
Librarians and Archivists to Palestine Solidarity Statement

August 2013

We are an independent group of librarians and archivists who traveled to Palestine from June 23 – July 4, 2013. We come from the US, Canada, Sweden, Trinidad & Tobago, and Palestine. We bore witness to the destruction and appropriation of information, and the myriad ways access is denied. We were inspired by the many organizations and individuals we visited who resist settler-colonialism in their daily lives. We connected with colleagues in libraries, archives, and related projects and institutions, in the hopes of gaining mutual benefit through information exchange and skill-sharing. We learned about the common and unique challenges we face—both in different parts of Palestine and in our home contexts. In all our travels and work, we respected the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel and did not partner with any organization that violates this call. As librarians and archivists, as people who believe in access to information, we affirm that institutional academic and cultural boycotts are appropriate responses to curtailed freedoms and are effective tools for change.

Our group was small, our scope limited. We traveled only to Palestine, and only to parts of Palestine. We were not able to visit Palestinian communities in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, or elsewhere, and our trip was only the first step in creating a network of information workers. We were privileged to visit cities, villages, and refugee camps, and to meet with grassroots activists and institutional representatives. In the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and 1948 Palestine (Israel), we engaged with librarians and archivists about their projects and their struggles.

As we travelled we saw barriers to movement everywhere: walls, checkpoints, turnstiles, metal detectors, segregated roads, surveillance watchtowers, military patrols, security cameras, and settler militias. We saw

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communities devastated by criminalization and incarceration. We visited the rubble of villages that were destroyed in 1948, and we witnessed the ongoing Judaization of Palestinian communities through new housing developments, unequal provision of municipal services, and the Hebraization of place names. We saw new Israeli settlements hovering on hilltops above Palestinian villages, evidence of the forcible land grabs and displacement that Palestinians have been facing for decades. We met families that have struggled and suffered through egregious violence and yet work every day to secure education, opportunities, safety and a more just world for their children.

The erasure of Palestinian culture and history is a tactic of war and occupation, a means to further limit the self-determination of the Palestinian people. Yet the richness, beauty, and complexity of Palestinian existence was everywhere evident, in the historical and contemporary cultural material produced by writers, poets, journalists, artists, archivists and librarians, and in the histories passed down through stories and from person to person. We bore witness to a culture of resistance, which in all its myriad forms resoundingly refutes the notion that Palestine does not exist.

Our experiences in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and 1948 Palestine (Israel) were complex, challenging, beautiful and deeply meaningful. We met creative, committed, and courageous activists, visionaries, cultural workers, artists, librarians and archivists. Everywhere we went we witnessed the daily lived realities of occupation and colonialism, as well as ongoing resistance and the persistent quest for justice.*

At Aida Refugee Camp located in Bethlehem, we saw how the Apartheid Wall prevented the community from accessing nearby olive groves which had been used for relaxation, studying, animal grazing and agriculture. We also heard about the Lajee Center's project to map the people's histories of the camp.

In Nabi Saleh weekly nonviolent demonstrations against the confiscation of the community's land and water are met with extreme violence from the Israeli military. The villagers are using video to document the violence they experience, as well as collecting the empty tear gas canisters and shell casings which are used against them. This documentation is used by the community to honor their resistance, to communicate their struggle with the wider world, and to dispute false accusations in the courts.

School librarians described the difficulty in obtaining Arabic language children's literature, especially in 1948 Palestine (Israel). Many of the available books are low-quality translations from Hebrew, and Palestinian children have little access to their own literary heritage.

We visited the destroyed town of Saffourieh and heard from former resident Abu Arab about his experiences fleeing the town as a child during the Nakba. Abu Arab has a museum of Palestinian material culture, which he developed

out of his work as an antiques collector. The museum challenges the process of ethnic cleansing and the erasure of cultural memory. Abu Arab is the brother of poet Taha Muhammed Ali.

Throughout Palestine we encountered cultural production by youth to preserve traditions, by the Yaffa Youth Movement in Jaffa, the Yafa Cultural Center in Balata Refugee Camp, and the Lajee Center in Aida Refugee Camp.

We witnessed the documentation of prisoners' lives, a central experience in the Palestinian struggle against occupation. At the Nablus Public Library we saw the marginalia and creative book repairs in a former prison library collection, and at the Abu Jihad Museum for the Prisoners Movement Affairs we learned about a project to collect and digitize prisoners' notebooks from across the West Bank.

We learned from the Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association that the Israeli military is currently detaining 4,900 Palestinians, including 236 children and 8 members of Palestinian legislature.

In East Jerusalem we visited the Nashashibi Center for Culture and Literature, a rebuilt family library from which all the books were stolen during the Nakba in 1948. We also visited the Orient House, which was closed by the Israeli government in 2001 and had significant portions of its archival collections confiscated.

Librarians at Birzeit University told us of their success in petitioning the Library of Congress to adopt a call number for the First Intifada, recognizing it as a unique historical period even as it was still happening: DS128.4.**

During a meeting with the organization alQaws for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, we learned about the process of organizing across the West Bank / 1948 Palestine border, the articulation of Palestinian-specific understandings of sexual identity, and the Singing Sexuality project, which discusses sexuality through music.

In Lyd, not far from Tel Aviv, we saw where the library of the local school was removed and replaced with a police station.

We visited the Wadi Hilweh Information Center in Silwan, where residents of the neighborhood create grassroots media about the settler violence they experience on a daily basis.

At the El Bireh Municipal Library we learned about the Tamer Institute, which produces and publishes Arabic language children's books that are distributed to libraries and community centers throughout Palestine.

Recognizing the barriers to movement and access that often keep the aforementioned organizations and projects from connecting with each other, and appreciating the importance of accountability to the communities that hosted us in Palestine, our delegation organized a public forum in Ramallah on our last evening together. We shared our initial ideas and asked for feedback about our observations.

While the delegation has ended, our work will continue: we will seek out and convene events in our home communities where we can share our knowledge about the effects of occupation and colonialism on libraries, archives, and Palestinian society; we will publish reports, articles, and zines that document the challenges faced—and the amazing work being done—by Palestinian information workers; we will develop an international network of information workers to facilitate skill-sharing, solidarity work, and community among librarians and archivists in Palestine and abroad; we will lobby national and international library and archival organizations to take tangible steps against the occupation and in support of Palestinian perspectives in information work; we will join Palestinians, Israelis, and international activists in campaigns for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israeli apartheid and colonialism. We will continue to learn and adapt our strategies to changing realities and will engage in critical examinations of our own positions of privilege. Through these activities we will work to support access to information in and about Palestine and Palestinian self-determination.

Librarians and Archivists to Palestine 2013 Delegation:

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Molly Fair – Interference Archive; Justseeds Artists' Cooperative; CUNY TV

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Andrea Miller-Nesbitt – Liaison Librarian, McGill University

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Melissa Morrone – Public Librarian

Vani Natarajan – Barnard College Library

Elisabet Risberg- Librarian, The International Library in Stockholm

Maggie Schreiner – Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive; Rude Mechanical Orchestra

All organizational affiliations are listed for identification purposes only and in no way indicate a position taken by such organizations on the issues raised in this statement.

* For a more complete list of projects and organizations we visited, please see this handout we distributed at our public forum in Ramallah at the end of our delegation.

** An earlier version of this statement listed the call number as DS119.75. Birzeit University librarians have clarified that DS128.4 was the number assigned during the First Intifada, whereas it appears that the Library of Congress assigned a new number (DS119.75) after the Intifada ended. Birzeit University continues to use DS128.4. We apologize for the error.