Salvador MUÑOZ-VIÑAS, *A Theory of Cultural Heritage: Beyond The Intangible*

Oxon–New York 2023, Routledge, ISBN 9781032263946

After *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (2004) and *On the Ethics of Cultural Heritage Conservation* (2020), Salvador Muñoz-Viñas, a professor at the Technical University of Valencia, published *A Theory of Cultural Heritage: Beyond The Intangible* (2023) which serves as a continuation of cultural heritage discourses, theories, and practices on safeguarding and preserving cultural, historical, and natural assets for present and future generations. The three publications can be considered emblematic of Salvador Muñoz-Viñas' continuous commitment to advancing the field of cultural heritage conservation. Through his works, he consistently pushes the boundaries of understanding cultural heritage, challenges established perspectives, and promotes critical approach to complex issues related to preservation and interpretation. These publications form a coherent trilogy that traces the development of the cultural heritage discourse, from its theoretical foundations to its ethical considerations and now, to an extensive exploration that transcends the tangible and intangible divide. It guides scholars toward a more holistic, nuanced, and responsible approach to safeguarding diverse cultural legacies.

A Theory of Cultural Heritage: Beyond The Intangible explores the notion and discourse of cultural heritage through a theoretical framework that provides a foundation for understanding closely affiliated, yet uniquely different tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The framework builds on interdisciplinary fields such as cultural studies, anthropology, and archaeology, as well as scholarly references that are employed throughout the book to offer a critical and multidimensional exploration of cultural heritage. Muñoz-Viñas actively interacts with prevailing perspectives, he poses questions and reevaluates the established concepts in a manner that inspires readers to expand commonly embraced ideas about cultural heritage. This critical evaluation of known ideas is not the only introspection the author calls for throughout the book. He also places a strong focus on reflexivity and self-analysis, encouraging readers to continuously question their own beliefs, biases, and preconceptions,

which I think is a noteworthy aspect of the book. As a good example, we can take the author's own positionality as a native Spanish speaker. To bring awareness of the linguistic and cultural differences surrounding the concept of cultural heritage, he acknowledges that the English notion of cultural heritage is not universal. To support that, he employs the Spanish term *patrimonio cultural* to illustrate the nuanced contrast in how a Spanish speaker and an English speaker comprehend the ostensibly similar concept. This complexity is not limited to Spanish language. Muñoz-Viñas also references *cultural heritage* in French, Italian, and Chinese, acknowledging that translating *cultural heritage* into or out of English is a challenging task. He thereby emphasizes the importance of understanding that when English terms are used in different contexts, their meanings may vary. This relativistic standpoint suggests a commitment to fostering cross-cultural understanding and dismantling ethnocentrism. It not only promotes a more well-rounded understanding of cultural heritage but also contributes to a more inclusive and balanced scholarly discussion. Inevitably, with the concise examples, thought experiments, and quotes from various authors, Muñoz-Viñas' work is dense in ideas and contributes valuable insights that go beyond conventional thinking.

As the title of the book suggests, the author explores new dimensions and perspectives within intangible heritage, which he addressed in his first book, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, through languages, traditional rituals, beliefs, rules of behaviour and religions (p. 40). In *A Theory of Cultural Heritage*, however, he prioritizes an in-depth examination of *intangible heritage* as an integral part of cultural heritage at large. This characteristic distinguishes the book from the first two but it may present a challenge to the readers who do not have a prior knowledge of cultural heritage. Nevertheless, features that may help alleviate the mentioned challenge is the book's structure: three distinct parts, each serving a specific purpose in guiding the reader through the subject of cultural heritage. Each part is further divided into two to four chapters, providing a structured and organized flow of information. This division can help to convey the book's content and allow readers to browse through it easily.

Part I: Setting the background provides a historical overview of the concept of cultural heritage and its evolution over time. It traces the roots of cultural heritage to antiquarianism and the Renaissance, highlighting the shift from mere collecting to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the past. Here, the author draws attention to the important paradigms in

cultural heritage, starting from the 1973 letter to UNESCO by the Bo-
livian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion to the Paris 2003 Conven-
tion for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The author
acknowledges both documents as important milestones in the history of
cultural heritage because they shifted the focus to intangible cultural her-
itage, emphasized community involvement, promoted cultural diversity,
encouraged international cooperation, and raised global awareness of the
significance of preserving our common cultural heritage. The author also
discusses the influence of scientific disciplines such as archaeology; as
well as the practice of conservation as an important element that has
shaped the discourse on cultural heritage. He further explores the ex-
panded discourse on cultural heritage that has challenged the biases and
elitism of the classical approaches.

   This new perspective is known as the non-axiological approach. But
before we get to understand the non-axiological approach, Muñoz-Viñas
briefly explains the term axiological approach, which involves the eval-
uation of cultural heritage through the lenses of history, art, and science
by historians, art historians, archaeologists, and scientists within their
respective fields of expertise. The non-axiological approach, on the oth-
er hand, draws on the anthropological notion of culture, challenges the
notion of Western cultural superiority, and embraces a more inclusive
and egalitarian perspective. It recognizes the value of non-Western cul-
tural expressions, embraces intangible cultural heritage, and broadens
the scope of cultural artifacts. This shift also increases the importance
of intangible cultural heritage, such as performances, traditions, and lan-
guages. This brief insight into the differences between the axiological
and non-axiological approaches in cultural heritage forms the basis for
understanding the author's treatment of tangible and intangible cultural
heritage later in this section.

