

Heritage-Boom: On Culture and Nature in the Americas (Introduction)

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Arguably every human society engages in practices of memory in order to build identity and belonging. If autobiographical memory reconstructs life events, cultural memory can be understood as the communal effort to retrace the supposed original state or form of a cultural event or cultural object, or in extended terms a natural event or natural object. Such act of restoration is a discursive construct that involves processes of discovery, selection, imagination, and reconstruction. Cultural memory refers to communal conceptions of heritage and history, and thus to more public forms of narrative such as museum narratives, documentary films, national park narratives, published histories in a popular or academic vein among others. Cultural memory also consists in oral histories that members of a community share with each other. Just as individual identity emerges from the narrative shape one gives one's life through recalling it, these historical accounts of a community foster a shared identity among its members. And like the individual's past which changes to fit present circumstances, the community's cultural and natural heritage and history are revised as community moves in time. "How memory and heritage are created, preserved, or changed is always entangled in a network of power relationships" (Raussert et al. 14). The growing internationalization of the circuits of mobility and capital, information and labor, cultural practice and goods leaves individuals tied to "differing and multiple cultural reference groups in a series of multiple positionings" (Raussert and Kunow 10). In an ever more globalized space that suggests borderless multiplicities without unity, cultural differences, competing conceptions of memory and heritage, and conflicts of value seem omnipresent. (ibid. 17).

The notion of heritage that alludes to practices

and discourses made by scientific experts emerged around the second half of the nineteenth century in the context of nation building. The nation's attempt at a diachronic and harmonious narrative is at odds with the dynamics of industrial revolution, internal migration, and massive processes of urbanization disrupting the processes of identity formation. Therefore, the discourse of heritage is offered as a way to heal the flaws of modernity. It promises continuity and stability, continuing an invented origin that was lost in the processes of modernization. (Herwitz 18; Smith 17).

Without doubt, heritage is booming all over the world. Within the last years, we have witnessed an impressive qualitative and quantitative expansion of heritage policies. Not only have international heritage organizations like the important UNESCO-World Heritage Center expanded their scope dramatically, but the cultural industry is blossoming with a "heritage lifestyle" marked by nostalgia, vintage, and a "retro" look. Performance and narration of heritage are related to a globally established form, although their appropriation depends on local patterns. In Western European societies, heritage has often been stylized into a depoliticized lifestyle factor. In postcolonial contexts, and throughout the Americas, "heritage has also transformed into a battleground for identity politics and for the interpretation of history and its projection into the future" (Kaltmeier 13). Especially in Latin America the general heritage boom and growing cultural industry are intrinsically entangled with questions of coloniality and indigeneity.

According to David Herwitz, this is the main reason why decolonizing societies enter into the heritage game and make their own heritage, although heritage itself is a western device.

To do so is a rehabilitating move, a way of self-assigning a future by taking over the ideology which allows them to ascribe origin and destiny to the past, accretion and transmissibility to their 'values'. And a central part of the postcolonial dialectic is re-conceptualizing the precolonial past as a heritage, finding a way to claim that past as the origin of one's future. (Herwitz 21)

The politics and uses of heritage have their pitfalls, since heritage is a discourse and a practice that is not rooted in indigenous policies of the past but introduced by the colonizers, which implies certain logics of representation, categorization, and exhibition. While heritage is based on these logics of representation, categorization, and exhibition, generally made by experts, it is articulated with the affective and emotional side of nostalgic feelings that, in the Americas, are related to "the antagonist patterns of coloniality and indigeneity" (Kaltmeier 14).

Cultural and natural heritage are separate and distinct entities but they also overlap in current heritage projects in the Americas. The Natchez Trace Parkway in the American South and the Mayan tourist train project in Mexico demonstrate that cultural and natural heritage frequently go hand in hand in contemporary ways of creating, preserving, promoting and commodifying heritage. The journal edition at hand wants to sharpen the reader's awareness of the ambiguous dynamics of current policies and uses of cultural and natural heritage. And it wants to open the reader's eyes to the equally powerful presence of cultural and natural heritage in the struggles about authorship, historical representation, and the commodification of heritage "as an object or as a reference in the marketing of places – from the city up to the nation" (Kaltmeier and Rufer 2).

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