

# Reinterpreting and Reforming the City Patrimonialization, Cosmopolitanisms, and the Ethnography of the Heritage-Scape in Damascus

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Résumé de l'article

Les concepts et pratiques de patrimonialisation dans le Moyen-Orient, bien que principalement importés d'Europe au cours de la dernière phase de la domination ottomane et du mandat/période coloniale, ont été réinterprétés et se sont vu attribuer de nouvelles significations et de nouveaux objectifs à l'ère postcoloniale. Dans cet article, j'étudie une re-conceptualisation de la pratique du patrimoine local, mis en avant par les Damascéniens impliqués dans les politiques du patrimoine de la capitale syrienne. Je me concentre aussi sur la marginalisation des groupes de personnes considérées comme inaptes à faire partie du patrimoine, ce qui est un résultat commun du processus de patrimonialisation. Enfin, j'explore certaines questions relatives à l'étude ethnographique des espaces sociaux globaux qui sont souvent étiquetés comme « paysages patrimoniaux ».

## REINTERPRETING AND REFORMING THE CITY

*Patrimonialization, Cosmopolitanisms, and the Ethnography of the Heritage-Scape in Damascus*

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As Maffi and Daher (2013) have recently shown, concepts and practices of patrimonialization in the Middle East, although primarily imported from Europe during the last phase of Ottoman rule and the mandate/colonial period, have been reinterpreted and given new meanings and aims in the postcolonial era. I investigate a local re-conceptualization of heritage practice, put forward by Damascenes involved in the heritage policies of the Syrian capital city, and discuss the tensions between global governance and local re-appropriations of power. One common outcome of patrimonialization is the marginalization of groups of people considered unfit to be part of the heritage, a practice which shows the tensions between the social pacification and the conflicts, oppositions and politics of cultural heritage.

Such local reformulation notwithstanding, a Western-oriented framework is still visible in Damascenes' conceptualization of cultural heritage and, as a consequence, in their activities of protection and development of ancient urban sites. This has consequences as to how an ethnographic enquiry is conducted in the field of patrimonialization in contemporary Syria and, probably, in general in the Middle East. Here I also focus on these ethnographic concerns regarding gentrification and patrimonialization. On the one hand, I think that ethnographic studies on patrimonialization in the Middle East answer Lila Abu-Lughod's call to expand anthropological concerns to overcome what she calls the "zones of theory" regarding the Arab world, namely those fields of interest liable to reproduce the alterity of the Arab world, with the well-known cultural consequences of archaizing lifestyles, perpetuating biases, reifying cultures (which become "viewable" and identifiable with few ideas – Islam, the

harem, segmentation) whilst serving to conceal other aspects of social life, irrespective of how important they are to people. Meanwhile, scholars exploring cultural heritage policies and such topics as media production and interpretation, higher education, movements for social change, subjectification in Middle Eastern cultures, have helped in answering Abu-Lughod's call. Cultural heritage policies have repercussions on a global level: analyzing them helps overcome the representation of radical differences between Western and Middle Eastern cultures and the construction of Arab alterity. On the other hand, the choice of this theme opens another set of questions, related to the liability of an ethnographic inquiry in/of a global social context, the heritage-scape, that are discussed in the final part of this paper.

Di Giovine (2009) defines heritage-scape as an all-encompassing structure made up of the World Heritage sites; this structure provides an international community, sharing ideals and practices of heritage protection, with a material and monumental form. Overcoming the traditional national distinctions and contrapositions, it becomes the main actor of the international pacification project undertaken by UNESCO, in its capacity of United Nations' agency devoted to education, science and culture, in order to promote "peace in the minds of men." Such community is tied together by the common appreciation and self-identification with the cultural diversity. It feels to be united in diversity, beyond the traditional world borders. The monuments in which it recognizes itself are the knots of a global landscape reordered irrespective of national borders. Heritage-scape is not merely a mosaic of single sites, but a unique place, with its social context which evolves and expands as the World Heritage Program integrates new sites, objects and traditions. As I'm showing, the dislocation of marginal groups and the emergence of alternative forms of memory show the limits of the idea of "heritage-scape" as a global pacified space.

The research, conducted during an intensive stay in Syria from 2003 to 2005 and several journeys up to 2009, ended before the outbreak of the civil war, that was the tragic outcome of the democratic uprising of the Syrian people. The damaging of several monuments (among which the Citadel and Umayyad mosque of Aleppo and, marginally, the Umayyad mosque of Damascus), that occurred in 2012/3, is part of the challenge put to president Asad's rule, whose legitimization involved the safeguard of the historical heritage. Even though the built environment of Damascus' Old City proper hasn't sustained severe damage so far, its social environment has changed radically. The architects in charge of heritage protection,

with whom I communicated via phone and email recently, are afraid for their own and their families' lives. Their distress is leading many of them to abandon their country seeking asylum and international protection. Common people living in the patrimonialized districts too are being dislocated: many informants of my research and friends, with whom I constructed an ethnographic representation of life in the heritage-scape, fled Syria; I don't know what has become of some of them. The current concerns of my friends and acquaintances with whom I conducted my inquiry are really distant from those I discuss here.

### Arab homes as cultural heritage

As elsewhere in the Middle East, in Damascus an entire urban district – the so-called Old City (al-Medina al-Qadima) – has been declared part of the UNESCO world heritage and is undergoing processes of protection, safeguard, reification and development that Maffi and Daher (2013) effectively sum up under the definition of patrimonialization.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, Syrian political and religious institutions are interested in the safeguard of the main relics of the political power and of the *waqf*; since the first UNESCO inquiry in Syria (Collart, Abdul-Hak and Dillon 1954), Damascus' architectural heritage has been represented as the objectification of Syrian history, conceived as a teleology that started from Aramaean founders of the city, crossed Seleucid, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Seljuq, Ayyub, Mameluk, and Ottoman civilizations and reached its climax in the modern Syrian Arab Republic. Since the official inclusion of the ancient districts of Damascus in the World Heritage List (WHL), in 1979 (Chastel, Millon and Taralon 1979), the institutions of heritage preservation stressed Damascus' feature of being among the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. Several monuments and places witness this age-old history (e.g. the Roman Via Recta, Noured-Din's city

1. Maffi and Daher (2013) accomplished the hard task of translating in English the French concept of *patrimonialisation*, preferring it to the calque "heritization" (Singerman and Amar 2006). The concept of patrimonialization serves the purpose of coping with the material and symbolic reuses of the cultural heritage and with the fact that the "objects of memory are always reinterpreted and reconfigured, to adjust to the present and act as a reference for the future" (2013: 18). The term implies the transformation of a place or a spatial object into a heritage good; the circumlocutions "heritage development" or "listing into the World Heritage List" cover only specific facets of this complex process, that besides listing into the WHL, involves the objectification, safeguard, development, in most cases commodification of the place at issue.

walls, the Ayyubid Citadel, the Umayyad Mosque, built on the Chapel of St. John the Baptist), whose traces are detectable also in place names as “the Jewish quarter,” or “the Christian quarter” that, although not inhabited exclusively by Jews and Christians, recall the juridical status and urban collocation of religious minorities (*dhimmi*) in Islamic empires. As Micheal Di Giovine (2009) shows, conceiving the heritage as a set of monuments involves separating them from the social context that produced them.

