



Open Anthropology

A PUBLIC JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Volume 4, Number 1

March 2016

Cultural Heritage

The Editors' Note

Sallie Han & Jason Antrosio

Cultural heritage is both easy to grasp and difficult to define: You know it when you see it. Anthropologists and the communities with whom we work have not been content, however, with such flimsy criteria. In recent years, archaeologists, ethnographers, and museum professionals, among others, have undertaken thoughtful and meaningful considerations not only of what cultural heritage is, but particularly how it comes to matter, what is at stake, and for whom.

The questions raised are not only academic ones. The attempts to promote and protect cultural heritage by defining and regulating interactions with it—notably [UNESCO](#)'s 1972 World Heritage Convention—have had a range of consequences and effects. While cultural heritage refers to a purportedly shared past, it bears directly upon the experiences of the present and the expectations of the future. Access to cultural heritage has come to be regarded as a right. At the same time, it is recognized as a resource for economic development, significantly through tourism. There has been long standing interest in collecting heritage in the form of artifacts placed on exhibit in museums, and preserving the places of the past. More recently, attention has been directed also toward living or [intangible heritage](#), such as practices of language. Supporting cultural heritage in all of its forms is a project of some urgency today—especially in contexts and conditions of conflict—and one in which anthropologists can make important and necessary contributions.

How people live in the present with the past (and the future) is a theme that is explored across all of the readings on cultural heritage included in this issue of *Open Anthropology*. We open recent work in anthropology with an aim toward engaging in conversation with students, scholars and professionals in other disciplines, and interested readers seeking insight on the topic of cultural heritage. With these selections—which include eight journal articles and three book reviews culled from the publications of the American Anthropological Association—our aim is to offer an overview of what anthropologists do, say, and think about cultural heritage, such as its conceptualizations as a right and a resource as well as at risk.

One source for starting this conversation is the collection of sixteen “In Focus” essays on cultural heritage that have been published on anthropology-news.org. These essays, each about two or three pages in length and written in generally accessible language, cover a range of concerns. How definitions of cultural heritage and related concepts of patrimony and cultural property also define claims that are made and actions that are taken—by parties that range from UNESCO to local communities to professional and scholarly organizations—are addressed in these commentaries by [Robert Shepherd](#), [Michael A. Di Giovine](#) and [Sarah E. Cowie](#), and [Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels](#), who note the particular role that anthropologists play in a broader field of heritage studies. (Samuels is also the co-editor of a book, *Heritage Keywords: Rhetoric and Redescription in Cultural Heritage*, which [Uzi Baram](#) reviewed in the [Anthropology Book Forum](#).) [Rosemary Joyce](#) writes about her participation as an archaeologist in the [Cultural Property Advisory Committee](#), an agency of the United States Department of State that advises on matters such as the repatriation of cultural properties to other countries. [Amber O’Connor](#) offers an account of the unintended consequences of patrimonializing indigenous cuisine—an example of intangible heritage—in the Yucatan region of Mexico, where there has been pressure to preserve (and serve) only the more “tourist-friendly” dishes, which are also costlier and more time consuming to prepare. The disputes that arise among groups claiming rights over cultural heritage are illustrated in [Guido Carlo Pigliascio’s](#) discussion of the attempt of Fiji Airways to trademark tapa cloth designs that it intended to use as part of its “brand”—and the battle that erupted as local artists and indigenous organizations called upon lawmakers to protect traditional knowledge and expressions of culture. Among those parties that have a stake in cultural heritage are museums, which have both responsibilities and opportunities, as [Stephen E. Nash](#) and [Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh](#), [Maria F. Curtis](#), and [Hulya Sakarya](#) describe in their essays about programs in the United States and the Republic of Georgia. Reminding that cultural heritage is not only a “resource,” but also a source of resilience for individuals and communities are essays by [Jurgita Antoine](#) and [Richard Meyers](#), [Charlotte E. Davidson](#), and [April Eastman](#) (both documenting projects promoting Native American cultural heritage), [Blaire O. Gagnon](#) (discussing Latin American artisan-vendors in the northeastern United States), and [Antoinette T. Jackson](#) (detailing what the past means in the present experiences of an historic African-American community in Kansas). Pieces by [Alejandro J. Figueroa](#) in Honduras, [Rabia Harmansah](#) in Cyprus, and [Henrike Florusbosch](#) in Mali and Ghana, provide case studies both of local heritage management projects and of what we can learn from ethnographic studies of such projects.

