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Critical Heritage Ecologies

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ABSTRACT

This short essay outlines some of the main dimensions of ecological thinking and explores the different ways in which heritage scholars might engage with ecological ideas and approaches from a critical perspective. The paper offers an overview of the emergence of ecology and ecologies across the sciences and the humanities, highlighting the need to consider such work alongside and in conjunction with Indigenous ecological approaches. Finally, the paper serves as a position statement for the Critical Heritage Ecologies initiative, which began in 2024 and is situated in the Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture.

Keywords: Heritage, Ecology, Ecologisation.

In recent years the terms ecology and ecologies have been taken up in different ways and to different ends across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Monographs, exhibitions, edited volumes, research initiatives and educational programmes have been launched to address the ecological dimensions of – for example – architecture, art, design, history, curating, the media, memory studies and philosophy. It would be easy to dismiss such an outpouring of scholarship and creativity as yet the latest 'turn' in artistic and academic knowledge production, one that will surely give way to another exciting and urgent turn in due course. Such a reading would be wrong on at least two counts: (1) ecology is far from a novel concern, with ecological questions and debates bringing together science, literature, philosophy and economics circulating since at least the nineteenth century; and (2) the idea of 'ecologisation' cannot be captured in a single mantra or set of principles. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that introducing ecology into any topic or research area signals a radical openness to new critical and creative orientations that transcend established disciplinary (and socio-political) boundaries. While there may be some commonalities to the pathways that emerge in and around these reorientations, the ecological always retains a sense of feral volatility – this being one of the main reasons it is so appealing to scholars and artists keen to push against the limits of humanistic enquiry.

In their introduction to the edited book *Heritage Ecologies*, Torgeir Rinke Bangstad and Þóra Pétursdóttir gesture towards this sense of openness and uncertainty when they underline the need to reflect critically on the 'anthropocentric assumption that heritage is an insular human property detached from its messy worldly relations' (2022, 5). Questioning this assumption means moving beyond linguistic, social constructivist and representational theories and approaches to consider instead the 'extra-discursive conditions that enable, delimit and transform heritage' (Bangstad and Pétursdóttir 2022, 6). Or, put another way:

The sense in which things are constantly falling out of place or asunder is important to an ecological view of heritage practices, because it emphasizes the precarious, indeterminate

and contingent as properties of rather than (merely) threats to heritage objects [...] by attending to the work of nonhuman agents like moss, weed, limestone, concrete, acid rain, mushrooms, rust, geese, black mould and mud, we may begin to recognize the multifarious nature of sites and the contribution of the other-than-human world in the materialization of memory and heritage. (Bangstad and Pétursdóttir 2022, 19)

We highlight this approach to the ecologisation of heritage both for what it contains and for what it elides. Notably, the sense of disorder, uncertainty and contingency outlined by Bangstad and Pétursdóttir is distinctly material and more-than-human. This framework offers a useful corrective to the idea that heritage emerges through human-centred processes of meaning-making, but in so doing it risks depoliticising the ‘messy worldly relations’ in which any heritage work unfolds. Here we do not mean to say that focusing on the non- or other-than-human is inherently apolitical, only that omitting or marginalising the human from ecological relationalities may in fact short circuit the important contribution that an ecological view can make to urgent contemporary debates, not least those concerned with climate breakdown, biotechnology, conflict, decolonisation, and the resurgence of fascism. As environmental historian Donald Worster notes in the preface to *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, first published in 1977, ‘perhaps because it is a “social” science, dealing with the interrelationships of living creatures, [ecology] has never been far removed from the messy, shifting, hurly-burly world of human values’ (1994, xi). As Worster’s account makes clear, ecological theories and perspectives may be deeply entangled with both dominant and subversive views about social and economic relations, political formations and diverse cultural practices. Developing a *critical* perspective on heritage ecologies means attending to these all-too-human matters alongside and in conjunction with an openness to more-than-human elements and forces.

One way to understand this is to consider the contested history and status of ecology itself. While we do not have space to offer a detailed genealogy of the concept here, a brief summary of some of the main social, scientific, and theoretical dimensions of ecological thinking may help to sharpen the critical approach we advocate for in relation to heritage ecologies.

