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Greening the Past: Putting History in its Place at the Ecological University

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Greening the Past: Putting History in its Place at the Ecological University

Keywords: Environmental History, Green Heritage, Historic Preservation, Green Space, Urban Sustainability

Abstract: This paper looks to combine an urgent need to engage with environmental sustainability with progressive endeavours at decolonising the curriculum to explore how humanities (and History in particular) can be brought into the service of the ecological university. In terms of the sustainability in higher education imperative, it argues that youth climate change movements and endeavours to diversify curriculum content make this a moment of critical mass to push forward with new historical programmes that embed environmental themes in a wider intellectual pedagogy. Thereafter, it looks specifically at ‘green heritage’ in the city as a useful example in which the greening agenda can be used to re-contextualise historical approaches, encourage useful conversations around the role of History as a conservation and heritage management tool, and build active partnerships with local stakeholder groups. The originality of this approach lies in thinking both of content and intellectual practice, pedagogy as content and behaviour and in reconstructing the terrain of a theme such as heritage to think through opportunities for sustainability in education.

1 Introduction: Heritage, History and the Need for an Ecological Approach

Circulating on social media in summer 2019 was an activist declaration that pointed out the \$1 billion pledged to restore Notre Dame after fire engulfed its roof and spire in April 2019 could be better used to clean up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (Al-Aswad 2019). A reflection on the increasing saliency of plastic pollution as a priority issue for a planet suffering from a raft of pressing environmental crises, this soundbite salvo was, equally, an important marker of what we understand to include (and not to include) under the category of heritage. The vaulted canopy of Notre Dame, comprised of 800-year-old oaks known affectionately as the Forest, had *become* worthy of veneration (and, accordingly, financial investment and eventual restoration) by virtue of its placement within the fabric of an iconic religious and national monument. The Pacific and its polycarbonate raft of flotsam and jetsam, however, seemed part of a different category – out there, outdoors, important as a *cause celebre* for nature conservationists and environmental campaigners, but not, surely, in the same conceptual space as Our Lady of Paris.

In this paper, I argue differently. In a world of anthropogenic impacts - from climate change to chemical contamination - the distinction between the natural and the cultural seems increasingly blurred. Radioactive particles in arctic lichen, daily revisions to the tipping point of global atmospheric warming and microbeads in marine mammal guts suggest that we can no longer patrol a meaningful boundary between the synthetic and the organic, or, indeed, ignore issues of environmental transformation and sustainability in our discussions as to the how, what and why of heritage production and management. According to Yingbi Lee, producer of the *Green Heritage Futures* podcast (2019), the predicaments of global eco-cide demand an urgent conversation about the environmental dynamics of historic preservation in the twenty-first century. In short, the risks associated with climate change – sea level

