

***This is the pre-print version of the following review article: Douglas-Jones, Rachel. 2015. 'Claiming and knowing the real: authenticity today' Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 21(2): 466-469, which has been published in final form at doi/10.1111/1467-9655.12215. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.***

Claiming and knowing the real: authenticity today<sup>1</sup>

(PN) James, Jason. 2012. *Preservation and National Belonging in Eastern Germany: Heritage Fetishism and Redeeming Germanness*. Palgrave Macmillan:

(AA) Filitz, Thomas and A. Jamie Saris. 2013. *Debating Authenticity. Concepts of modernity in anthropological perspective*. Berghahn Books:

(ML) Sharon Macdonald. 2013. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. Routledge:

While writing this book review, I was asked to give an overview of my first year of teaching at a Danish University to a workshop for incoming international staff. A meeting with the workshop coordinators furnished me with powerpoint slides from previous speakers, although they assured me it didn't matter what I focused on. What I should deliver, they felt, was an 'authentic account'. Euro-American anthropology has an uneasy relationship with the concept of authenticity, whether in its connotations of inner, personal genuineness requested of me as a speaker, its still recent association of 'essential meanings' and 'authentic culture' (Asad 1979, Strathern 1995: 3) or its current ubiquitous use in heritage and tourism. In its more implicit days, the authentic was sought unquestioningly: '[t]he anthropological concern was with 'real' tradition', writes Macdonald in the introduction to *Memorylands*; twentieth century careers and ambitions built on 'gathering up information about ways of life deemed to be on the brink of disappearing' (ML: 29). In its current, more explicit era, the constructions, practices, processes, negotiations, truth claims and effects of authenticity are anthropologically analysed. But its transition from desired to critiqued practice has been far from smooth, and the disentanglement of its connotations of the genuine, the essential, the true and the real from analytical language can perhaps never be complete. How, then, is it to be written about today, what modes of reasoning might it encompass (DA: 144)? As the editors of *Debating Authenticity* suggest, the 'dichotomy between academic use of the term and the one deployed in public spaces and political projects' (DA: blurb) is a juncture at which it is worth pausing, and in the review below, I do so for each of these three recent publications.

Filliz and Saris handle the complex conceptual past of authenticity most elegantly, their introduction to *Debating Authenticity's* 12 chapters providing students and scholars with a critical handle on the disciplinary history, periodicity and philosophical inheritances of the concept. The 'spectre of authenticity', they write, 'can still be found at the anthropological banquet' (DA: 8) pointing to anthropologists professionally implicated in legitimation, authorising, and adjudicating claims of the authentic (e.g. Carrier 1988). 'Debating' is an appropriate title choice, since the assembled chapters take radically distinct approaches to both the study and use of the term. Filliz and Saris are 'struck by the ubiquity of the notion of authenticity'; they are also [467] stuck with its polyvalency. At various points, the

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers given in square brackets [ ] refer to the pagination in the published version, for citation purposes. The page number appears where a new page *begins*.

authentic is produced (DA: 176), performed (DA: 54) constructed (DA: 87-88) and dismissed (DA: 220). It is a lens (DA: 192), and it is a truth to the self (DA: 193); it is most interesting as a process (DA: 213), it is binary (DA: 88) it is belief (DA: 52), it is institutionalised (DA: 111), a remnant of boundedness (DA: 10, 196), a product of modernity (DA: 8) and defined in relation to an other, an inauthentic untruth which comes into being with it (DA: 2, 65, Dutton 2003).

Yet though the excellent index documents this flourishing plurality around something which references a singular truth, as Filliz and Saris prefigure in their introduction, plurality has also been incorporated as a characteristic of the concept itself. While they write that authenticity 'is most of the time linked to the idea of a cultural core, to the essence of a thing' (DA: 21, 196-211), they note that it has been conceptually tied in to 'diversity', a scale shift in which a multiplication of differences make up the authentic collection (Clifford 1996, Taylor 1999). Longing, nostalgia and loss, as romantic and temporal characteristics of authenticity's desire, are one way of understanding its endurance and appeal as subject matter, at a time, in Mursic 's melancholic language, 'when everything solid is ineluctably melting into the air' (DA:46). But what is melting, and which pasts are to be claimed? The two single author texts in this review take up authenticity within the field of European heritage studies, Jason James attending to architectural and cityscape debates in eastern Germany in the 1990s, and longtime ethnographer of Europe Sharon Macdonald providing a wide ranging synthesis of European ethnographies of heritage and memorialisation. These activities raise companion spectres for authenticity: the nation state, nationalism and 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald 2009).

