

## Introduction

### *Following Absence: Plotlines of Erasure and Ruination in the Middle East and North Africa*

Anne-Marie McManus and Nancy Y. Reynolds

“And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom—for us or for them?”

—Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 3

In Egyptian writer Haytham el-Wardany’s wry how-to manual, *Kayfa takhtafi* (*How to Disappear*, 2013), scenes from ordinary life in Cairo—the noise of barking dogs floating onto a balcony, the murmur of a crowd on the street—all point to something disappearing. What disappears is never quite clear: perhaps the individual, perhaps a revolution, perhaps a sense of safety and certainty. El-Wardany subtitles the scenes with words like “Emptiness” (*al-faragh*) and “Panic” (*al-hala’*). The effect is a charged, ominous atmosphere—threats both human and inhuman at every turn, an inability to trust the senses as “dream blends with reality” and the narrator’s body contorts into the city.<sup>1</sup> Disappearing is often celebrated today as a skill one can learn in order to evade state surveillance and the omniscient eye of global data collection and to craft a meaningful life through invisibility.<sup>2</sup> El-Wardany’s confident title professes just such a self-help manual for the twenty-first century. Yet, echoing Palestinian author Ibtisam ‘Azem’s *Sifr al-Ikhtifa’* (*Book of Disappearance*, 2014), *How to Disappear* demonstrates that even a brief pause before its core topic may cause everything to shatter: into words for absence and reappearance; into fear, desire, and ambivalence; into a sudden vigilance to what is becoming visible and perceptible—and to what may be perpetually sliding out of view.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today is an epicenter for the theorization of absence and its associated terms: destruction, disappearance, erasure, oblivion, to name a few. Exhaustion and despair are pervasive after decades of protracted wars (e.g., in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Israel/Palestine), cycles of uprising and defeat, the banalization of violence spectacular and slow, and callous disregard for the lives of ordinary people among ruling elites, both domestic and global. These dynamics were exacerbated by the ten-year anniversary of 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and the US withdrawal after twenty years in Afghanistan. This present layers onto the wreckage of earlier erasures whose traces remain: the Armenian genocide, the Nakba, the Hama massacre, the Lebanese civil war, Algeria’s decolonization and Dark Decade, Morocco’s Years of Lead, and many more.

To depict this present, contemporary anglophone media tends to dredge up Orientalist stereotypes of ancient religious rancor and intractable nonmodernity in the MENA, circulating images of social, political, and environmental wastelands that are easily forgettable with each news cycle. At the time of writing, Palestinians in Gaza were fighting to remain visible while western cameras fixated on seemingly empty, flattened buildings rather than the people killed under the rubble. Against these and other dangerous essentializations and erasures, scholars frequently assert the microdynamics of resistance, resilience, and memory to be found in ecologies of practice and cultural production; point to the ways people rebuild and survive in ruins that are material, political, and social; and

reactivate potential histories smothered by the colonial archive.<sup>3</sup>

The articles in this special section perform a different intellectual labor. We acknowledge the urgent political need for narratives of overcoming destruction, for acts of care and repair. Yet this section acknowledges that absences exist in myriad ways across the MENA and pauses before restoring or recuperating modes of presence. What other ways of telling absence might be brought into view? Building on the words of Saidiya Hartman in the epigraph, what might stories afford when the presences of absence confound the very idea of “after-ness” in the aftermath of disaster?

In place of presence, this thematic section begins to unravel, then reweave, existing plotlines for thinking and representing absence. With plotlines, we point to the stringing together of events into familiar temporal arcs with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Our objective is not to dismiss or undermine the most well-known, linear plotline for absence or its associated questions and tasks. Rather, by unraveling then reweaving stories and histories of absence, we aim to widen the scope of what can be perceived as absence, its work in the world and on the subject, and the forms of agency and injury it shapes. In the linear story, something or someone is present, but then it is (or they are) erased, destroyed. Finally comes absence, which names the aftermath of this erasure. This plotline, by arranging events into a linear chronology, tends to prompt questions about restoring the absented to presence. When restoration is impossible, then archiving, narrative (particularly literature as a vessel of memory), and the mechanisms of justice are called upon to testify to what has been lost. When the absented are humans, memory work is tightly entangled with the demand for justice—to commemorate the dead, tell their stories, and thus refuse their erasure.<sup>4</sup>

