Branded Heritage
We need new names

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I have often experienced the ‘heritagisation’ of misdeeds and the constant mutilation of what could be regarded as a heritage at the hands of the well resourced and the politically powerful. In the couple of years that I have witnessed celebrations of ‘heritage’ in South Africa, I have been made to ask myself questions around what my own heritage is. During the month that South Africa celebrates ‘Heritage Day,’ I believe that it is important to grapple with elements that are brought about by naming, performing and constructing what signifies and represents ‘heritage’ and to critically question if we can recognise ourselves, past, present and future, in those words and images. Should heritage consist of the positive and affirmative? The pitfalls of postcolonial elites? The ever-present shadow of neo-coloniality?

I would take heritage to mean what we have inherited, legacies of the past and what is succinct and significant in our memories of that past that we choose to preserve and cherish. Heritage also includes the places that we – things, people, past and present – imagined. It is the pathways we knowingly and unknowingly take, that shape and inform memory and contribute to the building of an edifice of history. A decade of Zimbabwean political and socio-economic turmoil undoubtedly influence my conflicted conceptions of heritage. Fighting the legacies of colonialism is part of a revolutionary, anti-colonial heritage, which has bequeathed often undesirable socio-political cultures centred around postcolonial elites and hegemonic cultures of impunity and accumulation.

Yet even considering the contemporary intricacies of post-colonial primitive accumulation and economies of affection, it is difficult to ignore, what some would regard as vestiges, and others as blatant manifestations of an exploitative and depriving past, witnessed in the na-

1 This is borrowed from the title of Zimbabwean writer Noviolet Bulawayo’s book *We Need New Names* (2013).

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ture of inequalities and dissatisfaction in post-apartheid South Africa. What then has been inherited, particularly in terms of culture as it occupies a salient position in celebrating heritage?

Encapsulating a people’s way of life in diverse ways, culture can extend to include the violence, impunity, overt and tacit forms of discrimination and segregation that continue to exist. It also can encompass cultures of intolerance and disenfranchisement, accompanied by a loss of sense of self and worth. These are aspects that have been inherited, aspects that inform ‘culture’ today. The tangible and intangible elements of various facets that inform postcolonial cultures cannot be subsumed under any one category, but here I try to engage with heritage as inherited material and non-material aspects of existence, as well as an emergent process, a becoming, that we are always in the process of creating.

Is Heritage Day or the entire month of September here in South Africa a time to celebrate and ululate alone, the ‘unity and diversity’ that we profess in our desire for a rainbow nation? Is it not also an opportunity for introspection and reflection on whether we hold in our hands today what is worth cherishing and preserving? With such diversity, is there ‘national heritage’ or numerous heritages based on race, ethnicity, class, language and other nuances that go beyond demographic data? How do we reconcile such invented traditions and state created forms of social engineering with vicious manifestations of violence, intolerance and inequality?

What does it mean to still name our streets, or buildings, museums and galleries, our towns and cities in a certain way? What is the nature of that heritage? Does ‘heritage’ signify a brand, a commodity we now sell to sanitise the meaninglessness of our lives in postcolonial contexts, where we own little by way of material, but even less by what we name ourselves and the places and objects that surround us? In increasingly hyper-commodified and zombified spaces shorn of a sense of community and belonging, such invented traditions and ‘national days’ are an attempt to foster a sense of national identity and pride. The fractures and fissures present are however a constant reminder of the nuances to be considered in such discourses around heritage, as well as in practical efforts at social/human engineering.

The map, the gaze and the narrative were powerful tools of colonisation. If the mapping, gazing and narration of heritage is not shorn of some form of power and dominance, whose narrative and gaze informs the bounds of heritage? And to whose benefit? In response to Robert Mugabe’s constant use of the word ‘sovereignty,’ I have heard people joke in paradoxically sad ways that we do not eat sovereignty. Is the focus on cultural heritage then a concern and worry of an intellectual elite? Or perhaps an aspect of postcoloniality that extends to the political and economic well being of those we like to refer to as ‘ordinary people’? I am always attracted to the Marxian dictum, that the owners of the means of material production in any age are the owners of the means of intellectual production. The two are, in my opinion, symbiotic. Without a recourse to some kind of economic determinism, the point here is that concerns with heritage are not exclusive concerns, because they shape how and what we come to know and think of ourselves. Heritage, as an inherited past, as well as a present, future and consequently emergent past-in-the-making, maps places and situates that architecture of our existence and (im)mobility. Who determines what becomes our heritage?

