Yapp is a magazine created by the 2012-2013 Book and Digital Media Studies master's students at Leiden University.

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Artist's impression of Jacir's billboards installed at the Fridericianum in Kassel. Text in Arabic reads 'This book belongs to its owner Fathallah Saad. He bought it with his own money. Gaza, March, 1892'. Illustration: Visnja Ostojic.
The appropriation of books
andrea reyes elizondo

Book ownership is a layered process, which involves more than sole physical acquisition. Private libraries are usually built with care and curiosity, and often reflect specific and highly personal intellectual interests. A collection will grow through transactions, gifts and inheritance, but above all it will grow through reading the books—the true process of intellectual appropriation. Such rich histories are what make large private libraries interesting, particularly when the owner is educated or affluent. Following the owner’s death, these libraries are often sold or donated and their contents moved to new collections. However, there are also alternative methods of book acquisition, the most intrusive of which are, for example, theft and the unfortunate act of looting. Not only do these means accelerate the process of ownership change, they are also considerably cheaper than standard acquisition.

The toll of war is difficult to apprehend in real numbers and extent. Infrastructural damage is expressed in currency while the impact on human life is referred to in numbers of casualties and refugees. Yet the scale of dispossession on a cultural level is usually absent in any statistical survey, as it is almost impossible to definitively calculate. One particular difficulty in gauging the damage that war causes arises when the cultural dispossession of one people is part of another people’s nation building. When one “finds” an object, how far must one go searching for the original owner before claiming ownership of it?

Much has been written of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but not all parts of the conflict have received the same amount of attention. A little-known issue is the cultural destruction (on the Palestinian side) that goes beyond the physical destruction and dispossession of land and property. A particular case is that of the books which were extracted from Palestinian houses and which are currently held by the Jewish National Library in West Jerusalem. This is an undeniably delicate case surrounded by controversy due to the on-going conflict—without temporal distance one’s views can be easily disregarded as “taking sides”. However, it is my view that one can still comment on the issue based on facts, as difficult as they are to come by.

In 1948, neighbourhoods in Jerusalem and other urban centres were raided by extremist Zionist militias. Many Palestinians did what every human being would do in the midst of conflict: flee with the few objects they could carry,
imagining that they would return home once the fighting had ended. Many of these deserted neighbourhoods were affluent, their inhabitants wealthy and formally educated. Given the social and economic status of the homeowners, the existence of private libraries in these neighbourhoods can easily have been inferred. This possibility certainly did not escape the librarians of Israel's National Library: they harvested and catalogued 30,000 books in West Jerusalem alone. The books were written in Arabic, English, French, Italian and German, while the subjects were equally varied: religion, foreign fiction, science, history and philosophy.

At first, these books were catalogued by subjects and owners’ names into the Israeli national collection. In the mid-sixties the policy changed and most of the books were added to the general catalogue of the library without any record of provenance. 6,000 books were accessioned into a collection labelled “Abandoned Property”; their call numbers still begin with the letters AP today. The change of cataloguing policy can be understood by looking at the internal papers of the National Library, which show the different attitudes among the librarians: from doubts about the duality of robbing versus rescuing and the dilemma of whether to define collecting the books as plunder or not, to coming to terms with the firm belief that this was an act of grace and rescue. At the end, the official narrative took the shape of a 1949 announcement in the library’s bulletin: ‘In the end of May the Jewish national and university library embarked on collecting abandoned books in occupied sites, appointing itself as their guardian, thus rescuing thousands of books from the damage of war and from annihilation’. The Abandoned Property category could suggest that the books were intentionally abandoned, whilst the reality of West Jerusalem's displaced population suggests otherwise. However the AP designation is closely related to the Absentee Property Law in which the State of Israel is the custodian—though not owner—of a refugee's property.

Recently, two artists’ initiatives addressing this controversy were launched. By focusing on the issue of the appropriated Palestinian books, they hope to generate discussion that may ultimately result in restitution of the property in question. Ex Libris is a series of photographs by Palestinian artist Emily Jacir. From 2010 to 2012 she used her mobile phone to document dedications and other property marks on the AP books at the Jewish National Library in West Jerusalem. Her work was presented at dOCUMENTA(13) as an exhibition of pictures and transcripts of some of these marks. The transcripts were displayed during the summer of 2012 on billboards throughout the city of Kassel, both in Arabic and in English. A particularly intimate note discovered in one of the stolen books became a public symbol denouncing theft of private property.

Another initiative is the documentary The Great Book Robbery, which includes a digital platform to create a virtual library of the harvested Palestinian
books. Israeli-Dutch filmmaker Benny Brunner and Dutch filmmaker Alexandra Jansse coordinated the project with Arjan El Fassed, a Dutch member of parliament with a Palestinian background. The screening of the documentary highlights the large-scale dispossession experienced by Palestinians, and its goal is not only to raise awareness but also to mobilize legal and political action. Where restitution of the stolen books is not possible, they intend the virtual collection to act as a repository for part of the lost intellectual Palestinian heritage.