Yet other social, economic and institutional actors, on the other hand, interpret UNESCO mandate as urging consideration of Damascus’ Old City as cultural heritage in its entirety. This point of view is promoted by the intellectuals working at the Directorate of the Old City (Mudiria al-Medina al-Qadima), commonly known as Maktab ‘Anbar, from the name of the Ottoman palace housing it, and the local NGO Friends of Damascus (Asda’eq Dimashq). They stress that Medina al-Qadima is a living district, which houses and attracts different social groups, and thus is hardly imaginable as a monument separate from its social context. Conceiving heritage this way involves singling out the heritage objects, which in their view are not so much the main monuments as the common dwelling structures – the so-called “Arab homes.” Such designation doesn’t cover each and every building: in order to become an “authentic” Arab home, a fabric has to pass through a life-cycle (Appadurai 2001) of symbolic investment, material restoration and economic development.<sup>2</sup> Such heritage objects are not separate from their local context, as the “heritage-scape” definition would lead to think; they are inserted in wider social and spatial relationships.

Having found the objects that embed cultural heritage, the local institutions have to entrust certain subjects with the duty of protecting them; this involves a) singling out the legitimate inhabitants of the patrimonialized districts, and b) excluding, as a consequence, those who are considered illegitimate intruders.<sup>3</sup> These activities – carried out firstly by the main institutional actors of the patrimonialization of the Old City

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2. As I showed in Copertino 2010, only houses restored following “traditional” criteria, namely the norms framed by the local institutions of heritage protection, – using “authentic” materials and made habitable – become “Arab houses.”
  3. As Maffi and Daher stress, a neat distinction between material and immaterial heritage is often far-fetched; in the case of Damascus the two facets are hardly separable from each other. Indeed the process of patrimonialization in Damascus involves, besides restoring and developing the material heritage represented by Arab homes, two further processes related both to the materiality and the immateriality of cultural heritage.

of Damascus, Maktab ‘Anbar and Asda’eq Dimashq – are aimed at shaping the community legitimately living in the Old City; they are not politically neutral activities and arouse resistances and contestations.<sup>4</sup>

As Di Giovine (2009) has shown, heritage-scape is imagined as a pacified space. Yet Damascene preservationists’ practices and conceptions show that patrimonialization, rather than producing a pacified space, is an arena of contestation created by different social, institutional and economic actors, with different interests, capital forms and investment strategies.

### **Legitimate inhabitants and illegitimate intruders of the patrimonialized districts**

Since the 1990s, dilapidated buildings, or houses remodeled and renovated by former dwellers not in compliance with preservation rules and procedures, are being purchased by Syrians and foreigners interested in living in the Old City or starting amenities and tourist business there. These people, to which both local institutions and the other residents refer as “newcomers” (*yilly bidakhkhalou*), purchase dilapidated houses at low prices from the former owners, who are often forced to sell them because of the high cost of materials, restoration taxes and fines for improper restorations. Newcomers can afford the expenses for complex restorations, entrusting local specialized architects or master masons with the task of directing the work. A dilapidated building’s actual value is low, whereas its potential value (as part of a World Heritage area) is very high. Through proper restoration, newcomers bridge this gap (Smith 1987; Clark 1988) realizing the exchange value of Arab houses. Some of them – the investors (*mustathmareen*, sing. *mustathmar*) – convert houses into hotels, restaurants, coffee-shops, internet cafes, and ateliers. Besides food, beverages, water pipes, stay, web connection and works of art, they sell culture (*thaaqafa*), memory (*dhikra*), and history (*tarikh*).

Among “newcomers,” local institutions single out as their stakeholders those who share the preservationist discourse. Their commitment to heritage preservation and development can be seen in their choice of talented architects, their willingness to commit funds to expensive restoration work, their envisaging of improvements that benefit the neighborhoods where their properties are located. They are middle classes, highly educated, orientalist literature and local history lovers and consider themselves as

4. Both dynamics are also related to the partial liberalization of the building sector in Syria (Copertino 2010); Rami Daher (2012) has shown the tight relation existing between real estate investments and oil revenues in several Middle Eastern states.

the actors of an '*islah* (literally "reform") and a *rujuw*' ("comeback"), two notions by which local actors conceptualize the patrimonialization of the cultural heritage.

As Maffi and Daher stress,

We may legitimately ask how the modern notion of cultural heritage was integrated into Arab-Islamic culture [...]. What facilitated the appropriation of the notion of cultural heritage was probably that in many ways it was consistent with indigenous attitudes towards the past (2013: 12)

Indeed, Maktab 'Anbar intellectuals refer to the gentrification of Damascus' Old City with a specific term which is worth analyzing as a culturally dense concept: '*islah*. This is a concept implying an action carried out to enhance the qualities of an object or an individual; *aslaha*, a verb most preservationists use, derives from the same radicals, and means "to improve," implying an active part in implementing something or somebody's qualities. '*Islah*, on the one hand, coincides with English terms such as "renovation" or "rehabilitation," intended as material adjustment of dilapidated buildings and neighborhoods; on the other hand, the concept of '*islah* in the field of historical heritage is linked with the complex meaning of the term in Arab-Islamic history, as a religious and social reform.<sup>5</sup>

In their own small way, Damascenes involved in the development of cultural heritage refer to '*islah* in the latter sense; they see themselves as more than just restorers of the Old City's built environment. Preservation and development of heritage is for them a sort of social renovation, a gentrification in the narrow sense of the term, namely the transformation of marginal districts into suitable areas for the middle and upper classes.<sup>6</sup> What

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5. The radicals S-L-H cover a wide semantic field and express a number of ideas widespread in Islamic thought too, both in modern Islamic culture and movements and in the Koran itself (Ahmad 1997). In its Koranic meaning '*islah* implies the periodical renovation of the Prophet Muhammad's message, which would lead Muslims back to the original spirit of Islam, at the same time dealing with the changes Islamic societies would face in the course of time. Reformists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the concept of '*islah* to imply both the renovation of Muslim legal systems and religious practices and the changes that the Arab-Islamic societies needed as a whole; the concept came to imply social reform in general, for instance in the writings of Muhammad 'Abduh, Jamal al-Deen al-Afghani and Rashid Rida (Branca 1991).

