

Palmyra and the Radical Other

On the Politics of Monument Destruction in Syria

Ella Mudie

Abstract

Since its ancient ruins were targeted for destruction by ISIS in 2015, the World Heritage listed site of Palmyra has become the focus of a global campaign to unite for cultural heritage protection. However well-intentioned, the unfolding of this international call-to-arms to safeguard the nation's monuments against the backdrop of an active civil war and humanitarian crisis in Syria points to the discord that has emerged between the universalist tendencies underpinning the rhetoric of World Heritage protection and the more complex geopolitical causes which fuel the targeting of such sites in the first place. Concerned specifically with those responses by the West that construct the safeguarding of cultural heritage along a civilization versus barbarism binary, this article interrogates the Othering tendencies of the notion of "culture under attack." Today, the international push to increase the legal mandate to protect cultural heritage coincides with the rise of the field of virtual heritage. Critical attention is paid therefore to the role played by technology in preserving at-risk archaeological and architectural sites and the extent to which digital reconstructions risk reifying a classical past at the expense of engaging with the present-day cultures of the Middle-East.

Keywords

Palmyra, monument destruction, virtual heritage, universalism, Étienne Balibar, Hardt and Negri

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Palmyra was indeed a city, a civilized and even cultured place, but it was dangerously close to nomadic noncivilization and a civilization of “the other,” that of Persia or of an even more remote place.
- Paul Veyne, *Palmyra: An Irreplaceable Treasure*.

Prior to its placement on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger in 2013 (along with five other Syrian sites¹), the desert city of Palmyra was venerated as one of the great remnants of the ancient world. “An elusive and highly romanticised goal of European travellers over the centuries,” enthuses historian Ross Burns (1995, 156) in his historical guide to the city. Today, the destruction of the monuments of Palmyra unfolds at the nexus of a bloody civil conflict and war on terror that has produced one of the most significant humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. While the death toll in Syria is estimated at around 470,000 lives lost during nearly eight years of combat, the classical ruins of Palmyra still occupy a powerful mythical status in the cultural imaginary of the West. It is a fascination evident in the global online circulation of before-and-after photographs documenting the deliberate destruction by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and

¹ The six Syrian locations listed as UNESCO World Heritage in Danger are the Ancient City of Damascus; Palmyra; Ancient City of Bosra; Ancient City of Aleppo; Crac des Chevaliers and Qal’at Salah El-Din; and the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria.

Syria (ISIS) of the city's renowned monuments of antiquity, the sharp dissonance between then-and-now provoking horror and disbelief at the hyperviolent targeting of ruins that form part of what is increasingly (although not unproblematically) perceived as the common heritage of not only the people of Syria but of the world-at-large.

In keeping with recent developments in international humanitarian law aimed at protecting cultural property during armed conflict,² significant concerted efforts are underway to protect, and draw global attention to, the endangered monuments of Palmyra. And yet in light of the devastating impact of the war on Syria's civilian population, the international call-to-arms to protect the nation's monuments raises thorny questions about the discord that exists between the universalist tendencies underlying World Heritage discourse and the particular causes that fuel the targeting of culturally valuable sites and artefacts in the first place. With its pronounced links to Roman classical antiquity the targeting of Palmyra throws into sharp relief the civilization versus barbarism polarity that all too often frames responses by the West to the attack on cultural heritage by radical extremists. Indeed, the very concept of World Heritage has always had Othering tendencies in the dialectical tension it generates between inclusion and exclusion and, furthermore, the way in which it "amplifies an idea originating in the West and tends to require an attitude toward material culture that is also distinctly Western in origin" (Gamboni 2017, 167).

