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# Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGOs and Defiant Arts of Government

Chiara De Cesari

**ABSTRACT** Beyond the commonsense dichotomy between art as radical practice and heritage as conservation, this article analyzes Palestinian heritage as the ambiguous terrain where these two practices meet, creating a language that is both locally rooted and cosmopolitan. By examining the recent Palestinian art *biennales* (biennials), I show how heritage-informed art functions as a platform for performing the future Palestinian nation-state. Organized by a heritage organization, the biennales highlight the creativity of a new generation of Palestinian heritage NGOs, which continue a local social-organizing tradition marked by the alliance between heritage, the arts, and liberation politics. This cultural production undermines a traditional dichotomy between heritage and counter-memory because it represents both part of a state-building project and an act of anticolonial resistance, suspended between what scholars term “transnational governmentality” and “counter-governmentality.” I argue that Palestinian heritage practices constitute a form of nonstate governmentality. In this context, problems of representation acquire strong relevance.

*Keywords:* heritage, Palestine, governmentality, NGOs, transnational artistic practices

Heritage usually defines a hegemonic, highly institutionalized project of commemoration that is productive of collective identities—most often in the function of nation-building. In the critical literature on the subject, it is frequently opposed to the counter-memories it oppresses. Heritage is the shared past of the nation, which manifests itself in a monument to fallen soldiers or a site of national memory once visited as a child. Heritage also refers to the apparatus of institutions and regulations set in place as part of the state’s bureaucracy to administer its significant, distinctive past and the national cultural objects deemed worthy of preservation. Alternatively, heritage identifies different counter-memories, as in the case of minority or indigenous heritages rendered invisible by practical, *tabula rasa* ideologies of settler societies. In this article, I want to unsettle this binary vision (cf. Eidson 2005) by rethinking heritage in terms of governmentality beyond the nation-state. This approach will shift attention from what has been the focus of much scholarly literature—that is, the relationship between heritage and the nation or the production of identities—to the relationship between heritage and the state or the production of governance.

What is the relationship between heritage and current transformations of the nation-state and governmentality un-

der globalization? Can heritage conservation be both the platform for a politics of liberation and a site of government? In this article, I will use the compelling case of the Palestinian art biennales to examine the contemporary proliferation of heritage activities in Palestine as a form of what Edward Said (2000:17) has called “defiant memory.” In spite of dramatic sociopolitical circumstances, several Palestinian nongovernmental and semigovernmental organizations are struggling today to protect the material remains of the past, particularly the vernacular heritage of historic homes and urban neighborhoods. The oldest of these organizations, Riwaq, organized the recent biennales of 2007 and 2009. Weaving together art and heritage, resistance and state-building, and nationalism and transnationalism, this truly cosmopolitan endeavor strongly emphasized the country’s heritage (*al-turath*).<sup>1</sup> Below, I will argue that the new Palestinian past represented by the work of organizations such as Riwaq is a creative one—a world-making project of social and institutional production inscribed in a transnational space.

From its inception, the critical study of heritage has been an interdisciplinary and centrifugal endeavor, much like its twin field, memory studies (see Erll and Nünning 2008). The idea that heritage is a fundamentally political artifact of the present was first discussed by critical historians in the

1980s (e.g., Hewison 1987; Lowenthal 1985) in response to what was perceived as a veritable heritage boom—an aspect of the proliferation of memory practices at the end of the 20th century (see Huyssen 2000). Following Benedict Anderson's (1983) insights into the role of a shared past in constructing the imagined community of the nation, several scholars have explored the intersection of heritage and archaeology with nationalism. This research has emphasized heritage's instrumentality in the materialization of the nation's story (Abu El-Haj 2001; Boswell and Evans 1999; Handler 1988; Kohl 1998; Maffi 2009; Meskell 1998). The production of a homogeneous story with the nation as its substance and telos is always a selective project enmeshed with power, whereby "other," less powerful histories are excluded and doomed to silence (Hall 1999; for indigenous examples, see Watkins 2005). Therefore, heritage produces a contested and "dissonant" space (Graham with Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000) because its dominant representations are open to different interpretations and appropriations.

More recent scholarship has considered how heritage is shaped by globalization and its combination of localizing and homogenizing effects. Dissonance heightens with the growing intersection of scales and ethnoscapes, and scholars underscore multivocality, or the proliferation of alternative narratives of the past, as definitive of our heritage times (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006; Lowenthal 1996; Wylie 2008). Others emphasize a shift from heritage manufactured to trigger national identity to heritage commodified for tourist consumption and economic profit (Al-Sayyad 2001; Rowan and Baram 2004; for heritage and neoliberalism, see also Breglia 2006; Herzfeld 2009). Today, the formula of heritage-as-development is encouraged within the cultural development policies of a number of agencies, including the World Bank (Samuels 2009; World Bank 2001). However, several scholars view the growing spread and universalization of heritage as an instance of Western hegemony, as in the case of UNESCO World Heritage policies (Byrne 1991; De Cesari in press; Herzfeld 2005; Smith 2006).

Scholarship has focused on the multiple ways in which heritage practices participate in imagining nations and materializing their stories. In contrast, my focus is on how "states" and "state institutions" are imagined and creatively reconfigured through "grassroots" heritage practices, particularly in thoroughly transnationalized settings with weak and unstable state structures. Moreover, I am interested in investigating cases of heritage-as-resistance without downplaying heritage's involvement in power and capillary territorial control. Hence, I propose to examine heritage processes through the lens of governmentality, so as to reveal the role of heritage in Palestine as a technique of government in the Foucauldian sense and as an integral part of a state-building (in addition to nation-building) project.

