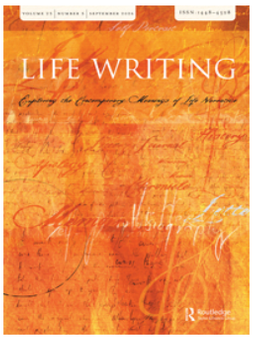

Life Writing

ISSN: 1448-4528 (Print) 1751-2964 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rlwr20

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To cite this article: Claire Squires (27 Aug 2026): ‘Rethink the Title of Your Talk, and Possibly its Substance’: On Speaking (out) About Palestine, Genocide, and Genre, Life Writing, DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2026.2716046

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2026.2716046

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Published online: 27 Aug 2026.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2026.2716046

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'Rethink the Title of Your Talk, and Possibly its Substance': On Speaking (out) About Palestine, Genocide, and Genre

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ABSTRACT
Framed by a meditation on border-crossing of people and of texts, this essay reflects on the genre of autofiction in relation to the geopolitical contexts of Palestine and global literary marketplaces, as well as outlining a specific example of academic censorship in the context of the 2023– genocidal war on Gaza. It brings together an examination of Palestinian/diaspora literary texts (including Atef Abu Said's *The Book of Gaza: A City in Short Fiction* (2014) and *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (2023), Zaina Arafat's *You Exist Too Much* (2020), Yara Hawari's *The Stone House* (2021), Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* (2024) and Isabella Hammad's *Recognising the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (2024)) with inscriptions of the author's own experience, through the lens of publishing studies and literary sociology. The essay explores, by and beyond reading, how resistance, solidarity and activism can occur, while remaining cognisant of geopolitical inequities and privilege. With a focus on the genre of 'autofiction', this essay articulates personal and professional questions of academic freedom, activism and solidarity in the face of genocide, blending lived experience with book historical approaches.

KEYWORDS
Academic censorship; autofiction; Gaza; genocide; Palestine; literary marketplace

My flight touches down in Prague. It looks sunny but cold from the airplane window. It's late November 2024; the Christmas markets are opening this weekend. I switch my phone on, looking for updates from the friend I'm due to meet. She's on a train from Berlin, and reports seeing from the window a frozen river somewhere after the border to Czechia. I should have been arriving in Prague from Germany after delivering a keynote at an academic conference. But as this essay unfolds, that keynote was not to be. Instead, this essay explores, by and beyond a 'reading journey', how resistance, solidarity, and activism can occur, articulating personal and professional questions of academic freedom in the face of genocide, blending lived experience with book historical approaches.[1]

I had been invited to speak at the conference *The Textual Self: Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Self-Narration*. Following the COVID-19 lockdowns, I was pleased to be asked to an international conference, not least as financial circumstances in my own university meant it was offering limited funds for research-related travel. And yet, in the context of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza following Hamas' attacks on 7 October 2023 (and the much longer history of violent displacement and dispossession of Palestinians from the Nakba of 1948, and earlier colonial histories), I had misgivings about presenting in Germany. The German state, German universities, and other academic institutions, and some cultural organisations, have been highly repressive towards Palestinians and others expressing pro-Palestinian views, and strongly supportive of Israel (Connolly 2024; Demos 2025).

I had already written about the censorious nature of German cultural institutions towards Palestinians with the friend I was travelling to meet in Prague. In October 2023, the award ceremony for the Palestinian author Adania Shibli at Germany's Frankfurt Book Fair (or Frankfurter Buchmesse) was cancelled (Driscoll and Squires 2023). The Buchmesse is the world's biggest annual publishing industry event (Driscoll and

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Squires 2020), and Shibli had been due to receive the LiBeraturpreis for *Minor Detail* (2020; originally published 2017). *Minor Detail* has a dual timeline: first, a narrative of a Palestinian Bedouin girl raped and murdered by Israeli soldiers in 1949, who had seized her village during the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israel during the Nakba; and second, the story of a woman attempting to investigate the crime decades later, the 'minor detail' being the coincidence of the date of the girl's murder and the woman's birth 25 years later.[2]

The LiBeraturpreis is awarded annually to a female writer from the Global South, and in 2023 Shibli was due to receive the award on 20 October at the Buchmesse. Litprom, the organiser of the prize, announced the cancellation of the ceremony, citing 'the war started by Hamas, under which millions of people in Israel and Palestine are suffering', and further detailed that 'they thought it right to hold the award ceremony at a different time in a less politically charged atmosphere – also to avoid possible disturbances or even attacks on Adania Shibli's person' (2023). Litprom is a different organisation from the Buchmesse itself, the Buchmesse was keen to emphasise, but the fair's director Juergen Boos is president of Litprom's board. In his role as fair director, Boos had made a statement on 14 October, saying the Buchmesse wanted 'to make Jewish and Israeli voices especially visible at the book fair', and that the fair 'stands with complete solidarity on the side of Israel' (2023).