Following the observation of Christian Moraru that "culture does not end where terror begins (and vice versa)" (2012, 41), this essay considers how the privileged elevation of exceptional monuments in the name of Western values and

² Notable developments include the passing of Resolution 2347 by the UN Security Council in March 2017, the first specifically condemning the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage. This follows a landmark case at the ICC in 2016 where Islamist rebel, Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, was convicted for the war crime of intentional attacks against religious buildings and monuments in Timbuktu, Mali.

civilization can in fact serve to perpetuate, rather than inhibit, the cycles of violence and destruction committed against architecture by the so-called “radical Other.” In their treatise on the ascent of a new world order grounded in global imperialism, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri emphasize in *Empire* the *differential* racism (as expounded by Étienne Balibar) of the contemporary era according to which “biological differences have been replaced by sociological and cultural signifiers as the key representation of racial hatred and fear” (2001, 191). As World Heritage protection efforts are increasingly focused upon coordinating projects to safeguard cultural property during armed conflict, the targeted destruction of monuments has become a principal cultural signifier of Otherness and barbarism in a manner that risks reinforcing the differential racism of which Hardt and Negri speak. In what follows, I address the case study of Palmyra in order to explore how the discourse of monument protection might be turned around to take greater account of the local context and lived experience of monuments as one potential means to mitigate the division and opposition that arises from framing the defence of cultural heritage in abstract universal value terms.

Culture under attack

In assuming a critical heritage approach to the politics of ruin destruction and preservation, this essay builds upon a rich body of work already undertaken on the relationship between memory, identity and the built environment, as well as the subset of literature within it concerned more directly with the targeted destruction of architecture, cultural monuments and archaeology in modern warfare. The numerous case-studies outlined in Robert Bevan’s *The Destruction of Memory*, in particular, have done much to establish that the breadth and depth of damage inflicted upon the built environment during the major conflicts of the twentieth-century extends well beyond collateral or incidental damage. Furthermore, this scrutiny of the deliberate targeting of buildings as containers of memory, tangible

markers of history, and as expressions of power relations is warranted, Bevan effectively argues, not as a means of privileging the safeguarding of architectural fabric above or before human life but to the extent that its destruction is all too often a precursor to the imminent physical attack upon civilian populations. Others have drawn attention to the growing mobilization of archaeology, specifically, as not only a target but also as a *weapon* of war, a discipline all too readily instrumentalized to serve wartime aims in a propagandist sense and used militarily as a form of structural violence aimed at economic and cultural forms of dominance (Pollock 2016; Harmanşah 2015; Plets 2017).

As an archaeological site located in the Middle East yet claimed by the West as an example of universal heritage, and standing at the crossroads of both the global war on terror and an intensely localized civil conflict, the current situation at Palmyra in many ways continues its long history as a complex multi-ethnic site. Located in the central Syrian desert to the north-east of capital city Damascus, the remains of this oasis city with a rich cosmopolitan past date back to at least the second millennium BC. Owing to its strategic location on the cross-desert caravan trading routes, Palmyra prospered during the second centuries CE as an outpost of the Roman Empire. Indeed, it was under Roman rule that an impressive, if ad-hoc, assemblage of civic imperial structures were built in a fusion of ancient Syrian and Roman architectural styles. Fragments of the main colonnaded street and its associated public buildings survive today alongside religious temples and remnants of the sandstone chambers of the Valley of the Tombs where the Palmyrene upper classes buried their dead. Throughout the Byzantine and Islamic periods that followed Palmyra remained an important trading centre and was occupied continuously at varying levels of density over the ensuing centuries. It was only in the early twentieth-century in 1932 that the local population living amid the ruins of Palmyra were finally displaced from their mud-brick villages to the nearby modern town of Tadmor under the direction of the French administration.

Ultimately, this contemporary image of Palmyra as a priceless and irreplaceable archaeological treasure, an eternal site frozen in time, belies the waxing and waning fortunes of a constantly evolving desert city where over the course of millennia the western influences of the Greco-Roman world intersected with the eastern cultures of the Levant. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the city slipped largely from the consciousness of Europe until it was “rediscovered” in the seventeenth century by a group of merchants working for the British Levant Company at Aleppo who set off in search of the fabled desert city. This early modern fascination with Palmyra’s monuments, sculptures and inscriptions intensified in the latter part of the nineteenth-century with the formal establishment of the discipline of European archaeology.³ During the late Ottoman rule (1876-1922), and the subsequent French Mandate (1923-1946), thousands of Palmyrene antiquities were removed from the site and dispersed to museums around the world. After the First World War, large-scale archaeological excavation commenced under the governance of the French. In recent decades and prior to the beginning of the civil war which commenced in 2011, the ruins of Palmyra as open-air museum had become a major tourist attraction and, as such, a significant contributor to the Syrian economy.