The linear plotline thus tends to train the gaze on humans, whereas in this special section we aim to think of human lives in embodied proximities and relations to the nonhuman (e.g., animals, plants, landscapes). In so doing, we learn from scholarship on annihilation and human/nonhuman intimacies in the environmental humanities, which tracks how existing and impending absences, notably wrought by climate change, entangle bodies and landscapes materially and imaginatively.<sup>5</sup> The necropolitical worlds of recurrent war are also “a multispecies affair,” writes Munira Khayyat on south Lebanon: entangling humans and landscapes, “vitalizing relationships and dynamic pathways that are forged

amid war’s lethal objects and technologies.”<sup>6</sup> An emergent strand of ecocritical writing crosses literary studies and cultural geography to explore human affects of grief, as well as efforts to create arks to hold the traces of what has been absented in material landscapes.<sup>7</sup> This attention to the trace echoes the concerns of ruination studies, which track how industrial and decaying materials linger, the signs of “the rot that remains” of colonial and postcolonial inequalities.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to absence, writes geographer John Wylie, human and nonhuman are not “fusing or coinciding” nor even “singularly present or replete in themselves, but all held tense and tangled” in zones whose shifting relations defy permanent assignments of presence/absence.<sup>9</sup> Such perspectives uniquely position the environmental humanities to attend to the materiality and specificity of traces and sediments without losing sight of “geological and evolutionary timescales” that confound the human imagination and notions of time.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, the field of extinction studies addresses both the large scale of permanent, planetary, and/or nonhuman absences and the granular register of individual extinctions.<sup>11</sup>

A second reason to loosen the strands of the linear plot of absence is that it tends to presume that the place of storytelling is one where the annihilating violence has ceased or at least paused enough to find a stable ground to contemplate what has been lost. This present tense, where violence is in the past and justice lies on a hopeful, future horizon, is also recognizable as the present of human rights.<sup>12</sup> In this special section, however, erasures do not lie securely in the past nor does the violence of absenting conform to onetime spectacles.<sup>13</sup> Repetitive, accumulating, and perpetual, absences also inhabit the present and future. As al-Wardany’s text warns, the space left by absence is not an empty void (*al-faragh*). It is charged with sedimentations and scarings populating daily life and memory. Moving in and out of perception, absences are “affective (non)things and (non)sites of intensity, critique, and encounter.”<sup>14</sup> Traces remain, shifting in and out of view. As Ilana Feldman in this special section writes about objects of absence in Palestine, “by working to repeatedly change the tense—moving between past and present,” these ordinary objects recall “that absence is not total.” Absence can be recursive and/or anticipatory: this latter, often overlooked dimension of absence can be found when states and other actors prepare lands and populations for their annihilation; where cities are built for wars to come; and in the affective worlds of those who are subject to erasure—perhaps multiple times.<sup>15</sup>

The trauma of absence also shapes language, which becomes an ongoing “form of ‘displacement’” that takes place in relation to loss.<sup>16</sup> As the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish expresses, “we are no longer able to form complete sentences, and yet we are asked to reformulate the elements of an experience exposed, in the open, to destruction.”<sup>17</sup> In 2006, writing on the devastation of Beirut’s Dahiya district in the Israeli war on Lebanon that summer, the Lebanese poet Abbas Beydoun mused on why no poem existed on Dahiya and whether poetry could ever write destruction. Such cities—of proliferating rubble and unnamed, faceless humans—“can only be treated by a measure of invisibility—such places have no language, of course. . . . Can we be deviant and speak about beauty here? Or is the real ruin on our tongues?”<sup>18</sup>

### Holding Space for Absence

In English, the word “absence” can capture not only what (or whom) has been absented but also the conditions of life that remain and are defined, in some sense, by what (or who) is no longer.<sup>19</sup> Absence is therefore “not synonymous with loss” or even the rites of mourning and memory that are closely entangled with it.<sup>20</sup> An entity that unfolds within the present, absence “speaks to much more: what is not *anymore* and what is *not yet*.”<sup>21</sup> This “*not yet*” points to foreclosed futures, the lives and events that are rendered impossible by absence. Equally, absences that sediment and accumulate over time may signify an impending repetition of violence and annihilations to come.

