

## Review

*Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation and Destruction*, edited by Veysel Apaydin

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What is the potential of destruction and transformation in the making of cultural heritage? And in which ways do processes of destruction collide with the construction of memory, identity, and social justice? These questions – essential in the inquiry on the modes and aims of conservation – are at the centre of the eighteen contributions of the book *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation and Destruction*, edited by Veysel Apaydin, and published by UCL Press.

The book presents diverse perspectives on the role of cultural heritage in placemaking, and how that relates to the construction of identities, the reclamation of space, and the contestation and/or reification of memories. Although the book focuses on urban and built heritage, archaeology, and objects and ways of doing created by indigenous communities, the overarching discussion around material culture and identity is transversal to other types of cultural heritage manifestations. The agents of change in cultural heritage investigated by the authors varies greatly: from catastrophic events such as war and forms of direct and violent destruction, to forms of intervention in the surrounding environments or places in which cultural forms of identity and memory reside, and that are modified or destroyed through forms of violence that are more elusive and are propelled by political conflicts, regimes of oppression, or capitalist and neo-liberal agendas. This book's contributions analyse these agents and the infrastructures built through their interactions in a way that clearly demonstrates that the survival and transformation of cultural heritage is dependent on ecologies of care, negligence, and destruction that are intertwined in processes of knowledge making. The understanding of cultural heritage as interactions between these ecologies inevitably raises questions such as: who gets to care about heritage? And, in which ways are values embodied in processes of neglect? The authors of the book's various chapters do not shy away from these questions in their situated analysis of the different themes, and through a generous group of case-studies, which both help in illustrating the tensions and relationships between place, memory, identity, and heritage, and provide the readers with a set of contexts from which new thinking can take place.

The book is divided into six parts. The first part is dedicated to the ways in which memory and cultural heritage relate to each other. Veysel Apaydin is the author of the sole contribution of Part I, providing readers with a comprehensive situated review of the field while also arguing for the empowerment of communities of users of heritage in processes of decision-making on both the maintenance and conservation, and the transformation of cultural heritage and its manifestations. This argument is developed through engagement with relevant literature from Memory Studies, namely the foundational works of Maurice Halbwachs (*La mémoire collective*, 1950) and Pierre Nora ('Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire', 1989), and more recent contributions from scholars such as Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney. Memory Studies is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to memory, practices of remembrance, and uses of the past. The field is very rhizomatic, and intertwines with various disciplines and consolidated and emerging fields. One of those fields is that of Heritage Studies, which is dedicated to understanding heritage practices and/within society and material culture. Apaydin successfully

demonstrates that the intertwining of Memory and Heritage Studies – which is arguably somewhat absent in conservation-related literature - is very generative in the understanding of how material culture is transformed through the various human agents that are involved in the making of heritage. In discussing these themes in relation to paradigmatic case-studies, the author effectively lays the ground for the discussions that unfold in the subsequent chapters.

The six chapters in Part II - *Urban Heritage, Development, Transformation and Destruction* – discusses the impact of development projects in the care of culture heritage. The various contributions touch on various forms of cultural heritage, some of them with more elusive materialisations than others. Building on the notions of ‘hyperobject’ (Morton) and ‘slow violence’ (Nixon), Rachel King analyses fiction works by several African writers and activists to discuss the effects of substantial development projects in erasing cultural memories and identities of oppressed groups. King’s exploration of the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa, in which the author describes the ethnic and environmental violence involved in the decision to install oil pipelines across the Niger River Delta area, by the Nigerian government in alleged collusion with Shell, demonstrates the impact and instrumentalisation of large-scale development projects in politics of identity. This first chapter of Part II, raises various questions around the idea of ‘development’ or, as Saro-Wiwa puts it, ‘betterment’, and how such idea can underpin many of the narratives that surround the identification, management, and protection of cultural heritage. Significantly, this idea is echoed across other chapters in Part II – from Jonathan Gardner’s analysis of the narratives around the archaeological work on the site of the 2012 Olympic Games, in East London, to Sterling’s, Apaydin’s, Grima’s, and Almansa-Sanchez and Corpas-Civicos’s subsequent chapters.

As someone who is interested in how we talk (and who gets to talk) about heritage and conservation, I was drawn to Gardner’s analysis of the use of terms as ‘wasteland’ to define the site of the London Olympic Games of 2012. The use of this term to refer to industrial and contemporary heritage, alongside the more positive characterisation of archaeological findings from other periods, raises many questions both the uses of heritage and its role in ratifying or contesting identities. The decisions on what to call waste and what to value as heritage are undoubtedly familiar to any conservator who has ever interacted with an object in a conservation action, that ‘methodological moment’, as Cesare Brandi puts it, in which an work of art (or a cultural manifestation) is recognised as such.<sup>1</sup> And while the discussion of what is considered valued – and how its value is weighted against that of the ‘betterment’ promoted by capitalist and/or identity policies and politics – is somewhat more nuanced and definitely more individualised when conservators make decisions about how objects should look and who is asked to participate in those decisions, it would not be an overstatement to say that the devil is also in the details. What is thought as waste, and what is valued in the process of conservation? Which of the many possible manifestations of a given object gets to survive to future generations, and which material possibilities, voices, perspectives, and values are we deeming irrelevant? In the end, conservation of heritage and cultural memory is a human right, and it is also up to conservators as co-tutors of the future of cultural heritage and its manifestations to identify the source of the voices heard and to understand in which ways we are promoting the erasure of stories in the performative process of making heritages. This discussion reverberates in some of the arguments of Part III, which is dedicated to Indigenous heritage and destruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Brandi, Cesare (2005). *Theory of Restoration*, (Italian original published 1963; transl. Cynthia Rockwell; rev. Dorothy Bell). Florence: Ed. Nardini.

