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Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene

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The New Inheritance Paradigm: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene

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Climate change and the Anthropocene are defined by intersecting patterns of cultural and ecological inheritance that unfold in time. To inherit – to take on and pass down knowledge, beliefs, values, genes or property across generations – is a multi-temporal process, one that crosses the boundaries of the social and the natural. Understanding environmental change and degradation in this way focuses attention on the highly asymmetrical modes of accumulation and transmission that underpin many of the urgent debates of our time, from reparations for loss and damage to the politics of planetary stewardship. As Thom van Dooren asks, 'in a time of ongoing extinction and colonization, a time in many ways characterized by interwoven patterns of biological and cultural loss, what does it mean to inherit responsibly?'[1]

Our response to this question builds on recent work in critical heritage studies – an emerging discipline that seeks to address the complexities and ambiguities of inheritance across varied fields of praxis. Inheritance emerges from the Latin *inheriditare* – to appoint as an heir – before moving through Old French and Middle English to attain its present definition: to receive or derive something (money, land, a title, a personal quality or predisposition) from those who came before. Heritage can be traced to the same origin, describing in Old French the property that was inherited by a person's heirs. Crucially, the *process* of inheritance depends on heritable things or traits – an adjective from which the noun 'heritage' is ultimately derived. The traditional concerns of heritage stem from this linguistic genealogy: cultural property, traditions, memories and ways of life are 'passed on' from one generation to another, forming a composite inheritance that must be cared for in some way so that future generations might also benefit from this bequest. Heritage in this sense describes nothing less than "the possessions that make us who we are,"[2] an ontological reading that corresponds with Derrida's memorable formulation of inheritance: "All the questions of the subject of

being or of what is to be (or not to be) are questions of inheritance … the being of what we are is first of all inheritance."[3] Inheritance in Derrida's thinking is also a duty or responsibility, something owed by the present to those who have come before and will come after. In this sense inheritance is "never a given … it is always a task."[4] It is here that we can begin to locate the fundamental work of *critical* heritage studies in relation to the all-pervasive processes and patterns of inheritance that structure human and more-than-human worlds.

A first point to note is that while the notion of a deep-rooted, unchanging inheritance still underlies many aspects of heritage discourse (particularly those associated with nativism and conservatism), critical thinking in this field has tended to highlight the gap between "organically" inherited customs and the "invented traditions" of modern heritage experiences.[5] Heritage in this framework emerges from a *rupture* of inheritance, brought about in different ways and at different times by forces such as the Industrial Revolution, colonialism, urbanization, globalization and post-industrial forms of mass consumption. In its modern and post-modern forms, heritage fills the gap between past and present, evoking themes of continuity and nostalgia that are played out through historical consumption and a kind of kitsch romanticism, typically oriented towards the production of origin myths connecting territory, tradition, citizenship and the nation-state. This is not to say however that certain attachments to the past are simply imposed by hegemonic forces. As a heavily commoditized industry, heritage is closely tied to global tourism and the preservation of grand architectural sites, but it is also deeply personal and embodied, drawing together both collective and individual genetic, cultural, artistic and economic modes of inheritance.

Over the past two decades numerous strands of research have developed around the micropolitics of heritage as a practice and an industry. Much of this work has sought to 'humanize' the discipline, highlighting the social, emotional, affective and cultural factors shaping the management of the past over and above issues of physical preservation and conservation – an exploration of 'why' people preserve natural and cultural heritage, rather than 'how' they could do it more effectively. Such thinking has been hugely important in driving forwards emancipatory heritage projects that seek to radically subvert the values afforded to people, things, places and cultural practices when it comes to 'saving the past, for the future' (a key trope in heritage discourse).[6]

Without denying the impact of this critical agenda, we advocate for an alternative – or perhaps complementary – model of heritage that foregrounds different processes of 'taking on' and 'passing down' across human and non-human worlds. Through this approach we aim to engage with the ways in which heritage and conservation practices, broadly understood, actively resource the construction of future worlds.[7] This reorientation asks us to rethink contradictory approaches found in natural and cultural heritage management, such as the celebration of existence value in biodiversity conservation and the prioritization of social value in the protection of cultural artifacts. The Anthropocene is both a prompt for this reconceptualization and a focal point for assessing the implications of an expanded heritage field.[8] In contrast with earlier work in critical heritage, much of this thinking departs from the premise that heritage should not be reduced to a human construct, looking instead to processes of care, inheritance, sustainability and connectivity *in excess of the human*, as a way of thinking through the entangled and dialogical nature of all heritage processes. This is no simple task, but we might find an opening or fissure in the call to reimagine heritage in the wake of the posthumanities, which aims to dislodge anthropocentric concepts of memory, transmission, precarity and affect, all of which are central to the emergence and ongoing work of heritage across various domains.[9]

