Concrete Memories and Sensory Pasts: Everyday Heritage and the Politics of Nationhood

Kelvin E.Y. Low

Abstract

This paper interrogates how Singapore’s everyday heritage has been framed through embodied and sensory experiences. While buildings and other landmarks have been conserved as heritage icons, this designation also includes particular routes known as heritage trails. Buildings and trails by themselves are not invested with symbolic meaning; it is the processes of heritage packaging that consign particular landmarks and sites with a heritage purpose. By employing the notion of “concrete memories,” I argue that heritage landmarks and trails form a site through which the nation’s history is selectively interpreted, negotiated, and experienced by different actants. Concrete memories comprise three key features: familiarity, sensory remembering, and ownership. The discussion of concrete memories is undergirded by broad methodological principles of actor-network theory. The intention is to call attention to embodied tourism in heritage tourism studies while at the same time addressing the production and consumption of heritage and power relations through heritage networks.

Keywords: everyday heritage, concrete memories, heritage trails, heritagization, sensory remembering, actor-network theory, Singapore

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Introduction

In 2008, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore announced that its conservation program would extend beyond buildings to include other landmarks and structures such as bridges, pavilions, and towers that are emblematic of the nation’s history and heritage.¹ Such

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conservation efforts are administered alongside the 6,800 buildings that were already gazetted for conservation three decades ago. While buildings and other landmarks have been conserved as heritage icons, similar earlier initiatives include the designation of particular routes as heritage trails. Buildings, landmarks, and trails by themselves are not invested with symbolic meanings; rather, it is through heritage packaging that particular landmarks and experiences are consigned with a heritage purpose. Heritage sites and trails form intersections between collective histories and individual biographies. These heritage sites also serve as visual and experiential reminders of how Singapore society has progressed through the decades. Heritage trails provide an avenue through which the past is engaged vis-à-vis embodied ways that are further bolstered by sensory encounters. These trails are invested with sensory cues that conjure the past, textured with individual stories and experiences that have transpired on site.

I examine networks of heritagization through both content analysis of trail booklets and media reports, as well as my own heritage trail walkabouts carried out over five months in 2015. I assess how sensory encounters are deployed toward crafting a sensorially embodied consumption of heritage for both tourists and locals, and sieve out personal narratives and collective biographies. Through my participant observation at heritage trail walkabouts, I also interviewed both foreign and local participants to examine how they receive the past as heritage consumers of different backgrounds, knowledge, and interests. Walking as an ethnographic method facilitates an analysis of multi-sensorial knowledge of how people relate to place and history, which is produced through encounters between researchers and respondents.

In order to analyze why mundane landmarks warrant heritage attention, and to explain the centrality of heritage trails, I suggest the notion of “concrete memories.” Three key features of concrete memories are instructive here: familiarity, sensory remembering, and ownership. Mundane landmarks are selected not because they embody grand historical narratives. Rather, they are tied to quotidian routines, activities, and social relations that are important for identity and belonging. These sites may be regarded as repositories of individual memories, as well as those of collectivized sentiments. Extant literature on memory and the senses signal the importance of sensory remembering and the implications that such

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2  See Deborah Hayes and Nicola MacLeod, “Packaging places: Designing heritage trails using an experience economy perspective to maximize visitor engagement,” Journal of Vacation Marketing 13, no. 1 (2007): 45–58. The trail booklets were published in 2004 (Singapore River Trail) and 2006 (Jalan Besar Community Trail and Balestier Trail) and no updated editions are available to my knowledge.
remembering hold for individual as well as group identity. In attempts to make history and heritage relatable, references made to the senses, corresponding to Zhang and Crang’s “sensuality of heritage,” form a feature of how heritage trails should be consumed so as to engender concrete memories in the re-experiencing of the past. By doing so, I add to the work of scholars who have elucidated sensory aspects of heritage, given that the former enlivens the past by affording embodied links between the present and past. As some of these works are however limited in analyzing the sociality beyond the senses as biological experiences, I discuss how sensory recollections illuminate social relations, values, and experiences in reliving the past. Such emphasis would contribute to two lines of inquiry in contemporary heritage interest and practice: that of crowdsourcing to invite public engagement, and the broadening of the range and mass of materials as heritage to include sensory faculties as an intangible mode. This approach is also motivated as a follow-up to the National Heritage Board’s (NHB) inaugural annual HeritageFest in Singapore, where sensory invitations to see, hear, gaze, and sniff out different aspects of an ethnic enclave, Little India, have been put forward.

