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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

The Sociopolitical Shaping of Heritage Landscapes

Review by Caroline Murray

Critical Theory and the Anthropology of Heritage Landscapes

By Melissa F. Baird

University Press of Florida, 2017

Melissa Baird, assistant professor in Anthropology at Michigan Technological University, uses a comparative approach based on a variety of fieldworks and methods that focus on social, ecological and political impacts of resource extraction, especially in regards to Indigenous communities. In her first book *Critical Theory and the Anthropology of Heritage Landscapes* (2017) published by University Press of Florida, she offers surprising insights into the implications of cultural landscape as heritage.

Extractive activities in regions with significant heritage values seems to be globally on the rise. Anthropology defines heritage as a social construction in everyday practices. Baird explores how heritage is mobilized, for what purpose and acknowledges systems at play as well as the many relations and significations across time and space. She studies the heritage landscapes as sites of contestation in several contemporary contexts, including urban, post-colonial and Indigenous landscapes, wilderness areas, archaeological sites, marine environments, and temple complexes. According to Baird, heritage landscapes are scenes where issues of preservation are inserted in sociopolitical contexts.

Most analysis regarding heritage lack insights into local representations and social relations with regards to communities and their environment. The definition offered by the World Heritage Centre concerns natural values and land-use practices. This way of separating nature/culture is incorrect for communities that instead see a continuity. Therefore, heritage professionals ignore Indigenous systems of knowledge, and this underrepresentation can be seen in the colonial act of renaming. Baird argues

that the contested contexts and histories are not only presented as resolved or ignored, but they are also reinvented. She questions the meaning of progress itself and argues it brings land alienation, along with environmental impacts and community disruptions. Baird criticizes the models that prioritize biodiversity and sustainability at the expense of culture, thus placing management of landscapes within an environmental frame. This framework cannot adequately explore these tensions and intersections while at the same time accommodating Indigenous people's conception, meaning they provide only a fragmented and partial view (p.70). Her work is relevant since people are being displaced from their traditional lands as extensive capitalist extraction and natural disasters increase in front of nationalism, globalization, urbanization and economic development. Her position is that heritage is constructed through historical and cultural processes, transformed into resources and is entangled within sociopolitical dynamics.

To overcome the lack of theory and methodology in these debates, the author uses the emerging critical heritage theory (CHT). This comparative and multidisciplinary framework, based on postcolonial theory, includes insights from anthropology, indigenous, environmental, history, geography, cultural studies, public policy, rights, justice, ecology and theories of development. Connecting the sociopolitical contexts of heritage, its implications, contradictions and consequences, it investigates how knowledge and power intersect with actual practices. Thus, it can be used to address social, cultural and political dynamics and systems, along with a diversity of beliefs. As a larger hegemonic discourse that engages with issues of rights, neoliberalism, cosmopolitanism, identity and class, it focuses more on structures rather than individual motives (p.9). Baird's research includes a variety of case studies and methodologies, including ethnographic, archival, archaeological, participatory and historical work. Her choices put different fields at play and illustrate how heritage is intrinsically linked with relations of unequal powers. Her main fieldwork was conducted in Alaska, Mongolia and Australia from 2000-2016.

Drawing from her work on the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, she describes how policies work in ways that force communities to make claims within bureaucratic systems that are incompatible with their philosophy, custodial responsibilities, rules, knowledge and subsistence practices (p.16). The reconfiguration of the historical and social conditions redefined their relationship to the land as they were forced to adopt the Western land-use lifestyle. Some practices, such as burning and gathering, are seen in ecological terms and were used for commercial interests (p.34). Differences in worldviews

resulted in appropriation and misuse of Indigenous knowledge, relating back to colonial legacies and histories of dispossession that constrained their participation in heritage decisions in Australia. The state, which did not truly intend to protect, assigned values and meaning and restricted any other alternative perceptions.

Based on the examples of the oil spill at Prince William Sound in Alaska which disrupted communities' subsistence practices and caused a profound cultural loss (p.45), and the Mongolian Altai Mountains where pastures lost to wildfires, shrinking glaciers, declining water resources, smog masses and insect outbreaks are real (p.51), the author shows how landscape intersect and is central to contemporary debates on environmental issues. In these cases, cultural resources were not a top priority in recovery efforts, and the separation of cultural and natural resources did not provide space for discussions about the real political, economic and social implications that go beyond cultural history. By studying only archaeological and environmental data, contemporary representations are silenced (p.50), making it difficult to hear various, hybrid and contradictory meanings in areas of transformation, loss and renewal. In the end, communities were marginalized, and their subsequent struggles overshadowed in the rebuilding efforts.

Moreover, Baird calls "epistemologies of landscapes" the culture of expertise, and its multiple theories interfere with cultural heritage, preservation, and identities (p.14). Institutional and expert knowledge applied in developing World Heritage nominations affect communities, create inequalities and overstep how discourses are historically situated within a disparity of power. To validate social responsibility campaigns and their investment, extractive industries, mobilize the language of heritage, Indigenous rights and sustainability (p.89). Baird criticizes the strategies that corporations adopt for legitimization, away from social concerns. In other words, by cloaking a history of conflicts, human-rights violations and environmental impacts within a more acceptable story, "heritage is performed and industry is exempt from responsibility" (p.93).

Heritage landscapes are sites of ambiguous status, affecting how they are interpreted. How they are used to promote some values more than others reveal their significance in the industrial and globalisation contexts. In this sense, we must ensure far more equal management and sensitivity in determining importance, knowing that the lack of representation can transform into a lack of power. Unfortunately, the past is in service of geopolitical agendas, mediated within systems of exclusion

(p.96). In anthropology, it is then essential to locate the sociopolitical, cultural and historical dynamics and extend the understanding of where colonial structures remain in heritage landscape practices, but more importantly, how they are neutralized, regulated, reproduced and absorb change. In order to bring transparency and elucidate the actual contemporary tensions, it is a necessity to question the modalities that guide research and its writing.

After reading that book, one can only see that the models, theories and practices of heritage work through specific pre-existing systems and mechanisms that underlie sources of tensions, the creation of inequalities and construction of knowledge. Baird recommends that engagements with landscapes should include emancipatory discourse, providing room for controversial topics and multiple understandings (p.101). Personal experiences and stories related to her investigations and evolution of thought that are well connected and the well explained reasoning certainly make this book a pleasant read. Moreover, the force of her arguments derives from the relatively new and more than suitable theoretical framework as well as a great diversity of methodologies and multiple worldwide examples that support her explanations. Baird is very daring and raises fundamental questions about the ethics and objectivity - behind the scenes and in the open - of cultural landscape as heritage. Comparative and critical ethnographic approaches are efficient in understanding how strategies and practices are plotting heritage discourse. Within this framework stands a chance for all to apprehend the relationships between the past and the harsh contemporary socio-political realities.



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