

BOOKS

Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture

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REVIEWED BY LAURAJANE SMITH

In 1994, the historian Raphael Samuel observed that, whatever doubts might exist about the notion of heritage in Europe—at the time, dire warnings were being aired about its potential for the most reactionary forms of conservatism¹—heritage was “one of the major aesthetic and social movements of our time” (1994, 25). He went on to note that we are living “in an expanding historical culture, in which the work of inquiry and retrieval is being progressively extended into all kinds of spheres that would have been thought unworthy of notice in the past[;]... whole new orders of documentation are coming into play” (1994, 25). Samuel went on to enumerate the range of ways heritage was being explored by the hitherto ignored “under-labourers” engaged in exploring the meaning of the past and in memory-keeping, in forms that range from family history to photography.

The new social media interfaces are combining with a surge of interest in heritage, and the development of new electronic ways of communicating, documenting, and remembering. *Heritage and Social Media* is an important book, which advances the digital heritage literature beyond the methodological discussions of how to archive the past—a theme that has tended to dominate this genre. As editor Elisa Giaccardi notes, the authors in this book set out to “crit-

ically address the profound and transformative impact of social media on our understanding and experience of heritage” (1). Debate and research in both museum and heritage studies are moving past essentialist ideas that heritage can be equated simply to objects and sites. The way ideas of heritage are constructed and used by a wide range of social actors to help mediate the meaning of the past for and in the present is an ongoing concern in much of the critical literature.² This book belongs within the context of this developing critical debate. The various chapters in this book identify new ways of understanding and doing heritage; they also illustrate that arguments by various commentators about the negotiated, communicative, and creative nature of heritage making are often actively facilitated by social media (Dicks 2000; Smith 2006; Byrne 2008; Macdonald 2013).

The book, and its discussions about the ways in which social media has affected the complexities of heritage discourse and practice, is framed by the idea of participatory culture—cultures of participation—as shaped by social media. Giaccardi defines participatory culture as “characterized by relatively low barriers to public artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others, and frameworks for formal and informal mentorship to novices” (3). As she notes, partici-

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patory cultures are not new. Historical societies, preservation societies, and literary societies are all examples of such cultures, although social media technologies allow for a much “broader and more profound phenomenon” (3). Thus, the core aim of the book is to explore “how experiences, memories and identities are constructed, valued and passed on in a society in which people come together to generate, organize and share content through an ongoing interchange of thoughts and affects, opinions and beliefs, attachments and antipathies” (6).

The book’s twelve chapters are divided into three sections or themes of four chapters each: social practice, public formation, and sense of place. The authors come from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, and use a range of contexts, including museums, to explore the interaction of social media and the cultural work that heritage does. Chapters focusing on the museum include an analysis of collaborative exhibition design and new technologies by Luigina Ciolfi; the *Digital Natives* exhibition, Aarhus Center for Contemporary Art, Denmark, 2010, by Iverson and Smith; the notion of the “media museum” and the use of new technologies within the museum environment, by Angelina Russo; and an examination of interactive museum guides, by Ron Wakkary, Audrey Desjardins, Kevin Muise, Karen Tanenbaum, and Marek Hatala.

The section on social practice explores the ways in which new media is facilitating community and other grassroots practices in curating and heritage making. Neil Silberman and Margaret Purser look at community-based heritage initiatives in a number of different contexts, while Sophie Liu examines the way the memory of the industrial disaster in Bhopal, India has been kept alive and continually renegotiated through various social media sites. Stacey Pitsillides, Janis Jefferies, and Martin Conreen, using the metaphor of the “museum of the self,”

explore what they see as the emerging curatorial dilemma caused by the accumulation of increasing amounts of digitalized data, which the authors refer to as “mass data.” Ciolfi, drawing on her experiences as an exhibition designer, explores the social nature of museums and the way this role can be facilitated through both new media and a commitment to participatory stakeholder engagement in design.

The social practice section also offers an exploration of what Robertson (2012) has called “heritage from below.” While some of the papers represent a hesitation with what that might mean—for instance, Pitsillides, Jefferies, and Conreen express a concern that “mass data” causes experts to feel their ontological certainties have been undermined—the section overall illustrates the power of social media “to stimulate unique, community-based reflection on past, present and future identities” (Silberman and Purser, 26). Moreover, the authors are not necessarily blinded by technology. Ciolfi stresses that these technologies are simply tools to achieve a range of aims, and “social media tools might not provide the right or sole solution for every design case” (85), or for every moment of heritage making.

