

# Conclusion

## *Closing Conversation*

### *Lessons in Humanitarianisms from the Global South*

Arzoo Osanloo and Cabeiri deBergh Robinson



*We began this project in a darkened café one cold, rainy Seattle day in the fall of 2018. We used scraps of paper to chart our ideas. We kept talking until, some hours and many espressos later, we found the thread connecting our interests in Islamic humanitarianism and misperceptions about migrant destinations.*

*A year and a half later, pandemic lockdowns and travel restrictions hit just as our seminar series was scheduled to begin, and in the end, we had to begin planning anew. At first, it felt like something had been lost. But then we reflected on what we had learned from teaching online for a quarter, and we realized that our work could have enduring and accessible outcomes. This sparked our format of paired conversations—recorded, indexed, and accessibility captioned—and curated enduring teaching resources. Over the years of preparation and production, our idea of the global South transformed; our goals and our conversations shifted from a conference model to global outreach, and we were able to include people from refugee camps and scholars from around the world with limited travel ability. Our multilingual Q&A sessions looked very different from what we had experienced in traditional university lecture halls. Quarterly virtual meetings with our working group members and speakers led to discussions of ongoing research (people writing books, dissertations, articles) and of the courses that many of us teach on related topics. These discussions led to an eventual decision to write this kind of volume.*

*This conclusion, in a similar vein, is a conversation between the editors, coming together over coffee and tea on an uncharacteristically sweltering Seattle summer day in July 2023.*

**Arzoo:** When we started this project, my main concern was that media outlets—progressive, mainstream, or conservative—as well as people we talked to regularly—whether they were our family and friends, in the sorts of lay communities we inhabit, or students, scholars, and researchers, in our professional lives—had all expressed a sense, almost implicitly, that forced migrants are finding their way to Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, or what we refer to as the global North, when, in fact, both of us knew that to be totally incorrect. And this created a significant misunderstanding about what humanitarian care is, what it looks like, who is involved, what it means in such contexts, and, especially, who provides that care.

So, we set out to do an inquiry into exactly this question of what the understanding of humanitarianism would be if we focused on who is doing the caregiving. And then we thought, if we dared to ask new questions and look at things in new ways, what would we learn?

**Cabeiri:** I remember, too, that we felt from early in our conversations that another thing that was missing was recognition of historical regional exclusions in the definition of the problem. So, you know, in addition to this idea about where people are hosted, there are problems related to categorization—who even counts at all? I think from there, too, came our commitment to the concept of “the global South.” It wasn’t just a geographical designation that reflected an empirical reality; it was also a concept that allowed us to question the historical power of hierarchies that made the processes of producing differently valued categories of migration invisible and continue to make them invisible.

**Arzoo:** Yeah, I love that. And I think you coming at it as a scholar of refugees in South Asia and history and me coming at it more from practicing immigration and refugee and asylum law allowed us to arrive at that question of how categories—particularly, in this case, colonial legal categories—established what we now have as these categories that are denuded of their history, of their politics.

I think the other thing that’s important to consider is how some of the stories that we tell help us to see how the Refugee Conventions actually excluded certain categories of forced migrants, particularly those from the global South. We see that with Pam Ballinger’s invocation of “patriation” as a project that was in part necessitated by the exclusion from the refugee definition of ethnic Italians displaced by postwar decolonization, or with Emma Meyer’s focus on the “evacuee” as a bureaucratic category for managing displacement. That category developed originally in postwar South Asia, also in the absence of an international process of willingness to think of World War II–related or decolonizing displacement as a “refugee” problem.

**Cabeiri:** Yeah, absolutely. And, as James Pangilinan's chapter shows, other decolonizing nation-states, such as the Philippines, claimed an ability to host refugees as a way of asserting independence within the newly emerging post-colonial and post-World War II world order. So, the relationship between sovereignty and humanitarian care is crucial.

