

Heritage as viewed by an archaeologist in South Africa: intersection of market, history and identity

Lindsay Weiss

Anthropology Department, Columbia University, New York
[lw2004@columbia.edu]

My field research examines the late 19th century diamond rush, and the difference between the early diamond fields community of Kimberley with the later days of corporate consolidation. Specifically, I'm investigating how corporations such as the early De Beers Company came to refashion the city of Kimberley into what was essentially an apartheid city. The field aspect of my project excavated an informal site of the early diamond fields, and through this site, attempts to understand what sort of informal and hybrid community the British corporate colonial forces were responding to in their mechanical segregation of the town. The site itself was that of a late 19th century hotel—marginal to the city center, which moved at a critical juncture in the history of the consolidation of the diamond fields. Changes in the material culture of the hotel trace genealogically the shifts in technologies of governmentality applied by the corporate diamond magnates who pursued vilification of such marginal sites which were assumed to be locales of illegal diamond exchange. During the course of the excavation, I facilitated a community group discussion on local history and heritage—I was interested to understand the future of this archaeological site in terms of the town's perception of heritage and history, and it was during the course of these discussions that I encountered some very surprising conclusions.

Upon ending the four month field project, the members of the Kimberley community who participated (and who had previously participated in similar community excavations), spoke with me about the project and whether or not they came to feel a stronger sense of connection to the local history and heritage. Most of them commented that they did not, in fact, feel any more interest in heritage and history, that they were—in reality—quite detached from issues of local history. Persisting, I asked a member of my team (who was a heritage manager), whether or not this site that we were investigating could conceivably become a heritage site, and if this might, in fact, be of interest. He replied that it could only be 'history' because it didn't affect the lives of people—and couldn't be directly linked to the progression of the anti-apartheid struggle. As such, it wouldn't pull tourist numbers, and could only be a part of history—it was something to be *known*, not something to be celebrated within the rhetoric of heritage. History as heritage, therefore, as it is shared and thought about publicly, comes of necessity, only to be of readily apparent relevance insofar as it relates explicitly to the popularized folk-hero individuals and their activity-locals. While the historical site that we had worked on was equally about the valorization of forces and individuals that stood in opposition to imperialism and colonial rule in South Africa, it just seemed inadequate to the discursive horizon of heritage.

What I took away from such conversations was that we had reached a fundamental disconnect on the nature of what precisely constitutes heritage. My sort of historical project, the genealogy of power and the moments that precede its emergence locally—was not something that translated into the notion of heritage rhetoric in South Africa at all. My own theoretical pedigree approaches history from a certain loss of faith in history's redemptive course—and so it was the same for those South Africans with whom I worked, but for very different and much more pragmatic reasons. Heritage understood in this sense enters into another negative labor. As Wendy Brown has written, "While moralizing discourse symptomizes impotence and aimlessness with regard to making a future, it also marks a peculiar relationship to history, one that holds history responsible, even morally culpable, at the same time it evinces a disbelief in history as a teleological force. When belief in the continuity and forward movement of historical forces is

shaken, even as those forces appear so powerful as to be very nearly determining, the passionate will is frustrated in all attempts to gain satisfaction at history's threshold: it can acquire neither an account of the present nor any future there. The perverse triple consequence is a kind of moralizing against history in the form of condemning particular events or utterances, personifying history in individuals, and disavowing history as a productive or transformative force....Having lost our faith in history, we reify and prosecute its effects in one another, even as we reduce our own complexity and agency to those misnamed effects"(Brown 2001:30).

What Wendy Brown describes here, is arguably a very compelling description of a process that could be termed the production of heritage. When history becomes infused with a moralized force, a consequence of this move is that it is resultantly delimited to only particular sorts of narratives, and this is precisely what happens when history comes to be about recognition. When this happens, heritage is what we are allowed to conceive of as redemptive, and the rest will only ever be 'just' history. This, perhaps, is the most troubling effect of heritage as it enters history into recognition-based identity politics and is certainly worth further consideration. This sort of instrumentalization of history, whether from the top down through government edicts, or the bottom up, through community based initiatives, cannot escape this dynamic. This is not to say that history is *ever* outside of its instrumentalization, but the important fallout of this realization is that we come to see that heritage—insofar as it is grounded in the politics of recognition— in many important ways will 'always already' prevent the genealogical history, the problematization and pursuit of historical construction and discourse-spaces of power. Therefore, in the shadow of heritage, history-work can only with great difficulty critically engage historically received modes of understanding and grouping people.

Reference

Brown, W. 2001. *Politics out of history*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.