

Knowledge, Access, and Resistance: A Conversation on Librarians and Archivists to Palestine

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In June 2013, 16 librarians and archivists traveled to Palestine to connect with Palestinian librarians, archivists, activists, and organizers, to learn more about their struggles and their work. We came from the U.S., Canada, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, and U.K./Palestine. We were public, academic, and school librarians; movement archivists; artists; and activists. We spent eight days traveling throughout the West Bank and '48.¹ In the few days that followed, participants went off on their own to participate in follow-up meetings and to connect with people we hadn't had time to meet during the first week. We reconvened at the end for a public event in Ramallah. Most of us did not know each other beforehand.

Hannah has led many delegations in Palestine over the past decade, but this was the first specifically with librarians and archivists. Vani traveled to Palestine with an LGBTQ delegation in January 2012. Both live in New York and work with Adalah-NY: The New York Campaign for the Boycott of Israel. For this article, we sat down in August 2013 to reflect on the Librarians and Archivists to Palestine delegation. We recorded and transcribed our conversation, and edited and rearranged it slightly for the sake of clarity. It should be noted that we often refer to the U.S. in our conversation, because this is the context within which the two of us work. Not everyone from the delegation lives in the U.S.

Vani: What is the significance of having librarians and archivists do solidarity work in Palestine?

Hannah: Part of what brought me to my Palestine work is what brought me to librarianship: issues of access to information and to stories. Palestine is not a place that's underreported; it's a place that's misreported and misrepresented. There's actually a wealth of information out there, but it's very hard to sift through that

information, and a lot of the work I've done has been to help people sift through it. I've worked with many delegations, taking people to Palestine to experience for themselves what's happening there, to have that direct access. As librarians we have a responsibility to help people access the information they want about different issues.

V: My involvement with Palestine activism is also rooted in my belief in access to information; I also like to think about this in terms of knowledge, and how knowledge is structured. Like you said, we get so much misinformation about Palestine, and even the categories that we're given—whether on the news, in a reference book, or when you look on a map—the ways that things are named obscures so much. Giving people access to different ways of looking at history, different stories and perspectives, is really important because so much has been erased.

We've talked about the importance of access to information, but what do we do with a collection of facts and stories? How do we make sense of images, sounds, numbers, and words? I like to think of knowledge as what happens when we make meaning out of information, when we imbue it with a consciousness. I want to think of our work as beyond information access, as something deeper than just the sharing of information.

I'm also interested in the question of solidarity. It's important and it also opens up a challenge. In my training as a librarian, I've learned to try to be accountable to a community of users that I come to know well and that is directly around me. Then again, a lot of that work is about solidarity, as I've worked in communities where I'm not actually a member of that community. I don't have much of a history of librarian practices of transnational or global solidarity from which to draw, though. Solidarity still feels like more of a possibility than an existing condition.

H: A big challenge in planning the delegation was how to approach it as people who have specific skills we want to use and share in Palestine without doing so in a framework of charity. In some ways we do have more resources, and we are able to offer things that people need and want. How do we do that without imposing upon people? How do we recognize that there is a power differential and that we want to learn from people? We have a lot to learn from Palestinians that can inform our own

work locally. With solidarity work, what's hard is recognizing a power differential but trying not to play into it, trying to have an equal relationship with those we work with. Our professional identity—though we're not all paid for our librarianship and archiving work—helped us avoid some of the problems of other delegations. Sometimes people on generic human rights delegations lack focus and end up asking questions that are not relevant to the expertise or interest of the person we're meeting with. Or people get inspired in a moment, come up with ideas without consultation, and make promises they do not fulfill.

V: Did you notice many moments on our delegation when members would say, "This needs to be captured and recorded!" and when we might be imposing our ideas of documentation onto people?

H: There were definitely moments of walking through a community—Balata refugee camp in Nablus, for example—with half the delegation taking pictures and the other half cringing at the thought of taking pictures. But we worked through it. It's very difficult to avoid voyeurism when you have a large group of people walking around in a community that they are not from.