This approach aligns with and builds on the emergence of what we might call the new inheritance paradigm. Across science, philosophy, culture and the arts the question of inheritance has been posed anew in various disciplinary contexts, from environmental criticism to biogenetics. There are many branches to this reconceptualization, but a central thread can be located in the erosion of boundaries between human and nonhuman, between subject and object, and between 'natural' systems and 'cultural' formations. As Donna Haraway notes, the whole question of nature/culture is about "the dilemma of inheritance, of what we have inherited, in our flesh."[10] This 'we' extends beyond the human to consider the diffuse material, chemical and biological residues 'taken on' and 'passed down' across social and ecological worlds. At the same time, our current ecological predicament might be usefully understood as a crisis of inheritance, where specific socio-cultural processes have pushed biological and planetary systems to the brink of catastrophe.[11] In many ways the complexities of the Anthropocene and climate change circle back to this central problem: how to account for and ultimately redirect the entangled inheritances of capital and toxins, of fossil fuels and marginalized groups, of political ideologies and nonhuman bodies. The new inheritance paradigm emerges from and documents such entanglements in a multitude of

ways, gesturing towards new pathways for critical research and practice at the intersections of heritage and the environmental humanities.

No longer to be seen primarily as a set of places or things to be 'saved' in the present, for the future, heritage as we understand it is an intersubjective and inherently transdisciplinary space where ongoing concerns over climate breakdown, environmental justice, more-than-human legacies and alternative modes of care and stewardship might be worked through by different actors in different ways.[12] In this sense critical heritage studies poses a valuable set of questions that correspond with the geopolitics of the Anthropocene and emerging concepts of "ecological inheritance."[13] What are the concepts, practices and methods that will enable heritage to be 'worked' differently in the context of the Anthropocene? To what extent might *doing* and *thinking* heritage in new ways help us to engage with the systemic foundations and (potentially) dire consequences of this new geo-philosophical reality? What pasts should be prioritized in this new framework, and what futures might we open up by reconceptualizing heritage? Historical inequities and present injustices that shadow both heritage and the Anthropocene as universalizing concepts are brought to the surface through such questions, which provide an important foundation for further transdisciplinary inquiry across these fields.

To begin to map out these intersections we need to consider heritage as object, as process, as method and as field of praxis. These vantage points offer different ways of thinking through the critical dimensions of heritage and inheritance in, of and after the Anthropocene. Roy Scranton's slight but engaging book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* offers one way of thinking about heritage within this new geological framework. For Scranton the climactic changes wrought by humanity signal the demise of global capitalist civilization: "The sooner we confront this situation," he argues, "the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality."[14] Tellingly, Scranton identifies the "variety and richness of our collective cultural heritage" as one of the key facets of this new humility.[15] This leads to a familiar assertion made in the face of the apocalypse: build arks. These would not just be biological but cultural, carrying forward genetic data and 'endangered wisdom' alike: "The library of human cultural technologies that is our archive, the concrete record of human thought in all languages that comprise the entirety of our existence as human beings, is not only the seed stock of our future intellectual growth, but its soil, its source, its womb."[16]

Such projects are already underway. *The Memory of Mankind* initiative for example aims to store millions of ceramic tablets recording human life in all its banality and diversity deep underground in the mountains of Austria. *The Arch Mission* meanwhile looks to outer space as a site of preservation, with hi-tech storage devices designed to last billions of years planned for distribution across the solar system and beyond (one such 'Archive of Civilization' was attached to a privately funded lunar lander that crashed into the moon in 2019, another will be orbiting the sun for the next 30 million years in the glove compartment of Elon Musk's Tesla). These join well-known global projects such as the Voyager Golden Records and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault as premeditated fragments of material, cultural or biological inheritance: a 'gift' from the present, to the future. What such projects often fail to register however is the fact that – as Scranton admits (echoing arguments in Derrida's *Archive Fever*) – 'the heritage of the dead' always needs nurturing: "This nurturing is a practice not strictly of curation… but of active attention, cultivation, making and remaking. It is not enough for the archive to be stored, mapped, or digitized. It must be *worked*."[17]

