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Module: Unravelling Heritage: History, Theory, Methods (HPHE7002)

Assessment 1: Critical Review of Heritage relevant article

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Title of article under review: DeSilvey, C. and Harrison, R. (2020) ‘Anticipating loss: rethinking endangerment in heritage futures’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(1), pp. 1, 1-7.

Overview and Summary of Key Themes

The article explores the notion of endangerment and loss in both natural and cultural heritage contexts, as well as the concomitant efforts to reverse, and where possible, avert the processes of loss and change.

There is an underlying recognition by the authors that while concern for endangerment and loss often drive preservation and conservation practices, there is creative potential in the acceptance of the inevitability loss and change.

DeSilvey and Harrison argue that the prospect of loss is not new within heritage practice and go on to posit that ‘endangerment sensibility’ (Vidal and Dias, 2016) have been fundamentally priceless in the production of heritage value. It is this notion of potential risk of loss or endangerment in its varied forms – including threat of extinction and destruction, that has traditionally driven the techniques of preservation or what (Holtorf, 2015) refers to as techniques of ‘loss aversion.’ These responses to endangerment within natural and cultural heritage practice, the authors recognise, have produced valuable social and cultural work. However, they propose alternative ways that are not directly predicated upon the notion of endangerment and risk vis-à-vis the valuation of heritage assests.

Three general themes – the inevitability of loss, the politics of loss, and the potential in loss are presented in the article to provide a framework for critical engagement with the future of

cultural and natural heritage vis-à-vis conservation, preservation and management. The main thrusts of these three themes are summarised below.

The inevitability of loss: DeSilvey and Harrison assert that the commitment to protect heritage from decay, damage and destruction is underpinned by the notion that heritage is irreplaceable and non-renewable. While both authors agree that the ultimate objective of such a notion is to sustain heritage significance, they question the sustainability of preservation and conservation in the face of accelerated climate and environmental change. For DeSilvey and Harrison, heritage values in coastal contexts may need to be reconsidered and adapted to reflect these new realities.

The politics of loss: While DeSilvey and Harrison agree that the preservation of cultural and natural heritage is often projected as something to be done for the future, or on behalf of future generations (Stainforth, 2017), they aver that the precise relationship of such practices to the future is rarely reflected upon. For the authors of the article, this raises several questions that are fundamentally political, and highlight the important role which critical heritage and museum studies play in presenting how heritage works in reality to promote certain kinds of heritage assets and values to the detriment of others. This reference to power structures and politics which shapes decisions regarding heritage value and significance resonate with (Gordillo, 2014) notion of the inequalities of power which underpin the process of ruination –itself an important part of conservation and preservation, according to DeSilvey and Harrison.

Here, the pertinent question regarding whose ‘collecting and ordering practices’ (Bennett et al., 2017) resonates with DeSilvey and Harrison’s question of whose stories are collected, remembered and celebrated, whose stories are forgotten, and who decides what gets lost and what is preserved (DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020).

The potential in loss: DeSilvey and Harrison note that within heritage practice, there is appreciation of the ways in which loss can enhance heritage value. They admit that for certain types of heritage assets to attain the level of scarcity and rarity which activates protective action, many other heritage assets may be lost in the process.

The authors present what they refer to as emerging perspectives which view loss as potentially generative, emancipatory, and engendering new values and forms of significance (DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020).

The authors suggest the need for heritage to actively tend to its own conservation through what they refer to as ‘pruning and forgetting’ (DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020). This pruning and forgetting resonates with the concept of ‘relinquishment’ (Bendell, 2018) and ‘curated decay’ (DeSilvey, 2017).

DeSilvey and Harrison aver that change should no longer be perceived as loss, and that change holds both gains and losses which should be appreciated in heritage practice

Theoretical Perspectives

The primary theoretical perspectives underpinning the article relate to the theory of loss and change, as well as critical heritage perspectives.

As is evident in all aspects of human life, including the natural and built environment, loss and change is inevitable. What is important, as DeSilvey and Harrison posit in the article, is our responses to this reality - particularly as it relates to heritage value, and the management, preservation and conservation of heritage assets.

DeSilvey and Harrison echo the understanding within natural heritage practice that the accelerating impact of environmental and climate change is likely to necessitate a reconsideration of practices relating to the care of at-risk buildings/properties and places. The authors recognise that heritage agencies and organisations are already at work developing ways to address future threats while also prioritising resources accordingly.

DeSilvey and Harrison further aver that it is becoming increasingly clear, that for some heritage assets, it is necessary to manage the process of decline while also coming to terms with the creative and regenerative potential in loss. For DeSilvey and Harrison, their concept of ‘adaptive release’ (DeSilvey et al., 2021) may be useful in expanding the range of options available within natural heritage practice in responding to and dealing with the eventuality and inevitability of change.

DeSilvey and Harrison further anchor their arguments on critical heritage and heritage futures perspectives.

Critical heritage studies reconceptualise heritage by paying attention to politics and power, identity, engagement with memory studies, creative tourism, cultural geography and material culture.

The authors echo (Gordillo, 2014) ‘inequalities of power which underpins the process of ruination’ and (Dawdy, 2016) notion of the politically contested nature of the process of heritage preservation, conservation and management.

For DeSilvey and Harrison, the scholarship produced through critical heritage and museum studies have served to deepen and broaden our understanding of the reality of how heritage works to promote, as they put it, ‘certain kinds of objects, places, practices and values to the detriment of others’ (DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020). This further underscores their position concerning the political and power relations which shape preservation, conservation and management decisions, policies and practices, as they aptly ask, who decides what is saved and what is destroyed/lost.

DeSilvey and Harrison’s question above, closely connects with the position taken by (Bennett et al., 2017) that the collection and ordering practices within heritage practice are essentially political in nature.

Anchored on a critical heritage perspective, DeSilvey and Harrison present the pertinent question of whose heritage is collected, remembered, celebrated, and whose are forgotten. The authors push the questions even further to consider who makes the decisions regarding the distribution of limited funds for nature conservation.

Evaluation of Methods, Limitations, and Conclusions

The article comes across as an introductory statement or some sort of foreword to a larger body or collection of articles and may seem to confuse the reader even though the title clearly states what the reader should expect its main thrusts to be about. For example, in the opening line of the section on conclusion, the authors remind us that the focus of the papers in this special issue – the inevitability and creative potential of loss and change.

In line with the observation above, the authors state in the opening lines of the section on contents and contexts that ‘the majority of papers collected in this special issue.....’ They go on to mention in the closing line of the same section that ‘the papers presented here focus on different forms of heritage.....’ While this may not necessarily be misleading, it may confuse the reader, although there may be some added value to such a statement as it could lead the

reader to want to explore the approach(s) taken by the authors of the other articles in the volume/issue.

The authors seem to make a concerted case for the inevitability of loss and the need for alternative ways of valuing objects, places and practices which are not purely driven by notions of endangerment and risk of loss, however, they do not tell us how these alternative approaches to valuation may be deployed in heritage practice.

Furthermore, the authors offer scant appraisal of the potential gains and generative value of loss. Rather, they proceed to draw the reader's attention to the availability of a more detailed appraisal of these gains in the papers that follow (highlighted above), I believe, constitutes a major limitation of the article.

The authors affirm their conviction that the three themes upon which the article is predicated (inevitability of loss, politics of loss, and potential in loss) bear positive implications for the future of natural and cultural heritage conservation, preservation and management, on the one hand, while also mapping out future directions for critical heritage studies.

Conclusively, the arguments put forward by DeSilvey and Harrison centre mainly around natural heritage contexts with skeletal reference to cultural heritage contexts.

References

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