



Heritage and the Existential Need for History

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Why do people compulsively collect, reexperience, visit, inscribe, amend, and recall the past? What does the past do for us in a straightforward and philosophical sense? To answer these questions, Maud Webster transports the reader across the various borders of heritage studies to observe the beauty in the intricacies of why humans must weave themselves a past and how essential it is to orient ourselves in the present. The author demonstrates the many ways the past, and our memories of it, ground us by situating us in a bigger picture of significance. *Heritage and the Existential Need for History* liberates the reader, for a time, from the disciplinary and institutional blinders of one's heritage specialization or the regulatory valuation of the past to refreshingly observe the natural compulsions behind engaging with the past. Through a variety of case studies in the Western world, Webster shows how myriad media and materials (e.g., oral stories, poems, song, art, images, rituals, artifacts, documents, monuments, memorials, tombs, and reenactments) are not just made by humans, but can be said to make us human.

In the first chapter, "On Being in Time: History, Death, Text," Webster begins by laying some conceptual groundwork, including the interactions between history, time, literacy, commemoration, and material agency. An important idea woven into the chapters is the contrast between memory and history. Memory is

selective, alterable, and elastic. History, by contrast, is fixed and is first recognized through some kind of separation or distance from a present that no longer participates in it in some fashion. What ends up becoming preserved as a record then serves to function as scaffolding for a particular group's interests. In discussing material agency, the author describes how material records take on a new life, growing with each generation's accreted commentary and evolving meaning, demanding more and more space and specialists to tend to it, while continuing to affect its readers and commentators with the pedigree of its ideas and the therapeutic act of its engagement.

Chapter 2, "Archaeological Cases: Blood from Stone," discusses the function of history as a tool for legitimization of authority and its sustainable role as a prop for advancing present-day narratives through the concepts of tomb tendance and *spoliation*. Tomb tendance concerns the use of the material remains of an ancestor to establish the livings' attachment to place. Two examples discussed concern the Greek Iron Age and the biblical Cave of Machpelah to illustrate how burial sites or tombs are used for land claims in rooting a people to the land as their possession and the right to a place. Webster also introduces the concept of *spolia*, the recycling of objects such as building materials that have lost their value from one context to another to symbolically break from one past and pragmatically recycle it to bolster claims for the new order of things. As examples Webster points to Roman sarcophagi, which are upcycled into goat water troughs in the Middle Ages,

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and imperial bath houses, which have been known to be later turned into cemeteries.

Chapter 3, “Historical Cases: Contextualizing the Self” explores how representations of the past take on a life of their own after leaving the hands of their creators. In one example, Webster demonstrates how the Jewish construction of the past is not dependent on a historical record but kept alive in memory and embodied through ritual experiences of the *mitzvot* (commandments) from male circumcision to annual holiday observances. The chapter offers profound insights into the ways that traditional Jewish love of study and interpretation is existential in nature. For instance, textual commentators harbor a deep desire that their delving into and contributing to the sea of texts can grant them a kind of immortality by their contribution to Jewish memory. Transitioning from this notion of embodied memory, this chapter also addresses period dramatization from early historical battlefield reenactments to present-day ones in the historical tourism industry, turning to the subjective notion of lineage as a form of self-identification with the past rather than a concern with historical accuracy.

For those working in the heritage industry and in academia, this text presents important concepts that are frequently taken for granted. A reader may find its oscillating presentation of concepts somewhat confusing to follow, since it is not arranged in a systematic and linear fashion. This structure can lead to some inconsistencies or unanswered applications in the author’s thought. For example, in chapter 3, while discussing the concept of nostalgia, periodization, and historical tourism, Webster appears to have an adverse reaction to how the artificial process of periodization leaves its visitors with misgivings for the present while yearning for an imagined past that never existed. This section of the text leaves the impression that the author finds the historical tourism industry’s garish manner of approaching the past as a

buffet for customers rather than accurate presentation. Maybe the author views periodization as a sort of *spoliation* of whole periods of the past to present-day peoples? But if not, it would have been a good opportunity for the author to contrast how these actions are really different from her prior examples on the subjective nature of memory. After all, are they not all subjectively imagined and embodied exercises in identifying with the past? One other minor critique I have of the book is that it is not research- or problem-oriented. It is a missed opportunity in that it does not attempt to apply these principles to present-day issues or make recommendations for further action.

Overall, this is an enjoyable book for musing about the philosophical underpinnings of heritage work. Readers with a literature background are bound to enjoy the author’s apt textual-based undercurrent. For those working in North American cultural resources management, who may rarely consider the role of intangible heritage in non-Indigenous contexts, the book’s plentiful examples from Old World and Western contexts may lead one to reconsider how these concepts may be applied with equal authority and insight in similar arenas in non-Indigenous North America. Historical and public archaeologists will benefit from this addition to their library for its reflections on the ways that managing heritage is not about dealing merely with history behind glass, but as something that is alive. Managing heritage is never an apolitical exercise, and this can have political repercussions on their stakeholders’ use of resources or affect their historicized claims to places.

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