

Public Interest Anthropology in Heritage Sites: Writing Culture and Righting Wrongs

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In an era of increasingly contentious identity politics and growing tensions over whose narrative should predominate at heritage sites, public interest anthropology offers a valuable approach for scholars engaged in heritage research. As the articles in this issue illustrate, not only does public interest anthropology offer more nuanced insights into the complex social dynamics surrounding these sites, but this more engaged approach also offers promise for finding the common ground necessary for constructive dialogue between the varied stakeholders and for ameliorating social inequalities at these heritage sites.

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Heritage whilst ostensibly about the past, is always about the future. About having a future and the recognition that those excluded or marginalized from this discourse are also being denied one.¹

As many scholars have recently observed,² interest in heritage has mushroomed over the past few decades. Refugees, labour migrants, international tourists and educational exchanges have become dominant motifs in the fabric of contemporary social life and with these global movements have come intensified passions for establishing a sense of belonging or ‘hereness’.³ Intrinsic to forging a sense of self-identity and belonging in this era of global flows and pastiches is the ‘production of locality’,⁴ a cornerstone of the heritage industry. As embodiments of narratives concerning belonging and ‘hereness’, heritage sites have become akin to ‘cathedrals of identity’⁵—centres of worship, pilgrimage, and self-exploration for diverse groups. Moreover, like many cathedrals, heritage sites are increasingly recognised as tourism assets capable of increasing local

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revenues. Accordingly, heritage sites are destined to be sites of controversy, as different groups embracing different narratives seek to assert symbolic (or economic) ownership of these sites. Herein lies the conundrum of heritage sites for anthropologists and others employed by or engaged in research at heritage sites. Our traditional task as chroniclers of culture makes us inadvertent ‘amplifiers of identity’,⁶ for our writings challenging or reifying particular narratives associated with these sites have the potential to be read not only by local stakeholders but also by visiting tourists and representatives from granting agencies involved with these sites. How do we situate ourselves in these frequently contentious sites? How does awareness of the potentially political nature of our academic writing inform what we do? What role, if any, are we to play in the articulation and negotiation of various stakeholders’ claims surrounding heritage sites?

The articles in this volume vividly depict how public interest anthropology can offer a valuable approach for scholars engaged in research at heritage sites. As Peggy Reeves Sanday has outlined,⁷ public interest anthropology entails the marriage of problem solving with theory development. Foremost values in public interest anthropology are the ‘commitment to social justice, racial harmony, equality, human rights and well-being’⁸ and a dedication to making our anthropological analyses available to multiple publics. In tandem with these concerns, public interest anthropology prompts researchers to expand beyond theory building to consider the social impact of our work. These orientations characterise this assemblage of papers and offer promise for a new, more socially responsible approach to heritage studies.

As Sanday and others have noted, public interest anthropology’s orientations towards action and social justice have a long legacy in anthropology, dating back to Franz Boas’s celebrated use of his research to combat racism.⁹ However, in the 1960s until the early to mid-1980s, the Boasian ideals of socially engaged research took a back seat to ‘academic detachment’¹⁰ and a romance with theory building for theory’s sake. Perhaps not surprisingly, the academic study of tourism and heritage sites was born in the 1970s period of scholarly detachment, with the publication of now-classic volumes by Dean MacCannell and Nelson Graburn,¹¹ among others. Traditionally, much of this classic tourism research, though not all, tended to be oriented either towards theory building and the narrow audience of the academic world, or towards more purely applied aims—evaluating the impact of foreign guests on indigenous hosts, examining heritage tourism as a possible passport to development, or writing strategies to preserve ‘indigenous ways of life’ in the onslaught of golden tourist hordes. What is exciting about this assemblage of articles is that, taken together, the cases described in the pages of this journal issue go beyond this bifurcated world and advance a vision for how researchers in heritage sites might draw on their theoretical insights and become more socially accountable.

