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To cite this article: Lila Sharif (2021) Afterwards and Other Non-Endings: Palestine, Afghanistan, and the Afterlives of War, Amerasia Journal, 47:1, 164-171, DOI: [10.1080/00447471.2021.1994281](https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2021.1994281)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2021.1994281>



Published online: 17 Dec 2021.



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Afterwards and Other Non-Endings: Palestine, Afghanistan, and the Afterlives of War

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ABSTRACT

A feminist refugee epistemology is about naming the affective and material nonendings and afterlives of colonial and imperial violence on refugee terms, as well as foregrounding the polyethnic subjectivities that constitute “refugee.” Composed at the heels of war’s declared ending and during a global pandemic, I discuss a feminist collaboration with Dr. YẾN Lê Espiritu and artwork by Mary Hazboun. I then discuss the nonendings and afterlives of the War on Terror, ending with a reflection on the importance of Palestine and Indigenous epistemologies in the study of displacement, and the U.S. academy’s response to the 2021 Gaza massacre.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan; afterlives of war; feminist collaboration; Indigenous epistemologies; militarization; Palestine; U.S. academy

“We got to carry each other now”: A feminist collaboration with Dr. YẾN Lê Espiritu

Composed during the jagged but persistent surge in a global pandemic, when many of us have never felt farther away from our homelands, this collaboration with YẾN Lê Espiritu has been about curating a space to grieve, celebrate, narrate, remember, and reflect on what it means to be displaced. The graphic featured on the cover is by Chicago-based, Palestinian-American artist Mary Hazboun, whose collection *The Art of Weeping* (Figure 1) explores themes of displacement, danger, trauma, warfare, and collective nurture, especially for women from war zones. The image, entitled “Healing Circle,” depicts six women, each dressed in a traditional Palestinian gown (*thob*) lined with Palestinian embroidery (*tatreez*). The tone is somber: dark silhouettes of their contiguous, huddled bodies against an austere, colorless background. The women sit in pairs embracing one another so that their bodies are sealed tightly. They share an expression that is silent yet loaded, perhaps frozen between fear, uncertainty, and sorrow. Each has only one eye, but the woman she embraces has the other, suggesting a continuity of experience that forms their collective bond. The detailing of care and nurture also appears through their positioning: the tallest woman nestles the smallest woman into her chest. These affective relations represented through the juxtaposed frames, mirage of eyes, and interlocking arms remind us of those we carry, the disembodied nature of displacement, and everything left behind in the search for safety. In Mary’s words: “displaced communities dwell in a continuous state of diaspora, it is a daily reality/ritual that they find refuge and healing in closeness and in the intimate connectedness of bodies.” The connection between these women conjures the

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Figure 1. Mary Hazboun, “The Art of Weeping” (courtesy of the artist).

fateful words by Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad 20 years ago: “we got to carry each other now.”¹

Through this collaboration, Professor Espiritu and I want to do more than critique Western media representation of refugees; we want to foreground refugees’ layered lives, the ways they create spaces of pleasure, joy, and safety, even while they are forced to contend with the failures of international law, food insecurity, settler colonial vanishment, incoherent national politics, racial subjugation, intergenerational loss and trauma, climate and environmental disasters, and many other factors, as they search for a better life. Sometimes, they are formally recognized as refugees, and other times they identify as displaced even when claimed as citizens by a nation-state. Professor Espiritu’s work has long argued that displacement is a direct result of the braiding of militarism, colonialism, and imperialism, while foregrounding and affirming the everyday acts of life-making that haunt the decontextualized statistics, propagandas, and (mis)representations that permeate the media and migration studies on refugees.

This special issue details the ways that refugees carry each other and themselves through unspeakable loss and stitch together a full life despite the conditions of displacement and fragmentation. The field of Critical Refugee Studies reminds us that refugees are not problems to be solved by social scientists, elite officials, or colonial nation-states; from their unique and often contentious position, refugees are knowledge bearers who critique the interweaving between settler/colonialism, imperial expansion, capitalist exploitation, racialized state violence, and militarized warfare.

