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Essence in excess: heritage and the problem of potentiality

Bille, M. 2019. *Being Bedouin around Petra: life at a World Heritage Site in the twenty-first century*. New York: Berghahn Books. 210 pp. Hb.: US\$120.00. ISBN: 9781789201208.

Meyer, B. and M. van de Port (eds.) 2018. *Sense and essence: heritage and the cultural production of the real*. New York: Berghahn Books. Pb.: US\$34.95. ISBN: 9781785339400.

How is heritage manifested and made present in the world? How is this presence made knowable to others outside of its immediate communities of shared sentiment? While inscribing a site or practice in a national or international register relies on criteria for selection and admission, the recursive aura that makes heritage compelling is mired in ambiguity, ambivalence, and differing means of social evaluation. How, then, to account for the *other* of heritage, those unstirred by the narratives that guide its designation or the qualities of excess that evade its form? In response, what means do heritage advocates draw on to make compelling their case for the indispensable quality and demarcation of a physical site, a community of objects, or a set of practices? While achieving recognition often relies on bringing together stakeholders in a process of argumentation, heritage continuity requires intermittent moments of rupture that often go unacknowledged. These might be instances that bring into focus the possibility of loss, long-term periods of restoration, battles for ownership or threats of appropriation. In these contexts, ambiguous or conflicting energies brush up against one another, producing shifting boundaries and limits, the ambient contours of which hint at the possibilities of their transformation. It is at these frontiers of affect and attachment that the essence of heritage is sensed and manifested.

Two books from scholars whose research has driven recent debates into media affects, the materiality of religious sensation, and the sensing of atmospheric presence delve into many of these questions and more. Both books bring together anthropology, material culture studies and religion, and take heritage as a system of knowledge that is essentially constructed. How this construction takes place and how it becomes persuasive or unconvincing is the subject of their enquiries. Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port's edited collection of essays *Sense and essence: heritage and the cultural production of the real* (2018), is founded on the premise that heritage formation is primarily a work of selection in the present. This selection is driven by essentialist claims that the heritage object is indivisible from its materiality as well as the identity it supports and the people it represents. Dissatisfied with constructionist arguments that this assemblage

implicitly renders heritage inauthentic, the introductory essay by the editors calls for means of interrogating how people find such assemblies active and efficacious (p. 3). The book features rich and varied chapters from scholars whose regional foci align with those of the editors' work in Africa and the Brazilian state of Bahia respectively, as well as in the Netherlands, where both hold academic posts. To answer the question of why cultural construction is implicitly seen as inauthentic, Meyer and van de Port bring together two conceptual trajectories for which they are known. This includes van de Port's work on 'the cultural production of the really real' (2011), and both Meyer's influential work on the 'sensational form' of religious media (2011, 2015) and an earlier edited collection that helped to bring aesthetics to the forefront of anthropological analysis (2009).

Mikkel Bille's 2020 monograph *Being Bedouin around Petra: life at a World Heritage Site in the twenty-first century* provides an excellent example of these questions being taken to the field in fresh and holistic ways. Bille explores the dynamics of guardianship, materiality, and presence among Bedouins around the archaeological site of Petra in Jordan as it is forged in relation to the heritage industry and its overlapping stakeholders. Written in a lucid and succinct style accessible to those beyond the scope of anthropology and heritage studies, Bille builds on ethnographic fieldwork that took place between 2005 and 2011. In his fieldsite, he found the changes wrought by the impacts of tourism and the responsibilities of traditional forms of guardianship made the prospect of 'becoming Bedouin' (p. 42) ever more sensitive to the integrity and materiality of its contours. These contestations took place against the backdrop of an area heavily impacted by tourism and the normative UNESCO definitions of 'tangible' and 'intangible' cultural heritage. The sections on Islam benefit from a degree of modesty on the part of the author that are grounded in local categories of knowledge. This understated analysis of the impact of Islamic revivalist discourse in Jordan is strong, particularly its insights into how the labour of 'protecting and denouncing' (p. 4) formal and informal heritage is a labour of moral debate that centres closely on epistemologies of the object.

