

ROUNDTABLE: DISPLACED SCHOLARS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

## Decolonizing Displacement Research: Between Autoethnography as a Method of Resistance

Katty Alhayek<sup>1</sup>  and Basileus Zeno<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>School of Professional Communication, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada and

<sup>2</sup>Department of Politics, York University, Toronto, Canada

**Corresponding author:** Katty Alhayek; Email: [katty.alhayek@torontomu.ca](mailto:katty.alhayek@torontomu.ca)

Over the past decade, there have been increasing numbers of displaced scholars from the Middle East and Africa who have come under sustained pressures and threats from their governments; only a few of them have been able to relocate to European and North American academia through scholarships and grants.<sup>1</sup> Even these temporary solutions for displaced scholars rarely result in sustainable institutional solidarity in the form of permanent teaching or professorial positions. The lack of institutional support, coupled with discriminatory and racialized immigration policies, pushes these few fortunate scholars to either accept exploitative conditions perpetuated by the neoliberal economy or leave academia altogether to support their families. These challenges, along with draconian economic sanctions and restrictions imposed by the US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) on citizens of countries such as Syria, Sudan, Iran, and Cuba are only a snapshot of what displaced scholars endure on a daily basis while trying to do research, care for their families, and compete with scholars with privileged citizenship status for shrinking opportunities in the academic job market.

In a world dominated by nation-states and informed by what W. E. B. Du Bois called the global “color line,” freedom of mobility for some and restrictions on others has become a version of “racial segregation on an international scale.”<sup>2</sup> When displaced scholars from countries targeted by the United States plan to conduct fieldwork, they gradually learn that dominant and dominating Eurocentric power structures maintain and reproduce the coloniality of knowledge and scientific racism by several means. These include: (a) restricting displaced scholars mobility (by inequalities in passport value); (b) stealing their time and savings (with paperwork, fees, and waiting for appointments with embassies and visa centers); (c) limiting their access to financial resources and grants (with different eligibility criteria for noncitizens); (d) discrediting non-Western credentials and literature (such as non-English or French publications and degrees); and (e) suppressing their embodied

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a lack of comprehensive reports that trace numbers of scholars and academics who remained in or returned to their home countries or who migrated or sought asylum in the EU or North America or fled to neighboring countries. One recent exception is the 2021 report from the Institute of International Education’s Scholar Rescue Fund, which surveyed scholars who completed fellowships between 2003 and 2019. The report found that although the majority had not returned to their home countries, many of them were making significant impacts on their home countries and continued to stay connected with places they had been forced to leave. To learn more, see Evgenia Valuy and Jodi Sanger, “To Rescue Scholars Is to Rescue the Future: An Impact Study of the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund (2002–2020),” Institute of International Education, April 2021, <https://iie.widen.net/s/r1bczggkjq/to-rescue-scholars-is-to-rescue-the-future>.

<sup>2</sup> Polly Pallister-Wilkins, *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives* (London: Verso Books, 2022), 24.

experiences (which are stigmatized as biased, nonscientific, nonobjective reflections). Consequently, marginalized people and displaced scholars are systematically objectified and treated as muted informants whose voices are only heard when scholars from the Global North collect them as data during their funded and usually multisited fieldwork.

This pattern of unequal power relations is among the continuous legacies of colonialism and Eurocentric modern social theories that constitute cultural others as an object of study but not as producers of valid scholarly knowledge. The coloniality of knowledge is manifested in unequal mobility and access to field sites, a monopoly over representation, and the gatekeeping of sources of knowledge. Therefore, the decolonization project in research is about “transforming the institution of research, the deep underlying structures and taken-for-granted ways of organizing, conducting, and disseminating research and knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> In this essay, we argue that autoethnography is a method of resistance that historically marginalized and displaced scholars should use as a critical tool to destabilize Euro-American norms and transgress the national order of things.

Initially, autoethnography as a method received harsh criticism from scholars who consider it “navel-gazing” and assumed that researchers were necessarily objective observers who do research from a neutral and impersonal stance.<sup>4</sup> However, the “reflexive turn” in the 1980s opened the door for some disciplines of social sciences to slowly accept autoethnography and to value lived experiences as a valid form of scientific knowledge. Although many scholars now recognize that autoethnography can be rigorous, analytical, and theoretically and empirically grounded, its legitimacy continues to be questioned in social science fields such as ours: political science and media studies, especially with the computational, big data turn in social science and the humanities in the last decade.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, “betweenner autoethnography” can serve as a decolonizing qualitative inquiry tool in migration and displacement research in and from the Middle East and beyond.<sup>6</sup> As junior scholars from Syria who have experienced displacement firsthand and have lived in North America for the last twelve years, we adopt a “betweenner” position, referring to the experience of living in and between two cultures (Syria and North America) that informs our praxis and writings.<sup>7</sup> As betweenners, we use our positionality not to reify or essentialize our identities but to “situate ourselves in the socially constructed, fluid space from which we are writing, thinking, and giving meaning to the experiences” that we and others who are displaced and racialized share in the context of systemic power struggle.<sup>8</sup> As betweenners we acknowledge that we simultaneously inhabit both intense precarity, as displaced Syrians without protective status, and a certain privilege related to our academic standing as scholars in North America.

We propose a critical approach to decolonizing the transdisciplinary field of migration and displacement research, illustrating it through our work focusing particularly on migrant and displaced populations in and from the Middle East. We contend that this approach should be applicable in other similarly transdisciplinary, historically freighted, and politically charged fields. Drawing on our decade of experiences as displaced scholars and betweenners, we highlight how issues of power and difference have confronted both our

<sup>3</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “On Tricky Ground: Researching the Native in the Age of Uncertainty,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Holt, “Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 1 (2003): 18–28; Sara Delamont, “The Only Honest Thing: Autoethnography, Reflexivity and Small Crises in Fieldwork,” *Ethnography and Education* 4, no. 1 (2009): 51–63.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Kitchin, “Big Data, New Epistemologies and Paradigm Shifts,” *Big Data & Society* 1, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951714528481>.

<sup>6</sup> Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira, *Betweenner Autoethnographies: A Path towards Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira, *Betweenner Talk: Decolonizing Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Praxis* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

research interlocutors (marginalized populations moving across borders, boundaries, and borderlands) and ourselves. We illustrate how these issues operate through the vectors of race, class, gender, sexuality, and national origin, and we describe how we have come to understand them, at both the epistemological and methodological levels.

We contribute to a growing literature that tackles the colonality of displacement and migration studies.<sup>9</sup> To produce decolonizing research, we use three cross-disciplinary concepts as analytical tools to challenge Euro-American ontological hegemony. The first analytical tool is intersectionality, which helps to address the complexity of marginalized communities' lived experiences in relation to systems of domination.<sup>10</sup> We demonstrate how analyzing one category alone produces a distorted image of the experience and predicament of displacement, and how to take account of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other social categories to capture the multidimensional nature and complexity of the experiences of displaced peoples. The second tool is self-reflexivity. Research is always "value-laden and reflects the power structures within which the researcher operates."<sup>11</sup> Reflexive ethics and practices allow us to account for the dialectical and reciprocal workings of power in the research process and theorization. The third tool is the use of "ethics as method," which is particularly essential when investigating the use of digital technologies by displaced communities and the effects of technological changes on these communities. Practicing ethics as method invites scholars to follow a process-based approach in how they make their ethical decisions around research issues such as harm, factors that should always be present in the minds of researchers, even when they seem to be invisible.<sup>12</sup> Together these tools equip us to intervene in the interest of a decolonized future for the field of migration and displacement research and practice in the Middle East and beyond.

### Intersectionality and Displacement Research

The experience of displacement is one of intense vulnerability. It is a product of two parallel, complex worlds. One world sits at the intersection of systems of oppression like racism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, authoritarianism, classism, and capitalism. The second world exists in the lived experiences of displaced populations and their complex identities as they move across their countries of origin, transit, and destination. Intersectionality provides a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the complexity of displacement's causes and consequences, and how it is lived.<sup>13</sup> It asserts that social categories—such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, and national origin—work simultaneously at both the individual level and in relationship to the social, economic, cultural, and political systems individuals navigate.

As scholars displaced by the conflict in Syria, we have found intersectionality an invaluable tool with which to engage critically in the field of migration and displacement in a way that is true to our experience. Moreover, it has given us a language with which to describe the subject through our experience in a way that is not just legible within ongoing critical academic and policy debates but contributes to pushing them forward. As we watched how a

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Lucy Mayblin and Joe Turner, *Migration Studies and Colonialism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021); and Rebecca Hamlin, *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar, and Linda Supik, *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Patricia Nagy Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser, *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Annette Markham, "Ethic as Method, Method as Ethic: A Case for Reflexivity in Qualitative ICT Research," *Journal of Information Ethics* 15, no. 2 (2006): 37–55.