I am convinced that the restitution of “rescued” goods is not a high priority for the Israeli government. Yet the subject of restitution cannot be avoided indefinitely. In recent years, property stolen and confiscated from Jews during the Second World War has been returned to rightful owners or their heirs. When restitution was no longer possible, financial compensation and recognition of previous wrong-doing was given to the victims. Although belonging to completely different historical contexts and periods, these cases highlight what could be considered as double standards on the subject of rightful restitution. Are the legal mechanisms of restitution available on an equal basis to all victims of political conflict? Not according to Chomsky and Herman: in Manufacturing Consent they note that since it is the victor who writes the annals of history after a war, not all victims are considered legally equal after the political dust has settled. It would be understandable for political factions in Israel to be anxious about any issue concerning the property of the Palestinians. Conceding that the Palestinian West Jerusalem libraries—and others—were looted would mean opening a Pandora’s box of legal, social and political implications and could ultimately threaten the national narrative.

Any bibliophile can surely empathize with the rightful owners of these appropriated books. We have all felt the pain of losing books before, but never on such a large scale. To lose all of one’s books at once during a conflict, and then to see those books systematically appropriated by others, is a terrible thing to imagine for anyone who treasures their book collections. Many of the Palestinian owners marked their books with a hand-written note, such as: ‘This book belongs to its owner Fathallah Saad. He bought it with his own money. Gaza, March, 1892.’ An ex libris and other property notes are an educated territorial-marking ritual: beware; this book belongs to me. However, their placement is incredibly naïve since they cannot safeguard one’s books from theft nor do they guarantee their rightful return, as many Palestinians have sadly learned.

Robbed or rescued from a conflict zone, these books were owned by somebody—as their various provenance and marginalia marks show. Their presence in the Jewish National Library as “abandoned property” is difficult to understand in the light of international law. These books belong to their rightful owners and heirs. In the cases where no heirs can be found, the books should be returned to the Palestinian people as part of their collective intellectual past. No
people should be denied access to their own libraries.

1 It is worth noting that this “low price” is only valid when considering the lack of economic price in the absence of an initial commercial transaction. The long-lasting moral and legal costs can end up backfiring, as the cases of stolen goods and property during the Second World War have shown in recent times.

2 After writing about the Palestinian refugee problems, historians began focusing on the physical destruction of Palestinian property. An example can be found in Falah's account of how Jewish civilians aided the military into demolishing strategically positioned villages as well as settlers ‘harvesting both existing and abandoned Arab fields’. (Falah, p. 261)

3 During the 1948 war and the preceding civil war there was fighting originating from both sides, as in any other war. However, for the purposes of this article we will focus on the effects of the violence originating from the extremist Zionist flanks as described by Hannah Mermelstein.

4 Regarding the Palestinian refugee problem, the Old Israeli historians (as defined by Shlaim) have classified this as ‘exodus out of free will’ whilst the Arab historians have called it ‘expulsion’. As Shlaim points out, the “old” historians were no scholars academically formed but politicians and soldiers who had experienced the 1948 war. Setting national narratives aside, Benny Morris—a New Israeli historian—concludes that ‘the Palestinian refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab. It was largely a by-product of Arab and Jewish fears and of the protracted, bitter fighting that characterized the first Arab-Israeli war; in smaller part, it was the deliberate creation of Jewish and Arab military commanders and politicians.’ (cited in Shlaim, p.135). In other words, this displacement was similar to other war-related displacements throughout history.

5 Amit Gish points out that the harvesting first originated of a concern by ‘men of letters’ for the books as spiritual heritage that could be lost forever. But it was also a result of the moving of the National Library from an autonomous scientific body such as the Hebrew University to an ideological authority: the State of Israel. (Gish, pp. 1-3.)

6 Gish, p. 4.

7 An overview of the various Absentee Property Regulations can be found in Forman, “From Arab Land to ‘Israel Lands’: The Legal Dispossession of the Palestinians Displaced by Israel In the Wake of 1948,” pp. 813-822.

8 The dispossession of Palestinian Arabs’ property is one of the most infamous aspects of the conflict. Thanks to several legislative processes—such as the aforementioned Absentee Property Law—the expropriation and reallocation of land and property was carried out legally—although not internationally recognized. Any legal challenges to any form of property restitution, whether books or land, would no doubt challenge the legal basis for the land and resources claims from the Israeli part.

9 Text on billboard, Ex libris 2010-2012, Emily Jacir. Displayed at Fridericianum’s tower (Kassel, Germany), Documenta 13, 2012.

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Further Reading