Having now gleaned some of the arguments in these two books, it is possible to nuance some of the questions already posed in this review. How is heritage manifested and made present in the world in ways commensurable across different social fields and means of evaluation? Between Bille's book and Meyer and van de Port's edited collection, two common themes emerge that might provide an answer, as well as evince the strength of the authors' contributions to future scholarship. Both themes relate to Meyer and van de Port's call for further study of the sensory engagements that make heritage affective. They manage to articulate this in a clear and accessible way in their introduction: 'As heritage is not given naturally, *persuasion* is a necessity' (p. 22), they explain. It should not be taken for granted, however, that such persuasion is effective. As Bille's book shows, the ambiguities at the heart of heritage formations present social tensions when contingent forces arise untethered to authorised means of evaluation. Both books show that when the social world becomes the arena for adjudicating heritage, the surfacing of potentiality can be the greatest source of rupture. Potentiality refers to a category of knowledge in Aristotelian philosophy that describes the future-oriented nature of forms. The term is also used widely in affect theory to describe the potentialities of the body. Taking a different route, *Being Bedouin around Petra* examines the anxieties of the undefined, namely how the unruly nature of presence can evade

existing systems of authority. This is shown in light of Islamic revivalist tendencies to question the presence said to emanate from objects and the materiality of their use and engagement. The second common theme is the problem of excess. What to do once the undefined and the latent manifests and destabilises the bounded nature of the heritage object?

In *Being Bedouin around Petra*, the presence of UNESCO looms large, as does its multi-sited definitions of heritage that appeal to notions of universality. The Bedouin among whom Bille worked had mostly become detached from the nomadic practices that the UNESCO register had attributed to them, especially practices relating to shamanism and saintly intercession. The book shows that, although the Kingdom of Jordan was established through the support of nomadic tribes, recent history has seen many Bedouin lead sedentary lives in towns and cities. At the same time, these communities remain deeply invested and entangled with the representations of Bedouin life that feeds the tourism industry, resulting in competing obligations that present myriad ways of benefiting from the past. At their margins, Bille observes what he calls 'parallel universalities' (p. 6) at work, which provide alternative visions of how protection and conservation can take place. He draws on data exploring the deployment of talismans, the active objects that act as prophylactics against the materialised vision of the evil eye or absorb potentially enriching blessings. Most compelling is Bille's argument that Bedouin 'ways of presenting the world' (p. 176) resist hierarchies and assignation as being either particular or universal. These are therefore contestations that cannot be reconciled by, say, arguing for a Dumontian structure of hierarchy in which one more dominant category subsumes its inverse.

Quite how these different approaches, which are fundamentally driven by ethical and economic factors, coexist beyond the attachment to material culture is less clearly delineated. This is not a major drawback, however, because Bille uses this ambiguity to frame his rich ethnography into the moments when the undefined raises the potential for discord. He argues that in terms of religious objects, the distinctions between material and immaterial become less clear cut for the Bedouin. It is here that Bille offers his own intervention into studies of material religion; that while traditional protective talismans rely on the materiality of presence to achieve efficacy over physical forces, the more controversial question of saint intercession among Bedouin Muslims operates on another register of presence. Bille defines these two modes of presence in terms of their mechanics rather than their place within a hierarchy. He identifies *being-in-place* as a mode of protection that acts as a centripetal force in movement towards its centre and *being-in-touch* as a centrifugal force away from its centre of motion (p. 138). This analogy is used to suggest that Bedouin ways of dealing with the eruptive presence of potentiality is at the heart of Islamic debates over objects, attachment and intercession, rather than shaped in any way by normative definitions of heritage.