A feminist refugee epistemology is centrally about naming the affective and material nonendings and afterlives of colonial and imperial wars in refugee terms, as well as foregrounding the polyethnic subjectivities that constitute refugee lives.² In this context, “nonendings” refer to the ongoingness of colonial and imperial wars, and “afterlives” refers to their mutations in the present. The impact of warfare is not always immediate and direct. In fact, many times, more Iraqis, Afghans, and Pakistanis have lost lives due to destroyed infrastructures than directly from militarized violence, indicating that the afterlives of war are persistent and fatal.³ The notion of nonendings names the ways that militarized warfare is an extension of the ongoing legacies of colonialism across Asia and beyond.⁴ What will the lives of the displaced be like? What do we make of the nonendings and afterlives of war?

The War on Terror, nonendings, and afterlives

This special issue of *Amerasia Journal* comes at the heels of a declaration by U.S. officials that the \$50-billion-per-year War on Terror – the largest refugee-producing war in world history – is over, two decades after its official beginning. The declaration of war’s end sits perpendicular to the chaotic display of a frantic withdrawal, the Taliban’s immediate takeover of Kabul, and the ongoing snarl of U.S. empire and its afterlives, especially as the war continues to ravage communities, local and global. Thousands of Afghans are trying to escape to safety, especially women, while foreign capitalists eye Afghanistan’s lithium reserves. Refugee resettlement organizations are flooded with e-mails with desperate pleas for help. Afghan women activists report that their homes have been invaded, their organizations looted, and their families’ lives threatened. They fear being kidnapped, tortured, or assassinated for attempting to leave exactly as the Taliban promised their safety. @TheAfghan reports that 550,000 Afghans have become internally displaced, 80% of them are women and children – a shameful fact for a war purportedly waged for “the rights and dignity of women.”⁵ Currently, ten million children in Afghanistan are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance and one third of the Afghan population faces food insecurity.

The War on Terror pivoted to West Asia when the U.S. bombed Iraq on March 20, 2003, and soon expanded to 85 countries and became the longest ongoing armed offensive in U.S. history. At least 800,000 people have died due to direct war violence, including civilians, journalists, and humanitarian workers. The war has also claimed the lives of over 7,000 U.S. military personnel and has been linked to over 30,000 veteran suicides. The total cost of damage to climate change is also great; the U.S. Department of Defense is one of the world’s top greenhouse gas emitters, wreaking havoc on a planet submerged in a global pandemic. The wars have been accompanied by erosions in civil liberties and human rights at home and abroad, especially for people from Muslim majority countries and Southwest Asia and North Africa, as well as for African Americans, Native Americans, migrants with and

without papers, refugees, and the working poor. Most U.S. government funding of warfare (see Yazan Zahzah's essay in this special issue) has served the expanding military industrial complex in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria. Other federal monies allocated for humanitarian efforts and rebuilding have been squandered or lost to fraud and corruption. A USAID-funded power plant will cost an estimated \$280 million per year to run – more than a third of total government tax revenues – but provide electricity to just 2% of Afghans. In total, the War on Terror has cost the U.S. over \$6.4 trillion.

Sixty million people have fled their homes in the eight most violent wars that the U.S. military has launched or participated in since 2001, namely, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Libya, and Syria, and as a result of the indirect militarization and colonial projects in Palestine, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and elsewhere. The U.S. has accepted only a small number of refugees that it has produced; Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, with nearly 3.7 million people and Colombia is second with 1.7 million, including Venezuelans. In other words, despite the massive public debates about the refugee crisis in the U.S. and Europe, most refugees have not been admitted to these places. Almost half of all forcibly displaced people are children under 18. Asian American studies, ethnic studies, and American studies should continue to engage the field of Critical Refugee Studies, especially as it is so deeply resonant with our immediate and ongoing realities.

