Book Review: Archiving Gaza in the Present: Memory, Culture and Erasure. Edited by Dina Matar and Venetia Porter. London: Saqi Books, November 2025. Paperback, 288 pp. ISBN 9781849250979.

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Figure 1: Dresses from the Gaza Region. From Left: Asdud, Gaza, Hirbiya, Khan Younis, Deir Al-Balah. Thread Memory: Embroidery from Palestine (23 January - 17 April 2025). Installation view at Hayy Jameel, Jeddah - Photo Credit: Mohamed Alaskandrani, Coutessy of Art Jameel.

Since October 2023 and the beginning of Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza, many people around the world have come to know this historically significant coastal territory of Palestine primarily through images of mass suffering, destruction, and devastation circulated in real time. While the scale of human loss has rightly demanded urgent attention and action, far less visible has been the systematic destruction of Gaza's historical, cultural, and intellectual life.

It is against this narrow framing that *Archiving Gaza in the Present*, edited by Dina Mattar and Venetia Porter, intervenes, offering "a reminder that Gaza as we see it today in the media's live-streaming coverage of the war, miserable, shattered and deformed is not the Gaza that saw the unfolding of many civilisations". The question — "what is Gaza?" — is taken up explicitly by Salman Abu Sitta in his contribution, where he offers a stark historical answer: Gaza is "the land that never dropped the flag of Palestine."

Emerging from a conference held in London in November 2024, the volume brings together over forty contributions by artists, scholars, lawyers, curators, and cultural practitioners from within and beyond Gaza. Across six thematic sections, the collection moves through history,

archaeology, architecture, visual art, education, and testimony. More than an account of destruction, the book foregrounds Palestinian history, cultural heritage, artistic production, and collective memory under attack.

Across its pages, Gaza emerges not only as a site of rubble and dust, but as a place of longstanding intellectual, cultural and artistic vitality. Despite the range of perspectives, the volume remains remarkably coherent, united by a shared commitment to documenting and reaffirming Palestinian presence against colonial attempts at erasure.

The book's central intervention lies in its rethinking of archiving under settler-colonial violence. Rather than treating archives as static repositories of the past, the contributors present archiving as an urgent practice rooted in the present. Here, archiving becomes both political and existential: a way of sustaining memory, identity, continuity and dignity under conditions designed to undermine and erase them. Archiving thus becomes inherently a form of resistance.

Archaeology, Architecture, and Erasure



Figure 2: The Great Omari Mosque, Courtyard and FacadeÇ, 2013 – Photo Credit: Mounia Chekhab Abudaya. Figure 3: The Great Omari Mosque following bombardment on 8 December 2023 - Photo Credit Le Monde.

The volume's archaeology and architecture sections highlight Gaza's vibrant cultural infrastructure before the war alongside its rich archaeological and architectural heritage, demonstrating the region's historical importance as a commercial and cultural hub. Alongside documenting the widespread destruction caused by the Israeli assault, itself part of a longer history of attacks, the book foregrounds Palestinian efforts to preserve and restore cultural heritage under attack.

Particularly striking is the account of Jawdat Khoudary, who began collecting artefacts in 1987 to protect them from colonisers' theft and destruction, eventually founding Gaza's first private

archaeological museum. Khoudary's work embodies one of the volume's central concerns: the role of preservation as an act of resistance.

Throughout the volume, essays detail attacks on museums, historical sites, libraries, universities, and cultural institutions. Contributors argue that these attacks are not incidental consequences of war, but part of a longer process of cultural erasure ongoing since the 1948 Nakba. Joanna Oyediran, for instance, traces Zionist theft and removal of Gazan artefacts, including sarcophagi, jewellery, and the large mosaic once contained in a Byzantine Basilica. These artefacts are now displayed in Israeli museums and universities, highlighting the role of Israeli institutions in the long-term plans of removal, appropriation, and institutionalisation of Palestinian cultural heritage.

Rashidi, Ghannam, and Elbaz instead guide readers through the past and present of the Great Omari Mosque and the adjacent Al-Qassariya market, connecting these spaces to community life, restoration efforts, and their repeated destruction. Their contribution demonstrates how attacks on cultural property seek not only to destroy physical structures but also to sever relationships between people, history, and place. Such destruction attempts to render Palestinian presence not only temporary and disposable but ultimately impossible.

Yet these accounts capture one of the volume's central interventions: they reveal how Palestinians continue to preserve, create, and resist despite conditions designed to erase their historical, material and cultural presence. As Al-Qattan observes, Palestinians continue to "tenaciously clinging onto life, rising from the dust, gathering in, documenting and bearing witness".