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3 rises, temperature extremes, drought, flood and fire - require us to rethink traditional
4 narratives on the protection of cultural heritage and to actively engage with how the
5 sector can encourage citizen (and civic) environmental responsibility. Calling for a
6 new heritage mantra that tracks the mundane alongside the monumental, Lee points
7 out: “It might be inconceivable now to imagine heritage and historic artefacts as
8 anything other than old buildings, ruins, and archaeological finds – but decades and
9 centuries from now, what we consider heritage will be the items we engage with on a
10 daily basis today. This means not only the buildings we construct and art we create,
11 but also plastic bottles, electronics and toxic waste” (Lee 2019).
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15 I am not arguing for a redefinition of heritage to include the murky artifice of the
16 Great Pacific Garbage Patch (though a history of our all-consuming plastic habit is
17 crying out to be written). However, I do want to unpick the assumed pantheon of
18 what we deem important as historical artefacts (and why) to suggest practical ways in
19 which the “Ecological University” can facilitate a new discussion about heritage
20 landscapes in which issues of environmental efficacy and what I am recommending as
21 an ecological turn assume a greater visibility (Barnett 2017). Read particularly in the
22 context of current endeavours to decolonise and diversify the curriculum, and also to
23 positively engage with issues around climate emergency and species extinctions, this
24 seems a particularly useful way that sustainability education can feed into academic
25 practice. With youth climate change movements suggesting keen demographic
26 engagement among potential undergraduate students for environment-centred courses,
27 the incorporation of environmental subjects into programme and degree designs has
28 the benefit of market appeal and actively engages the sector with issues threatening a
29 global biosphere. Moreover, the valuable contribution to this project offered by the
30 environmental humanities also speaks to contemporary initiatives (notably the UK
31 SHAPE project, 2020) to showcase the importance of our disciplines in creating
32 graduates with enquiring, investigative and interdisciplinary skillsets. In my own
33 teaching on environmental history, for instance, the space between learning about
34 sustainability and being sustainable is usefully collapsed by an attention to the
35 subjectivity of our readings of the past and the syncretic relationship between past and
36 present acts of anthropogenic environmental transformation. This blended approach
37 feeds nicely into conversations about graduate attributes. In the next section, I dig
38 deeper into ideas of a connected and mindful pedagogy to offer a practical example of
39 how environmental sustainability and issues around it might be usefully and
40 productively fed into historical field-working (in terms of teaching, research and civic
41 engagement) by highlighting synergies between more traditional heritage studies and
42 the emerging concept of ‘green heritage.’ A fresh terminology that can help us
43 navigate an entangled ground of organic interaction that spans the centuries and
44 usefully incorporates more-than-human landscapes and agents, ‘green heritage’
45 represents a useful hook on which to build more integrated, environmentally poised,
46 approaches to historic management and to engage student constituencies, policy and
47 community groups. Indeed, by ‘putting History in its place’ (so to speak), we can
48 helpfully move beyond the usual binaries of natural and cultural to find instead a
49 space in between, a middle ground in which to locate the swirling and often
50 contradictory relationships between people and the terrains we inhabit. This presents
51 a fertile habitat for the intellectual ethos of the ecological university to sit in and
52 provides room to explore sustainability and practice. In the second part of this paper,
53 meanwhile, I set out how ‘green heritage’ as a concept can work in practice by
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delineating a recent project with academic, government, business and community actors in Canterbury, UK.

2 Green Heritage: From Toilet Rolls to UNESCO

Heritage is a social construct, formed from what society deems significant or worthwhile in its cognitive and physical excavations of a collective past. As geographer David Lowenthal motions, heritage and History are common bedfellows that “continually merge and interact along a continuum of everyday experience” to “domesticate the past” on behalf of “present causes” (Lowenthal 2011). Whether couched in terms of the adage of History ‘as written by the victors’ or communicated by the rather more sophisticated findings of the Royal Historical Society’s *Race, Ethnicity and Equality Report* (Atkinson et. al. 2018), our choreographing of chronology has overwhelming privileged the ‘dead white man’: a vantage which is now rightly being challenged by moves to decolonise the curriculum. Alongside this endeavour, though, is a parallel need to acknowledge the human-centred fixings of written History and to actively engage with the causes and consequences of the age of the Anthropocene, a contested term that critically situates *Homo sapiens* as an dominant agent of biospheric alteration, and one which usefully captures the importance of approaching the historical and the geological with a sense of human-environmental relations in mind (Lewis & Maslin 2015; Harrison, 2015). Indeed, environmental humanities has made useful inroads into this territory already by decoding the thorny thicket of metaphor and material transformation that marks our encounter with the planet and to forge a helpful methodological terrain that points to the value of integrated and interdisciplinary approaches for navigating the complexities of the natural-cultural borderlands. The idea of nature as a pristine and inviolate entity has been resolutely explored (see, for instance, “The Trouble with Wilderness” (Cronon 1995)), while expositions on various sites from Dachau to Disneyland reveal a global geography of physical and semiotic multispecies complexity (Schama 1995; Wilson 1991; Haraway 2016). Equally, the world of critical heritage studies has begun to move beyond the traditional discourse on protected sites as things where heritage magically resides (Harrison 2018) to grapple instead with the multitude of actors, infrastructures, practices and objects that go to make up what Manuel Delanda calls “heritage assemblages” (Delanda 2006). This attention to the relational dynamics between all manner of human and nonhuman agents usefully constructs a past in which “hybrid geographies” are animated by a cohabiting cast of entangled organic bodies (Cloke & Jones 2004). Beyond the world of the corporeal and the jurisdictional, then, heritage emerges as a world of biotic relationships, layered narratives and “transactional realities” (Harrison 2018) that seems ripe for eco-reorientation.

