

## CHAPTER 15

# Heritage Naturecultures

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### Abstract

This chapter considers heritage natureculture as a resource and theoretical lens to inform sustainability studies. In the context of changing environmental, cultural, and technological conditions, the category of heritage has emerged as a situated concept that describes how people relate to place and society in late modernity. It is similarly a source to challenge received histories that exclude particular experiences from official public narratives. In response to climate change, heritage scholars increasingly turn to institutions and sites of cultural memory as contested grounds to reimagine both past and future relationships with the environment.

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This chapter offers examples of these developments in theory and practice. Thinking heritage in relation to sustainability through these contexts enables scholars to understand how knowledge of the past is composed, maintained, and rewritten, with a view toward present and future generations.

### **Introduction: Disrupting Heritage**

In an era of anthropogenic climate change and accelerated human mobility, the category of heritage becomes a key site for situating sustainability discourse. Heritage has been defined at the crossroads of international legal protections and local cultural definitions, referring to sites, objects, and practices that constitute tangible and intangible sources of meaning-making in the world. Originally limited to cultural objects and places considered worthy of conservation by historians, art historians, archeologists, architects, and anthropologists, the term has expanded to include important ecosystems, as well as practices through which cultural memory is made, reproduced, and circulated in the contemporary world. In 2015, over 20 representatives from international heritage organizations issued The Pocantico Call to Action on Climate Impacts and Cultural Heritage, sounding an alarm that climate change poses a material threat to world heritage sites (Markham 2016; Union of Concerned Scientists 2015). The call to action reaffirms the status of cultural heritage as a human right and argues that threatened heritage sites contain invaluable knowledge of the human and environmental past that can inform present societies. However, anthropogenic change also forces us to rethink the categorical distinctions between nature and culture, distinctions that have reinforced the belief that humans are separate from the environment and that have traditionally informed our understanding of 'heritage' (Lowenthal 2005). The ontological distinction between natural heritage (e.g., national parks, wildlife reserves, bodies of water) on the one hand, and cultural heritage (e.g., arts, industry, traditional practices) on the other, can no longer be easily maintained in the Anthropocene (Harrison 2015; Lowenthal 2005; Solli 2011).

Thankfully, philosophers of science such as Bruno Latour (1993) and Donna Haraway (2003) have posed the term ‘nature-culture’ to refer to hybrid objects that cannot be reduced to either of the dualistic categories of nature or culture. This awkward construction is made to slow down our thinking in order to attend to the material and discursive practices through which the world takes on meaning, as it supports the formation and circulation of knowledge. Thus, heritage natureculture is a conceptual hybrid that emphasizes entwined environmental and social histories on both the material and symbolic level. This chapter takes this situation as a starting point and illustrates how heritage practitioners are redefining the present through the past. Telling stories that emphasize entangled meaning and being allows us to better situate heritage practices in the service of sustainability.

Defined one way, heritage is all the invented tradition and social memory that is under threat by anthropogenic change. However, considered critically, heritage is that which disrupts settled convention and presentist assumptions by dramatically reframing the material history and intangible traditions of human culture. It works against the ‘reactionary populism’ that uses heritage rhetoric to buttress essentializing and exclusionary claims to identity and territory in that it exposes overlooked and deeply-interrelated material histories (González-Ruibal, González and Criado-Boado 2018). Critical heritage practices can also serve the interest of cultural recognition. In the case of traditional ecological knowledge, it creates opportunities for epistemic exchange in the management of ecosystems (see Chapter 14 on *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* in this book). Likewise, it opens the way to emerging digital heritage practices, as well as to alternative and non-professional or non-expert understandings of heritage.

The critique of the so-called Authorized Heritage Discourse has become a cornerstone of the Critical Heritage Studies movement (Smith 2006). Within this context, and the wider context of sustainability, it is appropriate to consider not only expert, specialist, and authoritative viewpoints, but also those of non-professionals. Previously overlooked groups, which include traditional Indigenous communities and amateur enthusiasts, are now receiving

more attention in heritage discussions. In some cases, amateur enthusiasts identify and collate knowledge about a particular heritage category long before academics become interested. This is seen in the material heritage connected to, for example, World War I material culture in Belgian Flanders (Thomas and Deckers 2020; van Hollebeke, Stichelbaut and Bourgeois 2014) or the material remains from the World War II era in Finnish Lapland (Thomas 2019). Furthermore, the participatory potential of heritage for co-creative engagements between specialists and members of the public, who are sometimes identified as citizen scientists, is a growing area of research and practice (e.g. Gibb 2019; Simon 2010). These co-creative engagements with the past highlight the democratic practices through which cultures are made, and reframe heritage as a 'space in which futures are assembled'. Since it 'involves working with the tangible and intangible traces of the past to both materially and discursively remake both ourselves and the world in the present', Rodney Harrison, for instance, argues that understanding heritage as a natureculture is fundamentally a future-oriented practice (2015: 35). These conceptual shifts are registered in broader culture with increasing urgency.