6. The term "gentrification" is related to the social level of newcomers – often middle class, chiefly employees in the service industry or the civil service, intellectuals, artists and part-time workers. Their socioeconomic status, graduate

the concept of gentrification doesn't cover is another shade of meaning of *'islah*, shared by developers of architectural heritage, that is the idea of a return to the past.<sup>7</sup>

Maktab 'Anbar intellectuals often speak of a "return to the Old City" (*rujuw' lil-Medina al-Qadima*); analyzing urban trends and demographic data against the background of Middle Eastern historical dynamics, they link the exodus of wealthy families away from the Old City toward modern European districts during and after the French mandate (1920-46), to their pursuit for class distinction in a socially ranked geographical space (Bourdieu 1979). As Dr Moafaq Dughman, Maktab 'Anbar director in 2004, told me, "the social character (*al-tabi'a al-ijtima'ia*) of that time affected the city's morphological and dwelling structures (*tarkibe al-morfologie wa sakanie*)." According to him, the exodus was also influenced by mass immigration into the Old City by low-income groups from the countryside near Damascus<sup>8</sup> – owing to the failure of the government's agricultural policies in the 1970s (Hinnebusch 2001) – and of refugees from Golan and Palestine after the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973. This added to the growing impression of the Old City's terminal decay and of the backwardness of its population, categorized as *fellaheen* (peasants) and *mohajereen* (immigrants), and drove well-off families to move to other affluent urban areas

In preservationist discourse, such dynamics led to the neglect of architectural heritage, as this incoming population wasn't interested in maintenance and preservation of the buildings they inhabited. Such a point of view permeates UNESCO reports regarding Damascus (Collart, Abdul-Hak and Dillon 1954; Pini et al. 2008). Since their building habits countered the discourse of heritage (using cement, concrete, lime, plaster and enamel, parceling out houses, building new rooms), and were considered inauthentic heritage forms by preservationists, they were considered inauthentic inhabitants of Damascus too. Since the late 1990s the preservationists have been witnessing an *'islah*, an "awakening" (*sahwa*), a new "awareness" (*ua'i*), made up of new stakeholders, namely new residents and investors. Preservationists compare them to the groups

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level, education, professional and service sector occupations and bourgeoisie tastes marked them out as a new urban gentry.

7. This nuance was common in nineteenth century reformers' thought, according to which the reform of Islam and, as a consequence, of Arab societies, should start from the return to the authenticity of the original Islamic message, expressed in the revelation and the hadith. *'Islah* was therefore a form of social renovation through a return to the teachings of the first Muslims.
8. See also Bianquis (1981).



that formerly fled the Old City and metaphorically bind them together in the class that is “moving back” to the Old City to rescue it from the state of decay caused by *fellaheen* and to settle there as the authentic Damascene community legitimately living in the heritage.

Among city dwellers on the one hand, and *fellaheen* living in the countryside surrounding Damascus or in urban districts with strong rural migration (Abu-Lughod 1969) on the other, the feeling of actual differences exists.<sup>9</sup> Middle Eastern anthropology shows that *fellaheen* and *hadareen* (urban dwellers) self-definitions are ascriptive concepts grounded in behavioral and performative practices, informed by shared ideas<sup>10</sup> about hospitality, wealth, gender differences and, very marginally, actual occupations.<sup>11</sup> As I have shown, a crucial element in the distinction is currently the disposition towards the cultural heritage, since in Damascus and in other Middle Eastern cities people from the countryside and “the poor” in general are treated as threats to the development of cultural heritage (Maffi and Daher 2010).<sup>12</sup>

As Paul Ricoeur (2000) has explained, memory is strictly related to oblivion; like individual memory, social memory involves dissonance and

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9. The well-known stereotype of the city – the place of civilization, prestige and true religious practice (a foil to the traditional concept of cities as dangerous, decadent places in need of purification by simple and noble rural people and nomads), was investigated by many Muslim scholars (Lapidus 1969; Asad 1986) – among them the fourteenth century jurist and historian Ibn Khaldoun (1967). The mutual sense of otherness between urban dwellers and peasants, the city and the countryside, has been analyzed in different Middle Eastern contexts by Rosen (1984), Eickelman (1976), Porter (2003), where it emerged as a set of ascriptive definitions, grounded in the objectification of certain ways of living and material conditions, which help different actors and groups define their belongings, identities, cultural borders.
  10. Salamandra (2004) reported several pejorative terms used by Damascenes to characterize those whom they felt as encroachers in their city: “villagers” (*qarawiyin*), “people from the countryside” (*ahl al-rif*), “peasants” (*fellaheen*). According to Martin (2009) who analyzed a cartoon issued in the Syrian newspaper *Al-Jundi*, titled “Those who people scorn”, in the 1960s the Damascene bourgeoisie was annoyed by Alawi-related groups migrating into the city.
  11. Eickelman 2002. Being a member of the peasantry is being part of a “moral community” (Eickelman 2002: 41) which considers itself rooted in the village of origin (Van Aken 2003: 88-90).
  12. This happened also in Fez, where preservationists and authorities held rural migrants responsible for the dilapidation of the architectural heritage of the city – and of the degradation of Fassi (informal term for Fez residents, with shadows of meaning concerning authenticity, sophistication, civility, culture comparable to those of Shuwam (Porter 2003) lifestyle.

dissimilarity. Collective or social memory isn't a coherent whole following a straight line from past to present and doesn't command a homogeneous and hierarchic symbolic system. Maurice Halbwachs (1996), who emphasized the study of memory as a social and collective phenomenon, dealt with the clashes within groups, which allow for the emergence of peripheral and marginal memories besides the ruling one. Such clashes, whose targets are the different interpretations of the past, may involve the administration of urban spaces and the safeguarding of the remains of time.

The designation of Damascus' Old City as a heritage site, whose main actors are the Syrian state and the international bourgeoisie of preservationists, who consider themselves as "the humanity" (Palumbo 2003), involves the oblivion of forms of memory not complying with the preservationist discourse. *Fellaheen* are not allowed to enter this process of construction: on the contrary, they are the preservationist bourgeoisie's main opponents. Yet the relationship between the *fellaheen's* lifestyle and urban space is meaningful. Even though they do not conceptualize their group relationship with memory and space in cultural heritage terms, this doesn't imply that the *fellaheen* do not express "the right [...] to feel that they belong somewhere" (Rowlands 2002: 105) and do not objectify it in specific spatial objects. The point is that their awareness of such a right does not give rise to any sort of political claim. Although blamed for the dilapidation of architectural heritage, *fellaheen* and other people living in the Old City despite its patrimonialization nevertheless produce their specific representations of the past and of the relationship between memory and urban space. The houses they inherited individually are literally their heritage objects. I visited often a friend called 'Abd al-Rahman, who lived in the neighborhood of 'Ammara Barrania, situated at the back of the city walls. With its enameled walls and additional rooms constructed on the roof, it is doubtful that it would pass Maktab 'Anbar's scrutiny, yet his home was far from dilapidated. 'Abd al-Rahman's lifestyle was typical of other city-dwellers, in particular those living in the same neighborhood. 'Abd al-Rahman and his neighbors in 'Ammara Barrania were tied together by a shared sense of belonging, emphasized through hospitality, the exchange of agriproducts amongst neighbors, seasonal moves from the city to the village, marriages that strengthened links between families living partly in Damascus and partly in the village. The common experience bringing them together was their migration from the same area (the northern Rif Dimashq); such experience was often the object of their conversations along with stories, e.g. stories of abandonment after selling their plots of

land in the 1970s.