The impact of the ceremony's cancellation was substantial. Many authors, national publishing agencies and organisations (particularly from the Arab and Muslim world) pulled out of attendance at the Buchmesse, and PEN International (the global organisation supporting freedom of expression for writers) condemned the cancellation (PEN International 2023). By the beginning of 2025, the group Publishers for Palestine (constituted of more than 500 publishers from 50 countries) was calling for a boycott of the fair because of what it perceived to be its complicity in genocide through its support of Israel and silencing of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices, following an unanswered Open Letter in September 2024 (Publishers for Palestine 2024) and the breaking of the ceasefire agreement in January 2025. As the group articulated:

> Our call [for boycott] comes after the Frankfurt Book Fair's repeated failures to address their longstanding ties to German state and corporate partnership in Israel's genocide of Palestinians. Not only have FBM's programming gaps contributed to the erasure of Palestinians, and the normalization, disguising, and denial of Israel's regime of occupation and apartheid against Palestinians, it has, through public discourse, repeatedly and disgracefully declared its explicit support for genocidal Israel. (Publishers for Palestine 2025)

The Buchmesse's siding with Israel was in line with the political positioning of German government, higher education and cultural organisations, which had made me cautious to accept the conference keynote invitation. Moreover, the obliteration of universities in Gaza, and the intentional targeting of academics, have been a particular reason to decry Israel's ongoing actions for those of us in education and academia, with the UN issuing a statement in early 2024 about its deep concern over 'scholasticide' (OHCHR 2024), the term developed by Karma Nabulsi.[3] *The Guardian* detailed how in the first hundred days alone, Israel bombed and 'wholly or partly destroyed' all twelve of Gaza's universities (Desai 2024).

Germany's 'philosemitism', as examined by Pankaj Mishra in the *London Review of Books*, has its complex foundations in the context of the Holocaust, a (misplaced) sense of Western civilisation, the late twentieth century/twenty-first century rise of Neo-Nazi political parties, and Islamophobia, a stance which results in 'the German authorities […] seeking to discipline even Jewish writers, artists and activists' who express any positive feeling towards Palestine (Mishra 2024). Anti-Zionist speakers – Palestinian, Jewish, and others – have been deplatformed from German universities in attempts to silence pro-Palestinian, or anti-Israel, voices. Germany's Holocaust history has been weaponised to brand any pro-Palestinian or anti-Israel narrative as anti-semitic; an approach strongly encouraged by Israel.[4] In 2025, a comprehensive report was published detailing the experiences and perceptions of academics in Germany whose work focuses on the Middle East, in terms of restrictions, self-censorship and institutional pressures (Grimm et al. 2025).

This context played in my mind as I considered the invitation to be a keynote at the conference. I was uncertain that I wanted to contribute to an event housed within a university that might be aligned with the normative, German pro-Israeli stance. I checked the university's website, and discovered it hosted a Center for Israel Studies, whose 'About' text started by detailing that Israel had been founded in 1948, and 'has a rich and multifaceted history' (nd.). I replied to the academic who had invited me, to ask if their university

had an official statement or policy on Palestine and Israel. The response I received was that the university had not (to my respondent's knowledge) made any such statements, but that its position was likely – as with all public institutions – to be aligned with that of the German government. The response concluded that if I decided not to come, it would be understood, but that I would also be welcome to attend and express solidarity.

Rather than turning down the invitation, I decided to write an abstract, and frame my keynote, as a response to my concerns.[5] The abstract I submitted was thus entitled 'Autofiction, Genre and Genocide: the Politics of Writing the Self/the State of Palestine'; its intent was to examine autofictional writing from Palestine and its diaspora. I planned to put pressure on the concept of 'autofiction' from two perspectives: that of genre, and that of genocide.

My choice was intentionally provocative and, as this essay unfolds, was received as such. But as well as a political response and a way of appeasing my conscience, the intent set out in the abstract was one which would require me to extend my knowledge of Palestinian writing. I wanted to ask whether autofiction – a marketplace category of writing with significant visibility over the past decades – was a term that made any sense when reading Palestinian texts. That marketplace element was one I felt confident to assess: my scholarly expertise lies in the field of publishing studies and literary sociology, and in the transactions of local, national, and global book markets. I integrated these perspectives into my abstract, asking how texts from Palestinian authors – written in situ while bombs rain down, written from the relative safety of diasporic perspectives – enable political responses, while troubling aesthetic categories and international market regimes of recognition and value. As a scholar with a background in contemporary book history, I am attendant to the ways in which socio-political contexts and market economies impact upon the production, circulation and reception of writing. I intended to bring this lens to my keynote.

I was more tentative in writing about the Middle East, however, and felt uncertainty not only in making a political intervention, but also in terms of establishing a definition of Palestinian writing which might, loosely categorised, be thought of as having autofictional elements. Did this category even exist, I wondered? To respond, my plan was to read a set of texts both recent and more historical, as well as to explore their publishing contexts and their arrival at international marketplaces.

I set off on a reading journey.

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But, as I have already unfolded, my keynote wasn't to happen. In mid-July 2024, I received an email not from my original conference contact but from a male professor. He began by stating that he was writing on his 'own behalf, after a discussion among the organisers in which we "agreed to disagree", and after which I decided to pull my weight' (my previous contact was a female early career researcher). Such an assertion of hierarchical and gendered power forewarned me as to the contents to come. The email went on to articulate that the professor was 'taken aback by [my] unqualified use of the word "genocide" in the title of [my] paper and the first paragraph of the abstract', and that 'to present the extermination of the Palestinian people as a political goal of the state of Israel is, to [his] mind, just grotesque'. The email went on to request that I 'to rethink the title of [my] talk, and possibly its substance'; words I repeat in the title of this essay. The email ended with an accusation that my paper might constitute 'hate speech'.

The email confirmed my understanding of the censorious and repressive circumstances pertaining to German universities in relation to Palestine. I withdrew from the conference (which was, in fact, eventually cancelled completely), while explaining how, in the keynote, I would have outlined the numerous international bodies from whom I was planning to take my cue to name Israel's actions in Gaza 'genocide'. I also affirmed my position on scholasticide in Gaza, and how it was a particular reason for those of us based in higher education contexts to decry Israel's obliterating actions with regards to Gazan universities and academics.