On a related point, I'm thinking about how our early reviewers of the manuscript proposal expressed doubt on whether chapters related to Romania or Bosnia should be included in a collection focused on the global South. We had such a strong instinct that they should, because our understanding of the term wasn't primarily geographical. Yet, including their contributions pushed us to elaborate our understanding of the global South. We understood the term to be connected to colonial and inherited categories, and our sense of the vernacular was also part of this . . . but we also needed to articulate the "in-relation" aspect of it.

**Arzoo:** That's right. And it's important not to think in purely geopolitical terms, because even in Europe, we saw groups that were caught up in other fraught contexts, such as environmental disaster, and who could not avail themselves of the protections of the Refugee Conventions, given the very limited legal purposes for which they were created. For instance, Cristian Capotescu's chapter explored how people came together in socialist Romania to offer support to others who were dealing with a catastrophic flood, by delivering humanitarian aid through private networks.

**Cabeiri:** And his concept of "graying" also asks us to think beyond the global North/global South divide. There was something very different about the ways that the Socialist, authoritarian world worked that produced different power imbalances than those that operated in the postcolonial era, engagements that a lot of the global South literature talks about. It was only possible for humanitarian aid to operate by using the gray economy, exploiting private networks, and accommodating social forms on the ground.

Many similar patterns come to the foreground. Kathie Friedman-Kasaba's chapter, for example, examines "a lucky break," to characterize the often chance nature of clearing the legal and other hurdles required to achieve humanitarian protection, which depends so much on personal connections and what relationships are forged. So, humanitarian work operates and expands in these spaces through the labor of caring work done in private networks, by local hosts, often by refugees themselves giving aid and refuge to other refugees.

**Arzoo:** This was so important to many of our contributors! These include the use of these private interactions, as Amira Mittermaier's chapter explores

through the idea of *kbidma* (service), which is well-known in many Muslim societies. There is also the fact that these local actors are often circumventing some of the legal structures where there are incompatibilities between the requirements of international relief organizations and the concerns of host states. I am thinking about Gözde Ege's chapter that takes seriously the work that goes on, not just of laypersons in the camps but also of the refugee-turned-manager. It also challenged us to think critically about what it means that such an industry even exists. The world of "development" as ensconced in the context of a refugee camp is juxtaposed by the temporary and supposed emergency nature of humanitarian relief, laying bare layers of contradiction in which people are forced to live or endure, as it were.

**Cabeiri:** You know, other volumes have tried to address caring traditions outside of the international regime by focusing on charitable organizations and the role they play in caring for refugees in places where humanitarian organizations do not operate. On the other hand, most of the work on how the humanitarian world expanded is really thinking about legal and institutional expansion. This volume makes, I think, an interesting additional contribution by highlighting that, whether it was encountering the regional definitions of "the refugee" or understandings of what giving relationships look like, NGOs had to build on the networks that had been established. This is why, now, looking back, we see that localized vernacular understandings have worked their ways into what we now call "global humanitarianism."

**Arzoo:** Sure, and more broadly, Ilana Feldman pointed out that practices of refugee management (its legal forms, customs of aid provision, and policies of recognition) influenced contemporary global aid dynamics. That's another important element that we've considered through these chapters because many of our contributors were conducting research in contexts that fall under the UN's definition of a protracted refugee situation. And, as a result, we need to think not just about the vast majority of the world's refugees who are in the global South and never leave it but also about the ample numbers of forced migrants who do not fit within the technical definition of a "refugee."

**Cabeiri:** And life goes on; they're living in this very weird space that has been historically and legally defined as emergency, temporary, and liminal—for generations. And some of our contributions compel us to think further about what it means to live in liminality for a lifetime. How does that shape a life? I'm thinking about Megan Butler's meditation on what it means to reclaim a kind of psychic sovereignty for somebody who's been incarcerated in a camp for five years or more.

**Arzoo:** This reminds me of Khathaleeya Liamdee's account of the paradoxes and ambiguities of what she calls "unapproachable histories" of semi-secret or denied so-called "transit camps" that operated in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. This raises the issue, of course, that it's not possible to grapple fully with the impact of how the humanitarian practices of international aid organizations spread unevenly across Asia in so-called refugee-like situations unless one is willing to confront the politics of cultural ideas of refuge and hospitality in local contexts.