Given this complex history of Western interactions, it is “impossible to write a history of archaeology in Syria without addressing European colonialist interests” (al-Manzali 2016). In the specific case of Palmyra, the ascendancy of the site’s archaeological ruins in the Western imagination as a mythical fragment of classical antiquity and exemplary World Heritage site has come at great cost to its quotidian, or everyday, significance. The displacing of the local population from the site to make way for its archaeological excavation most notably marks an

³ Indeed, the cult of ruins (and by extension, archaeology) is itself a product of modernity and as such the hunger for authenticity that ruins symbolize only intensified “the more it was threatened by alienation, inauthenticity and reproducibility during the course of modernization” (Huyssen 2006, 9).

upheaval that speaks to a broader “disdain for present-day cultures in the Near East over its ‘glorious past’ [...] just as present today as it was in the 19th-20th centuries” (al-Manzali 2016). Historian Ingrid D. Rowland similarly notes the contemporary reification of Palmyra by archaeology and tourism in so far as prior to the recent vandalism inflicted by ISIS the site had earlier “suffered destruction in the lofty name of knowledge: it was twentieth-century archaeologists, not Islamic fanatics, who obliterated old Tadmor Village, and many structures, like fortification walls, that dated from post-classical times” (Rowland 2016). Today, neither the vernacular architecture of old Palmyra nor its Islamic relics elicit the same attention as its classical ruins. Still, “these places and these structures had their own tales to tell; in them, sometimes for centuries, people lived out their lives, built their families, gathered their memories” (ibid).

Notwithstanding the frequency with which Western accounts gloss the site’s myriad colonial and Orientalist associations, the arrival of ISIS at Palmyra in 2015 nonetheless marked the beginning of an extremely dark chapter in its recent history. In fact, the implication of Palmyra in the Syrian conflict predates ISIS as regime forces began installing military units in strategic areas within the modern town and the old city as early as 2012, resulting in substantial structural damage to the archaeological site and its surroundings.⁴ As the civil conflict escalated Palmyra was drawn into a tug-of-war between Syrian government forces and ISIS extremists challenging for control of the location. In addition to the military infrastructure at the site, the nearby modern town housed the notorious Tadmor prison where for decades political dissidents were jailed and tortured by the Syrian regime. When ISIS seized control of Palmyra in mid-2015 one of its first targets for demolition was the prison which it detonated with explosives. The destruction of ancient temples and tombs followed alongside vandalism of antiquities at the Palmyra

⁴ For a detailed inventory of the damage caused to the archaeological site between February 2012 and June 2015 refer to the Special Report from the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology prepared by Cheikhmous Ali, “Palmyra: Heritage Adrift” (2015).

Archaeological Museum. The brutal beheading of archaeologist and Palmyrene antiquities expert, 82-year-old Khaled al-Asaad, attracted global headlines as did the execution of Syrian soldiers in the Roman amphitheatre. A year later, Syrian and Russian forces reclaimed the city only to lose it again in a counter-offensive until the Syrian army finally recaptured Palmyra in early 2017. Since then, the area has remained under close military guard preventing further ISIS occupation.