We locate absences in the aftermath and/or anticipation of material and immaterial acts of violence both slow and spectacular. This violence includes erasing the traces of what, or who, has been absented from official historical records, an act that forbids collective mourning outside sanitized national narratives. Inspired by Darwish’s writing on “the presence of absence,”<sup>22</sup> this special section seeks to capture shifting affects and strategies of living amid traces that move in and out of view, as well as the cultural work of depicting absences, writing against them, and producing traces to compel a spectator’s witnessing. Rather than filling in the gaps, our contributors dwell with absences’ sedimentations, scarrings, and mobilities, broadening existing vocabularies and perceptions of living in a wrecked present.

The distinctive temporalities and modes of representation that cluster around absence, as it is defined in this special section, invite interdisciplinary reflection across history, literature, and anthropology. Absence

emerges as an overlooked, diffuse, yet connective tissue that invites new conceptualizations of intra- and interregional comparison from below. Such comparisons, however, as Anne-Marie McManus’s contribution to this section explores, must work across zones and subjectivities that have (often violently) been relegated to nonbeing and the non- (or not-quite) human. Reading across absences, in other words, can neither collapse their differences nor fill them in with presence. As Saidiya Hartman notes, “it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure” for the absented, gesturing to a “*free state*” or imaginary of the future salvaged from the archive’s degrading, death-licensing statements.<sup>23</sup> She refrains, however, noting the risk of “committing further violence in [her] own act of narration” and choosing instead to foreground the impossibility of her task and the archive’s limits.<sup>24</sup> In a similar fashion, anthropologist Yael Navaro calls for a “negative methodology” in the aftermath of mass violence that refuses “evidentiary presence” and permits scholarship to “rest in the gaps of knowledge.”<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, literary scholars celebrate narrative’s generative difference from “demographic data, historical facts, and legal trials” and human rights reports.<sup>26</sup> Literature promises to be an alternative archive “to see or hear what history has rendered ghostly.”<sup>27</sup> Yet a wealth of scholarship influenced by trauma theory and psychoanalysis questions whether knowledge of the absented can ever be “made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved, or communicated without distortion.”<sup>28</sup> In an ethical gesture that echoes Saidiya Hartman’s, Claudia Brodsky writes on the Holocaust to argue that narrating the content of absence enacts renewed violence against “the loss that is every specific, individual death, and, with the individual, every moment, equally inexhaustibly representable, of every life stopped from continuing, every act of conscious and unconscious sensation lost forever with that life.”<sup>29</sup> Across disciplines, holding open a space for absence—performing Hartman’s “narrative restraint” or what critic of European modernism Gérard Wacjman describes as making absence itself the primary referent—is a labor of depicting the present as well as of rendering justice to the plenitude, human and non-human, of what has been erased.<sup>30</sup>

The temporal complexities of absences, and particularly their unfolding within the present, suggest certain affinities with the concept of haunting, which foregrounds “how the over-and-done-with comes alive” in the present.<sup>31</sup> The concept has had a robust life in

academic work since Jacques Derrida's 1993 publication of *Specters of Marx*, which introduced the language of hauntology to replace "the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive."<sup>32</sup> Glossed by Fredric Jameson, "spectrality [is] what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave" that make *something else* apparent in the present, "shimmer[ing] like a mirage."<sup>33</sup> These descriptions bear strong resemblances to the moods and modalities of absence, yet key distinctions between absence, as we describe it, and haunting lie, first, in the relative agency of that which returns to animate the present. Specters and ghosts assert themselves *into* the present, lending the past a vibrancy recently associated with matter.<sup>34</sup> Absences, in contrast, linger, recede, seep, and metastasize in mobilities that depart from the eventful from/to and here/there of a spectral past entering the present. As our approach to plotlines aims to foreground, attention to absence begins to confound such temporal distinctions. For this reason, many contributing essays emphasize the agency of individuals, spaces, and objects that mediate, embody, and invert the shifting presences of absence.