The final factor concerning ownership is related to how Singapore has developed rapidly in the last few decades, where its urban landscape has evolved and changed dramatically. Many old architectural structures have given way to urban redevelopment. Buildings including the red-brick National

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Library erected at Stamford Road in the mid-1900s, and the “New 7th Storey Hotel,” an iconic hotel that dates back to Singapore’s pre-independence period, have been demolished so as to make way for a one-way tunnel and subway line construction, respectively. Such removals have provoked debates concerning whether Singaporeans are therefore left rootless as these sites hold significant meanings. Various memory projects and heritage drives have therefore been organized by the government to invite the general public to lay claims to what is important to them. One example is the Singapore Memory Project launched in 2011, which is a national digital collection of knowledge about Singapore’s past with themes ranging from family trees, housing estates, and bookstores, to different uniformed groups, one’s school days, and community festivities, among many others. Agencies and members of the public are also invited to contribute to the web portal. These initiatives are meant to cultivate a sense of ownership so that citizens will remain rooted to a nation-state that holds relevance and meaning for them. Ownership is also tied to resonance, thereby making possible broader participation in heritage developments in establishing cultural and emotional anchors to the nation-state.

Undergirding my employment of concrete memories are broad methodological premises derived from actor-network theory (ANT). As a constructivist approach, ANT focuses on the agentic capacity of humans and nonhumans to act within networks. Following the bridge between ANT and tourism research, I show how people, architecture, and practices are intertwined in the multiplicity of experience, production, and consumption in heritage tourism. ANT is taken as a methodological approach in linking it with tourism studies as it foregrounds how actants enact heritage. Such
enactment entails the formation of networks comprising associations of human and nonhuman entities, which in this paper include architecture, heritage trails, heritage brochures, sites, and participants that relationally translate heritage. By translation, actants—such as heritage trail participants—participate with and respond to heritage sites by engaging with the concrete memories presented in trail brochures, recalling their own sensory pasts, or taking up recommendations to try out certain foods in attempts to relate to the past through gastronomy. All of this will be illustrated below. The concept of translation therefore allows an analysis of how associations come about, which is useful in addressing a gap in memory and heritage studies: the issue of reception. Conway notes that seldom do we find in a study how people relate or respond to commemorative endeavours. Going on trails with participants is therefore a method adopted in this paper to investigate how brochures and trails are interpreted and engaged by both local and foreign participants as heritage actants. By operating within these networks and showing how different actants hold stakes in the production of heritage, such a relational framework thereby also renders dualisms untenable, including top-down/bottom-up, macro/micro, or state/society. Examples on counterheritage below will illustrate power relations and negotiations that are better apprehended as associations of heritage production rather than simplistic a priori polarization between different social groups.

In order to examine heritage through concrete memories and ANT, the rest of the article is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of heritage management in Singapore and explains why and how interest in such management transpires. As a corollary, the second section on architecture elaborates on concrete memories and locates how objects of heritage, namely physical structures and everyday practices, are infused with meaningful recollections of the past that lend resonance to the nation’s identity. It foregrounds the mediating capacity of objects as nonhuman actants (in following ANT) so as to demonstrate how these objects participate in the network of heritage negotiations. Even if the turn to the mundane has been a fairly common manoeuvre in various heritage policies globally, the context of Singapore demonstrates that it is only in recent

22 Jóhannesson, “Tourism translations.”
24 Law, “Actor Network Theory.”
26 Sayes, “Actor-Network Theory.”
times that such efforts have been pronounced. Recent everyday heritage endeavours include the Heritage Tree Scheme that identifies historically significant trees, as well as attention paid by the NHB to intangible sources of heritage comprising language, dialects, cultural activities, and traditional trades. By borrowing ANT features I subsequently show how these efforts reflect upon the enactment of heritage and tourism by different groups of actants, including political leaders, the general populace, and architectural structures.

The last section focuses on the various heritage trails that have been demarcated by the NHB in recent years. These trails include neighbourhoods or other marked sites that reflect upon how memory is recorded and re-experienced in materialities of place. The Singapore River Trail, the Jalan Besar Community Trail, and the Balestier Trail are core examples that illustrate how the notion of concrete memories works in different aspects of heritage presentation. They are selected given their culturally plural makeup comprising different places of religious worship, ethnic histories and communities, and architectural landscapes that range from prewar terrace houses and art deco buildings, to shophouses and bridges that present different concrete structures as heritage resources. I further deliberate upon two dimensions of heritagization that have become formulaic in state initiatives toward presenting such trails in Singapore. These are (1) sensory encounters with the past that are employed to provoke embodied heritage experiences; and (2) everyday communal life and historical narratives that lead to the construction of a shared history. I conclude by linking constructions of the nation with the crafting of everyday heritage and demonstrate the conceptual purchase of concrete memories toward identifying key themes in studying heritagization.

Managing Singapore’s Heritage

Given its beginnings as an immigrant nation, Singapore’s heritage comprises the stories and life experiences of migrants. The politics of heritage making in Singapore are therefore not only about identifying which aspects of the past count as heritage. Rather, this exercise of identifying heritage also involves bearing in mind the inflows and outflows of peoples in Singapore. According to 2010 Department of Statistics records, the number of permanent residents increased from 368,800 in 2005, to 541,000 in 2010. The number

