Theorizing digital cultural heritage: a critical discourse


With the adoption of the UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage in 2003, this anthology of essays is a timely publication and a consummme attempt to grasp the most contemporary developments and key issues in a rapidly and ever-changing field. Part of the Media In Transition series, Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse is primarily concerned with the impact emerging digital technologies have made on traditional practices in cultural heritage organizations. Theoretical and practical perspectives are presented and the book is intended as a primary and secondary reference resource serving an audience that includes students, academics and practitioners working in a variety of disciplines and professional environments that are related to cultural heritage.

The book contains a comprehensive introduction and 22 essays divided into three sections, each emphasising different aspects of contemporary interests and concerns with digital technologies as they relate to cultural heritage. Most of the essays follow a formal structure with an introduction and conclusion; each is thoroughly referenced and includes a comprehensive bibliography. The editors and many of the contributors to this collection come from museum and collections environments and thus it is not surprising that many of the essays address the interaction between digital technologies and cultural heritage from a perspective that tends to a concept of cultural heritage that privileges objects and collections over heritage sites and landscapes. However, this does not diminish the quality of contributions given that so much of the technical and theoretical development of digital technologies has taken place in the collections sector internationally led by major collecting institutions such as national libraries, museums, archives and galleries. Gavan McCarthy’s essay ‘Finding a Future for Digital Cultural Heritage Resources Using Contextual Information Frameworks’ in part II is a good example of this, addressing what are perhaps the most fundamental issues relating to the preservation of digital cultural heritage by creating and maintaining contextual information that ensures heritage – in any form – remains accessible into the future.

The essays in part I – Replicants/Object Morphologies – explore the relationship between digital and physical collections challenging ‘conventional understandings of museum representation, art, history and culture and their application to digital objects and Indigenous collections’ (Cameron & Kenderdine 2007: 5). Several essays in this section explore the possibilities of digital technologies for the collection, management, interpretation and preservation of Indigenous cultural heritage. ‘The Materiality of Virtual Technologies: A New Approach to Thinking about the Impact of Multimedia in Museums’ by Andrea Witcomb and Deidre Brown’s ‘Te Ahua Hiko: Digital Cultural Heritage and Indigenous Objects, People, and Environments’ both use case studies to explore this theme and are particularly enlightening.

Part II – Knowledge Systems and Management: Shifting Paradigms and Models – deals with the impact of new technology on the development of documentation that supports cultural collections and their interpretation. In this part, the essays are again primarily from the perspective of the collections sector and together, combine to explore in depth issues arising from the rapid evolution of digital technology as it is being applied by cultural heritage institutions. The role of collection institutions - museums, galleries, libraries, archives – as sites of education and learning is the emphasis in this part and examples are drawn internationally. Ross Perry and Nadia Arbach’s essay ‘Localised, Personalised, and Constructivist: Space for Online Museum Learning’ is a thorough examination of the commitment to this endeavour in the UK.

In part III – Cultural Heritage and Virtual Systems – the emphasis on cultural heritage as collections and objects rather than sites is somewhat remedied by the inclusion of several pieces by contributors from backgrounds in architecture and archaeology. Here the emphasis is on the creation of virtual systems to model, document and interpret archaeological, architectural and environmental research. Part III engages broader perspectives and it is interesting that many of these essays relate case studies that cover a similarly broader worldview such as ‘Urban Heritage Representations in Hyperdocuments’ by Rodrigo Parailzo and José Ripper Kös.

It is a nice irony that a book dedicated to the changes wrought by digital technology is so finely designed and produced. Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse is not a text to be picked up and read from beginning to end but this is a book to dip in and out of according to one’s needs and interests. Cameron and Kenderdine have gathered some timely and illuminating treasures that celebrate developments in digital technology and the rich possibilities it offers to the cultural heritage sector.

Kim Burrell

Ochre and rust: artefacts and encounters on australian frontiers


In his book, Ochre and Rust, Philip Jones explores the wider issues of the engagement between Aboriginal people and the new influx of settlers at the new frontiers in Australia. His use of museum objects from the South Australian Museum, as the springboard to illustrate and develop the often subtle but significant interactions between new and the old cultures, is aided by a lucid and engaging, yet scientifically rigorous writing style. Quoting from the introduction to the book by way of
explaining the title, ‘The biographies of these objects span that frontier, and are the more fascinating because of it. Having brushed against both cultures they wear a double patina, of ochre and rust.’