Developed by the so-called English governmentality approach on the basis of Michel Foucault's late work (Foucault 1991; Rose et al. 2006), governmentality pro-

vides a theoretical framework for rethinking the complex ways in which territories and people are governed—through a focus on the microprocesses of governing. This approach understands modern government as the management, or "conduct of conduct," of populations and the production of self-regulating citizens. Government entails "any attempt to shape with . . . deliberation aspects of our behavior according to particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends" (Dean 1999:10). The role of knowledge in government and the plurality of agencies involved in it are also crucial to this perspective (Gordon 1991). Among different rationalities or arts of government, advanced liberal governmentality works through freedom rather than command: that is, by producing subjects who are free to govern themselves, free to think and act in specific ways that are discursively constituted as good, virtuous, and responsible (Rose 1996). In heritage studies, Laurajane Smith (2004) has adopted a governmentality approach to argue that in postcolonial settler societies such as the United States and Australia, archaeology functions as a technology of government through the state's mobilization of it as Cultural Resource Management. It helps the state govern indigenous identities by mobilizing the positivist, depoliticizing knowledge of processual or scientific archaeology.

In contrast to Smith, I look at how heritage participates in the government of territories and populations under conditions of multisited, graduated authority (see Ong 2006). Several anthropologists have reworked the Foucauldian approach to governmentality to overcome its Eurocentrism and exclusive focus on sovereign nation-states. They emphasize the transnational quality of today's governance. A current global phenomenon is that NGOs are increasingly performing statelike functions. Scholars view this significant development in the context of a broad redeployment of the operations of government from the nation-state to nonstate entities (Trouillot 2001). James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002; see also Ferguson 2004) have developed the concept of "transnational governmentality" to describe these new transnational practices of government that coexist with the older system of nation-states without replacing it: practices of government that slip away from the hold of the nation-state (see also Gupta and Sharma 2006). Ferguson and Gupta refer to the neoliberal erosion of national sovereignty and the partial transfer of state functions to nonstate, especially transnational, entities, including NGOs, major donor countries, and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. They argue against contemporary scholarship on Third World politics that celebratorily employs the Eurocentric concept of "civil society" as made up of small, grassroots, volunteer organizations outside of or opposed to the state. They have also stressed that many of these organizations can hardly be labeled "local," given their transnational links. Nor are they "as 'NG' as they might wish us to believe" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:993).

Yet, Arjun Appadurai (2002) finds the promise of a "deep democracy" or "democracy without borders" in the

“countergovernmentality” or “governmentality from below” of Third World activist groups and transnational advocacy networks. Under a more watchful anthropological eye, however, NGOs represent “the subject of both negative and positive dialectics” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:33). These can provide a space for experimentation with creative forms of association and government as well as new instruments of neoliberal governance from afar (see Fisher 1997). More recently, anthropologists have begun to attend to the specifics of the new geographies of governance produced by globalization. Some have criticized governmentality’s all-encompassing approach, emphasizing that aspects of “neoliberal governmentality” can be found in other cultures of government as well (Kipnis 2008). Others have pointed out that contemporary governmentality takes multiple shapes, combining globally circulating techniques and discourses with local cultural logics (Ellison 2009; Ong 2006). Indeed, governmentality can only be spoken of in the plural.

This study provides one such analysis of specific, emerging forms of governmentality by focusing on a peculiar governmental space. In her historical ethnography of Gaza bureaucracies, Ilana Feldman (2008) identifies a number of techniques that allow for a tenuous government to subsist in the absence of stable state structures, including what she calls tactical government and abeyance of legitimacy. Although sharing Feldman’s Foucauldian approach and interest in how seemingly ungovernable places are managed, I focus on contemporary Palestine, “nongovernmental” actors, and unconventional fields of government. Feldman’s notion of “layered government”—that is, government distributed across actors and layers (e.g., 2008:160)—is similar to what I call Palestine’s “state-which-is-not-one.” In 1994, in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established as a semiautonomous governing structure in parts of the West Bank and Gaza (for a critique of the Oslo process, see, e.g., Waage 2005). The PA is a nonsovereign “quasi-state,” now indeed in a condition of dissolution, struggling to administer the patchwork of shrinking, disconnected enclaves that the so-called “peace process” left to the Palestinians (e.g., Halper 2000; Hilal 2007). The PA represents only one actor—probably the least powerful—in a field of government characterized by its multisitedness: that is, the coexistence of a new form of Israeli colonial rule with the strong presence of international donors and aid agencies (Le More 2008), a grassroots infrastructure of local service-providing organizations (Hammami et al. 2001), and various militias. In terms of Palestinians’ quotidian experience, this condition translates into what artist Yazan Khalili labeled a “state of waiting,” characterized by a fundamental paralysis, chiefly marked by the ubiquitous Israeli checkpoints and closures. Not yet a nation-state, not yet post-colonial, it is on this fragmented, liminal, and war-ravaged terrain that Palestinian heritage emerges as a form of nonstate governmentality.

The creativity of what I elsewhere call “the new Palestinian heritage movement” (De Cesari 2009) entails multiple

dimensions. First, the case of an art biennale focused on heritage and organized by a heritage organization shows that heritage making in Palestine is strongly intertwined with cultural and artistic production. Second, this heritage making blends local and transnational legacies into a poetic and scientific practice that is both nationalist and cosmopolitan. Third, going against the view that heritage is fundamentally “conservative” in its preservation of the status quo, I argue that the restoration of the past in Palestine embodies an activist project of resistance to the occupation and sociopolitical emancipation. However, Palestinian organizations are also involved in national institution building and governance. At least at times, they look and act like a state. In this context, problems of legitimacy acquire new urgency (cf. Baker-Cristales 2008). My emphasis is on creativity so as to show the qualities of a heritage practice that, beyond the mere preservation of old stuff, is fundamentally productive of new institutions and new socialities—in substitution and anticipation of an as-yet nonexistent state by imitating its operations and with the long-term goal of setting one in place.

Weaving together description and analysis, I first discuss the 2007 Palestinian biennale and the organization responsible for it. Second, I proceed to situate these heritage practices in the broader Palestinian context and portray their conditions of formation as well as the knowledges and legacies on which they draw. The latter is what I call Palestinian heritage’s “cosmopolitan stratigraphy.” Finally, I discuss the 2009 biennale and the problems of representation and legitimacy that plague NGOs’ practices.

