

Review of Resisting Erasure: Libraries in Palestine in Libraries

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ABSTRACT: Review of Murad, N.L. & Onorato, M.L. *Resisting erasure: Libraries in Palestine and Palestine in libraries*.

Keywords: Palestine, Israel, genocide, libraries, censorship



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Seventy-three thousand seven hundred and seventy. This is the number of casualties in Gaza after October 7th, 2023, an estimate provided by the World Health Organization in their latest report on a genocide that began over 78 years ago (WHO 2026).¹ The use of the word “genocide” is an intentional provocation on my part, meant to spotlight the library profession’s damning silence as it regards the numerous, well-documented crimes against humanity committed by the State of Israel (and primarily enabled by its main benefactor, the United States). As the writers collected within *Resisting Erasure: Libraries in Palestine and Palestine in Libraries* remind us, this silence can take on many different forms—everything from misleading and inaccurate cataloging practices (Drabinski 2026) to, as is more often the case, outright denial.² Deftly edited by Nora Lester Murad and Mary L. Onorato, *Resisting Erasure*, taken in its entirety, lands an uncomfortable critique. Our profession has been more than willing to aid and abet a *specific* aspect of Israel’s genocidal policy: the total erasure of Palestinians from the historical and cultural record.

The first part of the book deals directly with Palestinian libraries and the various ways in which they have been physically threatened. This includes in times of outright warfare, when the cyclical destruction of essential infrastructure like hospitals, electrical grids, is the main threat. The dangers faced by libraries in Israeli military campaigns is compounded by the fact that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) refuses to honor the distinction between military and civilian targets—an act of aggression that runs afoul of numerous obligations under international law. In a particularly shocking example, Mosab Abu Toha, librarian and activist, reflects on the founding of the Edward Said Library, the first English-language library in Gaza. What begins as a tale of triumph ends in abject horror. As it is put in an editorial note at the end of the chapter: “...the following libraries and bookstores mentioned above [including the Edward Said Library] were destroyed in the early months of Israel’s 2023-2024 invasion of Gaza...It is likely that all or most of the other libraries in Gaza have also been destroyed” (Abu Toha 2026, 77).

But, as *Resisting Erasure* makes clear, the threats to libraries in Palestine have not always entailed physical violence. For example, after the Nakba (or the first expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians from their ancestral lands in 1948), it was Israeli policy to seize “abandoned” property, including the personal libraries of famous Arab writers, artists, and journalists (Snaije 2026). As Hamad (2026) reminds us, “more than 30,000 books and manuscripts were stolen from West Jerusalem alone” (24). In several cases, the collections of already existing libraries (such as the Jerusalem Public Library) were lifted wholesale, transferred into the custody of the occupying forces with feigned promises of an eventual repatriation that never came.

And where did many of these collections end up? In many cases, they are now housed at the National Library of Israel, whose staff, citing concerns for the “safety” of these “abandoned” artifacts, were more than willing to assist the IDF in assessing their “security value” (Hamad 2026). The dual character of libraries in times of colonial expansion is illustrated by the two examples above: Not only do they function as sites of, but they can also serve as sites of colonial

¹ 80% of these deaths involved civilians. I had to revise the number upwards several times during the drafting of this review.

² Denial in the context of libraries, as Williams (2026) argues, often takes the form of simply refusing to purchase books written by Palestinian authors.

dispossession. One is reminded of the role librarians have played in the larger capitalist project of the United States—enforcing strict codes of conduct for immigrants earlier in the nation’s history, exporting neoliberalism around the globe in the post-war period (Bales 2015)—but also the ways in which some of them have begun to challenge these narratives. It is the perseverance of librarians in Palestine, their willingness to rebuild what will inevitably be destroyed again, that provides the much-needed reminder that institutions do not *necessarily* serve the vested interests of colonial powers. Libraries can exist outside of (and resist) the twin paradigms of our time: capitalist exploitation and authoritarian repression.

The second part of the book turns towards librarians working within the United States, who, obviously, deal less directly with the physical effects of an unending, asymmetric war but are nonetheless intimately familiar with the rhetoric used to justify a whole host of horrors in the name of genocide.

One illustrative example comes to us from a Quaker school in Pennsylvania, where a children’s author was banned from reading her book because of her vocal support for Palestine. “Banned” is used here ironically. Mermelstein and Thompkins-Bigelow (2026) recount how both the librarian who invited the speaker and the speaker herself were subjected to the “concern” of school administrators, who framed their intervention as a form of protection for the children and for the wider community. Their “concern,” in reality, functioned as an advanced form of gaslighting, in which the victims of censorship were made to feel that their beliefs violated some unarticulated ethics of care (a particularly egregious weaponization of leftist rhetoric against leftists). And, as the authors of this chapter rightly conclude, who, in this scenario, is really being protected? As a rule, management.

Particularly affecting is the chapter written by Raida Gatten and Yael Noble, members of Librarians and Archivists with Palestine, an organization that not only does extensive advocacy work but also tracks censorship of Palestinian-related “materials or expressions of solidarity” within the United States. I have included some of the complaints they have received below:

A patron took *Power Born of Dreams: My Story is Palestine*, by Mohammad Saba’aneh, off the shelf and flushed it in the toilet of our public restroom (Gatten and Noble 2026, 125).

A patron stole a copy of a resource, while leaving copies of evangelical pro-Israel and Islamophobic books around the library (Gatten and Noble 2026, 130).

It is these small but increasingly prevalent moments of censorship that have come to define our current political moment in libraries. There are, of course, larger, more insidious forces at work behind the scenes, an agglomeration of actors, neoliberal administrators and right-wing authoritarians among them, that benefit from this silence on Palestine. Dislodging them will require building a broader coalition, one that crosses disciplinary boundaries and connects library workers to the wider currents of organized political action. But there is something to be said for an approach that begins with *practical* methods to be implemented at the level of our day-to-day jobs as librarians and through which we can begin to resist these forces. Some suggested methods include critically questioning the biases that underpin the Western library’s treatment of the Middle East (Roberts 2026; Williams 2026), altering the previously mentioned subject

headings that erase Palestinian identity (Drabinski 2026), and dismantling collection development practices that systematically privilege Israeli and American institutional perspectives (Roberts 2026).

Resisting Erasure functions as a valuable resource precisely in its capacity to introduce readers to the larger struggles faced by the Palestinian people and their libraries, while also offering potential starting points from which we might begin to resist these injustices within our own communities. First and foremost, however, *Resisting Erasure* should be understood as a *J'accuse!* It forces librarians to face the uncomfortable truth that the profession still refuses to acknowledge: to support one aspect of some overarching plan to exterminate a people's culture and history is, in the end, to support a genocide in its entirety.

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