I'd already started on my reading journey, though, and I knew the questions I had set myself in the abstract were important. Did autofiction from Palestine exist? If so, what did it look like? How was it developed as a category, and how was that category developed through international marketplaces? Despite my conference withdrawal, I continued to read books by Palestinian and Palestinian-diaspora authors, both in translation and ones originally written in English, some of which pre-dated 7 October 2023, some written subsequently.

The essay both addresses the topic that I was to have spoken about – Palestinian 'autofiction' – and the circumstances which led to my withdrawal from the conference. I incorporate aspects of the intended conference keynote through an examination of a small number of texts by Palestinian authors, considering how autofiction might stand up as a category in the circumstances of its production and circulation. Although this essay reflects on a number of the texts I read, it is not a work of literary criticism, even while it pays attention to inscriptions of the experience of border and checkpoint crossing within the texts. Rather, it takes the idea of a 'reading journey' more akin to that undertaken by a 'recreational' or 'general' rather than 'academic' or 'professional' reader,[6] while also reflecting on Global North academic experiences of international travel, contestations of the concept of academic freedom, and the critical public role of scholars. In so doing, this essay also articulates personal and professional questions of activism, allyship, and solidarity in the face of genocide.

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Back in Prague airport, I wait in the customs queue, eyeing the EU and the International lines. Since the UK exited the EU, I typically carry two passports: British and French. The British one now has stamps from other European nations: France, Portugal, as well as travels further afield. I'm never sure whether I should consistently use one passport on a single trip, or whether I can use the EU one to enter the EU and the British one to enter the UK. My approach is haphazard, but nothing untoward has happened yet, and I know my quandary would be an enviable one for many. A line opens up at the special assistance/staff passport check desk, and I shift over. I use my French passport. No stamp.

I get on a bus into the city centre, my friend's location on WhatsApp tracking closer and closer to mine. Rounding the hilly streets that encircle Prague Castle, we are overtaken by a cavalcade of police vehicles, their lights flashing as they sweep down the hill. I see a TV crew, a smartly dressed interviewer explaining something to camera. Later that day, checking the news on my phone, I discover that Israel's new Minister of Foreign Affairs is paying his first official overseas visit; to Czechia. We must have been in the airport at the same time. Was he in the cavalcade that had overtaken the bus near the castle? The Czech government puts out a press release which is strongly supportive of Israel (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2024).

I arrive at the train station within 5 minutes of my friend, and we wave to each other from across the road. After some sign language about who should join whose side of the street, we set off to explore the city and learn about its layered history, including its Jewish ghetto.

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I read a scene set at the Allenby Bridge crossing, where 'sunlight ricochets off a white-painted archway and onto the mountains looming in the distance' (Arafat 2021, 242). It's from Zaina Arafat's debut novel *You Exist Too Much* (2020). The unnamed protagonist is entering the West Bank from Jordan for a family funeral, after a stopover in Paris from the US. She boards a bus after the Jordanian control, where the passengers' passports are collected. After over an hour's wait, the bus travels for less than two minutes and stops at the Israeli customs office. Passports are handed back, and a line forms at the Israeli control. The protagonist nears the front of the queue, her passport is taken and she is told to sit on a chair to wait, '"For questioning"' (Arafat 2021, 244). The wifi is not working, so she pulls out a book to read. She waits two hours, then 'a soldier approaches me, casually slapping against her leg a passport that I assume is mine. She is tall and thick, and the scars around her mouth signal that she once had a cleft palate. I also can't help but notice that she is beautiful. The sight of an attractive woman in a military uniform and combat boots is somewhat jarring' (Arafat 2021, 245). The soldier goes away, returns some time later, taking the narrator to a table and instructing her to pick up her suitcase from a pile, while several soldiers sit around, smoking.

The soldier goes through the narrator's belongings: a camera, with which she takes several photos, pointing it at herself in one shot; clothes; toiletries, tampons, boots. The soldier asks her why she has '"men's shoes […] You are lesbian?"' (Arafat 2021, 247). The protagonist waits longer. The sun starts to set. She worries that the crossing will close before she is allowed to leave. She asks the customs official not to stamp her passport, so she can return at some point to Lebanon, where other relatives live. He considers the request, stamps a piece of paper and returns it to her, tucked in her passport. She travels on to the West Bank.

Later, back in the US after introducing her Palestinian mother to her female partner, she develops her photos from the trip. 'It takes me a moment to remember how shots of ceiling pipes and cinder block

have ended up among them. Then I come to her photo. I can only discern a vague figure and the outline of sunglasses resting atop her head. But her face has been obscured by the flash, rendering her indistinguishable from any other' (Arafat 2021, 249).

Arafat is Palestinian-American or, as she puts it on her website, an 'LGBTQ Arab-American fiction and nonfiction writer' (Arafat 2025). *You Exist Too Much* might be the most obvious candidate for a work of Palestinian autofiction I find on my reading journey. Autofiction is a term which, while contested, finds common ground in reference to texts which 'combine fictional and autobiographical modes' (Effe and Lawlor 2025, 129). European writers of autofiction include Annie Ernaux and Karl Ove Knausgaard, while in its North American incarnation, recent autofiction has an orientation towards queer protagonists and alternative, often artistic lifestyles (Bloom 2019). Critique of much contemporary autofiction argues that it is middle-class, self-involved to the point of narcissism, and apolitical, at least in the Global North (King 2025).

