

Berliner, David C. *Losing Culture. Nostalgia, Heritage, and Our Accelerated Times*. New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2020, 150 pages

Francisco Rivera

Volume 64, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091584ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64120221581>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rivera, F. (2022). Review of [Berliner, David C. *Losing Culture. Nostalgia, Heritage, and Our Accelerated Times*. New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2020, 150 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 64(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64120221581>

© Francisco Rivera, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Book Review

Berliner, David C. *Losing Culture. Nostalgia, Heritage, and Our Accelerated Times*. New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2020, 150 pages.

Francisco Rivera
Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution

“I love the things I never had / with the others I no longer have,” wrote the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1958, 96) to express a longing for that which we have never owned. Arjun Appadurai (1996, 77) calls it a feeling for “losses that never took place.” Nostalgia is a theme long explored in literature, popular culture, and the arts. In recent years, nostalgia has seen a boom in anthropology, contemporary archaeology, social history, and heritage studies through studies on migration, exile, and deindustrialization.

David Berliner has studied cultural transmission, nostalgia, and its anthropological derivations since the 2000s. Originally published in French under the title *Perdre sa culture* by Editions Zones Sensibles in 2018, *Losing Culture* is welcomed by an English reading audience. The book is a sober, almost frugal—with a single photo and no figures or tables—edition of revised articles previously published. The theme is a growing sense of cultural loss. The book is an analysis of the place of the past in the present and the multiple discourses that are built around such nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a complex notion, and many have attempted to define its contours, its derivations, and its conceptual trajectory. *Losing Culture* offers a conceptual distinction between *endonostalgia* and *exonostalgia* to decipher the multiple forms taken by the diagnoses of loss and the experiences of longing. Endonostalgia refers to the “nostalgia for a past that has been experienced personally” (62). Exonostalgia is the longing for “a past that one has not personally lived, entailing feelings of loss that are detached from the direct experience of loss” (62). These ideas invite us to reflect on the dynamism of nostalgic discourses and practices through time. Exploring exonostalgia as “the

sadness for *other people's* cultural loss" (9), Berliner identifies it with Western tourists, Paris-based UNESCO experts, and anthropologists. Nostalgic discourse is understood in spatial and temporal terms, built around both a longing for the past and other places; for example, anthropologists in terms of their longing for disappearing cultures.

Divided into four chapters, the book depicts the sense of cultural loss and the associated nostalgic discourses. The first chapter focuses on the author's ethnography among the Bulongic, a Baga group of Western Africa. It explores the ambivalences of culture transmission, memory, and nostalgia that are associated with pre-Islamic traditional ritual practices. The male Bulongic initiation ritual is discussed in terms of religious practices that vanished in 1954 when Islam was established in the region. Ritual knowledge is gradually fading, and its transmission is impeded by the current silence of elderly men, whose secrecy is resignified into prestige and power. While elders emphasize the religious values of the present, they "nostalgically described the era of initiation and pre-Islamic rituals as some sort of golden age and idyllic past; and lamented the real loss of ritual power that accompanied the end of this period" (27). This ambivalent gaze on past and present customs—and its associated objects such as the *bansonyi* masks—allows us to reflect on meanings and their dependency on the paradigm that locates historical value in the imagined original state of objects or practices. Is memory being decoupled from its dependence on continuity and stability? Cultural secrecy and the absence of objects do not necessarily lead to forgetting and cultural loss. Absence and secrecy paradoxically dignify and open the door to the persistence of memory and meaning. The persistence of cultural and knowledge transmission can be found elsewhere, for example, in rituals performed by women. The Bulongic ethnographic case shows how nostalgic fossilization and "museumification" of the past obscures how traditional cultural meanings are produced and subtly transmitted through diverse mechanisms embedded in the dynamics of social life.

The second chapter turns to the author's ethnographic work in Luang Prabang, a town in Laos listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1995. This chapter is a voyage into the global policies of heritage represented by UNESCO, the interests of local communities, the agendas of bureaucrats, and the consumption desires of tourists. The town's nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial architecture mixed with its cultural landscape of vernacular Buddhist temples and religious practices make Luang Prabang an internationally recognized cultural landmark. Fueled by the multiplicity

of views on local heritage management, Berliner offers a rich analysis of the networks and consequences of participating in UNESCO's inscription and its relation to the complex web of the past, local, historical, and nostalgia. It is not an analysis of UNESCO's World Heritage designation politics but an ethnographic journey into the contradictions and conflicts that this designation enables. Luang Prabang is a *nostalgiascape* (63), where a common discourse ties together "heritage, postcolonialism, the West, moral decline, and gay peril" (61).