A particular contribution of these articles is their attentiveness to the multiple and often conflicting meanings of heritage spaces (and in some cases objects). An appreciation of the plurality of visions tied to heritage spaces is essential if we are to contribute insights that will aid in resolving conflicts. For instance, Levine, Britt and Delle offer a fascinating examination of how a Lancaster Underground Railroad site is

conceptualised and objectified by different community groups with competing visions of its significance. Likewise, Elizabeth Greenspan examines on-site memorialisations at the World Trade Center site to illustrate the multiple (local, national and global) perceptions of that space and its significance. The other papers in this issue are similarly attentive to the competing visions and struggles surrounding heritage spaces. Taken together, these articles further our appreciation of the complicated, multivalent meanings and identities that are articulated, performed and counter-posed in heritage sites.¹²

Moreover, these papers generally go beyond simply chronicling the contested social meanings of heritage spaces to map out the regimes of power connected to these heritage sites. In so doing, they direct our attention to the underlying inequities in the control of heritage spaces and the resources connected with them. For instance, Cathy Stanton spotlights the unintended hierarchical patterns embodied in a Lowell foodways demonstration, where we find left-leaning heritage professionals staging a Southeast Asian cooking demonstration, thereby domesticating and trivialising cultural differences rather than meeting with them on equal ground. Stanton's spotlighting of how anthropological inquiry can be engaged in 'opening up ... shared discontent and capital[ising] on the latent potential for positive social change' is particularly salient. Having conducted research on the Indonesian island of Alor, site of anthropologist Cora DuBois's celebrated book *The People of Alor*, I have been struck by the ways in which the writings of anthropologists can amplify particular sites and particular images of identity, inadvertently fuelling local inequities.¹³ DuBois's widely read 1944 book projected an intriguing image of one Alorese ethnic group (Atimelangers) round the globe, and as a result her research village has been sporadically targeted by adventure tour groups, prompting bitter local resentments over the financial benefits DuBois's village has received. When I arrived on the island, representatives of various ethnic groups approached me to write a book about them, so that they, too, could become famous enough to be sought out by deep-pocketed adventure tourists. At the time, the situation seemed so fraught with ethical dilemmas that I ended up remaining in the main town of Kalabahi, avoiding focusing on any one group or region. But since that moment of deeply troubling awareness of anthropologists' complicity in the commodification process, I have reflected on avenues for fostering broader community dialogues on Alor concerning how best to engage in socially responsible representation of their identities. In short, we need to more carefully and systematically address our role in the amplification and commodification of particular groups' identities, homelands and products if we are earnestly to devote ourselves to public interest anthropology. Moreover, we need to be mindful of how we, too, are situated in the hierarchies of power at these sites. As Elizabeth Greenspan observes in her article on the constructed spaces of memory at the World Trade Center site, a public interest approach can further enrich studies of global heritage by prompting researchers to consider the ramifications of their work and critiques, as well as the analytical categories employed.

Whereas the Stanton case spotlights a situation in which outsiders have pre-eminence in heritage productions and imagery, Lisa Breglia evocatively chronicles the

dynastic history of Maya caretakers of Chichén Itzá and illustrates how a few privileged Maya families have benefited while other Maya families at the site have been excluded from the spoils of the heritage industry. Breglia's observation that we need to attend more carefully to labourers at heritage sites, and to the dynamics between local residents, is particularly salient and brings to mind Chambers's¹⁴ early call for us to recognise indigenous pluralism and the range of ideological positions within local communities. Breglia's observations reverberated with my own fieldwork experiences in Tana Toraja, Indonesia, where aristocratic families residing in heavily visited villages received government stipends to collect visitor fees and shepherd independent tourists, while the descendants of slaves in these villages generally performed more menial clean-up work at a fraction of the pay. Breglia's ethnographic portrayal also offers a thought-provoking elaboration on Pierre van den Berghe's¹⁵ observation that tourism is always superimposed on indigenous rank, class and ethnic relations and that it is not always the state or big business that frames the distribution of heritage-related resources. As Breglia suggests, outsiders are not always the exclusive commodifiers and interpreters of heritage sites. (Indeed, it was the elites at my Toraja field site who advanced a successful campaign to secure their natal village with candidacy as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.) In short, Breglia's nuanced examination of the local community politics at Chichén Itzá demonstrates the value of micro-analyses of heritage sites for shedding light on local inequalities. This is an important first step towards conceptualising ways in which local stakeholders can find more equal footing.