Ruy Llera Blanes' chapter in *Sense and essence* provides another angle to Bille's phenomenology of heritage attachment. Titled, 'Scaffolding heritage: transient architectures and temporalizing formations in Luanda', Blanes explores the 'temporal trigger' (p. 158) that activates when a catalyst destabilises prevailing notions of heritage time. Blanes explores the ubiquity of construction scaffolding in the Angolan capital of Luanda in relation to the force of anticipation. In an accomplished analytical twist, Blanes explores these heritage formations through their

structural patina, in the scaffolding on new constructions already seen as budding landmarks or heritage in the making. Scaffolding becomes a semiotic frame that gives value to what is beneath and delivers mixed temporal sensations. Returning to *Being Bedouin around Petra*, Bille deploys the central analytic of ‘taming’ to account for both these temporal triggers and the eruptive nature of presence (p. 170). This notion of taming refers to systems for enduring, as well as adoring, material objects. In relation to Bille’s other scholarly work on atmosphere (Bille et al. 2015; Bille 2020), it might be said that ‘taming’ is the attunement of the material. By attunement I refer to the ways in which Martin Heidegger’s concept of *stimmung* has been explicated as the ways of encountering the affective conditions of a shared environment. In this reading, ‘taming’ is the place where aesthetics and morality meet. It is here that Bille takes a similar approach to Meyer and van de Port, arguing that the project of bringing the past into the present requires viewing heritage as what he calls a ‘practice of assembly’ (p. 56) with epicentres rather than objects. Viewed together, the central analytic of ‘taming’ in relation to heritage assemblage enables a critical look at power structures, through which UNESCO practices of inscription necessitate momentary fixity.

Perhaps it is here, on the place of intention and potentiality, that the two books diverge. Meyer and van de Port attempt to resolve this tendency to ‘equate that which is made up with that which is false’ (p. 5) by scrutiny of essentialism, that most feared accusation for social anthropologists. For the editors, however, essentialist speak is characteristic of the political present and an important matter with which to come to grips. They propose exploring how the real is culturally produced through material objects and knowledge, techniques of the body, and how these means convince people that a culture is in some way authentic. While aesthetic persuasiveness is how the real and the authentic go about maintaining their hold, the editors call for further study of how this achieves that ‘sense of essence’ that makes authenticity convincing (p. 16). The ways in which many of the contributors to the volume look at persuasion and authentication rely heavily on accounting for intention among multiple stakeholders.

In contrast, Bille’s notion of ‘taming’ instead identifies means of moral reception and aggregation in the face of the contingent and the unexpected. For example, for many of the Bedouin among whom he worked the dangers of saintly intercession reside in the threat of their ‘possible multiplicity’ (p. 103). Without means of authenticating or invalidating the powers of dead saints, the looming potential for misfortune if gravesites are mistreated serves as a regulator that averts destruction of the site. At the same time, adherence and respect for the site, driven by the potential for blessings, ensures conservation over time. For the Bedouins around Petra, the material debris that surrounds dead saints and their graves generates an ‘excess of agency’ that is ‘neither intentional nor simply mechanical’ (p. 109). This central focus on potentiality has the ability to bring some of the richest recent scholarship on Islam into dialogue with the materiality of heritage. Amira Mittermaier’s work in particular has challenged the paradigm of ethical self-cultivation in the anthropology of Islam, particularly its focus on intentionality. By focusing on the active influence of dreams and visitation among Egyptian Muslims (2010), Mittermaier’s focus on being *acted upon* draws attention to ethical systems based on alterity rather than individual agency.

Providing another view of heritage excess in his chapter in *Sense and essence*, Bruno Reinhardt shows how these dynamics operate within the bounds of listed traditional practices, or what UNESCO calls 'intangible heritage'. Reinhardt explores the heritage of the acarajé bean fritter as the product of Brazilian Bahia communities whose traders signal their roots in Yoruba religions. After a long gestation in the rubble of the African slave trade, the fritter became a typical example of Bahian cuisine. Reinhardt narrates how evangelical groups tried to rebrand them as 'Jesus fritters' to counter myths about sorcery employed by the traditional sellers. Perceptively, he observes that amid all these changes became perceptible 'a tacit threshold of authenticity' (p. 84) that once transgressed led to public outcry. Reinhardt proposes to understand these conflicting claims by understanding the fritter as a boundary object (p. 78), both mutable and moveable, that possesses 'excessive vitality' that is open to appropriation (p. 98). This tendency for heritage objects to exceed the present can also be seen in the future-oriented strategies that Irene Stengs explores in her chapter in *Sense and essence* on the preservation of commemorative material after a violent public death in the Netherlands.