The objects incorporating ‘Abd al-Rahman’s memory (*dhikra*) – his heritage objects – were chiefly located in the village (al-Tawani), where one day I paid a visit to him (ruins, party walls, old agricultural tools), but also in the city, both inside the house (the pictures on the walls) and outside. They were the houses in ‘Ammara Barrania themselves, each related to a certain story of migration.<sup>13</sup> The *fellaheen*’s memory was constructed also by reference to the arrangement of houses in the neighborhood. Houses were built or, if existing, rented near relatives, according to patterns of neighborly relationships overlapping with kinship relations, already in existence or being created by common migration. New migrants relied on the assistance of relatives and friends already settled in town, who often found them dwellings near their houses.

According to Maffi and Daher (2013),

since the inclusion of intangible cultural heritage in the UNESCO list is a state-dominated procedure, and states try to display in this international showcase only positive aspects of their official culture, it is very likely that [...] embarrassing traits that tend to be kept secret [...] will not be selected to represent the country – not to mention the fact that various groups of the population will not be represented, because they fail to accord with the official narrative of national identity (2013, 19).

Falling outside Damascene tradition and norm, *fellaheen*’s building practices are discarded as inauthentic by preservationists, according to which immigration isn’t an acceptable part of Damascene history, but – on the contrary – a threat to its integrity.

### **Reforming the moral character of the space**

As I have shown, some heritage practitioners’ program consists in rescuing the sacred character of the space (*‘islah*). They appear cohesive to a certain extent in opposing the decay caused by *fellaheen*, yet some heritage practitioners stress the distinctive peculiarity of their understanding of cultural heritage and refuse to consider themselves as newcomers. They rather identify themselves as *Shameen* (sing. *Shami*) after the colloquial term for Damascus, *Sham*; they are the descendants of wealthy Damascene families that moved away from the ancient districts in the first half of the twentieth century because of their state of decay – actual or perceived –

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13. Van Aken (2005) reports something similar in an Egyptian village.

and “return” there as residents, investors,<sup>14</sup> or both.<sup>15</sup> *Shameen* feel they are authentic Damascenes, like the *bouyout Shameen* (“Damascene houses,” synonym of Arab houses) they restored to their former glory. While Maktab ‘Anbar intellectuals and other preservationists speak of a *rujw’* as a sociological dynamic, *Shameen* describe the return in biographical terms: to the returnees, purchasing a house in the Old City means recapturing a space that had been taken away from its rightful owners by “outsiders.”<sup>16</sup> *Shameen* see themselves as the main actors in the *’islah* of the Old City, mainly inhabited by “outsider” immigrants, who, they believe, are responsible for the state of decay of the social structure of the Old City.

*Shameen*’s discourse is informed by their nostalgia (Cunningham Bissel 2005) for a place they consider encroached on by intruders. ‘Abu Muhammad, a *Shami* I met in 2005, “returned” (as he told me, “*ana raja’t lil-Medina al-Qadima*”: “I returned to the Old City”) and bought a house in a gentrified neighborhood, where his grandfather would live and his relatives currently do. After listing the names of the few authentic *Shameen* families still remaining in town, ‘Abu Muhammad complained that people living in Damascus were mostly *mohajereen* and *fellaheen*; as for himself, he said “I love the Old City because I was born here and my family has always lived here.”

Though confirming other heritage practitioners’ aversion to *fellaheen* and *mohajereen*, *Shameen* distinguish themselves from *mustathmareen* to the extent that they consider the latter as not interested in reforming the moral qualities of the ancient neighborhoods. According to *Shameen*, *’islah* consists in ameliorating the whole neighborhoods they reside in; Abu Muhammad’s neighborhood, once called Zabt, was meaningfully renamed al-’*Islah* after the restoration. Adopting such a program, they become the actors of the UNESCO guideline which stresses that preservationists should

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14. Like the owner of the fancy restaurant al-Khawali, in the Madanet al-Shahm neighborhood, that is a member of an important family of merchants who moved from the Old City in the time of the French Mandate; the owner’s father had been living there until the 1930s, then rented out the house as a storehouse.
  15. Ra’ed Jabry, for instance, the owner of a fashionable coffee shop that Maktab ‘Anbar intellectuals and new residents regularly haunt, told me he named it Bait Jabry (Home Jabry) to stress its feature of being firstly an Arab home, and secondly a public place; Ra’ed retrieved and restored the house his ancestors had built at the beginning of the eighteenth century and his relatives had rented out in the 1970s to craftsmen and storemen, who set up their workshops and storehouses there, as often would happen in Damascus’ Old City. At the time of my fieldwork he was planning to move there, on the top floor.
  16. Herzfeld (1991) analyzed a similar dynamic in Crete and Bangkok.

adopt the role of educators of the local population.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, among the aims outlined by UNESCO and the Agha Khan Award for Architecture (Akafa 1978; Abu Lughod 1978) and actualized by the Agha Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED) in its restoration projects in Damascus' Old City, is the education of the local population for the safeguard of their patrimonialized neighborhoods (*harat*). Maya, a *mustathmara* I met in Damascus, consistently with UNESCO mandate saw her activity as one of education addressed to her neighbors. With her activity, Maya said, she was ameliorating (*'ahsan*) and reforming (*salh*) the neighborhood and educating local inhabitants.

Popular television serials set in past time,<sup>18</sup> insisting on the sentiment of nostalgia (Cunningham Bissel 2005; Herzfeld 1991) spread in Syrian and Middle Eastern mass culture the idea of the traditional *hara* (singular of *harat*)<sup>19</sup> as a sacred space, where – as a friend of mine said, commenting the serial *Liali al-Salhie* – “people were happier, they ate better, there was no pollution, they lived longer and were stronger.” Such serials as *Bab al-hara* and *Liali al-Salhie* aim to excite the sense of loss of social interrelations and aspects of past life such as the sense of honor, family ties, the proper ways to express brotherly and filial love, the righteous interrelationships between men and women, the manifestation of mourning, the neighbor relationships, and the ways to live a pious life and adopt lifestyles informed by proper Islamic conduct (*shari'a*). As Fuad al-Shurbashi, *Liali as-Salhiye's* author and producer<sup>20</sup> told me,

The subject of ancient Damascus rouses nostalgia (*hanin*): people feel nostalgia for the lifetime with the dad, the granddad and the uncle, for the home of their childhood, for the nights at home (*sahrat*) and feel

17. According to UNESCO, the local population should be educated “by means of intelligent propaganda [...]; through [...] education [...] it should be possible gradually to arouse general sympathy and interest [...]. The important point is to show clearly that historic monuments are not merely an outdated and costly burden, but have a positive and lively interest for every individual. [...] If the work is done with good taste, it will help not only to interest a few scholars anxious to learn more of the past, but to develop a love of their monuments in the inhabitants themselves, as they come consciously or *unconsciously* (my italics) to appreciate their beauty, and in a short time, take them as an essential and familiar ornament to their daily life” (1954: 11-12).
18. Salamandra 2011 analyzed and categorized several Syrian TV serials.
19. Hara is a heritage element whose centrality as a basic element of Middle Eastern cities is well documented (Lapidus 1969).
20. I interviewed Fuad al-Shurbashi soon after the time of the broadcasting of the serial, in 2004.

that those relations were good. Life was more humane, house was more humane: there were trees, air, water, a piece of heaven inside the house. There is a relationship among people and the space, between people and the stones. Damascus is a dramatic city, where there is always a relation between the past and the present.

