



Aníbal Arregui, Gesa Mackenthun,  
Stephanie Wodianka (eds.)

# DEcolonial Heritage

Natures, Cultures, and the  
Asymmetries of Memory

# Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship

Edited by  
Gesa Mackenthun

Volume 10

This series seeks to stimulate fresh and critical perspectives on the interpretation of phenomena of cultural contact in both transhistorical and transdisciplinary ways. It brings together the research results of the graduate school “Cultural Encounters and the Discourses of Scholarship,” located at Rostock University and sponsored by the German Research Foundation (DFG). One of the concerns of the volumes published in this series is to test and explore contemporary theoretical concepts and analytical tools used for the study of intercultural relations, from antiquity to the present. Aware of significant recent changes in the ways in which other cultures are represented, and “culture” as such is defined and described, the series seeks to promote a dialogical over a monological theoretical paradigm and advocates approaches to the study of cultural alterity that are conscious of the representational character of our knowledge about other cultures. It wants to strengthen a recognition of the interdependencies between the production of knowledge about unfamiliar peoples and societies in various scholarly disciplines and ideologies of nationality, empire, and globalization. In critically investigating the analytical potential of postcolonial key terms such as “hybridity,” “contact zone,” and “transculturation,” the series contributes to international scholarly debates in various fields oriented at finding more balanced and reciprocal ways of studying and writing about intercultural relations both past and present.

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With the editorial assistance of Lisann Wassermann

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## Natures, Cultures, and the Asymmetries of Memory



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## INTRODUCTION

# **DEcolonial Heritage. Natures, Cultures, and the Asymmetries of Memory**

ANÍBAL ARREGUI, GESA MACKENTHUN,  
STEPHANIE WODIANKA

The idea for this volume, and the conference on which it is based, was triggered by an event that is a perfect illustration of the triangulation of decolonial politics, environmental protection, and ongoing discussions about World Heritage. In 2007 the state of Ecuador decided to resist the extraction of oil from underneath an UNESCO biosphere reservoir, the Yasuní National Park, and made an unconventional offer to appease the ecological concerns this project raised all around the world: President Correa promised to retain the national park, including its fauna, flora and human cultures, in its current state provided the world community would recompense this ‘service’ to World Heritage by transferring to Ecuador the sum of 3.6 billion US Dollars. In 2013, President Correa alleged to have to give up on this unprecedented plan to save the Yasuní Park because only few nations had contributed to the fund (Vogt, “Grünes Licht”; Acosta, “Erdöl oder Leben”).<sup>1</sup>

The photo on the cover of this volume (see Fig. 3 on p. 214), shot by our contributor Jürgen Vogt, shows an ancient plug or stopper on top of an oil drill left over from previous, smaller scale extractions in the Yasuní Park, which Texaco and other multinational companies had been undertaking since the 1960s. The “pupa” (puppet), as the local population sometimes calls it, stands in the rainforest like one of those ancient pagan stone monuments that fill the pages of colonial travelogues (Fig. 1), or like a Pacific Coast totem pole confronting European visitors with unfamiliar mythologies and heritages (Fig. 2). The pupa reminds us of the ongoing history of resource exploitation that has characterized the relations between the so-called First and Third World. Yet the recent conflict about leaving the oil in the ground and thus salvaging the area for the sake of global natural heritage indicates a change in these relations: it indicates a new political reaction on the part of self-confident indigenous and local governments who take the metropolitan ‘center’ by its word, asking what it values more: World Heritage or cheap energy?

1 Germany, in spite of its ‘green’ reputation, was not among the significant donors.



Fig. 1: Stele at Copán, Honduras. Lithograph by Frederick Catherwood. Source: Fabio Bourbon, *The Lost Cities of the Mayas. The life, art, and discoveries of Frederick Catherwood*. New York/London: Abbeville Press, 2000.



Fig. 2: Kicksetti Totem and Sun House, Wrangell, Alaska. Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome (1853–1936). Source: Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Color\\_post\\_card\\_Kicksetti\\_Totem\\_and\\_Sun\\_House,\\_Wrangell,\\_Alaska.\\_-\\_NARA\\_-\\_297730.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Color_post_card_Kicksetti_Totem_and_Sun_House,_Wrangell,_Alaska._-_NARA_-_297730.jpg)

The conservation of the Yasuní Park is an example that confronts us with a key problematic of this volume: how to reassess the topic of cultural and natural heritage from a decolonial perspective?<sup>2</sup> As a number of important scholarly works have shown in the last decades, the decolonial project must not only address how ‘third-world’ cultures and societies are still being exploited, but also how their very ‘ecologies’ – and note here the plural – are being penetrated by a hegemonizing ‘Western’ nature in both ideological and material senses (see Escobar; Hornborg; Descola; Latour). If, since the 1960s, postmodernism and poststructur-

2 We prefer ‘decolonial’ to ‘postcolonial’ because the term (which originates from a Latin American response to postcolonial theory) is less burdened by some of the connotations sticking to ‘postcolonial’, among them a misreading of ‘post’ as ‘after’ and a neglect of indigenous and sedentary subject positions, combined with a celebratory attitude toward geographical mobility. But of course, ‘decolonial’, with its emphasis on the need to decolonize knowledge, has its problems, too. See the introduction to Beer/Mackenthun, *Fugitive Knowledge*.



alism destabilized and pluralized concepts such as ‘civilization’, ‘rationality’ and ‘culture’, they needed the addition of a postcolonial critical perspective to lay the theoretical foundations for the associated projects of, first, intellectual decolonization which critiques, among other things, the Western exclusiveness of definitions of history, heritage, and knowledge. Secondly, this convergence of three inter-related intellectual movements also set the base for the more recent ecocritical, posthumanist, and new materialist approaches that question the categorical divide between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, subject and object, and structure and agency.