In her broad ranging book, *Memorylands*, Macdonald draws on two decades of previous work on the Isle of Skye (1993), in Germany (2009) and on Holocaust memorialisation in the UK (2005), to put forward the 'meso-level theorising' (ML: 7) argument that Europe today is a 'memoryland, obsessed with the disappearance of collective memory and its preservation' (ML:1). Her own ethnographies are added to a plethora of other texts on Greece (43-48) Latvia (48-49) Italy (59), the Czech Republic (68), France (69), Bosnia (71), the UK (74), Hungary (75), Cyprus (90) Norway (141), drawn from an unevenly ethnographised Europe (ML: 21). Her intention is to move towards a synthesis which simultaneously aims to bring into view 'European patterns', a 'repertoire of tendencies' around memorializing, *and* show that there are also 'significant variations within Europe' (ML: 3). Macdonald acknowledges the tension in her ambition to 'recognise the complexities and specificities that ethnographic research typically highlights and at the same time [...] identify broader patterns' (ML: 2). She also notes the tension in her use of Europe 'as context' given the potential for it to replicate the boundedness she seeks to move away from (ML: 20) and the problems of the breadth of 'memory' as a device for examining the making of meaning. Given the fraught ground her argument covers, Macdonald therefore dedicates large parts of the first chapter to a clarification of her terms, and in a strike away from essentialism, argues that her European memoryland is characterised by change, tension and ambivalence, rather than 'enduring memorial forms' (ML:2) .

One well developed thread is 'past presencing', a phrase intended as a conceptual and methodological contribution, a means of framing research about the past 'that may entail very little remembering or memory at all' (ML:12). In the ambitious empirical scope of the volume however, many intriguing ideas and phrases are introduced rapidly, and points are made but discarded as the text speeds on to further examples. Documents, for example,

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are given to indicate a 'facing up to the past' (ML: 237) but the way in which they achieve that 'facing up' or indeed what 'facing up' implies (acknowledgement, acceptance, strategic displacement?) is not addressed. The book's selected epigraph, pointing to the 'imperative' 'to keep everything' (Nora 1989) therefore leads to surprisingly little discussion of the politics, modes, or assumptions of selectivity, and it would have enriched the arguments in the book to hear more about Macdonald's encounters with forgetting. If forgetting is such a 'failure', how is the fear and threat of this to be managed? (ML: 229) Macdonald asserts that there will be 'ongoing need for renewal and reminding about the past and existing memories' (ML: 235), and though she does not expand on the character of this 'need', James's account - the final in this review - gives us some grounds from which to understand it.

*Preservation and National Belonging in Eastern Germany* complicates the character of forgetting. Jason James uses the town of Eisenach's material landscape to explore the heritage fetishism and the remaking of 'Germanness' during conservation and restoration tensions in the 1990s, asking what buildings are to people, and people are to buildings. Is it possible, James asks, whether it is 'possible for a hometown or nation to be embraced as a process that does not depend on so much forgetting'? (PN: 176) Where in Macdonald's account the Euro note images of generic architecture demonstrate 'the significance of place in the European imaginary but at the same time defus[e] its real situatedness' (PN: 36), the Eisenach of James's account is, in contrast, highly situated. Eisenach was 'seized upon' he tells us 'as a place where Germans could find a common national legacy' after unification in 1990, a place, unlike Berlin, which could be thought of as a *Heimat*, 'the kind of historic hometown that has long [468] been seen as the locus of true Germanness' (PN: 14). It could be made distinct from the doubly 'burdened past of the GDR (1949-1990) and Nazism, part of an East Germany cast as a 'site of national authenticity', an internal 'orientalization' (PN: 83, see also Borneman 1998). The authentic here was as much a built environment 'not falsified by prosperity' as it was an authentic 'social conduct' of East Germans which reached 'all the way in to 'private habits' (Gaus 1983:26, JJ's translation). The condition of the built environment merged with struggles over how the GDR era was to be understood: did that which had preserved the built environment ('poverty', 'neglect') also represent 'unwillingness to take responsibility' (80) on the part of East Germans, not only in their houses and cities as well as in political life' (PN: 80)? These framings of architectural styles, cobbled streets and cityscapes saw post-unification leaders, living in a 'cult of monuments' (Koshar 1994), praising the landmarks of East Germany 'as icons of the shared cultural traditions that supposedly justified national unification' (PN: 78).