The declarative end of the War on Terror follows the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam 48 years ago, a war that resulted in the death of millions of Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotian, and Khmer people among many others, and the displacement of 1.2 million Southeast Asian refugees to the U.S. alone. It also marks the seventieth anniversary of the supposed end of the Korean War although its nonendings continue through the division of Korea, U.S. military occupation of South Korea, U.S.-led sanctions against North Korea, and ongoing militarization there. In fact, Vietnam became part of an ingress of empire, especially in Southeast Asia. The nonendings and afterlives of war run deeper than combat, bombings, militarization, and state-sponsored dictatorships; they include the imposition of embassies, businesses, private organizations, educational programs, modernization projects, popular culture, tourism, the Peace Corps, and other such institutions vying for “hearts and minds” while in piercing pursuit of imperial expansion, land theft, labor exploitation, markets, and extractable resources.

Palestinian refugees and the nonendings of settler colonialism

For Palestinians, displacement mediates the relationship between settler colonialism, militarized violence, and global racial subjugation in a way that reveals the nonendings of settler-colonial wars. In international law, Palestinian refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period between June 1, 1946, and May 15, 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.”⁶ This “conflict” refers to a radical colonial transformation of our homeland when European Zionist militias violently invaded, colonized, and settled the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River – Historic Palestine. As a result, 750,000 Palestinians were displaced that year and 500 villages were destroyed through genocide and displacement. Palestine was extracted from its geopolitical continuities with the Arab

world and made into the nation-state of Israel with the support of Europe and the United States. The remaining “Palestinian territories” became the ever-shrinking lands west of the Jordan River – the West Bank and East Jerusalem – both under a violent military occupation – and the Gaza Strip, whose lands and people have been made captive in a catastrophic blockade and in a humanitarian crisis.

I inherited refugee status through my Palestinian father who was born in Gaza although my ancestry is from al-Khalil. However, I have hesitated to identify as a refugee my entire life because I was not born and raised in a refugee camp, a hesitation shared among many Palestinians who are claimed as citizens by Western nation-states. Palestinian refugees who live in 68 refugee camps across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip have radically different material realities. The situation in Lebanon is especially dire, where Palestinians are denied citizenship and access to jobs, running water, sanitation, roads, medical facilities, and other basic needs.

Without purporting to represent the diverse experiences of Palestinian refugees, we foreground Palestine in this issue politically and intentionally, by beginning with the special forum featuring Jennifer Moghannam, Rana Sharif, and Eman Ghanayem. With attention to Palestine, these commentators release “refugee” from the hegemony of international law, which has participated in the normalization of settler colonialism by offering conditional forms of recognition, while failing to enforce the Palestinian Right of Return, promising more generations of refugees to come.⁷ These U.S.-based, Palestinian feminist scholars elaborate the ontological goal of decolonization at the heart of Palestinian refugee aspirations.

As a U.S. citizen, my taxpayer money continues to enable the very settler colonialism and militarized violence that informed my family’s displacement. I also teach at a university that has benefitted from the settler colonial displacement of the Illinois Confederation (also known as Illiniwek Indians) and the Miami tribe following French and British colonial encroachments in the latter half of the seventeenth century. By 1800, 150 Illinois people survived, and their descendants were forced to move to Kansas before they were displaced once again to Oklahoma as a result of the Indian Removal Act. This local context finds its parallel in Palestine where militarized settler colonialism has led to multiple displacements for many Palestinians.⁸ Half a million Palestinian refugees who had originally fled to Iraq following 1948 were displaced once again to Syria due to indigenous removal policies and the War on Terror, only to be displaced once more because of the wars in Syria. This parallel demonstrates that displacement is a key feature of indigenous experience. In the field of Critical Refugee Studies, we must continue to center Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism, and in Indigenous Studies, we must take into account displacement and exile, including who is seen in these categories and why.