<sup>13</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1990): 1241–99; Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2016).

decade-long humanitarian crisis and devastating war affected all aspects of life for our community members, we were committed in our scholarship to developing critical, decolonial research questions that contributed to interpreting and designing beneficial policy for this community. We chose case studies that helped us fight Orientalist and self-orientalizing representations of Syrians particularly in mainstream online media, which robbed Syrian refugees of their agency and made invisible their struggle, suffering, and resistance.<sup>14</sup> Highlighting the peculiar and highly variable ways that gender, education, class, age, family status, and place of origin intersect, we have documented the complex stories of different groups of displaced Syrians.<sup>15</sup>

As educators, we have been particularly interested in the stark realities faced by displaced young people seeking education both within Syria as well as in wealthy Global North countries like the United States.<sup>16</sup> The lens provided by intersectional analysis has allowed us to show how even students who overcome educational gaps and have been able to attend schools are still subject to an alienating process that constructs a variety of barriers between students based on class, race, place of origin, gender, ability, religion, and parental political affiliation.

### Self-Reflexivity and Displacement Research

The process of knowledge production on migration and displacement is rife with inequality and misrepresentation. The human tragedies in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, among other places, have driven the total world population of displaced people to unprecedented heights.<sup>17</sup> Between 2012 and 2022, the field of migration and displacement studies in and from the Middle East and beyond has grown correspondingly. Academics who are concerned with refugees' visibility and representations have long advocated for a greater recognition of refugees' agency as historical actors rather than simply as voiceless victims, or what Lisa Malkki describes as "speechless emissaries."<sup>18</sup> However, the last ten years have shown that this advocacy has not reached the academic and journalistic mainstream. We have observed a broad trend of Global North scholars doing ethnographic fieldwork, surveys, and interviews in the most vulnerable displaced communities without any acknowledgment of relations of power and how that influences research outcomes. Some sites like the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan were filled with "camp tourists" who snapped pictures of refugees without any effort at understanding the diversity of the Syrians' experiences based on categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, and place of origin.<sup>19</sup> This is simply a continuation of the colonial gaze and dehumanization of displaced subjects in and from the Global South.<sup>20</sup> This context demonstrates the need for academics to incorporate reflexive practices that account for "the dialectical and reciprocal workings of power, including the changing position of the researcher within the research process, the sociohistorical context, and the changing relations of power within which the research participants operate."<sup>21</sup> Self-reflexivity also can help researchers iteratively hone their research ethics in terms of

<sup>14</sup> See Katty Alhayek, "Double Marginalization: The Invisibility of Syrian Refugee Women's Perspectives in Mainstream Online Activism and Global Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 4 (2014): 696–700.

<sup>15</sup> See Katty Alhayek, "Untold Stories of Syrian Women Surviving War," *Syria Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 1–30.

<sup>16</sup> See Basileus Zeno, "Education and Alienation: The Case of Displaced Syrians and Refugees," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 4 (2021): 284–94.

<sup>17</sup> According to UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, there were more than 108.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide by the end of 2022; UNHCR, "Global Trends 2022," 14 June 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org>.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 377–404.

<sup>19</sup> For "camp tourists," see Katty Alhayek, "Syrian Refugees in the Media," *Middle East Report* 278 (2016): 10–11.

<sup>20</sup> Kalpana Ram, "Gender, Colonialism, and the Colonial Gaze," in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (New York: Wiley, 2018), 1–7.

<sup>21</sup> Hesse-Biber et al., *Feminist Perspectives*, 18.

their personal relationship to power.<sup>22</sup> In sum, reflexive practices should be attuned to issues of power at the intersection of systems of oppression as well the lived experiences of displaced populations and researchers.