V: There are problems with witnessing as a form of activism. It's easy to forget that people who have been directly experiencing occupation, colonialism, and apartheid have been "witnessing" it all along. There is a danger in ascribing a special significance to the U.S.- or Europe-based, mostly white, non-Palestinian acts of witness. And this idea that injustices don't happen unless they are documented and observed with western eyes—why is that gaze given so much privilege? How do we acknowledge our ability to share what we have seen in Palestine, within our own communities, without intensifying these power dynamics? How do we make sure to center Palestinian expression, Palestinian narrative in our reporting back? And most importantly, how do we make the act of reporting back one that is accountable first and foremost to the Palestinians whose communities we visited?

H: Those are tough and crucial questions, especially as we try to share information. We have already put out a statement and a zine, and we're going to release a longer report,

but we're trying to do it in a way that's accountable to the people with whom we're working in Palestine. Our initial statement had a mistake that a Birzeit University librarian caught, and we changed it. We had laid the groundwork for this interaction when we were there. Even before any of this production and dissemination of our experience, on our last day in Ramallah we did a report-back to share with Palestinians a bit about what we had seen in the prior couple of weeks and ask people to tell us if we were wrong about something, if we were missing things, or if we were focusing on the wrong things. So I think asking for feedback and fostering relationships with colleagues in Palestine are necessary parts of solidarity work.

V: In order to really do solidarity work, and do library work according to our values, we often need to challenge the structures within which we work. And challenge some of the assumptions that go into our profession.

H: Like what?

V: One example is the Library of Congress classification system. Many of us are familiar with this scheme of subject headings and call numbers; librarians around the world have adopted it by necessity. We've also come to know its limits—LC imposes a hierarchy on knowledge that often reflects an imperialist, sexist, racist worldview. Librarian activism has called that into question, and it came to light when we talked to librarians in Palestine. Working within this system requires a double consciousness. You have to know a system really well and also start to envision its undoing, its transformation into something better.

H: The Arabic language cataloger at Birzeit talked about using the LC system because there is no other option. He has to translate everything from Arabic into English to find appropriate descriptors, and then back into Arabic for cataloging. The terms prescribed by the LC are not the terms Palestinians would use to describe their history, geography, or culture. But they use them, and he changes a few things now and then, but he wants to be able to work in the world, and unfortunately that requires some compromise. Hearing from the Birzeit librarians who fought to get a call number for the First Intifada was also inspiring to all of us. They were very matter-of-fact about it: it's a unique

historical period that needs to get recognized. But then we heard how afterwards the LC here in the U.S. apparently created and started using a totally different call number than the one assigned to Birzeit. So most of the world uses a different call number than the one the Birzeit librarians had fought for and continue to use: DS128.4.

V: That reminds me—we talked to Palestinian librarians living and working in '48, who work in Israeli institutions and have been creatively devising ways to resist these from within. There was a conversation at Mada al Carmel² in Haifa, with Palestinian school librarians working in schools within '48. We had not been aware of so many of the challenges they're facing under Israeli apartheid, including the Hebraization of school curriculum. For Palestinian kids in '48, there's a growing pressure to read only materials in Hebrew and not read in Arabic.

H: And the fact that they can't access materials in Arabic. Many new children's books in Arabic are published in Beirut, and because Israel and Lebanon do not have relations, they can't get those books anywhere in Palestine. In Haifa and elsewhere in '48, most of the Arabic books in Palestinian libraries are translated from Hebrew, so they're reading Zionist stories in Arabic. This makes it even harder to get kids to read in Arabic. We had a librarian from Sweden with us who maintains an Arabic literature collection at a public library in Stockholm; she focuses on children's literature. She was shocked to find that there was less original Arabic literature in Palestine than she has in Stockholm, because she goes to Beirut and other places and she buys the stuff. When she was in Palestine, she saw more books that had been translated from Swedish into Arabic than ones originally written in Arabic. In Haifa, we also learned that the first school libraries in Jewish schools were established in 1927, and in Palestinian schools inside Israel, it was in 1992. That discrepancy was pretty shocking.

