

Open letter from members of Museum Detox seeking justice for and expressing solidarity with the people of Palestine

Signatures are now closed. Thank you to all those who have responded.

We the undersigned members of [Museum Detox](#), a network for people of colour who work in museums, galleries, archives, libraries, and heritage across the UK and beyond, write to express our solidarity with the people of Palestine, and urgently call on our cultural institutions to speak out against the collective punishment and crimes against humanity we are currently witnessing in Gaza. We reiterate that we oppose the actions of the state of Israel, but this must not be equated with anti-Semitism, which we abhor. We take this opportunity to condemn the killing of all civilians, whilst pointing out that the occupation and ensuing violence did not begin in October of this year.

Museums and cultural institutions in the United Kingdom and around the world have recently been swept by a rhetoric of decolonisation. Yet the question of Palestine is woefully absent from these conversations and otherwise progressive shifts. As cultural workers committed to decolonising our practice, and to working within and beyond institutional parameters to achieve social and political justice, we hear this overwhelming silence and urge the sector to speak up.

Decolonisation, as Unanga scholar Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang (2012) remind us, is 'not a metaphor'. Neither is Palestinian liberation a cultural accessory. Exhibitions, public events, and collecting programmes that fetishise Palestinian resistance, whilst turning a blind eye to the illegal and inhumane treatment of Palestinian peoples themselves, reify colonial models of objectification that have historically characterised museum collecting and display. Such artwashing runs right through to executive levels, as highlighted by the arts and activist collective, [Decolonize This Place](#). To aestheticise the struggles of the Palestinian people in their fight for self-determination misunderstands the meaning of decolonisation.

The Museums Association, the national body supporting museums and museum workers, outlines in their current '[Supporting Decolonisation](#)' guidance that they 'aim to empower more people to take action and lead change as museums address the legacy of British colonialism'. However, in recent years we have seen a definitive clampdown on [programming decisions](#) and [directorial actions](#) that express solidarity with the Palestinian people, whose present political situation partially arises from the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Given this political climate, our signatories understandably fear reprisals for advocating their support for this letter. We call on the cultural sector to resist the weaponization of Palestinian solidarity and stand up to political attempts to create a 'culture war' out of what the [United Nations](#) and multiple other humanitarian organisations have rightly identified as a systemic violation of human rights.

There is a clear moral case for the sector to condemn any [genocide](#), including the escalating state-sanctioned crimes against humanity in Gaza, in the same way museums actively vocalised their support against the invasion of Ukraine. The silence, and selective humanity in the sector surrounding recent events indicates that cultural autonomy is seriously under threat. If

continued, museums and cultural institutions are at risk of becoming mouthpieces for government propaganda.

Against this climate of political repression, we call on the Museums Association to:

- 1) Break their silence and show integrity and leadership by including a long overdue discussion strand on museum narratives and ethical responses to events in Palestine at their next Annual Conference, scheduled to take place 7-9 November 2023 in Gateshead.**
- 2) Incorporate support and resources for enacting Palestinian solidarity in museums into the upcoming review of the Code of Ethics.**
- 3) Articulate clear and actionable resources to protect workers from acts of anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim bigotry, and other forms of racism during this time.**
- 4) Commit to concretely supporting those who speak out on this issue who risk institutional and media targeting.**

We stand with our colleagues who are bravely speaking up; the pressure to stay silent and continue working as though this isn't affecting us takes a heavy toll. We also stand firmly with our colleagues in the cultural sector in Palestine, who have used their positions to speak out, often at great personal and professional risk - sometimes [death](#). In writing this, we urge our workplaces not to bow to toxic political pressure, and to instead join efforts with peer organisations like the Palestine Museum to 'confront [...] the systemic efforts of erasure directed towards the Palestinian people' ([Palestine Museum, 2023](#)).

We ask those across the cultural sector to sign this letter in solidarity, to use your platform to speak up, and to enact a truer commitment to decolonial practice that fosters peace, justice, and healing for all.

Signed,
Members of Museum Detox

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5. Alia Syed, Museums/Project Manager
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20. Emily Beswick
21. Faisal Hussain, Artist & Director, True Form Projects
22. Fatema Zehra, Programmes Manager
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25. Hajra Williams
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27. Irene Aristizábal, Curator
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42. Melissa Helen Hernandez
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- 258. Laura Owen
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