In parallel with the general increase in the population of displaced persons, the displacement of academics also has increased—a result of war, as in our case, but also of government crackdowns on academic freedom. For example, according to Human Rights Watch, in Turkey alone, since 2016 more than 5,800 Turkish academics have been dismissed from public universities under emergency decrees.<sup>23</sup> Even with the field of displacement studies growing so rapidly, displaced scholars with relevant interests, training, and personal experience have struggled to find a footing. Academic scholars from the Global North who research migration and displacement should not only advocate for the recognition of refugees as historical actors; they also must recognize the expertise of their colleagues from the Global South who have experienced displacement. Reflexive practices throughout the process of conducting and writing research on displacement should value displaced scholars' past experiences and acknowledge their lived experiences as a valid form of knowledge. This does not mean that scholars with no experience of displacement should burden their colleagues who have experienced displacement with additional emotional labor. Rather it is a call for all scholars to reflect on their positions of power and open the door for displaced scholars by engaging with their work and facilitating their efforts to continue to contribute to these discussions. Promising models along these lines include the efforts of the New University in Exile Consortium and the recent interdisciplinary initiative, the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Global Academy.<sup>24</sup>

When reflecting on our experiences as displaced scholars in North American academia, we find it ironic that our academic expertise has always been taken seriously when we do research on issues such as sectarianism, media, and conflict, which positions us as detached, objective experts.<sup>25</sup> However, in the last ten years, whenever we have incorporated reflexive practices in our displacement-related research, addressing the multiple positionalities we occupy as displaced scholars, simultaneously inhabiting both intense precarity and a certain privilege related to our academic standing and the connections that standing has enabled us to develop, we have been faced with complaints from reviewers, such as “You’re not writing a novel,” and subsequent requests to delete any self-reflexive language for the proposed academic publication to proceed.<sup>26</sup> This is one example of the colonial legacies that still govern many academic fields and prevent the development of gray areas where a scholar can be both researcher and situational participant.

Although we have encountered sincere solidarity in academia, especially in the Trump era, when it comes to our scholarship, some influential senior scholars in our fields who have expressed sentiments of sympathy at the personal level have nonetheless expressed concerns and doubts regarding our academic careers at the institutional level. For example, just a few weeks before the COVID-19 announcement, we had a meeting with a senior scholar

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Wedeen, “Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (2010): 255–72; Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Timothy Pachirat, *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Government Targeting Academics,” 14 May 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/14/turkey-government-targeting-academics>.

<sup>24</sup> The New University in Exile Consortium, “Our Mission,” 6 June 2022, <https://newuniversityinexileconsortium.org/history/mission/our-mission/>; Middle East Studies Association, “Global Academy,” 2023, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/global-academy>.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Basileus Zeno, “The Making of Sects: Boundary Making and the Sectarianisation of the Syrian Uprising, 2011–2013,” *Nations and Nationalism* 28, no. 3 (2022): 1040–60.

<sup>26</sup> This is especially the case in political science and technology studies. An example of a publication for which one of the authors was asked to delete any self-reflexivity language is Katty Alhayek’s “ICTs, Agency, and Gender in Syrian Activists’ Work among Syrian Refugees in Jordan,” *Gender, Technology and Development* 20, no. 3 (2016): 333–51.

in Middle East studies who questioned the validity of our research and ethnographic methods because at the time we could not conduct fieldwork with Syrian refugees in countries other than the United States. We reminded the scholar that as pending asylum seekers with expired Syrian passports, our research design was shaped by the immobility of our bodies across racist borders. Still, he looked at us, shook his head, and said: “I know . . . I sympathize, but I’m sorry, the discipline does not care!”

In our experience, the major exception to this colonial state of academia and what is counted as “worthy” knowledge or not lies in the field of autoethnography, which turns the researcher’s membership in the class of a social or political group into the object of study, collapsing the traditional distinction between the roles of researcher and situational participant.<sup>27</sup> Autoethnographers acknowledge the researcher’s influence on research and the role of emotionality and subjectivity, and instead of hiding or disguising these effects invite the reader (public or academic) to enter their world and engage with their analysis. As Norman Denzin puts it, the autoethnographer “inscribes the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life.”<sup>28</sup> An illustrative example is the seminal work of Shahram Khosravi, who has used the lived experience of border crossing to decolonize migration and displacement research and expose the capitalist-oriented, racially discriminating ways of thinking that govern the contemporary border regime.<sup>29</sup> The academic journal *International Review of Qualitative Research* is exceptional for nourishing autoethnography and reflexive practices in research. Through this venue part of our displacement story was documented.<sup>30</sup>

### Ethics as Method Approach

In our efforts to decolonize migration and displacement research and practice, we have embraced ethics as method as a general approach to organizing, conducting, and disseminating knowledge about displaced populations. By “ethics as method” we refer to “a stance that views ethics as a dialogic process rather than a set of values or principles.”<sup>31</sup> Embodying ethics as method means adopting a process-based approach to ethical decision-making, with intersectionality and self-reflexivity at the heart of the process.<sup>32</sup> Instead of just applying standardized ethical codes of conduct like those found in the guidelines of the institutional review board (IRB) in the United States, ethical research decision-making should be inductively and iteratively developed and redeveloped at every stage of the research and writing process, based on displaced participants’ perspectives and their safety and protection from intersectional forms of structural inequality.<sup>33</sup> The IRB itself can function to reinforce

<sup>27</sup> Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design*.