### THE 2007 BIENNALE AND THE WORK OF RIWAQ

What does an art biennale have to do with heritage? In Palestine, any distinction between an art and a heritage biennale became blurred. Organized by the main Palestinian heritage NGO, Riwaq—Centre for Architectural Conservation, this initiative was officially called the Riwaq Biennale but became known informally as the Palestinian Biennale. The biennale’s director described the event in the mission statement as “stemming from Riwaq’s central aim of protecting and promoting cultural heritage in Palestine” (Rabah 2007:18). This clearly articulated focus on heritage is striking, as was the absence of a large-scale central exhibition. The biennale consisted instead of a weeklong series of “curated conversations and interactions” between Palestinian and international artists, architects, planners, conservationists, archaeologists, curators, and theorists. Its trips, “gatherings,” workshops, screenings, and walks were intended to energize the Palestinian cultural landscape. The defining keywords were *journey*, *connectivity*, and, tellingly, *process*. The process was about the synergies produced by the sudden (although short-lived) transformation of the West Bank into a center of cosmopolitan cultural production—a node in a network crisscrossing the globe rather than the prisonlike enclave of Palestinians’ daily experience. Although grounded in heritage, the biennale was an extremely future-oriented,

performative endeavor, already envisioning future collaborations and activities, including the next biennale. The most important of these activities was the “50 Villages” project, Riwaq’s most ambitious scheme ever, launched during the 2007 biennale. The scheme’s central goal is the restoration and rehabilitation of the 50 most significant historic centers of the West Bank and Gaza, selected from the properties of the national registry compiled by Riwaq. It is precisely this type of capillary knowledge and “meaningful presence” (Appadurai 1996:189) as well as comprehensiveness of approach that is usually attributed to the phenomenology of the state. In Palestine, though, this particular function—planning the comprehensive conservation of heritage at the national level—is taken over by entities other than the Palestinian Authority: in this case, an NGO.

Riwaq is what I would call the Palestinian shadow ministry of culture and cultural heritage, the “deep connectivity” of which spans the national, transnational, and local levels and guarantees high efficiency in terms of project outputs. Based in Ramallah, it was founded in 1991 by prominent leftist intellectuals involved in peace politics three years before the creation of the PA. Under the imperative of “working closely with the community,” the people of Riwaq—a tight-knit, enthusiastic group of about 20 young, cosmopolitan architects, archaeologists, urban planners, artists, designers, and cultural managers—have embarked on a “mission” to spearhead the rescue of the recent Palestinian vernacular past with several innovative projects. Riwaq has succeeded in restoring over 60 buildings and groups of structures around the West Bank, mostly for public use as social or cultural centers, including houses and palaces from the Ottoman and Mamluk periods. Riwaq has also compiled the national registry of historic buildings (Riwaq 2006), played a key role in the elaboration of the new draft heritage legislation (Birzeit University Institute of Law [BUIL] 2005), and pioneered conservation planning in the West Bank. Its main task, however, is to “spread the message” and “raise the awareness that heritage matters” so as to “make people take care of it on their own.”<sup>2</sup>

“It’s not just about restoring the stones!” is a frequent comment made by Riwaq and other Palestinian heritage practitioners.<sup>3</sup> It illustrates their understanding of heritage, and Palestinian heritage in particular, as a field imbued with sociopolitics. The following quote from Palestinian writer, lawyer, and human rights activist Raja Shehadeh—like Riwaq’s people, a member of the Ramallahite secular civil society and critical intelligentsia—accurately depicts their shared urge to preserve the remaining fragments of what Shehadeh calls a “vanishing landscape,” one whose physical, demographic, and social features have been radically altered by the Israeli colonization project.

In the course of a mere three decades close to half a million Jewish people were settled within an area of only 5,900 square kilometers [the West Bank]. The damage caused to the land by the infrastructural work necessary to sustain the life of such a large population, with enormous amounts of concrete poured

to build entire cities in hills that had remained untouched for centuries, is not difficult to appreciate. I witnessed this complete transformation near where I grew up and I write about it here. Beautiful wadis, springs, cliffs and ancient ruins were destroyed, by those who claim a superior love of the land. By trying to record how the land felt and looked before this calamity I hope to preserve, at least in words, what has been lost forever. [Shehadeh 2007:xx]

Although a nostalgic structure of feeling dominated by a sense of accelerated loss and disruptive change caused by modernization is commonly believed to be what triggered the modern conservation ethic, developing heritage in Palestine acquires additional urgency because of the dramatic spatiopolitical effects of the Israeli occupation.

Encroached on by expanding settlements, encircled by military checkpoints, and suffocated by the Israeli closure policy, Palestinian villages are going through a process of spatial and social dismemberment (see Hanafi 2009). In this context, Riwaq—which focuses on villages, as opposed to other, mostly city-based Palestinian heritage organizations—understands its task chiefly as one of socioeconomic development. The director made this point very clear on several occasions: “At Riwaq, we do not understand heritage as something beautiful only or [of value for our] national identity or its historic importance. These values are very dear to us but . . . our philosophy is developing cultural heritage for the sake of socioeconomic development . . . [even though] we know that this approach is very problematic.”<sup>4</sup> The last remark refers to the growing popularity of heritage-as-development and the fact that this approach is now sponsored not only by cultural agencies such as UNESCO but also by aid institutions, including the World Bank, which Palestinians tend to regard with suspicion.