This volume, whose contributors are hailing from a wide range of disciplines, seeks to enrich these critical perspectives by adding that of the politics and poetics of ‘heritage’. It aims at providing some examples of the ways in which changing conceptualizations of nature and culture intermingle in the making and commemorating of human history. More specifically, the main endeavor is to provide some particular accounts of how precisely the complex confluence of the natural and the cultural domains in the production of World Heritage sets the basis for political asymmetries. Does World Heritage continue the process of Western domination? What precisely is being preserved when we speak about the Yasuní Park in Ecuador (see the essay by Jürgen Vogt in this volume)? Or about the ‘pristine’ Amazonian forest? Are we referring to the cultural ‘purity’ of the Waorani indigenous society that dwells in this region? Or is preserving the Yasuní Park an attack against the economic prosperity of Ecuador? Does not the demand that President Correa desist from exploiting the energy resources of his country risk a setback of Ecuador’s economic and political autonomy? What is then more ‘decolonial’, to preserve or to mine the natural wealth of Yasuní Park? The tension we address here is that of whether a stance that promotes the preservation of ecological and cultural heritage in a developing country can avoid coming into conflict with that country’s demand for political and economic independence. Does an ecologically sensitive attitude to natural heritage necessarily compromise the similarly important project of decolonization? The answers to these questions are quite complex and probably depend on the scale of the analysis – regional vs. global, economic vs. ecological, short term benefits vs. long term prosperity, and so on. Far from offering a definitive response to these critical questions, we are content to show, through our contributors’ particular prisms, how scholarship nowadays makes an effort to integrate scales and concepts of analysis across disciplines as part of a common effort to decolonize their own knowledge. Historical memory is a part of such knowledge, and so is heritage – an institutionalized manifestation of what shapes collective memory politically and culturally. Accordingly, we would like to regard the contributions to this volume as provocations for a more ‘symmetrical’ intellectual (and political) attitude toward preservation practices, in the sense that these practices involve local ecologies (natures), heritage sites (cultures), and the entangled way in which they shape collective memory. To bring *decolonial* ways of thinking about heritage into a conversation with *ecological* approaches to heritage is one of the aims of this volume.

## Heritage in the Age of Geographical and Cultural Mobility

A seminal inspiration for this volume has been the work of David Lowenthal, eminent scholar of heritage politics who also edited the work of America's foremost defender of nature, George Perkins Marsh (Lowenthal, *Heritage Crusade*; Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh*; Lowenthal, ed., *Man and Nature*). Throughout his work, Lowenthal argues that natural and cultural heritage are in fact intimately intertwined. Historically, the awareness of the need to protect the natural environment (which Lowenthal dates, for America, to the work of George Perkins Marsh and which is also at the heart of the writings of Thoreau in the 1850s) followed on the heels of the new nation states' self-inventions in genealogies dating back to Antiquity. Since then, Lowenthal argues, the lobby groups defending cultural and natural heritage have somewhat grown apart ("Natural and Cultural Heritage" 86). While culture is predominantly protected for aesthetic reasons, that of nature follows a seemingly rational impulse to ensure the future survival of our species (87). What unites these two movements for conservation – of artifacts, of plants and animals – is a strong emotional impulse. But while this impulse is in one case directed at ensuring permanence, in the other case it is ready to accept change and adaptation (88). It is at any rate becoming increasingly futile to try to separate ecological from cultural stewardship; in fact, it often requires experts from both sides to try to solve conflicts arising from the rivalry between them, as when human settlements are endangered by the attempt to save the habitat of endangered animal species.<sup>3</sup>

Some time ago, the *New York Times* reported about a group of Iraqi refugees visiting the Pergamon Museum in Berlin to be introduced to Germany's cultural heritage – only to find out that the monuments forming part of Germany's 'heritage', such as the Babylonian Ishtar gate, stem from their own country (Donadio). The case illustrates the vicious ambivalence of the repatriation debate: in the light of the recent and ongoing lootings in the war-torn Middle East, even the Iraqi migrants admit that the ancient monument is better off in Berlin. In a mobilized world, they traveled hundreds of miles to escape war and persecution, to arrive unexpectedly at a place which releases strong emotional reactions in them: "Some people want to cry," the museum guide says, "When they see the colors and the shapes, they get chills" (Donadio). Thus the 'stolen' property, as it may be regarded in spite of having been removed in agreement with the Ottoman Empire, can now become a cultural-affective "bridge for immigrants." In spite of its colonial past, it can have a psychological healing effect on the deracinated refugees.

3 These discussions have also entered the literary field, a fact that increases their global circulation. For example, Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2005) dramatizes such a conflict, based on a real case in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh, about habitat: between humans fighting for the preservation of their ancestral territory and an international scheme for protecting tigers confronted with extinction.

Emotional attachment to heritage is often seen as a result of global migration and a growing number of people's experience of exile. Edward Said writes of the fate of the exile that he/she has to inhabit a world "on a constantly shifting ground, where relationships are not inherited, but created. Where there is no solidity of home" ("My Right of Return" 457–58). Said's assessment of modernity's mobility is ambivalent. He is aware of the "predicaments that disfigure modernity – mass deportation, imprisonment, population transfer, collective dispossession, and forced immigration" (*Culture and Imperialism* 403). But he also identifies mobility and exile as driving forces of intellectual life. What's important is his differentiation between social relationships as being inherited (in a pre-modern world) and as having to be created in a globalized world. Cultural heritage offers islands of solidity and groundedness in an increasingly "liquid" cultural universe (Bauman), and in doing so it responds to an emotional need felt by refugees like the Iraqis in the example but also by all those other people who are being confronted with the many forms of displacement caused by the late capitalist economy. Within modernity's structure of feeling, heritage culture fills an emotional gap produced by individual and collective experiences of deracination and alienation. This, we suggest, in part explains its incredible cultural power.

Such attempts at explaining the heritage hype are far from new. Heritage historians David Lowenthal and Marcus Binney already reflected on the reasons for the triumphal march of the UNESCO Heritage program round the globe at the time when it had only just begun. In their early study *Our Past Before us. Why do we Save it?* (1981) they write:

The pace of technological change, the radical modernization of the built environment, the speed of material obsolescence, an increasing propensity to migrate to new homes, and greater longevity combine to leave us in ever less familiar environments; we are remote even from our own recently remembered past. In a world grown so strange, we hunger for the sense of permanence that tangible relics can best provide. Prevailing doubts – disaffection with modern structures, pessimism about the future – add fuel to nostalgia for the past. (19)

Back in 1981, the collective pronoun "we" predominantly referred to white Westerners. Thirty years later, migrancy in search of life, work, and an escape from the effects of climate change has become a global phenomenon. Increasingly, unlike in the 1980s when we could observe the first consequences of a massive and ongoing rural depopulation (*Landflucht*), economic and political pressures drive more and more people away from their areas of origin.