**Cabeiri:** Yes, and Tanzeen Doha raised this as well by invoking the Islamic concept of politically valued forced migration, which unravels the distinctions between migrant and refugee that are so important in international aid practices and legal statuses. His idea of the invocation of "deathworlds" really emphasized the importance of understanding non-Euro-Christian value systems as sources for organizing everyday living among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. And Mediha Sorma claimed that Kurdish women mothered the dead and also what she calls "toward death," both in resistance to state violence and in rejection of being seen as appropriate humanitarian subjects. Indeed, for many who consider themselves "refugee-warriors," it is not acceptable to be visual or narrative representatives of the humanitarian community's ability to care for the suffering if it also depends on occupying a space of nonagentive innocence.

**Arzoo:** This reminds me of your insight [chapter 11] into the importance of "deathwork." Your chapter started with that juxtaposition we were discussing earlier—how international aid organizations view events like earthquakes as "natural," purportedly nonpolitical, disasters, whereas Islamist organizations had a deeply political view of the conditions that contributed to unequal impacts and differences in access to aid. But deep public support for the Islamist groups' work developed from their ritual care for dead bodies, not only from their provisioning of relief to survivors.

**Cabeiri:** Yeah, you know, this dovetails with something that we thought was really important when we first conceptualized the project and that didn't really work out the way we thought it might, but that also worked out really well in another way. What I'm thinking about is the concept of "rethinking the human," which was a theme in our webinar series. We had challenged ourselves to think about new ways of talking about posthuman phenomena or social actors who are "other-than-human." We thought it might help us to understand the ways in which so many issues, including those that obviously require humanitarian responses—such as climate-change-related displacement and ecological-collapse-induced suffering—are still excepted from institutional and philosophical recognition as "humanitarian" problems. So, we were trying

to build on the concept of comparative humanitarianisms to find the language to explore how an expansion of the objects of care might emerge from regional or vernacular care traditions.

**Arzoo:** Right, in the volume, we see our contributors grappling with “time” and “care” simultaneously, showing, in a sense, that time does not stand still in the liminal state of being a refugee or forced migrant. By the same token, care, we have shown, is not only regionally diverse, but its meaning changes over time. Given the magnitude of the crisis of forced migration, we also have to think about how the political economy and neoliberalism intensify the problems related to these global displacements. The trajectory of the entire series led us to conclude that we have entered an age in which a big transformation is occurring, wherein an entire global regime around care—relief, aid, and repair—is displacing claims to rights. We refer to this new age as the “time of humanitarianism.”

**Cabeiri:** Yeah, that became so important to our final thinking! I thought it was so telling the way that you reflected in your chapter [6] on one of the consequences of the crisis as the enduring quality of benevolence. One of your key points is that with the ubiquity and ever-expanding reliance on charity, mercy, and, yes, care, we see a global shift in which the call to benevolence and care has overtaken the demand for rights. For me, that’s a worrisome paradigm to be sure.

**Arzoo:** Exactly. In the absence of meaningful human rights protections, which were supposed to accrue to refugees but never did, we see more and more people dependent on aid, relief, and other forms of care. In a setting in which people are without rights, living in legal limbo for a protracted period of time, they must make do with charity and handouts—with benevolence. This is not in keeping with the democratic promises of rights, human rights, or civil rights. Our contributors share this critique by highlighting and recognizing the inhumanity of (temporary) care in lieu of rights.

**Cabeiri:** Speaking on inhumanity, Sinan Antoon, the author of *The Book of Collateral Damage* (2020), didn’t write a chapter for the volume, but he gave a wonderful talk in our webinar series that inspired so many of our contributors. Part of that was his challenge to think about an object as something that has a presence in a humanitarian moment, and has an ability to reveal important, maybe unexpected, truths about experiences of violence and the conditions under which humanitarianism ultimately operates.