Yet, while several development approaches (e.g., democracy building) appear neocolonialist to many Palestinians, heritage is not seen as a “dictated issue.” Riwaq and other professionals often told me how they have to “play around” with donors to obtain funding for heritage as it is not considered enough of a priority by the international community in Palestine.<sup>5</sup> Although all Palestinian heritage projects have been financed by international donors, especially after 2000 such funding was not part of a specific, intentional strategy, and donors frequently do not classify these projects as heritage or development. For example, most of Riwaq’s projects have been conducted under the “Job Creation through Conservation” scheme, financed by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) since 2002. These employment-generation initiatives are motivated by the dramatic humanitarian conditions produced by the crisis of the peace process and the explosion of the Second Intifada in 2000, and such schemes are not considered development per se but emergency-relief measures. Unexpectedly, the donors’ post-2000 turn to job creation has benefited several heritage organizations, including Riwaq, partly because of the lobbying of Palestinian organizations but also

because labor-intensive restoration creates more employment than more conventional job-stimulus activities.<sup>6</sup>

Riwaq works in similar ways regardless of the source of funding. The “50 Villages” list now guides Riwaq’s choice of sites for intervention, but priority is also given to rural areas surrounded by settlements with high rates of unemployment. Locally, Riwaq understands its mission as one of building “social coalitions” and having a positive effect on village social life by involving different local actors. They view their work as follows:

We approach the towns and villages and tell them we are interested in restoring the buildings in their historic center . . . for the benefit of the public. Then Riwaq is engaged in establishing a social coalition between different social partners in the locality itself in order to create a partner for Riwaq, in order to secure the sustainability of the project . . . Then we discuss the proper use of the building with them in accordance with the social needs of the community and then we begin the actual physical restoration. So [there is] a lot of preparation work in *developing the social partner* before we get to restore the stones. Therefore, you can see that . . . in most projects *we restore the relationships between the partners themselves, the potential users of the building*. So a lot of community-outreach programs have to be conducted, a lot of politics is involved in it. . . . We hope that in the coming few years we will reach as many communities as possible, not [only] with lectures, publications, pamphlets, brochures, etc., but also with actual tangible projects which will also affect the social life of the towns and villages.<sup>7</sup>

Riwaq’s main local partners are village municipalities, which must either own or lease the premises. Civil society groups like local women’s associations are also involved; they are considered the main beneficiaries of the project and, ideally, are the ones who propose it. Restored buildings benefit the whole community, particularly marginalized groups such as women, children, and the elderly. Examples include the reuse of buildings as public libraries, cultural centers, women’s training centers, computer labs, and kindergartens. As the above quote shows, these projects aim to create community not simply as an aftereffect of rehabilitation but also during the restoration process itself.

Riwaq members, along with many other Palestinian practitioners, emphasize their efforts to “make people care and appreciate [heritage]” so as to “make people do the rehabilitation themselves.”<sup>8</sup> They encourage local communities to participate in the protection of their cultural heritage by means of outreach and awareness campaigns and techniques such as public lectures, brochures, and workshops.<sup>9</sup> There is a strong sense among the largely middle-class, secular, and left-leaning Palestinian NGO practitioners that heritage care should be among the responsibilities of the democratic citizens of the state-in-the-making, toward which they see themselves as contributing. The care for heritage is understood as an aspect of a general democratic disposition toward the public good. It is also understood as a form of *sumud* or steadfastness (staying put, a rooted behavior), the chief Palestinian nationalist value, and simultaneously as an embrace of cosmopolitan horizons. Regardless of their success in promoting this (govern)mentality, organizations such as

Riwaq work to restore social fabrics as well as physical ones: they aim to produce public spaces in emergency conditions and to create a new consciousness for the citizens of the state-to-come.

Unlike similar organizations, Riwaq works nationally and invests much of its energy in knowledge production and the elaboration of policies for effective heritage preservation. Its longest-running endeavor has involved preparing the most accurate national survey of historic properties, the *Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine* (Riwaq 2006), which now includes documentation about over 50,000 properties. Fifty of the most significant historic centers, Riwaq’s “50 Villages,” have been selected for priority conservation. Compiling national surveys, drafting legislation, setting policy models, and providing sectoral umbrella frameworks, this organization enjoys a broader reach and scope than its “state” counterpart, the Palestinian Authority (PA) department of antiquities. Echoing James Scott’s (1998) terminology, Riwaq not only sees like a state by performing key operations of legibility (e.g., surveying) but also tries to act like one as the “50 Villages” project shows (cf. Wedeen 2003).

“Each Palestinian feels that he has a national role to play,” replied Riwaq’s Nura when asked about the most peculiar feature of Palestinian heritage: that is, its being largely run by NGOs.<sup>10</sup> More straightforwardly, she also stated that Palestinian NGOs manage heritage because there is no government to carry out the functions that would normally be the responsibility of the state. Yet, in Palestine today there is an assemblage of institutions that claim, more or less effectively, authority and legitimacy as the Palestinian “proto-state”: the PA and, in the case of heritage, its Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH). Thus, NGOs such as Riwaq, which do indeed take over governmental functions, often clash with their state counterparts over competencies and jurisdictions in manifold public arenas, from courts to legislative cabinets.

One of these conflicts pertains to heritage law. Recently, new heritage legislation has been drafted that involves different actors in the heritage process and widens the scope of protection to include the recent vernacular past (BUIL 2005). This law was written by a broad team for which Riwaq was a driving force. The Palestinian Legislative Council has yet to approve the new law, which remains the object of behind-the-scenes negotiations that have pitted the NGOs against DACH, most adamantly around the issues of the latter’s control of the NGOs and centralization versus decentralization of heritage management.<sup>11</sup> Frustrated by the impasse, Riwaq sought other ways to guarantee the preservation of Palestine’s most recent past. Resulting from intense lobbying, the one amendment that has been approved is a bylaw of the Planning Law prohibiting the destruction of historic buildings and sites more than 50 years old. The organization has also lobbied the Ministry of Local Government to create a cultural-heritage protection department within its infrastructure. Most interestingly, in conjunction with the preparation of protection plans, Riwaq has also begun working

on local institution building by creating rehabilitation units within each municipality. This NGO's new strategy is to work bottom-up "to empower the local government."<sup>12</sup>

The last point emphasizes how it is not just a matter of ambiguous distinctions between the "state" and "civil society." Not as "NG" as they seem, Palestinian organizations like Riwaq do not simply act like an institution of the state, they participate in building it too—and do so creatively.<sup>13</sup> According to Rema Hammami, a central feature of Palestinian civil society organizations is their being "embodiments of an absent state": that is, their "being non-governmental but symbolizing an absent but desired for government" (Hammami et al. 2001:215). This desire is evident in the above quote about Palestinians feeling like they have a national (indeed a governmental) role to play: they feel obliged to participate in statecraft, in the making of the state-to-come.