The section on public formation examines the ways in which new media are supporting the formation of new publics and collectives. The section starts with a powerful paper by the late Roger Simon, who explores the way digital technologies provide spaces for diverse groups of people to “remember together” (89). Based on the idea that remembering is an ongoing mediated process, Simon explores how disparate groups and individuals may come together to remember historical events, and “how the past is made present in their lives” (104) through the cultural and social work of heritage, but also the ongoing development of social media. Dagny Stuedahl and Christina Mörtebeg examine the ways in which social media tools are related

to knowledge creation—in this case, how knowledge as intangible heritage associated with the craft work around wooden boat building is transferred—and the implications for its continuity. This chapter offers a warning about the need to utilize and understand social media as a tool, and to put thought and care into the selection of these tools so they support the aims of a particular project.

Also in the section on public formation, Ole Sejer Iversen and Rachel Charlotte Smith offer an analysis of the *Digital Natives* exhibition, which is described as a “research and exhibition experiment exploring the intersections of cultural heritage, participatory design and new interactive technologies” (130). *Digital Natives* concerned itself with “young people” immersed in digital culture; the aim of the exhibition was to “express their lives and cultures in a local museum setting” (130). The authors discuss how museum audiences engaged with the exhibition and actively co-created or created their own meanings. Angelina Russo’s chapter on the concept of the “media museum” continues the discussion about social media and the museum by offering a review of the ways social media technologies are increasingly being deployed in museum contexts; she also observes how social media can engage new audiences.

The final section looks at new ways of re-articulating a sense of place. Richard Coyne studies amateur digital photography and photo sharing, and how they are transforming people’s understanding of space, place, and heritage. Rather than being alarmed by this mass phenomena, as Pitsillides, Jefferies, and Conreen appear to be, Coyne looks at the multitudes of new meanings (as well as multiplying images and meanings) that can perpetuate and unsettle established narratives. Chris Speed offers a playful analysis of two case studies in which mobile social media (mobile phones) can

explore both place and objects. Speed uses the metaphor of ghosts and death to explore ideas of space and time. The ghost metaphor is perhaps inspired by one of the case studies that used “white ghost” objects—such as the dancing shoe on the book’s cover—to bring back memories of things lost or destroyed. Stickers, when scanned by smartphones, accessed recorded stories or reminiscences about the object. Smartphones, as Speed puts it, thus became “spirit guides” that allow new navigation and re-imagining of object and place, and the temporal contexts in which things are used and understood.

Continuing the section on sense of place, Nicola J. Bidwell and Heike Winschiers-Theophilus relate how Herero communities in Namibia, Southern Africa, used digital technologies to extend and record their knowledge practices. The authors offer a strong criticism of the ways in which technologies can constrain and limit knowledge production, and what may or may not be preserved. Bidwell and Winschiers-Theophilus echo the warnings in other chapters to think carefully about how technologies can frame and affect knowledge production, and the utility of certain technologies and social media tools for achieving the aim of any given heritage or museum project. The final chapter, by Wakkary, Desjardins, Muise, Tanenbaum, and Hatala, notes that museum visits are as social as they are entertaining or educational. Drawing on various examples, the chapter looks at the ways sociability is addressed using interactive museum guides. The chapter concludes that one of the key shifts brought about by interactive guides is that these systems tend to orient visitors to each other, and each other’s comments, rather than the more traditional orientation to the exhibition.

The book is topped and tailed by a foreword and afterword by Graham Fairclough and Peter Wright, respectively. Wright, a professor of

computing, makes an interesting observation when exploring the online debate around a YouTube video that contained an aspect of the United States's memorializing of the 10th anniversary of September 11. Underpinning Wright's comments is an assumption that heritage is naturally celebratory and will speak to consensus understandings of national identity. He ruminates over how an enactment of living heritage could be curated for future audiences. He wonders, should the dissenting comments be included with the celebratory? He notes that this is a relatively new problem for digital interaction designers, and possibly for museum curators as well. Of course, this is not a new problem, but one that cuts to the heart of what heritage is. The dissonant elements of the YouTube event he discusses are integral and vital aspects of all heritage. These comments recall the criticisms that Lowenthal (1985, 1996), Patrick Wright (1985) and Hewison (1987) have leveled at heritage as a way of engaging with the past that emphasizes consensus, positive emotions, and national celebration, and overlooks the insights offered by Samuel (1994), and many of the authors in this book: Inclusive heritage practices will inevitably engage dissonant responses, and will facilitate challenges to common ways of understanding. This useful and important book throws up a number of issues and insights that can cast new analytical light on the nature, practices, and consequences of heritage making. **END**

NOTES

1. See Lowenthal (1985; 1996), Wright (1985); Hewison (1987); among others.
2. For overviews see Smith (2012); Harrison (2013); Tunbridge et al. (2013); Kalela (2012); and critique by Witcomb and Buckley (2013).

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