In this way, several inhabitants of Damascus' Old City, though not being among the safeguard institutions' stakeholders, developed a new awareness of being part of the social and spatial reality of the *harat*. This awareness is leading to a series of paradoxes: old residents perceive new cafes as a threat to the integrity of the *hara*; some old residents, represented as rural immigrants in preservationists' discourses and intruders in *Shameen's* view, in their turn consider some investors and their customers as intruders. An old resident, living in a huge Arab home converted into a condominium with state-controlled rents for low-income residents (the preservationists' nightmare!), deplored the scandalous things ('*aib*), such as the fact of boys and girls drinking alcoholic drinks and kissing each other, that happened in the new restaurants in his *hara*. He held "people from 'Abu Rumaneh and Malki" responsible for corrupting the lifestyle of "popular (*sha'bi*) neighborhoods." As such episodes show, the *harat* become places where Damascenes display forms of social distinction grounded on consumption patterns rather than on the social control among neighbors. Old residents retrieve the nostalgic idea that the *hara* should be a device of social control, based on the actual reciprocal acquaintance of neighbors (Abu-Lughod 1987; Fabietti 2011; Shami 1994); yet their sense of social distinction is based on a more abstract confrontation among wider groups: old residents, calling themselves "popular" groups, claiming their adherence to a moral and proper behavioral code, confront new residents and visitors of new venues, of which they sense the socioeconomic distinction (people from 'Abu Rummaneh and Malki, the two mentioned districts, are the wealthy Damascenes par excellence) and the rejection of that code. Both *Shameen* and old residents fear that Damascenes imagine the Old City as a tourist place where loose kinds of behavior are tolerated; as they put it, *mustathmareen* play a part in spreading such images. Abu Muhammad, the *Shami* I mentioned above, one day told me he deplored the fact that

Dimashq Qadima (the ancient Damascus) has become a tourist area, with too many restaurants. This loses Damascus' magic (*tiraz*). For instance, Bab Touma (the so-called Christian quarter) is completely touristic and can't get back to its old state: now there are inlaid furniture shops, carpet sellers, tourist stuff. They want to rebuild the Old City like Venice, with hotels and coffee shops but in an Oriental style.

In Damascus' "sacred geography," indeed the Old City, though hosting several important Islamic monuments, among which the great Umayyad mosque, is not a central landmark anymore. A friend of mine, Khawla, a young woman of Palestinian origin, a language graduate, who lived with her sisters in Damascus, often haunted the venues located in the Old City with her sisters and friends on the weekend. There she would dance, make new acquaintances, drink alcoholic drinks. Probably she adopted such behaviors because of the particular image she associated with the Old City; sometimes walking there with noisy friends caused her no worrying. Elsewhere her interpersonal physical disposition was different: one night, after a convivial dinner, Khawla, her younger sister and I left her flat in Mohajereen, a hilly district in Damascus periphery. Noting her sister wouldn't stop talking loudly and joking with me in the street, Khawla scolded her harshly for behaving this way outside the home. Later she explained to me that such behavior should be avoided particularly in Mohajereen, which in her view was a strict and conservative (*taqalidi*) district: her neighbors were very religious and linked to Hanbali law school and didn't allow women to behave in an uninhibited fashion. Indeed, Mohajereen is commonly recognized as one of the more observant quarters of the city, because of the influence of devotional movements. When I went to and from Mohajereen with Khawla and her sisters by collective taxi, they were always silent. According to her, the presence in the area of several mosques and the activity of piety movements impose on women a modest and silent behavior in the street; when they meet a female acquaintance they should approach and greet her in a low voice. Khawla was thus able to adopt consciously different codes of conduct, according to the different spaces she went to. Though we never talked about that explicitly, I noticed that the Old City was for Khawla a space promoting the access to another dispositional repertoire.

'Issam 'Abd al-Haq, a friend and informant of mine, Khawla's neighbor and an employee of Damascus land office, was a regular participant in mosque discussions, from which he grasped suggestions for proper forms of devotion, pious behaviors and lifestyles, and the correct interpretations of the sacred texts and orthodox forms of Islamic argumentation. What's most, he had constructed a worldview in which he divided people according to their devotion and subsequent lifestyles: at the mosque he had learned to discern three kinds of Muslims: *mutashaddidoun* (literally "those who pull"), *wasat* ("those in the midpoint"), *bai'een* (literally "those who give themselves away"). The former are very strict, the latter are outlaws and irreligious; *wasat* – the majority, to which 'Issam himself subscribed – observe

the proper Islamic conduct (*ash-shari'a*) and have found the happy medium between the opposite extremes. In 'Issam's spatial imaginary sphere, this representation of Syrian society was reflected in a distinction of Damascus' districts according to the degree of piety of people living there.

I went several times with 'Issam to visit the sacred places located in Salhiye, another hilly district in Damascus, known as a very religious area; for many residents, Salhiye is a synonym of piety and religious virtue.<sup>21</sup> A symbol of the multi-millennia Damascus' history, it is the place where *Lialis-Salhiye*, the serial I mentioned above, was set. Mohajereen and Salhiye are currently inhabited by a petty bourgeoisie of merchants and state and private employees.<sup>22</sup>

The hilly districts of Damascus have plenty of popular sacred places (several shrines of religious personalities and places linked with Koran stories such as the Maqam al-'Arba'een, the grave of the Seven Sleepers, the cave where Cain killed Abel), guarded by residents – some keepers hand down their duty across the generations – often visited by small groups of pilgrims. On the contrary, the Old City has lost its location in this sacred geography. *Shameen* and some former residents' aim is to return the Old City to its centrality in such moral topography.