In a magazine article on 'the books that shaped me', Arafat cites Maggie Nelson – author of *Bluets* (2009) and *The Argonauts* (2015), often cited as one of the leading US autofiction authors – as one of her writing heroes. Arafat also discusses the importance of literature to her:

> As a Palestinian-American, I grew up shuttling between the States and the Middle East, constantly on the outskirts of both cultures, feeling as though by having a foot in both worlds, I essentially had a foot in neither. Instead, my world became books. Stuck in between cultural spheres, the place I felt I most belonged was between the pages of a novel, following characters that often seemed to share my out of place-ness, immersing myself in imagined realities that allowed me to make sense of my own. (Good Housekeeping 2020)

Arafat's novel sees her queer protagonist similarly placed between worlds, which operate with different cultural, sexual and societal mores. The protagonist's occasionally comic travails in therapy—she has what she terms a 'love addiction' for which she attends the 'Ledge', a retreat in Kentucky alongside others suffering various addictions—sit alongside depictions of her fraught relationship with her Palestinian mother, and her feelings towards her diaspora family and homeland.

Reception of Arafat's work frequently draws on the autobiographical similarities between author and protagonist, and although Arafat quite carefully distinguishes between herself and her narrator in interviews, there are clear autofictional tendencies and elisions between discussion of, for example, what 'home' means to her character and to herself as a writer (Neilson 2020). Had I found in this diaspora writer an example of Palestinian autofiction close to anglophone and Global North market conventions? Arafat's book was published in the US by the Brooklyn-based independent Catapult, but in the UK by Dialogue Books, an imprint of Little, Brown (part of the Hachette conglomerate), which focuses on diverse, marginalised, or non-mainstream voices.

I turn to another novel, which I hear has autobiographical underpinnings. Mahmoud is setting out on a school trip to Jerusalem, I read, with his uncle, Nawaf, who is the same age as him. The teenagers on the bus are excited; Mahmoud's mother waves him off, anxious. Yara Hawari's *The Stone House* (2021) depicts the bus passing through checkpoints on their journey, as the teens chatter. Mahmoud has been to Jerusalem as a child, but doesn't remember much. His perspective on the city is filtered: 'Everything else he knew from avid reading and listening', and he 'traded stories' with his cousin, 'sharing details and together painting a picture of Palestine. The more they heard, the more familiar it became. It wasn't long before Mahmoud was talking with confident familiarity about places that he had never visited' (2021, 19). Hawari continues by detailing how books can inform and disinform under censorious circumstances, in which the circulation of books—and of alternate histories and truths—is circumscribed:

> Mahmoud also learned fairly quickly that many of his schoolbooks couldn't be trusted to teach him his history. It was outside of school that he sought books or papers that described what Palestine had been like before. He was captivated by stories of ancient civilisations and by the steadfastness of buildings that had survived a multitude of occupations. But it wasn't easy to get his hands on this literature. He and all the other Palestinians who lived in the territories occupied in 1948 were under Israeli military rule, which meant strict martial law. It was as repressive as it was suffocating. Every aspect of their lives was monitored and watched. Going to a neighbouring villages or towns required a permit from the local policy stations. Under such tyrannical surveillance, Mahmoud and his friends devoured whatever forbidden books they could get their hand on, often resorting to hiding them under mattresses and in hidden cracks in the walls'. (2021, 19)

Reading, as Hawari explains, enables us to know parts of the world we haven't had the chance to travel to, either in time, or geographically, or both. Mahmoud's life as a Palestinian teenager was controlled in so many ways that mine wasn't, including in his access to books, and yet the act of reading is one we both turned to in our search for knowledge. My reading, here, felt like an act of commonality, even of solidarity.

In the keynote I had planned, I wanted to counterpoint the critique of Global North autofiction as narcissistic and apolitical with a set of books from a very different geography. I was intrigued, as I continued reading, by Hawari's multi-generational autofiction in *The Stone House*. Hawari writes in her Author's Note that the book is a 'deeply personal endeavour – indeed the three main characters are my father [the character Mahmoud, on the school bus], grandmother and great-grandmother', who bear her surname (2021, i). In the Note (which is dedicated to '*the descendants of Hamda* [her family village]. *One day the stone house will be returned to us*'), Hawari further describes her book as proceeding from an 'ephemeral cognitive realm of inherited stories, personal and collective', a development of oral history which builds on 'Storytelling, al-hakawati […] an ingrained cultural practice, but […] also a steadfast form of resistance against a dominant historical narrative that seeks to eliminate all other narratives.' Hawari, who is a political analyst with a PhD from the University of Exter, places her text within the context of the 1948 Nakba, through the story of generations of one family and their disrupted relationship to their home through violent Israeli action (2021, i). *The Stone House*, written in English, is published by a small UK company, Hajar Press, run and publishing books by people of colour.