The policy arena has been rather slower to embrace revisionist and post-structuralist takes on heritage as contested and negotiable in favour of maintaining traditional binaries (something which is starkly evident in recent trends in UK planning legislation). The infrastructural context has not helped the situation – historical efforts to preserve so-called natural resources (national parks, nature reserves, sites of special scientific interest) have typically been demarcated separately to endeavours to conserve cultural heritage (important buildings and landmarks), leading to a bureaucratic complexity to establishing new ways of operational thinking. In the UK, by way of example, such distinctions are illuminated by the institutional remits of

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3 governmental sponsored public bodies Natural England (nature and landscape) and
4 English Heritage (monuments, buildings and historic places). In a global context, the
5 creation of the World Heritage Convention by UNESCO (1972) did include both
6 outstanding cultural achievements and unique natural phenomena in its criteria,
7 providing they were of “exceptional universal value.” In practice, however, the
8 1000+ locations now dedicated as World Heritage Sites fell into one or other of the
9 categories, a reflection of the typically discrete markers of natural or cultural
10 importance that governed assessments of historic value (Cameron & Rossler 2013).
11 As such, despite the formal addition of cultural landscapes to the stable in 1992
12 alongside a willingness to embrace “mixed landscapes” that, especially, paid heed to
13 indigenous worldviews alongside the modern-nation-state paradigm, UNESCO has
14 tended to act to perpetuate the nature-culture binary (Kari & Rossler 2017).
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18 As various academics point out, the time is right to realign this global heritage agenda
19 on the basis of sustainable development and shared conservation/preservation goals
20 (Harrison et al 2020). As Larsen & Wijesuriya see it, we have a “major opportunity
21 to reassert the contribution of world heritage to the effective and equitable protection
22 of cultural and biological diversity” (Larsen & Wijesuriya 2017). Adding weight to
23 the developing critique of what Kenneth Olwig calls the “contested patrimony” of
24 heritage management (Olwig 2005), the visible consequences of anthropogenic
25 impact adds substantial urgency here in bringing issues of loss and endangerment to
26 the fore (DeSilvey 2017). A new, networked approach to heritage management is
27 thus needed that looks at connected systems and multispecies relationships (Smith
28 2004; Harvey 2001; Harrison, 2015) and crosses disciplinary and jurisdictional
29 boundaries to apprehend the realm of historic preservation as “dynamic, interrelated
30 and complex” (Larsen & Wijesuriya 2017). This is where the “Ecological
31 University” comes once more into the frame: conceived along the conceptual lines set
32 out by Ronald Barnett in his recent book of the same name (Barnett 2017). With an
33 embedded attention to networks and ethics – a place *in* the world and *for* the world -
34 the notion of heritage might (must) be usefully reoriented and repurposed to better
35 engage with issues of global sustainability, environmental responsibility and citizen
36 equity.
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41 A possible start in this direction might lie in explorations of the notion of ‘green
42 heritage’: a concept ill-defined, but one which can point, firstly, to the complex weave
43 between cultural and natural forces in our biotic and geopolitical communities, and,
44 secondly, one which is helpfully veneered with a marker of politically
45 environmentalist intentionality. Not yet in popular usage, a quick search of the
46 Internet finds a scattering of references, some throwaway, some pertinent, including a
47 recycled toilet roll brand; various community and volunteer activities in urban parks
48 and reserves; a guided trail at London’s recent National Park City festival, and an
49 antiquarian book on Gloucestershire’s green heritage by Mary Hopkins that describes
50 itself as a study of “plants and the past,” somewhere between a “botany book, a
51 county guide, or an identification book” (Hopkins 1989). Precursory academic
52 definitions have come courtesy of two academic papers that deal specifically with
53 green building and infrastructures and future-proofing historic sites in the Middle
54 East. In their study of sustainable practices for cultural heritage in Egypt, Ismaeel and
55 Elsayed talk about “green heritage” as an assessment criterion that considers the
56 “triple bottom line” of project objectives, social-cultural, economic and environmental
57 (Ismaeel and Elsayed 2018). Probably the most useful early extrapolation on the
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concept, Teleki and Baskaya use the term to discuss environmental changes, sustainability issues and planning strategies for the “historical green network” of sacred groves in Istanbul. As they point out, the historical groves of the Bosphorus present “great potential for carrying the natural and cultural landscape values of this city to future generations.” The framework of ‘Green Heritage,’ offers an unrivalled opportunity to create landscape planning strategies that connect urban memory and spatial protection (Teleki & Baskaya 2015).