As Berliner shows, while heritage can simultaneously conjure the past and forge a relationship to the present, it requires that the needs of the current inhabitants of places considered as World Heritage Sites be taken into consideration. It comes as no surprise that the motivations and interests of UNESCO are at times in conflict with local communities' agendas. As Berliner reminds us, heritage is a political project that serves particular and collective interests, and more importantly, serves in many cases to standardize historical narratives and "to anesthetize the past and render it harmless to the present" (64). Luang Prabang brings forth the contradictions of traditional heritage paradigms and its double-faced paradox. On the one hand, it seeks to safeguard the traditional elements of places, customs, and landscapes. On the other hand, the integration of these global mechanisms and guidelines entails the de-structuring of the traditional contexts themselves as they are subsumed into new logics of administration. As Berliner writes, "This constitutes the main dilemma when it comes to heritage: how to maintain historical ties to the past without falling into conservatism" (100). In many cases, this simultaneous and paradoxical process ultimately illuminates the structural problem of asymmetrical and neocolonial power relations between the State and local communities. The sublimation of values such as authenticity operates within a universality that, paradoxically, aims to respect cultural particularities. Luang Prabang is an example, one of many, of "the very paradox at the heart of UNESCO and the international heritage mission" (61). "Here is an institution whose policies seek to preserve both places (since the Convention of 1972) and cultural practices (since the Convention of 2003), but which also produce a dynamic effect on the very places and practices they aim to protect" (61). There are no pre-established solutions or a manual that applies to all contexts equally. The strength of ethnography lies in unveiling the singularities and contradictions that are invisible to the vertical policies of heritage institutions.

Losing Culture reveals that nostalgia is a discourse that transforms the longing for past lives into the political-charged vitality of the present, raising

the critical issue of the consumption of nostalgia and the desire for heritage. Heritage is the “human antidote” (101) to the anxiety provoked by the threat of loss and the “anxiety about irreversibility, a feeling about the passing of time seen as irreversible” (101). Berliner’s ethnographic portraits show how modern nation-states need what is functional, heritage thus becoming functional to a political project. Modernity does not tolerate what is useless and requires the transformation of the unusable and the idle into a kind of merchandise that provides new benefits. “Even a heritage setting like this is not immune to the logic of international capital, which is serving to transform the town into an object of consumption, marketed based on its international uniqueness” (64). UNESCO’s heritage policies in Luang Prabang are a Foucauldian heterotopic space (37) where we find the tensions between the nation-state’s modern project of order and rationality and the local practices that subvert this same order on a daily basis. *Losing Culture* invites readers to consider the reflective possibilities that are critical of the vertical, sometimes unidirectional, policies of traditional heritage paradigms. These policies’ rigid aesthetic and patrimonialist frameworks tend towards the alienation of places, objects, and practices embedded in the social life of local communities.

Chapter 3 further discusses the notion of the “local” and anthropologist’s exonostalgia, a “discursive and emotional posture that has defined anthropology since its beginning” (68). “The exonostalgia of the first anthropologists who readily and frequently invoked the ‘paradigm of the last’” (69). The notion of the “local” is one of the most common tropes in anthropology. The discipline has not only “nostalgized” the local (79) through ideas of particularism and cultural heterogeneity, it has also nostalgized its methodology itself that is treating participation observation as “a nostalgic search for intimacy and sincerity with locals” (79). The “nostalgic anthropologist” reveals those dark corners of anthropological thinking and writing that are permeated by non-discursive tropes. Such nostalgic narratives still shape anthropological thinking, in ways that reflect on the disciplinary atavisms that affect the production of anthropological knowledge. In chapter 4, the author proposes the concepts of empathy, imitation, and “leaving the self” as new angles to explore anthropology’s fascination with intimacy and the emotional side of participant observation. This fourth chapter may seem disconnected from the rest of the book; it nonetheless offers a relevant discussion about the figure of the “plastic anthropologists” and their ability as participant observers to

“switch from one cultural or social repertoire to the next” (81). Certainly, this is something that many anthropologists can identify with.

This book is an important contribution to the study of nostalgia and heritage that reveals contradictions and non-explicit tropes within anthropology. It is a concise and insightful book, with no pretension of universality. Yet, readers will find it stimulating and full of ideas with which to think differently about their work. *Losing Culture* speaks to us both through its fascinating ethnographic cases and the lucid eye it poses onto ourselves, the plastic and nostalgic anthropologists. Its insight can apply to numerous cultural contexts, as diverse as they may be, by situating participant observers in contradictory and complex globalized cultural networks, “a transnational community of loss, albeit one defined by a thousand different influences and aspirations, with contrasting cognitive and emotional investments” (48). Berliner offers a lucid study of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of participants in the accelerated times of a rapidly changing world.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mistral, Gabriela. 1958. *Tala*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada.