

***Uses of Heritage.* Laurajane Smith. London: Routledge, 2006. 351 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Burt Feintuch

In a recent review in *The New Yorker*, Joan Acocella characterizes the academic use of the term *discourse*. “In the postmodern vocabulary,” she writes, “this means the web of assumptions that collect around a cultural fact, with heavy emphasis on notions that have been unmasked as naïve and ridiculous by French theorists. The names of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard come up frequently. . .” (2007). *Uses of Heritage* is largely about heritage as discourse. More specifically, *Uses* is about discourses that contrast or conflict, all of them with heritage as their subjects. Heritage, then, Laurajane Smith would maintain, is a social construction. And the particular portion of society that does the constructing is the key to understanding heritage and its uses.

From the start, there is the AHD, the “authorized heritage discourse.” This, Smith says, “takes its cue from the grand narratives of Western national and elite class experiences, and reinforces the idea of innate cultural value tied to time depth, monumentality, expert knowledge and aesthetics” (p. 299). If that seems a portrait in very broad brushstrokes, Smith also assures us that in practice the AHD embodies more subtle differentiations and disagreements, and is more subject to change than her general characterization initially appears to allow. But more important is that the AHD has palpable qualities and outcomes. First, it has power. Some of that comes from its close connections to international and national organizations such as UNESCO or English Heritage. Some of it derives from material realities—it is often the privileged and their comparatively well-endowed institutions, she writes, who endorse and promulgate the official story.

That power has its consequences. Heritage is a kind of social process, and it does what Smith terms “cultural work.” That is, with the advantages that power provides, the AHD serves to establish what counts as heritage, what its value is, where resources should go, and what cultural identities matter in the context of particular times and places. In Smith’s model, the authorized heritage discourse is one of the primary, if not *the* primary, ways in which heritage is constituted. The discourse, Smith argues, creates heritage; heritage is not something that exists in the world awaiting discovery. All this means that “heritage is a culturally directed process of intense emotional power [that is] both a personal and social act of making sense of, and understanding, the past and the present” (p. 304). And it also implies that despite the increasingly common distinctions we find in heritage industries between tangible and intangible heritage, in an epistemological sense, all heritage is intangible. The tree falling in the forest, this analysis suggests, makes no sound without someone there to hear it.

Smith lays out this model in two chapters—one based in discourse analysis, the other on heritage as cultural practice—both under the broad rubric of “the idea of heritage.” Then she examines various institutions that embody the AHD. One chapter discusses official instruments and institutions such as UNESCO’s *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, adopted in 1972, and more recent UNESCO work on intangible cultural

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heritage. These are among the “authorizers” in the authorized heritage discourse. Then, under the rubric “authorized heritage,” she moves to two kinds of official heritage sites—English country houses and Australia’s Riversleigh, a series of densely packed fossil fields designated a World Heritage Site under the UNESCO convention. The country house chapter is rich, because it includes a close examination of visitors’ understanding of their experience and the ways in which they make meaning during their times on site. “It is a truth universally acknowledged,” Smith writes, tongue-in-cheek, “that a country house not in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a heritage tourist” (p. 115). Her survey data—showing visitor demographics and ways in which visitors construe their visits—add very useful flesh and bones to a generally abstract argument.

If something is authorized, backlash is nearly inevitable. Contested heritages, dissonant discourses, and other power struggles figure in the balance of the book’s three chapters under the heading “Responses to Authorized Heritage.” One chapter is a close examination of museums of labor heritage, including the influential Beamish (The North of England Industrial Museum). Another looks at the English town of Castleford, a deindustrialized community in Yorkshire. The author writes that Castleford lost its way, in terms of community cohesion and pride, in the wake of the bitter mining strike of the mid-1980s. Heritage, she says, is now being used to redefine and re-engage a sense of social ties and connection to place. The two chapters, like the country house chapter, are fleshed out by survey data. Finally, a chapter takes on the subject of indigenous people and the fraught question of who controls heritage, and how. This is a very important subject, one that is being argued out in many forums, from the intergovernmental to the local.

Uses of Heritage is a dense book, closely argued and wide-ranging in its concerns. As a reader, I found that it opened provocative questions. I also finished it with some ambivalence. The author’s dense prose is likely to make the book less useful than it might be; if it asks important questions for people in the field, perhaps many readers who are in the trenches of heritage work will find the thickness of its prose uninviting. Readers who know contemporary cultural criticism may find that the notion of heritage as discourse is not all that surprising. A great deal of contemporary scholarship tells us that culture constitutes, and the concepts of discourse and social construction are quite common these days. So, while the details are very useful, the analytical framework feels familiar. But it is unequivocally important that the author reminds us that heritage is made, not found; that it is intimately tied up in relations of power; and that for many people, it matters. Among the book’s many other strengths are its historical examination of the development of the idea of heritage, especially in official settings, and the flesh and blood of its survey information. I was disappointed that, discourse and abstract thought aside, this paperback book had a real weakness; its spine broke before I’d managed to read it to the end.

Reference Cited

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