One of our follow-up ideas is to help people get materials they don't have, and a question for us is how to do that responsibly. Especially when we start to make campaigns public, we need to be conscious of our relationship with Palestinian projects and institutions. We want to avoid the model of "We have things we want to give to less fortunate people," and embrace a model of mutual struggle in response to a political problem.

V: I often hear librarians in the U.S. refer to neutrality as a core value or cornerstone of librarianship, but curiously I do not see it on the American Library Association list of the core values of librarianship (American Library Association, 2004). There *is* a value of social responsibility on that list that doesn't get talked about nearly enough. It's really interesting that neutrality is not listed as a core value, while social responsibility is.

H: And within social responsibility, it specifically says, "ALA recognizes its broad social responsibilities" and affirms the "willingness of ALA to take a position on current critical issues with the relationship to libraries and library services set forth in the position statement." So it's decidedly not neutral. Not only does it not mention neutrality, but it's saying we can take positions on things, so far as they are for the public good, democracy, access, and these other values.

Are there ways in which we're challenging the core values? Or are we really just challenging the core practices or the core assumptions?

V: Well, the word "democracy" carries so much baggage. For those of us living in the U.S., we're living in a country that projects itself as a democracy and proclaims democracy as a core value of its existence. Yet many of the values associated with democracy run counter to what the U.S. government is actually doing. Similarly, Israel, an apartheid state that is occupying Palestine, self-identifies as a democracy. So much mainstream reporting about Israel/Palestine refers to Israel as the "only democracy in the Middle East." There's hypocrisy in the ethos of many countries that label themselves democracies, particularly the U.S. and Israel. Our work can challenge and unpack that core value of democracy, a word that so often goes unexamined.

H: It seems like the ALA's core values are very much about the U.S. They refer to "the nation," and the one about democracy specifically talks about the First Amendment, but otherwise it seems to be more about little 'd' democracy. It says, "the publicly supported library [...] provides free and equal access to information for all people in the community." That's the idea of democracy they're talking about, which is something I think we can get behind.

V: I totally agree. Still, it's useful to look critically at the fact that the ALA cites the First Amendment. The U.S. Constitution in its inception had a very limited definition of personhood. So who even counted as a person, who counts as a person, is something that we should interrogate.

H: It's the same with Israel. Israel defines itself as a democracy, and it's able to do that only by not recognizing the personhood of Palestinians. Israel is a democracy for Jews, just not for the rest of its citizens, particularly the 20% who are Palestinian.

V: Exactly. This is a really interesting value to look at critically.

H: This isn't part of the core values, but perhaps a core tension of librarianship is that on the one hand the public library was founded as a place for free access to information. We're supposed to provide that access. At the same time, at the beginning, it was very much about assimilation into American culture. It's this whole question of whether we're trying to better people by providing them with what we think they should have, or trying to be a place where people can come and get what they're looking for.

V: This is why I was so inspired by Palestinian public libraries. The public libraries in Palestine are more public to me than ones in the U.S.—when you think about the history of American public libraries, so many of them are tied to these rich white men philanthropists, and they had this whole “civilizing” mission. That history is still there and can be very prevalent, even though many public librarians do a lot of work to challenge that ideology. From what we learned about public libraries in Palestine, they emerged as spaces of political resistance against occupation. I think about Al-Bireh Public Library near Ramallah, which was founded right before the 1967 invasion, right before Israel was dropping bombs on the West Bank. The library became a space for popular education, folklore, transmission of Palestinian culture, and politicization. How the story of public libraries is told was really moving and inspiring.

H: During the First Intifada, in the late 1980s, Israel closed the Palestinian schools, and it was illegal for people to teach in their own houses. In this context, the library by default becomes a space of resistance, as does the underground school. Libraries were in fact used for political meetings in the Intifada.