This disruption of past, present, and future imaginaries is expressed in *Parasites Like Us*, a speculative novel written by Pulitzer Prize-winning US author Adam Johnson (2003). The otherwise mundane setting of this campus novel is shattered when archeologists unearth a jar containing ancient North American popcorn, which they eat. The exposure of the jar's contents simultaneously unleashes a buried plague, wiping out domesticated livestock and those humans who have not been immunized by the corn. The graduate student whose project involves reconstructing paleolithic techniques and simulating hunter-gatherer lifeways enables the small group to survive the collapse of agricultural-industrial society. The narrative dramatizes the biological, settler-colonial, and temporal conjunctions that disrupt historical periodization. Narratives of cursed archeological sites emerged from the colonial expeditions that founded many museum collections. The symbolic threat from the past, often from the ethnic other, are products of an orientalizing gaze. Yet today, this threat from

an unearthed past comes from viruses released by melting permafrost, the exposure and erosion of archeological sites, and the disintegration of the natural markers (e.g. layers of sediment or ice) that are necessary for measuring environmental change and human impact across geological time. Indeed, this temporal collapse contributes to what author Amitav Ghosh (2016) calls ‘the great derangement’ of climate change, which is exacerbated by the erasure of the imperialist economies that have contoured the globe through extractive industries. This collapse of past and present is joined by a collapse in the distinction between nature and culture.

In this context, museum curators and historians alike must consider how climate change challenges the conventional distinctions between natural history and cultural history. The condition of anthropogenic climate change demands histories that emphasize the environmental dimensions of human culture, with expansive understanding of the diverse conceptions of the natural world. These approaches are intended to ‘prepare for uncertain futures’, ‘manage nature/culture borderlands’, and ‘conserve diversity’ in culture and ecology (Harrison 2015: 37). On the other hand, these practices draw critical attention to the objects and locations of heritage, specifically how these objects and locations are identified, theorized, and put in conversation with broader contexts. Redefined as heritage naturecultures, the objects, sites, and processes of storage and transmission may open new possibilities for humans to redefine their place in the world and cosmos, while at the same time transforming the policies that threaten it.

## Uses of the Past

### *Climate Stories in the United States*

The new uses of heritage can be found in the US National Parks Service, whose Framework for Addressing Climate Change with Cultural Resources outlines a plan to integrate traditional ecological knowledge, archeological evidence, and cultural history into a strategy for managing national parks, which combines science, mitigation, adaptation, and communication (Rockman 2015: 40).

This approach examines how past human societies responded to environmental changes like droughts with evidence from the archeological record. Reconstructing successful and unsuccessful responses from the past can inform current social dynamics. Likewise, the strategy recognizes the epistemic importance of Indigenous North American knowledge and cultural memory. Inviting Indigenous collaboration and co-production into climate change mitigation—for instance in the controlled burning of forests—is a necessary step toward redressing dispossession. Perhaps the central pillar of this programme is communication.

The ‘every place has a climate story’ initiative synthesizes this knowledge into stories that highlight the naturecultures that compose the objects of heritage institutions. These stories are designed to communicate: 1) how climate affects material heritage now and in the past; 2) the disproportionate environmental impact, past and present, of European settlement on Indigenous societies; 3) how the archeological record of past responses to environmental change can inform the present; and 4) what contemporary practices and effects result from this history (Rockman 2015: 46). Even more recently, the disastrous bushfires in Australia in 2019–2020 have generated media discussion on how adhering to traditional Indigenous land management practices could have safeguarded against the fires (Shastri 2020). In such cases, we find a determined effort to use the naturecultures of the past and present to fashion more durable futures.

### *Material Memory in Finnish Lapland*

An example of heritage natureculture that has, until recently, continued without much intervention from professional management is found in the communities that interact with the material and environmental remains of World War II in Finnish Lapland, particularly among the numerous German military sites established between 1941 and 1944. These interactions range from everyday encounters of local inhabitants, to the ‘hunt’-like interventions of military collectors searching for objects of interest, through

