



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Critical heritage studies

WHAT IS CRITICAL HERITAGE STUDIES?

I'm an archaeologist by training and I've always been interested in anthropological aspects of archaeology so I spent a lot of time working with communities recording oral history and working collaboratively, and I think I've always been interested in the way that people develop a sort of sense of place and the way that heritage feeds into people's sense of community, and I think a lot of those aspects come through in the course. I've also worked for State government heritage agencies in Australia, and I've worked as an archaeologist working for, on behalf of developers as well as the State, as well as local communities, so I've had a hat in every corner really. Heritage has had a bad rap in that people see heritage as sort of bad history or you know they think of Disneyland, or sort of museum evocation of the past, and a lot of archaeologists and a lot of historians see that as bad, and it's in contest with what they do, but I think that there are also lots of positive aspects about heritage, when we think about heritage in terms of social practices and in terms of community building. And then also, you know, I think there's lots of dangerous aspects about heritage, I think heritage as it's used by the State can be awfully excluding of diversity in society and it can be used - for example, in Nazi Germany, you know, heritage was used to exclude people and to justify all sorts of atrocities, so there's a kind of cautionary tale in this as well which is about the dangers of heritage when it's not looked at critically.

Heritage is a very powerful force and that's something that is pervasive in contemporary society, as something that we're always coming up against, and that's something which in a way grew up in the wake of de-industrialisation in the west, and it's been argued that it is a form of industry that replaced those industries that were dying, that were being, you know, overcome in the wake of de-industrialisation. You know the coal mining industry in the UK, as the coal mining industry declined, we had the growth of all of these coal mining industry museums that kind of celebrate the decline of things, so heritage is in a way something that takes over when the function of something else has passed, it sort of celebrates those things that are past, and it's about remembering those things that are past. But it also has this slightly insidious side in that it infiltrates all aspects of society, and it can override things that are still living, things that are still living aspects of culture, which I would see as being quite dangerous.

When most people think about heritage they sort of think about the practical aspects of heritage: conservation, restoration of buildings and management of historical sites, and in the past heritage has been more about doing than thinking, so Critical Heritage Studies is not so much concerned with how we conserve heritage, but why we choose to conserve heritage, why societies might value particular sorts of objects and places and practices over others, and why we would choose to memorialise and remember particular things from the past by conserving them while we forget other things by allowing them to fall into ruin.

Historians quite often criticise heritage because they say it presents a sort of glorified or inaccurate version of the past and it's more interested in producing a sort of national story that fits in with the image of citizenship and nationhood that particular nations want to put forward about themselves. I'm much less interested in whether something's authentic than I am interested in why people choose a particular story about the past to emphasise. What is the aspect of that story which is important in terms of the way in which a nation wants to present itself or the way in which a community wants to celebrate its sense of collective heritage? So it's getting at the meaning of these stories that people tell about the past, these things that people choose to memorialise and remember, and we exclude particular sorts of histories, and particular sorts of material heritage, so thinking about those people that are excluded from the national story and what that does in terms of power and representation in heritage.

In heritage studies it's conventional to distinguish between official heritage practices, things like the sort of conservation and listing of places by the State, and unofficial heritage practices. Now these things, unofficial practices, exist at a local level and relate to the cultural work that communities do which helps bind them together as a community and helps establish a sort of relationship with the place in which they live. Some examples include things like folk stories and festivals, and one of the things that we look at in the course is the Notting Hill Carnival, which is a very good example of a sort of unofficial practice that isn't really sponsored by the State, so it's this sense of the sort of top-down nationalistic approach to heritage versus this bottom-up very local, very sort of community approach to heritage, and the way that they relate to one another.