While the archaeological site at Palmyra has been implicated in the Syrian civil conflict since 2012, it was the circulation of images on social media purporting to show the spectacular detonation by ISIS of the 2000-year-old pagan Temple of Baalshamin in 2015 that sparked worldwide debate over the motivation behind such targeted attacks. As an act of negation, the “moment of explosion is, from the point of view of spectacle, undoubtedly the most significant in the whole biography of the monument,” notes Mikhail Iampolksi (2017, 180). In this sense, the targeting of Palmyra’s heritage serves powerful propagandist purposes for the group. The initial focus by ISIS on the vandalism of religious monuments associated with polytheism and idolatry also invites explanation, to some extent, at the level of iconoclasm; which names the deliberate destruction of icons and other images or monuments for distinctly religious or political reasons. While iconoclasm is nothing new in either the West nor East, the deliberate destruction of millennial old ruins of antiquity has nonetheless transgressed a boundary, provoking a level of outrage that belies an amnesia on the part of the West with regards its own legacies of perpetual destruction. This legacy is at odds with the ease with which Western commentators declare the total incommensurability of the terrorist as barbarian vandal. At the same time, that fact that iconoclasm as a construct has evolved from naming the destruction of symbols of religious rivals to a more positive modern meaning of revolutionary destruction from the French Revolution onwards (Gamboni 1997) also renders it a problematic label for the targeting of cultural heritage by terrorists lest it offer an apologist reading. Thus, the motivation behind the destruction of

monuments by ISIS is often construed at the level of a more general “attack on culture,” as is evidenced, for instance, in the exegesis of French scholar and historian, Professor Paul Veyne, in which he asks:

But why, in August 2015, did ISIS need to blow up and destroy the temple of Baalshamin? Because it was a temple where pagans before Islam came to adore mendacious idols? No, it was because that monument was venerated by contemporary Westerners, whose culture includes an educated love for ‘historical monuments’ and a great curiosity for the beliefs of other people and other times...They blew up that temple in Palmyra and have pillaged several archaeological sites in the Near East to show that they are different from us and that they don’t respect what Western culture admires. (2017, 70)

No matter how impassioned, the rationale offered by Veyne for the destruction of the Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra throws into sharp relief the inherently contradictory nature of the veneration and defence of the cultural heritage of the Middle-East by Western scholars. In qualifying the interest of the West in the heritage of Syria in terms of “a great curiosity for the beliefs of other people and other times,” Veyne’s comments reveal an Orientalist approach to the Middle-East that Edward Said has already deconstructed at length as an entire topic of learning, discovery and practice (1995). At the same time, the universalization of the value of the historic monument cannot help but, paradoxically, involve the “definition of a *residual place of exclusion*” (Balibar 2017, 936). The notion that the culture of the West includes “an educated love” for historical monuments interpolates as radical Other those who fail to enunciate the same educated love or respect for what the West admires as inherently uncivilized, barbarous, retrograde. This points, then, to the way in which the racism of the contemporary era is increasingly a *differential* one “whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences” (Balibar 1991, 21). Just as the Orientalist scholar’s erudite investment in the classical past of the East is mutually imbricated with colonial interventions into its present reality, the modern tendency to frame the act of terrorism in terms of a general attack on universal Western values is implicitly tied

to the emergence of the “notion of right” that Hardt and Negri identify as a key feature of global imperialism “affirmed in the construction of a new order that envelops the entire space of what it considers civilization, a boundless universal space” (2000, 11).

At a theoretical level it is tempting to cast the contradictory nature of defending at-risk cultural heritage sites like Palmyra as an inherently aporetic problem. Considering these attacks from the local perspective, however, serves to concretize the crisis in a more immediate fashion. In contrast to the more theologially-oriented motivation of iconoclasm, a number of commentators emphasize the place-based nature of the violence arguing that it is principally the domestic impact upon local populations for whom the ruins of Palmyra embody layers of memory that constitute the target of these attacks. For Elly Harrowell, Palmyra is an exemplary “urban palimpsest” (Huysen 2003) such that its demolition by ISIS signifies a direct assault on the vernacular memories attached to the site and an attempt to erase the physical evidence of the region’s multicultural history (2016). Nour Munawar cites several factors motivating the destruction but is also concerned to emphasize the desire of ISIS to rewrite history by “erasing the extraordinary collective identity and memory of Palmyra in a way that would facilitate creating a new identity” (2017, 39). These readings place a positive emphasis on the archaeological site of Palmyra not for its universal heritage value but distinctly in terms of its significance for local communities as a repository of collective multicultural memories and identity at odds with the monocultural ideology of ISIS, which in turn acts as provocation for their attacks. It is an interpretation to some extent supported by the custodianship the local population have demonstrated towards Palmyra and in the active role Syrians have played in protecting heritage during the conflict, often at great risk to their own safety.