There are also libraries that come out of the prisoner movement, which within Palestinian society is not necessarily a challenging idea the way it would be in many parts of U.S. society. Within mainstream Palestinian society, everyone supports the prisoners, and it's assumed that if you're in prison you're unjustly imprisoned. In the U.S., mainstream society generally thinks that prisoners deserve to be in prison.

V: And we are often unaware of what is going on in prisons in the U.S. It's out of sight, out of mind.

H: Right. So these Palestinian prison libraries may not challenge Palestinian society, but they are challenging to the U.S. ethos and, obviously, to Israelis. So I think about the Nablus Public Library, how they have a section—almost like an archive—with materials that were in the Nablus prisons before most of the prisons were moved inside Israel. They have books from the prison libraries and books the prisoners wrote themselves. At the Abu Jihad Museum for the Prisoners Movement Affairs in Abu Dis, collections highlight the experiences and voices of Palestinian political prisoners. These include orientation manuals about prison rules and internal systems, written by prisoners for each other. They're archiving all this material. We can learn a lot from these libraries and archives.

The whole question of archives in Palestine is huge. It's like many colonial situations in that the people who are being colonized, the people under occupation, do not have access to most of their own materials. We can define archival materials a lot of different ways: legal documents, photographs, and claims to land and history, for example. Most of that information is either in Israeli archives and inaccessible to Palestinians, or in the archives of the U.K. and Turkey, previous colonial powers. Or even held by private Israeli collectors. So it's important to have archivists connect to learn how Palestinians create social history archives in the absence of a Palestinian national archive.

Many people we met mentioned the importance of digitization, both because you have a very real threat of materials physically being taken by an occupying force, and you also have a dispersed Palestinian population throughout the entire world that is prevented from entering Palestine. So there's digitization in service of access. And there are

practical concerns about it: Palestinians were asking our opinions about whether PDF or TIFF is a better format for digital preservation, for example, and we had a good discussion about the relationship between access and preservation.

V: I sensed that this experience for archivists and librarians forced us to challenge our inherited assumptions about what constitutes an archive. The way we often learn about archives is tied to institutions and bodies with power ascribing significance to a collection. There is so much we learned about in Palestine and so much we didn't have time to see, including the many ways in which people collect or preserve or transmit memory, the oral tradition—which, so often in U.S. settings, gets dismissed. And then the official questions of archives and state power, the ways that the Israeli state has clearly and violently co-opted and taken by force so much of the Palestinian archive.

H: There was also a conversation among Palestinian archivists about how to create archives that are parallel to movement-building rather than state-building, as there is this new institutional interest in archives in Palestine. Some people on the ground see a potential danger of working with the Palestinian government on state-building rather than serving the people that the archive represents.

In thinking about what constitutes an archive, I'm reminded of Nabi Saleh³, where people were both documenting their protests against settlements and land confiscation and also collecting tear gas canisters and sound grenades that the Israeli army used against them and displaying them on fences in front of their homes. We all looked at that and said, "That's an archive!" But were we ascribing a label that they wouldn't use? I guess we can say they're documenting their current reality and their resistance in a way that is similar to an idea of archives.

V: I thought of that when we were in Abu Arab's house in Nazareth⁴, too. We might think of Abu Arab's collection as a museum or an archive, but he also challenges and subverts so many traditional aspects of museum and archive curation.

H: Like the fact that nothing was labeled, and he wasn't necessarily interested in documenting and labeling. Someone asked him about it, and he responded, "That

would take a while”—it’s all in his memory, in his brain. And when we asked him to tell us some stories about the objects, the oral tradition was there. He showed us his mother-in-law’s bridal dress.

V: And the blanket under which he and his brother—the poet Taha Muhammad Ali—slept as children.

H: And their cradle. And I was thinking, “Someone should record him describing every single one of these objects!” But if that’s not something that he’s specifically interested in, then, I don’t know. It’s interesting to think about that—a really rich history that people should know about and that he wants people to know about. And at the same time, how much should we push our ideas and methods? If we want to send someone to record him—is that really something he wants or not?

