

**INCARCERATED CHILDHOOD AND THE POLITICS  
OF UNCHILDING**

Who has the right to a safe and protected childhood? *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding* deepens our understanding of children as political capital in the hands of those in power, critically engaging children's voices alongside archival, historical, and ethnographic material in Palestine. Offering the concept of "unchilding," Shalhoub-Kevorkian exposes the political work of violence designed to create, direct, govern, transform, and construct colonized children as dangerous, racialized others, enabling their eviction from the realm of childhood itself. Penetrating children's everyday intimate spaces and, simultaneously, their bodies and lives, unchilding works to enable a complex machinery of violence against Palestinian children: imprisonment, injuries, loss, trauma, and militarized political occupation. At the same time as the book documents violations of children's rights and the consequences this has for their present and future well-being, it charts children's resistance to and power to interrupt colonial violence, reclaiming childhood and, with it, Palestinian futures.

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# Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding

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*To all Palestinian children marching for their return,  
to their life without violence,  
to safety in their childhood,  
to a homeland without occupation, and  
to my family, daughters, and granddaughters,  
Evelyne and Gaby  
Maro, Tamar, Salpy, Georgiana, Sophia, and Le'a*

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## Preface

For many years, I have been involved as a scholar and researcher with the phenomenon of children living under conditions of unending cruelty and violence. As a Palestinian who grew up in Haifa under Israeli domination and who now lives in and has raised her daughters in a “conflict zone” – Occupied East Jerusalem – I am particularly interested in questions raised around children’s experiences in contexts of racial and structural violence. In the past, my own scholarship and activism have sought to address the political work involving children’s trauma when experiences of violence and of denial of that violence shape their lives. Yet in recent years by learning from children and conversing with an amazing community of friends and scholars, including Rosemary Sayigh, Rema Hammami, Nadim Rouhana, Jasbir Puar, Sherene Razack, Penny Green, Dorit Roer-Strier, Daphna Golan, David Lloyd, Saree Makdisi, Aijaz Ahmad, Katherine Franke, Kamala Visweswaran, and Lila Abu-Lughod, I have come to believe that the traditional theoretical frameworks for investigating such questions fail to grasp the complexity of childhood under conditions of continuous political violence and injustice.

The term “conflict zone” carries with it an ambiguous, almost neutral orientation toward the power asymmetry between those living in such an environment and powerholders. “War zone,” too, often assumes some measure of equality between the two “opposing sides.” Both terms mask specific historical conditions and racialized violent regimes – often established and reproduced through imperial and/or colonial projects – that define the circumstances of these conflicts. Therefore, scholarship on “children in conflict/war zones” often presents children as pitiable victims of violence. While children are indeed victims in contexts of violence, extant scholarship on children and violence often overlooks the political work of everyday experiences and the *intimacy* of such intrusions. Moreover, existing frameworks of analysis also fail to identify the power dynamics that silence, deny, and justify the violence directed toward children and the psychopolitical workings of such dynamics for generations to come.

This book documents the words and chronicles of Palestinian children. In working on this project, I consulted with the narratives of the elderly who survived the Nakba (the Palestinian catastrophe) and of their children who are still marked by violence in their lives and on their bodies. My analyses are framed by my observations as a Palestinian–Armenian social worker, criminologist, and sociolegal scholar. But they are also shaped by my own experiences as a child and descendant of survivors of the Palestinian Nakba and the Armenian Genocide, survivors who are still struggling to prevent further atrocities and realize a morally grounded acknowledgment of their pain and ability to survive.

The chapters of this book explore the logic of racialized violence targeted at Palestinian children. They examine what I define as the politics of *unchilding* wielded as a geopolitical, economic, and sociolegal tool that materially and symbolically marks children’s bodies, lives, and futures with violence. The logic of unchilding, I argue, is crucial to how Israel reinvents and reterritorializes itself through racialized, gendered, and colonial imaginaries and securitized and sacralized rationalizations. Unchilding is both historical and current, consisting of persistent security theologies which support the enactment of everyday and also emergency regulations; regimes of control and incarceration operating at the global, local, and psychological level; and the reordering of time and space through violence. It is a regime in motion that gains power in the mundane, in language, and in sponsored narratives in such a way as to produce fear and justify physical violence and the colonial infrastructure. But, as Kamala Visweswaran eloquently explained in her edited book *Everyday occupations*, “Occupations have a habit of turning massacres into genocides” (Visweswaran, 2013, p. 27). My study on unchilding further reveals the workings of such genocidal logic.

I must acknowledge that this book is limited because of its omission of the accounts of many Palestinian children living in various locations both within and outside historic Palestine. In particular, this book does not discuss the two to four million Palestinian children living in refugee camps and enduring exile throughout the world. Those Palestinian children are by no means erased from my moral or political consciousness.

## Acknowledgments

Palestinian children and their parents who shared with me their narratives, words, and silences are the backbone of the book. Their ordeals and thoughtful reflections, as well as their astounding insights and humane observations, guided my research and scholarship. They introduced me to their world and engaged with me in discussions which improved my critical analyses and became the book's main inspiration.

I am deeply grateful for the generous support that made the research and writing of this book possible. Fellowships, visiting scholarships, and grants, which I received from the LUCE Foundation, UN Women, the Israeli Science Foundation, Columbia University, University of California, Irvine, and Queen Mary University of London provided support and invaluable scholarly exchanges during various stages of writing this book.

I have always been blessed with enriching academic friendships that have influenced my work and analyses. I am particularly grateful to Rema Hammami, Nadim Rouhana, and Lila Abu-Lughod as friends and colleagues for their unending support, their careful reading and comments, and their continuous critical engagement with my work and ideas. I am also grateful to an unforgettable friend, Michael B. Preston, whose guidance, suggestions, love, and kindness never left me despite his passing three years before the completion of this book.

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Being a visiting scholar at Columbia University allowed me to pursue this research, and I am grateful to Lila Abu-Lughod and Katherine Franke for their warm hospitality and to Wael Hallaq, Rashid Khalidi, Timothy Mitchell, Nabila El-Bassel, Zohar Goshen, and Nadia Abu El-Haj for welcoming me, for their



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My family was my strength in writing this book. To my mother, husband Gaby, brother, sisters, daughters, and granddaughters, their sweet inquiries about the book's progress and unending loving and lovely interruptions created the one and only space of joy and tranquility amidst the devastating violence discussed herein.