And yet in considering the place-based or domestic motivations for the targeting of cultural heritage by ISIS, one must also pay heed to the nationalist

agendas that archaeological monuments are made to serve and the extent to which the strategic use of archaeology by oppressive regimes arguably produces a more profoundly ambivalent relationship between local populations and ancient sites. Not only are the remains of the past increasingly commodified or made ‘saleable’ due to tourism and the booming international antiquities trade (Pollock 2016), such sites are expediently deployed in the logic of state-building. In assessing the political history of archaeology in Syria, others are more emphatic in stressing the “**modern political reasons**” behind the attacks by ISIS on ruins as “sites of governmental power” (al Manzali 2016, bold in original). In Syria, archaeology has in many ways become “an instrument in the service of the Syrian regime, as part of the imposition of an official national memory and identity” (ibid). It is arguably this misuse of monuments for nationalistic purposes that provides a principal motivating factor for their targeting by terrorist groups. At the same time, it complicates the relationship of cultural heritage to civilian populations all too aware that the recapture of sites such as Palmyra are strategically exploited by the Syrian regime and its allies seeking to cast themselves in a positive light as the civilized guardians of Syria’s cultural heritage. While presently safeguarded from ISIS, recent developments at Palmyra nonetheless represent just one further step in a long history of cultural heritage and archaeology in the Middle East as “indelibly marked by its interplay with colonialism and nationalism” (De Cesari 2015, 24).

The race for virtual preservation

While monuments have long been targeted for multi-dimensional geopolitical purposes, the ease with which images of their destruction are now circulated in the age of social media and the online twenty-four-hour news cycle heightens the sense of urgency to intervene when under threat. In recent years, the pivotal role played by technology, in particular, in the monument destruction debate has expanded as the international push to increase the legal mandate to protect cultural heritage

coincides with the rise of the fledging field of virtual heritage. Representing “an amalgam of archaeology and VR imaging technologies,” virtual heritage is “primarily focussed on generating digital reconstructions of historical or archaeological artifacts and sites with enough fidelity to be truly accurate representations of their real-world counterparts” (Roussou 2008, 228). With the rapid proliferation of preservation projects utilising 3D models, digital printing, artificial intelligence, robotics and virtual reality to document and recreate at-risk archaeological and architectural sites, further questions arise around the relationship between heritage protection, globalization and the colonizing forces of capitalism. No matter how neutral technology may appear, the fact remains that “designating something as heritage is a critical act, leaving no object untransformed” (Gamboni 2017, 167) holds just as true in the virtual realm.

At the forefront of this race for virtual preservation is the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA), a multi-lateral research institute that has engaged extensively with the threatened ruins at Palmyra through its multi-year Preserving Syrian Heritage project. In April 2016, the IDA attracted international publicity for its role in creating a 3D printed marble replica of the ISIS destroyed Arch of Triumph.⁵ Publicly unveiled in a media spectacle at London’s Trafalgar Square prior to its international tour,⁶ then-mayor of London, Boris Johnson, delivered a bombastic speech praising the near six-metre tall recreated monument, which is roughly two thirds in scale, as an embodiment of “London values.” For Johnson, the replica was erected in a spirit of “defiance of the barbarians who destroyed the original of this arch as they have destroyed so many other monuments and relics in Syria and the

⁵ The 3D printed replica of the Arch of Triumph was a collaboration between the Dubai Future Foundation, UNESCO, the British Institute for Digital Archaeology, and the universities of Oxford and Harvard.

⁶ To date, the replica arch has also been installed in New York’s City Hall Park, at the World Government Summit in Dubai, at Florence during the G7 Summit and in Arona, Italy.