V: These are crucial questions. They also make me wonder: what is our role? How do we act and engage in ways that are useful?

H: Part of our role started in Palestine, just in organizing these conversations. We brought together librarians and archivists—in Haifa, in Ramallah—who, because of occupation and colonialism and apartheid, are not always able to meet. So some of the discussions we had were just as much an opportunity for people from different organizations and projects to have conversations with each other as it was for them to meet with us.

Now that we’ve returned to our own communities, maybe our most important role is to use our library skills and a particular framework to approach this issue that, as far as we know, hasn’t yet been publicly approached in this particular way.

V: Do you think this is an especially challenging time to do that? There’s a sense that libraries, especially public libraries, are in a state of crisis. It seems like people are constantly asking these questions. *What is the future of our work? What is the future of our profession? What is the future of the work outside professions or official institutions?* Because it already feels like a lot of libraries are grasping at straws, do you

feel like it's a harder time to push things politically? Or do you think it's easier because people are politicized around libraries and their larger meaning or goal?

H: Hard to say. I think that with globalization comes the sense that we are larger than ourselves, that our communities are larger than we have previously thought, and that, consistent with the ALA's core values, we can and should take a stand on certain issues. As a group of librarians and archivists who support access to information, we can have a unique voice in the BDS movement.⁵ People are generally familiar with consumer boycott tactics, but when we talk about academic and cultural boycott, it is often misunderstood as a limit on freedom of expression and individual rights. Having librarians say that we support a boycott of institutions that are complicit in Israeli occupation can be quite powerful.

V: I totally agree. I think that our work is so much about freedom of expression and challenging censorship. What I hope we do well is to illuminate that it's the occupation, and not BDS, that is equal to censorship. The very conditions created by the occupation stifle freedom of expression and access to information and knowledge. One thing that inspires me about the BDS movement is how multifarious and increasingly diverse it is. I hope we can help support that growth, and also sustain and nurture the connections we made with the people we met this summer.

H: I guess the rest remains to be seen. We need to keep asking in what ways our network will be a political awareness or advocacy campaign, in what ways it is about practical skill-sharing or project support, and how these connect.

Librarians and Archivists to Palestine is committed to sharing what we have seen, applying what we have learned, publicizing projects we have visited, and building a wider network of librarians and archivists to continue this work. To learn more about us and stay updated on our ongoing work, visit us at librarians2palestine.wordpress.com.

References

American Library Association (2004, June 29). *Core values of librarianship*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues>

Mada al-Carmel (n.d.). *About*. Retrieved from <http://mada-research.org/en/about/>

¹ Palestinians often refer to areas of Palestine by the year they were occupied. Israel is called “48” or “1948 Palestine,” and the West Bank is sometimes called “67.”

Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, whom Israel refers to as “Arab Israelis” or “Israeli Arabs,” often use the term “48 Palestinians” to describe themselves. We mostly used this language during our conversation.

² Mada al Carmel: Arab Center for Applied Social Research “generates and provides information, critical analysis, and diverse perspectives on the social and political life and history of Palestinians, with particular attention to Palestinians within Israel’s 1948 boundaries” (Mada al-Carmel, n.d.).

³ Nabi Saleh is a small village northwest of Ramallah that has been affected by Israeli settlement policy for decades. Since 2009, villagers have been holding weekly demonstrations against land and resource confiscation. For their nonviolent actions, protesters have been arrested, injured, and even killed by Israeli soldiers. For more information, see nabisalehsolidarity.wordpress.com.

⁴ Abu Arab is a Nakba survivor originally from the town of Saffourieh. He and his family were expelled from their home in 1948. They fled to Lebanon for several months and returned to Nazareth, where Abu Arab has lived ever since. During our visit, he showed us the objects he has collected from destroyed villages over the years; he houses these in an apartment adjacent to his own.

⁵ In 2005, Palestinian civil society called on international supporters to impose boycott, divestment, and sanctions initiatives against Israel until it complies with international law and basic Palestinian rights.