



Wall + Response

March 8, 2022

To: Michael Lambert, City Librarian; Maureen Singleton, Chief Operating Officer; Katrin Reimuller, Acting Chief of Main Library; Michelle Jeffers, Chief of Community Programs and Partnerships; Kate Patterson, Director of Communications; Joan Jasper, Exhibitions Curator; Hannah Gribetz, Exhibition Designer; and Jesse Dutton-Kenny, Senior Museum Preparator; Susan Goldstein, City Archivist

We are writing to express our serious concerns about the decision of the San Francisco Public Library to avoid the growing world recognition of Israel's oppression of Palestinians by censoring the *Arab Liberation Mural* from the exhibition *Wall + Response*, a two-year project featuring 16 poets responding to the social, political, and racial justice narratives of four murals on Clarion Alley. The *Wall + Response* curators have been working with the library on the exhibition since early November, which had been a very positive experience. Therefore, we were taken by surprise to receive this news one week before the exhibition opens on March 12, 2022, followed by a public poetry reading event on March 13.

While the library has offered to move forward with the exhibition by omitting all images of the *Arab Liberation Mural*, and to proceed with the planned poetry programs, the entire Clarion Alley community is offended by the library's thinking that omitting images of Arab Liberation Mural would be acceptable to us. This is especially disturbing given that SFPL has exhibited the prominent poster campaign, "all are welcome", yet are actively excluding parts of the SF community.

Furthermore, The American Library Association advises that exhibit spaces should conform to the Library Bill of Rights:

In developing library exhibits, staff members should endeavor to present a broad spectrum of opinion and a variety of viewpoints. Libraries should not shrink from developing exhibits because of controversial content or because of the beliefs or affiliation of those whose work is represented. Just as libraries do not endorse the viewpoints of those whose work is represented in their collections, libraries also do not endorse the beliefs or viewpoints of topics that may be the subject of library exhibits.

In addition:

The library should not censor or remove an exhibit because some members of the community may disagree with its content. Those who object to the content of any exhibit held at the library should be able to submit their complaint and/or their own exhibit proposal to be judged according to the policies established by the library. Libraries may wish to post a permanent notice near the exhibit area stating that the library does not advocate or endorse the viewpoints of exhibits or exhibitors.

The San Francisco Public Library is also one of 129 public libraries across the country to have signed the Urban Libraries Council's statement on race and social equity. This statement serves as a baseline upon which libraries can build policies and actions that make their communities more inclusive and just. The statement reads as follows:

As leaders of North America's public libraries, we are committed to achieving racial and social equity by contributing to a more just society in which all community members can realize their full potential. Our libraries can help achieve true and sustained equity through an intentional, systemic and transformative library-community partnership. Our library systems are working to achieve equity in the communities we serve by:

- *Eliminating racial and social equity barriers in library programs, services, policies, and practices*
- *Creating and maintaining an environment of diversity, inclusion, and respect both in our library systems and in all aspects of our community role*
- *Ensuring that we are reaching and engaging disenfranchised people in the community and helping them express their voice*
- *Serving as a convener and facilitator of conversations and partnerships to address community challenges*
- *Being forthright on tough issues that are important to our communities. Libraries are trusted, venerable and enduring institutions, central to their communities and an essential participant in the movement for racial and social equity.*

In July 2019, San Francisco's Office of Racial Equity (ORE) ([Ordinance No 188-19](#)) was created by Supervisors Sandra Lee Fewer and Vallie Brown as a Division of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. In December 2019, Director Shakirah Simley and Senior Policy Advisor Sami Iwata joined the ORE team. ORE was legislated in response to the City's growing racial disparities as a means to address the history of structural and institutional racism in San Francisco's delivery of services to the public and the City's internal practices and systems. Creating ORE was the result of successful advocacy and organizing by Black City workers, labor leaders, and community members. With the establishment of ORE, San Francisco joins a national movement to address the government's role in resolving the inequitable outcomes it created. [<https://www.racialequitysf.org/about>]

As defined by the Office of Racial Equity:

Racial equity is a set of social justice practices, rooted in a solid understanding and analysis of historical and present-day oppression, aiming towards a goal of fairness for all. As an outcome, achieving racial equity would mean living in a world where race is no longer a factor in the distribution of opportunity. As a process, we apply racial equity when those most impacted by the structural racial inequities are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives.