‘Green Heritage,’ then, seems ripe for development as a fresh descriptor to denote spaces of *convergence*, sites woven into collective memory by cognitive meanings and material encounters; to describe areas marked by an entwined collage of natural and cultural features; and to engender a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to issues of ecosystem health and sustainable development. It is flexible in design, easy to understand, has a certain attention-grabbing quality, and offers significant amenity value. Any terminology, inevitably, is not without its nomenclatural problems. For instance, why ‘green’? Championing a land-biased view of human-world encounter leaves out much of the equation, not least the so-called blue landscapes of riverfronts and coastlines. Despite these caveats, however, the phrase seems to offer useful mileage in its ability to connect up the various constituencies engaged in making our home and habitat liveable and in emphasizing the important links between people and place – biophilic philosophies and deep time - physical interactions and imaginative possibilities. Cloke & Jones’ study of co-constituted narratives of dwelling and resistance in Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol points to the conceptual reach and interpretive value of such a perspective in charting human-dendron conspiracies of place-making in action at one site (Cloke & Jones, 2004). Two further aspects of the concept are worth noting here. Firstly, ‘green heritage’ as a label speaks to the necessity for any dialogue on urban futures to take in the environmental past as well as the present. We hear a great deal about the contemporary value of urban green space as CO₂ and heat sinks, flood alleviators and enhancers of physical, psychological and community wellbeing. What is less understood, however, is the historical benefits of urban green space. As Rostami et al. note of their study of Persian gardens, this sense of a “historical fixation” plays a “notable influencing role” by generating personal attachment, enhancing a sense of local identity and building social cohesion, making urban green space a key element in urban revitalization programmes (Rostami et al 2015). Secondly, the nomenclature of ‘Green Heritage’ actively suggests the idea of transforming living environments into more ecologically friendly versions of themselves (i.e. ‘greening’), injecting an important ethical and sustainable aspect to the heritage corpus. Usefully encapsulating a middle ground of nature-culture engagements, with a firm sense of locatedness, the concept thereby points towards a conversation aimed at a better kind of human-terrestrial transaction, the creation of a new set of landmarks (which may or may not include the Great Pacific Garbage Patch) and a recognition of the multitude of community interactions (social and biotic) taking place in our local environments.

3 Canterbury Cathedral & its Precincts: Maps, Stories and Civic Engagement

If this all sounds too much of an abstraction, it might be useful to set down a practical example of how ‘green heritage’ might operate as a positive and galvanising motif for local community activity and consciousness raising. Brought into the service of the

ecological university, environmental history, it seems to me, has a particular contribution to make to this endeavour in four important ways:

- 1) Creating a workable definition of 'green heritage'
- 2) Uncovering new histories and new landmarks that help to define and demonstrate its essential tenets
- 3) Finding valuable examples of 'green heritage' in plain sight: by which I mean re-envisioning the landscapes we already value as heritage spaces by making a conscious intervention to show their embedded, but overlooked, narratives and lessons about human-environmental encounter.
- 4) Facilitating community activity to discuss, digest, collect and protect 'green heritage'

In this section, I want to outline how points 1) – 4) were recently put into practice in a specific context as part of an event organised by academic practitioners, community and NGOs groups, the business district and local authority. Called "Growing Canterbury's Green Heritage: Inspiring the Future," the day-long event in October 2018 brought together various constituencies to discuss how we could move from 'grey to green' and create a sustainable legacy for the city. In specific terms, we wanted to put issues of green space on the local authority heritage management plan (which was under public consultation) and to raise consciousness about the various 'green heritage' assets within the district. The programme included talks on sustainability and green space, garden history, street tree and park maintenance and hardy plants, a poetry reading and a design competition for local schools. At two round-tables events during the day, various representatives of government, conservation, business and civic organisations talked about their engagements with a greener Canterbury and took part in a Q&A with the public on salient heritage and public open space issues facing the city.

A key part of the day was to encourage the idea that green space should necessarily be included in civic and community ideas of heritage: bringing it from background space to an essential part of the fabric of a thriving urban area. What we wanted to do was to mitigate the idea of heritage blindness (borrowing Wandersee & Schussler's definition of plant blindness, namely the "the inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment, leading to the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs" (Wandersee & Schussler 1998) to show histories of ecological encounter hiding around every corner in the city. Whether public or private spaces, large parks or a small pocket of shade provided by a trailing shrub, the idea was to get people to look afresh at the landscapes they moved through in everyday life. As it turned out, 'green heritage' was a popular tag, something easy to apprehend, and good to think with. One of the practical tasks we asked the audience to engage with was to pin their examples of 'green heritage' on a local map. By the end of the day, we had the beginnings of a newly mapped city, identified by alternative landmarks of street trees, riverbanks, formal parks, woodlands, allotments, and such like. People identified places of 'good' greenery and also areas they felt needed improvement and preservationist intervention. Also important in this regard was the way in which 'green heritage' seemed to invite two useful responses, firstly, to bring to the fore intimate and collective memories of human-environmental encounter – a storytelling trace – and also to encourage people to travel around the city with a different gaze in mind. There was a clear sense of its value as a historic

asset and an important part of how it made the city liveable. Accordingly, such responses provide a good baseline to work from in arguing *why* we need to take responsibility to protect and to grow these sites as well as providing a helpful case study in how the *historical* can be positively utilised in conservation work and in unpacking more detail to resource assessments of intangible values.

Associated with this exercise in redefining the heritage corpus of Canterbury was a short, participatory exercise aimed at remapping the city along green lines. For this, we looked to the extensive and intriguing ‘green heritage’ trail hiding in plain site at the cathedral. Canterbury is a World Heritage Site and is dominated – in terms of its physical and historical imprint – by the cathedral. A popular tourist attraction and the spiritual centre of the Anglican Church, its history is typically framed in religious (think Thomas Becket), architectural, and literary (think Geoffrey Chaucer) terms. However, as anyone who has visited the landmark will know, there is a substantial amount of outside space in the cathedral precinct: one which harbours a fascinating environmental history of medieval spirituality, subsistence provision, health and healing regimes, and sanitation systems and technologies. Via a short talk and then a self-guided walking tour, we encouraged a look at the cathedral with fresh eyes, to see the building in its habitat so to speak, and to witness a space of spirituality and pilgrimage, and one equally one alive to a medieval world of work and water pipes, animals and plants. Central to this part of the workshop was the notion of placing nature at the heart of the city by showing a long tail of historical use and cultural interaction. Core to this endeavour was an amazing medieval illuminated medieval manuscript, the Eadwine Psalter, dating to the 1150s and now housed in Trinity College, Cambridge, which includes a waterworks plan drawing from Prior Wibert. A richly illustrated document, this plan is one of only two surviving documents to depict a medieval cathedral garden (the other example being the plan of St Gall, c.1092, which showed a cathedral compound, but was never built). Although not drawn to scale, the walls and buildings still give a good sense of the boundaries of the site and a combination of bird’s eye view and a perspective drawn as it one is looking at particular structural features provides a vivid entry into monastic cultural life and the myriad functions of green space and garden space in a medieval cathedral. By using this document as a map, we can plot a path to the twelfth century to see sacredness, subsistence, medicinal uses and daily practice entangled in the environmental history of the cathedral site. The main purpose of the plan was to delineate an elaborate waterworks system – a remarkable engineering marvel of pipes, cisterns and feeding tanks from a mile outside the grounds - that fed the cathedral buildings and provided water for ritual, sanitary and subsistence uses. Embedded in this plumbing blueprint were also a kitchen garden, a vine growing on the west wall of the kitchen, beehives in the walls; along with more distant orchards (for apple, pear and also medlar, quince and nuts) fields and coppiced woods, all showing the cathedral as a productive and self-sufficient community connected. Religious ordinance was indicated in the Great Cloister built by Lanfranc in the 11th century for the Benedictine monks of the monastery, the central open square of which, called the *cloister garth*, was surrounded by a covered, often colonnaded, walkway on all four sides. There was also a fountain for ritual washing. Also clearly depicted on the map were an infirmary cloister garden (with grass and flowers) where patients could recuperate, divided by a small fence from the herbarium, where medicinal plants were cultivated and a large oval fishpond next to the cemetery garden (now covered by a car park) which was adorned with a central island of sculptures of sea monsters and