Writing again on this topic in 2005, David Lowenthal suggests that the deracination from familiar areas of childhood memories contributes significantly to the influx in heritage sites:

Because the loss of habitual environments and traditional milieus threatens our very sense of being, we treasure their surviving vestiges all the more. A deeply felt need for tangible relics of both nature and culture fuels crusades to protect and conserve them. (82)

The Iraqi immigrants' response to the Ishtar gate in Berlin's Pergamon museum, mentioned above, is a telling example of this migration-caused nostalgia for lost cultural and natural environments. Lowenthal's emphasis on tangibility seems important here; we less frequently learn of intangible things, such as sacred or literary texts, to fulfill this function, although in many cases they do provide an intellectual and emotional 'home', as George Steiner has powerfully argued in his essay "Our Homeland, the Text" (1967) and as Salman Rushdie has argued in "Imaginary Homelands" (1982).

The growing popularity of historical sites, interactive museums, theatrical reenactments and heritage websites testifies to a strong psychological need for the tangible experience of things and landscapes reminiscent of childhood homes and familiar story traditions. "Nostalgia," writes Lowenthal in his recently republished masterwork *The Past is a Foreign Country*, "transcends yearnings for lost childhoods and sciences of early life, embracing imagined pasts never experienced. From an often fatal ailment nostalgia became a benign and even healing response to dislocation, absence, and loss" (15–16). If a capitalist flip side of this emotional need is a growing market for retro products, a political flip side is its availability for rightwing nationalism promoting a "halcyon past" of "sunlit fields [...] settled by peoples united by ethnicity or religion," elegantly analyzed by the UN High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein: a statement that received the expected slander in rightwing 'social' media.<sup>4</sup>

While the centrality of migration experiences for understanding the contemporary heritage hype already indicates a need to discuss heritage in the context of cultural encounters, frequent conflicts about the possession and access to heritage sites makes such an approach mandatory. The main reason for this is that the history of World Heritage is deeply implicated in the colonial history of western nations since the nineteenth century where it keeps fulfilling an ideological and sometimes even a territorial function. In this sense, the history of archaeology, the science traditionally dedicated to the salvage and conservation of heritage sites, is also a long history of acquiring cultural treasures in foreign lands in order to collect and exhibit them in the museums of Western nations (Díaz-Andreu; Aguirre). This is why presently there are discussions about repatriating many of these treasures – from human remains and moveable sacred artifacts to massive structures much more difficult to move and to return. The recent skirmish between Jordan and Israel about the national belonging of the site of the baptism of Jesus

4 See Hussein's speech attacking the 'bonding of demagogues' including Geert Wilders, Donald Trump and Nigel Farage on 6 September, 2016. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54862#.WGPw5EYzX3g> (accessed 28 December 2016).

is another case in point. In 2015, the UNESCO designated Al-Maghdas on the Jordanian bank as the authentic World Heritage site, “believing” it to be the correct site because this was the view of the Christian church (Laub/McNeil). Elsewhere, ideological wars about access and stewardship of sacred sites have been waged between economic interests and indigenous groups in the media and in court rooms (Carmichael et al.).

Thus, heritage is an ambivalent and embattled ground not just for exiles driven by nostalgic longing for preserving a piece from their past but also for those who remain in their areas of origin and who see their homes encroached by economic ventures clad in the rhetoric of modernization. In both cases, heritage conflict reflects the centrality of human beings’ particular emotions and attachments to place. This may seem obvious, but paradoxically individual and collective needs, and the particular interests of humans, have not always been in the focus of heritage politics – UNESCO being a program primarily oriented at abstract national concerns. However, as the entanglement of heritage with human rights is being more recently understood, the interests of people in their affective relationship to cultural and natural heritage sites is becoming more and more visible.

Especially since the beginnings of the UNESCO World Heritage programs, cultural heritage has experienced a veritable boom of conservation and at times commodification. The Italian intellectual Marco d’Eramo complained about the “murderous” effects of heritagization on Italian cities. The old parts of UNESCO-ennobled villages and cities, he writes, are deprived of all marks of modernity such as shops (except for souvenir shops where ‘historical’ items are being marketed). As a consequence, they are also deprived of inhabitants who do not want to live in a museum. The brand name “UNESCO World Heritage,” so d’Eramo, exclusively serves the interests of the tourist infrastructure while the villages have lost their human face. Everywhere heritage is turned into theme parks with their inevitable commodification industry, while people disappear from those areas marked off as heritage sites. D’Eramo suggests the neologism “Unescocide” to capture this development.

The downplaying of current forms of human life and cultural expression caused by the foregrounding of an idealized past is a common problem for the politics of both urban sites and ‘natural’ heritage. Writing on the politics of national parks on different continents, Guillaume Blanc speaks of them as “territories of violence” due to the eviction and dispossession of their former inhabitants. As Blanc shows with reference to the ghost towns in the Cevennes, and as Camila del Mármol and Ferran Estrada also show in this volume, there is a certain ghostliness about many heritage sites. As with people, it seems, a heritage site, according to the traditional understanding, has to be dead in order to become embalmed in the global pantheon. The temporality of such cultural heritage sites is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of what he calls “castle time.” Bakhtin traces the origin of this particular chronotope to the beginnings of gothic literature and the historical novel in which the castle features as an imaginary place

“saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past” (245–46). The castles of these literary texts have their origins in the distant past; they have an “antiquated, museum-like character.” The “historical intensity” of Bakhtin’s castle time is also felt at heritage sites devoid of life, frozen in a particular historical moment, yet haunted by a condensation of mnemonic energy.