Indigenous thinkers remind us of the nonendings of settler colonialism. It is due to settler colonialism that Palestinian refugees have increased thousand-fold since 1948. Today, there are seven million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. Most were displaced in 1948 with the violent creation of Israel, and others were displaced as a result of the ongoing settler colonial encroachment and militarized occupation of Palestinian lands that have now technologically evolved into a corporatized system of 24-hour surveillance, control, and containment. Many of the earliest refugees, now in their seventh generation, still hold on to their land deeds as proof of their rightful claims to their homes and olive groves. Others continue to lose their homes to Zionist Jewish settlers who often get subsidized housing by Israel to populate the state, revealing the ongoingness of the

Nakba. The recent attempts by Israel to expand its state borders into East Jerusalem (Palestinian) neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan demonstrate the co-constitutive nature of settler colonialism and displacement. Today, Palestinians continue to lead the fight against settler colonial encroachment in their neighborhood, despite harassment, abuse, incarceration, and military aggression. In April 2021, an Israeli court ruling evicted eight Palestinian families from their homes to house settlers. Muna Al-Kurd, one of the Palestinian women leading protests against Israel's forced evictions and threats of displacement in Sheikh Jarrah, said "We have been living with this threat our whole lives." It also reveals the ongoing strength and resilience of the Palestinians to stay on their lands. In Al-Kurd's words, "We will remain in our homes and we will continue to defend our land."

Gaza and the U.S. academy

In May 2021, an 11-day assault on Gaza began on Land Day (May 10). Eighty percent of Gaza's inhabitants are Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948, yet another example of the ongoing reality of settler colonial violence. In the words of Rabab Abdulhadi and Dana Olwan, "Israel's attack on Gaza cannot be dissociated from its broader settler colonial foundation that is premised on the extinguishing of Palestinian life."⁹ Israel bombed hospitals, schools, press headquarters, and innocent people. Doctors were murdered on their way to help resuscitate families who had been buried alive in Israel's aerial bombardment. Dalia al-Kolak tells of how at midnight on March 16, 2021, Israeli airstrikes targeted Al-Wahda Street in Gaza, bombing five homes, "2 of these homes belonged to my family. They were all asleep in their beds when the airstrikes hit without warning. They were buried alive under their demolished homes."¹⁰ Eman Basher huddled her children into her bedroom every night with the hopes that "when" they died, they would at least die together.¹¹ In total, 256 Palestinians were killed, 60 of them children, and Gazan homes and buildings were razed to the ground for a fourth time in 12 years.

We were grieving during the pandemic, behind screens, in group chats, Zoom calls, with our families, and a lot of times, alone. When U.S. academics asserted their support of Palestinian struggles, it meant a lot to many of us, especially at a moment when Zionists have mobilized to silence criticism of Israel in the U.S. academy and extract Palestine from ethnic studies curricula in K-12 education. The Critical Refugee Studies Collective, Asian American studies departments, the Society for Sinophone Studies, numerous ethnic studies departments, gender and women's studies departments, and scholar activists mobilized through statements in support of the Palestinian people. The Critical Ethnic Studies Association writes, "Palestine continues to be at the heart of what ethnic studies fights for ... [I]n spite of the ongoing effects by Zionists to silence histories that call out injustice, white supremacy, settler colonialism, militarized and violence, we affirm our commitment – now more than ever – to Palestine, the Palestinian people, and indigenous sovereignty and racial justice everywhere." These circulations were novel in their organized intensity and the speed of their traction, with the Palestinian Feminist Collective's "Love Letter" to the Palestinian people¹² endorsed by programs, departments, organizations, and grassroots movements nationally and globally. Palestine's allies in the U.S. academy insisted on their stance against Zionism amid increasing legal, political, social, and institutional pressure.