Art As Resistance



Figure 4: Majeb Shala, Children's Workshop in Deir Al-Balah 2024 - Photo Credit: Shababeek Archive.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its refusal to reduce Palestinians to passive victims. The contributors foreground Palestinians as agents who continue to archive, teach, create, and rebuild even under siege and bombardments. This theme emerges powerfully in the sections devoted to art and visual culture. Contributors describe how artists continue producing work amid devastation, often using the limited materials available. For example, Ahmed Muhanna turned aid boxes into canvases, incorporating the stamped warning "NOT FOR SALE OR EXCHANGE" into his compositions with striking effect.

Art, as the book persuasively demonstrates, becomes testimony, survival and resistance. Shareef Sarhan's *Gaza Live* project, a photo book documenting life under siege, exemplifies this, while Malak Mattar's paintings respond to the impact of war and genocide on artistic production, serving as a mission to "make the voices and stories of the people in Gaza heard." Similarly, Sohail Salem's sketches, created upon arriving in Deir al-Balah after repeated displacement, record the harsh realities of the genocidal assault in real time. These works do more than illustrate suffering—they archive lived experience from within catastrophe.

But art also becomes an act of care, creating beauty and knowledge through art exhibitions and installations, and strengthening individual and collective well-being. As Salman Nawati and others show, teaching and practicing art function as therapeutic and communal practices, particularly for children living through war and displacement. Initiatives and community workshops reveal how creative expression becomes a means of healing trauma, reaffirming belonging, and sustaining collective life.

As the volume demonstrates, art in Gaza is not a luxury, but a form of resistance often pursued at great personal cost. Sarvy Geranpayeh and Venitia Porter's essays recount the stories of some artists whose studios, homes, and works have been destroyed, and of those whose lives have been violently taken away too early, yet whose art continues to speak powerfully and loudly.

Archiving As Decolonial Practices




Figures 5 and 6: The Al-Qarara Museum: Rescuing Objects - Photo Credit: The Palestinian Museum.

The book situates Gaza's destruction within a broader settler-colonial framework. Drawing on Patrick Wolfe's concept of settler colonialism as inherently based on a "logic of elimination" of indigenous people, several essays show that violence in Gaza extends beyond immediate military attacks." Siege, spatial fragmentation, environmental destruction, restricted movement, and the erasure of historical narratives function together to make Palestinian life increasingly unliveable and invisible. Yet erasure is never complete, memory persists through everyday acts of documentation, storytelling, teaching, and rebuilding.

The volume repeatedly emphasises the political importance of narration. Throughout the collection, it answers Edward Said's call, written during the siege of Beirut, to "furnish the world with narrative evidence". Archiving and real-time documentation during war emerge as tools that both counter erasure and provide materials for future justice and accountability. Archiving thus functions as immediate witness, political practice, and resistance.

However, if there is any limitation to the volume, it is perhaps that readers unfamiliar with the long history of Zionist settler-colonial violence in Palestine before 2023, may not immediately grasp how profoundly everyday life had already been shaped by it and how the same logic of elimination applies to the West bank as well. More than a limitation though, this reflects the need to expand and produce more of such academic and intellectual efforts.

What ultimately makes *Archiving Gaza in the Present* so powerful in fact, is that it is not solely a book about loss. While it documents immense destruction, it is equally a book about endurance, cultural continuity, and *sumud* (steadfastness). Across its pages emerges a persistent insistence on life: on protecting heritage, cultivating joy, creating art, teaching children, preserving memory, and imagining futures even under conditions designed to foreclose them.

The volume therefore asks readers to understand Gaza not only as a humanitarian catastrophe, but as a profound cultural and historical question. It makes clear that what is under attack is not only individual lives, but an entire lifeworld: its histories, infrastructures, knowledge

systems, and relationships. To archive in the present, as the contributors insist on, is to defend that world from erasure, it is an act of resistance against memoricide, culturicide, scholasticide, ecocide, the many-cide that constitute the multiple dimensions of genocide.

This intervention is particularly significant in the context of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. By foregrounding heritage, memory, and cultural continuity, *Archiving Gaza in the Present* offers a timely reminder that protection extends beyond physical survival to the preservation of history, culture, and collective memory. In doing so, it speaks to broader debates on displacement, heritage, and justice.

By the final pages, the book leaves readers with a profound sense of urgency and responsibility. It reminds readers that the destruction of Gaza is not only an assault on individual lives and communities, but on histories, cultures, and forms of collective belonging that constitute our shared humanity.

References

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Endnotes

[1] Dr. Gabriella Ibba holds a PhD from the University of East London. Her research focuses on Palestinian refugee women's agency, everyday resistance, and sumud through intersectional and decolonial spatial perspectives. She combines academic research with humanitarian engagement through collaborations with NGOs and refugee support organisations in the UK. Her broader interests include refugee and human rights issues, gender and displacement, and the ways displaced communities sustain dignity, agency, and resistance under conditions of marginalisation.