I found more representation of the importance of polyvocal storytelling and narrative perspective as I travelled further into my reading journey. Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* (2024; originally published in Lebanon in Arabic 2014) is also published by a UK independent and a US university press, though in translation. Azem grew up in Palestine, but moved to study and work first in Germany, and then in New York. *The Book of Disappearance* is a magic realist satire, in which Israelis awake one morning to find all Palestinians gone. One of the two narrators of the book, Ariel, an Israeli journalist, investigates the fantastical event, weaving in news and social media sources as the Israelis and the wider world try to understand what has happened, seeing no Palestinians crowding at checkpoints, or turning up to work. At the same time, Ariel reads Alaa's diary. Alaa is a friend and Palestinian Arab who lives in the same building and who has also disappeared. The disappearance is highly confusing and brings Israeli infrastructure to a halt. Ariel reflects on the strange events and whether they are the result of the Israeli desire for the eradication of Palestinians: 'He stared at the ceiling and found himself wondering how the country would be with no Palestinians in it' (2024, 134). He recalls the Facebook page of Palestinian author 'Badriyya', and her entangling of storytelling with politics, truth with fiction: 'She would knock on doors and ask people to tell her stories about Jaffa, or any other beloved city. Most preferred to talk about Jaffa. It didn't matter whether the stories were true or not, she said. History is stories and stories have histories' (2024, 145–146).

Azem takes historical reality – the oppression of the Palestinian people by Israel, and the violent, decades-long Zionist desire for them to leave their lands and 'disappear' – and fictionalises it, fantastically. As such, *The Book of Disappearance* is far from autofictional, although its assumption of a speculative approach derived from lived experience places it firmly within the ambit of 'sociological fiction' (Watson 2021). My reading journey, I realised, had taken a haphazard approach, one more akin to an interested general reader rather than a scholar precisely interested in definitional work and genre boundaries. Was there any value at all in the term 'autofiction' in this context, or was it one I had intended to use purely because of the framing of the conference call? In her scholarship on Palestinian life writing, Brown tussles with the question of literary categorisation:

> I do not, however, want to be prescriptive about terminology; the fact that one comes across a whole range of terms, including *autocritique*, *autocriticism*, *autotheory*, *autocritography*, *creative nonfiction* and *personal criticism*, when researching this area of life writing indicates to me that a concern with categorisation arguably gets in the way of simply paying attention to texts themselves and the intriguing push and pull between different genres. After all, the extent to which theory is autobiographical, or autobiographical writing is driven by theory, is impossible to determine finally, making attempts at categorisation relatively unhelpful. (2017, 45)

'Autofiction' is not a term included in Brown's list, because it is – in market terms at least – classified as *fiction* rather than *non-fiction*. However, Brown's troubling of non-fiction categories helped me to think through the term; autofiction explicitly presents a form of writing drawn from selfhood, which many novels

implicitly do. I found Brown's statement about how Palestinian life writing might *not* be classified instructional, in terms of '*not* using the term autobiography in relation to Palestinian life writing: '"Auto" – self – is particularly problematic when it comes to much of Palestinian life writing due to the latter's notable attentiveness to a wider social and political context, which refutes the term's clear privileging of a single identity and its inner self' (2017, 42). This prompt is in line with Juliane Hammer's comment that '"Memoirs and autobiographies of Palestinians have over the last five decades contributed to the development of a Palestinian collective identity"' (Hammer 2003, 178; cited in Brown 2017, 37). Such a collective identity, whether articulated through a fictional, non-fictional or autofictional lens, has particular foci, including that of border crossings and checkpoints, as Brown (2017) writes about in detail, and as I immediately began to observe in my own reading, prompting me to reflect on my own privileged position in the passport queue. Perhaps autofiction was a meaningless category when taken away from the confines and market conditions of the Global North, despite the numerous literary works and associated scholarship that have developed from and on the Global South. Hywel Dix's central argument in *Autofiction and Cultural Memory* (2023) is:

> that because autofiction blends truth and fiction in a highly self-conscious way, and because it has the capacity to modulate between individual voice and collective experience, autofiction has the capacity to operate as a form of testimony or witness-bearing with regard to past cultural and/or political struggles. In doing so it also has the capacity to restore to contemporary view experiences and conflicts that have been historically marginalised or overlooked and thus contribute to a new form of cultural memory. (2023, 8)

The examples of Palestinian writing that I had been drawn to on my reading journey are illuminated by this line of thinking. Alternative constructions of selfhood, including those of collective selfhoods, might bring to Global North definitions of life writing and autofiction the idea that such forms are inherently social. The variance of what constitutes the 'social' in any given geopolitical context thus renders autofiction a highly unstable, albeit productive, category. And yet perhaps there is also a literary burden here, in expecting writers from such geographies to articulate collective identities, to enter the social field in representative fashion, to always be seen to be speaking autobiographically.

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I continued my reading journey, although I realised I was sticking less to my tentative search for Palestinian autofiction after the cancellation of the keynote, instead picking up books through a mix of haphazardly seen social media mentions, and more concerted searches. *The Book of Gaza: A City in Short Fiction* (2014) is a volume in the 'Reading the City' series of short-story collections from the Manchester-based Comma Press. The collections are often in translation (in counterpoint to the typical Anglophone market avoidance of translated texts (Clarke 2022)). Further geographies addressed by the series include Damascus, Sana'a, Rio and Prague (perhaps a volume I should have read before my trip, I thought) and Manchester itself.[7] In *The Book of Gaza*, editor Atef Abu Saif details in the Introduction how the extremity of political circumstances have affected literary production, form and genre in Gaza, particularly after Israel's occupation in 1967. He describes how in this period 'most of its writers took refuge outside the Strip', but those that stayed frequently turned to shorter forms from the 1970s onwards:

> Through the brevity and symbolism of the short story, Gazan writers at times found a way to overcome printing and publishing restrictions imposed by Israeli occupation forces. The Palestinian novel written in Gaza during this period also was characterised by its concision – not exceeding a hundred pages at most, it was an art form perhaps closer to the novella. Copying and transporting a story to publishing houses in Jerusalem to be printed was no easy task, and so its short length helped facilitate publication. (2014, ix–x)

Abu Saif illustrates an extreme example of what was very familiar to me from the discipline of book history: Robert Darnton's 'communications circuit of the book' (1982) with all its multiple agents, stages and processes, as well as the blockages along the way, including those of censorship regimes. Abu Saif adds to his account how in this period, 'Gaza, as was said in Palestinian circles abroad, became "the exporter of oranges and short stories"', footnoting himself that 'The Arabic word here "tusaddir" means both "to export" and "to publish"' (2014, x).