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28 “History lessons in the city: 5 heritage trails for you to explore,” Straits Times, 30 March 2016.
29 “Step out to learn about Singapore’s heritage,” Straits Times, 7 January 2016.
of non-residents (foreigners who are either studying or working in Singapore) increased from 797,000 in 2005 to 1,305,000 in 2010. Overall, foreigners constituted one-third of the resident population in 2010. In this context, local anxieties over immigrants have heightened over recent years and these have been expressed through anger at rising housing costs, increasing competition in the job market, overcrowding, and competition in schools for local children.32 Heritage therefore has been employed as a form of capital by the ruling elite to cultivate a sense of fellowship among citizens to allay such anxieties. Recent media reports have focused on a sense of ownership when it comes to suggestions regarding which sites or estates in Singapore qualify as a heritage town. By articulating a common history and at the same time respecting ethnic and cultural differences, visions of a Singaporean identity are supposed to both bind people together and rouse loyalty to the government and the nation.33

Heritage administration in Singapore involves balancing both development and conservation. Singapore achieved its independence abruptly, having first been granted self-rule by the British in 1959, and soon thereafter expelled from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. The newly independent country engaged in a process of national identity construction during its postcolonial period. The process comprised new discourses on nation building, incorporating diverse ethnic groups, as well as an emphasis on collective heritage and history with a focus on the rhetoric of national survival and economic pragmatism.34 Balancing an immigrant society with its vision of becoming a global modern city therefore required attention to conservation, modernization, and economic growth. Several state organizations were established, including the Preservation of Monuments Board (1971), and the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which announced its Conservation Master Plan in 1986 to preserve parts of Singapore as historic districts.35

The premium placed on heritage conservation first arose in the 1980s, coinciding with the governing elite’s fears of the negative influence of Westernization on Singapore society.36 Western notions of individualism, for instance, were deemed incompatible with the traditional Asian values that the ruling elite emphasized from the 1980s. As the then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stated: “We are part of a long Asian civilization...

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35 Kelvin E.Y. Low, Remembering the Samsui Women: Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).
and...should not be assimilated by the West...We should be a nation that is
uniquely multiracial and Asian, with each community proud of its traditional
culture and heritage." For this reason, heritagization in Singapore invites
the general public to have a stake in deciding what forms of heritage ought
to be singled out for preservation. This is done so that different communities
might contribute to a heritage production that will be in line with Asian
values broadly conceived. By maintaining a sense of belonging through such
heritage participation, outward migration might therefore also be curtailed.

An example of heritage participation and negotiation may be traced to
the case of the Bukit Brown Cemetery, which was threatened by government
plans announced in 2011 to build an eight-lane highway across it. This is a
cemetery that has served as a resting place for different ethnic Chinese
groups since 1922. Civil society activists have since called for the cemetery
to be protected as a heritage park. Activists have documented the graves
using aerial photography, showing different results than the official maps,
and organized events such as educational tours and walks. Several meetings
were also held between government agencies and civil society groups,
petitions against constructing the roads went online, and many exhibitions,
seminars, and other events were organized as forms of protest. As Chong
argues, the Bukit Brown case represents an "ongoing struggle to prescribe
the nation with timeless values thus rendering it eternal in order to anchor
it against the ferocious stream of capitalism and modernity," and where
heritage actants such as civil society activists, cultural producers, heritage
researchers, and members of the public "position themselves as both the
custodians and authors" of Bukit Brown as an important heritage space.

These various efforts represent authentic-making processes and the dynamics
of power interplay—where the right of the state as sole arbiter of “national
interests” has been challenged—in raising awareness of the historical and
cultural value of the cemetery. In this manner, concrete memories, as they
are relevant to the general public, are harnessed as a form of counter-heritage
to acknowledge beyond official versions—another way of relating to the past
through such a network. One approach would be to render structures
meaningful, as the next section shows.

37 Ministry of Communications and Information, Our national ethic (Singapore: Speeches: A
38 Henderson, “Understanding and using built heritage.”
39 Kai Khiun Liew and Natalie Pang, “Neoliberal visions, post-capitalist memories: Heritage
politics and the counter-mapping of Singapore’s cityscape,” Ethnography 16, no. 3 (2014): 331–351.
40 Terence Chong, “Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery: Contesting imaginations of the good life
in Singapore,” in Worlding Multiculturalisms: The politics of inter-Asian dwelling, ed. Daniel P.S. Goh
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Architecture, Structures, and Concrete Memories

Beyond the historical importance and restoration merit of buildings such as places of worship, war memorials, and other monuments, the scope of conservation, according to the URA, has expanded to include concrete structures such as the Botanic Gardens bandstand, and the gates to the now defunct New World Amusement Park. Apart from important events or persons, the everydayness of place and certain sites or landmarks that constitute personal and collective experiences of the past are also deemed important vessels of history. As the then Singapore Minister of State for National Development Grace Fu has stated: “Many of these [structures] are familiar landmarks that possess aesthetic, engineering, design and historical merits” that also comprise “gates, bridges, and other infrastructural or utility structures, as well as park and garden structures, such as pavilions and gazebos.” The examples of the bandstand and cast-iron gazebo at the Botanic Gardens was singled out by Fu as they were believed to “hold many dear memories for Singaporeans over the generations.” By preserving these landmarks as part of Singapore’s heritage inventory, this move “reinforces the important role physical structures play in cementing a sense of history and tradition.”