### A HERITAGE BY NGOS AND ITS COSMOPOLITAN STRATIGRAPHY

Heritage, conversations, and a lot of frantic traveling throughout the West Bank characterized the 2007 biennale. The biennale was effectively a traveling workshop, and its main symposium at Birzeit University also partly consisted of walks. Moreover, there was a film festival in Ramallah, two exhibitions in Ramallah and Bethlehem, and a set of installations in East Jerusalem. But the defining feature of the biennale was walking and crossing boundaries. A very diverse group of people—young, old, Palestinians, internationals, artists, architects, archaeologists, scholars, cultural producers, journalists, and human rights activists—all traveled to Hebron, Bethlehem, the villages of Riwaq's projects, the northern West Bank, and the main Palestinian cultural institutions. Many of these were heritage trips to historic conservation projects, such as the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee and the Bethlehem Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation.

Three kinds of politics merged in the itinerant field opened up by the biennale: the politics of space, the politics of heritage, and the politics of transnational connectivity. The ambitious objective was to rewrite the cartography of Palestine. Described in the terms of one of the biennale participants, Alessandro Petti (2007), the goal was to transform Palestine—at least temporarily and for some people—from a set of disconnected enclaves into an archipelago, a space interlinked with transnational culture flows. On our trip to the villages of Riwaq's projects, some international participants remarked that the restored buildings looked too new. There was no romantic sense of ruins, no decaying old stuff or mystery of the past, no feeling of a war zone. Instead, there were houses outfitted with modern amenities to make life in the territories somewhat better for its inhabitants. Some of Riwaq's buildings are among the few examples of postmodern, experimental architecture in the territories, with glass, steel, and copper superstructures juxtaposed with the old stone walls as if to frame and enhance them—a metaphor for the operation of heritage. The juxtaposition of old and

new is a prominent feature of this creative, activist heritage, which employs the past to produce art, culture, and a new spatiopolitics in the present.

Riwaq belongs to a new generation of heritage organizations, such as those the biennale group visited in Bethlehem and Hebron. These organizations share the same social geography and discursive space in the way they understand and practice heritage. Ranging from the semigovernmental to the nongovernmental and private sectors, they play a central role in what is perceived as the urgent task of preserving the remains of Palestine's past and the very "Palestinianness" of place. A striking feature of this heritage is precisely the prominent role that the local civil society plays in a field historically monopolized by state apparatuses. In contrast to Europe and neighboring countries like Israel and Jordan (see Maffi 2009), control over the nation's past in Palestine is not in the hands of the "state" (the PA); instead, this heritage is run by all kinds of organizations and NGOs supported by international funding.

This configuration of heritage management must be understood in the context of the peculiar history of Palestinian civil society. In Palestine, NGOs are a burgeoning sector (for an overview, see Hammami et al. 2001). They are the main service providers and act as key channels of international aid, which often results in conflicts with the PA, as shown above. The roots of today's NGOs are to be found in the mass mobilization against the Israeli occupation during the 1980s and the First Intifada when civil society organized in response to occupation and statelessness (Hammami 1995). According to Glenn Robinson (1997), the First Intifada galvanized a grassroots process of nation-building whereby an alternative, highly democratic "governmental apparatus" was established through a loose structure of popular committees and relief organizations linked to political parties. In Robinson's view, this apparatus was defeated by Israeli military repression and overturned by the returning Tunis PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), which replaced it with its own governmental structure, the PA. Post-Oslo, Palestinian grassroots organizations have undergone a process of professionalization and have moved away from popular constituencies under pressure from the international donors (Hammami 1995, 2006; see also Hanafi and Tabar 2005). Along with many others, Hammami represents the current relationship between the PA and the NGOs as a clash between an authoritarian state and an organized oppositional community that has been intermittently trying to reconnect with its own constituencies and catalyze a social movement. Yet, as Ferguson (2004) has argued of civil society under globalization in general, this image of NGOs as oppositional forces from below should not go unquestioned. Moreover, rather than acting as "horizontal contemporaries of the organs of the state" (Ferguson 2004:392), the Palestinian organizations creatively participate in its making.

In this context, Palestinian heritage organizations advance a project that overcomes a long-standing dichotomy between heritage and countermemory (Foucault 1984; cf.

Eidson 2005) because it is about both resistance and state-building. The new heritage movement promotes cultural and spatial resistance to the continuing Israeli occupation. At the same time, it is a project of social and institutional production aimed at improving local environments and creating a new generation of Palestinian citizens. Finally, this heritage participates in transnational flows of people and ideas and blends global heritage and art narratives with local idioms. It also produces Palestine as a crossroads of contemporary cultural flows, as a cosmopolis.

The argument that Palestinian heritage practices constitute a form of resistance has been advanced by several scholars (e.g., Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Slyomovics 1998) and can be criticized for a certain tendency to flatten Palestinian nationalism into an ideology existing only as a reaction to Israeli policies (for this critique, see, e.g., Khalidi 1997)—in other words, for interpreting Palestinian heritage merely as a counter-memory. Although the dramatic impact of Israeli policies on Palestinian lives and cultural production is a reality—and I would argue that, although in a different, more subtle way, the Palestinian question deeply shapes all aspects of Israeli life as well—central to my argument is the idea that the creative heritage practices I describe here cannot be reduced to a counter-memory and a reactive movement to Zionism and its legitimizing use of the Bible and the archaeological past. (Otherwise, Palestinian practices of the past would mirror Israeli nationalist ones—which is definitively not the case.) These heritage practices are fundamentally about imagining and mapping out a different Palestine, disengaged from the Israeli infrastructure of rule: a Palestine that is both independent, in that it relies on functioning local institutions, and part of global flows. These practices are also one of the multiple ways in which governance currently operates in a place like Palestine.