The next two articles remind us that heritage does not already exist, but that it is actively imagined and constructed in the contemporary moment.

In her 1999 *American Ethnologist* article, “The Burden of Heritage: Claiming a Place for a West Indian Culture,” [Karen Fog Olwig](#) discusses the making of the past is an important, meaningful, and even necessary practice of the present. This is a lesson that Olwig particularly draws from her experience undertaking an oral history project on St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands. On the one hand, the St. Johnians participating in her project shared the conviction that their island’s history ought to be recorded for posterity. On the other hand, they also expressed their ambivalence and even objections specifically to the publication of their stories for the general public. They expressed particular concern with “the very idea of preserving St. John’s culture for display, an idea indicative of understanding culture as a museum piece divorced from everyday life” (376). They also expressed unease with the interest taken in their local history as connected to a notion of global heritage, which St. Johnians understood resulted in the reshaping of their stories to fit others’ ideas about the island’s past. For example, local oral traditions emphasized not the dramatic slave uprising of 1733 and other such monumental events that historians and

anthropologists have referenced, but long-standing commitments to peaceful, civil, and respectable causes such as education and pride in community.

In her 2010 *American Anthropologist* article, “Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGO’s and Defiant Arts of Government,” [Chiara De Cesari](#) notes that heritage refers to both “a hegemonic, highly institutionalized project of commemoration that is productive of collective identities—most often in the function of nation-building” and “the counter-memories it oppresses” (625). Both projects of future-oriented heritage-making come together, though not without contest and negotiation, in the case of the planning of the Palestinian art biennales in 2007 and 2009. The events involved the efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as arts festival committees, museums, folkloric dance and music groups, academic research centers, and other cultural heritage groups, which De Cesari suggests “do not simply act like an institution of the state, they participate in building it too—and do so creatively (630). As with Olwig, De Cesari describes the connection between local and global heritage ideas and practices: “one needs to speak the memorial language of Nakba [the events of 1948 resulting in the forced displacement of 750,000 Palestinians] but also be familiar with the global idiom of heritage-as-development. Buzzwords such as *outstanding value*, *World Heritage*, *UNESCO guidelines*, *management plan*, *impact assessment*, and *job creation* are all part of the vocabulary of Palestinian heritage.” (632).

“Why are some stories told and others ignored? Who decides if, when, and how to tell a community’s story or how to interpret and present the history of a community for public consumption and representation for future generations?” asks [Antoinette Jackson](#) in “Changing Ideas about Heritage and Heritage Resource Management in Historically Segregated Communities,” her 2010 *Transforming Anthropology* article. Jackson, like Olwig, is concerned with approaching heritage as a resource not for others’ consumption, but for the diverse wants and needs of members of a community itself. In this case, emphasizes the important and necessary inclusion of African-American residents in the heritage-making of Sulphur Springs, Florida, with its history as both a recreational destination and a segregated southern city. For example, while white residents shared fond memories of a resort called the Arcade, and regret that it had been torn down, black residents shared what De Cesari might call their counter-memories of segregation and exclusion from the facility. The cultural heritage of Sulphur Springs is not to be found in a single story about the community, but many stories about the diversity and divisions within it. Jackson’s other work on race and cultural heritage is discussed also in [Whitney Battle-Baptiste’s](#) book review of *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation*, which was published in *American Anthropologist* (2014).

As these articles demonstrate, an anthropological perspective on cultural heritage is as concerned with the present as it is with the past, and is interested in tangible and intangible heritage, notably practices such as storytelling, which is the central concern of [Elizabeth Falconi’s](#) “Storytelling, Language Shift, and Revitalization in a Transborder Community: ‘Tell It in Zapotec!’” published in 2013 in *American Anthropologist*. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in San Juan Guelavia in Oaxaca, Mexico, Falconi describes the meaning ascribed to storytelling as a verbal genre and especially to telling stories in the local variety of Zapotec. For Guelavians, storytelling is associated with male elders in the community, who in telling their stories are understood to be teaching their younger listeners. Interestingly, while men more frequently speak Spanish in their storytelling in order to engage their listeners, women insist on the importance and necessity for men to tell their stories “authentically” in Zapotec. There is also the involvement of anthropologists—including scholars who are Mexican, but not necessarily indigenous—concerned with promoting and preserving language as heritage. Falconi, however, suggests “an exclusive focus on language shift and loss can divert analytical attention away from the ways that traditional

cultural stances and forms of communication can be preserved and practiced in nonindigenous languages” (633).

