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RESEARCH UPDATE

Heritage Futures

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Introduction

Heritage Futures is a four-year collaborative international research programme (2015–2019) funded by a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 'Care for the Future' Theme Large Grant, and supported additionally by its host universities and partner organisations. The research programme involves ambitious interdisciplinary research to explore the potential for innovation and creative exchange across a broad range of heritage and related fields, in partnership with a number of academic and non-academic institutions and interest groups. It is distinctive in its comparative approach which aims to bring heritage conservation practices of various forms into closer dialogue with the management of other material and virtual legacies such as nuclear waste management. It is also distinctive in its exploration of different forms of heritage as future-making practices. This brief paper provides an introduction to the research programme and its aims and methods.

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The research programme

Our research considers sets of practices within a range of different domains which are dedicated to conserving and perpetuating ideas, words, objects, places, species, persons and things into the future. We suggest that a comparative analysis of different kinds of conservation and preservation practices will expand the notion of heritage in creative and productive ways. The research programme aims to provide intellectual and practical templates for alternative ways of thinking about and managing heritage and other conservation targets. It will highlight the advantages and problems of particular approaches and show what can be done otherwise. It will also open up the question of what we mean by 'heritage' and how this might be understood in the future.

The project works across four themes, each of which identifies a challenge for the future of heritage and looks at a range of institutions which aim to tackle it in various ways. The themes are:

- *Uncertainty* – which investigates how to deal with radical uncertainty about the distant future, by considering how to preserve knowledge about sites for final disposal of nuclear waste (see Holtorf and Högberg 2015a, 2015b), the design of messages sent from earth into outer space, and selected practices of world heritage designation and management (for example in the Lake District, UK; **Fig. 1**);

Figure 1: The pump house of Thirlmere reservoir in the Lake District hides its intervention in the landscape behind heritage tropes. Concepts of 'forever' overlap with 'timeless nature' (Photo Sarah May).

- *Transformation* – which explores how remembrance can be sustained within features that are allowed to undergo active processes of change and material transformation, with a comparative focus on management of built heritage and transitional landscapes (DeSilvey 2006, 2014);
- *Profusion* – which looks at how museums and households decide what to keep in the face of a profusion of things produced by mass production; and,
- *Diversity* – which compares ways of valuing and managing biological, cultural and linguistic diversity in indigenous landscape management, biodiversity conservation programmes, endangered language preservation programmes, seed banks (**Fig. 2**), herbaria and frozen zoos (repositories of genetic materials from endangered animals and plants stored at low temperatures in liquid nitrogen).

Within these thematic areas, we undertake fieldwork focussing on heritage and other forms of conservation practices to understand what is done and why – including the assumptions and values of which participants might be unaware – with a range of groups and institutions who work within different heritage and heritage-like fields. We then aim to work with these groups to identify how specific strategies and practices from each of these fields might be creatively re-deployed in others.

Our methods draw broadly on archaeological, material and visual ethnography (see especially Gonzalez-Ruibal 2014; Meskell 2012; Pink 2009, 2012; Pink and Morgan 2013; Pink, Morgan and Dainty 2014), but also incorporate documentary research, creative artistic practice, ethnographic film making and creative knowledge exchanges. Here we are influenced by the work of Holmes and Marcus (2005, 2008; Marcus 2013) and others (e.g. Rabinow et al 2008) on multi-sited *paraethnography*, in which ethnographers come together with other expert knowledge producers in the development of shared, critical insights which cut across the fields in which we work. In addition to theme-specific events, we organise cross-cutting, programme-wide events, including academic symposia, collaborative workshops

Figure 2: The Svalbard Global Seed Vault (SGSV), located on the island of Spitsbergen in Arctic Norway, is one of the Heritage Futures programme partners. Co-operated by Nordgen (the Nordic Genetic Resource Center) and the Global Crop Diversity Trust, it aims to provide a secure repository for the maintenance of global crop diversity (Photo Rodney Harrison).

and experimental exhibition work (after Macdonald and Basu 2007). The outcomes of the project will be shared with practitioners, policy makers and academics through a range of outputs, including training and capacity building resources, policy briefings, short films, books and journal articles.

Conceptually, the project is influenced by previous work on the application of assemblage and actor network theory to the critical investigation of heritage and museums (Macdonald 2009, Harrison 2013; Bennett et al. 2017), and the comparative perspectives of the Endangerment and its Consequences project (Dias and Vidal 2016). The project is also influenced by the 'ontological turn' in the social sciences, in particular Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism and various aspects of Science and Technology Studies in seeing heritage practices of various kinds as enacting new realities through contingent practices of assembling and reassembling bodies, techniques, technologies, materials, values, temporalities and spaces in particular ways. Central here is a notion of plural heritage ontologies-understood as the world making, future assembling capacities of heritage practices of different types and the ways in which different heritage practices might be seen to enact different realities and hence to assemble radically different futures (Harrison 2015).

Collaborations

Through our advisory board, empirical research and knowledge exchanges, we work with more than twenty non-academic partner organisations who represent a range of different interests in the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, including museums, endangered language documentation programmes, cultural heritage site managers, frozen zoos herbaria, seed banks, botanical gardens, landscape rewilding projects, national parks and other protected area managers, as well as a range of government and non-government organisations tasked with representing the interests of biodiversity and cultural heritage preservation in a number of different ways. We also work across fields which are not conventionally understood as 'heritage' fields, such as nuclear waste disposal and extra-terrestrial communication initiatives, which

we think share certain objectives with heritage and might be productively brought into conversation with it. These organisations include Arts Council England, Associação Transumância e Natureza (ATN) (Portugal), Association of Independent Museums (AIM) (UK), CITiZAN (UK), Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (EDLP) (based in UK), The Frozen Ark (based in UK), Future Terrains (based in UK), The Heritage Alliance (England), International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) (based in France), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (based in Switzerland), Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (UK), The National Trust (UK), New School House Gallery (York, UK), One Earth New Horizons Message Initiative (based in Hawaii), NordGen (who manage the Svalbard Global Seed Vault) (Norway and Sweden), *Svensk Karnbranslehantering AB* (SKB-the Swedish Nuclear Fuel and Waste Management Company), National Museum of World Cultures (Netherlands), UNESCO (based in France), Wheal Martyn Trust (Cornwall, UK) and York Museums Trust (York, UK). We also host partner research exchanges with a number of other research projects currently based at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, Minzu University of China, Texas A&M University at Qatar with UCL Qatar, and University of Gothenburg.

The research programme will run for four years, from April 2015–March 2019, and in addition to its empirical research, will host a series of events, workshops and symposia. For news and updates relating to our research, please see www.heritage-futures.org and follow us on twitter @Future_Heritage.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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