A second distinction between haunting and absence lies in late deconstruction's ethical commitment to the unknowability (or alterity) of that which returns. The specter may disrupt the present, suspending the boundaries of past/present and absence/presence—yet it "promises nothing tangible in return," only a destabilization of the common-sense belief in presence at all.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the absences that move through the current moment, in this special section, are tied to identifiable practices, events, grammars of racialization, and political economies of erasure, violence, and distortion. The knowability of what caused (and perhaps still causes) absence does not contain the aftermath, whether material or affective, yet it crucially grounds the possibility of demanding justice.

### Contributions

These essays were first produced for a symposium that we convened for our codirected Mellon Sawyer Seminar, "Grounding the Ecocritical: Materializing Wastelands and Living on in the Middle East." We invited contributing authors to explore their respective disciplinary challenges in writing absence by producing a short essay on an object, landscape, building, or image in a state of absence or ruination. However, we asked authors to refrain from filling in the absences they found, taking

refuge in philosophical abstraction, or abandoning the local. Rather, we encouraged them to experiment with representational techniques and writing styles to depict their chosen object, as well as to explore changes to space, scale, or connections to other sites or modes of absence. Returning to plotlines, this prompt in a sense provided an ending for the articles in advance, urging authors to experiment with holding open spaces for absence in their writings and methods.

Their resulting attention to neglected plot points of absence between Morocco and Iraq echoes the spirit of Donna J. Haraway's "staying with the trouble"—a refusal of "impatient" responses to "the horrors of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene" and of cynical resting.<sup>36</sup> A quieter, "indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper" emerges, inviting reflexive attention to the act of naming loss in the present.<sup>37</sup> Taking inspiration from a practice of history developed in trauma studies, we aim to trace the outlines of an archive that does not "represent" what has been erased so much as follow what is always slipping away, an archive "totter[ing] between remembrance and erasure."<sup>38</sup> The issue thus expands recent anthropological scholarship on "the residuality of violence [and] its afterlife," advancing interdisciplinary inquiry into "material and immaterial traces" of absence in the MENA.<sup>39</sup>

The articles in the special section replot absence in different ways. Some hold open or break apart points along narrative arcs. Others invert, loop, redirect, integrate, or run parallel to their stories. Some articles focus on modes of life's erasure (via disappearance, vanishing, invisibility, petrification), while others analyze ways that absence is recalled or claimed into the present. All of the articles wrestle with the methodological challenges of following absence through fragmented archives or field sites to bring at least fleetingly into view individuals, nonhuman lives, material objects, and sites that serve as emissaries to various pasts. According to their chosen case studies, authors employ different strategies of representation and reflexivity. Often, contributors respect the vagaries of narrating absences through uneven or incomplete plotlines and avoid suturing tears to life stories caused by state and non-state violence or neglect.

Nancy Y. Reynolds explores the stories of absences produced through botanical extinction and the forced displacement of people in Nubia. Assumed extinct, a species of palm tree appeared to botanists exploring a remote oasis of the Nubian desert in 1963. As the tree



moved in and out of view and in and out of extinction—the primary idiom of (species) absence in ecology—the region, Nubia, itself faced large-scale destruction from the growing reservoir of the new Aswan High Dam. These stories of absence tenuously averted weave in botanical texts through eulogies for a Nubian Egyptian botanist known for his desert-mindedness. At the same time, ecologists developed new theories of desert succession that posited rupture and destruction as necessary to sustain life in arid ecosystems, thereby rendering a new “productive” aftermath for erasure: flourishing life rather than absence. Intertwined along textual margins, these narratives of human and non-human botanical loss thicken and distort plotlines of absence, eliciting practices of following—of translation and collection, curation and publication, mentorship and memorial—designed to manage absence in natural and professional landscapes. Twisting extinction through text and landscape assisted state efforts, then, to prepare Nubia for vanishing: the absent tree moving from past to present while Nubian presence—the land, the botanist—moved into absence and became pasts.

State strategies of absenting come to the fore on racialized grounds in Brahim el Guabli’s investigation of the fragmentary dossier that remains of Black Amazigh scholar Boujemâa Hebaz, who was disappeared in 1981. Unlike other Moroccans abducted and killed under state violence, Hebaz’s disappearance is blanketed by multiple silences: his story untold, circumstances unwitnessed, and remains unaccounted for to this day. Part of what el Guabli calls “forgotten Morocco,” Hebaz’s vanishing precludes reconstruction yet also stands in for the larger processes of regional and racial exclusion. Since “Morocco’s black and Amazigh citizens . . . combine two doubly-invisibilized identities and they inhabited areas that were not a priority for the state, they were de facto disappeared from the nation. In this logic, Hebaz’s forcible absenting is just a violent manifestation of a sneakier and invisible absence of Blackness and Amazighity from the nation.” The fractured, fragmentary, and even false testimony obtained by Morocco’s Equity and Reconciliation Commission (2004–2006) constitutes both the beginning and the end in the replotting of Hebaz’s absence.

Ilana Feldman examines material objects that stand in for absences: Palestinian homes and homeland lost in 1948. Mundane objects such as identity cards, photographs, and keys to former homes often drop out of scholars’ view because of their ubiquity. Feldman demonstrates, however, that they are more charged than

repositories of memory.<sup>40</sup> These “objects of absence” hold and vitalize lost lifeworlds, keeping open the plot of Palestinian return and using the lost past to make claims in the present. Feldman witnesses the activation of these objects during her fieldwork: “These objects are part of a wide Palestinian expressive repertoire that includes petitions and protests, poetry and memoir, graffiti and farming, all insisting *I (still) am* and *we (still) are*.” Performing presence in suspended times between the past of absence and a future of threatened erasure, the Palestinians she encounters knit together community as they circulate, in “quiet repetition,” these “tokens of a lost past.” As she puts it, “Where an historical object resides in the past, telling a story of an earlier time and a former configuration, an object of absence tells a story of loss that has a force in the present. Such objects do things, now—for individuals and for collectivities.”

Absence as strategy is the focal point of Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins’s essay, which is based on her fieldwork in a West Bank Palestinian village, where the harsh, chronic conditions of Israeli occupation aim to make its residents disappear. Stamatopoulou-Robbins suggests, however, that absence is not the outcome or endpoint of a narrative of dispossession, but rather a mid-plot strategy of resistance against ruination. “Absenting” as a form of agency, she argues, allows villagers to manage their relationship with and distance from the settler frontier as it encroaches on their lands. Bringing into view material and affective practices of edge-making, Stamatopoulou-Robbins narrates the temporal changes of the border area as it is layered with remains of fields, demolished home sites, a garbage dump, a garden refuge—a place rendered dangerous and unproductive by the state but still engaged with by villagers. The edge’s story from demolition site to dump to garden is itself a replotting of absence from a condition of being to a form of action: a reweaving and repurposing of destruction into an integrated story of action that refuses the full force of state violence and ruination.

Read across these disparate sites, the contributing essays highlight the complexities of absence when it is apprehended not only as an imposed condition or a description for what has been lost but also as a strategy or claim-making device in struggles for social justice and reparation. Rebecca Gruskin charts the work of light and objects in efforts to document “absent” injuries in the lungs of phosphate workers in French colonial Tunisia. Through X-ray technology, company officials denied the presence of lung damage caused by mining despite

