Abstract

Public history as critical heritage practice in South Africa

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In the new South Africa, a national heritage complex has been constituted out of narratives of great leaders’ epic lives and the triumph of the human spirit, and from stories of a rainbow nation that has experienced reconciliation. While new biographic museums and memorials present the nation’s ‘long walk to freedom’, apartheid’s constructs of race and ethnicity were morphed into a post-apartheid discourse of diversity and a new nation comprising ‘many cultures’.

As much as heritage has been marshaled in the service of new discourses of the nation and a convened, authorized public sphere, it has also emerged as a terrain of critical public scholarship geared towards a critical citizenship. While national heritage continues to draw inspiration from the narratives and building blocks of conventional modern history, marked by great men, formal political movements and stories of progress, it has also drawn from the perspectives and approaches of history from below. Ironically in spite of its claims to recover the voices of the marginalized, social history has remained steeped in a politics of paternalism and atonement that is not unlike the discourse of heritage preservation.

Notwithstanding the ways in which heritage has enabled new forms of power and authority to be consolidated in the name of transformation, it has also been a terrain of significant epistemic contestation that has transcended mere institutional reordering. In the main national museums, such as Iziko Museums, the old classificatory division between cultural history and ethnography has been discarded, posing interesting challenges for new museologies beyond conventional museum categories. In their spaces and practices of knowledge transaction, new community museums, such as the District Six Museum, have also shown how it is possible to rethink the museum beyond conventional notions of collecting.

This paper proposes to examine the laboratory of new heritage formation and transformation in South Africa, and especially how new museologies and forms of heritage practice have emerged to transcend the teleologies of race and nationalism. It will also show how these new museum forms and practices are part of new networks of public history through which new approaches to critical heritage studies have begun to emerge, which transcend hierarchical knowledge relations and notions of recovery and which question the workings of expertise.