Other structures that possess valuable and familiar memories and hence warrant historical attention comprise the National Stadium (as stadiums are “an intertwining of sporting history and personal history”); old shop houses; Singapore’s “oldest bus stop” that served generations of military men from nearby camps; playgrounds built in the 1970s; public housing with unique facades or ornamentation; and other old buildings that used to operate as schools, libraries, or shopping complexes. According to a poll administered by the local newspaper The Straits Times, a 1970s bus stop located at Old Choa Chu Kang Road in the western part of Singapore garnered the highest number of votes to be preserved. Readers who voted for the bus stop revealed that they “had never used that particular bus stop in Old Choa Chu Kang Road.” Yet, they could identify with it as a “mental icon of a bygone era” given that its design could be found in many places where they

42 “Conservation widened to include familiar landmarks,” Straits Times.
44 “Conservation widened to include familiar landmarks,” Straits Times.
46 “Que Sara Sera,” Sunday Times, 3 October 2010.
48 “Shop house showcase,” Sunday Times, 30 January 2011. Shop houses in Singapore were first built in the 1820s, under the influence of the Chinese community in Malacca and Chinese immigrants.
49 “Heritage fun on home ground,” Straits Times, 8 August 2014.
50 “Landmarks at risk?” Straits Times, 7 June 2008.
51 “Celebrating the mundane,” Straits Times.
52 “Celebrating the mundane,” Straits Times.
were growing up. In short, the familiarity of the bus stop as a physical structure provides that generation with a source of concrete memories. In this manner, these “everyday places” are significant because they form part of an individual’s “routinized biographical traces.” Further instances can be found in “ordinary yet intimate landmarks” including bridges and lookout towers located in parks. These places and landmarks are ones that people “can identify with and feel for in Singapore—places where we spent quality time with our family and friends,” according to the then National Development Minister Mah Bow Tan. Issues of ownership, a sense of rootedness and belonging are pertinent within the broader arena of identifying and conserving various sites as heritage markers. It follows that my use of “concrete memories” here is two-fold; the first meaning of “concrete” refers to architectural objects and structures as discussed above that in themselves do not carry narratives of grand history, and yet are relevant sources of heritage. This is because actants relate to them as important and meaningful structures of the past. As a corollary, the second meaning of “concrete” therefore points to such memories that are grounded and concrete in the metaphorical sense. This is conceived in opposition to distant, historic events or monuments that are usually obvious candidates for heritage making but which are however not immediately intelligible or felt. This dual meaning of concrete memories is therefore useful in querying notions of authenticity in heritage production as debated in the wider literature. Instead of talking about heritage and authenticity as a fixed and objective experience that has been legitimized by institutions, a constructivist position on authenticity and heritage production and reception has been adopted here. Such a position acknowledges that social actors who meaningfully consume places and formulate identities are as legitimate as those that have been historically and officially validated. In line with ANT, these multiple relational orderings of heritage highlight links between human and nonhuman actants where political leaders, architecture, and the general population enact embodied heritage tourism. The crux of the issue therefore lies not only in what constitutes heritage, but how people process and experience heritage by referring to their own concrete memories.

54 “Celebrating the mundane,” *Straits Times*. The links between bridges and colonialism are easily discerned through such examples as British colonial administrators and bridges named after them, including Crawford Bridge, Cavenagh Bridge, Ord Bridge, and Elgin Bridge (see “Twelve iconic structures,” *Straits Times*).
55 “Twelve iconic structures,” *Straits Times*.
56 “Twelve iconic structures,” *Straits Times*.
58 See Chong, “Bukit Brown.”
59 See Jóhannesson, “Tourism translations.”
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Heritage Trails in Singapore

Heritage trails in Singapore comprise two categories. First, there are a total of eleven heritage trails that are marked out by the NHB, including housing estates, civic districts, and ethnic enclaves located in various parts of Singapore. Second, there are also public trails that are suggested and organized by members of the NHB, which comprise walks or visits to sites such as the Changi Chapel Museum and the Marina Barrage. Such trails are not only identified through official, bureaucratic avenues. Members of the public can suggest routes or places that hold heritage value in their assessment. This involves a sense of “ownership” when it comes to the selection of what constitutes important signifiers of the nation’s past through individual and community-based approaches for heritage identification and conservation. As a brief example, the NHB’s Queenstown heritage trail was officially launched in 2007. Queenstown is Singapore’s first satellite estate where the Housing and Development Board (HDB) erected their first government flats in the 1950s. However, several important landmarks and memories that were held close to the residents’ hearts were left out. In order to preserve memories of Singapore’s oldest housing estate, “My Community,” a civic group, has come up with five heritage trails in Queenstown that incorporate the “personal recollections of hundreds of residents.” As the president of “My Community” expressed, these five new trails provide “something more intimate which includes greater input from the residents and not a top-down approach.” Over a four-year period, the civic group spoke to the estate’s residents in their homes, at churches, schools, and libraries to procure personal photographs and memories. In this instance, consensus over what should be included in the Queenstown heritage trail has not been immediately reached at the onset. I suggest that concrete memories are deployed by these residents where their input represents a delineation of what they deem important in their mobilization of the past, resembling a form of “counterheritage.” Where actants mobilize residents, objects, and memories, this serves as a network response to aspects that have either gone unnoticed or have been displaced in official heritage orchestration. The Tiong Bahru Trail is another example, where residents volunteer their services as guides for “first-ever public guided tours,” in