Middle East, and in Palmyra.”⁷ Considering that Britain was at that time accepting the lowest number of Syrian applications for asylum in Europe, the comments were striking as not only culturally imperialist but as deeply hypocritical, too. Whatever the intrinsic worth of virtual heritage tools such as 3D scans and printing in terms of preserving collective knowledge about past civilizations and their potential capacity to assist in post-conflict restoration, the installation of a replica with such high symbolic value at a site so embedded in the history of British imperial power during an active war at the very least called for a more measured presentation.

At the same time, just in case one is willing to excuse the pronounced civilization versus barbarism theatrics of the London unveiling as an isolated offense by a particularly insensitive Western politician, the staging of a concert at the Roman amphitheatre at Palmyra by the Russian government just weeks later points to the more endemic complicity of so-called “civilized” cultural posturing in the conflict. Here, a “carefully choreographed spectacle” (Plets 2017, 18) unfolded on 5 May 2016 when an audience of Syrian and Russian soldiers, government ministers and international journalists were gathered amid the ruins to watch the renowned Russian Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra perform a classical concert titled “A Prayer for Palmyra.” Given the strategic domestic and diplomatic ends that sponsoring the reconstruction of Palmyra clearly serves for Russia, a number of commentators have rightly questioned the legitimacy of the Kremlin’s interest in protecting cultural minorities and their heritage (Plets 2017; Eakin 2016). At a moral level, it is deeply troubling that while the amphitheatre resounded with the soaring notes of the orchestra, fatal bombings continued across Syria. In this sense, it has been suggested the pageantry represented little more than an “act of cultural propaganda that seemed explicitly aimed at contrasting the jihadists’ brutality with

⁷ Filmed footage of Johnson’s speech at the unveiling can be viewed online. This quote is transcribed from “UK: Boris Johnson gives IS two fingers during Palmyra arch replica unveiling,” Ruptly, video file, posted April 19, 2016 <https://ruptly.tv/vod/20160419-055>

the victors' enlightenment" (Eakin 2016). Not only did the uncritical staging of this Eurocentric high-brow performance further encode Palmyra as a target for destruction by ISIS (Plets 2017), it also acted as a potent reminder of "how detached from reality the international campaign to save Syria's endangered cultural heritage has been" (Eakin 2016).

As the custodians and beneficiaries of cultural heritage including large swathes of classical antiquities sourced and governed according to "a finders-keepers, buyers-owners system" (Scheid 2016, 2), it is perhaps unsurprising that Western museums are also taking an active interest in the destruction of monuments. Such an interest cannot be otherwise than ideologically loaded if one considers that where "Archaeology as a modern practice is an invention of the West; so is the museum" (Wharton 2016, 2). In this sphere, too, new technologies are being harnessed to combat their disappearance from memory. In late 2016, the Grand Palais in Paris presented "Eternal Sites: From Bamiyan to Palmyra," an exhibition that combined artefacts from the Louvre and other French collections with immersive virtual reconstructions of major archaeological sites, including Palmyra, to draw public attention to the issue of cultural heritage in danger.⁸ At the Los Angeles Getty Research Institute (GRI) in 2017, the museum presented its first ever online-only exhibition titled "The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra," making freely available online a digital archive of more than one hundred historical photographs and illustrations of the site dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Promoted as a tribute to Palmyra, the exhibition drew from two bodies of work held in the GRI's special collections: a suite of etchings made by the French artist and architect Louis-François Cassas (1756-1827) as part of a diplomatic mission to the

⁸ For a critique of the methods of "institutionalized dispossession" that underpins the collection of antiquities in many Western museums, including the looting of Rome by Napoléon Bonaparte that bolstered the collection of the Louvre, see Kirsten Scheid's article, "Artfare: Aesthetic Profiling from Napoléon to Neoliberalism" (2016).

Ottoman Court, and photographs of Palmyra taken in 1864 by sea-captain Louis Vignes (1780-1862) during a scientific expedition to the Middle East.

