

“Rewriting History/ Co-curating Identity – Conserving Cultural Heritage of the Caribbean”



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Colonialism has profoundly impacted many aspects of life, not least the heritage, both in the Caribbean and in Europe. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) has posited that: “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)...To put it differently, any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.” (pp. 26-27)¹

These silences have had direct implications for what Caribbean communities believe about themselves and know about their identities; how they are recognized, valued and shared on the one hand, and consumed, commoditized and appropriated by European counterparts on the other. The impact of these interactions (innate contradictory in ascribing value) among Caribbean citizens has been palpable. Factors such as Place, People, and Period are all infused with interpretive processes which have affected (and still affects) the evolution of cultural heritage, its interpretation and conservation in contemporary societies around the globe, not just in the Caribbean.

In the context of **Place**, Lillian Guerra opined that: “the legacies of slavery, imperialism, and historical responses to it are immediately evident in all the “weightier” concepts the Caribbean associates with modernity: notions of citizenship, individual freedom, collective liberation, and nation. Regional history is not merely about the “colonial origins of poverty”; it addresses the most fundamental questions of who we are, what we believe, and how we got that way”.² Archaeological and archival investigations are allowing for greater accessibility, better understanding and deeper appreciation of these sites, structures and spaces, but it is still very much a work in progress.

Stuart Hall has observed that ‘**People** are not only legal citizens of a nation; they

¹ Trouillot, M-R, 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press

² Guerra, Lillian, 2014. ‘Why Caribbean History Matters’, in *Perspectives on History*, American Historical Association, March online, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2014/why-caribbean-history-matters>

participate in the **idea of the nation** as represented in its national culture.³ Yet as Guerra posits: “While countries of the Caribbean may be geographically tiny, their impact on the development of global economies and political thought has been fundamental. Just as Haiti was the first country to embrace blackness as an ideological position promoting true freedom and the right of self-determination, the people of the British West Indies were the first in the 20th century to invite people of the African diaspora to unite in pan-ethnic liberation movements.”⁴

On the matter of **Period**, Richard Drayton (2016) has crucially adverted that: “Time is of the essence of the colonial idea. The time of colony condemns the colonised, to a perpetual anachronism, always out of time with the mother /master time, of being ‘late’ to history, to science, to art, with lateness taken always as a condition of inferiority. The non-white, lined up in a queue behind the chariot of history.... is perpetually delayed....and so long as they accept this location, they are simultaneously out of place in the country they inhabit”.⁵ It is this state of perpetual ‘anachronism’ which requires continual critical discourse in re-appraising Diaspora histories, art and cultures.

Andy Pratt (2015) in contextualizing and characterizing the basic premise of the international heritage management regime observes that “Benedict Anderson (1991) famously offered an insightful analysis of the historical role of culture, and the material goods, practices, and celebrations to sustain and constitute the nation state. On the one hand we can see how individual states in the Global North have used culture to bolster state making; but it has used its version of cultural value in its interaction with the Global South; specifically in the case of colonial administrative systems internalizing such value judgements. On the other hand, post-Colonial states have sought to assert their own value systems and state building aspirations through culture...In this context the argument for the support of world heritage artefacts or sites can get very complex in terms of curation, ownership and control, and identity, let alone the availability of resources to manage them.”(p. 506)⁶

It is only in recent decades that these communities have become aware of and begun to respond to this shared history of silences which has been making and shaping our heritage(s), of invisibility, immobility and inequality. The origins of the artefactual, architectural and spatial resources, the selection and defining scope of the narratives, the sources of curatorial cultures and societal roles have all been impacted. These issues have been confronted and are being addressed through moving:

³ Hall, Stuart, 2006. ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’. in *Theorizing Diaspora*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, p. 233-246

⁴ Guerra, *ibid.*

⁵ Drayton, Richard, 2016. Review of *Art in the Time of Colony* by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, in *Third Text*, http://thirdtext.org/domains/thirdtext.com/local/media/images/medium/Drayton_Art_in_the_Time_of_Colony.pdf

⁶ Pratt, Andy (2015) ‘Creative Industries and Development: culture in development, or the cultures of development?’ In (Eds) C Jones, M Lorenzen, J Sapsed: *The Oxford handbook of creative industries*, Oxford University Press, pp.503-516

- from the isolation of historical incidents to the interconnection of national/regional/ international migrations.
- from monologic to dialogic interpretive and activist approaches
- from passive presentation to active engagement
- from authoritative to participatory co-curation processes
- from an object-centred to a people-centred approach
- from museum/heritage practice to museum/heritage purpose
- from primacy of place to accentuating the importance of people
- from the fixity of permanence to embracing the dialectic of diaspora
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Multidisciplinary processes, interactive technologies, social media outreach, socially inclusive practices and co-curating methodologies, are utilized in the recovery of hidden histories, the re-valuing of mutual heritages and the reconfiguring and recentering of marginalized memories. Proactive approaches to developing new historiographies, decolonizing old and articulating new architectural/art historical canons and generating multi-vocal interpretations of the histories of the region are evolving into conscious praxis in response to local/national/regional communities' perspectives. However, chronic under-development, under-staffing and under-resourcing of regional conservation practice continue to undermine and affect the sustainability of both the tangible and the intangible heritage which share, amongst our communities and the Diaspora. Ultimately societies everywhere must challenge the values of inequality, exclusion, hierarchy, and Eurocentrism if we are to reshape our heritage/s. The rewards will be profound, for both individuals and institutions if conservation activism and values-based agency serve as the foundation for Caribbean heritage action.