62 “Intimate look at S’pore’s oldest housing estate,” Straits Times.
65 Tiong Bahru is a small housing estate that spans about three kilometres. Comprising some indie cafes, eclectic shops, and Art Deco buildings dating back to the 1930s, the area is sought after for residential addresses (Tiong Bahru Trail, URA, 2013).
addition to having come forward to “contribute their stories and memories of their neighborhood to the research for the trail.”

Trails shift from personal biographies and sensory encounters, to collective histories and global events (for example, World War I and II). This amalgamation of heritage production is realized both through grand narratives and localized experiences that together lend more nuanced meanings and draw further on embodied experiences of heritage and history. The idea of the nation, then, is “rooted in the materiality of sociopolitical and socioeconomic lives” understood within the “specificities of time and place.” While Crouch has argued that heritage “objectifies Great Places, Sites and People” and hence becomes “distanced from the real, the everyday, the experience of individual lives,” I contend—as with earlier iterations that everyday places where people lived their lives are also bestowed heritage value—that heritage trails and their sensory, narrative ingredients concretely bridge the very distance that Crouch speaks of in the processes of heritage consumption.

Background of Heritage Trails

The Singapore River Trail provides a guided introduction to monuments and sites of historical importance along the river banks. Spanning six kilometres, the river is an important waterway synonymous with Singapore’s growth and development. This trail is also supplemented by storyboards and markers along the river that are meant to make one’s journey “an enriching and enjoyable one.” While the river was the focal point of trading activities as Singapore grew in importance as an entrepôt port, immigrants also settled in the vicinity. This resulted in the rapid but unplanned growth of a town along the river. Participants can begin exploring this trail at the Asian Civilizations Museum (ACM) that houses the Singapore River Interpretive Gallery, where video and sound clips, artifacts, and archival photos tell the story of the river since the fourteenth century.

The second trail, the Jalan Besar Community Trail, depicts the history of Jalan Besar, which literally means big (or wide) road in Malay. Being one of the first roads to be built in Singapore, it was cut through a betel nut plantation and fruit orchard. The owners bought this piece of land in a largely swampy area from the British East India Company in the 1830s. The area of Jalan Besar has been historicized as follows:

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66 “Trail of the 77-year-old Tiong Bahru estate launched by the National Heritage Board,” Straits Times, 14 April 2013.
68 Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh, The politics of landscapes, 2.
70 Singapore River Trail brochure, NHB and URA (2004).
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To most Singaporeans, Jalan Besar is synonymous with the Jalan Besar Stadium, a landmark in the area for almost a century. It was here that many an exciting soccer match was played and a place that also bonded Singaporeans through sports. [emphasis added]

Some may have even noticed that many of the roads located off Jalan Besar are named after famous World War I battle sites and personalities. Jalan Besar also offers one of the best examples of the Singapore Shop house.72

In both trails, a combination of the colonial past, communal social activities and bonding, and architectural legacies form the core ingredients through which they are then heralded as depositories of the nation’s past and present. The assumption here is that such heritage production is supposed to galvanize Singaporeans together by referring to a shared memory of the stadium, given that sports was a social glue that held people together.

The third trail, the Balestier Trail, is known to many Singaporeans for its delicious local fare tucked away in shop houses that line the road. The trail brochure states that many roads located off Balestier Road are named after cities and towns in Myanmar. On top of that, “[a]nother little-known or forgotten fact is that our very own Singapore movies were once filmed at No. 8 Jalan Ampas and Chinese revolutionist leader, Dr. Sun Yat Sen’s Kuomingtang headquarters in Singapore was located in this charming old district.”73 This trail therefore contains many transnational and global links in architecture, culture, and religion, among others:

Balestier Road was named after Joseph Balestier who first developed the area in 1834 when he leased 1,000 acres of land for a sugarcane plantation and named the area Balestier Plain. He was the first American Consul to Singapore and his wife was Maria Revere Balestier, the daughter of the famous American bell-maker and patriot, Paul Revere, maker of the famous Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. Singapore has the only Revere bell outside the USA … The bell became part of the National Museum of Singapore’s collection.74

The above trails, combining broader economic (Singapore River), communal (Jalan Besar Stadium and the importance of sports) and cultural histories (Singapore movies) show how national identity is built upon the heritage contributions of different actants, where they may all constitute components of concrete memories because of their importance, relevance, and resonance. As some local trail users shared with me, they find the stadium to be “such a nostalgic place where we all used to go watch matches and cheer together,” and where “those were the good old days.” One of them remembered quite vividly: “I can recall the excited atmosphere … cheering,

72 Jalan Besar Community Trail brochure.
73 Balestier Trail brochure, NHB and URA (2006).
74 Balestier Trail brochure.
shouting and booing at those soccer matches … I think it was one of the Malaysia Cup of … where we were all supporting our favorite team that was playing, taking in all the noise, heat and excitement … watching these games live is still the best experience!”75 As an example of how heritage is given meaning through feelings,76 such emotive and sensory recollections therefore demonstrate how the senses serve as a conduit toward reliving past embodied socialities, which I elaborate next.

