

Sweet Emotions: Why Feelings Matter at Heritage Sites

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Abstract:

Emotions matter. This is true for much in our lives, but it is just as vital for accessing, understanding, and using heritage. In *Emotional Heritage*, Laurajane Smith presents revealing insights into this assumption and gives further substance to a gradual, yet often inchoate, people- and affect-oriented shift in the heritage field. Analyzing an extensive set of empirical data compiled over three continents and several years, the renowned critical heritage scholar emphasizes the importance of addressing the emotional dimension of heritage genuinely and comprehensively in all heritage agendas.

Süße Emotionen: Warum Gefühle an Kulturerbestätten wichtig sind

German Abstract:

Emotionen sind wichtig. Das gilt für vieles in unserem Leben, aber ebenso für den Zugang, das Verständnis und die Nutzung von kulturellem Erbe. In *Emotional Heritage* gibt Laurajane Smith aufschlussreiche Einblicke in diese Annahme und konkretisiert den allmählichen, aber oft unvollständigen Wandel im Kulturerbefeld, sich stärker auf Personen und Emotionen auszurichten. Durch die Analyse eines umfangreichen empirischen Datenmaterials, das über drei Kontinente und mehrere Jahre hinweg zusammengetragen wurde, unterstreicht die renommierte Critical Heritage-Forscherin wie wichtig es ist, die emotionale Dimension von Kulturerbe sowohl im musealen als auch im akademischen Bereich ernsthaft und umfassend zu berücksichtigen.

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Heritage has become a powerful term to engage with representations of the past and processes of remembering and forgetting. For many, heritage is part of what can be visited at certain sites or in museums and as such has particular value for society. However, heritage is not univocal and uncontested. The events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement have recently demonstrated that heritage is always dissonant and contested by someone — particularly because different people relate differently to it. While especially critical heritage studies and museum studies have, for some time, argued that heritage is something that is not possessed but done, these more-than-representational approaches still struggle to grasp the affective sides of heritage-making in their full extent.

Emotions matter and they, too, matter for accessing, understanding, and using heritage. In *Emotional Heritage*, Laurajane Smith aims to draw a fuller picture of how aspects of affect and emotions influence and shape both the implications and consequences of heritage-making. Arguing about the often overlooked or misunderstood issue of affect/emotion around heritage, the renowned critical-heritage scholar aims to understand more thoroughly what people do at heritage sites and what their visits mean to them. Through over 5,000 interviews with visitors at 45 museums and heritage sites that address national or dissonant histories in Australia, England, and the United States, Smith puts together a vast collection of empirical data to assess the dynamics and complexities involved when different people in different contexts use heritage.

Emotional Heritage is divided into three parts. In the first part, Smith outlines her theoretical framework around performative definitions of heritage from a people-centered, critical heritage studies perspective. Responding to some dominant theoretical debates in critical heritage studies and the issue of human agency therein, she touches upon the politics of

recognition and the nature of affect and emotion. She herein argues that people as visitors make choices and that these choices matter for the social and political impact of heritage (cf. p. 4). To assess why and essentially how heritage matters to people, Smith then introduces the idea of ‘registers of engagement’ as her main analytical category. Defining them as those different modes and degrees in which people are involved in the performances of heritage-making — or as she terms it in “affective heritage practices” (p. 57–59), she points out how these registers are inflected by three factors: intensity, valence, and conservative/progressive meaning of using heritage sites and objects. As such, registers of engagement help revealing how people respond to heritage(s) and what social and political work this engagement does (cf. p. 65).

Part II outlines the history of the study and its methodology and provides an overview of the quantitative findings. In chapter 4, Smith explains how combining qualitative and quantitative analysis of her interviews in mixed-methods research allowed her to comprehensively reflect visitor experiences and to identify “the nature and material impact of the performance of museum and heritage site visiting” (p. 109). Presenting quantitative breakdowns of her interview data, Smith indeed gives ample insights into how people interact with and respond to these sites and, moreover, contextualizes certain demographic factors underlying different visitor experiences. Chapters 5 to 7 summarize the visitor responses in three comparative settings: national context, genres of sites, and demographic variables. These coded and clustered datasets form the basis for Smith to subsequently define those registers of engagement as the main category of her qualitative analysis.

The distinct heritage performances which emerged from these data and the registers of engagement they signify are then analyzed in Part III. These range from issues of learning and education (chapter 8) to reinforcement and affirmation (chapter 9), intergenerational communication (chapter 11), to recognition (chapter 12) and misrecognition (chapter 13). Smith’s analysis of different registers of engagement reveals an interrelation between the genre of heritage (sites) and how individual visitors use them in various ways (cf. p. 214). This suggests not only that there are different ‘emotional repertoires’ in a ‘complex emotional landscape’ (cf. p. 177) but also different ideological outcomes from the variety of heritage performances. Assessing the range and nuances of visitor engagements at museums and heritage sites, Smith findings point “to the diversity and consequences of how people undertaking the practice of

visiting different types of heritage use and emotionally invest in the meaning of the past for the present” (p. 4).

Adding the important aspect of affect/emotion to the conceptualization, understanding, and use of heritage, *Emotional Heritage* sets out as an addition and extension to Smith’s previous work on the performative processes of heritage making. The study particularly clarifies what was occasionally criticized of her pioneering book *Uses of Heritage* (New York 2006). Relating to critique that her conception of heritage as discursive practice was dissolving into a denounced ‘discursive turn’ of heritage studies, she counters that it rather advances a “critical realist heritage studies” (p. 21–24) that developed on human agency (as opposed to predefined mechanisms of the so-called ‘authorized heritage discourse’ (AHD) which she has coined as hegemonic discourse on national, material, and expert definitions and practices of heritage). A minor weakness of the book then seems to be the entanglement of the analysis in the author’s critique of the AHD. Despite her criticism of its predefined structures for understanding heritage (predominantly in terms of national history and Westernized conservation practices), Smith herself classifies the sites studied by their national narratives and thus constrains space for how meanings can travel beyond and across borders as well as attributions, which seems particularly vital for visitor engagements. Nevertheless, Smith makes the important argument that, while often heritage studies talk about the collective (memory, identity, ...), people engage differently with heritage and thus “the diversity of ways individuals and groups use and engage with heritage” (p. 308) must more thoroughly play its part in heritage agendas.

All in all, this study is a refreshing perspective on and in heritage debates. It may be noted, in terms of the reading experience, that Smith excelled herself in taking the reader by the hand, though the sometimes stoic guidance from paragraph to paragraph also reads somewhat heavily in parts. The findings and insights provided in the study along with the theoretical angle, however, outweigh this easily. This well-researched and easily accessible book is a major contribution to both heritage and emotion studies. In its intriguing and persuasive argumentation, *Emotional Heritage* challenges the prevailing suspicion with which heritage and museum studies have treated emotion (cf. p. 49) and counters that “if heritage ‘matters’, then there is an emotional element in the way it matters” (p. 50). Emphasizing the social context and political power of heritage-making, this study illustrates that and how visitors emotionally invest in their engagement with heritage sites and heritage-making processes. It is, therefore,

an excellent departure for further emotion studies on heritage and its social and political consequences as well as a powerful appeal to address the emotional dimension of heritage genuinely and comprehensively in both professional and academic agendas.