Heritage and Memory

Joy Sather-Wagstaff

‘Memory’ eludes any neat definition. It is as difficult to define as it is for any one of us to stop and consciously note its use as we engage, as part of our human being-ness, in our everyday memorywork of collecting, recollecting and employing knowledge gained through experiences in and of the past. In human practice, memory, perhaps at its most basic, may be defined as acts of recounting or remembering experienced events, a conceptualization of memory as something intangible but performed in some manner over space and time. Yet memory is also simultaneously agentic in that it is an aspect of the social construction, production and performance of everyday, lived social life which, by extension, includes heritage and identity. This is memory manifested through forms of memorywork, ranging from individual reverie and oral narratives to physical individual or collective performances such as dance or the enactment of daily routines, secular and religious rituals, or festival celebrations.

Heritage and memory share many characteristics, and it is these similarities, along with their symbiotic and dynamic relationships to one another in social life, that ground the overarching framework for this chapter. Heritage and memory are similar in that they are productively synergistic by way of myriad forms of communication; we simultaneously share and produce memories with others through various narrative and activity modes, while heritage is also shared and produced through narratives, engagement with landscapes, performance and other endeavours. As such, they are also individually and collectively experiential and require sustained social, interpersonal interaction in order to endure. Memory and heritage in practice are both partial, subjective, contested, political, subject to particular historical contexts and conditions, and thus dynamically changing – never fixed and static. Perhaps most importantly, heritage, understood as a social and discursive construction, simply cannot exist without individual and collective memory and memorywork-in-action in the everyday world. If heritage
is that from the past which groups consider important to remember and re-remember as part of crafting and articulating various identities in the present, then memory and memorywork are intrinsic, constitutive properties of heritage.

The study of memory has been and continues to be centred in the disciplines of, and subdisciplines within, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, cultural geography, history, philosophy, psychology, semiotics and sociology, with ‘memory studies’ currently recognized as a largely interdisciplinary field of research. Historically, philosophy has grounded enquiry into the metaphysical nature of memory, psychology the developmental aspects, and neuroscience the biological underpinnings and actual physiological mechanisms that make memorywork possible. For the sake of brevity, this chapter focuses on approaches to and theories on memory and memorywork primarily from disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.¹ To begin with, scholarly work in heritage studies today on the relationships between memory and heritage is implicitly or explicitly informed by foundational approaches to memory and memorywork. Selected historical foundations are discussed first, followed by a presentation of selected key issues and themes and case study synopses, concluding with observations on a few future directions for interrogating the relationships between memory and heritage.

**Selected foundations**

Given that heritage is shared by groups of people, the foundational frameworks for understanding its iterations as well as the role that memory plays in heritage largely come from scholarly work on collective memory. I briefly address here the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Connerton and James Wertsch, all memory scholars, and Raphael Samuel, a key early heritage studies scholar addressing memory.² The contributions from these scholars discussed here inform the selected current issues, themes and case studies presented in the following sections on memory and heritage, including the nature of memory, history versus memory, embodiment and difficult heritage. A singular contribution that crosses all of these scholars’ work is that enduring memory, for the most part, is that which is shared collectively in some manner with others through lived social contexts, be it with friends, family, local community or nation.

Halbwachs, one of the earliest scholars to formulate entire works on collective memory in the early twentieth century, first and foremost argued that a ‘collective’, group formation is necessary to the existence of memory:

> What makes memories hang together is not that they are contiguous in time: it is rather that they are part of a totality of thoughts common to a group