## Heritage Time and the Coloniality of Heritage

The instantiation of an ideal past can be observed from at least two well differentiated periods, and therefore from at least two historical ‘presents’. The first one is the period to which Bakhtin refers in his comment on the invention of castle time. It happens to be the period of emerging nation states in Europe and in America and of the beginnings of archaeological expeditions to Italy, Greece, Egypt and the so-called Holy Land, as well as Latin America. The main ideological purpose of the heritage “crusades” of that period (Lowenthal) was to provide those nation-states with nation-legitimizing narratives of origins reaching back to antiquity. The second period is that of the past thirty years or so during which the invention of the culturally valuable past has undergone a significant process of expansion, caused by the process of globalization and monitored by the various UNESCO programs. These programs started off with the well-known emphasis on ancient sites: the Ramses temple at Abu Simbel, which had been removed to be salvaged from the rising waters of the Nile due to the building of the Aswan Dam in 1963–68, became the first UNESCO heritage site in 1979. Many other monuments of the distant past would follow.

It is probably no coincidence that the UNESCO program took off in the late 1970s as many European countries were in the process of salvaging past monuments both on the global and local scale – the rescue of Abu Simbel coincides with local restoration programs for preserving historical town centers. Viewed from a broader perspective, the global heritage initiative is contemporaneous with the general intensification of globalization. The accelerated global expansion of production sites and markets intensifies the significance of including as many historical periods and cultural styles as available in the global heritage museum. There is a symptomatic quality about the passion with which artifacts regarded as cultural and natural heritage – both tangible and intangible – are being set aside while the “ruination” (Stoler, see below) of less privileged places continues. While the Norwegian Aurlandsfjord with its magnificent, awe-inspiring mountains is being set aside as a celebrated natural heritage site, to name just one example, the landscape of the Osterfjord not far distant becomes ruined as a result of mountain top removal to produce gravel for road construction. Meanwhile, many economic actors are driven by the desire to acquire as much land as possible – the prime item of colonial power. In some instances, as Charlotte Joy has shown



for the case of Mali, the massive land-grabbing we can presently observe especially in Africa and in Eastern Europe coincides with the production of ancient Mali as a kind of fairy tale scenery. Heritage, as Lowenthal reminds us, is crucially about land, law, and justice (“Natural and Cultural Heritage” 81).

We can observe a remarkable concurrence, then, between the increasing musealization of the world’s cultural treasures and the ongoing despoliation of places not privileged enough to join the global ark. Can the nervous amassing of World Heritage be seen as the cultural flipside – or even, with Jameson, as the ‘cultural logic’ – of the creation of national sacrifice areas around the globe? Ann Laura Stoler suggests as much in her recent volume *Imperial Debris*. In her introduction, Stoler describes the project of the volume as one that disentangles the complicity of the imperial nostalgia associated with World Heritage practices with the “ruination” and “petrified life” of human beings (9). While “colonialisms have been predicated on guarding natural and cultural patrimonies for populations assumed to need guidance in how to value and preserve them” (15), Stoler suggests nothing less than that the deep-felt attachment that many feel for the monuments of past civilizations – for our global heritage – is the emotional reservoir necessary for us to accept present-day despoliations around the globe as unavoidable collateral effects of globalization. Land-grabbing and forced relocations, acts of “radioactive colonialism,” health-hazardous resource extraction and waste disposal in the global south, and similar ‘imperial’ corporate activities are thus quietly sanctioned by first world governments and populations. ‘Terrorists’ from Al Qaida to ISIS have understood the cultural-ideological function of these monuments whose destruction they gleefully disseminate in the World Wide Web, while turning themselves into the executioners of such historical ruination. In the twenty-first century, heritage is increasingly becoming a weapon of war.

As *Imperial Debris* and similar recent studies also demonstrate, our thinking has definitely moved beyond the ancient nature-culture dichotomy, with significant consequences for discussions of global heritage. Our initial example of the Yasuní Park in Ecuador illustrates this new direction in scholarship, as the Correa government invited the world community to respect the disputed territory for both its ecological and its cultural values, regardless of any official UNESCO status.

There is an evident tension between the planetary scope of UNESCO actions on cultural and natural preservation and the particular ways in which different peoples see what is worth being preserved and how. This, we argue, shows how deep the hook of Western coloniality goes. Despite the critical work of a few intellectual elites, it is still widely accepted that Western scientific recipes are the best to save all humans in this world from an ongoing ecological collapse. Ann Laura Stoler shows how imperialism both destroys social and natural environments and, at the same time, pretends to rescue us from the catastrophe it has itself created.

Yet leaving behind the dramatic environmental effects of the Western colonial and imperialist project, it is also possible to see that its spoil or ruination

acts deep inside the bodies of humans. A well-known controversy on the blood samples of the Amazonian tribe of the Yanomami may provide a clear illustration. In 1967 a research group led by the renowned geneticist James Neel and the respected anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon extracted blood samples from Yanomami people and, without their consent, sent them to the US to be used in biomedical research. Forty years later, Yanomami people learned that their blood and the blood of their ancestors remained in freezers in North American labs, and they urged the scientific community (mainly North American geneticists and anthropologists) to return their blood where it did belong (Borofsky et al.). In 2015 diverse media and NGOs celebrated the return of Yanomami blood to the Amazon rainforest. According to Davi Kopenawa, shaman and spokesperson for the Yanomami, their blood could finally be ‘put in the river upon its return’.<sup>5</sup>

The episode impressively shows how even anthropologists, despite their intent to take seriously native peoples all over the world, may become accomplices of scientific imperialism, disregarding for forty years the very native perspectives on how bodily substances should be used or preserved (surely not kept in a freezer!). Yet the episode also tells us about the objectification of nature, in that case of human bodies and their vital fluids. The objectification of nature is closely linked to the colonial project and the will to domesticate the newly discovered, ‘wild’ contexts. It is a typically Western scientific way of ‘naturalization’ that reinforces our divide between nature and culture, which allows to treat the former just technically, disregarding its immanent moral and political content, and which plays a crucial role in the politics of cultural and ecological preservation, as different essays in this volume illustrate.

