

**Rethinking Heritage as Pharmakon:  
Problematising ‘Heritage as Healing’ and ‘Heritage as Cure’ –  
Towards an alternative ‘therapeutics’ of memory-work and wellbeing**

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*A recent workshop on the topic of Heritage and Wellbeing was hosted by UCL’s new Centre for Cultural Heritage, Museums and Material Culture. The workshop brought together practitioners and academics, including museologists, heritage professionals, psychologists, psychoanalysts, anthropologists, archivists, medical professionals and others to discuss various heritage and wellbeing projects. These projects were located in contexts as diverse as museums, hospitals, reminiscence rooms, sheltered housing for the elderly and with groups including refugees and homeless people.*

*My own perspective on this context is someone active in teaching and researching into as cultural heritage studies, museum studies and cultural memory with a particular interest and emphasis upon those constituencies made marginal or disinherited from dominant, mainstream heritage culture. The paper I gave – key aspects of which I summarise below - was, therefore, a ‘thought piece’ in which I called for the problematisation of both orthodox and alternative investments in heritage as healing and as cure. This is based on my claim that ‘heritage as healing; and ‘heritage as cure’ is present not only in the ‘old’ Euro-Western’ [and distinctly colonial] grand narratives but that it is still dominant in ‘new’ and ‘post’ museologies and heritage discourses.*

*What interests me therefore is how in recent times ‘heritage as cure’ and as ‘wellbeing’ has become synonymous not only with the spiritual/ psychodynamic re-enchantment but in more grounded terms, they have also become bound-up with a post-conflict therapeutics of healing and recovery (including as part of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions) and with strategies for economic revitalisation, for example, the ‘angel of the North’ in North East England, the Guggenheim in Bilbao, and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt. The latter, has been dubbed by the *Economist* as an exercise in ‘urban shock therapy’ and is my specific area of research (see Butler 2007).*

*Given the above pressure on heritage to redeem and cure, I argue that the heritage as wellbeing motif has become overdetermined and requires rethinking in order to avoid ‘heritage wellbeing’ becoming a quick fix solution bound up in a top-down, ‘therapeutic turn’ that produces templated and therefore unresponsive models of cultural transmission and memory-work and healing which may be the cause of further traumatisation, illbeing and exclusion. My conclusions, therefore, call for the recognition of the diversity of human experience, of cultural forms and of strategies of wellbeing and memory-work that remain ‘outside’ heritage, museums and therapeutic-medical discourse to be centred in future discussions.*

### **- Grand Narrative Heritage Characterisations**

A return to 'origins' in terms of an historical overview of the 'rise of heritage' within the 'western tradition' reveals how heritage, healing, cure and memory-work are inextricably linked. As a grand narrative epic vision the languages, aspirations and the metaphors and analogies of heritage discourse legitimate, authenticate and invest museological and archival forms and, writ larger still, heritage resources variously as the 'symptom', 'cure' and at times diagnostic for a varied set of concerns and contexts. The Euro-Western 'invention' of cultural heritage is thus bound up in powerful mythologies which seek to reclaim and repossess lost pasts, imagined homelands, ancient Golden-ages and to salvage the essential, 'authentic' self/ selfgroup. Part of the seduction of this 'traditional' heritage paradigm is its transformative 'redemptive' quality: a return to the (newly) secularized-sacralised 'past' is understood as a means to revive, recover and restore contemporary contexts and to re-enchant the world/ self/selfgroup-in-the-world. Crucially here too, these historical appeals of 'heritage' to the romantic, rational and colonial imagination which formed part of the response to modernity's crisis of origins and the traumatisation and dislocation wrought by industrialisation that have since resurfaced. Heritage thus re-emerged as a means to 'cure' post-modern identity crises and to counter-act late-modern experiences of rootlessness, rupture and displacement. The potency of this redemptive quality is that it spans not only metaphorical and metaphysical registers but is concerned with the 'real' in terms of the transformation of literal, material formations and operational contexts. Global organizations such as UNESCO from the Second World War onwards have been empowered to take forward this redemptive formula as the core component of post-war and post-conflict reconstruction on a world scale.