Praised for its attractive user-friendly visual layout and provision of open-access to significant collection materials, the title of the GRI exhibition, “The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra,” nonetheless points to a cultural bias underpinning the curatorial approach. The reduction of Palmyra’s rich multi-ethnic history, for instance, to a singular “legacy” serves to perpetuate the grand narratives of colonialism and signals a missed opportunity to embrace the more pluralist legacies that viewing Palmyra through a postcolonial lens might have encouraged. Similarly, the emphasis on Palmyra’s *ancient* history again speaks to the ongoing tendency of Western media and historians to elevate the site’s links to classical antiquity whilst disregarding its relationship to the present-day cultures of the Middle East. In this way, the GRI exhibition falls into Orientalist traps, argues one reviewer who finds fifteen hundred years of “post-classical history [...] reduced to a brief parade of conquerors as we progress quickly from Palmyra’s glorious ancient past to its heroic Western rediscovery” (Press 2017). Rather than taking a critical look at Orientalist photography, the exhibition instead presents “a Syrian city reimagined as the heritage of its European visitors” (ibid).

To some extent, the shortcomings of the GRI’s exhibition could be addressed with greater remedial attention paid to “more of Palmyra’s varied legacies, alternately rich and heartbreaking” (ibid). Still, the narrow view of history that the exhibition somewhat unwittingly presents calls into question the taken-for-granted neutrality of technology in the mediation of politically contested historical narratives. Far from a non-partisan platform, capitalist and nationalist interests coincide on the net in ways that reterritorialize the lines-of-flight set in motion by potentially disruptive interventions. The institution of the museum, for instance, is inherently tied to colonizing systems of classification, organization and categorization. When the museum enters into the boundless space of the virtual it

too mirrors and reinforces the ways in which in “this smooth space of Empire, there is no *place* of power – it is both everywhere and nowhere,” as Hardt and Negri expound. “Empire is an *ou-topia*, or really a *non-place*” (2000, 190). This intertwined relationship between digital technologies, the internet and imperial power structures that the Palmyra exhibition brings into play has further reaching implications when one considers the role played by technology in the Syrian conflict more broadly. Initially harnessed by civilians as a tool of revolutionary uprising during the Arab Spring, the internet all too quickly became the target of a clamp down by the regime and in the present conflict is predominantly utilized for the purposes of surveillance, control and oppression.

As a distinct contrast to the institutional approach of the GRI exhibition, I want to consider by way of conclusion an independent grass-roots virtual preservation initiative with its origins in the self-organized culture of online hacktivism. The New Palmyra Project, or #NewPalmyra, is a digital archaeology project concerned with creating a reconstruction of Palmyra in virtual space, freely sharing its 3D models and data in the public domain. It builds on the legacy of the late Palestinian-Syrian free internet activist, Bassel Khartabil, an early pioneer in bringing the online collaboration and open-source philosophy of the Creative Commons to Syria. Khartabil’s efforts during the Arab Spring to broadcast live footage of the protests to international media captured the attention of the Syrian Military Intelligence, leading to his arrest by the regime in 2012. After three years of unlawful detainment Khartabil was executed in 2015. The New Palmyra project was founded by friends and colleagues in his honour with the aim of continuing Khartabil’s interest in building a virtual reconstruction of the ruins of Palmyra as part of a broader vision to utilize the web as a force for positive change, facilitating cultural exchange and empowering individuals through open networks and the free circulation of knowledge and information.

In February 2018, a file created by the New Palmyra project became the first 3D model to be officially uploaded to Wikimedia Commons under a new feature allowing users to share and view 3D models with enhanced interactivity on the site. The virtual model depicts the two thousand-year-old statue of the Lion of al-Lat, an iconic artefact intentionally damaged by ISIS during its looting and destruction of monuments at Palmyra in 2015. The rationale for specifically selecting the Lion of al-Lat is outlined on The New Palmyra website:

This lion who watched over the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra for over 2000 years was the first thing ISIS militants destroyed. Now it lives on as the first 3D model uploaded to Wikicommons, freed for everyone.

