

# ‘Bridging epistemic divides in cultural heritage protection: An exercise in confrontation and conversation’

(8-9 May 2023, EUI Theatre, Badia and online)

## Background

Government responses to recent efforts to topple monuments and statues, whether of James Cook, King Leopold, Cecil Rhodes, or the Confederate generals, have demonstrated how heritage laws continue to be rooted in colonial notions of who heritage belongs to, the values heritage serves, and whose interests determine how heritage is protected/regulated (Knudsen et. al., 2021).

These events have triggered polarized discussions about contested heritage: Is the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas a similar crime to the toppling of statues of known enslavers like Colston? To whom do the “Elgin” marbles really belong? Are artefacts looted from conflicts in Syria and Iraq “safer” in the hands of private collectors? Should the Slave Trade Route be memorialized as heritage? Where does one draw the line between memorialization and valorization? What does heritage protection really mean, beyond the confines of a sanitized Western museum? What role does the law have to play in these debates?

Although heritage policy on these questions is of interest to and significantly impacts communities around the world, all too often heritage policies are negotiated in insular, Eurocentric, expert circles. This partition is created on the basis of civilizing logics that see local communities as incapable of holding policy conversations with Global North networks (Sud and Sanchez-Ancochea, 2022). There is also little engagement with the growing body of data produced by other relevant heritage disciplines such as history and critical heritage studies, where the politics of heritage policy and its colonialities are regularly up for discussion (Petrie, 2005). Even within disciplines such as heritage history, connections between heritages in different spaces are rarely sketched out. The only running thread that cuts across discipline and borders is that heritage experts – while identifying international organizations and States as *political/interested* actors – hesitate to accept their own political aspirations and their complicity in the inequalities of policy structures (Meskell, 2014).

A natural consequence of this insularity is that activists, heritage custodians, and the broader field of those affected by heritage policy see little utility in engaging with heritage “expertise”. This cements a model of policy making which puts Eurocentric expertise at its nucleus, leaving communities far from this decision-making epicenter. This structure has become so naturalized that it is all but impossible for heritage expertise based on epistemologies outside the nucleus to find their way in.

This workshop is an attempt to resolve this impasse. It is designed to create a safe and interdisciplinary space where all people who are affected by heritage policy can come together for knowledge-sharing and discussion. Conscious of our own individual privileged positionalities and the social capital of the academic institution we belong to, we deliberately intend for this workshop to transgress the traditional way that ‘scholarly’ spaces are created by inviting those who are excluded from academic discussions and forging a bridge between siloed networks. The

objective of the workshop is also to spotlight what Santos calls an ‘ecology of knowledges’ (Santos, 2007) and understands how new grammars can be discovered in equal collaboration with Global South and other disciplinary partners. We are particularly interested in inviting grassroots actors, indigenous activists from the Global South, and early career researchers.

## Format

The workshop will take place in the form of a hybrid long-table conversation. The long-table format encourages intimate, open-ended, non-hierarchical and informal discussions, which offer a more open space for debate than is usually provided in traditional formats for academic discussions ((Ballakrishnen and Dezaley (eds.), 2020).

The option to join discussions remotely is available, in recognition of the material barriers to mobility that plague those living in Global South(s). The workshop discussions will be multilingual, in recognition of the linguicism that infects academic spaces. We are keen to curate an open access, interactive, multilingual published series featuring selected contributions from the workshop.

## Themes

The workshop is intended to trigger inter-disciplinary discussions about the Eurocentrism of heritage policies and their implementation. Here, we centre the role of epistemic conflicts - the conflicts between different ways of thinking about and knowing heritage. This could be through reflections on the workings of heritage organizations, dynamics of heritage custodianship, spaces where heritage is housed, classifications of heritage, or heritage histories. The ambition is to bring actors representing different epistemologies, situated in diverse spaces and positionalities in conversation with each other.

We invite contributions on themes including but not limited to:

a) Troubling heritage

Prompt questions: who decides if heritage is troubled? What are the diverse ways in which communities respond to troubled heritage? What are the tensions between institutional and community-led responses?

b) Heritage custodianship?

Prompt questions: Can heritage be owned? Who should own heritage? What are alternative ways to think about heritage ownership? Could custodianship be an alternative?

c) Epistemic authority in heritage management

Prompt questions: How is epistemic authority apportioned in heritage spaces? How can the authority for heritage decisions be equitably shared? What, if any, lessons can be learnt from other global commons fields?

d) Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Prompt questions: Is “tangibility” an appropriate metric to classify heritage? Which heritages escape the fold of tangibility? Does it make sense to classify heritage at all?

e) Heritage organizations and cultural diplomacy

Prompt questions: Historically and in present time, which are the chief heritage organizations that steer heritage diplomacy? How have the mandates of heritage organizations changed over the past decades? What hegemonies mark the capital enjoyed by heritage organizations? Whose voices are heard and whose voices aren't heard in heritage diplomacy?

## Deadlines and details

If you would like to share your insights at the workshop, please submit expressions of interest to [culturalheritagewg@eui.eu](mailto:culturalheritagewg@eui.eu) by 31 January 2023. Contributors are free to submit either 300-word abstracts or audio/video abstracts (maximum 2 minutes). Contributions can be made in any language.

We will notify prospective contributors of our selection decisions by 20 February 2023. Selected contributors will be invited to submit a 2000-word concept note/audiovisual note (of 7-8 minutes) by the second week of April 2023.

We shall offer financial assistance to early career researchers and participants from Global South(s). Please inform us if you would like to be considered for financial support. We would request participants who are able to obtain institutional funding to try and seek such funding. That would allow us to make our funding available on a genuine needs-basis.

## Organizers

This workshop is being organized by the EUI Cultural Heritage Working Group, with the generous support of the [Decentering Eurocentrism](#) cluster.

Feel free to direct any questions or queries to [culturalheritagewg@eui.eu](mailto:culturalheritagewg@eui.eu) or the individual convenors of the Working Group:

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