Another important feature of contemporary Palestinian heritage is that the significant past is not the one that has achieved high visibility throughout the history of archaeology in the Middle East. Here, the significant past is not the stuff of the “cradle of (Western) civilization” but the recent, vernacular past of the traditional Arab Palestinian house and living historic neighborhoods. This new past has its origins in a peculiar history where heritage has allied itself with colonialism and oppressive nationalisms. The archaeological past of the Bronze and Iron Age has dominated heritage initiatives in the Middle East for over a century. A particular practice of archaeology, mainly biblical archaeology, constituted the discursive center of colonialism in the region and contributed to different refashionings of Palestine, first as the cradle of Christianity and Western civilization and subsequently as the exclusive homeland of the Jewish people. Heritage fundamentally participated in turning a colony into the ancestral site of the Israelite–Israeli nation, an old–new land where Palestinian traces could be materially and discursively wiped out (e.g., Abu El-Haj 2001; Benvenisti 2000). Yet, Palestinian heritage activism counteracts Palestine’s erasure through a set of discursive practices and a

politics that are very different from the ones of mainstream Israeli and biblical archaeology.

I find it useful to read the complexity of Palestinian heritage in terms of Anna Tsing’s notion of “cosmopolitan specificities” (Tsing 2005:121–154). Pointing to the inextricability of connectivity and locatedness as core features of culture, this notion facilitates the thinking through of discursive formations that both partake in transnational flows of knowledge and are imbued with a unique identity, representing the fruit of particular, deeply rooted historical trajectories. The specificity of Palestinian heritage today materializes the articulation of a set of historical legacies that are themselves syncretistic and stratified. For example, current heritage practices cannot be understood outside of the specific Palestinian history of political mobilization, which is characterized by strong interconnections between heritage, the arts, and anticolonial politics (as well as transnationalism). The first layer uncovered by an archaeology of Palestinian heritage, then, is the Folklore Movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Harakat al-Fulkuriye).<sup>14</sup> This saw the proliferation of grassroots organizations, research centers, and committees involved in the collection, study, and preservation of heritage; the spread of popular arts festivals, museums, and temporary exhibitions; the establishment of folkloric dance and music groups; and the artistic elaboration of folkloric motives as national symbols. At stake in these activities—pioneered by women’s groups—was the preservation of Palestinian identity in the face of the dramatic political and socioeconomic changes triggered by the 1967 Israeli occupation (see Khalil 1974). Grassroots organizing for the preservation of heritage was also clearly intertwined with political mobilization, as one of its protagonists, anthropologist Sharif Kanaaneh, emphasizes, writing: “The Palestinian folklore movement has always been an integral part of the Palestinian National Movement . . . an integral part of the overall Palestinian national struggle” (2005:112). Since its beginnings, then, Palestinian heritage has been a markedly future-oriented project, deeply intertwined with the making of Palestinian political and civil society. This form of memory work continues to function as an act of cultural survival and resistance, and a terrain of knowledge and data production in the absence of state archives and institutions.

Although the Folklore Movement of the 1970s can be regarded as the ancestor of contemporary heritage organizations, it is the current culture of remembrance surrounding the Nakba that provides the most fertile ground for the emergence of material memories of the recent past. These heritage efforts participate in the extraordinarily vibrant culture of memory that presently distinguishes the Palestinian transnational public sphere. This grassroots culture is organized around the focal node of Palestinian time: the Nakba, or 1948 catastrophe. The Nakba marked the dismemberment of Palestinian society, as over 400 villages were destroyed and an estimated 750,000 Palestinians dispossessed of home and homeland and forced to leave what became Israel (Khalidi 1992; for the historiographical debate on the



Nakba, see Beinín 2005). This past that is not truly past (for statelessness is not yet settled) has been the object, especially in the last decade, of multiple practices of commemoration, including personal recollections and public projects of narration, oral-history research, and films, novels, plays, and many village memorial books written by refugees (Khalili 2007; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Slyomovics 1998). This cultural production is characterized by an extraordinary attachment to the places of the pre-Nakba past. Along with the military technoscape of the occupation, it is this memoryscape that gives meaning to heritage organizations' efforts to repopulate the landscape with signs of the Palestinian ancestral presence.

To understand this heritage culture, one needs to speak the memorial language of the Nakba but also be familiar with the global idiom of heritage-as-development. Buzzwords such as *outstanding value*, *World Heritage*, *UNESCO guidelines*, *management plan*, *impact assessment*, and *job creation* are all part of the vocabulary of Palestinian heritage. Unlike the earlier Folklore Movement, the agents of the recovery of the past are no longer lay citizens, the "people"; rather, they are professional practitioners who employ a mixture of developmental and activist idioms to frame their activities. These practitioners belong to the new "Palestinian globalized elite" (Hanafi and Tabar 2005), composed of highly educated, middle-class individuals working in the NGO sector, endowed with well-paid jobs and worldwide connections. Palestinian heritage is part of this transnational infrastructure. Projects are funded by international donors, mainly from Europe and the Gulf. Often trained in Western academia, these cultural producers spend a considerable amount of time traveling the world, attending conferences, training programs, and meetings organized by international universities, research centers, and organizations such as the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and UN-Habitat. International consultants and task forces often visit the West Bank to provide technical assistance. Palestinian experts are also part of transnational professional networks such as the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and regional cultural partnership programs like Euromed Heritage. Through these encounters, they become active producers and consumers of the universal idiom of heritage-as-development.

Borrowing from archaeological terminology, Palestinian heritage can be described as having a complex cosmopolitan stratigraphy. Reaching out to the world, cosmopolitan yet nonetheless situated, this heritage culture is the product of multiple, intertwined cultural legacies, both national and transnational.