Running parallel to this techno-utopian tale of virtual rescue, the Lion of al-Lat was also one of the first destroyed artefacts of Palmyra to be physically restored by the Syrian government. When the Syrian army cleared Palmyra after the departure of ISIS, the statue's fragments were transferred to the National Museum in the capital Damascus where it was restored by Polish conservators in coordination with local experts. In March 2017, the statue was presented to the public and media at Damascus, "ready to welcome visitors as a sign of reconstruction and the beginning of victory," the Director of Antiquities and Museums, Mahmoud Hammoud, commented to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) at the time (qtd in O'Connor 2017). Thus the reconstruction of cultural heritage is equally taken up by the state as means to project a politically expedient picture of civic stability, progress and social harmony. Seen from an international perspective, this race to coordinate heritage restoration efforts in collaboration with agencies such as UNESCO also serves to provide an otherwise isolated Syrian regime, and its Russian allies, with "a global platform and a seat at the table at future international conferences" (Plets 2016, 22). And still, the civil war in Syria rages on with brutal intensity. At the time of writing, airstrikes over the rebel-held suburb of Eastern Ghouta located near Damascus were so severe as to lead United Nations officials to describe the situation on the ground as a "hell on earth."

The intentional destruction of cultural heritage by terrorist groups is an alarming development that warrants some degree of international coordination aimed at implementing preventative measures and legal consequences for the perpetrators. At the same time, as the strategic motivations underpinning the apparent good news story that the Syrian government's restoration of the Lion of al-Lat attests, there is an urgent need to reflect more critically on the symbolic meaning of the reconstruction efforts – both virtual and actual – already underway. The ease with which such restoration projects are co-opted and made complicit in the structural violence of war supports the view that such efforts should not be carried out when a war is still ongoing, nor controlled by one party such as the victorious side (Munawar 2017). In addition to reserving post-war restoration projects until such a time when they can be used to serve the aims of genuine reconciliation, it is also necessary to question the universalist rhetoric that all too frequently underpins the exhortation by Western leaders and agencies to rush to the defence of “culture under attack.” For as Hardt and Negri argue (following Balibar), today it is cultural signifiers and the apparent incommensurability of cultures that are responsible for so much racial hatred, division and fear. Even the most well-intentioned global efforts to safeguard cultural heritage sites like Palmyra risk escalating further violence and conflict if the discourse utilized is too simplistic and merely reinforces the polarity of a civilized West in opposition to the assent of a barbarous radical Other.

In addition to recognizing the deeply political nature and potential Othering tendencies of urban reconstruction (Harrowell 2016), it is also important to consider the longer-term risks that hasty rebuilding projects pose to authentic and culturally sensitive restoration work. As the authors of one report point out, “the greatest threat to Palmyra is mismanagement stemming from prioritizing immediate and highly visible results, ultimately grounded in larger political objectives, and not guided by conservation best practices, community-based heritage management, and

sustainability” (Cuneo et al, 2016). Not only does the race for speedy reconstruction pave the way for substandard repairs, kitsch replica projects and amnesiac interpretations of the past, in a very practical sense it redirects resources from the more immediately urgent task of rebuilding essential infrastructure such as roads, schools, hospitals and housing that should take precedence in the aftermath of war.

Lastly, for the people of Palmyra “the ancient site will be remembered as a place where their neighbors and family members were executed and buried. The restoration of ancient and modern Palmyra [therefore] presents an opportunity to heal the local community, and so current and future managers are challenged to consider how to address Palmyra’s difficult and modern associations” (ibid). The international campaign to prevent monument destruction in Syria and in armed conflicts around the world is no doubt poised to accelerate with the rapid advancement of digital and virtual technologies. The situation in Syria, however, gives pause for thought, provoking reflection on both the complex geo-political realities and the imperialist nature of the civilization versus barbarism rhetoric that place sites such as Palmyra at such great risk of destruction. However universally admired, it is only when the relics of Palmyra are acknowledged as belonging first and foremost to the present-day culture and everyday life of the region that local stakeholders may be afforded their proper role in determining the nature of the site’s eventual restoration. The lessons of history suggest it is by no means a given this will occur, but one hopes that with sufficient dialogue the remains of Palmyra might just be prevented from again becoming merely expedient to the project of legitimating state-power and nation building when the war is over.

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