With the Yanomami example, we aim at showing that the nature-culture divide is not shared by all, and that this should invite a rethinking of these terms in the domain of heritage politics, as Lowenthal has already noted. Such rethinking seems pretty urgent, also, because such heritage politics, managed by UNESCO and related institutions, have a global reach. So, our proposal is to turn our gaze from the planetary realm to small places, as small as a body of an indigenous person in the Amazon or elsewhere, and ask *there* what is worth being preserved, on what basis, and what we can learn from these specific perspectives in order to confront hegemonic discourses and practices of preservation.

5 <http://www.survivalinternational.org/about/yanomami-blood-controversy> (accessed 24 February 2017)



## Decolonizing Heritage

That the Heritage industry is historically and causally related to the politics of territorial appropriation has already been pointed out. Aware of the entanglement between Heritage and colonial power, Helaine Silverman and Fairchild Ruggles suggest viewing the political concerns of the United Nations' commission responsible for Heritage (UNESCO) in conjunction with the work of the High Commission for Human Rights. Both the discourse on Heritage and that on human rights, they remind us, share a number of aspects, among them a strong assertion of universal values. But these assumptions become problematic in situations where the *heritage* interests of one social and cultural group get into conflict with the *human* rights interests of another group. In fact, Silverman/Ruggles argue, heritage is itself to be regarded as both an individual and a collective human right, and has been so regarded by the UNESCO itself (5). Access to certain parts of ancestral lands held sacred by a country's indigenous people – such as the “dreaming tracks” of Australia's Aboriginals – should therefore be granted as being covered by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (7). Certainly, conflicts about access to sacred sites continue to be a source of armed clashes all over the world – from Jerusalem and Jordan to Afghanistan and Mali to Mexico, South Dakota and Tibet. The authors also point out that non-Western narratives about indigenous heritage have been systematically ignored, belittled, and erased – such as when the inhabitants encountered by the colonizers in America were not seen as descendants of the former ‘higher’ civilizations of the Mound-builders or of Tiwanaku but rather as people not capable of such cultural perfection (10). Denial of a people's history has often been a preparatory step to denying its human rights as well:

Because the denial or distortion of history/prehistory has proven to be a contributing factor in genocide, ethnic cleansing, and oppression to an extreme degree in recent centuries, history often becomes a human rights issue. Among the lessons learned is that the freedom or inability to articulate one's own cultural heritage and express one's own identity is vitally important. (11)

A major impediment for indigenous groups in having their cultural traditions and sites listed and respected as official World Heritage is that UNESCO still operates on the level of nation states and that minority groups have to file their claims through the colonial administration. By now, of course, most of their precious sites have long been ingested into the hungry maws of national heritage, their traditions overwritten with the narratives of colonial history (18).

While the decolonization of heritage will remain an important project until cultural groups have regained full control of their traditions and monuments, another recent development in heritage practice seeks to reform some of the more antiquated aspects of an older heritage industry, such as its focus on dead mon-

uments and ghost sites mentioned above. Cornelius Holtorf and Graham Fairclough have recently diagnosed, and seek to further promote, an important shift in heritage practice – away from the conservation of national monuments and ‘ghost’ zones, and toward a practice of integrating heritage sites and artifacts into educational processes in multicultural learning environments. Indeed, cultural heritage has the potential of being a useful tool for conflict resolution precisely in such constellations described in the previous paragraphs – where two or more groups contend for different readings, and the possession of the same heritage items. Holtorf and Fairclough call attention to the Faro Convention of 2005 which required a redefinition of cultural heritage from its former function as static historical site to a new practical function as a vehicle for intercultural exchange and personal experience of places and objects (199–200). The Faro Convention explicitly calls for “using and exploiting all cultural heritage for high-level political, social and economic progress” including the recognition that (quoting the Faro document)

rights relating to cultural heritage are inherent in the right to participate in cultural life, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that heritage is an important contributor to human development and quality of life, and that cultural heritage [...] should be made to support the construction of a peaceful and democratic society. (201)

This practical aspect of heritage, Holtorf and Fairclough suggest, can be an important resource for interactive educational processes organized around storytelling and the sharing of experience. This, they emphasize, should not exclude the more painful aspects of shared history: they refer to the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, which currently manages seventeen sites around the globe. It selects ‘painful sites’ as heritage sites – places that are globally representative of conflicts and divisions between communities. The aim is to use heritage for enhancing “social healing and reparation,” and for promoting a sense of historical and social responsibility (204). As for the Iraqi visitors to the Ishtar Gate in Berlin, this new approach to heritage includes the possibility of a cathartic function of cultural artifacts and memories. Such interactive “heritage as action” (201), Holtorf/Fairclough write, can also enhance an understanding for the connections between human and natural environments which ought to be thought about from an anti-essentialist perspective rather than resting on the old nature-culture dichotomy (203). This contemporary form of ‘Action Heritage’ – somewhat reminiscent of Tax Sol’s and Karl Schlesier’s ‘action anthropology’ – considers the embeddedness of heritage sites in their lived cultural and ecological environments.

A crucial element in this new approach to heritage – as an ecologically aware lived and shared cultural practice – is indeed the oldest form of communication: storytelling. Holtorf/Fairclough mention an intercultural storytelling session around a Swedish stone age monument (204). To generate new respect for the cultural traditions transported by oral traditions continues to be a concern of a

decolonial approach to cultural knowledge. An encounter with oral heritage also draws attention to the dynamics of cultural signification because a site or an item undergoes various transformations of meaning over the centuries and between interpretive communities. Heritage sites are essentially storied places, and it is important to know the various stories tied to them.

An extension of heritage to include intangible, immaterial elements may also invite us to consider an even more radical idea: that of the dissolution of heritage. During a former Rostock symposium, an archaeologist colleague found himself confronted with the question whether there was something called the archaeology of disappearance – the scientific observation and documentation of the gradual dissolution of monuments and other remains. He was completely flabbergasted. Our thinking about heritage demands that we cling on to every semantically resonant material scrap of ancient stuff. Only once it returns to dust does all meaning cease (Steedman).