The *Arab Liberation Mural* was created by a diverse team that included Arab youth, Jewish allies, and Latinx artists to express the resilience and resistance of the Bay Area community to attacks on freedom and liberties of Arabs, Muslims, people of color, immigrants, and refugees.

As a multi-ethnic, racial, cultural, and intergenerational community of artists, poets, and community-based organizations, it is deeply disturbing to us that the San Francisco Public Library has singled-out Palestinians, a community historically and disproportionately marginalized and disenfranchised, to be unworthy of having a voice or to be included and respected as part of the exhibition.

Also disturbing was the response by Kate Patterson, Director of Communications with the San Francisco Public Library, "I am very sorry, this matter didn't come to our attention sooner, so that we could have addressed this issue before we got so far in the process. We are making adjustments to our review process so that this never happens again." What should the interpretation of this statement be? That it's important to ensure the voices and experiences of Palestinians are not heard, or if they are, they must be filtered through an institutional process that does not allow agency for those most impacted by structural racial inequities? What are the Library policies put in place that would allow for such a discriminatory action to be taken? Is the Library Commission aware of this decision?

This begs the question: Does the San Francisco Public Library actually understand what racial equity means in the context defined by San Francisco's Office of Racial Equity? And especially for people historically oppressed by a dominant culture defined politically, socially, and economically by institutionalized state mandates based on racial segregation.

While there are some people who might not agree with the Palestinian position, it should be noted the human rights organizations Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Yesh Din, and B'Tselem, as well as the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia have all determined Israel to be an apartheid state. And just as it was once unpopular to support the struggle against the racist practice of apartheid in South Africa, the movement to do so led to the end of the policy in 1994 after 48 years.

When you go to the Holy Land and see what's being done to the Palestinians at checkpoints, for us, it's the kind of thing we experienced in South Africa. Whether you want to say Israel practices apartheid is immaterial. They are doing things, given their history, you think "Do you remember what happened to you?" Then they clobber you and say, "You are anti-Semitic."

-- Desmond Tutu

Additionally, we do not agree with the rationale of not showing the mural because of the harm it would do to the community. While art may challenge dominant narratives, causing difficult and uncomfortable conversations, the harm to community comes from ignoring or denying the experiences of others.

The human rights and social justice messages represented by the *Arab Liberation Mural* should be given as much visibility and voice as the others represented in *Wall + Response*, as well as those represented in the current exhibition *Heroes & Monsters* by CAMP's community partner The San Francisco Poster Syndicate.

We ask you to reconsider the decision to censor the *Wall + Response* exhibition, which has grave implications for communities throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. We hope we are able to resolve this matter in the spirit of community.

Sincerely,

Megan Wilson, Artist, CAMP Co-Director and Board member, Curator, *Wall +*

Response Maw Shein Win, Poet, Curator, *Wall + Response*

Christopher Statton, CAMP Co-Director and Board member

Shaghayegh Cyrous, CAMP Board member

Kyoko Sato, CAMP Board member

Ivy McClelland, CAMP Board member

Sean Levon Nash, CAMP Board member

Keyvan Shovir, CAMP Board member

Youssef Alaoui, Poet

Jason Bayani, Poet

Heather Bourbeau, Poet

Karla Brundage, Poet

Aileen Cassinetta, Poet

Celeste Chan, Poet

MK Chavez, Poet

Elaine Chu, Artist

Emory Douglas, Artist

Tongo Eisen-Martin, Poet

Chris Gazaleh, Artist

Susan Greene, Artist

Jennifer Hasegawa, Poet

Art Hazelwood, Artist

Genny Lim, Poet

Tureeda Mikell, Poet

David Petrelli, Artist

Paul Corman Roberts, Poet

Kim Shuck, Poet

Chris Stroffolino, Poet

Michael Warr, Poet

Marina Perez-Wong, Artist

Tim Xonnelly, Poet

Lara Kiswani & Arab Resource & Organizing Center (AROC)

Justice4Luis.org

Paul Boden & The Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)