<sup>28</sup> Norman Denzin, “Performing [Auto] Ethnography Politically,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 25, no. 3 (2003): 268.

<sup>29</sup> Shahram Khosravi, *“Illegal” Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Bryant Keith Alexander et al., “‘I’m Sorry My Hair Is Blocking Your Smile’: A Performative Assemblage and Intercultural Dialogue on the Politics of Hair and Place,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 12, no. 4 (2019): 339–62; Katty Alhayek et al., “Collaborative Autoethnographic Writing as Communal Curative,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 15, no. 4 (2023): 544–70.

<sup>31</sup> Markham, “Ethic as Method,” 50.

<sup>32</sup> Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, “Ethical Concerns in Internet Research,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James C. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Elsevier Press, 2015), 606–13.

<sup>33</sup> Markham and Buchanan (“Ethical Concerns in Internet research”) describe how ethical guidelines for conducting research with human subjects, like IRB protocols, have centered around three principles: (1) respect for persons—this has been translated to informed consent; (2) justice—the inclusion of research participants should be fair so that the benefits and risks of the research will be shared and not limited to specific groups; and (3) beneficence—this is based on risk-benefit analysis: if the benefits of research greatly outweigh the risks it can be implemented. Drawing on the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) guidelines, Markham and Buchanan outline four complications arising from these principles, especially when conducting online research with human subjects:

academic complicity in maintaining colonial, racial relations of power and research ethics discourse.<sup>34</sup> The very process of obtaining IRB approval is ethnocentrically biased because it assumes “a population of literate, research-savvy, English-speaking, well-off participants, with access to modern technologies regardless of where in the world they are located.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, IRB guidelines enact a form of what Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein call “colonial unknowing,” referring to the active erasure of academia’s complicity in the production of contemporary contexts of oppression and racialized social injustices.<sup>36</sup> This requires, as Sheeva Sabati insists, “reframing of research ethics that are grounded in the very material effects of knowledge production.”<sup>37</sup>

Some of the ethical concerns surrounding research conducted with displaced participants via the Internet became increasingly evident as scholars had to adapt to new challenges and navigate safe ways to access field sites in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on our research expertise with our community members in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, one of the major ethical considerations that we wrestled with was the question of when to and when not to disclose the real names of our interviewees. This consideration is vital to protecting interviewees’ privacy and to avoid exposing them to any possible future harm. At the same time, many of our interviewees wanted their real names to be published with the final research outcomes because they perceived their time and sharing their experiences with us as a form of intellectual contribution to our research that should be recognized. This challenged us to practice better social inquiry and to wrestle with the institution of the IRB, especially the rules of avoiding personally identifiable information and protecting

1) Human subjects. This principle emerged from biomedical research and does not account for potential ethical questions in Internet research such as harm, vulnerability, and identifiable information.

2) Privacy. Boyd’s concept of private publics challenges the traditional dichotomy between private and public on the Internet.

3) Informed consent. This principle also emerged from biomedical research, but it is problematic in online research. For example, it is unclear how a researcher can gain informed consent in anonymous chatroom. Instead, Markham and Buchanan argue that harm (more so than informed consent) should be the central consideration.

4) Personally identifiable information. There is no consensus on how to handle and protect personally identifiable information online. The authors recommend that instead of strict adherence to parameters of regulatory bodies, researcher should keep their ethical decision making active and case based. In fact, many people are surprised to learn that their social media posts can be used by researchers without their consent.

For more information, see Danah Boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); and Casey Fiesler and Nicholas Proferes, “‘Participant’ Perceptions of Twitter Research Ethics,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118763366>.

<sup>34</sup> In the United States, the passage of the National Research Act of 1974 created policies referred to as the “Common Rule,” requiring universities to establish institutional review boards to uphold regulations regarding research with human subjects. These regulations were largely a response to the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, a study conducted between 1932 and 1972 on a group of nearly 400 African Americans with syphilis by the United States Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study deceived the black participants by telling them they were receiving treatment for bad blood. However, the study’s true goal was to observe the effects of syphilis left untreated. As a result 100 participants died. This example illustrates the broader racial and colonial entanglements of academia.