Brown examines whether Palestinian life-writers are displaced internationally or in exile (and sometimes, particularly with second generation or onwards, writing in the language of their adopted home), or writing from within Palestine in Arabic, and therefore accessible to broader global markets only if they are translated (Brown 2017, 19–20). These are challenges, in other words, of border crossing in linguistic and market terms.

Abu Saif's later work, *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (2023) provides an even more extreme example of literary production and consumption. The book has an extraordinary immediacy; written as a day-by-day account from 7 October to the end of 2023 by Abu Saif from Gaza. Writing under extreme constraints and deathly bombardment, he nonetheless produced several hundred words every day, sending them as WhatsApp messages and voice memos to his publisher rather than as a completed manuscript, and publishing extracts in news venues including *The Washington Post, The New York Times* and *Le Monde* in advance of its appearance as a book. The book was rapidly assembled and published initially as an ebook at the end of 2023, with a print version with additional, later entries, appearing in 2024 (Comma Press 2024). Digital technologies enabled the rapid writing, global circulation and publication (on multiple platforms) of the text. The ubiquity of mobile phones (despite the challenges of recharging and internet network access) powered the communications circuit of this book, but also livestreamed images of genocide via social media platforms from both press (another group, with academics, which sustained high mortality rates from targeted Israeli attacks) and citizen journalists.[8]

In *Don't Look Left*, Abu Saif details living in Gaza in the wake of 7 October, depicting Israeli bombing, drones, tanks, and snipers, causing injury and death, displacement, and the Gazans' struggle to locate food, safe shelter, and separated family and friends. Reading as an outsider, the book made sense for me of the geography of the Gaza Strip, and the daily updates via mainstream and social media of Israeli invasions and refugee movements. It also records some semblance of 'normal' life: the ways in which community operates, traditions, and daily practices of food making, buying, and sharing – the falafel stand, fruit and vegetable stalls, the saj bakery, the supermarket. Embedded are also longer histories of those already made refugees, often several times over, in long-established camps such as Jabalia, north of Gaza City.

My research partner Beth had written about her experience of reading Abu Saif's diary, in a piece about reading in times of crisis, and the ways in which long-form reading is a 'dynamic activity', both 'aesthetic and moral'. For Beth, *Don't Look Left*'s aesthetic dimension was a 'narrative structure [which] offered me a shape I could recognise and a pace I would absorb. It aligned with my brain and helped me find meaning in the world around me.' The book's moral dimension, she continued, 'enabled me to empathise with others [… to] see Gaza at eye level, as a person walking through its alleys and buildings, not just as a series of aerial images' (Driscoll 2024). I felt similar sensations as I read the text in early 2024. In Brown's essay on Abu Saif's earlier *The Drone Eats With Me: A Gaza Diary* (2015), she argues that this effect is the author's intent: a role 'as a witness of warfare and his commitment to producing work for a non-Palestinian audience', which the book's partial publication as newspaper articles further evidences (Brown 2022, 445–446). Zahoor and Aamir articulate that Abu Saif 'harnesses the generic potential of life narrative to shape and challenge global recognition and perceptions' (2025, 38). Here, another border crossing question arises: the intended and potential audiences of texts; whether they are written for Palestinian, diaspora, global audiences, or parallel 'communities of struggle'; penned by authors in Palestine or outside; and written in Arabic, in translation, or in other languages from diaspora writers' homes. Power dynamics are inherent in these various positionings, as publisher and translator Hazem Jamjoum articulates in interview on the launch of a London-based Arabic press (Arablit and Arablit Quarterly 2025).

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I realised that I'd got distracted from my search for Palestinian autofiction; examining a range of fiction and non-fiction genres, as well as the putative 'in-between' that autofiction might constitute. I'd strayed in order to find out more about the situation in Palestine, and more specifically in Gaza – to learn, and to recognise. Isabella Hammad's argument in *Recognising the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (2024) addresses this aspect of reading. Originally delivered as the Edward W Said Lecture at Columbia University just before 7 October, the published text includes an afterword from early 2024. Following Said, Hammad sees engagement with fiction as a form of humanism which goes beyond Eurocentric boundaries, and which 'commits itself to crossing boundaries between cultures and disciplines' (2024, 5). While situating the novel as a market form, 'born in the age of mechanical reproduction, and […] sold as commodities' (2024, 5), Hammad sees reading fiction as a way of 'thinking deeply about experiences other than our own, using some of the tools of our dream life, and listening carefully to the voices of others, in ways that ask for our imaginative participation and that might also shed light upon our own experiences of being alive on this planet' (2024, 6). Novels enable us to recognise the stranger, Hammad argues, to have an 'aha moment' as we encounter

