

# Interview with Lynn Meskell

Douglass W. BAILEY\*

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Lynn Meskell is Director of the Archaeology Center at Stanford University. She took her PhD in Archaeology from Cambridge University (1997), before holding the Harold Salvesen Research Fellowship at New College Oxford. From 1999-2005 she taught in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, before joining Stanford where she is Professor of Anthropology. In 1999, Lynn founded the *Journal of Social Archaeology*, of which she remains editor.

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**Douglass W. Bailey:** Stanford University has become a leader in the study and research of heritage and heritage ethics in archaeology. What is specific about the way that heritage is approached at Stanford?

**Lynn Meskell:** In the United States, heritage research is based in anthropology departments. What is distinctive for our program is that anthropologists and archaeologists here have taken the same issues and approaches equally seriously. Thus, we have anthropologists who are interested in heritage and museums, but also in issues such as materiality. Heritage ethics at Stanford is a forward-looking area of research that is very international. Our students train in ethnographic methods and can also focus on an archaeological area of the world. Because of this breadth of participation by faculty, we can set up dissertation committees across departments, and they now work with students in many parts of the world, anywhere from Indonesia to Ghana to South Africa. These students are concerned with issues and debates about government or international agencies like UNESCO but also on a larger scale with bigger topics such as disaster, inequality, poverty, segregation.

**DWB:** What ties all of those disparate issues to archaeology?

**LM:** It is an attention to the material, not only attention to materiality or the archaeological site, but also to the materialities of context, of people and of communities. The difference between archaeology and anthropology is that archaeologists by their nature and by the nature of their fieldwork are embedded in communities and have to work between local, regional, state, and international bodies and agencies. Archaeologists have to work at a larger scale, and have a much larger presence than does a single solitary ethnographer. We feel that we have responsibility back to the people of these communities. We are not just doing work that is some sort of intellectual exercise, after which we just move on; it isn't just on one day you work in Romania, and the next day you decide that your work is going to be in Papua New Guinea and that it is all about neoliberalism or intellectual property.

There is something that is very important for local groups about understanding the significance that the past has to groups of people today. It is history with a point for heritage. But how it is done, what it means, and what is constituted by heritage is differently understood in different parts of the world. So if you are Latin America like one of our students, Maria Fernanda Escallon, you might be interested in something called intangible heritage, and how that might play into ideas of recognition and racial difference in nation states and violence. This is very different from work done by Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels in North Africa where heritage sites are being mobilized for economic regeneration and then supported by the World Bank and neoliberal efforts to democratize people. There are these regional issues and though it can be encompassed under the banner of heritage, this doesn't mean that there is a unilinear model or a singular way for understanding what

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this thing called heritage is and what it does in different places. Another example is a student, Trinidad Rico, who has just finished in our program and who was working in Indonesia looking at post-tsunami disaster and the rebuilding of heritage. Here you are in an Islamic post-conflict situation and you are also talking about Banda Aceh and you are talking about something that is called heritage that is understood completely differently and is not about archaeological sites or particular mosques. It is actually about much more ephemeral sites, sites that are marking the disaster itself, sites that would never be put in a museum, but which to local people are the more salient heritage items.

**DWB:** Is this the discussion that you were stimulating in your recent edited book, *Cosmopolitan Archaeologies* (2009; Duke University Press)?

**LM:** That discussion was about heritage but it was also about the ethics of doing fieldwork internationally. It is a bridging between anthropology and archaeology: a convergence of concerns about uses of the past. It transcends the old ideas of nationalism, the idea that countries use sites just to bolster their own identity formation. That was an approach that was very comfortable in the 1980s and 1990s. Now we have to look at issues of sovereignty, of minority rights, of transnational groups that define nation states. It becomes much more complex. In addition, archaeology's methodologies have changed and now include local communities, vested communities, and other stakeholders. It's not the old idea that we just need to have one day of outreach, or that these are descendants or non-descendants, or that we are only interested in the dead subjects of archaeology. The *Cosmopolitan Archaeologies* book was about a recognition of our responsibilities, that we are in a sense contributing to certain sets of conflicts or hierarchies about rights to sites, about land claims: that we are in the mix. In the 1980s and 1990s, we saw ourselves as archaeologists standing outside of these issues, that we didn't have the expert status to contribute to the debates. Anthropologists, of course have always felt that they were players in that field, that they worked with the World Bank or that they consulted with governments or that they had that intellectual or political standing. Archaeologists felt that they were secure in the dead subjects of the past, and I think that this is no longer possible.