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3 fed by filling and drainage pipes. At other monastic locations, fish were cultivated for
4 the table, but the size of the pond here suggests a ritual or contemplative use,
5 especially given the 12 water inlets around the edge. Next to the burial ground, this
6 was probably a 'paradise garden' for the monks to contemplate in. On the psalter
7 plan, you can even see the ripples in the water.
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10 **4 Greening the Past, Greening the Future: Academia and Activism at the** 11 **Ecological University** 12

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14 Heritage as a property has been typically demarcated along a nature-culture boundary.
15 In this paper, I argue for a new integrated approach based on the need to confront our
16 complicated relationship with the planet and to recognise the complexity of actors and
17 networks entangled in the places we deem of historical value. The idea of "people-
18 less nature landscapes" and "nature-less cultural landscapes" has been critiqued in
19 recent years and seems increasingly anachronistic in an age of global anthropogenic
20 environmental crisis (Byrne et al. 2013). 'Green heritage,' however, might present
21 one small conceptual track in which we can effectively explore the maelstrom of
22 natural and cultural elements that make up our home habitats and also work positively
23 towards creating more sustainable futures. Here, the "Ecological University" has a
24 useful role (and a civic responsibility) in championing this process of nomenclatural
25 reorientation, and, therein, environmental history a particularly important function in
26 bringing an ecological turn to our processing of the past into heritage and in
27 highlighting the abiding connections between people and green space across deep
28 time. With strong youth appeal and an important link to projects aimed at
29 diversifying the curriculum, an environmental humanities perspective usefully
30 forwards a sustainability agenda through a pedagogy founded on place that extends
31 the idea of historical value beyond conventional parameters. Turning to a global
32 perspective, the value of something as deceptively simple as presents an opportunity
33 to transcend local geographies of study (in this case, Canterbury) to examine the ways
34 in which past human activity has altered and modified a planetary habitat. Beyond
35 the university to a policy dimension, UNESCO might look to 'green heritage' as a
36 way of bridging the nature-culture dichotomy that has plagued its endeavours to
37 create mixed landscapes of outstanding, universal significance in the half century
38 since it created the World Heritage Convention. Meanwhile, the ever-presence of a
39 raft of gnarly issues – air pollution, disaster relief, green field development to name
40 but a few – often make the task of championing an environmental agenda more
41 reactive than proactive. At the very least, I hope to have indicated a few precursory
42 steps in how we might practically and positively re-paint the conceptual terrain of
43 heritage with a green hue. Endeavours to create a green legacy for the city of
44 Canterbury – remapping local landmarks and encouraging a located sense of
45 community identity - I hope, will have an after-life that demonstrates the usefulness
46 of the 'green heritage' term for 21st century urban sustainability. Notre Dame might
47 take note.
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