their suffering, and connect our humanity to theirs (2024, 25). And yet with the long and violent history of Palestinian repression, Hammad expresses a sense of scepticism at the possibilities of fiction to do anything *more than* connect; in other words, to effect change. In this context, she discusses writers attending the Palestine Festival of Literature: 'I was moved to see them moved. At the same time, I couldn't help but feel a kind of despairing déjà vu, the scene of recognition having become at this point rather familiar' (2024, 21). While onlookers, or Israelis, can have their moments of 'epiphany' through encounters – be they via the medium of narrative or other modes – Hammad writes that 'The Palestinian struggle has gone on so long now that it is easy to feel disillusioned with the scene of recognition as a site of radical change, or indeed as a turning point at all' (2024, 33).[9] Said himself exposed the violent unevenness in access to narrative in 'Permission to Narrate' (1984), arguing that 'A disciplinary communications apparatus exists in the West both for overlooking most of the basic things that might present Israel in a bad light, and for punishing those who try to tell the truth.' Such an 'apparatus' is a censorious one – first and foremost of Palestinians, and then for any who might advocate for their cause.

To further her argument, Hammad turns to autofictionist Maggie Nelson's articulation in *The Art of Cruelty* (2011) that having 'emotion and understanding are not the same as action' even if they might be necessary precursors (2024, 49). The term 'recognition' is then examined by Hammad in its legal and political contexts: the recognition of a state, or of human rights as 'a place to start, but it is no place to end' (2024, 49):

> In the language of both law and literary form […] recognition is a kind of knowing that *should incur* the responsibility to act for it to have any value beyond personal epiphanies, or appeasing the critics of the one doing the recognising. Great effort is required to ensure that such a moment marks the middle of the story, and not the finale. Another act must follow. (2024, 50)[10]

As Said (1984) continued, 'Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them. Such a narrative has to have a beginning and an end: in the Palestinian case, a homeland for the resolution of its exile since 1948' (1984).

On reading these words, I wondered about my own role, and the utility of this 'reading journey' on which I had embarked from the safety of my Scottish home. For an outsider, can reading, or even writing, only ever be a first, tentative step of connection rather than a tool of political change in itself? Reading Hammad and Said's own narratives, I asked myself what that 'other act' could be for me; how I could take action beyond my personal experience outward into the world? Beyond my own self-education, through reading numerous texts (not all mentioned in this essay, and many more unread, and that my linguistic competence, limited to English and French, will leave unread), what else can I do? Folded into this question is my own positioning, one born of a high degree of privilege: relatively frictionless travel; the possibility of being invited (and turning down) an all-expenses paid international trip; a pivot to a self-paid trip to a different country in time for Christmas markets and wintertime celebrations of a birth in Bethlehem. Even to think of providing some kind of parallel between my experience as an academic in the Global North and that of the characters in the books I was reading, let alone the real people on which these often highly autobiographical fictions were based, seemed glib.

And yet I realise that there is an important principle of solidarity to be expressed from my position, and also a way of using that position to highlight my experience of academic censorship with regards to Palestine and Israel. After a lengthy email interchange with the German conference organiser and his Dean of Faculty, who informed me that in the end my exclusion from the conference ultimately came down to the 'academic freedom' to choose *not* to accept my intended keynote, I decided to be more public about the censorship I had faced. I did this through a lengthy Twitter/X thread.[11] I constructed the thread carefully, within the word count constraints and thread style of each platform, providing hyperlinked references for my assertations about genocide and scholasticide (some of which have made their way into the citation fabric of this essay). The thread garnered some virality, with responses from academics, and others, who had undergone similar acts of deplatforming because of their perspectives on Palestine. Some months after the events that I describe above, I discovered that the university which had invited me to speak had cancelled a talk from Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories and an outspoken critic of Israel, an act that was repeated by a Berlin university (Knight 2025). Colleagues – particularly more junior colleagues and PhD researchers – told me they appreciated my openness about

my own experience and standpoint. Perhaps there is some, limited role for me in speaking out. I took the decision to write up my experiences at greater length.

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While I complete a draft of this essay, I think ahead to future international travel in July 2025, a conference long-planned in the US before the election which confirmed Donald Trump's second presidential term. Alongside campus repression across the US, I hear of the disappearance and deportation of international academics and students articulating pro-Palestinian views (Hellmann 2025). I read accounts of academics stopped at the border as they attempt to enter the US for conferences and other academic visits; their intent interrogated, their phones and laptops searched for anti-Trump articulations, leading to the writing of a 'safety manual for academics visiting America' (Boynton 2025). I wonder whether to finally deactivate my Twitter account on which I've stopped posting but still use to get news of what is happening in Gaza. Do I risk getting arrested? Am I jeopardising a family member's Green Card through my own more outspoken views? I am aware these questions only expose me to a tiny aspect of the duress that academic counterparts in Palestine encounter, and which authors express through their writing.

My reading journey may have strayed from its initial intent to discover some form of Palestinian autofiction: in the end, I am not sure I ever 'found' such a genre, although I did enrich my own literary and political knowledge. The professor who had instructed me to 'rethink' the title of my talk was censorious, and yet the urge to 'rethink' in the face of genocide and scholasticide is crucial, I would argue, as an act of solidarity. Through the experience I have described here, I have explored, by and beyond reading, how resistance, solidarity and activism can occur, while nonetheless being cognisant of geopolitical inequities. As such, I align my writing with the numerous acts of pro-Palestinian solidarity and activism across the world in literary and academic contexts and beyond, from online and in-person talks hosted within universities and campus encampments, to journal articles and opinion pieces, conferences and symposia. Central to this activity is PACBI, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (part of the broader Palestinian-led BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement)) movement, which pressured many universities around the world to end links with Israeli academic institutions, and divest from companies complicit in Israeli apartheid and genocide. UK-based Palestinian and Arab scholars formed Scholars for Palestine UK, issuing a call to action against scholasticide.[12] As Michael Buroway argued in 'Why and how should sociologists speak out on Palestine?', 'social scientists cannot conduct their investigations without taking a standpoint. To study the "infinite manifold" that is the world we need to select in order to interpret […] To refuse to take a stance is a stance itself, a stance in favour of the status quo, in favour of Israel's asymmetrical massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and beyond' (2025, 250). In such terms, this essay is an act of stance-taking, activist interpretation, and solidarity.