But, ideally, public interest anthropology goes beyond simply giving voice to minorities and mapping out competing regimes of power at heritage sites, as these articles suggest. Public interest anthropology advocates actively contributing to the promotion of equality, social justice, and conflict resolution at these sites. Interestingly, over the past two decades, archaeologists and museum anthropologists have tended to be more active in this regard. Museum anthropologists may have been prompted to do so earlier because they are more accessible to public scrutiny and generally rely on public support for their continued existence. In essence, museum curators and museum anthropologists have been forced to grapple with the ways in which their representations of group and local heritage articulate with the sensibilities of various communities.¹⁶ Archaeologists, although not traditionally schooled in strategies for interacting with local living communities, have experienced a certain parallel degree of public scrutiny and pressures for accountability, particularly with the post-American Indian Movement era demands for repatriation of heritage goods and with the institution of NAGPRA. In contrast, most cultural anthropologists who received their graduate school training prior to the mid-1980s exposés of colonial, post-colonial and gendered biases in ethnographic representations,¹⁷ were urged by their teachers to adopt the identity of 'professional strangers' at their sites, and even to be wary of the potential ethical pitfalls of active engagement. However, the 1980s post-modern and feminist critiques challenged the viability and legitimacy of the classically prescribed ethnographic stance of disengaged observation and analysis, paving the way for the rise of new variations of Boasian engaged social research in cultural anthropology.

The cases in this issue, authored both by cultural anthropologists and archaeologists, chart and chronicle innovative strategies for fostering discourses between various publics and stakeholders at heritage sites. For instance, Levine, Britt and Delle discuss the community outreach they offered in Lancaster schools. These sessions not only educated locals about the significance of the Thaddeus Stevens and Lydia Hamilton Smith site, but they also provided forums for dialogue between local community members and student archaeologists from local colleges. And in her article on tensions surrounding a foodways demonstration at a US industrial heritage site, Stanton proposes more active styles of engagement for cultural anthropologists, styles that include organising conferences that bring all parties to the table, publishing to broader audiences, and so forth. These sorts of engaged and accountable stances are akin to the 'curator as canary' role that was advocated quite some time ago by William Burns and more recently re-invoked by Michael Ames. Both Burns and Ames envisaged new, more socially responsible roles for museum professionals, roles wherein curators would be analogous to the canaries carried by underground miners to warn them of potentially deadly gases. Anthropologists working at heritage sites can play similar canary roles, proclaiming the presence of dynamics and perspectives normally invisible to the dominant groups engaged in creating narratives at these sites.

To conclude, these articles fruitfully advance our thinking about what is entailed in a public interest approach to heritage sites. As tourism projects and heritage sites mushroom around the globe, anthropologists have the potential to play key roles in understanding and ameliorating some of the more troubling dynamics of tourism. Their critical perspective and awareness of power issues enables them to serve as constructive voices in tourism-related heritage projects in our field communities, as does their community-oriented, diversity-attentive approach.¹⁸ As outsiders, anthropologists are also in a position to address externally imposed stereotypes of the peoples with whom we work, as long as we are reflective and responsible about ethical issues and our roles as identity amplifiers. These articles are excellent testimony to the value of embracing a public interest approach.

Notes

- [1] Rowlands, 'Heritage and Cultural Property', 113.
- [2] See, for example, Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*; Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*; and Rowlands, 'Heritage and Cultural Property'.
- [3] See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*.
- [4] See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; and Rowlands, 'Heritage and Cultural Property', 105.
- [5] Elsewhere I have made the argument that museums, as sites for the display of heritage, are akin to 'cathedrals of identity' (see Adams, 'Museum/City/Nation').
- [6] See Adams, 'Generating Theory, Tourism and "World Heritage" in Indonesia'.
- [7] See Sanday, 'Public Interest Anthropology'.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 1.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 2; Stocking, *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic*. Boas', *Race, Language and Culture*, exemplifies this work.
- [10] See Sanday, 'Public Interest Anthropology', 4.
- [11] MacCannell, *The Tourist*; Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*.

- [12] In this sense these papers are in the same vein as several recent studies undertaken at heritage venues. See, for instance, Bender's *Stonehenge*, as well as Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*.
- [13] DuBois, *The People of Alor*. See Adams, 'Generating Theory, Tourism and "World Heritage" in Indonesia'.
- [14] See Chambers, *Rural Development*.
- [15] See van den Berghe, 'Tourism as Ethnic Relations'.
- [16] For examples of the challenges and rewards of a public interest approach to designing museum exhibits, see Day, 'Aztec'; Dunstan, 'Fostering Symbiosis'; Kahn, 'Not Really Pacific Voices'; and Nason and Wright, 'Sharing Heritage'.
- [17] See Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*; Marcus and Clifford, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*; and Wolf, *A Thrice-told Tale*.
- [18] See Errington and Gewertz, 'Tourism and Anthropology in a Post-modern World'.

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