



Heritage, whose heritage?

Perceptions of heritage

SUSAN: David Dabydeen is Professor of Literary Studies at the University of Warwick and co-editor of the *Oxford Companion to Black British History*.

DAVID: Well, when I think of the word heritage, I think of the word nationalism. Because I think, um, the quest to recover, announce and assert a sense of heritage is frequently bound up with flexing your muscles on behalf of your nation. So, unfortunately, er, that's my association. It, it means that heritage is about who we are as opposed to who you are, so the concept of heritage immediately sets up in my mind a differentiation between self and other.

SUSAN: Is there anything that strikes you as odd about the apparent British obsession with the heritage of the built environment?

DAVID: Well, coming from the Caribbean, it is, um, something different from my own cultural upbringing. You see, in the Caribbean, the slave artefacts rarely exist. They're rotted away. You know the iron muscles and the ankle chains, they either rotted away or upon emancipation, we threw them away. The sugar factories that exist in Barbados and in other places have been converted into very nice tourist flats. So what remains of, um, our heritage in the Caribbean, it's in invisible things – in the language. You know, the way that we were able to retain our African grammar, even though speaking English. It's invisible. It's in the canals, the canals that still exist, the hundreds of thousands of miles of, hundreds of thousands of tons of mud that we dug by shovel, by muscle, to irrigate the cane fields. Those canals still exist. So so when you look at the canals, that's our heritage! You can't put that in a museum, you know, you can't quantify it, you can't put a price to it. Or else our history is submarine. All the great sea battles to do with slavery and empire, which is our history, our heritage from the Caribbean, took place on the sea off the shores of Barbados or off the shores of Guyana. And so there's a lot of dead bodies, there's a lot of skeletal remains of ships and people. But they're submarine, they're not visible, you know. So if you think of one of the greatest art forms we've created, it's a performative art form, it's Carnival. You cannot take those costumes – which are absolutely ravishing, they're as gaudy and as beautiful and as complex and intricate as a piece of rococo work. But you can't put it, you see, in a ceiling. Or you can't put it in a museum because then it's dead, it's static. The carnival costume has to be worn by the human body and it has to gyrate with the human body. So we're talking about kinetic art. So from the Caribbean I can see, um, differences between the way we perceive art and the way we would like to preserve art as a living, performative activity. And I can see the difference between that and going to the National Gallery in London. I think the most important thing about heritage, the difference between the Caribbean and Britain would be this: we don't do heritage to flex our muscles, to say 'we're Guyanese and you're nobody!' Or 'we're ...Look at our spectroglyph, it's older than yours!'. You know, we don't have that triumphalist connection between the notion of heritage and the artefact.

SUSAN: David, do you think that there are aspects of the presentation of country houses as heritage in Britain that might exclude people from Asian or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds?

DAVID: Well, if you go to a lovely eighteenth-century English country house with gardens laid out by William Kent and you come from, in my case, Guyana, you may think that 'this doesn't belong to me, this is not my landscape. I wasn't part of the, er, building of this, er, neo-Palladian structure. Neo-Palladianism isn't part of my own traditions, my own cultural

tradition', so you can feel very much an outsider. You know, you feel an immigrant. You feel that, although you've been living in this country for most of your life, somehow the valorisation of the concept of heritage is there to... to make you feel marginal, to make you feel that you don't quite belong. Now most of my academic work therefore so far has been to show that even in the eighteenth century and before, there was a substantial black presence in Britain and that we contributed to the literary and artistic heritage, to show that when I do go to a country house I can say, in many instances, that slave money, the revenues from slavery, bought this house and therefore I belong. You know, I can look at the paintings and I can see, in a country house, and I can see black figures as servants and therefore I feel that I belong. You know that, that even in the grand edifices and um showpieces of British culture, I belong, because I used to be... my ancestors were slaves and Indian indentured labourers and it was our labour that helped pay for the patronage of the arts.

SUSAN: Let's take as an example, then, something like Penryn House, which I think was a house built on money made out of sugar plantations which were worked by slave labour. How could in this case the National Trust present that house in a way that you think would be more inclusive?

DAVID: Well I think we have to go beyond the pretty pictures in the brochures and we have to be honest about the the origins of the revenue when we recognise that there's an inextricable link between black plantation labour and the the construction of English country houses with their English country gardens. You know, there were two plantations, one hacked and ploughed by blacks in ... who sweated to death, as it were, and the other one which is all, er, manicured and it's beautifully shaped. But there is a deep connection between the chaos of the Caribbean plantation, the inhumanity and the humane values represented in the English country house and the English country garden. Now to to recognise that is not to create a sense of shame or guilt, it's just being accurate in terms of scholarship.

SUSAN: It's interesting that you should say that going to a grand English country house for example, that building is a gesture of a triumphalist nature. Is there no way that you could visit such a place and for it to be neutral? That it's just a big, handsomely-built house in a park?

DAVID: One would hope that eventually one could have a a genuine, spontaneous aesthetic response to the country house as a work of art. Unfortunately, at the moment, the way these country houses are represented in brochures, they're all about the gloriousness of the English past. Now that goes with things on television, costume drama, you know, in other words they present the house as a form of costume drama. Now why are we doing costume drama? I believe it's because we don't want to look at the complexity of our present situation. Our present situation is complex, it's multicultural, it's multi-ethnic and a way of escaping from that sense of the present, the vibrancy of the present, is to deaden the past. To costume it and garland it and to prettify it and to remove it from the present and to claim it for yourself. So once these attitudes prevail, it's very hard for me, as a, as a human being, never mind as an artist, to have a purely aesthetic response to that artefact.

SUSAN: In a much more inclusive future then, perhaps, can you see how aspects of the Afro-Caribbean and Asian experiences could be interpreted as heritage in a way that would be comfortable and happy for everyone?

DAVID: Yes, I think a living example of that is carnival, Notting Hill carnival, which is the largest street carnival in Europe, which involves many more white people and indeed an increasing amount of Europeans than than native British Caribbean people. So that is our contribution to our heritage. And and in doing carnival in Notting Hill, what we are doing as West Indians is resurrecting very ancient English traditions of carnival. You know, in the eighteenth century especially, you had the great carnivals, Bartholomew Fair, Southwark fair, you know, great occasions for merriment and pick-pocketing and prostitution and low life as well as opera singers, you know, turning up at the fringes as it were of these great fairs. Now the Victorians suppressed the fairs so our car... Notting Hill carnival is a resurrection of eighteenth-century English traditions. I can give you another example: the performance poetry, whether it's dub poetry or Creole poetry. Well what is that? You can see it as

something distinct to the West Indian or else you can see it as the resurrection of ancient English traditions of verbalising poetry, the ballad tradition, where a poet got up and voiced and articulated the moods of a people in language that rhymed, as it were. Now that is not black, that is not black performance, that is a deep aspect, an aspect of a deep English tradition. And once you see those correspondences, then heritage ceases to be triumphalist. It's about sharing. It's about 'well you have a stake in this as well'. And after a while, we abolish the terms 'you' and 'us'. Even in this interview, I was saying 'our'. Well, I like to go beyond that.