It is clear, then, that the problem of heritage excess within normative definitions lies in the possibility of its appropriation and refashioning by others. One of the discursive means that Bille's interlocutors find to demarcate categories of heritage presence are to locate practices in relation to a theological other, those engaged in 'jahiliyya' [ignorance] (p. 73). Due to the influence of the Islamic revival in Jordan, many of the attachments to the intercessionary ability of shrines have been severed and associated with the 'age of ignorance' temporally located in the era before the coming of Islam. Bille asks what role ignorance plays in knowledge systems that employ practices of protection, particularly in relation to the moral anxiety over the efficacy of things in Bedouin cosmology. While ignorance of this kind might describe a lack of knowledge, disagreement or indifference, it is one that is expressed in a moral and aesthetic judgement. The reverse effect to Bille's formation can be seen in André Werneck de Andrade Bakker's chapter in *Sense and essence*. De Andrade Bakker focuses on Brazilian indigenous Pataxó people's deployment of heritage and participation in the tourist economy through forms of bodily adornment that had not been practised by their ancestors. In this context, Amerindian ontologies remain porous to otherness and therefore stand in contrast to the fixed sense of identity that Western heritage discourse understands (p. 46). In contrast to the pragmatic ambivalence that many of Bille's interlocutors displayed, the contemporary Pataxó have honed their own pragmatic 'ethics of invention' (p. 47).

De Andrade Bakker is right to pose the porosity of communities to excess and adaptation as a question of ethics. After all, the *other* of heritage is not only antagonistic actors but also the force of potentiality, as opposed to fixity and systems that work for continuity. Perhaps this is what Jarret Zigon describes when he writes of a 'politics of worldbuilding' (2018: 48) that includes both experimentation and enacting the results, as the 'onto-ethical grounds for new worlds' as the product of 'potentiality' (2018: 49). Zigon argues that the anthropological study of ethics needs to develop an analytical sense of things coming into being, to better trace the link between potential and actualisation. Indeed, if both books share one implicit call, it is for heritage studies to do more to engage otherness and to stage a more critical anthropology of heritage formation. Perhaps the reason Bille, Meyer, van de Port and the contributors to *Sense and essence* are able to generate such rich insights into these questions is because of the backgrounds many of them share in

the anthropology of religion, where engaging with the transcendent is done by remaining sensitive to that which lies outside of immediate perception. Yet it is in the realm of the political aesthetics of what Jacques Rancière calls ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (2011: 12) that these questions gain the most traction. As Rancière has argued, ways of sensing and being sensed emerge within a particular political economy. These aesthetic formations imbue immediate presence with an essence of the past and it is within these political regimes that heritage becomes palpably urgent and real. Surveying the discursive field of heritage taxonomies and impulses, Haidy Geismar (2015) underlines the ways in which anthropologists have approached heritage as a selective material exchange that is driven as much by politics as by generational inheritance. By focusing on means of authentication that lies outside the state or normative heritage bodies is to engage with what Michael Herzfeld has called the assertion of ‘subversive archaism’ (2019) by those facing dispossession or precarity, as a way of laying claim to some integral element of national tradition or an older trajectory of the state.

While *Sense and essence*, published in 2018, is already widely used by heritage studies scholars and is likely to remain a pivotal text in the field, *Being Bedouin around Petra* manages to ethnographically account for efficacious means of providing protection to material objects beyond normative definitions of heritage. Bille does this by presenting the possibility of a non-hierarchical system of multiple heritage ontologies. Combined with the fascinating contributions to *Sense and essence*, which examine evocative changes over time, both books clearly identify some of the affective ruptures that strive to manage the unruliness of potential and deal with the emergence of heritage excess.

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