**DWB:** Recently, you have been doing research about UNESCO. What have you been looking at?

**LM:** When I said that I would like to start a project about UNESCO, Chris Gosden at Oxford said something very helpful to me. He said, in some ways, UNESCO is just as it is often described, as a huge international organization that we cannot avoid, that it is ever present, that it stands as a universal register of archaeological sites. On the other hand, it is completely meaningless to us as practicing archaeologists. In a sense, my project is in the interstices of those two positions. It is a humbling project. As an archaeologist, I want to understand what UNESCO does and how it works, and I think that most of us are woefully ignorant about that, even people who are experts on ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites), who are an advisory body to UNESCO, and who do recommendations, site visits, and reactive monitoring for them. You talk to these people and you realize that they are atomized and separate from this thing called UNESCO which itself is fractured by a culture sector which does intangible heritage, the world heritage center that does the cultural and natural sites. We don't even know how this organization is assembled, let alone its regional offices. How it works? How is it funded? There is also the important role played by nation states; it is part of the United Nations. If you think about heritage sites, you notice that we often work with minority groups. How does this work in practice? How, if at all, can minorities challenge sovereignty?

Over the past summer, my initial fieldwork on UNESCO suggests that we really don't know the answers to these questions. We don't know how powerful is the 21 - body nation state committee that makes those decisions. It is not the World Heritage Center that is making decisions about which sites are delisted; that this is all done by nations. We often imagine this juggernaut that is UNESCO, but in fact, at any one time, it is driven by particular national agendas. Tracking that and tracking the deals that are done between other UN interest groups is a real eye-opener. It is very easy to demonize something that is called UNESCO for certain decisions if we realize that, in fact, it is nation states that are voting and that it is not experts at UNESCO making unilateral decisions. In fact, those guys are facilitators rather than arbiters.

**DWB:** What happens in the process of listing a site and after a site is listed? Does the status of a site change, and if so, is this a positive or negative thing?

**LM:** What you realize is that the national flavor of things is one of the most salient characteristics of anything around UNESCO. The importance of listing and nominating and successfully inscribing a site varies country by country. What I found this summer is that if you talk to the Italian delegation, they will say, sure, it would be wonderful to have another one of our sites (one of the many hundred) inscribed, and there will be some positive knock-on effects from tourism and visibility and fund-raising, but people will still come to Italy without that. They see the decision in terms of international economic and social generation.

If you successfully nominate a site in Japan, the stakes are entirely different. Japan sends more media personnel to cover the world heritage event than any other nation. They are there as a much larger force. In Japan, overnight, a small relatively unknown site can generate over a million domestic tourists. A small village that might be inscribed on the list will suddenly be flooded with purely domestic tourists, and the whole social, economic, revenue profile will be transformed immediately.

The other thing is that you have to realize that if we put in a dossier for Turkey or some other country, we might pay someone to write that nomination, and it might cost a few thousand dollars. If a country like China prepares a dossier, it can be anything up to five million dollars. The stakes are different, the resources are different, the end products, the ramifications can be totally different in terms of scale. For some countries, it is not such a big deal, and they already have a huge reservoir of sites and tourists. For another country it can be absolutely overwhelming, and you cannot preempt the reasons for that.

**DWB:** What does the concept of intangible heritage mean and how does it work?

**LM:** Intangible heritage is not managed at all by the World Heritage Center in Paris. It is separate. It is in the Culture sector, and increasingly in culture and development. There is a nomination process, but an advisory body does not go out and assess intangible heritage. There is no model of adjudication that follows along the lines of the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Many people are very critical of the intangible heritage convention, because there is a lot of usurping that goes on. For example, do we say that the Italians have the monopoly on olive oil production as an intangible heritage, or should that be the Greeks, the Turks, or the North Africans? So, if you put forward one of these huge intangible concepts, there is no adjudication and, for the most part, these get through. So, we have some very strange things, like French cuisine, as some impossible whole gets presented as an intangible heritage legacy. If you think about some countries in Latin America, certain dances, practices, and rituals all get set. In some places these can also be used by local governments to marginalize groups. This thing called intangible heritage can have different effects in different countries.