Museology has long presented objects, individually or collectively, as the entry to their story; a practice the heritage profession is moving closer to as we realise the human, intangible values associated with our built heritage. Nevertheless, the practice generally relates only to the object, place or genre which, in ‘Ochre and Rust’, Philip Jones shows to be only a shadow of the story they can really tell if we put our minds to it. Whilst his theme in considering the nine artefacts he has selected from the First Fleet to the 1930’s is the story of the early New Settler / Aboriginal frontier interaction, which may not be particularly relevant to the heritage profession, it is a vivid example of how heritage places could be used to illuminate our history and culture.

One example particularly struck me with its close association with ‘cultural routes’. The chapter title Philip Jones has used is ‘That Special Property’, which refers to an 18cm cake of red ochre from the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. As a collectible item it was hardly high on any agenda, it was just a natural paint the Aboriginal people used to decorate themselves, their implements and weapons; but looking into where it came from and how it came to be in the collection of the South Australian Museum, opened the door to vivid illustration of the efforts of both Aboriginal people and new settlers to work through the inevitable friction from the New Settler expansion into central Australia. The particular mine the ochre comes from was considered unique by the Aboriginal people of central Australia due to trace elements which give it a silvery sheen, much admired when applied as body decoration. As such there is a long history of cultural mores relating to access to it and the traditional ‘cultural routes’ used by remote groups to access the mine. The manner in which Aboriginal people and new settlers co-operated, or at least pragmatically worked together, to allow the traditional mine and associated routes and practices to continue, illustrates a high level of ingenuity and ability to work through problems. Philip Jones is not content to let matters rest at this point but further delves into the underlying politics of the period which led to the government declaring the mine site a protected area to prevent its destruction by mining leases reflecting ‘a concern – in Adelaide’s official circles at least- for rigorous application of the rule of law to all parties on the South Australian frontier, black and white’.

Many times I found myself musing that he was drawing a long bow but quickly came with a mental apology as I realised how the particular aspect fitted into the whole. I have no doubt that in writing in this manner it would be very easy to get into a rambling mode and as such would require a very structured approach to be true to the primary focus. But we clearly have opportunities in our cultural heritage field to use the interest and education deriving from such an approach to engage with the broader community to help conserve our large body of tangible heritage.

Whilst this would be a fascinating book for most people interested in Australian history, for professionals who have to look to presenting the values of a place they are studying or working on it would form an invaluable aid to writing in this genre. To most of us this is a whole new arena and I strongly recommend a quiet read of ‘Ochre and Rust’ for the stimulus it can give to our writing on the places we care about.

Derek Hallam
analysis touches the right buttons for me. Paterson presents original research - he is able to make the most of the ‘weak patterning’ of archaeological data that characterise the surface assemblages at Strangways Springs (pp. 121-127) and is also able to apply the work of others to his study – for example, drawing on Rowse (1998), to examine how rationing on pastoral settlements subverted early-period violent conflict by rendering cross-cultural relationships more peaceful (pp. 141-142, 168). The table (3.1, pp. 62-63) listing both Aboriginal and colonial settler use of arid-zone flora and fauna is an innovative and useful tool (though perhaps underused here) for exploring cultural linkages across knowledge domains. I enjoyed the description of the way in which the nineteenth century reading room of the Adelaide State Library, where Paterson pores through “boxes of aged letters wrapped in string” (p. 130) (so Maria von Trapp), provides an intimacy with the colonial period he is investigating.

However, I do have a few quibbles. As a body of work that draws on a variety of published material, it seems to lack a consistent style, a point illustrated by the assortment of north arrows, scales and symbols used in the many figures. The biographical map (Fig. 6.7) could have been overlayed on a map or air photo to provide a spatial reality to a lived experience. The text works best where it is personal and where there is a regular questioning of the data, but less well where it becomes more technical. Also, there is some odd choice of language, such as the use of the term archaeological ‘fingerprint’ (p. 95) in place of the more widely recognised ‘signature’ (used on p. 167).

*The Lost Legions* is the third publication in the Indigenous Archaeologies Series and was preceded by *After Captain Cook*, edited by Rodney Harrison and Christine Williamson. *The Lost Legions* is a valuable addition to this Series because Paterson is able to weave the detail of a local spatial history into reflections on the global colonial project. “What relevance is knowing about this to you?” asks Paterson (p. 2); my answer is that conservation practice without an understanding of the complexities and consequences of Indigenous-colonial settler encounter will be deficient. I recommend the book to all Australia ICOMOS members.

Steve Brown

**Bibliography**
