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Gender and heritage: performance, place and politics

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PREPRINT

BOOK REVIEW

Gender and heritage: performance, place and politics, edited by Wera Grahn and Ross J. Wilson, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, 274 pp., £27.19 (paperback), £92.00 (hardback), £17.00 (eBook), ISBN: 978-1-138-20814-8 (paperback), 978-1-138-20816-2 (hardback), 978-1-315-46009-3 (eBook)

Considering a minimal discourse surrounding gender perspectives on heritage, an observed dominance of masculinity and a skewed representation of gender and power in heritage studies, this book aims to bring forth the significance of a critical gender heritage perspective. In doing so, it not only discusses gender as socially and culturally constructed but also highlights the role of gender as an effective tool of critical enquiry in heritage management, construction and consumption. A compilation of empirically and contextually driven heritage projects in the book manages to achieve the stated objective by delegitimizing existing gender hierarchies, recognizing the need to integrate critical gender perspectives in heritage theory and practice and therefore, calling for further cross disciplinary debate that strives towards creating balanced gendered landscapes through an acknowledgement and inclusion of the roles of all gender in heritage production.

The book is a significant academic contribution to debates on gender and heritage as it addresses gender concerns within a wide range of topics situated in the domain of heritage studies such as museum displays and representation, institutions and heritage-making, intangible heritage, critical heritage pedagogy, lived heritage, ethics, accountability and interpretation in exhibition practices, heritage tourism, memory and heritage relocation. The chapters comprise contributions from academics and practitioners working in different areas such as museum studies, intersectional critical heritage studies, international law, gender studies, anthropology, indigenous studies and folklore, urban geography, history, ethnology, architecture, archaeology, art history and visual studies, etc.

The close nexus of heritage with gender is often perceived and felt through representations (or lack thereof), performances, meaning, identity, status and power across time and space. Hence, it makes sense for the book to be divided into three major sections – performance, place and politics, apart from the introductory and concluding chapters. The sixteen chapters present a multitude of approaches, the use of affective methods and an array of theories and notions rooted in feminism and queer studies, ethics, post-colonialism, cultural geography, anthropology and gender archaeology, performance studies and hermeneutic philosophy.

The first section addresses gender performativity and an exploration of identities situated within a cultural heritage context. The chapters in this section cover heritage issues as represented by an intersection of gender, sexuality and class; the dilemmas of incorporating social complexity and intersectionality in heritage production; fluidity of gender roles and gendered traditions within religious heritage; gendered patterns in making of intangible heritage and representation of societal heteronormative gender discourses in museum displays.

The second section includes chapters that analyze gender and heritage from a place perspective. It covers interactions of gendered representation in terms of heritage tourism; the politics of absence in feminist

museology; the celebration of masculinity and exclusion of women in heritage representations; the power of collaborative feminist praxis at museums; heritage pedagogy and issues of reflexivity and positionality.

The third section broadly deals with the power politics of gender and heritage encompassing theoretical concerns such as relocating queer heritage in a post-disaster context; exploring women's contribution to labour heritage in industrial workplaces; examining the gender dynamics of intangible cultural heritage using multiple approaches (feminist, anthropological and human-rights based); investigating the representation of gendered resistance narratives of the past in contemporary museological practice amidst pre-existing structural power relations and understanding dance as critical heritage in urban spaces using a feminist approach.

The case studies are quite descriptive and draw on examples from Scandinavia, UK, USA, Germany, Botswana, and Iran, which is rather commendable since the book manages to present the readers a global perspective and not restrict itself to a Eurocentric one, which often tends to ignore postcolonial contexts and histories thereby delegitimizing local narratives and traditions. In the concluding chapter, Wera Grahn challenges existing practices and functioning of heritage institutions and presents a holistic vision that considers intersectionality, i.e. integrating gender perspectives along with other social categories, such as class, ethnicity, age, etc. in heritage representation.

Although the book successfully discusses a comprehensive integration of gender issues in heritage projects and covers a heritage tourism perspective to a certain extent (from a place-making perspective at least), a mention of issues such as heritage authenticity, governance and management of dissonant heritage, gendered tourist experiences, tourist responses and interpretations, primary narratives and the gender/heritage nexus in the light of sustainable development and a tourism futures perspective, seem to be missing or inadequately covered. Since gender is a recurrent theme throughout the chapters, understanding some of the theoretical concepts borrowed from gender studies might be challenging for tourism scholars. All the chapters are well-written barring a few that display inconsistencies with grammar and flow of text. Despite these shortcomings, the book will prove to be an excellent resource for students, scholars and professionals working in the fields of gender, heritage conservation and museum studies, heritage tourism, global history, international relations, art and architectural history, performance studies, sociology, anthropology and folklore, cultural studies and urban geographers.

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