For most onlookers, what has happened is that this becomes very nebulous and diffuse. One of my students who works in Latin America has shown (and I think that this holds from my discussions with people about intangible heritage) that it is a bit of a second prize to be given. What people really want is to be given that World Heritage emblem and they want the concrete basis of the 1972 Convention. They want World Heritage status. The intangible heritage program was probably designed to make up for the vast imbalance of European sites of a particular monumental standing. My skepticism is that those who are being encouraged to put forward intangible heritage nominations are the South-South countries, the Pacific, Latin America, Africa. It has a very continental South-South bias: you don't have the Pyramids, the palaces and the cathedrals, but you have all of this other more lived, peopled heritage which is also worth celebrating in some way. There are two different orders of things, and I think that people are not unaware of the differences.

**DWB:** You have also written about negative heritage. What does negative heritage mean?

**LM:** It is hard to think of any heritage that does not have some sort of negative inflection. More recently in heritage studies, in the paper that you mention that I wrote in 2002, we see output

that you might think of as dark sites or conflict sites. I never intended there to be a specialization in genocide sites or war sites or battlefield sites. That would be a very narrow and literal reading, very fetishized, sensationalized, so extreme that it does not bear on the more regular forms of negative heritage. In the 2002 paper, I used the case of Ground Zero in New York but also the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas (in Afghanistan) to reflect on more regular, daily practices of destroying certain sites whether it was for industry and development or social pressures. In fact when you create heritage, you create heritage conflict; here are always people who are inside and included and there are always people who are excluded.

It is a very mundane and quotidian process but the term negative heritage often gets connected with these very extreme massacre sites and sites of memory and mourning. Some of that work is terrific and others are less substantive and more a fetishization of the extreme. Suddenly we have license to do work that matters; archaeology can contribute to these contemporary, politicized sites that reveal inhumanity. This elevates archaeologists to being more important than the issues. I am very conscious that it is not about derailing the everyday violence for something like the Cambodian killing fields. These things do need to be documented, but it is a little like cases where people want to do Nazi Germany or other fascist sites. By putting the spotlight on sites that are almost impossible to talk about, sites that you can never get beyond, you forget about all of the other sites where everyday inequalities and inequities have occurred; these are the sites that we need to think though, the sites that we are still creating.

**DWB:** One of your other recent projects has been based in the Kruger National Park in South Africa. What were you working on there?

**LM:** I went to South Africa to lecture on negative heritage and about what happened at the World Trade Center and in Afghanistan. I became so fascinated by my lack of knowledge about South Africa and about what had happened there, that I wanted to educate myself about it. I was invited to come back and to do some work. I started to work in Kruger because it was home to over 1000 archaeological sites. Archaeology was being talked about as a means for reconciliation between communities. Kruger had the first archaeological site supposedly excavated by black and white archaeologists together, so it was held up as an emancipatory example of the way forward. Of course, when you get there, things become rather different on the ground. In speaking to people, the rhetoric becomes undermined by the realities of whose communities were included, or if people had the right of veto, or if they were used to elevate the status of the site or the Park. It became clear that there were many, many political agendas.

At the start, I brought a group of computer scientists to do a big mapping project that included ethnographies and oral histories in many different languages. Through this, I realized that I was less interested in the mapping of a reconstructed archaeological site and more interested in what people wanted to talk about. For the most part, they didn't want to talk about deep history or Iron Age history; they wanted to talk about the history of their exclusion from the Park, their forced evictions, their loss of cattle, their loss of livelihood, and how the Park had treated them. They wanted to talk about how even under the new dispensation, how a new government, a black government, was depriving their rights of access and use of natural resources and access to cultural resources. Initially, I said to people that this was all very interesting but could they tell me more about these particularly archaeological resources. I realized that this was not the way to go and that I should be listening to people and following what they considered history and heritage. So the project shifted from a positive, heritage-can-pay, let's-move-forward kind of project, to a let's look backwards because we have not resolved the issues of the recent past.