Another example of how people live with heritage by transforming it to their everyday wants and needs is presented in [Walter E. Little's](#) “Façade to Street to Façade: Negotiating Public Spatial Legality in a World Heritage City,” published in 2014 in *City & Society*. The city of Antigua, Guatemala, has been a destination for tourists attracted by its Spanish Colonial architecture and designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. For both reasons, there are architectural regulations to preserve the appearance of the buildings. Other laws govern the use of public space in order to create the quaint ambiance that tourists seek to experience in the city's cobblestone streets, in particular attempting to ban vendors from selling in the streets. Yet, Antigua is as much a city that people inhabit as it is one that is imagined and visited. Little finds a surprising degree of flexibility and informality with which local residents live and work in and around this cultural heritage site and assert their rights to the city as their own.

Cultural heritage as a resource for economic development through tourism is a theme explored in the next two articles, which also explore the unintended and under-recognized effects.

In “Configuring and Commoditizing the Archaeological Landscape: Heritage, Identity and Tourism in the Tuxtla Mountains,” published in the *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* (2014), [Marcie Venter](#) and [Sarah Lyon](#) describe the landscape of heritage tourism in the Tuxtla Mountains of Veracruz, Mexico. Here, an ecological resort and two museums place pre-Hispanic history and culture on display using archaeological and ethnographic material, such as recovered artifacts and more recently collected costumes and handicrafts. Cultural heritage is connected directly with economic opportunities, and local people are highly cognizant that there is unequal access both to heritage as a resource and to the rewards it brings, resulting in bitter disputes that divide local communities. Venter and Lyon describe, for example, the reactions of local people to the excavation of a new site in the area—under the main street of the municipality. While hotel owners become interested in developing the site to attract tourists, even proposing to enclose the site in plexiglass so that it can remain on display, other business owners object to the disruption of traffic in the area. Venter and Lyon caution anthropologists—archaeologists in particular—to remain sensitive to the diversity of interests in cultural heritage that are glossed in terms like “local” and “community.”

In “Sharing Culture or Selling Out? Developing the Commodified Persona in the Heritage Industry,” published in *American Ethnologist* (2008), [Alexis Celeste Bunten](#) calls attention to the cultural tourism workers themselves, drawing from her participation and observation in a Native American-owned company in Alaska called Tribal Tours. Bunten suggests the Tlingit tour guides, tasked with both presenting and representing cultural heritage, necessarily construct what she calls a commodified persona that must be “carefully balanced between the client's expectations (drawn from imagery found in mainstream media) and an expression of likeable individuality” (382). To this end, Native culture becomes simplified as language, architecture, dance and music performance, and handicrafts, and tour guides emphasize their Other-ness by using Tlingit greetings and words and dressing the part, with men growing their hair long and women wearing silver or beaded jewelry. While Native tour guides saw their work as an extension of hospitality, they also attempt to resist being stereotyped through jokes. One guide told his group, for example, that his knowledge of the habits of bears comes from the Discovery Channel.

Museums have long been significant sites for the exhibition and preservation of cultural heritage, but there have been important and meaningful shifts in their practices. According to [Marilena](#)

[Alivizatou's](#) book, *Intangible Heritage and the Museum: New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation*, reviewed by [Natsuko Akagawa](#) in *American Anthropologist* (2014), with cultural heritage reconceptualized as both tangible and intangible, the mission of museums today is less oriented around the preservation of cultural materials that are at risk of being lost, and more around the participation of people representing those living cultures.

[Graeme Were's](#) 2014 *Museum Anthropology* article, "Digital Heritage, Knowledge Networks and Source Communities: Understanding Digital Objects in a Melanesian Society," offers a compelling example of what can result from the changing ideas and practices of heritage and the involvement of indigenous communities in setting the priorities and designing the projects of a museum. The article describes the collaboration of the Nalik people of northern New Ireland with the Queensland Museum in a "Mobile Museum" project. In recent years, the development and integration of digital and mobile communication technologies into museums has been heralded in terms of the greater access they enable source communities to have to the cultural materials that have been collected from them while at the same time the objects can be preserved carefully in the facilities of a museum. While this seems to create new possibilities of "virtual" repatriation, working in Melanesia, Were notes a complex of attitudes toward digital objects ranging from a perception of digital images as poor substitutes for the "authentic" objects themselves to "an independent source of potential potency manifested through their capacity to be transformed" (135). In the case of the Nalik, however, access to digital images enabled "safe" contact with objects (carvings) that were considered dangerous to handle. Nalik men could have the knowledge to make such objects restored to them, which in turn bolstered their claims for cultural and political status with the provincial government.