While *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* relies on a familiar conception of heritage to take forward certain aspects of the past and the present into the future, other ways of confronting the more-than-human entanglements of the new inheritance paradigm ask fundamental questions about what heritage *is*. Take genealogical research for example – a popular heritage pastime that has developed into a multinational industry supported by DNA testing, in-depth archival research and popular entertainment.[18] Typically framed through human-focused narratives of familial descent, economic inheritance, individual triumph or repressed trauma, the search for ancestors is symptomatic of the free-floating nature of modern life, which searches for roots in historical traces and half-remembered echoes of the past. Such pursuits veer between individual curiosity about lost family members and highly politicized attempts to prove certain connections to history. What these investigations rarely draw attention to however is the fact we are multilineage organisms made up of various human and non-human genomes: "The volume of the microbial organisms in our bodies is about the same as the volume of our brain, and the metabolic activity of those microbes is about equivalent to that of our liver. The microbiome *is* another organ; so we are not *anatomically* individuals at all."[19] This model of genetic heritage is anathema to a discipline and industry built on the prioritization of human modes of inheritance (whether in cultural, biological or individual form), but it may prove vital if we are to rethink notions of care and vulnerability in the age

of the Anthropocene. Just as the Anthropocene destabilizes long-held certainties about the break between human and natural history, so recent work in biology, anthropology and the environmental sciences underlines the co-evolution and embedded entanglement of all life. As Haraway puts it, "critters – human and not – become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in earthly worlding and unworlding."[20]

The above quotes are taken from the edited collection *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* – a volume which takes the notion of entanglement as a critical point of departure to reconsider the 'monsters' and 'ghosts' of the Anthropocene. Monsters in this reading are held to signify the symbiosis of "enfolding bodies" against the "conceit of the individual," while ghosts act as guides to the "haunted lives and landscapes" of environmental degradation.[21] As the editors note, a major challenge of the Anthropocene is "how to think geological, biological, chemical, and cultural activity together, as a network of interactions with shared histories and unstable futures."[22] Ghosts and monsters are not fantastical figures from this perspective; they are "observable parts of the world" that we might learn "through multiple practices of knowing."[23] Arts of living then are necessary to counteract threats to our very survival. Crucially, this cuts across technological solutions to ecological collapse, new modes of storytelling and creative practice, and political encounters with diverse forms of oppression and marginalization: "There is something mythlike about this task: we consider anew the living and the dead; the ability to speak with invisible and cosmic beings; and the possibility of the end of the world."[24]

Working along this grain, we might situate heritage as a vital though often overlooked aspect of the Earth's very 'livability'. There are multiple pathways to think with in this regard. Non-Western practices of care and conservation for example often dissolve the boundaries between natural and cultural heritage through their insistence on the spirituality and enchantment of material things. Alternatively, we might consider Indigenous claims of 'human rights for nonhumans' as a politically charged mode of heritage protection across natural-cultural worlds.[25] Identifying heritage as a key component in the 'arts of living' underlines the need to rethink and redirect notions of care, curation, management and preservation, from museum objects to urban landscapes. These activities draw on and intersect with key questions in geology, biology, history, anthropology and the environmental

humanities. Heritage *in* the Anthropocene must embrace this multiplicity to encourage new ways of imagining and engaging with the past in the present to shape alternative futures.

An important line of inquiry here concerns the interpretive nature of many heritage experiences. Various storytelling devices are employed by heritage to create links between past, present and future, from audio guides and wall plaques to films and museum displays. As well as constantly rethinking these tools, we need to construct alternative genealogies to populate them. One of the most notable reverberations of the Anthropocene has been a renewed commitment to entangled histories when describing the emergence of the modern world. Such narratives bring together histories of resource extraction and social formations, marginalized voices and non-human agencies. A heritage *of* the Anthropocene will depend on these more-than-human stories and entangled lines of descent. Crucially, such accounts also bring to the surface unintended material residues and socio-political legacies. Despite – or perhaps because of – its geological framing, the Anthropocene cannot be divorced from urgent and lingering historical questions surrounding slavery, empire, colonialism and the rise of capital. Again, in this sense the notion of Anthropocene heritage extends rather than subverts progressive and emancipatory work in critical heritage studies scholarship and related fields.

