

Why does heritage matter?

Memories are something that are profoundly personal. My brother, Louis, and I would for instance share the same memory of an event, let us say my tenth and his seventh birthday. We were born on the same day 3 days apart. We spent it together doing the same things, eating the same foods, lovingly prepared by our parents. But our experience of that day will always be profoundly different. That is because we have multiple memories, similar to a computer system with its different hard drives. There is our individual memory, and our collective memory. Now these two principles apply to heritage studies, as originally theorised by Maurice Halbwachs (1925,1950) and Pierre Nora (1989). To this essay and to relate to my personal experience more closely, I chose to reflect with more recent works. The reason heritage is such a prominent issue is that it concerns all of us. Whether we like it or not, heritage being as a multidisciplinary field, turns most aspects of one's existence has some sort of heritage value. Heritage is political, natural, historical, and philosophical. It is a matter of culture and identity. This is an idea that is being reframed by Dacia Viejo-Rose (2015). It is an important toolkit of understanding the relationship between people, landscapes, and different events. But it has not always been using in a positive way. In one way understanding heritage is important in aspects such as cultural and natural conservation, decolonisation of many academic fields and various other fields, but it is also commonly used as anti-democratic tool, in extreme nationalist discourse or to instigate hatred. Indeed, sometimes the idea of heritage is used to create an insurmountable boundary to reject others. This concept has also been discussed Viejo-Rose (2013) in the parameter of memory, and similarly by Laurajane Smith (2007). In this essay I would like to reflect my personal story in three distinct aspects: heritage and the personal identity, heritage as a social bond between people, and the fluidity of heritage and its perceptions.

Heritage and personal identity

We think of heritage as something that does not move, a concept that stays unchanged and is passed down from generations. We engage with it, and we often mistake it as the word "tradition." My childhood was full of warmth from Brazil and old traditions from Switzerland. But Louis and I have not experienced the things the same way. I went to Brazil far more frequently than he did and speak the language with more ease and fluency. But today, his ties to that country seem stronger than mine, to reconnect with something he felt he never fully had. For my part, I live in England, which I feel strongly attached to but have no inherited connection to it. And since then, my homesickness has made me more attached to the country I was born and raised in, even if culturally, we were brought up by Brazilians.

Viejo-Rose (2015) idea of collective memory is helpful to understand how heritage can mean so many different experiences. Indeed, collective memory is shared but experienced through individual experiences. Furthermore, Ciaran Benson (2001) discusses that heritage is not necessarily innate, but something that builds up over time.

Heritage as a Social Bond

Heritage is a bond between people. Brazilian food and music are how I created a link with that side of my heritage that is at a further reach. My love for overly sweet desserts (Brazilians love their sweet-condensed milk), Bossa nova and for the places my feet grazed as a child. My brother, on the other hand, as most south American boys, was more engaged with football, an area I had extraordinarily little interest in. This simply demonstrates how heritage can have a sense of belonging that is vastly different from one to the other. Unfortunately, I also do believe it can also be a boundary that separates people and nations from each other. David Lowenthal (1998) has argued that heritage presents itself as a line that is continuously threaded, loomed by people and passing it on to others, without a cut. The connection between my brother and heritage reflects to that experience. His Brazilian side, he continuously threads with us as a family and his environment through his personal engagement, and his Swiss side, which has somehow been cut, for the lack of engagement with local traditions. We were also considered 'too European' and therefore not entirely Brazilian. Interestingly, due to a mix of both medical and historical unawareness, my brother and I happen to be tan skinned and therefore, stereotypically Brazilian. But it is a result of a genetic condition that is quite common within northern Europeans. Medical conditions, although often inherited, are hardly considered at being part of heritage contributions. Our parents are very pale, so in Switzerland we were too Brazilians, and it felt strange to participate in millennia old village traditions, because we could not possibly be sharing the same heritage. I often believe that is when Louis stopped wanting to be Swiss. I had to reconnect that thread multiple times to understand who I was.

The fluidity of heritage

Heritage is not something that is set. It fluctuates over time depending on personal changes and experiences. My feelings towards my Swiss heritage drastically changed after I permanently moved to the United Kingdom. Just as my parents and grandparents experienced in the past. Laurajane Smith (2007) discusses that heritage is a process in time, and it changes and reforms through our individual and collective experiences and similarly, Rodney Harrison (2020) argues that the construction of heritage is build up in time to form something unique and constantly in progress. This fluidity contradicts with the idea that heritage is something that one simply possesses, but it is an ever-continuing process that never ends. It simply just adds on with time. My sense of heritage always continues to grow and that is independent of the fact I am actively studying it. I am aware of its happening and I can recognize the changes and signs within myself. But if I disconnected from it, it would slip away. For example, the less I speak my native languages the more I notice my vocabulary disappearing. If I were to stop cooking the sweet desserts of my childhood, I might stop craving them. And if I stopped engaging with traditional events, I would disconnect from it and start to perceive them as being someone else's heritage. So in practice, if nobody engaged with heritage, would it just die?

Conclusion

Heritage matters because it forms identity, creates a sense of belonging and creates a connection between then and now. But as for my personal experience with my sibling, heritage is not perceived the same way by everybody. Even with my brother, having shared so much to our date of birth, we could not feel any more different about our individual heritage. So, I do believe that with added settings such as geography, language and personal engagement, heritage can be incredibly individual. This idea contradicts the concept of heritage being 'just' inherited. If it were true, I would be an entirely different person. I once thought heritage was something that manifested naturally and automatically connected people. It requires relating to. However, I would not be able to completely detach it from its original context or ancestry. Of course, heritage can be inherited, but I do not believe it is the only link to it, as I have personally experienced. One can inherit a nationality and be completely disengaged from it, and the opposite is also true, to feel connected to a place in time, such as my mother living in Switzerland for many decades and becoming one of them through engaging and living there, and bringing up her children there, but with no other apparent connection to it.

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