A new history was being written that was conducive to biodiversity and conservation purposes which is a new black modernity for South Africa and which allows South Africa to be part of the global fraternity of modern conservation states. In fact, what it did was to deprive the very people that apartheid had deprived. There was an aspect of history repeating itself. It is a much more sobering story.

All of this led me to broaden what I thought of as archaeology, because I had to take on not just the histories of Africa and the histories of enclosure (that great British model of fences and ditches), but I also had to take on everything from safari tourism and the consumption of Africa into the new version of that, which is biodiversity hotspots and the idea of biological and cultural diversity and sustainability and how these are the things that we want. It became a project and a book about why natural heritage and conservation has trumped the cultural past, why nature is seen as global and all embracing and non-racial. Even in the new South Africa (which claimed to want to excavate that past), the cultural past was seen by the national government and in the national parks as something that was divisive: we don't want to bring out ethnic difference, we want to be forward looking, we want to be modern, we want to have tourist revenue. The attitude was that this is not going to come from cultural heritage, but that this is going to come from wildlife.

**DWB:** Are there spaces in the Park that are empty or free of heritage?

**LM:** There are great tracts of the Park that are kept "empty", that are kept in a blank state. For example, you can only traverse certain roads. You can't get out of your vehicle. You are very controlled in what you can see, and there are only two archaeological sites that are open. The amount of fieldwork that you can do is also controlled, because you have to have an armed park ranger with you. If the Park doesn't want to support certain things, it just makes it impossible to conduct research. For example, there are San rock art trails that were going to be open to the public, but they are increasingly closed down because the work can't get done, because the recording can't get done. So many of the people who run the Park and the tourists who visit it don't want to see vehicles and people (indigenous or otherwise) working in it. These are places that are kept as wilderness, no-go zones; in reality there is no wilderness. It is all an anthropogenic landscape.

**DWB:** Is there a process by which space becomes appropriated for heritage and which is off-limits, but which then falls out of fashion?

**LM:** There are a couple of sites that are open, but they have become fossils of a sort; one of them has a display from the 1970s that has never been updated. It has become its own fossil; no one wants to visit it because the information is out of date. Tourists are told about wild animal sightings but not about the sites. There are other sites that are treated as if they are natural sites. When you want to clear some old archaeological reconstructions of huts, for example, you just burn the site. Sites are treated oddly; there are no employed archaeologists within the Park, and its management gets done by people trained in the biophysical sciences. There is a heritage officer there but he does not have a degree or background in archaeology. The task becomes impossible. How do you manage a park that is the size of Israel, when there is no interest and background, and you have more pressing issues like local employment and development? The contemporary issues are much more pressing, and as archaeology is not seen as generating the sort of income that animals generate, then archaeology gets left farther and farther off the map. It becomes a fiscal burden rather than a generator.

**DWB:** How did the local specialist biophysical community perceive your participation in the Park?

**LM:** They were very happy when I did the 3D reconstructions, brought computer scientists, and had something that they could relate to in their own disciplinary terms. They were less enthused with the ethnographic or anthropological work. There has been very little work done in the Park and I was told, even by the sympathetic people there, that we know all of this history, that there is all this bad history in the Park, and that we don't want to hear about this anymore. In fact, there is very little published about the negative history. There are a couple of excellent books by historians, but there is very little ethnography.

**DWB:** For a country where there have been a couple of generations of oppressive regime, what would be the approach to heritage? What would be the approach in a context where there has occurred a period of very rapid political change, a type of liberation, after a long period of oppression? Is there a period of time that has to pass by before you can engage the bad times, or is it best to rip into that heritage without delay?