Culture is by no means a constant and its dynamism is the very reason why we are where and who we are today. However, this quality can be appropriated and used as a smokescreen for imposing and obfuscating systems of knowledge. History is replete with instances of how
ways of thinking and seeing the world have been weeded out in efforts claiming ‘civilisation.’ The dynamism attributed to cultural changes can be manufactured, a combination of direct efforts and unintended consequences. Everyday narratives of blackness allied with poverty, violence, illiteracy are as much a product of conscious and deliberate colonial marginalisation, and the ensuing legacies, as well as the (un)intended consequences of a self-flagellation that derives from imbibing imposed notions of (cultural) being. Returning to the Marxian dictum on material and intellectual production, one then wonders how much space one can maneuver in contexts where s/he controls neither the material nor the non-material. In the Gramscian sense, the intellectual laboring of the ‘ordinary,’ in competition with the professionalised intellectualism and knowledge hierarchies, carries little clout and chance of becoming part of an intellectual cultural heritage, except maybe as Mahmood Mamdani has pointed out, as native informers.

The dominants of culture and practice yesterday and today seem then to determine what is, and what is not heritage. After ‘preserving’ it for a while, the statue of Hendrik Verwoerd was eventually removed. Was this statue part of the country’s heritage? Why do people in Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt quickly destroy physical public representations and names of previous regimes, as if they are not representative of a shared ‘heritage’? One wonders if ‘museumising’ periods of oppression and exploitation is an effort at preserving the memory of pain and saying ‘never again,’ the way we have Holocaust museums or monuments commemorating the Rwandan genocide. Or is it a way for power to preserve its vestigial elements, a tacit holding on to remnants of empire and coloniality, as well as an inception and implicit reminder that even in the postcolony, the centres of power have not shifted? It is not only the accumulation and impunity of postcolonial elites that is an obscene and grotesque heritage, inherited and in the making, but also neo-coloniality, present in the material, and non-material elements of our existence, that inform culture.

One of the most salient elements of postcolonial social and economic engineering in South Africa has been the affirmative action black economic empowerment policy, berated by many for cultivating cronism and ‘tenderpreneurship.’ There have been revelations however that this policy has not been abused only by ‘black’ postcolonial elites, but by ‘white’ power
brokers who misrepresent affirmative action policies. With reports of African countries losing more in externalised and cheated profits from multinationals than they get in foreign aid, how do we name and rename laws and policies that can grapple with a vicious heritage? How can we bequeath a different heritage?

Robert Mugabe’s lack of popularity usually centres on his real foibles in holding onto a position of power beyond reason, but Zimbabwe also has caused ripples in the past decade because of its land reform programme. Inheriting a highly unequal and racialised system of land distribution emanating from colonial exploitation, the need for land redistribution was unquestionable, although much can be contested in how this was achieved and the resultant consequences. Zimbabwe had to confront the legacies of the Land Apportionment Act of 1930. South Africa now has to contend with the consequences of the Native Land Act of 1913 that determined the land ownership patterns that currently prevail in South Africa today. The often cited statement that ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it’ is vacuous when one considers the disproportionate ownership of not just land but the whole gamut of wealth. With tensions of interpreting constitutional clauses and seemingly inefficient approaches to land redistribution, South Africa may need, politically and economically, to borrow the title of Noviolet Bulawayo’s book, new names.

A few days after being elected into office, President Michael Sata of Zambia renamed three airports after liberation war heroes. What is in a name anyway? Changing an airport from ‘David Livingstone,’ an explorer who claimed to have ‘discovered’ Victoria Falls to ‘Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula’ cannot be perceived simply as an act of renaming. In this instance and in many others, naming ceases to be an issue of semantics, becoming a process imbued with power, capable of being utilised to legitimise certain forms of social hierarchy, even if based on the use of names of people or places ‘long gone.’ The ‘brand’ of heritage is being redefined through change and power. Indeed, it is a part of broader socio-economic and political concerns and should be treated as such. In South Africa, and in Africa today, what then becomes of our ‘heritage’? Are we to acquiesce in what we are given as worth cherishing, to preserve what is far from innocent, but undeniably shapes and colours our memories? Like President Sata, must we engage in the continuous processes of renaming and reshaping our heritage? Names and language are tools that have been used to construct histories, access to space, place and resources, constantly working to determine what we inherit and revere as ‘heritage.’ One hopes that the sites and power relations in this arena of constructing, performing, bequeathing and engaging with what we regard as heritage shift, hopefully in ‘emancipatory ways.’