### **- Post-Heritage Wellbeing and Therapeutic Discourses**

Following the Second World War an important global shift has occurred in terms of the politics of recognition and inclusion which has also witnessed 'heritage wellbeing' pressed into the service of new and alternative constituencies: including re-investments made by those groups traditionally made marginal or disinherited from mainstream heritage discourse. Therefore, while important and necessary challenges have been made to the dominant 'Eurocentric' model of heritage by a critical postcolonial politics of identity, social justice, cultural wellbeing and alternative memory-work there has been a simultaneous re-affirmation and belief in heritage healing and in museological and archival cure vis-à-vis post-museological and post-heritage constituencies. As such, contemporary shifts of authority and the impact of new technologies of representation in conceptualizing and managing heritage resources and in creating exhibitions have revealed new aspirations and alternative modes of heritage and museological therapeutics bound up in the demands of those wanting to participate in their 'own' representation.

### **- Belonging and Wellbeing**

As such one can critically map both conceptual and operational attempts to transform heritage sites and museum spaces from bastions of colonial nationhood into more 'community-based' settings that evoke different senses of belonging and wellbeing. One particular facet of the postcolonial, late capitalist age is the growing democratisation

of heritage resources and museum spaces and the recognition and empowerment of diverse publics, cultural groups and ethnicities. These ideals are expressed in the philosophy which underscores, for example, the rise of ‘comparative heritage discourses’, post-museology and the reconfiguration of alternative technologies of representation: these include the ‘ecomuseum’, indigenised heritage resources, ‘neighborhood/community-museums’, ‘culture’/‘ethnic-specific’ museums and virtual technologies of repatriation.

### **- Pharmakon and Overdetermined Heritage**

My concern with the current state of heritage discourse, healing and cure is what I would term as its overdetermined nature and, as such, it is here I argue that the ‘pharmakon’ offers a more resonant analogy or motif to describe the contemporary context and more particularly its ‘therapeutic turn’. As Derrida reveals, in its original Greek the concept of ‘Pharmakon’ signifies a complex and seemingly contradictory set of meanings. While it is the origin of the term ‘pharmaceutical’ and is synonymous with wellbeing in terms of medicine, cure, remedy and healing it also translates as charm, poison, spell and as such can mean variously: the cure, or the illness, or its cause. Therefore, just as Derrida regards the ‘pharmakon’ as an overdetermined concept and as such illustrative of the ways in which the very notion of signification becomes overloaded I wish to similarly argue the need to problematise the ‘over-determined’ assertions (or appropriations) of ‘heritage as cure’ and ‘heritage as healing’ and the accompanying overdetermination at play. I argue that a key part of this problematisation is bound up in the need to recognise and to take responsibility for the ways in which heritage has been and continues to be, not only a symptom or cure but, the very *cause* of human suffering, dislocation and disinheritance.

### **Heritage as Cause**

Here one needs to acknowledge heritage as ‘cause’ and ‘contestation’ not only in the now infamous *cause celebre* such as the attacks on the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in Afghanistan which the UNESCO Director Matsuura dubbed as “crimes against culture” but this also requires critical museologists and heritage theorists and practitioners to address the place (or perhaps current placelessness) of cultural heritage within an alternative modes of ‘othering’ and to rethink human agency and the very condition of ‘what it is to be human’ in all its diversities. Here, one can identify how what might be described as the contemporary ‘therapeutic turn’ towards attempts to identify how cultural heritage can seek to play a ‘curative’/ healing role in the context of histories and experiences of trauma and loss and of those lifeworlds previously made absent or marginalized require further problematisation here too. The issues here are complex and difficult. The commemoration of traumatic loss, conflict and war continues to embrace the memorialisation of modernity’s violent conflicts and have not only witnessed the centring of Holocaust memory within heritage discourse but have seen the definition of historical and contemporary sites of ‘human suffering’, genocide and terror across the globe. It is here too that psychoanalytic and other theories of memory and of trauma theory have generated a significant body of texts. I would argue that rather than establishing a new, top-down, grand narrative monopoly on ‘heritage wellbeing’ and a fixed and templated strategy in terms of ‘working through’ traumatic episodes more

questions need to be raised about the nature of the healing and wellbeing sought in such contexts.