**LM:** This is very similar to South Africa. There is a lot of informing and of re-narration about which side of a conflict a particular person had been on. The question is, would it be better just to forget the past and move on? What I found in the ten-year period after democracy is that unless people are attendant to history, to recent history, and to working through it (no matter how uncomfortable or fractious that is), then the tendency to repeat certain xenophobias and other sorts of discriminations is rife. It is unbelievable how people can forget so quickly. They will forget, especially in South Africa, that there are indigenous people who were there first. It doesn't mean that black South Africans also don't have a claim to indigeneity that might be different from white colonialists, but they lose solidarity with those earlier people. Forgetting is a terrible option. This is how Kruger National Park becomes *terra nullius*: "there were no people here", "we are not going to be attendant to history", "we support the thesis that black and white arrived at the same time".

**DWB:** In taking the line of not forgetting, is there the chance of continuing or extending the conflict?

**LM:** If you don't talk about it, then it will come back. If you don't deal with it, then there is going to be festering. What I see in the last few years is that whenever there is any social pressure (unemployment, economic crisis, social crisis in cities) then suddenly all of those older conflicts get played out with new populations. It is as if those old tendencies have never been excised or exercised.

**DWB:** But isn't this what heritage is: the thing that lives through multiple generations of people?

**LM:** But heritage can also have different consensual histories attached to it, and that is why (after this project) I feel very proud to be an archaeologist rather than being someone who just does ethnography. The anchor of material that can tell different stories through time has a real value intellectually and politically in the present as well as in the past. To be honest to people in the past is itself a kind of human right: not to tell fictions and lies about the past. It is better to acknowledge that shitty things happened in the past and to say that we are different and to say that we will address this differently in the future and move on. That is better than to say that it never happened and it was all OK.

The materiality (whether that is a site, a object, or a particular oral history) is a shared embodied thing: museum displays, cultural centers, archives, testaments, other sorts of material witnessing. It may sound really old fashioned but it is an empirical grounding. Those sorts of objects, things, places, representational sites, they all transcend generations. It is a type of material witnessing. There is something there that is not just an intangible account of one person's story against another. Things happened in history and we have that record and that record has traction; it has something that we can work off of. It is not just he said versus she said.

**DWB:** At a more personal level, thinking about your wider work in archaeology and heritage, what of your other publications or projects do you feel happiest with? Are there any which have not received the attention that they might have deserved?

**LM:** I think that my work has had a pretty good run.

**DWB:** Is there one piece of work that you think stands out that you would like to be remembered for?

**LM:** Like everything, some of our best work is not about us. One work, *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (1998; Routledge), still gets quite good citation; it was something that I did as a graduate student. It was an initial foray in the subject area, and though I only wrote an introduction to the book, I think that I have a knack for finding good people and supporting good people who might not otherwise have worked together. The other I would mention is the *Journal of Social Archaeology*. I am proudest of founding that journal because it promotes such good work by people from all over the world. The best papers are by people from South Africa, Bangladesh, Iran, Australia. I am very proud of that as a vehicle, though this is not really about me.

**DWB:** Do you know the BBC program *Desert Island Discs*? As on that program, I would like to know if you were stranded on a desert island what would you take to read?

**LM:** The combined works of Ian Fleming, so I could read about James Bond.

**DWB:** You also can have three luxuries on the island. What would you take?

**LM:** Sun-lotion, my Audi TT Roadster, and my cookbooks (and a good swimsuit).

### **Selected publications**

2011 *The Nature of Heritage: the New South Africa*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

2009 (editor) *Cosmopolitan Archaeologies*. Chapel Hill, NC.: Duke University Press.

2006 (edited with Robert Preucel) *A Companion to Social Archaeology*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

2005 (with Peter Pels) *Embedding Ethics: Shifting Boundaries of the Anthropological Profession*. Oxford: Berg.

2004 *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present*. Oxford: Berg.

2003 (with Rosemary Joyce) *Embodied Lives: Figuring Ancient Maya and Egyptian Experience*. London: Routledge.

2002 *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2002 Negative heritage and past mastering in archaeology, *Anthropological Quarterly* 75(3): 557-74.

1999 *Archaeologies of Social Life: Age, Sex, Class Etcetera in Ancient Egypt*. Blackwell: Oxford.

1998 (editor) *Archaeology under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*. Routledge: London.