As theorist Joseph Pugliese writes in a searing explication of the many ways in which war, conflict and ecological violence are interwoven, at its foundation ecology ‘draws attention to the inextricable relations that, in a specific time and place, bind an assemblage of more-than-human entities’ (2020, 9). Worster offers a similarly expansive definition of the term, which in a strictly scientific sense refers to ‘the branch of biology that deals with interrelationships’ (1994, 471). In this reading the concept of ecology is typically traced to the work of Ernst Haeckel, who first formulated the term in 1866 to explain ‘the relations of the organism to the environment, in the household of nature, in the economy of all nature’ (quoted in Pugliese 2020, 16). This reference to the economy of nature already complicates such a simplified genealogy, however, as the idea of comprehending nature through an ‘economic’ lens was present in European theology and philosophy from the sixteenth century onwards. Here it should be noted that economy (or ‘oeconomy’) at this time referred to something much broader than goods, services and money, encompassing ‘the political administration of all the resources of a community or state for orderly production’ (Worster 1994, 37). The study of ecology as defined by Haeckel emerged from this milieu, infused from the outset with values borrowed from politics and economics, and shot through with a Christian view of nature as something to be tamed and managed by ‘man.’

From this we can already learn a few important lessons about ecology. First, it is never ideologically neutral. Although ecological thinking emphasises messy relationalities and more-than-human agencies across nature and culture, the idea itself (like all ideas) is a social construction, one that ‘can initiate, inform, and lend legitimacy to particular viewpoints’ (Corner 2014, 259). Ecological concepts and frameworks may animate eco-fascism on the one hand and urgent calls for environmental justice on the other. This realisation underlines the second – somewhat paradoxical – lesson to be drawn from foundational conceptions of ecology: it is sociological just as much as it is ecological. As Murray Bookchin famously observed, ‘the way we view our position in the natural world

is deeply entangled with the way we organize the social world' (1990 [2022], 65). Social Ecology – the theory and praxis developed by Bookchin between the early 1960s and 2000s to address this concern – began from an appreciation that the environmental problems of the modern era can be traced to social and political pressures, not least capitalism, inequality and patriarchal domination. This leads to a third crucial lesson about the emergence of ecological ideas over the past two centuries: for many writers and thinkers it is precisely the disequilibrium between society and nature characteristic of industrial modernity that has led them to pursue ecological perspectives and agendas. As Latour put it in no uncertain terms, 'everywhere we have "modernised" we must now "ecologise"' (1998, 238). From the environmentalism of Henry Thoreau and Rachel Carson to current appeals to 'hospice modernity' (Machado de Oliveira 2021), this conviction permeates diverse ecological viewpoints.

How are questions of heritage – and specifically critical heritage – implicated in this framework? While the notion of heritage ecologies helpfully underscores the dense entanglement of nature and culture in any heritage process, a broader historical and philosophical view of the ecological suggests that it cannot be seen as a simple addendum or 'turn' in critical thinking. Ecology itself has a contested heritage. Attending to the complex genealogies of this concept is vital when considering the challenges and limitations of ecologising heritage as a field of research and practice.

An important point to note here – one that dovetails with longstanding debates in critical heritage – is the overlap between the picture of ecology we have sketched out so far and the diverse ecological worldviews held by Indigenous communities for centuries if not millennia. At the risk of glossing important distinctions between Indigenous peoples in different parts of the world, recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in Indigenous epistemologies and practices cultivated in different contexts over thousands of years through an intimate relation to land and nature (Smithers 2019). As Pugliese stresses, ecological notions of reciprocity, relationality and the indivisibility of humans and more-than-humans have been 'prefigured, and continue to be *embodied as living practice*, in many Indigenous cultures' (2020, 17, emphasis in original). For Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd, the breathless but all-too-late acknowledgment of interconnectedness that characterises much ecological thinking may itself perpetuate the exploitation of Indigenous peoples and ideas: 'there is a very real risk to Indigenous thinking being used by non-Indigenous scholars [...] without contending with the embodied expressions of stories, laws, and songs as bound with Indigenous-Place Thought or Indigenous self-determination' (ibid, 9). A critical engagement with the contested history and ongoing biases of ecological thinking may go some way to addressing this concern, which intersects with heritage debates focused on the conservation, stewardship and governance of Indigenous lands (see Dawson et al. 2021).

Building on this important work, our approach to the ecological does not aim merely to ecologise heritage, but to understand the social, political and ethical stakes of thinking ecologically within and beyond this field. Through grounded comparative research bringing together art history, cultural studies, heritage studies and museum studies, Critical Heritage Ecologies aims to shed light on the different ways in which heritage ideas and processes have shaped human-environment interactions in the past and the present, and vice-versa. Drawing variously on historical research, ethnographic enquiry, cultural analysis, and creative methods, the project understands all forms of heritage – cultural, natural, tangible, intangible and otherwise – as fully entangled with diverse material-ecological worlds. Rather than stop at this insight, however, we will develop tools to map and analyse these entanglements with a view to reimagining the messy realities of heritage praxis. In this sense the project both engages with the radical possibilities contained in ecological thought while also critiquing the mobilisation of the very term ecologies, which is always entangled with diverse and sometimes deeply antagonistic socio-cultural systems.

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