

Book Review

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Susan L. T. Ashley and Degna Stone (eds) *Whose Heritage? Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall's Post-Nation Britain*, 2023, London: Routledge. E-book, open access, pp.v+216

In my work I am interested in understanding what is at play when people who are in a position to lead change, set in motion work addressing dangers and inequalities that they do not themselves have experience of. Speaking to the theme of this special edition, this is a recognizable condition of whiteness; the epistemological confidence in one's ability to fix or solve a problem – in this case racism – without taking full account of what we do not understand. One of the many things I admire about Stuart Hall's work is that he speaks so precisely about "race", addressing it within the specific cultural and social contexts of Britain, at a particular conjuncture. His seminal keynote, 'Un-settling "The Heritage": Re-Imagining the Post-Nation' approaches whiteness with caution. It is taken up as a rendering of national belonging and bordering, rather than a way of seeing and being in the world. Whiteness can be 'worked with' if it is made visible and can be inclusive of its own inconsistencies (Hall 2023: 17). The essay speaks to the moment in which Hall was writing: New Labour's aspirational confidence in the possibilities of a post-nation Britain (Lewis 2023), emerging in the wake of Margaret Thatcher's "tight little island" and widespread anxiety relating to the loss of old England (Gilroy 2010; Gilmour and Schwarz 2015). The keynote was delivered at a conference co-ordinated by the Arts Council England in November 1999, which brought together heritage and arts practitioners and policy makers to 'debate and challenge our concept of heritage in the context of today's multicultural Britain' (Smith et al. 1999: 5). What Britain was, what it had the potential to become, and who should lead this work, was up for debate. For Hall this included the possibility for the radical decentring of a monolithic, white English nationalism: "The Heritage".

Ashley and Stone's edited volume draws together responses to Hall's work collated in 2019, 20 years on. The book's chapters trace a shift in the conversation, and prompt reflection on whiteness as praxis. Together they present a crisis that is less about what is included and who self-represents in "The Heritage", than it is about the institutional and professional structures of practice that underpin it. In chapter three, Clara Arokiasamy illustrates how anti-racist museum work was conceived of differently by senior white members of staff who felt they were working towards solutions, in contrast to their Black colleagues who foregrounded structural challenges. Meanwhile, in Beverly Prevatt Goldstein's contribution, 'Searching for New Perspectives on Heritage', we see a consolidation of surveys that examine the impact of educational programmes about the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans in the UK, US, and Caribbean. Prevatt demonstrates the problems that can occur when educators centre a traumatic history, without sharing its ancestry. In chapter 12, Etienne Joseph eloquently reflects on the practice of preservation and its emphasis on keeping, without taking account of the realities of remembrance as an active part of living. Whiteness bubbles underneath the surface as the application of distance in a context that demands a proximity of intimate understanding and familiar recognition. As noted by Joseph, this work at a distance may open up possibilities for reform, but it is also susceptible to being misunderstood as radical dismantling. This reflects a tension that runs through the book between advocacy for change within existing structures of practice, and the quiet recognition that this 'slow-moving revolution' may yet require new foundations (Hall, cited in Joseph 2023: 173). There is broad agreement that there is value in formal archival spaces as important sites of recognition and re-imagining,

which craft national narratives of belonging. However, Hall's concern that 'things sometimes get worse, moving in the opposite direction' (Hall and Schwarz 2017:211) is shared with an underlying unease.

The questions raised by Hall in 1999 continue to dominate the ethical crisis museums in the UK are grappling with; this includes issues of representation, inclusion, and wider recognition that museums are both unequivocally political and have political potential. Ashley and Stone's retrospective arrives at a critical moment as the sector finds itself increasingly wrestling with this crisis in public. Caught in the unfolding of the pandemic, the widespread protests for Black Lives Matter in 2020, and the institutional aspiration to self-present as anti-racist, the volume offers an archive of its own. Chapters were written in the aftermath of that scramble for actions, not words, as white-led museums pressed forwards with reform (Zetterström-Sharp 2024). For many leaders, however, these were still new words. Emboldened by anti-racist training, working groups were established, reports commissioned, and policy reform set in motion, assuming comprehension of the issues at hand. What these chapters highlight is that whilst this sudden burst of activity was welcome, it was rarely sustainable. Important research by Sandra Shakespeare, Qanitah Malik and Edinam Edem-Jordijie presented in chapter seven of the book highlights how the drive towards historical truth telling has shifted institutional heritages, bringing what was on the margins into the centre and therefore serving to foreground "troubling legacies". But again, there is also unease here; in all this talk of change why are we still asking the same questions? Just as Hall saw a quest for uncomplicated, monolithic historical narratives, perhaps the sector today seeks the same completeness through its ethics; the impatience to find fixed solutions to necessarily roving problems. Whiteness emerges in the volume as ethical impatience; a desire to sort out systemic issues without taking proper account of their historical and institutional roots. Whilst the sector may welcome critique and seek refuge in statements of solidarity with movements of change, there remains an underlying belief that morally and intellectually we are already where we need to be.

Drawing upon Hall's call for un-settling and subverting, chapters address historical accountability and the politics of historical production, representation and self-reflection, and cultural production. It is very good to see such a wide range of different perspectives and positionalities brought to the question of Hall's legacy, and this assessment of where we are now. We hear from activists, educators, archaeologists, archivists, academics, poets, and artists. One of the defining features of the immediate post-COVID moment was that museums were forced to contend with their public value and position as institutions within a much wider national landscape of acute needs and expectations. Some became warm spaces, others transient digital platforms for critical conversations; some sent care packages to people living through incarceration, whilst others turned their attention to programming their outdoor spaces. Museum scholarship can sometimes struggle to look beyond the cultural peculiarities and particularities of museums as material archives, as places of object-based learning, or as sites for the production of knowledge through ordering and cataloguing. But as Hall recognised, they are both the product and protector of a much wider national cultural politics. This volume is an important reflection on the fact that what we are contending with can only be understood by first looking at what is happening outside of and despite museums. In this volume, this includes liberatory theatre, documentary making, music, poetry, and radical community archiving.

Just as the immediate aftermath of 2020 was contending with a politics both distinct from and in conversation with 1999, in 2025 we are arguably at a new conjuncture. Museums across the UK are preparing themselves for the very real possibility of active censorship and defunding under a populist government, as seen across Europe and the US. There is a new cultural politics at play. Whilst for Hall "The Heritage" was being both crafted and re-inscribed by archival institutions as purveyors of dominant institutional expertise, today we find this expertise being unsettled once again. But this is not the inclusive process that Hall imagined when he spoke of re-imagining the post-nation; rather, we are contending with a volatile, unpredictable, and xenophobic landscape that cannot be reasoned with through history. What I am struggling with in my own work is understanding how and if museums as historical defenders of white entitlement can carve out their space and responsibility within this context, where calls for

dismantling come with such fundamentally divergent futures for rebuilding in mind. Where I ended up, having read this book, was that even as we imagine and engage with heritage as something that has the potential to feel complete – to represent, to centre, to tell the right historical truths – what we are actually contending with is an inherent incompleteness, which can be as oppressive and exclusionary, as it is liberatory. Hall’s provocation that heritage, like culture, is always in a state of being remade, rings true. However, in seeking to resolve their crises, our institutions nonetheless imagine a place where the right kind of heritage might be found whole. I am left with the question of what it means to provide space for a collective and contested heritage to “live and breathe”, whilst also ensuring that people are safe in this context of unease, where expertise is being unsettled from the left and the right.

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