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“Critical Proximity in the Archaeology of Twentieth Century Bali”

Maintaining our vision of Bali as an island paradise involves forgetting the excesses of post-1970s mass tourism but it also involves deflecting our gaze from the mass killings that occurred on the island in 1965 and 1966 in the wake of the Suharto coup in Jakarta. Heritage discourse has colluded in this deflection. A critical practice and archaeological heritage calls on us to counter such moves and to bear witness to the effaced lives of past others. But five decades after the events of 1965-66, what can bearing witness mean? In searching for and interrogating the traces of those events a form of archaeological heritage practice emerges in which imagination and empathy become central in substituting critical proximity for critical distance. My focus narrows to a single object: the gateway of a Balinese house compound, examined here in terms of its engagement in the death and memorialization of a hypothetical household member. Still on Bali and pursuing the idea of critical proximity I move back in time from 1965 to 1927 when a young German artist, Walter Spies, began creating the a garden and a new life for himself at Campuan. The garden, currently the site of the Campuan Hotel, is read as an embodiment both of Spies’ entanglement in and efforts to escape from the Dutch colonial project. Critical proximity here takes on an aspect of flirtation.

Denis Byrne is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney. He is an archaeologist whose work has been in Indigenous and migrant heritage in Australia as well as in the cultural politics of heritage conservation in Southeast Asia. His books Surface Collection (2007) and Counterheritage (2014) challenge foundational assumptions about heritage and conservation in Asia while exploring new ways of writing of archaeology and heritage. He is currently researching the materiality of transnational placemaking in the context of the China-Australia heritage corridor.

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