**Sensory Encounters**

Sensory expressions and experiences of the past are often incorporated within heritage trails in Singapore. As an example, the Singapore River Trail includes a “Rivertales at Riverside Point and the Singapore History Museum,” targeting young school children. Sensory experiences are approached vicariously in their comprehension of history:

Rivertales is aptly located by the river at the Singapore History Museum … The Singapore River themed exhibition is specially designed for students aged 10-14 … The exhibition is complemented by a host of interactive and multi-media exhibits where young students have the opportunity to feel, see, smell and hear the experiences of our pioneers to get a ‘taste’ of life in the early days of our homeland.77

One of the foreign trail participants responded to the above sensory invitation by saying that it is a “clever way to engage with students who might not be interested in history … tapping into their senses to link them to the past should draw them closer to Singapore’s early days.”78 I have elsewhere discussed how the senses may serve as “markers of memory-making,” where the production of Singapore’s military heritage and its contemporary relevance are entangled with the senses as mnemonic devices. Sensory military encounters are crafted through such sites as the Army Museum of Singapore and the Army Open House, where visitors are able to “touch and shoot weapons” and “taste the latest combat rations.”79 Similarly, sensory registers found in the Singapore River trail vivify the past and make intangible heritage more embodied through such hands-on experiences. The trail guide had this to say as a parting shot for a group of us trail participants, both tourists and locals: “If you are in town, don’t forget to come back to the Singapore River in May as we will be having characters such as the coolies, the samsui women and others who will make the river come alive once

75  This author, field notes, 15 March 2015.
77  Singapore River Trail brochure (2004).
78  This author, field notes, 17 February 2015.
more—come and relive Singapore in the 20th century!80 This invitation to role play and interact offers embodied opportunities to connect with the past. Promoting one of the many Singapore HeritageFest 201581 events that were held as part of the nation’s fiftieth year of independence, the guide reiterated the possibility of experiencing the past as heritage consumers in embodied ways. Concrete memories are therefore relatable and bridge connections given that the senses enable social actors to connect more intimately to history when the latter is mediated and recalled through shared sensory moments. Such connections illustrate how embodied and emotive bonds are established between past and present times.82

Another aspect of sensory encounters involves a combination of food histories, local knowledge, and dining experiences. In the Jalan Besar Trail brochure, brief histories of nipah and opeh bring to life the dynamics of everyday gastronomy, heightening the identified importance of quotidian heritage sources:

Nipah is a mangrove plant with the oldest known fossil pollen dating back to 70 million years. Its fruit is the attap chee that Singaporeans are familiar with in ice kachang.

Opeh, the beige, fibrous sheet used as a wrapper for tar-pau (takeaway) food in the past, comes from the betel nut palm, (Areca Catechu) a tree that grows in the hot and humid tropics. It is currently enjoying a revival in popularity as people believe that a subtle, wood aroma seeps into the food and heightens the taste.

Another example of food history that is documented may be seen in the promotion of particular eateries such as “Swee Choon Dim Sum” at 191 Jalan Besar, which is “famous for its fresh and handmade bao (bun) as well as the back lane dining experience.”83 While such food places act as representatives of the nostalgic past, changes are inevitable as well: “However, over the years, the restaurant has expanded to become an air-conditioned dining establishment.”84 Nonetheless, visitors are encouraged to “[t]ry the restaurant’s big meat bao which is a Chinese bun filled with minced pork, a piece of chicken, egg and half a shitake mushroom.”85 Some local trail participants followed the trail brochure and ate at this restaurant, remarking that “the taste hasn’t changed,” egging me to try one so that I could also relive the past through eating. As one of them said to me afterwards: “I have

80 This author, field notes, 28 March 2015.
81 “Singapore HeritageFest 2015 to feature more programs over a stretch of five weekends,” Straits Times, 8 April 2015.
84 Jalan Besar Community Trail brochure (2006).
eaten at this restaurant for a long time … the tastes and smells of their food hasn’t changed a bit … my family used to dine here a lot when we were younger and I will always remember how delicious and moist the bun is … my father also used to buy those home from time to time.”

