Chicago. Amman. Bethlehem. In all of these cities, I have carried the Hesburgh library with me- usually in the form of some printed article or book checked out and renewed several times. In the summer following my sophomore year, it was in reading Rosemarie Tong’s “Feminist Thought” on the train into the Windy City that I began a process of discerning a political ethic that I maintain until this day- one indeed, that very much informs my thesis and also the career in women’s rights and refugee law I intend to pursue. A stolen backpack in Amman’s dusty markets would be most mourned for the lost Saba Mahmood edition, which had transported me to the women’s mosque movement of nearby Egypt. Proceeding through a checkpoint dividing Israeli Jerusalem and Palestinian Bethlehem, my satchel would set off alarms (usually because of some coins). When tossed over by IDF soldiers, it was not uncommon for them to scowl as they saw my volumes of Arabic-language Palestinian poetry. Mahmood Darwish’s beautiful liberatory verses (which often got me in a bit of trouble) were also made available to me by the library.

That is to say, that from the formation of my paper topic to the very methods in which I conducted my research, the abundance of materials and hands-on assistance provided by the library informed my intellectual development and enhanced the quality of my thesis immeasurably. I began the process of my intellectual discernment towards a postcolonial feminist ethic under the mentorship of Professor Atalia Omer nearly three years ago as we engaged in conversation over materials I spent time digging out of the stacks, written by authors such as Susan Moller Okin, Lila Abu Lughod, and Saba Mahmood. Their theoretical debates on secularism, women’s rights, and Muslim female agency resonate throughout my work.

Upon my departure for a year spent in the Middle East studying Arabic and volunteering in a Palestinian refugee camp, those (repeatedly renewed) books accompanied me and helped to maintain those discussions while the online books and journal articles provided by the online catalog. That I was still able to communicate with librarians through the online “Chat with a Librarian” service, which made the process of obtaining IRB (institutional review board) approval for my interviews far easier given the experience that the librarians could convey to me in those conversations. I read the material I acquired through interviews with feminist legal organizations in Ramallah and Bethlehem in light of J-Stor articles- and then, in keeping with practices of good scholarship, interrogated that which I already knew to form critiques of pre-existing work. Books read in the Hesburgh library became a part of my landscape; even in an unfamiliar Ramallah I found the Friend’s School to be a welcoming landmark, recalling its frequent mention in Jean Zaru’s “Occupied with Nonviolence”.

Returning to campus in the summer preceding my senior year, I renewed my use of the library’s on site facilities. The number of books I have checked out testifies to my research source of preference (numbering as high as 32). However in conversations with
I found myself challenged to utilize other research materials, often of similar academic quality to the books I rely upon but in condensed form. The librarians showed me how to conduct more refined search terms and to utilize the subject pages (especially that of Gender Studies) to find further resources and databases relevant to the often indecipherable concepts that I understood in theory but had difficulty in rendering on paper. For example, I have approached librarians with ridiculous questions such as “I remember reading in a source somewhere something about how the state formation period is bad for feminism- please help me find it”. They helped me converge such vagueries into searchable terms- which eventually lead me back to sources on Algeria that I read three years prior. I availed myself of the library’s films for my extensive section on Palestinian feminist art, which made access to otherwise costly films from the 1970’s possible. The Interlibrary loan system has helped me find somewhat obscure books ("For better, for worse: the marriage crisis that made modern Egypt") and some more difficult-to-find sources by favorite authors ("Family Law under Occupation" by Lynn Welchman). Moreover, law library materials came in use for my genealogies of Ottoman family law and helped to improve my understanding of what law as an entity consists of. From the rented headphones I used to listen to and translate Arabic feminist rap to the kind words offered by the help desk when I seemed most bewildered by my subject, that the library has accompanied me not only in my research process- but also around the world as I discerned the type of work I am most passionate about.