As I think back across my reading journey, I am not sure that I ever 'found' a version of Palestinian autofiction, which – after all – was a conceit I had devised for the planned keynote. But what I had read, and continued to read beyond the parameters of this essay, led me to think more about border crossing: both of individuals and socio-political groups, and of the texts they create, and consume. The varying degrees of constraint put on these border-crossings became a central theme in my own physical and figurative journeys, which this essay has written into its fabric. In the reading journey I had crossed borders in an undisciplined way across genres and, I realised, had elided the difference between the provenance of authors and texts (i.e. from those situated in Gaza and the other areas in the Occupied Territories of Palestine, those from diaspora situations, those written in Arabic and translated, those written in English). I was following the principle of readerly engagement laid out by Hammad as a border-crossing mechanism. And yet I knew I needed to continue to think harder: to rethink, in fact.

Had my search for Palestinian autofiction, as a marketplace genre, followed a misguided pathway? Was I falling into a trap similar to that critiqued by Gillian Whitlock, in her analysis of the Global North's publishing of female life narratives from Afghanistan and the Middle East in the wake of 9/11 (2005, 2007)? Not so much in the propagandist, exoticising modes of those texts, but perhaps in an insistence on the autobiographical? Perhaps, in my haphazard turn away from potential 'autofictional' texts, I was already subconsciously rejecting the parameters of my own search. Might I rather find greater ground in thinking about how, and why, certain subjects are invited and enabled to speak (or not), and the ways in which global publishing marketplaces intersect with geopolitical hegemonies? The thematic of literal border-crossing which became so recurrent in my reading becomes a metaphor in the question of how certain voices, and in certain forms, arrive in the global marketplace. I had more thinking, and reading, to do.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the numerous colleagues who encouraged me to write this essay, and the writing groups within which it was, in part, written. In particular for their comments on draft versions, I thank Beth Driscoll, Lianna Mark, and Mark Banks. I also thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive criticism, and Kylie Cardell (as Essays Editor for *Life Writing*), for her supportive and insightful editing.
2. See Boast (2023) for more detail on the book's relationship with the history of Palestine/Israel.
3. 'The term refers to 'the deliberate destruction of an educational system and its institutions' (Shlaim 2025, 1).
4. See Becker (2025) for further discussion.
5. Subsequently, I found a university press release from May 2024 entitled 'No Room for Antisemitism at LMU!', in response to a pro-Palestinian demonstration due to be held in the city. The press release detailed that 'LMU reaffirms its solidarity with its partner institutions in Israel and with Israeli and Jewish students and academics and unequivocally opposes all forms of antisemitism and discrimination.' (The press release itself does not detail how the demonstration would have been antisemitic or discriminatory.) The release concluded by affirming that as a member of the German Rectors' Conference and of German U15, the university 'fully supports and endorses the positions of these organisations.' (LMU Munich 2024). The German Rectors' Conference statement, published on 10 October 2023, states that 'As the German Rectors' Conference, the voice of German universities, we stand in solidarity with the Israeli universities and academic colleges and all their members'2023). In a similar political vein, the German U15 made a joint statement in early January 2024 after a meeting in December with VERA, an association of nine Israeli research universities (2024. For a concerted examination of the role of Israeli universities in the violation of Palestinian rights, see Maya Wind's *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* (2024). (
6. I follow here Radway's prompt in *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* (1997), where she unpacks ideas of the general and the scholarly reader, the tensions between them, and the affordances of occupying both positions (9-10).
7. The full Reading the City series is detailed at Comma Press (nd.).
8. See Tondo (2025) for numbers of journalists killed by Israel since October 2023; citing the Watson School of International and Public Affairs report that 'more journalists had been killed in Gaza than in both world wars, the Vietnam war, the wars in Yugoslavia and the UK war in Afghanistan combined'. See Al-Hajj (2024) for the role of citizen journalists in Gaza. By August 2025, the United Nations Human Rights office reported at least 242 Palestinian journalists killed in Gaza since October 2023. International journalists are not allowed into Gaza during the war (UNRWA, 2025).
9. Hammad's scepticism finds a parallel in the interrogation of the use of personal narratives in the field of human rights by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (2004), which they argue is both productive and problematic for social justice.
10. In the run-up to the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2025, numerous states (in addition to the over ¾ of those already declared) including France, Japan, Canada and potentially the UK have said they would 'recognise' Palestine as a state (Adams 2025).
11. I repeated the thread on Bluesky, which I had more recently joined. A link to the Bluesky thread (Squires 2024) is included in the bibliography; I subsequently deleted my Twitter/X account.
12. See https://bdsmovement.net/pacbi and https://www.scholarsforpalestine.org/. In 'The Academic Boycott of Israel: Reflections from a Liberated Future' (2026), Sami Hermez 'time travels' to examine how the BDS movement led to Palestinian liberation.

Notes on contributor

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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