Sensory presentations of food histories reflect the important links between food practices, identity, and a sense of belonging. The above quote taken from my respondent on Swee Choon Dim Sum indicates how the senses are related to family life in conjunction with food heritage. Memories of the past are enlivened through the lens of sensory encounters, bringing about a sense of immediacy and familiarity in one’s consumption of history as heritage. Wong parallels this argument: “[I]t is the sensorial experience of food that endures in one’s memory bank, long after the context in which it is consumed disappears or changes.” These are therefore concrete, gastronomic memories that resonate more with local rather than foreign trail users since the former would have had prior experiences to such foods that remain etched in their gustatory experiences. As for the latter group, some of them told me that it would be “interesting to follow the food recommendations included in the brochure” since they “have no clue what’s good or what’s really worth trying” and especially since “Singapore is famous for its food!” Another told me that he wanted to check if the tastes and smells of the local fare were actually as good as promised in the brochure. Food consumption as an avenue of imbibing concrete memories thus holds a different relevance for these two groups of trail participants based on their possession of local knowledge, or lack thereof. Where one group is generally in search of an “authentic experience” in a different country, another wishes to relive aspects of their selves and their past through eating, illustrating the idea that heritage wields contrasting purposes for its different consumers. In sum, these sensory invitations and representations have been largely successful in drumming up attention and curiosity among trail participants.

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86 This author, field notes, 4 April 2015. In this instance “buy” is a colloquial term for “bring.”
90 This author, field notes, 3 February 2015.
Collective Histories

This section attempts to highlight the links between architecture, biographies, and communal life by referring to such nonhuman actants as bridges, stadiums, shop houses, and other places in order to further elucidate the notion of concrete memories. Such links add to Zhang and Crang’s argument concerning sensuous materialism, where recollections of affective experiences are undertaken with reference to the senses and “emotional and historical sedimentation.” On the Singapore River Trail, bridges were usually named after colonialists. The Read Bridge, built in 1889 to replace the Merchant Bridge, was named after William Henry McLeod Read, a prominent merchant active in the local political and social scene. He was the first non-council member of the Legislative Council apart from being the first special constable during the 1854 riots between the Hokkien and Cantonese clans. Read also organized Singapore’s first public library, first regatta, and first sailor’s home. Read Bridge became known as Malacca Bridge. It used to be a popular venue for Chinese labourers to gather to listen to storytellers. The example of Read Bridge reflects an intertwining of personal biography (colonial migrant businessman) and community life. Through this example, aspects that have been highlighted toward framing heritage trails also bring to the fore the constitution of “social collectives” and a “cultural residue of sites, objects, or practices” that amalgamate into cultural heritage. As Yeoh and Kong suggest, the intersections of collective history and personal biography add deeper layers to meanings of place that therefore assign the latter as “recorders of the passage of history.” In the words of a foreign trail participant, “it is interesting to learn about how the early colonials and Chinese laborers’ paths are somewhat intertwined...the brochure does a good job of relating to the past...I can almost picture the laborers sitting around this area and listening to the storyteller.” Bridges as nonhuman actants therefore reflect networks of heritage associations that trail participants can relate to.

Another site on the trail, the Jalan Besar Stadium, was built in 1932 and is considered the birthplace of Singapore football. It was here that the Malaya Cup (1932–1966), and later the Malaysia Cup (1967–1973), was held for forty-one years before moving over to the National Stadium. This was also the site for international soccer games and many other important events. Personal narratives about the stadium lend a sense of historical credibility. They are usually culled from “long-time residents” who act as witnesses of times past:

93 Zhang and Crang, “Making material memories,” 3.
95 Yeoh and Kong, “The notion of place,” 55.
96 This author, field notes, 17 February 2015.
[During the peak of Singapore’s soccer history], the Jalan Besar Stadium used to be a focal point of the community, especially with kids. If you were to take a closer look at the older trees along King George’s Avenue, you will find wooden structures and planks on top of the trees used by children of the area as spectator benches to watch the football matches going on in the stadium.97

The stadium is therefore both a site of major events in Singapore’s history—it was the venue for the first Singapore Youth Festival in 1955, the first Singapore Armed Forces Day in 1969, and the 1984 National Day Parade—as well as a place where the community gathers to partake in communal activities. By drawing attention to the visual and material evidence of “wooden structures and planks,” which trail users are reminded of by eyewitnesses, these probes act as a testament to historical veracity, throwing light upon such material items as concrete signs of history and sports life on this trail. Implied through these invitations to the past is a sense of visceral familiarity that underscores everyday experiences.

Conclusion

If the idea of the “nation” is, as scholars such as Anderson and Brubaker argue, an ongoing accomplishment that involves a sense of “imagination,”98 I add to these debates by deliberating upon concrete memories and the role they play toward crafting the everyday heritage of Singapore as a nation. Explained through the lens of ANT, where networks of heritage associations and production are examined, concrete memories as a conceptual notion in this essay take on dual meanings. First, concrete memories encompass an augmentation of the range of concrete, physical sites or architectural structures that equally qualify as heritage units, apart from the usual list of monuments and other historically important locales that are recognized to possess heritage value by both local and international organizations. Nonhuman actants, including concrete structures and architecture, are shown to be able to engender collective, heritage responses that therefore shed light on how heritage networks are established and act. Second, the idea of concrete memories also points to the materialized ideas of heritage that are drawn from everyday, embodied histories of individuals and groups. Such familiarity thereby translates these banal forms of history and everyday life experiences into heritage stories that are not only relatable, but accord a sense of nostalgic recollection and ownership concurrently. Combining these two aspects of concrete memories is fruitful given that the latter sense

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of concreteness only makes sense if it is recollected and re-experienced as having taken place at a particular site, forming the context of concrete memories that provide a material form. This would then evince the link between everyday heritage, community, and locality where arguably, heritage is the outcome of actant networks and relationality.