Cultures with other practices of record keeping may think differently about this. Material things are made to disappear one day – cultural artifacts may return to nature to reenter the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Apparently, those cultures have a different source to feed individual and collective emotional needs for comfort and symbolic affinity. In 2006, the Haisla Nation in Kitamaat, British Columbia, enthusiastically celebrated the return of its ancient totem pole. The G'psgolox totem pole was a mortuary pole commemorating the spirits of its owner's departed family members. But in 1929, a Swedish diplomat, considering the pole abandoned, had it taken away to Sweden. In 1991, the Haisla rediscovered it in Stockholm's Museum of Ethnography and after long negotiations and the construction of a replica for Stockholm, the G'psgolox totem pole was returned to Haisla country – an event that received a lot of public attention. The indigenous heirs of the departed owner of the pole were deeply emotional about encountering the long-lost sculpture. The story of the pole, after all, was a story of loss and grief, both for the owner's family and for those many families which had fallen victim to colonialism and disease. Its return had cathartic and reconciliatory dimensions. Everyone knew that, had the pole remained in Haisla country, it would have rotten sixty to a hundred years after its creation in 1872. Though 'abducted' by Sweden, it had also been taken care of (see Cardinal for the full story).

Another eight years after its restitution, G'psgolox totem pole rests where it would have rested decades earlier without the transatlantic adventure: in the old graveyard in Kemano, where it now finally awaits its natural dissolution (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

This is a rather ironical example of how the *decolonization* of heritage can work hand in hand with its *ecologization* – its return to dust. The fate of the totem pole also begs the question whether the maintenance of functioning ecotopes would not ultimately be more adequate for ensuring global survival than

6 The story of the G'psgolox totem pole from its creation to its return is narrated by the film *Totem. The Return of the G'psgolox Totem Pole* by Gil Cardinal (2003): [https://www.nfb.ca/film/totem\\_the\\_return\\_of\\_the\\_gpsgolox\\_pole](https://www.nfb.ca/film/totem_the_return_of_the_gpsgolox_pole) (accessed 30 December 2016).



Fig. 3: The G'psgolox totem pole at the old grave yard in Kemano, 25 April 2014. Photo: Tony Sandin, Etnografiska museets bildarkiv 0962.0013.

the musealized preservation of dead monuments. The question at stake is whether protective measures would not have to be extended to *all* cultures and environments crucial for ensuring the survival of human and non-human life on earth. Both approaches to heritage – the decolonial and the ecological one – move the discussion of cultural heritage away from the silent monuments of high culture that dominated the discourse thirty years ago. Combined, they remind us that at the end of heritage there is not necessarily ruination and painful destruction. While heritage as an institutional hegemonic practice will only become obsolescent in a utopian future of universal peace, the impending survival of humanity on earth depends on preserving a vibrant memory of past knowledge and its human and non-human bearers.

## Chapter Summaries

The volume begins with the section *Soundings: Three Approaches to the Heritage-Ecology-Coloniality Problematic*. David Lowenthal sets the stage with an up-to-date analysis of the state of cultural heritage studies, arguing that dispute is an inherent quality of cultural heritage worldwide. Caught between private and public interests, between particularist, nationalist, and cosmopolitan agendas, as well as between attempts to preserve cultural artifacts in spite of ecological concerns and attempts to protect natural sites against the ravages of industrial and touristic encroachment, heritage, one must conclude from Lowenthal's essay, is an ideological battle zone. Lowenthal gives numerous examples of how heritage – cultural, natural, and intangible – becomes entangled in political disputes

whose parties are not always primarily interested in preserving the most precious achievements of natural growth and human creativity for future generations regardless of their cultural and political affinities. This situation produces its own ironies, as when tribal demands to exempt sacred artifacts from public view look deceptively similar to scientific demands for leaving artifacts in-situ and exempting them from public commodification. What's important in all of these debates, as Lowenthal shows, is the frequently massive imbalance of power between the parties involved, as when heritage interests clash with tribal demands for ecological stewardship. Within such conflicts, Indigenous nations are required to resort to culturally essentialist categories of identity to defend their interests because of an overwhelming discourse that admits legitimate claims to heritage only within the framework of homogenous, even nationalist, definitions of culture. Yet, in spite of their superficial similarity, romantic nationalistic essentialisms within Western countries differ remarkably from the strategic essentialism necessarily promoted by formerly (and continuously) colonized and indigenous groups, for whom the rhetoric of heritage is one of the few available entrance gates toward political recognition and legal protection of lifeways, environments and sacred sites. Heritage discourse, as it is framed at present, keeps intellectually outmoded concepts of cultural homogeneity in a semi-dead vegetative state. Meanwhile the "rain forest" wealth of heritage, Lowenthal asserts, has dwindled into monocultural islands – while real islands are themselves the first victims of the depletion of the environment, leaving the world with facing a growing need for a future-oriented 'living heritage', e. g. in the form of seed banks for plants (and maybe soon other species threatened with extinction).

Lowenthal's contribution is followed by *Ronnie Ellenblum's* climatological approach to a particularly crisis-ridden period in the medieval Middle East. Approaching the problematic of this volume from the perspective of ecocritical historiography, Ellenblum provokes us to pay better attention to the complex conjunctions of ecological and cultural factors in the making of history. The method of computer-based scientific reconstructions of historical climate, he asserts, will not sufficiently explain the behavior of human beings unless it is combined with the study of human cultural history, and vice versa. By triangulating data from different historical sources and periods, Ronnie Ellenblum's essay powerfully demonstrates how mass migrations and cultural destruction are frequently related to climate disasters. The essay reconstructs how the climate anomalies of the so-called Medieval Climatic Anomaly in the tenth and eleventh centuries led to disastrous effects in two areas in the eleventh-century Middle East, which suggests the precariousness of state institutions not prepared to meet such environmental hazards. The terrible events following upon the crop failures in Persia and Egypt about a thousand years ago can be read as a warning to present-day governments to remain aware of environmental change and to prepare themselves for impending disasters (such as the effects of global warming). At the same time, it offers a non-culturalist explanation for the upsurge of religious orthodoxies and fun-

damentalisms which, as Ellenblum suggests, may even have caused the destruction of the famous Jewish academies of Sura and Pumbeditha, located in Baghdad, in the year 1038. Ellenblum's essay thus evidences the explanatory power of combining various historiographical approaches – a combination inspired by both classical methodology dedicated to the analysis of social and cultural developments and a more recent ecologically-oriented historiography which uses climatological reconstructions of past environmental events. The essay uncannily reminds us of the mutual imbrications of climate change, religious fundamentalism, mass migration, and the wanton destruction of cultural heritage taking place in our own time and it illustrates the necessity of developing new methods for analyzing these connections in a pluricausal and non-dogmatic way.