<sup>35</sup> Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design*, 122.

<sup>36</sup> Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633283>.

<sup>37</sup> Anticolonial scholars like Sheeva Sabati explain that although guidelines like the IRB protocol were created in the 1970s as a response to cases of exceptional violence, they fall far short of overcoming (and in some ways reinforce) the racial and colonial entanglements that remain the foundations of research and institutions in settler colonial countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and others; Sheeva Sabati, “Upholding ‘Colonial Unknowing’ through the IRB: Reframing Institutional Research Ethics,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 25, no. 9/10 (2019): 1060.

<sup>38</sup> Although scholars in the Global North had privileged access to vaccines and boosters, most displaced persons and illegalized people had limited access to healthcare, and many lost their jobs and loved ones. Yet they are frequently treated as mere “data,” amplifying global systems of domination and oppression.

privacy and our commitments to our research participants. Working with human subjects means that the resultant academic knowledge is co-created by scholars and research participants, so the ethical decision we reached was that if a participant was already publicly known through social media or mainstream media for the ideas and positions they also shared with us, then we could respect their choice to use their full real name. However, things were riskier for participants who were not active publicly but who insisted on using their real full names. Based on in-depth discussion with the participants, understanding their current circumstances and legal residency status, in such cases we used first names when we estimated that there was no harm in doing so.<sup>39</sup> This ethical dilemma and resolution highlight one way to engage in antiracist and anticolonial research ethics: by taking research participants' agency seriously and respecting their freedom of expression and intellectual rights, and at the same time balancing exposure to harm and risks with an intersectional lens.

A similarly charged ethical issue in academic research on displacement arises with the uncritical formulation of research questions in a way that “may perpetuate or reinforce harmful discourses and frames for interpreting and designing policy.”<sup>40</sup> Over the years of the Syrian refugee crisis, we encountered several studies in which scholars examined the attitudes of refugees from the Middle East (mainly Syrians and Iraqis) toward Jews in European countries like Germany.<sup>41</sup> Without addressing the intersectional broader contexts of injustice and colonialism, these studies and research questions were generally framed in reductionist and cultural ways that accused refugees of antisemitism without analyzing the broader contexts of European colonialism and global politics that have contributed to both anti-Judaism and Islamophobia. This reductionist analysis contributes to discourse and policies that harm displaced populations fleeing authoritarianism and violence to Western, wealthy contexts that are products of white supremacy and colonialism.

Finally, we want to emphasize that decolonizing academia generally and migration and displacement research specifically has been a long struggle and cannot be achieved by individual researchers alone. “Betweener” autoethnography can serve as a method of resistance that historically marginalized and displaced scholars can use to destabilize Euro-American norms and transgress the national order of things. Nevertheless, true decolonizing efforts require “institutional commitments to shift resources and research practices to forms of knowledge that are anti-colonial.”<sup>42</sup> We hope to continue the fight with colleagues and institutions that work toward a decolonized future of academia that brings justice to racialized and marginalized communities and contexts.

<sup>39</sup> Based on discussions and understanding of the larger context, we believe that if participants are still displaced inside Syria or neighboring countries, it is better and safer to consistently use pseudonyms and omit identifiable information. However, if displaced participants are in more secure countries like Germany and Canada and have secured legal permanent status then risks are lower, and if requested by participants first names can be used. Additional intersectional factors like gender dynamics, engagement with an abusive domestic relation, and having family members in Syria also are important considerations in risk assessment.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Masterson and Lama Mourad, “The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in the Syrian Refugee Crisis,” *MENA Politics Newsletter* 2 (2019): 24.

<sup>41</sup> There are several studies coming out of the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism at Indiana University. See, for example, Günther Jikeli, “Attitudes of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees in Germany toward Jews,” in *Confronting Antisemitism in Modern Media, the Legal and Political Worlds*, ed. Armin Lange et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 239–68.

<sup>42</sup> Sabati, “Upholding ‘Colonial Unknowing,’” 1061.

**Cite this article:** Katty Alhayek and Basileus Zeno (2023). “Decolonizing Displacement Research: Betweener Autoethnography as a Method of Resistance.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, 548–555. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001071>