The variety of concrete memories and sensory pasts that have been systematically raised shore up important narratives. These narratives shed light on how aspects of the past are singled out and packaged to heritage consumers in relation to the processes of nation building. They are also used to instill a sense of rootedness to the country. The nation is constructed around these concrete memories, where the above examples draw upon the following resources:

1. Migrant pasts and beginnings that are documented since colonial times, thereby offering a longitudinal perspective concerning change, development, and progress. Even if contemporary migrant flows have led to some xenophobic sentiments among locals, heritage orchestration reminds citizens that Singapore was already a migrant society in its early days.

2. Certain occupational niches and links to ethnic identity that touch upon communal life in both collective and differentiated manners, thereby reflecting upon the multicultural character of the country as iterated by the government. In short, cultural and migrant diversities remain an important strand and resource of Singapore’s heritage and national identity.

3. Sensory invocations and embodied experiences of heritage, which offer a more intimate comprehension and consumption of the “nation” through first-hand corporeal vestiges or “sensuous knowing.”

4. The context of colonialism and hence colonial “remnants,” that thereby demarcate certain historic districts as colonial hubs. They serve as important reminders of colonial governance in Singapore’s pre-independence days, demonstrating the relevance of governance and change in postwar and post-independence milieus.

Through these various themes that are discerned from the variety of heritage avenues comprising both typical and non-typical concrete structures and landmarks, heritagization combines both material (commodities and other material items as symbolic artefacts of the past) and intangible (sensory encounters, sensory reminders) components of history and heritage. Such a relational combination of materiality cumulatively presents the pasts of a

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99 See Meskell, “Negative heritage and past mastering in archaeology.”


101 See Jóhannesson, “Tourism translations.”


nation that interlaces the personal and the public, the colonial and the “modern” as parts of its identity. Heritage trails are therefore presented as products to be experienced and consumed within what Pine and Gilmore term an “experience economy.” More pertinently, processes of heritagization also involve stakeholders, including the general public, who have been invited either to design their own heritage trails, or to suggest certain sites as historically relevant and hence deserving heritage consignment. Knowledge production of the past, therefore, stems not only from bureaucratic and urban renewal procedures, but also comprises the memories and experiences of individuals and communities deemed integral that thereby reflect a broader shift toward a more “engaged citizenry.”

Responses from participants of heritage trails suggest that heritage is not consumed in monolithic ways. The varying ways concrete memories are both produced and received also indicate how multivalent meanings are concurrently generated according to the different agendas that various trail users of different backgrounds wish to fulfill. These can range from “we want to try something different” to “I would like to find out more about different parts of Singapore that I know little of” or “it would be good for the kids to learn where we have grown up to appreciate how Singapore has changed so much.” Therefore, the focus on concrete memories as a notion here is not merely about them being a response to top-down approaches. Rather, what is pertinent includes how such memories have been received by varying groups of heritage participants, thereby encompassing different versions of heritage reality. In short, these divergent responses illustrate how different groups of heritage actants engage with other (nonhuman) actants; thus, deploying ANT with concrete memories is useful for analyzing the relational and material understandings of heritage. Heritagization processes contain political, sociocultural, historical, and communal motivations. Furthermore, questions of what is worthy of conservation, how this identified unit is to be conserved (that thereby also indicates the heritage use-value), and who are the ones participating in these processes of preservation, all illustrate the power relations and negotiation dynamics that are inherently embroiled in heritage projects as seen in the cases of Bukit Brown Cemetery and

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104 Ashworth, “From history to heritage.”
106 Kong, *Conserving the past*, 66.
107 Atkinson, “Kitsch geographies”; Cheung, “The meanings of a heritage trail in Hong Kong.”
108 This author, field notes, 29 January 2015.
109 This author, field notes, 23 April 2015.
110 Jóhannesson, “Tourism translations.”
111 Henderson, “Heritage attractions.”
112 Cheung, “The meanings of a heritage trail”; Yeoh and Kong, “The notion of place.”
113 Smith, *Uses of heritage.*
Concrete Memories and Sensory Pasts

Queenstown Trail. These processes render active interpretations or reconstructions of concrete memories and past experiences paramount. Where concrete memories indicate that there has been a shift in the position of heritage brokers or actants from state officials to members of the public, this is to be contextualized within the broader scholarship on heritage. Community involvement in heritage production processes reflect importantly upon the possibility of diverse versions of the past, as well as how they are continually worked at through different heritage ownership. In sum, heritagization is a cultural practice that organizes the relationship people have with significant aspects of their culture and everyday experiences, and with the environment. Heritage is a way of understanding and presenting culture. Therefore, studying heritagization, its sociocultural logics, and networks remains central.

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