Heritage Rites – Magical Thinking and Efficacious Objects: Rethinking Palestinian Experiences of Occupation, Displacement and Refugee Camp life

Dr Beverley Butler
UCL Institute of Archaeology, UK

Dr Fatima Al-Nammari
Department of Architecture, Petra University, Jordan

Abstract

The objective of our paper is to use ethnographic research to rethink Palestinian experiences of occupation, displacement and refugee camp life through the lens of critical heritage and memory studies. Our focus is upon a popular genre of ‘heritage rites’ synonymous with a potent constellation of activated heritage forms that are powerfully expressed in ritual acts of communion, magical thinking and wish-fulfilment and as such are used in contexts of everyday extremis to create new ‘factness’ and ‘realities’ on the ground. Thus as articulated through objects (domestic-personal mementoes and souvenirs) connecting people to the Palestinian ‘lost homeland’ as cosmic centre/axis mundi, or via public art/ murals and as sensoriums synonymous with the preparation and ingestion of traditional food we explore the impact on memory-work and place-making. We seek to demonstrate how not only traditional performances of dabke dancing but new media of rap and film-making form a fundamental part of this complex context. The Palestinian voices cited in this paper iterate the need for heritage critics/ workers to embrace a paradigm shift that re-situates heritage within a theory of subjectivity and recognise the efficacy of popular heritage rites to ‘clothe’ ‘bare life’ and thus to empower persons not just in the future but in the present, and thereby take on the complexities and paradoxes that being human means especially in conditions of extremis.