This shows the multiplicity of the symbolic capitals invested in the physical and imaginative reconstruction of Damascus' Old City; the patrimonialization of an entire urban setting is thus a complex sociocultural arena where the actors, considered alternately promoters or opponents, sometimes reverse roles. On the one hand, the construction of Damascus' Old City as a heritage site involves eliminating detrimental practices and the forms of memory of the actors performing them: the memory of low-

21. Salhiye is the most ancient Damascus' extra-moenia settlement, founded in 1158 after the migration of groups from Crusader-occupied Palestine; Mohajereen's origin is linked to the immigration of Muslims from the Ottoman empire's regions conquered by European powers and Russia (Weber 2005: n.p., Pellitteri 2004: 166). 'Issam 'Abd al-Haq explained to me Salhiye's name etymon, linked with its founders' virtues: "These populations were very pious and close to God, that's why a part of the area is called Salhiye." The name Salhiye, etymologically related to the radical SLH and to the word *saleh*, which means "pious" or "sage," derives probably from the name of the 'Abu Salih mosque, located in the first immigrants' settlement; nevertheless, 'Issam linked the name of the quarter with the virtues he and his acquaintances recognize as incorporated in the space.
22. Salhiye and Mohajereen are known as Hanbali law school's quarters; probably groups from this school took part in the foundation of the district in the twelfth century (Toru 1989). Mohajereen's name is related to devotion too, *mohajereen* being the first followers of Prophet Muhammad at the time of *Hijra*.



income groups must be removed from the heritage. On the other hand, *Shameen* join former residents in the struggle for rescuing the moral qualities of the place and in the opposition towards the owners and visitors of new venues. Furthermore, UNESCO's mandate for the education of the local population is interpreted by AKFED in terms of spreading the knowledge of "traditional" techniques and materials for the restoration of ancient houses by employing local craftsmen and workers on these projects. This leads to the paradoxical situation in which some *fellaheen* become active contributors to the heritage preservation and development; most craftsmen employed in the restoration of ancient buildings in Damascus are from the countryside surrounding the capital city and from other Syrian districts; *mo'allem* ("master") Muhammad, a craftsman whose work I followed during my fieldwork, was groomed in working with "traditional" building materials when he would build and restore rural buildings: therefore, ironically, a particular expertise developed in rural contexts is being embedded in the very basic structures of Damascus' architectural heritage, namely the Arab homes; this happens notwithstanding rural lifestyles, forms of knowledge and memory, and people themselves are marginalized in preservationists' and *Shameen*'s discourse. Otherwise, *fellaheen* can become heritage practitioners through education.

Thus people living in the heritage, posing a potential threat, become part of the heritage as stakeholders of the same values informing the *mustathmareen*'s practices. This happens through education, as in the case of the cultural heritage of Fez, Morocco (Porter 2003); old residents are thus becoming more and more aware of being part of Damascus' cultural heritage: some of them, influenced by preservationist discourse, restore their houses abiding partially by Maktab 'Anbar norms.

### **Cosmopolitanisms**

As I stated in the introduction, the anthropological study of heritage politics – global flows, in Appadurai's terms (1996, 2001) – in a Middle Eastern context helps to overcome what Lila Abu-Lughod (1989) terms the "zones of theory" in the anthropology of the Arab world, and deconstruct the Arab and Middle Eastern otherness: heritage discourse and practices can be seen as cultural frontier areas in Ugo Fabietti's terms (1999), meaning zones of contact, exchange, overlapping, rather than separating cultures. At the same time, it poses a set of problems, the first of which is that people concerned in patrimonialization are mostly cosmopolitan subjects, especially when international organizations such as UNESCO are

involved.<sup>23</sup> Listing a Middle Eastern city as part of the heritage-scape may be seen as a process of inscribing a local entity into a global frame: does this global framing correspond to a globalization of the social imaginary about the city? What is the nature of an ethnography of these groups in a post-colonial society: is this a study about the colonization of thought?

As heritage scholars have demonstrated, heritage-scapes are a global imaginary, like the other “-scapes” theorized by Arjun Appadurai. Di Giovine conceives heritage-scape as the space of an imagined community represented as “the humanity” by UNESCO, which acquires its materiality through World Heritage monuments.<sup>24</sup> The exclusion of *fellaheen* and other people from the heritage-scape, though, shows that the designation of such an abstract concept as “the humanity” is an ideological construct which serves to single out the stakeholders of patrimonialization, namely those individuals who share a cosmopolitan subjectivity of which a constitutive part is made of heritage practices and discourses.

These people embrace – or exploit – global preservationist discourses and enter an international class with shared values, tastes and habitus: Ghaned, a film director who in 2004 moved to an Arab home in the Old town was trained in Europe; Mustafa Ali, a leading figure in Syrian artistic circles and the main cultural activist of the artist quarter, studied sculpture in Italy and usually associates with people from European countries (art dealers, artists joining the international meetings he organizes, foreign scholars); a UNESCO architect I met, who decided to move from France to Damascus after his retirement and purchased and restored a dilapidated

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23 Old Damascus’ newcomers share European and North American gentrifiers’ features; comparing social changes occurring within the ancient cities of the Middle East with those in North American and European cities (Sassen 2002; Smith 1982, 1987), one finds several similarities. In Damascus, one outcome of heritage development is gentrification. An “artist quarter” is being created in the former Jewish quarter; booming “traditional” venues are attracting Syrian customers with a higher level of income and different lifestyles from former residents, which causes veiled opposition and sometimes overt clashes. Similar changes are well documented in North America and Europe, where the central parts of the cities (be these central business districts, downtown districts, inner cities, historical centers, old towns), often dilapidated, were chosen by private middle class citizens who planned to settle there for habitation and support services.

24 Berardino Palumbo has shown, indeed, that UNESCO’s aim is the construction of an ideal human community grounded in cultural goods (monuments, groups of buildings, geological formations, natural sites) that are declared expressions of a “universal value” (2006: 344). Such cultural goods are inserted into the imaginary global space called WHL, and become icons of humanity’s creative skill.

house, was a cosmopolitan citizen in the classic sense. Their practices and forms of imagination are acknowledged by the intellectuals and institutions of heritage preservation as the “right” method of presenting the discourse of history and heritage. Preservationists are themselves cosmopolitans to a certain extent, being used to traveling and residing in different countries, adopting different identities and nationalities: Arch. Zabita and Arch. al-Berry studied in Italy and often join international congresses; Arch. Rajab earned her postgraduate qualification in the restoration and maintenance of historical monuments and archeological sites in Lebanon and France; architect and art historian Simone Ricca, who restored several houses in Damascus’ Old City, has travelled around the world, often moving with his international family - a classic cosmopolitan as well. Daher (2013) illustrates the sociocultural similarities and transnational links of current Middle Eastern actors of patrimonialization. All these cosmopolitan individuals share the World Heritage discourse and their activities are inspired by complexes of ideas and practices that circulate globally; as such, their ideas and worldviews constitute what Arjun Appadurai calls a global “ideoscape” (Appadurai 1996): it is the very local character of cultural goods and knowledge that allows them to enter the heritage-scape global scenario.

