo (1254–1324) – traveled East and spent time in the Great Khan’s Cathay. Once he returned, a book capturing his fascination for the magnificence of Mongol China was written by Rusticello da Pisa. He praises Mongolia’s cities, ports, and hinterlands and details a vision of modernity, security, efficiency, welfare, success, and unimaginable prosperity and power, the like of which is found nowhere else in the world. From the gigantic tax receipts of its ports to the glories of imperial gardens and architecture; from exorbitant feasts to massive granaries; from the exquisite abstraction of paper money as symbolic currency to the high-speed postal relay gridding the empire; from welfare and disaster relief to a panoptic surveillance system; from military might to statesmanlike innovations in governance – Mongol China’s incarnation of an economic, aesthetic, technological, and ethical sublime. Marco Polo transmutes the Mongol race and empire into an object of fascination and desire under the Western gaze.^[3] At the same time as his gaze seems to eradicate racialised differences based on ethnic and religious grounds, the commodification of bodies, places and space grows strong. For example, a new form of objectification of women as goods is something that Heng brings to the forefront of her reading of Polo.

During this Summer Symposium, we will thus explore two different accounts of the Mongol Empire: William of Rubruck’s *Itinerarium fratris Willielmi de Rubruquis de ordine fratrum Minorum* from 1253 and *The Description of the World* from 1300. This enables us to compare and contrast how a liturgically trained gaze reads and understands customs and cultural practices to how a profit-minded merchant will see and describe what he encounters. The texts of this session will be of particular interest to students of economy, democracy, engineering and gender studies as well as our core group of religious, historical and artistic scholars.

Who can participate?

The Nordic Summer University (NSU) is open to all who want to engage in transdisciplinary and mutual learning under the values of equality and openness. You can be a student at bachelor's, master's, or doctoral level, and you can be a researcher, a scientist, an artist or work in a cultural or other third sector organization. Our study circle is explicitly open to people of all faiths. As a community investigating historical and living cosmologies, we are welcoming to Indigenous and artistic research with spiritual dimensions.

The NSU Summer sessions are events where you can bring your whole family. There is a special children's circle with activities and leaders who know all the Nordic languages and English that take care of your smaller family members while the study circle program is happening.

What do we offer?

First and foremost, we offer a platform for learning and collaboration.

For students, we can also offer study credits for active participation. For scholars, we plan for joint publications in open-access peer reviewed journals. And for artists and academics who want to collaborate, we will organise events where your works can be disseminated to the public. We have partnered up with forums like *aboagora* for presenting arts and science collaborations.

We further offer the chance to learn Digital Humanities methods of working with and annotating historical texts, as well as the opportunity to connect with the vibrant Nordic Summer University; a one-of-a-kind, radically non-hierarchical, democratic, and community oriented institution of education and research. Finally, we endeavour to make the study circle accessible to all, including financially. We are able to provide some financial aid and continue to pursue further avenues through which to offer as much financial aid as needed to those who reach out to us to request it.

Where?

The summer session will take place **27th of July - 3rd of August 2023**, in a resort close to the town **Palanga in Lithuania**. Palanga can be reached easily from Vilnius, Riga, or by ferry from Kiel (Germany). One can also arrive by busses from Tallinn or other major cities.

How can you participate?

Send us a short bio with your name, information about yourself, your home institution/organisation, your artform or area of research and a short motivation as to why you want to participate.

Please also let us know if you will have institutional support for participation, accommodation and traveling costs or if you would want to be granted a scholarship. The earlier you send in your request, the better the chances we will be able to work with you to secure scholarships! People in the Nordic/Baltic region are given priority in scholarships as we partner with Nordplus for this event.

Our final call for applications is **May 15th 2023**. Please reach out and express your interest earlier if at all possible.

The Nordic Summer University has set the deadline for scholarship applications to June 1st. On June 7th you will be notified of the results and by 1st of July all participants must have registered and made their payments in the webshop: <https://www.nsuweb.org/shop/>

Costs

Included in the cost is a full week of programs, lodging and meals. Prices range between:

550 euros for a single room

400 euros for a double room (this option can also be applied for even when you do not know other participants. Participants will be paired up with others of the same gender)

150 euros for grants and scholarships (Accommodations are in double or triple rooms.)

900 euros for a family room

All rooms include toilets and baths.

Membership fees are: 25euros, and 40euros support fee.

Traveling from the Nordic/Baltic region with climate-friendly transportation may be supported by additional scholarships. Please indicate in your application if you wish to have such a scholarship and give an estimate of your travel costs.

Background to the choice of texts.

During each of the Symposiums and Summer Sessions, we want to explore the problematics of racialisation in the medieval period. Our choice of texts are informed by the works of historians and theologians like Mary Louise Pratt, Geraldine Heng and Willie James Jennings. They have identified that these particular stories were at the core of what created and spread the racialised social imaginary that later became a racialised gaze of white Christian Europeans. Jennings further argues that this inverted, distorted vision of creation reduced theological anthropology to commodified bodies at the same time as it disrupted the relationship to land, place and creatureliness of Christian white westerners. By following this formation in the texts spanning from the period of the 11th to the 16th century, we hope that the participants in the circle will gain deep insights into how questions of race and relationship to creation are intertwined. Simultaneously, our practices are informed by both black feminist approaches and indigenous epistemologies which means that we want to include embodied, poetic and praxis based investigations to this journey.

Contact us with questions and send your application to:

praxis.social.imaginaries@gmail.com

Your co-facilitators:

Lindsey Ann Drury

Postdoctoral Researcher, Dance Studies

Institute für Theaterwissenschaft, Freie Universität Berlin

Doctor in Philosophy, "Text and Event in Early Modern Europe" Erasmus Mundus Consortium

PhD Programme

Laura Hellsten

Post-doctoral fellow at the Polin Institute at Åbo Akademi.

Doctor in Theology at Åbo Akademi University, Finland.

<https://www.nsuweb.org/study-circles/circle-3-the-praxis-of-social-imaginaries-cosmologies-othering-and-liminality/>

<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/praxis-of-social-imaginaries/index>