The third approach to the heritage-ecology-decoloniality triad comes from *Karl Steel* who adds another twist to contemporary reconceptualizations of the medieval period by discussing, from a broadly postcolonial perspective, the implicit (and explicit) racialism of popular modern inventions of the Vikings. His essay magisterially dissects the racist imagination of the Nordic mystique in the United States and beyond, presenting it as a case of “bad heritage” that stands in diametrical opposition to both what is historically known about the Norse and to the ethos of cultural heterogeneity and diversity. He pays particular attention to the construction of the myth of the Vikings as the first European settlers in North America firing the quest for national origins and celebrated throughout romantic literature and modern popular culture, e. g. ‘Viking’ films and heavy metal music. The ideal of white supremacy – of a rugged white-skinned and racially pure masculinity – forms the core of this mystique, Steel argues, and it serves a desire for a culturally closed, authoritarian, and intolerant society that defines itself over against an ‘effeminate’ Christian ethos. In doing so, it shares many features with the egomaniac and violence-admiring fascist character (in spite of the modern ‘Vikings’ occasional burliness and sloppiness). In addition to critically examining the ‘bad’ ideological content and the striking unproductivity of this image of the Vikings for solving problems of the present, Steel also produces historical evidence that shows Norse society, including the Vinland travelers, to have been culturally heterogeneous, adaptable and cosmopolitan, arguing that it is these features which ensured Norse hegemony in the pre-modern age and that qualify Norse culture as ‘heritage’ for our time.

The following section, *From Individual to Collective Heritage*, analyzes the influence of cultural dynamics on heritage, showing that heritage and its multiple forms do not always outlast transformations of cultural history, but also constantly initiate processes of renegotiation between individual and collective remembrance. The title of *Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink's* article only seemingly suggests a specifically French topic and object. It implicitly evokes the quite unknown figure of the politician and deputy during the French Revolution, Henrie Grégoire (1750–1831). However, although based on essentially French sources, in particular on the works of the abbot Grégoire, the article aims at reflecting on Euro-



pean and even world history: the birth and the cultural and symbolical transformations of modern states since the eighteenth century, amongst which France was a pioneering role model. National and intercultural heritage will be the key concepts for this reflection. On the one hand, the chapter focuses on the conception and realization of the *Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration* (*Museum of the National History of Migration*) in Paris. On the other hand, it explores Grégoire's programmatic parliamentary reports on the excesses of revolutionary vandalism. Both examples are historically intermingled and closely linked to the French constitution of national heritage and intercultural memory.

*Laure Lévêque's* article relates to a wider cultural and literary history of the heritage concept. She analyzes Stendhal's *Voyages en France* and shows that the aesthetics of perception in the nineteenth century are, on the one hand, oriented towards and preformed by Abbot Grégoire's concept of national heritage; and that, on the other side, the understanding of heritage itself is often reduced to the dynamics of an aesthetics of perception at play in nineteenth-century travel literature. Not only the performance but also the questioning of subjectivity and authenticity challenge the potentials and limits of supra-individual conservation and the worthiness of conservation. Buildings and monuments, museums and landscapes guide Stendhal's literary voyage through France. In his literary reflections, Stendhal's fictional persona subjectively appropriates the national memory spaces that shape the collective memory and evaluates their worth as heritage. Consequently, his travel reports become an undogmatic viewpoint of a traveler on what heritage is, could be or will be, as they discuss the relation of veridiction and fiction, of localization and changing perspectives, of subjectivity and universality, appropriation and transfer.

*Romeo Carabelli's* chapter explores the tension between civil society, economic interests as well as national and international institutions in the process of heritagization of the Moroccan city of Casablanca. Carabelli describes the recent history of urban planning in a city whose development exemplifies some of the central cultural and social problems originating just before and after colonial emancipation. While a cultural elite named *Casamemoire* is devoted to promote and protect the cultural capital of Casablanca's oldest buildings, real-estate actors push in the direction of a quick urban modernization in order to increase prices. As mediators, national governmental institutions and UNESCO representatives seem to not have an effective recipe that may re-establish an equilibrium between collective and individual interests. Cultural capital and actual economy thus display a complex tension and a struggle for power in the management of Casablanca memory and infrastructures.

The third section, *Colonial and Decolonial Ecological Epistemologies*, explores contemporary epistemic and practical conflicts between heritage and ecological interests under the continuing conditions of a (post)colonial global order. *Peter Probst's* chapter revisits the classic Maussian notion of the gift and uses it to analyze World Heritage logics. With his exploration of the heritagiza-

tion of the Osun Sacred Grove, in the Nigerian city of Osogbo, Probst argues for the consideration of the moral aspects of heritage. Unlike the commodification of Heritage sites in the form of touristic attractions, the understanding of heritage as a global “gift” deepens not only in the moral duty of preserving the values of the human past but also the need to consider cultural and ecological values of heritage sites in terms of a collective interest. Both the case approached and the analysis employed are illustrative of the kind of decolonization of heritage logics addressed in this volume. In invoking the notion of the “gift of heritage,” Probst not only critiques the neoliberal economization of sites as mere instruments of monetary exchange; he also highlights heritage sites’ moral, intrinsic value, opening their definition to other, “non-Western” cultural perspectives on what needs to be preserved and why.