Yet the discourse of heritage preservation and development, as it emerges in Damascus, is a global one, at least in another sense. Middle Eastern preservationists stress the local features of cultural goods as the elements of an anticolonial discourse: it is global to the extent that it exploits an Islamic vocabulary (promoting, for instance, the renaissance of the “Islamic city”), and it refers to the ideology of Arab nationalism (Poulot 2013), underlining the Arab essence of vernacular architecture as an “authentic” expression of *turath sha’bi* (popular traditions). Moreover, this anticolonial discourse stresses the idea of East-West opposition, opposing local tradition to imported modernity and stressing the importance of authenticity against imitation of the West in urban design and architecture (Akafa 1978 and 1990, Copertino 2007). The very idea of protecting the entirety of an urban setting whose current fabric dates back to the Ottoman period, as is the case of Damascus’ Old City, is part of a post-mandate and anticolonial elaboration, as Maffi and Daher (2013) suggest.<sup>25</sup>

25. Maffi and Daher (2013) and Poulot (2013) have recently recalled the Western and colonial origin of cultural heritage discourse and its influence on the processes of patrimonialization in the post-colonial Arab states; in several Middle Eastern contexts, world heritage discourses have been dismissed as forms of Western conceptual and practical colonization (Maffi 2006) and heritage preservation and development projects have aroused fierce debate (Tahan 2006; Fabietti 2011; Porter 2003).

Furthermore, Daher (2013) has astutely shown the current constitution of a Middle Eastern ideascap about heritage, practiced by a Mashreqi “creative urban class,” made up of notable families, artists and urban activists, emerging as the main Middle Eastern actors of heritage promotion, after the withdrawal of state investment and economical liberalization. Despite national differences, they share similar dispositions toward the heritage promotion, such as concentrating on local realities that had been marginalized by official discourses on heritage, focusing on issues of everyday life and on alternative readings of cities, “giving voice to rearticulated memories at a regional level, looking at patterns, interconnections, regional mobility, moments of change.”

### **Ethnography between and betwixt**

Studying the global activities that take place on a site which is part of the heritage-scapes, raises some questions about the subjects – namely the ethnographer and his or her interlocutors – involved in an ethnographic encounter that seems to remain in the “borderland” between cultures. Although heritage policies involve non-Westernized subjects to a certain extent, the ethnographic study of heritage-scapes focuses mainly on elite minorities (people with cosmopolitan education and habitus), that may be considered as hardly representative of Syrian society. Thus what is ethnography worth if its field is a borderland between cultures, once labeled as uninteresting or irrelevant for the comprehension of culture? Can one legitimately be called a Middle Eastern ethnographer if one doesn’t study the “core” of that culture (even supposing of course that a core of culture does exist) and rather remains in a “between and betwixt” state? Where are “natives” in such an inquiry?

I would like to use briefly the “between and betwixt” metaphor,<sup>26</sup> drawing on Fabietti’s idea of anthropology as a science “of the borderland.” According to Fabietti (1999), the ethnographic encounter, which enables the discourse about culture, happens in a borderland, conceived as a common land or an exchange ground rather than a line of separation,

26. Fabietti talks of a “mondo terzo,” literally “third world,” a concept which doesn’t refer obviously to the developing countries, which in Italian are called “terzo mondo”: the impossibility of literally translating Fabietti’s terms in English is related to the inversion of the order name-adjective, that gives the adjective alternately a descriptive or restrictive value, which is possible in Italian but not in English. Therefore, I translate “mondo terzo” with “world between and betwixt,” using Victor Turner’s words, which in his work refer to the liminal state in the ritual process.

populated by – besides the ethnographer and the “natives” – missionaries, state bureaucrats, other researchers, (once upon a time) colonial officers. The ethnographer is part of this complex context; analyzing ethnographic constructs, Fabietti develops the concept of “world between and betwixt,” through which he explains that, contrary to the functionalist allegation of ethnography as an objective and referential description of reality, the world (and the culture) that the anthropologist writes about emerges from the ethnographic encounter, gaining weight through the strategies that the anthropologist pursues writing his/her monograph.

I adopted one of these strategies, known as a “localizing strategy” (Fardon 1990; Fabietti 1999, 2011)<sup>27</sup> to identify the place – a place “small enough” (Gilsenan 2000) – of my ethnographic research: Damascus’ Old City soon appeared to me as a place distinct from the rest of the city in which I had planned to carry out my urban ethnography. My first impression of this place, the night I first arrived at Bab Touma gate by taxi from Damascus International Airport (a square which reminded me very little of my one-thousand-and-one-night preconception) was one of chaos, traffic, crowd and noise. After a while I started appreciating some specific features of the Old City: besides a few main streets and squares, the Old City, even if not closed to traffic, was off-putting for drivers because of its narrow streets, which in practice prohibited entry. This created a neat difference with the chaotic central districts and made it possible for Damascenes to walk in the Old City at all times of day or night. Especially in summer, wandering through the Old City is pleasant for Damascenes, since the shady alleys contrast with the sunny roads of other areas and offer a shelter from the summer heat. To me, this pleasure would grow in the courtyards of “Arab houses,” at least those equipped with a working fountain, plants and a restored *iwan*. Besides noting the Orientalist character of these impressions, I’d like to stress that, despite the small number of ethnographers working in contemporary Damascus, I was not the first to carry out similar localizing strategies; on the contrary, what made possible my definition of the field – and even my orientalist impressions – was a kind of localizing strategy, developed by urban designers and preservationists, who in the course of time have constructed an image of Damascus’ Old City as a specific place, distinct from the rest of the city (Copertino 2007). Afterwards this image

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27. Drawing on Fardon’s definition of localizing strategies, Fabietti criticizes the ethnographic practice which consists in locating cultures in the space, as isolated and circumscribed entities; localizing strategies involve pre-comprehending cultures, essentializing sociocultural forms, hiding elements ethnographers consider unimportant.

was the base for the localization and construction of a heritage-scape.

Therefore, besides being a real site, Damascus' Old City is an imagined place too, whose construction – and actual building – is a complex enterprise of framing a local entity into a global imaginary; can the subjects carrying out such enterprise be compared to the traditional subjects of anthropological inquiry? People with whom I conducted my fieldwork didn't resemble the classic "natives" of the anthropological research, that in Middle Eastern ethnography took the form of the segmentarian Bedouin and the segregationist village dweller; most of them were city dwellers, some Damascenes from several generations, citizens of a city whose urban traditions – intended as a synonym of civility, politeness, scriptural Islam – are a sort of synecdoche of the city itself, *Shami* being a designation meaning urbanity and civility. Yet the point is not that my informants were not classic natives simply because of their urban origins; indeed, many of them designated themselves as "peasants," a designation carrying meanings I briefly dealt with above. Far from being interesting for my research as natives, or representatives of a cultural authenticity recognizable in the city or in the countryside, both my urban and rural friends and informants were important to me for the multiple activities they pursued and to which they devoted their energies, imagination and activism. According to George E. Marcus (1995), in his call for a multi-sited ethnography, since today people in every local context are related to a certain extent to wider contexts and elaborate global worldviews – what he terms the "world-system" – the traditional anthropological idea of the "site" of fieldwork must be replaced with the concept of a multi-sited field of research, in which the subjects are interesting for their multiple fidelities, commitments and activism. Thus, Marcus suggests overcoming the very definition of "natives," replacing it with that of "activists." I would like to give just an example of my search for activists rather than natives. From the conversations and activities with 'Issam 'Abd al-Haq, I constructed a satisfactory (at least for me) ethnographic representation of the real estate-driven worldview of Damascenes, many of whom see a clear relation between social status and place of dwelling. Though, as I stated above, 'Issam was also an activist of mosque movements; spending evenings chatting and wandering with him, I could develop a frame of his ideas of right ways of dressing, sitting, raising the children, addressing other people, walking and greeting, and of his worldview – the world-system he had constructed, in Marcus' terms – as a Mosque activist. Following his multiple interests I was able to understand and give some insight into several