To take an anthropological perspective on cultural heritage is to raise awareness of how the past is being made in the present—and also to give attention to how so much of the past is already forgotten and destroyed. While the readings in this issue make clear that the risk of loss cannot be the only or even the primary interest that anthropology has in cultural heritage, protection and preservation remain important projects to which our discipline can contribute, as discussed in [Ann Hitchcock's](#) 2010 *Museum Anthropology* review of *Antiquities under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection after the Iraq War*, edited by [Lawrence Rothfield](#).

For more information about the future of antiquities in areas of conflict, the web page of the [United States Department of State-Cultural Heritage Center](#) highlights its projects such as the Iraq Cultural Heritage Initiative, the Syria Cultural Heritage Initiative, and the Ghazni Towers Documentation Project. [The AAA Task Force on Cultural Heritage](#) had been charged with developing recommendations for the organization.

In addition to the readings included in this issue of **Open Anthropology**, we refer interested readers, including students and scholars in other disciplines and professions, to UNESCO's [World Heritage Centre](#), which provides links to a number of projects that address heritage conceptualized as "cultural" and "natural," including architecture, landscapes, forests, seas, and skies (particularly dark skies and celestial objects).

Acknowledgements. We are grateful to Susan D. Gillespie, one of the co-chairs of the AAA Task Force on Cultural Heritage, and to journal editors Michael Chibnik, Niko Besnier, Suzanne Scheld, and Jennifer A. Shannon and Cynthia Chavez Lamar for their support and suggestions for this issue of OA. Our thanks to Chelsea Horton at AAA, who took on this project from Oona Schmid. Natalie Newton, our [SUNY](#)

[Oneonta](#) research assistant, deserves special recognition. Her interests and questions as an undergraduate major in Anthropology guided the selection of articles and book reviews included here. Every professor wishes to work with a student like her!

Volume 4, Number 1
March 2016

In Focus: Cultural Heritage

Anthropology News. Vol 55, Issue 3: 21-61 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

The Burden of Heritage: Claiming a Place for a West Indian Culture

Karen Fog Olwig – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 26, Issue 2: 370-388 (1999)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGO's and Defiant Arts of Government

Chiara De Cesari – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 112, Issue 4: 625-637 (2010)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Changing Ideas about Heritage and Heritage Resource Management in Historically Segregated Communities

Antoinette Jackson – *Transforming Anthropology*. Vol 18, Issue 1: 80-92 (2010)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Book Review: Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation. Antoinette Jackson

Whitney Battle-Baptiste – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 116, Issue 2: 456-457 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Storytelling, Language Shift, and Revitalization in a Transborder Community: "Tell It in Zapotec!"

Elizabeth Falconi – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 115, Issue 4: 622-636 (2013)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Façade to Street to Façade: Negotiating Public Spatial Legality in a World Heritage City

Walter E. Little – *City & Society*. Vol 26, Issue 2: 196-216 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Configuring and Commoditizing the Archaeological Landscape: Heritage, Identity and Tourism in the Tuxtla Mountains

Marcie Venter and Sarah Lyon – *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*. Vol 25, Issue 1: 74-82 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Sharing Culture or Selling Out? Developing the Commodified Persona in the Heritage Industry

Alexis Celeste Buntten – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 35, Issue 3: 380-395 (2008)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Book Review: Intangible Heritage and the Museum: New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation. Marilena Alivizatou

Natsuko Akagawa – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 116, Issue 4: 862-863 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Digital Heritage, Knowledge Networks, and Source Communities: Understanding Digital Objects in a Melanesian Society

Graeme Were – *Museum Anthropology*. Vol 37, Issue 2: 133-143 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Book Review: Antiquities under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection after the Iraq War. Lawrence Rothfield, ed.

Ann Hitchcock – *Museum Anthropology*. Vol 33, Issue 1: 80-81 (2010)

[Read more about this article >](#)