Part III encompasses four chapters that discuss issues of human rights violations in the context of making and destroying heritage sites and material culture. Agency is at the forefront of this discussion, particularly in the chapter eight, where Nicholas and Smith develop a thoughtful analysis on the various ways in which absences and ambiguities in instances of language codification of the rights of Indigenous people promotes a fate of invisibility, negligence, and violence. This section of the book further adds to the discussion initiated in Part II, on the (environmental and ethical) impacts of commercial enterprises, specially through the chapter authored by Rocha. Part III consolidates concepts of neglect and care, and how they are co-constitutive, raising ethical issues on whether there is indeed an ethics of doing nothing,<sup>2</sup> or what are the limits to care. In other words, when does care start to be oppressive?

While parts II and III introduce some of the ways in which urban and heritage development engage in politics of identity and place and can, indeed, enact forms of violence that have a serious and perduring impact in human and nonhuman communities and ecologies, Part IV explores the impact of conflict, catastrophic violence, and oppression in the heritage that is destroyed, transformed, and constructed during and after such processes. Although the destruction of forms of cultural practices through war and other forms of violence is clearly more visible than other systems of violence that are arguably more elusive (such as the ones described in part II), I would argue here – and through the reading of the four chapters that comprise this section of the book - that the impact of the loss of such forms of heritage and its entanglement with trauma, unveils layers of the construction of cultural memory that, many times, remain invisible in other settings. With catastrophic and visible loss also comes the need to look for what is no longer there. The examples and case-studies explored by Leeming, Walasek, and Pollard, are populated by forms of remembrance that thrive by being inherently involved with the revitalisation of shared imaginations. The reclamation of such absences is proposed through oral histories, narratives, alternative materialities and futures, a formulation that is also brought to the fifth section of this book, which looks at *Heritage, Identity and Destruction* through the lenses of policymaking. The section starts with a contribution by Linn-Tynen, who develops an outstanding analysis on the ways in why the continued reiteration of ‘authorised heritage discourses’, a term coined by the scholar Laurajane Smith (2006), have created inequalities of access and representation to African American communities in the United States. According to Smith, authorised heritage discourse occurs where narratives regarding what cultural heritage is and how we can take care of it are ‘based on the western national and elite class experiences.’<sup>3</sup> This often reinforces ‘ideas of innate cultural value tied to time depth, monumentality, expert knowledge and aesthetics’,<sup>4</sup> leading towards the exclusion of people, stories, ideas, forms of practicing and caring for heritage that do not conform to what is understood as norm, as ‘authorised.’ This discussion is also one that needs to happen in conservation. More often than not, we see codes of ethics, guidelines of practice, theoretical discourses, that focus on reiterating the historical and aesthetical values as being more of relevance than others, which have been defined in some value-systems (such as the Reiglian) as use or symbolic values. Beyond this characterisation of values - that, again, impacts what is seen as being valued and what is understood as waste – the misrecognition of communities in decision-making processes can lead to further exclusions, not only of the stories that could be told, but also of the ways in which they could be framed, discussed,

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<sup>2</sup> Ashley-Smith, Jonathan (2018) The ethics of doing nothing, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, 41:1, 6-15, DOI: 10.1080/19455224.2017.1416650

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Laurajane (2006). *Uses of Heritage*, London: Routledge, pp. 299

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

reimagined. When considering the role that cultural heritage plays in the construction of memory and identity – as it was so well discussed in various chapters in this book – conservation efforts and activities are inevitably linked to social interventions.

Reading this book from a conservation perspective adds to the arguments that the role of conservator is inherently social and has an impact in creating social justices and injustices. Ultimately, conservators need to consider whether their action as agents of legitimisation of collections also enacts forms of injustice, perpetuating violence in through opaque institutional policies. Transparency and accountability need to be at the forefront of conservation efforts, understanding not only the means of production of our situated practice, but also how they reiterate or contest forms of violence that are systemic and, many times, remain invisible.

The last section and chapter of the book is written by Cornelius Holtorf, Chair of Heritage Futures at UNESCO, who highlights that '[h]eritage futures are concerned with the roles of heritage in managing the relations between present and future societies' (p. 311). This contribution works as an epilogue that indeed, in some ways more than others, summarises the views expressed throughout the book of heritage being a complex assemblage of discourses, systems of power, people, objects, technology, infrastructure, and nature. From a conservation point of view, it is paramount to consider the characteristics of decision-making processes and try to map points of interaction and how they impacted the stories we are keeping for the current and future generations. Asking what is left out was never so important, and this book makes some of these absences slightly more visible.

Overall, this book can easily become a go-to volume for conservators working with various sites and objects from and in 'the field,' who are interested to understand the politics of heritage making, management, and protection. While the focus is not in conservation – and, when it is, it touches on lineages of thought that are more related to historical preservation – many are the relationships that can be made with our field, and I personally thoroughly enjoyed the possibility of thinking against the grain. It would have been interesting to see the book expand the range of perspectives to engage with other forms of locality and knowledge-making through embodied experiences and shared relations. The perceived absence of these perspectives, however, could be no more than the result of the curiosity sparked by this reading. And absences, as we have seen, are, and will always be, there.