aspects of contemporary life in a site as complex as the capital city of the Syrian Arab Republic. Going with him to short and private pilgrimages to the sacred places upon nearby Mount Qasium, I learned of local legends and interpretations of Quranic episodes such as the killing of Abel, the raven and the burial of Abel and the believers sleeping in the cave.

### Local cosmopolitans

To give an idea of the “borderland” character of the field in which I moved and which I constructed as the site of my fieldwork, I’d like to explain briefly the way I first met ‘Issam. I was introduced to him by an acquaintance of mine, a young American man studying Arabic in Damascus; he was tutored in spoken Syrian Arabic by the same teacher as I, Khawla, the young Palestinian woman I mentioned above, whose sister Buthaina, almost as old as her and with the same high education, was the second person I met in Syria. I obtained Buthaina’s email from a friend of a colleague of mine who had previously done field research in Syria and I sent her an email before leaving for Syria for the first time, as she was supposed to give me some private Arabic classes. Their father was a Palestinian journalist and they had another highly educated sister and brother; all three of them had married Europeans. These cosmopolitan girls’ mother was a Syrian peasant; by observing her behavior and living, I could develop a personal view of life in the countryside, overcoming the Middle Eastern stereotype, often accepted by the Middle Eastern ethnography, of the clear opposition between town and country. She belonged to (and was in contact with) different worlds at the same time: that of the land she worked for household consumption; that of the Palestinian people, their children being of uncertain nationality and status in Syria; that of her daughters’ and son’s European spouses; that of international students attending Khawla’s private lessons in Damascus. Therefore, she was living proof of the inadequacy of the classic image of Arab peasants as radically different from urban dwellers. Khawla’s cosmopolitanism didn’t release her from acting according to norms of pious behavior when she moved through her neighborhood, Mohajireen. ‘Issam ‘Abd al-Haq lived in the same neighborhood and Peter, the American young man I mentioned above, met him first in passing, on one of the small buses navigating through Damascus. Like Vincent Crapanzano’s assistant when he met Tuhami (1995), Peter came to Khawla’s saying enthusiastically he had met an extraordinary informant for my research. After that, Peter and I went several times to spend some *saharat* (evenings of chatting, drinking and nibbling) at ‘Issam’s;

Peter and 'Issam went together – both for the first time – to the *hammam*. I frequently visited 'Issam at his workplace, trying to gain a clearer insight into the building sector in Damascus.

Conceiving ethnography as a multi-sited endeavor, taking place in the borderlands between cultures, brings about a third sense of cosmopolitanism, besides those of heritage practitioners, cosmopolitans in the classic sense and in the anti-colonial sense. I rather take account of Lila Abu-Lughod's (1997) cosmopolitan subjects, namely individuals who are in contact with other worlds through their adhesion to shared imaginaries, the acquaintance with people coming from other places, the effects of government projects, the moves between village and city, the use of mass-media. In this sense, 'Issam, whose favorite talking points were Arab countries' international relations, was a cosmopolitan and Khawla, even though she didn't travel very much, was a young cosmopolitan woman too. She had constructed her own "world-system" through her education, acquaintances, moves between rural and urban contexts, relations with migrants, readings, mass-media, participation in the Palestinian cause; the very feature of being a native Arabic speaker enabled wide communication, enjoyment of works of literature, movies and television serials, exchange of ideas, adhesion to discourses, and the sharing of geo-cultural scenarios, political commitment beyond national borders.

## Conclusion

The entire built environment of Damascus' Old City – not just its main monuments – makes up the UNESCO site. Those who can afford proper restoration of so-called "Arab houses" and share the preservationist discourse are chosen by local institutions as their stakeholders. Through a process of self-identification with the space, they become the legitimate inhabitants of the Old City. Through the concept of *'islah* (reform), local gentrifiers liken their biographies, choices and activities to the broader Arab-Islamic history; furthermore, through the idea of *rujw'* (comeback), they claim a leading role in the history of the city. Therefore, the patrimonialization of Damascus' Old City involves the deletion of alternative forms of memory, such as those of the so-called *fellaheen* (peasants), that are considered as embarrassing traits of local culture, and of those inhabitants that blame the diffusion of disreputable behaviors in the "pious" neighborhoods on the opening of public venues. This shows the complexity of the notion of "tradition," that is interpreted in different ways by the different groups (Shameen, old residents, new residents, investors, *fellaheen*), depending



on the objects it is embedded in (the house, the neighborhood, the urban lifestyle, the pious behavior, the building techniques and materials).

Preservationists are cosmopolitans that share a global imaginary about the World Heritage; yet the neat distinction between cosmopolitans and “really locals” (Hannerz 1991) can’t account for the complexity of the construction of a specific site as part of the heritage-scape, that is a complex enterprise of framing a local entity into a global imaginary.

Among the actors constructing – and living in – the heritage-scape, the bourgeoisie of heritage practitioners (UNESCO’s humanity) is not unique in constructing a global subjectivity. People living in Damascus’ Old City are influenced in their life choices by broader dynamics and are often conscious of the connections between their social worlds and the “world-system.” Both new residents who purchase and restore ancient houses and former residents who sell off their properties since they can’t afford proper restorations are influenced by State decisions about economic liberalization, and indirectly by international pressures on Syria for political reform; other residents are influenced by preservationist discourse and stress their being part of UNESCO heritage-scape, undertaking more or less proper restorations, forced to take a stand on the complex argument of cultural heritage; some of them enter the tourist sector marginally, renting out rooms to Arab and foreign students and tourists who stay in Damascus for longer periods: the shifts in tourism and the choice for safer places will impact their lives and their ability to upkeep their part of heritage; immigrants from the countryside and from other Syrian districts, who have been living in huge houses converted into condominiums for decades and are well integrated in their neighborhoods, may be forced to move away because of the raising of rents, due to gentrification; students who rent rooms cheaply and civil servants who rent parceled houses supported by state subsidy may be in anguish for the current state of civil war, and may be wondering if the forthcoming state policies will protect them from sprawling economic liberalization, which is not being countered by Islamic movements currently triumphant in several Middle Eastern States.

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