Finally, the possibility of heritage *after* the Anthropocene points in two directions at once. The first concerns the future legacies diligently being produced today (plastic bodies and toxic landscapes, scarred minds and broken ecosystems); the second concerns the critical gesture of *post*-Anthropocene thinking – a peculiar consequence of the rapid take-up of the term in the arts and humanities and the equally swift recognition that it is wholly unsatisfactory as a socio-political diagnostic. What of heritage and the Capitalocene, or the Plantationocene, or the Chthulucene? Such labels ask us to look again at the differential legacies and material disparities of a planet altered by human activities. The challenge of the Anthropocene is such that entirely new modes of relating past, present and future are liable to emerge in its wake, whether as unintended consequences of inheritance and precarity or as subversive strategies of survival and flourishing.

In many ways, heritage is a paradigmatic apparatus of the Anthropocene. Through varied processes of collecting, conserving and storytelling, heritage practice (broadly defined) has come to shape how different communities understand their relationship to the past in the

context of capitalist modernity. It is increasingly clear however that the strategies of preservation, care and stewardship that have emerged under this system need challenging at every turn, especially where they reinforce modes of oppression related to nationalism, colonialism, militarism and extractivism. Inheriting responsibly means recognizing the inequities and injustices that have come to structure the present and will continue to impact the future without radical change. At the same time, it means questioning the *work* of inheritance across human and non-human worlds. Given the central role heritage has come to play in defining this work, critical and creative approaches within this field now have the potential to resonate far beyond familiar disciplinary boundaries.

Endnotes

This essay is an edited version of the introduction to *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene*, edited by Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling and first published by Open Humanities Press in its Critical Climate Change series in 2020. The original version of this piece, and the rest of the book, is available to download for free in Open Access at http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/deterritorializing-the-future/

[1] Thom van Dooren, "Life at the Edge of Extinction: Spectral Crows, Haunted Landscapes and the Environmental Humanities," *Humanities Australia* 5 (2014): 8–22, 11.

[2] Nora in Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 410.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 54.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[6] See, for example, Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013); Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (eds). *Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, practices and infrastructures* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016).

[7] Rodney Harrison, Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, Sharon Macdonald, Nadia Bartolini, Esther Breithoff, Harald Fredheim, et al. *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices* (London: UCL Press, 2020).

[8] Brit Solli et al. "Some Reflections on Heritage and Archaeology in the Anthropocene," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2011); 40–88; Matt Edgeworth et al. "Archaeology of the Anthropocene," *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* Vol.1 No.1 (2014), 73–132; Rodney Harrison, "Beyond 'Natural' and 'Cultural' Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene," *Heritage and Society* Vol. 8 No. 1 (2015): 24–42;; Bjørnar J. Olsen, B. and Þóra Pétursdóttir, "Unruly Heritage: Tracing Legacies in the Anthropocene," *Arkæologisk Forum* 35 (2016): 38–46; Þóra Pétursdóttir, "Climate Change? Archaeology and Anthropocene," *Archaeological Dialogues* Vol. 24, No. 2 (2017): 175–205.

[9] Colin Sterling, "Critical Heritage and the Posthumanities: Problems and Prospects," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 11(2020): 1029–1046.

[10] Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway (*Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 221.

[11] See Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[12] See Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Cailtin DeSilvey and Rodney Harrison, "Anticipating Loss: Rethinking Endangerment in Heritage Futures." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* Vol. 26, No. 1 (2020):1–7.

[13] John Odling-Smee and Kevin N. Laland, "Ecological Inheritance and Cultural Inheritance: What Are They and How Do They Differ?" *Biological Theory* 6 (2011): 220–230.

[14] Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (San Francisco: City Light, 2015), 23.

[15] Ibid, 24.

[16] Ibid, 109.

[17] Ibid, 99, emphasis in original.

[18] See Paul Basu, *Highland Homecomings: Genealogy and Heritage Tourism in the Scottish Highland Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[19] Scott F. Gilbert, "Holobiont by birth: Multilineal individuals as the concretion of cooperative processes," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, ed. by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), M73-M90. emphasis in original.

[20] Donna Haraway, "Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying with the Trouble," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, M45.

[21] Tsing et al. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, M3.

[22] Ibid. M176.

[23] Ibid. M3.

[24] Ibid. M176.

[25] See Denis Byrne, *Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia* (New York: Routledge; 2014); John Kelechi Ugwuanyi, "Human-Nature Offspringing: Indigenous Thoughts on Posthuman Heritage," in *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene*, ed. by Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling (London: Open Humanities Press. 2020), 266–288; Alexandre Surrallés, "Human rights for nonhumans?" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* Vol. 7, No. 3 (2017): 211–235.