The coloniality of heritage is furthermore tackled in the essays by Kerstin Knopf and Jürgen Vogt. *Kerstin Knopf* addresses the issue of living Indigenous heritage in the American far North. She compares Inuit and Western knowledge systems, departing from the interesting fact that Indigenous empirical observation of the natural surroundings has produced new knowledge about astronomical and geological events independently from, but recently confirmed by, scientific calculations of such events. The example serves as an entrée for a discussion of the significance of Indigenous ways of knowing, their adaptability to the world of Western scientific knowledge, and their value as a decolonial epistemology existing alongside the classical episteme of Western science. The Arctic is a particularly well-chosen example as its contribution to global intellectual and material culture has generally been ignored, covered by a colonial prejudice that the far North had no cultural merit to speak of. As Knopf reminds us, the Arctic is presently one of the most embattled zones in the search and extraction of natural resources. It has to deal more directly than other areas with the catastrophe of melting ice, which brings it into great danger of losing its social and cultural integrity. The essay promotes a combined effort of Indigenous scholars and Western ecologists to stay the tide of this development as well as the potential of transcultural knowledge relating to the land. That knowledge, Knopf forcefully argues, should be integrated into the canon of world heritage as it may have a direct effect on future life on this earth.

Building on a general consensus about the necessity of protecting the last natural habitats on earth from destruction by resource extraction, the Ecuadorian government in 2007 offered to the world community to keep the oil in the earth provided its decision in favor of protecting Ecuador’s cultural and natural heritage be remunerated by the international community. *Jürgen Vogt* describes the history of this unusual offer and of the failure of Ecuador’s appeal to a cosmopolitan sense of ecological responsibility. The area in question, the Yasuní National Park in northeastern Ecuador, has now been opened for oil drilling by Chinese and Ecuadorian companies, which continues the work of US petrol companies like Chevron in Latin America. The essay illustrates the brutal choices a devel-



oping and poverty-stricken nation has to make in order to retain its relative economic independence and to stay politically afloat in the international competition for resources. Even a decolonially-minded government, the Yasuní case suggests, is ultimately condemned to become complicit with those forces it has set out to defeat, by participating in the “ruination” of life and land.

The volume ends with a section dubbed *Toward an Eco-Cultural Decolonization of Heritage*. It combines three attempts to approach the heritage problematic through the lens of a contemporary ecocritical and post-humanist theory. All chapters engage with one of the initial questions of the volume, namely what role the cosmological differentiation between nature and culture, or between humans and non-humans, plays in the constitution of heritage practices, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The three contributions provide examples of how cultural analysis may also lead to crucial ecological questions of our time. The overall decolonial proposal of these final chapters aims at the ‘denaturalization’ of the environment, an ecopolitical gesture necessary for reinstalling a symmetry between cultural and natural human heritage.

*Camila del Marmol* and *Ferran Estrada* open the section with a study of how tourism is reshaping the rural landscape in the Catalan Pyrenees. The transition from rural-traditional forms of production to a tourism-oriented economy is drastically determining the development of rural areas. While tourism is indubitably opening up new possibilities of engaging in the global market, local populations and their environments are also being subject to a series of processes that reduce their existence to a monologic identity politics. The main feature of this reduction is what the authors call the “naturalization of culture,” that is, the tourism-oriented economy’s fostering of an image of rural societies as being fixed in an eternal past. By disguising the real economic transformations and instead staging a supposedly ‘authentic’ rural architecture and ‘traditional’ means of food production, rural communities become an attraction to tourists who wish to find in the Pyrenees not only an impressive landscape, but also the expression of ‘cultures’ that are so close to ‘nature’. Thus, rural societies are impelled to promote the false image that for them time has not passed, or, if so, it has just gone with the slowness of natural evolution, away from urban processes of cultural acceleration.

The essay by *John Kucich* shows how such nostalgic notions of an unchanging nature is both constructed and deconstructed in colonial and nineteenth-century American texts. He introduces the concept of “panarchy” to investigate the complex and often unpredictable ways in which human and non-human forms of agency interact in the North American colonial contact zone. In approaching nineteenth-century literary and travelistic texts by the Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller, as well as the Ojibway-Anglo writer Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, Kucich combines postcolonial, ecocritical, actor-network theoretical and new materialist perspectives in order to elucidate a cross-cultural poetics of place in which the non-human world itself retains a certain agency. He challenges us to rethink human relations toward the non-human world in a way that regards

the latter as possessing a kind of memory itself, and he invites us to rethink colonial encounters as “ecocultural encounters.” The pine tree in particular – a tree that features dominantly in the cross-cultural imagination but was virtually eradicated in the lower St. Lawrence River region by 1850, can be regarded as one of many “sacraments” of that ecocultural contact zone. Kucich suggests to look more carefully at place – “not as a nostalgic category of home and folk, but as a radically decentering way of engaging with the more-than-human world.” In the context of this volume’s interest in the intersections between cultural encounters and heritage discourse, this essay offers a fascinating glimpse at how place can be thought of as a cultural archive and a repository of cultural energies, i. e. as ‘heritage’ ranging below the official categories of nationalist discourse.

In the last chapter of this volume, *Aníbal Arregui* reflects on the difference between institutionalized practices of heritage ‘preservation’ and the alternative route of heritage ‘cultivation’. The cultivators’ perspective, the essay contends, allows us to consider the entanglement of the cultural and natural aspects of human heritage. Arregui takes the example of what humans do in order to preserve the sky, that is our atmosphere, or our climatic equilibrium. He draws on the example of how a climate scientist and an Amazonian Yanomami shaman address the relation between the forest and the sky, between the human action on the biosphere and its atmospheric consequences. Despite the radical anthropological differences between these two modes of looking at the forest-sky’s “ecological relations,” both the shaman and the scientist share a cultivator’s perspective, i. e. the vision that forest and sky do not just need to be preserved; they also need to be carefully cultivated. This cultivation has a double-sided quality, for it involves both a preservation of human-friendly natural elements and also the cultivation of those cultural or relational aspects that seem to better respond to our planet’s ecological demands. Unlike heritage preservation, the cultivation of the sky offers an example of the dynamic interaction of social and ecological entities and of their mutual transformations. It furthermore focuses on how to take care not of pre-given sites, artifacts, and symbols, but of the forms of relation that will ensure their permanence.

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