   In *Part II: Setting the limits*, the author explores various aspects of cul-
tural heritage discourse and addresses topics such as Western influence,
colonialism, authority, authenticity, and the fabrication of cultural herit-
age. He highlights the shift towards a more inclusive and non-axiological
approach in cultural heritage discourse, challenging cultural superiority
and recognizing the historical impact of European colonial powers. The
concept of cultural colonialism is examined, along with criticisms of the
Western-centric focus and exclusivity of the original cultural heritage
discourse. The author criticizes the elitist nature of the original cultural
heritage discourse which prioritized Western cultures and excluded lo-

cal cultures. The importance of including community voices is emphasized, while acknowledging the necessity of professional expertise. What I appreciate most about *Part II* is the author's focus on the complexity of authenticity in cultural heritage, within which he considers factors such as cultural context, evolution over time, and intangible aspects. He questions the oversimplified and binary nature of authenticity and explores how it is intertwined with factors such as preference, utility, beauty, and meaning. The concept of authenticity is presented here as a subjective construct, easily influenced by personal convictions and expectations. Through this lens, it becomes evident how the interpretation of authenticity can be imbued with individual predispositions, leading to introspection of what truly constitutes authenticity in cultural heritage. Muñoz-Viñas' debate on authenticity reminded me of a broader exploration of how notions of authenticity manifest themselves in different cultural contexts. For example, authenticity as a relational phenomenon is explored by the anthropologist Rajko Muršič in the context of popular music. He questions the conventional notions of authenticity in the domains of music, highlighting their uncertainties and contradictions within the contemporary cultural discourse surrounding it.[10] In another example, the sociologist J. Patrick Williams explores authenticity in the context of subcultural theory, and, just like Muñoz-Viñas, encourages a critical examination of the very notion of authenticity, recognizing that it is a term that is extensively discussed in contemporary society, and the understanding of what is considered authentic can widely vary.[11] The reason I use these brief comparisons is to reaffirm that Muñoz-Viñas' consistent acknowledgement of authenticity as a dynamic and non-fixed concept underscores his interdisciplinary approach evident throughout the book. He clearly abides by the Nara Document of Authenticity (1994) and advocates for authenticity as "a fundamental role in all scientific studies of cultural heritage."[12]

---

[10]   RAJKO MURŠIČ, "Deceptive Tentacles of the Authenticating Mind: on Authenticity and Some Other Notions that are Good for Absolutely Nothing," in: *Debating Authenticity: concepts of modernity in anthropological perspective*, (ed.) Thomas Fillitz and A. Jamie Saris, New York 2013, p. 47.

[11]   J. PATRICK WILLIAMS, *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*, Cambridge 2011, p. 140.

[12]   International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), „The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994)," https://www.icomos.org/en/386-the-nara-document-on-authenticity-1994 (accessed 2 December 2023).

In *Part III: Notes for a theory of cultural heritage*, the author explores evolving perspectives and ontologies of cultural heritage. Guided by a commitment to unravel the multifaceted essence of cultural heritage, his narrative pivots towards advocating for a multidimensional approach. He discusses the concept of heritage, emphasizing that true heritage involves something that "can be inherited or transmitted," (p. 143) as well as how it relates to the idea of passing things down to others. Within this discussion, he defines four ontological categories, one of which includes performances or events, and he argues that what is passed down is not the actual event, given its ephemeral nature, but rather a collection of souvenirs and a set of rules governing the performance of the event. Since he argues that neither a cultural heritage performance, a process, nor an event can be directly transmitted because they are inherently ephemeral, he characterizes the term *cultural heritage* (and tangible items associated with it) as "the set of items recognized at any given moment" (p. 173). The point that he is making is that cultural heritage is a complex concept that involves more than just the ephemeral events themselves. Recognizing this ephemerality is crucial for understanding the complexities of heritage preservation, and therefore, I believe it is something that stands out as the strongest element of *Part III*. The author concludes this part of the book by talking about the unpredictability of the concept of cultural heritage and its historical evolution. He also discusses the role of authority within the discourse on cultural heritage and emphasizes the need for a balanced approach. This approach is indirectly encouraged by the author who urges the readers to consider whether their view of the book is based on subjective or objective criteria and whether these criteria are credible or relevant to them. It highlights the significance of self-awareness in evaluating the credibility and relevance of one's perspectives, hence the balanced approach on a personal level from those who engage with his book.

Salvador Muñoz-Viñas' work offers a profound exploration of cultural heritage discourse that transcends conventional boundaries and fosters inclusivity. The author skilfully connects intangible and tangible cultural heritage and makes his way through the complex environment of interdisciplinary fields. The book offers an exploration of cultural heritage discourse with far-reaching implications for the field. The content is presented clearly and comprehensibly and the information is conveyed in a readable manner. The arrangement of sections and chapters demonstrates a logical coherence that facilitates readers' comprehension. How-

ever, the understanding of several chapters in *Part III* may pose a challenge, especially for individuals lacking academic background in cultural heritage studies. In this section, the author engages in a philosophical discourse on the categorization of cultural heritage and its ontologies. The exploration of various ontological misunderstandings and approaches introduces philosophical complexities and contradictions that could potentially disrupt the coherence and comprehension experienced in the earlier chapters of the book. Similarly, although the book repeatedly refers to concepts such as the process of heritagization, their clarity may be elusive without an understanding of the broader issues and debates within cultural heritage studies. To obtain a more nuanced understanding of the ideas presented in this book, it is recommended to have prior knowledge in cultural heritage. Nevertheless, *A Theory of Cultural Heritage: Beyond The Intangible* can serve as an inspiring guidepost for established scholars and early career researchers who promote a holistic approach to understanding cultural heritage in the context of constantly evolving scientific research. As a seminal work, it not only consolidates existing knowledge but also paves the way for future scientific research and invites continuous dialogue and exploration in the dynamic field of cultural heritage studies.

Martina VUKSAN
Charles University, Faculty of Humanities