### THE 2009 RIWAQ BIENNALE AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTING PALESTINE

The road map of Riwaq's work over the past few years became the thematic core of the 2009 Biennale. Entitled "A Geography: 50 Villages," it took place over several months in different locations in and outside of Palestine. The entire

event focused on the 50 most significant historic centers selected by Riwaq for priority conservation. By making these sites not only the theme but also the central locations of the new biennale, the goal was once again to foster Palestinian cultural heritage and to "reconnect isolated and walled Palestine to the international art world."<sup>15</sup> Organizationally, this biennale was similar to the previous one in that it lacked a central exhibition and was structured around a series of gatherings, visits, discussions, and small projects. This time, however, it was organized in close conjunction with local institutions and communities and, notably, was funded solely by Palestinian monies.<sup>16</sup>

Another example of rooted cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2005; see also Meskell 2009), this biennale spanned the whole Mediterranean. Riwaq's initiative started in Italy as part of a collateral event of the 53rd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia: the first ever Palestinian pavilion in Venice, significantly entitled "Palestine c/o Venice" (Mikdadi 2009). The Venetian event included a one-day symposium and an exhibition of Palestinian artwork, including Riwaq Khalil Rabah's installation "50 Local Pavilions." This also consisted of a performance of Riwaq's daily activities by its members as well as the mayor of a municipality with which the organization is now collaborating. In the inaugural words of Riwaq biennale's director, this was to be "a biennale within a biennale, an art work representing an institution."<sup>17</sup>

Attended by Palestinian and international artists, intellectuals, and sympathizers to the Palestinian cause, the symposium was dominated by a number of political debates, chiefly concerning the burning question of national representation. National pavilions at art biennales, especially high-profile ones such as Venice's, are fundamentally concerned with displays of nationhood and national grandeur—supported and selected by the cultural institutions of the respective countries. Put together by civil society and intellectuals, the Palestinian intervention turned this discourse upside down, with a mocking performance and critique of national representation. The first hotly debated question was the very opportunity of a "Palestinian Pavilion." This was the first year Palestine was officially represented with an exhibition in Venice. In the past, for instance in 2003, other curators of the Venice biennale proposed the inclusion of a Palestinian presence, but until this year such proposals had been strongly opposed, formally, on the basis of the rationale that pavilions represent only countries officially recognized by Rome. Officially, "Palestine c/o Venice" was indeed not a national pavilion proper but a collateral event. "This is not supposed to be called the Palestinian pavilion, but this is how we refer to it and it is important that we do so" summarized Riwaq's position, one that emphasizes the pavilion as a performative statement. Talking and acting as if the Palestinian exhibition were a national pavilion is a way of calling into being the future Palestinian state through a form of what I would call "preemptive representation," or the performance of an institution that does not yet exist. For

Riwaq, parody and parodic repetition is an important tactic, as with the mock “Riwaq biennale” passes that imitated those of the official biennale and with which some people actually entered the main Venice show.

Adopting a different line of geopolitics, a Palestinian art curator advanced a provocative argument in favor of “a Palestinian pavilion in the Giardini [the most prestigious and central biennale venue] sandwiched between the US and the Israeli ones, particularly now that people want a two-state solution.” Others contested the very concept of national pavilions as such and called for their deconstruction and destruction. A woman remarked how “we think of Palestine as a state but it is not, and this is an absurdity.” As the nonpavilion of a nonstate organized by “civil society,” rather than an absurdity, this event was a performance of statehood and a contribution to the building of state institutions. This performance also functioned as a technology of presence, geared to materialize the alternative map of the “50 Villages” project. The performance included the distribution of a heritage map of Palestine showing the 50 villages, which was deceptively similar to the current political map of the West Bank, marked by the patchwork sovereignty that the Oslo process produced. For Riwaq, this heritage map is “a dream . . . how we want to see the future of Palestine [by] creating the infrastructure for a national cultural project.” In other words, while mocking the status quo, this map contains in nuce the seeds of new institutional arrangements, and the work of imagining new politico-archaeological cartographies is matched by the realization of heritage projects on the ground (also thanks to the funds raised during both biennales).

The other debate that monopolized attention during the symposium regarded whether civil society groups are actually representative of Palestinians. How indeed to represent a diasporic, deeply fragmented, and nonsovereign Palestine? The debate originated from a criticism that is frequently directed at the West Bank intelligentsia and NGO professionals. Concentrated in the new pseudocapital of Ramallah, which is much less affected by the continuing Israeli occupation than most other areas in Palestine, these groups have been the objects of sustained accusations of elitism and detachment from both their former grassroots constituencies and, more generally, Palestine’s contemporary realities. Islamic organizations are often pitted against these secular NGOs, especially in light of the commonly held belief that the former are nowadays much more in touch with people’s experiences, needs, and desires than the latter. In the Venice exhibition, this voice of criticism was also present in the sound installation *Ramallah Syndrome*, which played the conversations of a group of young Palestinian artists and theorists. Ramallah is the cipher for the PA but also for the new Palestinian NGO culture. It symbolizes modernity, openness, freedom, and conviviality. It is in fact the center and main platform for the proliferation of cultural activities in which the heritage organizations I have described here play a role. This “culture of cultural production” that sees

itself very clearly in opposition to the Israeli occupation but also to thriving religious ideologies is an important feature of today’s Palestine. But Ramallah is also the place where you can live a normal life and act almost as if there were no occupation (for Ramallah’s cosmopolitan urban culture and its detractors, see Taraki 2008). For critics such as the Ramallah Syndrome group, then, the city stands for the normalization of the occupation and the end of resistance to colonialism through a fiction, an illusory statehood. In their view, Ramallah can be seen as a “bubble without any relation [to] or representation of what is going on in Palestine.”<sup>18</sup>

In the Venice discussion, such claims were forcefully expressed, revealing a fundamental anxiety about the problem of representation in Palestine and about how representative of the general Palestinian population “Ramallah” and its (unelected) NGOs actually are. Both senses of “representation” were at stake in the discussion: symbolic representation and representation as the right or authority to speak or act on behalf of others. As to the first meaning, several NGOs defended their legitimacy as representatives of a Palestine that cannot be captured exclusively by the figures of the peasant and the refugee. Concerning the second meaning, they emphasized that the 2009 biennale and the “50 Villages” project, conducted in partnership with local communities, constitute an attempt by Riwaq not only to involve the grassroots movement but also to “[make] it represent itself.” Yet a number of questions remain: Are these Palestinian elite projects that do not take into account the needs of the grassroots? Is such civil society activism in the context of absent or weak states always a sign of deep democracy and what are its predicaments (cf. Wedeen 2003)?