### **Everyday Heritage Magic**

Reconciliation after conflict is as much to do with re-establishing a social life as dealing with psychic injury: the two are inseparable. In this sense links have been made between heritage wellbeing and ways in which people create narrative to reveal past traumas in processes of healing which involve objects and places that have to be returned to - as tourists, refugees or as restorers. As such the memorialisation of major conflicts and events requires us to engage in a critical exploration of the ways in which attempts at collective, public healing may cause further suffering and healing to some groups. What is further required is that contemporary acts of repossession in which the dream to both define and re-possess one's lost heritage endures, as does an increased faith in, and calls for, culture as cure avoids becoming pressed into a standardized and thus ineffective format. The challenge is, therefore, of moving beyond what might be defined as new grand narrative paradigms of suffering, loss and redemption – the kind which currently pervades 'Truth and Reconciliation' projects – and of archival return, diagnosis and cure and the narrativisation of traumatic loss. Included here I would suggest is a refocusing upon alternative discourses of 'heritage magic' in the form of everyday practices which seek to bring about cure, wellbeing and protection.

### **'Othering' Heritage Healing**

It is here, however, that the limits of 'heritage as memory' needs to be brought into view. One can argue that memory and trauma, like heritage itself, can be seen as 'western' concepts and emerging from a 'Eurocentric' base with an emphasis being placed on Freudian concepts of 'speaking cures', 'working through' loss and mourning and 'closure'. As such, this raises questions concerning the need to apprehend specific cultural practices – in terms of both tangible and intangible rituals, performances and commemorative strategies, - in 'extra-' or 'non-western' contexts of suffering. Das and Feuchtwang, for example, use the alternative conceptualisation of 'critical events' and 'cataclysmic events' to explore local responses to experiences of violence in India's (Das 1995) and China's recent past respectively (Feuchtwang 2000a; 2000b). With the memorialisation of sites synonymous with Transatlantic slavery, the Gulags, the Palestinian 'Nakba' (the 'catastrophe' of 1948) and of genocide, in amongst other contexts, Armenia, Croatia, Cambodia, Nigeria and Rwanda these questions appear more urgent than ever (see DeJong and Rowlands 2008 for further discussions of heritage healing in African contexts). The ability to understand the complex psychodynamics and interactions of, amongst other factors, materiality, memory and 'persons-object' relations, with the more revelatory dimensions of heritage rituals is something that requires further investigation. It also requires a turn to alternative debates on 'otherness' and strategies of 'othering'.

### **- Bodies, Pain and Personhood**

What the UCL workshop and the creative work being undertaken by practitioners revealed was that a particular shift is needed to an area of new research and to new theorisations of cultural transmission and wellbeing: notably to critical research concerned with addressing issues of pain, illness, suffering and with the development of

alternative ‘therapeutics’ or strategies of healing and recovery. Again, the need here is to address human suffering and strategies of rebuilding and remaking worlds that mark both the ‘everyday’ and ‘critical’ and ‘cataclysmic’ ‘events’ and the specific relationships of memory-work to embodiment, to language, speech, self-representation and to the often violent break-up of known worlds and established meanings. These are contexts and situations which rather than requiring further suffering in terms of the formatting of collective experience require us to re-think questions of human agency, to apprehend the subjectivities of communities and individuals and to identify insights into the complexities of the human condition.

### **- Heritage Dignity**

What was hopeful – indeed exciting and particularly moving - about UCL’s Heritage and Wellbeing workshop was that it illustrated how projects are being created that rather than contribute further to the overdetermination of heritage healing and cure, have, by way of contrast, relocated cultural heritage within the realms of social and physical exclusion by juxtaposing critiques of the mainstream institutions of the museum and heritage site and orthodox histories of archaeology and anthropology with studies of institutions of care and containment such as the hospital, nursing home and the prison and with alternative genealogies that seek to centre-stage the marginalised subject and thus with constitutencies typically placed in the category of ‘others’. Here project work and research was responsive to understanding the threats to the loss of personhood and human dignity in the medicalisations, intellectualisations and in the physical incarceration of those suffering experiences of exclusion, stigma, marginality, illness, ‘madness’ and disability and yet again to address potential strategies in the rebuilding and remaking of worlds. Our interest and discussions thus refocused upon how persons and communities who have been ‘disinherited’ by and from mainstream cultural-transmission and memory-work require sympathetic and responsive practical projects that assist in reconstructive psychic and social identity-work and in exploring the relationships here to object-worlds, spirituality, ancestors, embodiment, language, speech and self-representation.