One of the moments I remember from his talk most vividly was about the “death” of a mosque. I remember when he first said that—“death” . . . What? Didn’t he mean “destruction”? But he meant “death,” and that’s really important, because part of what he was talking about is all the ways that wars disrupt,

destroy, and kill social connections and cultural inheritance, things that make people human in specific, valued, and important ways that exceed questions of whether they are kept alive. And it was in part because of how inspired our conversations became that we developed our idea to organize our stories around an object, or at least a conceptual object.

So, I guess, in a sense, we tried to take up his provocation.

**Arzoo:** Speaking of provocations, I remember back in 2002, when I began teaching my course on refugees, there was just a dearth of firsthand accounts of post–World War II refugees in the global South. And apparently, I wasn't alone in thinking this. Edward Said penned his appeal for such narratives in 1984 with “Permission to Narrate,” which was inspired by the rich literature of the inter- and postwar experiences of Jewish refugees fleeing Europe. Said was calling on Palestinian refugees to be the narrators of their own stories. Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* (2002) was one of the earliest published works to take up Said's provocation, and one that highlighted the experience of living a “suspended” life in protracted refugee situations.

**Cabeiri:** Yeah, and two decades later, we see our contributors fleshing out the sensorial qualities of living in, and with, the experiences of being held in suspension. One of the attributes or qualities of this sensorial world is the importance or attachment to objects. Here, I am thinking about Tiya Miles's incredible *All That She Carried* (2022), which links memory, affect, and social relations through significant and very tangible objects.

**Arzoo:** Right, in her case, it was about a sack that was passed down through generations that carried with it accretions of meaning; stories of power, too, were embedded and imbued in this object. Such objects contain layers of history and memory. In our case, our contributors also look at objects of care, and we see different ways in which they can offer relief: Jenna Grant's chapter explores how a barrette in a postwar context becomes imbued with meaning and memory. Rawan Arar's story shows how an item of clothing, her mother's embroidered denim shirt, becomes filled with emotion in the context of generational and protracted displacement. Stephanie Selover's chapter widens the lens to examine the macro-socio-political context of heritage objects and the meaning the international community gives to them as it determines which are worthy of saving and which are not. It's really important to acknowledge that people who have experienced long-term displacement have taken up Said's challenge very effectively with the genre of memoir.

**Cabeiri:** You know, the memoirs that took up those provocations became great teaching tools in addition to being valuable contributions to a global public

discussion. I think the authors in this volume—all of whom are scholars and some of whom have also experienced displacement, refugee aid, or asylum processes—were really successful at using the kernel of the story, whether an object, person, place, or idea, as a focal point around which to reveal the iterative processes by which scholars interpret the importance of things that seem ordinary. We really wanted to make it clear to students how we analyze what we discover in our research.

**Arzoo:** I was thrilled to learn that colleagues around the world are already using the webinars in their teaching. I already felt inspired after my students found the webinars relevant not only to the course but also to their broader education about forced migrants and the wider global political economy.

**Cabeiri:** I've also been really happy to see how positively undergrad students responded to those videos. I've been using them as integrated modules in courses that are relevant but not focused on the topic of humanitarianism or refugee studies. For instance, I use them in an upper-level undergraduate course on political Islam. The students have had great conversations around a module I created on "Islamic humanitarianism." It got students talking about how an idea of caring that embraces political activity as a part of human well-being challenges Western apolitical conceptions of humanitarian engagement. I've also integrated two modules into an introductory international studies course on social and cultural approaches to political issues—one on "Legal Exclusion from Refugee Recognition" and another on "Manus Island and the 'Humanitarian Solution,'" which paired webinar talks with memoirs. I've found that the diversity of materials approaching the themes and topics from different perspectives and via different mediums really connects with the students and leads to stimulating—and sometimes impassioned—conversations in discussion sections. So now I am looking forward to integrating these story-forward chapters into the course once this volume is out.

**Arzoo:** This has been a very generative project, and I know we are both looking forward to continuing it by hearing from our readers and adding more teaching materials to our website.

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