to more profoundly emotional experiences of descendants. This sheds light on changing attitudes of how material and cultural heritage is viewed within the context of nature. As Herva (2014) notes, the perception of Finnish Lapland, especially in tourism marketing, is often as an 'untouched' wilderness, exotic and liminal compared to the rest of Europe. Yet the positioning of Lapland as a natural wonder ripe for exploring denies the agency of humans in its shaping (particularly that of Indigenous Sámi), and points to colonialist Othering. Furthermore, there has even been concern on the national level for Finland to distance itself from its wartime past of acting as a co-belligerent with Nazi Germany (Herva 2014: 300). Connected to this perception of Lapland as devoid of human intervention, and also with Finland's downplaying of its role in the war, in the mid-2000s a voluntary organization known as *Pidä Lappi siistinä* ('Keep Lapland Tidy') began clearing World War II remains from forests in Lapland. This was ostensibly for safety reasons; much of the material removed was made from rusted metal, e.g. food cans, spent artillery, and remains of field kitchens. However, it also points to the perception of this historical material as somehow spoiling the otherwise 'pristine' wilderness of Lapland, and perhaps of being of a period that was better forgotten. Over time, however, debate, especially in the local press, moved from discussing whether the retrieved metal had any 'value' beyond potential resale as scrap, through to calls to leave the material remains in situ, as more people recognized their interrelationship with nature and their position as testimony to the recent conflict past (Thomas, Seitsonen and Herva 2016).

In more recent times, in part due to the raised public concern for (and appreciation of) World War II material as 'witnesses' to the violent past, a greater sense of their status as part of the palimpsest of heritage natureculture in Lapland has also developed (see Seitsonen and Koskinen-Koivisto 2018 for interviews with residents of the Sámi village Vuotso referring to the material culture in this way). This has also seeped into official policy, with it becoming possible only in recent years to designate sites from this period as official (authorized) heritage, in turn affording them

legal protection (Enqvist 2014). Whether this official intervention in practice alters how people continue to regard, consume, and even adventure, in this particular environment, and with this particular material culture, remains to be seen.

### *Digital Heritage Naturecultures in India*

In a different world region and cultural and social contexts, we find the use of heritage in digital creative industries, both in relation to and beyond naturecultures. India is currently experiencing a boom in video-game development, especially from so-called indie (independent) studios that use regional cultural heritages in their games in innovative and engaging ways. These include specific aspects from Indian history, art such as music, dance, and dress styles, and architecture. Such games are based on the Indian developers' marked consciousness of the distinctive nature of their own heritages and their potential to attract global audiences. A notable game that toys with Indian cultural heritage on many levels is the forthcoming but already intensively promoted and acknowledged (in game trailers, events, dance shows, journalistic blog entries and on its own website) 'Antariksha Sanchar' (English: 'Transmissions in Space'). Blending the life story of the South Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887–1920) with elements of science fiction, Steampunk and, most intensively, South Indian classical Bharatanatyam dance, the 'point and click adventure inspired by the dream theorems of prodigious mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan' (Antariksha 2017) creates a distinctive South Indian heritage tale.

One remarkable feature is the game's playful incorporation of classical Hindu mythological recounts of humans' relation to aeronature, that is, to airspaces and to the creatures inhabiting them, such as insects, birds, and mythological beings. As indicated in its name, Antariksha Sanchar 'traces the idea of flight from small plants to insects to birds and finally to mythological concepts like Hanuman, the Pushpaka Vimana and the Vaimanika Shastra, an early 20th-century Sanskrit text on aerospace technology', as the



main game developer Avinash Kumar (cited in Anonym 2016) explains. It adds to the game's appeal that intensive panoramas of South Indian landscapes with their own unique aesthetics, dominated by palm trees, are incorporated into gameplay. As humanity's long contemplations on space and aero-nature are taken up and redefined through the specific context of Indian cultural heritage and in the digital format of video games, this history is brought to larger audiences—both in India and globally.

Incorporating such themes in the video-game format invites new and potentially unique views on aerospace and human interactions with atmosphere, and additionally offers playful, creative experiences with these specific heritage naturecultures. This extends to the persons playing the game but also beyond them, to persons watching the game trailers, visiting the dance events around the game, and so forth. As it states in the current dance and show events promoting Antariksha Sanchar: 'when it all comes together, you are treated to an engaging, immersive storytelling experience that blends history, mythology and modern technology in new and exciting ways' (Kappal 2018). Exploring heritage natureculture through the video-game industry raises questions of authorship, commodification, archiving, and authenticity, as it forecasts a future of heritage production that redefines the immersive experience and the encounter with time.

### **Conclusion: Future Pasts**

The emerging framework of heritage naturecultures foregrounds the historicity of the natural world, as well as the historicity of human concepts of nature. Likewise, as anthropogenic environmental change challenges the imagined autonomy of culture, heritage naturecultures enable scholars and citizens to focus on the non-human entanglements that make culture possible. As the above examples illustrate, the rise of heritage naturecultures in the context of sustainability is opening up alternative pathways for sustainable land management, creating tourism and livelihood industries that redress the memory of war and systemic aggression,

and digitally reviving environmental and scientific culture to engage audiences in new contexts. The difficulty of a concept like heritage is that it is too abstract to be easily contained, and can be misused by those who prefer fantasy to an actual, if contested, past. Using a concept like heritage natureculture means recognizing that the past that is conserved is simultaneously a past that is produced. It is a composition of the human and non-human, brought together in the service of co-existent futures.

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