James's fieldwork took place in this post-unification period amongst activists and bureaucrats and the analysis from his two years of fieldwork at times remains somewhat rooted in the era: despite a return visit in 2006, the range of references does not feel particularly refreshed. Nonetheless, he provides a productive exploration heritage relative to his title's promise of 'redeeming Germanness'. 'Germanness' remains a category under interrogation throughout the book (PN: 98-101), as James traces controversies around city branding, restoration and development, and shopping centers. A key achievement of the text is to demonstrate the implication of the notion of the authentic in the shift from GDR to democratic administrations, and its role in these new administrations administration of the

past (e.g. PN: 50-51). Furthermore, he presents the intriguing argument that in conflicts between preservation activists and officials, the 'same' beliefs are held: officials rendering their own 'institutionalised, restrained and contingent' desire 'reasonable' through the 'legal, technical, and academic knowledge of official preservation', contrasting it with activists' supposedly unbridled, unreasonable attachment to heritage' (PN: 59). James addresses the question of selectivity by pointing to the apparent neutrality of 'the historic' over the loadedness of 'history' (PN: 98), a distinction his account would benefit from taking further. He is at his most persuasive discussing the shifting ground of 'nature' (PN: 102-107) as activists invoke 'natural' materials like wood over 'artificial' ones like concrete, and the natural is implicitly employed as a composite image of 'harmoniously integrated elements' (PN: 104). The decision to cast both authenticity (PN: 102) nature (PN:103) as metaphors, however, does little support his analysis in otherwise strong passages on the way in which materiality becomes an inadequate guarantor of integrity (PN:102), and activists distinguish between 'organic' and 'artificial' (PN:103).

There remains in the concept of authenticity a moral valence: the true opposed to the false, the real rather than the fake, the original not the copy' (Lowenthal 1999: 5, Taylor DA 63-77). Yet together these three books - two monographs and an edited collection - demonstrate and enrich anthropological understandings of what gets invoked in attempts to access 'the real', whatever value laden status it occupies. They also show how this 'remarkably stretchy' idea (ML: 129) opens on contemporary understandings of the labour of change and the labour of continuity, and the participation of anthropological accounts in creating and sustaining versions of the change/continuity measurement, from 'primitivism' (DA: 5-6, 134) to Macdonald's reflections about countering policy assumptions that 'shared' heritage will necessarily bind people together' (ML: 226).

Conservation and Anthropology in this sense suffer a similar unease with the relationship of change to continuity, and the way each is asserted. As Strathern remarks, 'each depends on the other to demonstrate its effect' (1992:3). Together these books show that understanding this relationship requires not only a periodisation of concepts, but also of their purchase and conditions of credulity, something Dilley's chapter accomplishes particularly clearly (DA: 175-95). Gingrich suggests that, 'twenty-first century anthropology tends to emphasize the pervasiveness of change, rather than continuity' (DA:142), an argument affirmed by Macdonald's *Memorylands*. At the same time, however, he remarks we may have to 'deal with authenticity as part of the *real* world that we seek to analyse' (DA:143, emphasis added) thereby collapsing the question of the status of the real, which the concept of authenticity works to hold in doubt.

Anthropological readings of materiality have rekindled interest in 'truth claims' of late (Carrithers et al 2010, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007), as well as its interest in the legacies of previous anthropological analyses (Schneider 2011 [1965]). Though the authentic seems to belong to a different era of analytical language, its temptation lies in a sense of 'the real' and claims upon it, a category debated today in a discipline collectively implicated in its empiricist efforts to define a sense of 'what is' over a sense of what 'merely thought' or represented (Jensen and Morita 2012). We are not the alone in these conversations, and it is to their credit, then, that these authors tackle authenticity head on, [469] empirically charting the instances of its foregrounding.

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