



## **Museums in contemporary society**

*Authorised heritage discourse*

### **Laurajane Smith:**

Any society will have a dominant sense of what its heritage is and when I was trying to make sense of heritage, trying to re-theorise what I thought heritage was about, I was trying to sort of quantify the existence of a dominant sense of heritage, and other ideas of heritage identity and the past and belonging that wasn't included, that sit outside of that dominant sense. But more importantly I wanted to also try and encapsulate the idea that the dominant forms of heritage do more than just sit in a vacuum, they more than just dominate, they have a consequence, so the idea of the Authorised Heritage Discourse, rather than dominant heritage discourse, stresses the sense in which dominant ideas of heritage become continually reinforced, continually authorised and made important, and the consequences they have on wider society about what that then says about what is history, and what is not history, what is heritage, and what is not heritage, and what that then means to people's sense of belonging, sense of self, sense of community, sense of national identity, and so on.

So for me the Authorised Heritage Discourse simply says that there is a dominant form of heritage out there and it tends to be that heritage, at least in the west, it tends to be that heritage that is material, that is comfortable, is grand, aggrandising, it tends to reflect the old sense of, you know, the history of great men doing great deeds so it's a heritage or a sense of history in the past that speaks to an elite sense of experience, it is one that can be seen on a day-to-day basis in the Handbook of English Heritage, you know all the particular sites that are open up to the public, in the activities of the National Trust and what they regard as important to save, we can see it operating in the Ancient Monuments Legislation, what it is that is, you know scheduled, all those things that, and they're things that are scheduled, that are protected, that are opened up for public, are dominated by the comfortable, the grand, and the material, the aesthetically pleasing, you know the pretty stuff, the treasure, and it excludes, it excludes other people's sense of heritage, it excludes, in particular what it excludes in this country is the heritage and the experiences, and the history of multicultural Britain and working class Britain, so it's an attempt to try and understand not only that there is a dominant heritage, but what having that dominant heritage does, how it constructs history and nationality, and sense of community and how it excludes, and that's what I'm trying to get a handle on by utilising that phrase. And I think, you know that awareness is necessary if you're going to change.

Now one thing I didn't say about the Authorised Heritage Discourse which is vitally important is that it's not immutable, that it's open to change, and indeed I think as people working within the heritage sector and the wider cultural sector it's our duty to change it, to challenge it, but you need to understand it and to be able to name it before you can instigate those challenges and make heritage in the cultural sector more inclusive. Well I think we're seeing change actually at the minute in terms of the introduction of intangible heritage, I mean this is at an international level, it perhaps is not happening so much or as explicitly here in the UK, but certainly in an international level the materiality of the western authorised discourse has been challenged by the development initially of the Masterpieces Program back in the late nineties by UNESCO, and then the 2003 International Convention on Intangible Heritage, that has begun I think to shift. How much of it has actually shifted we need to wait and see, but I think that is a significant challenge at the moment to the AHD.

We need to work towards having a dominant sense of heritage that is continuously in flux, that is continuously changing, because I think only in that way will we allow a more inclusive sense of heritage to allow us to renegotiate, continually renegotiate those social and cultural values that we want to take from the past or take from the present, and argue our heritage, you know, that we're going to say that these are the values that we want to take forward, so I think to have something continuously being questioned, continuously being reassessed is

really important because it allows that renegotiation of what it means to be British, or what it means to be a member of a particular community, or whatever, what it means to be simply myself living at a particular time in a particular place.