However, being anti-Zionist is not the same as supporting Palestine. Asian American studies, and ethnic studies more broadly, need to protect, uplift, and give space (material, personal, and political) to Palestinian students, faculty (especially junior), postdocs, staff, organizers, activists, artists, and humans knowing that speaking up about Palestine is criminalized, punished, dangerous, and isolating. The many battles on U.S. campuses reveal the ongoingness of colonial silencing in the U.S. academy. Now more than ever, scholars committed to decolonizing our systems of knowledge must protect and uplift Palestinian thinkers and writers, students, and activists and their allies.

While wars continue even when they are said to be over, there are also the nonendings of homeland, kinship, joint struggle, music, gardens, and life. The collection of writing and artwork in this issue addresses the “holes of memory”¹³ in popular and academic discourses about people who dwell in the “space between”¹⁴ – between nations and states, between homes and lands, between life and loss, and between memory and history. They articulate the intimacies, tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions that reflect the complex lives of the displaced and the non-endings and afterlives of warfare. Included in this collection is the detailing of the complex processes of life-making, memory-making, and narration that call out the strategic silences of the self-serving archives of the nation-state. Our contributors explore the ongoingness and afterlives of war as they continue to search for and make safety, and the beautiful worlds they build—somewhere in between there and here, past and present, wholeness and fragment, love and fury, and resolve and irreconcilability. They teach us about the struggle to make ends meet physically, mentally, individually, collectively, affectively, spiritually, culturally, and materially, as well as the joys and rebirths in the process. Their words demonstrate that there are other tellers of the way things have been, and great envisioners of the way that things can be, in the larger goal to demilitarize and decolonize our ways of knowing and being.

Notes

1. Suheir Hammad, “First Writing Since,” *Meridians* 2, no. 2 (2002).
2. YẾN LÊ ESPRITU and Lan Duong, “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art,” *SIGNS* 43, no. 3 (2018).
3. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary>.
4. Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho, eds., *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
5. Laura Bush, November 16, 2001, quoted in Kim Berry, “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 137–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23524156>.
6. <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>
7. The Right of Return for Palestinians has been systematically denied by the state of Israel despite the fact that it is a universally recognized right, provided for in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Resolution 194 (III) in the UN General Assembly.
8. For more on these intersections, see Steven Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
9. Rabab Abdulhadi and Dana M. Olwan, “Introduction: Shifting Geographies of Knowledge and Power: Palestine and American Studies,” *American Studies* 67, no. 4 (December 2015): 993, my emphasis. Here, they are speaking of the 2014 massacre in Gaza.
10. “Al-Kolak Family and Affected Families in Gaza,” retrieved from the Family’s GoFundMe page at https://uk.gofundme.com/f/alkolak-family-and-affected-families-in-gaza?utm_campaign=p_cp_url&utm_medium=os&utm_source=customer. Please note: funds are no longer accepted.

11. E. Basher, [@SometimesPooh], Twitter post, “Tonight, I put the kids to sleep in our bedroom. So that when we die, we die together and no one would live to mourn the loss of one another,” May 12, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SometimesPooh/status/1392612906089525251>.
12. The Palestinian Feminist Collective, “A Love Letter to Our People in Palestine,” *Jadaliyya*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23701> (accessed August 26, 2021).
13. Ahmad H. Sa’idi and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
14. YẾN LÊ ESPRITU, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Acknowledgments

I thank the contributors of this issue for pulling through with us during this pandemic, during times of such unspeakable grief, and celebrating what we have done together.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

Dr. Lila Sharif (she/her/hers) is an assistant professor of Asian American Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign. She is the first Palestinian to earn a Ph.D. in ethnic studies which she earned alongside a Ph.D. in sociology. Her work conceptualizes land through a global indigenous perspective. Her first book is about how Palestine’s olive—which has been cultivated there for 7,000 years—becomes an important site for Palestinian decolonial aspirations. She is a cofounding member of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective and Steering Committee Co-Lead of the Palestinian Feminist Collective. Learn more: www.lilasharif.com.