## CONCLUSIONS

Edward Said (2000: 17) framed the work of Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum as the instrument of a “defiant memory” that accommodates a “logic of the irreconcilables.” In this article, I have shown that restoring the Palestinian past is such a creative act of defiance. It is creative because it is productive of local institutions and transnational networks—of connectivity and governance at multiple scales. Palestinian heritage works as a technology of presence, a technology that, in addition to a historical, rooted topography, materializes a project of countergovernment in opposition to the Israeli colonization and, at times, the PA.<sup>19</sup> In other words, in Palestine, a heritage by NGOs inhabits the space between transnational governmentality and countergovernmentality by attempting to use the infrastructure of the former to produce the latter.

Riwaq and the story of the Palestinian biennale illustrate that a similar “logic of the irreconcilables” is at work in Palestinian heritage. To conclude, I would like to point out a number of paradoxes that run through this sociocultural formation. First, there is the paradoxical juxtaposition of heritage and art, the old and the new, which reflects the very modernity of heritage itself, born out of the clash of nationalism and colonialism. The second paradox arises from

mixing national liberation with transnational governmentality, so that the governmental and nongovernmental spheres become blurred, and resistance and the discourse of critique commingles with statecraft within a transnational frame. The Palestinian state-building process has been interrupted so that anticolonial politics now coexist with a form of self-rule and the infrastructure of development. Produced by “nongovernmental” organizations performing governmental functions, this situation generates a heritage that is both heritage (of the Palestinian state-to-come) and counter-memory (to hegemonic Zionist narratives of the land of the Bible).

The governmentality framework and its analytical approach helped me uncover this Janus-faced quality of Palestinian heritage. It has also enabled me to shed light on heritage organizations’ participation in the governance of a seemingly ungovernable Palestine, not only through the creation of state institutions—from the local government units to a (trans)national cultural infrastructure—but also through attempts to produce virtuous citizens who freely and responsibly care for their environments. As highlighted by the debates emerging from the 2009 biennale, however, Palestinian organizations suffer from questioned legitimacy and difficulties in connecting to the grassroots.

The Palestinian case of a heritage by NGOs as a way of making state thus shows that the dualism heritage—state versus counter-memory—civil society does not always hold. Heritage management can be a form of anticolonial counter-memory and at the same time work for nation-state building, which is rather the traditional role of heritage. More generally, this case questions the strict dichotomy between state cultural policies and civil society’s cultural production, particularly under conditions of neoliberal and transnational governmentality—a dichotomy that is remarkably salient today not only in the Arab public sphere but also elsewhere (see Winegar 2006). Another dualism that dissolves in the practices of Palestinian heritage is the local—global distinction. By emphasizing local historical specificity, Palestinian organizations are fighting against a particular universalism with a colonial genealogy: the exclusivist narration of Judeo-Christian origins rooted in the monumental Bronze and Iron Age sites of the Levant. However, the Palestinian emphasis on the vernacular is all but parochial. On the contrary, promoting the local heritage is seen as a way to connect with the wider world.

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## NOTES

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1. My reading of these events has been shaped by my direct involvement as the organizer of one of the 2007 biennale workshops. I became acquainted with Riwaq during my dissertation fieldwork on Palestinian heritage, and, as former archaeologist and heritage practitioner myself, I have collaborated with several such organizations while studying their work. Both participant and observer of the biennales, I critically participate in my field of study, which, in fact, is not so much a field but more of a transnational network.
2. Interview, Ramallah, April 27, 2006.
3. Conversation, Salfit (West Bank), October 20, 2007.
4. Field notes, tour of Riwaq’s projects, Northern West Bank, October 20, 2007.
5. Interview, Ramallah, April 27, 2006.
6. Interview, SIDA Jerusalem, March 20, 2006.
7. Conversation, Northern West Bank, October 20, 2007.
8. Interview, Ramallah, April 27, 2006.
9. Riwaq has a specific unit dedicated to community outreach; other units of Riwaq are conservation, rehabilitation and development, registry, and research.
10. Interview, Ramallah, April 27, 2006.
11. Conversation, Ramallah, October 19 and October 27, 2005.
12. Interview, Ramallah, November 21, 2006.
13. Although I am critical of the idea of *civil society*, I use this term because this is how Palestinian organizations most often define themselves.
14. A proper history of Palestinian heritage should begin with the so-called Canaan circle, a group of scholars that produced the first Palestinian ethnographies and studies of local material culture in the 1920s and 1930s, working from within the Orientalist discourse (De Cesari 2009:68–80; Tamari 2004). However, it was only with the Folklore Movement of the 1970s that proper heritage organizations were created with the purpose of not simply strengthening Palestinian identity in the face of erasure but also of institution-building from the bottom up.

15. See <http://riwaqbiennale.org>, Director's Statement, last accessed May 30, 2009.
16. Most funding for the 2007 biennale came from the Palestinian private sector, UNDP, and some European donors.
17. Introduction to the inaugural symposium, Venice, June 5, 2009. All quotes in this section come from my audio-recorded notes of the symposium.
18. See <http://ramallahsyndrome.blogspot.com>, extracts from conversation N. 1/Oct. 2008.
19. I thank Victor Buchli for his suggestion to think of Palestinian heritage in terms of a technology of presence.

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