oral testimony by workers and their families describing acute respiratory disease from phosphate particulates. These oral sources, preserved in petitions and reports, detail a multiplicity of embodied harms of differing durations to the bodies of workers and their families. A technology of absence—making “chronic injury vanish within a reciprocal relationship between the optic and the semantic,” Gruskin writes—was thus a tactic for colonialism’s extractive capital accumulation from land and bodies. The phosphate company kept Tunisian labor cheap by refusing to compensate for industrial injury, serving a larger political purpose of keeping colonialism’s harms invisible. Methodologically, Gruskin uses the archival absence of X-ray photographs to break the originary logic of erasure and to chart instead “a political economy of (in)visibility,” shifting the forensic plotline from medical diagnoses of workers’ bodies to “the linkages . . . reveal[ed] among circuits of Western biomedical knowledge, capital accumulation, and corporeal degradation in colonial Gafsa’s phosphate mines.”

Anne-Marie McManus explores absence, understood as racialized subjects’ recurring exclusion from the category of the human, as the grounds for new forms of relational reading across grammars of racialization. From the site of decolonizing Algeria and drawing on theorists from Sylvia Winters to David Marriott, her essay reads Frantz Fanon’s writings in dialogue with Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma* (1956). What kinds of comparison, she asks, are possible across zones of experience and categories of knowing that are formed in violent exclusion from racialized ideals of the human subject: white, agentively present, and capable of narrating itself in linear time? The resulting experiences of absence, born of differential regimes of racial power and colonization (i.e., anti-Black and anti-Algerian), are neither the same nor static. The common ground of racialized absences is the subject’s violent devaluation and erasure from normative ideas of the human. The resulting forms of absence, she notes, do not yield “an arrival-point, but a sustained state in repetitive motion where presence is repeatedly denied, where the subject is continually re-excluded from the category of Man.” Attending to such absences decenters that hegemonic figure, which is why McManus tracks forms of expression and metaphor that Fanon and Yacine use to express the petrifications and nonhuman intimacies of absented, racialized subjects.

Finally, the coequality of pasts and utopian futures in state-led development projects infuses Camille Cole’s essay on late Ottoman infrastructure and dreams of

the Baghdad Railway, which tracks the absenting of the present, the living, and even land in the struggle for modernization. Iraq had to be “actively emptied, the sense of lack offering propulsion toward the future,” she writes, leading to the erasure of “people, property, crops, profits” and existing forms of land cultivation to remake Iraq into a wealth-generating province and second Egypt. Yet contests over the developmental present in the vast marshes of southern Iraq were more spatial than temporal, Cole argues. She reads an Ottoman map of emptiness around the proposed railway, tracking accounts of land appearing and disappearing in unstable wetlands, through Iraqi writer Muhammad Khudayyir’s genre-bending novel *Basrayatha* (1999). Cole’s literary intertext for reading Ottoman narratives of agrarian development underscores that following absence prompts scholars towards new, local theories and modes of knowledge production. Her attention to her positionality as a scholar during the COVID-19 pandemic equally highlights the role of critical reflexivity in archival usage and modes of reading around absence.

### Following Absence

As method and dispensation, following absence invites slowed-down movement in thought, body, and time. We center the language of *following* to call into critical view the sequences, temporal arcs, and desires of coming “after” absence (a preposition problematized above that remains hard to avoid!). Following attunes us to disciplinary practices of knowledge production, as well as how we track others who are following absences (its spatial and temporal dimensions and registers) in our research. Following invites reflexive awareness of scholars’ reliance on various forms of presence (e.g., autobiographical, material, ontological) to produce knowledge often based on sources from the past.<sup>41</sup> Following, we find, can also be a way for researchers to manage the affects and desires provoked by certain kinds of absence: a narrative armature that allows scholars and our research subjects to fill in gaps, ensure continuities and inheritances, and evade the aporia of absolute absence.

As many contributors to this section note, the impulse to fill in absence can distract from the flourishing of ongoing life and even reinforce the logics of annihilating power. Cole, for instance, suggests that state concern over the periodic disappearance of land that emerged seasonally in the marsh erased land use practices ecologically attuned to and even profitable in that landscape. In the long term, this official work of managing absence authorized the devastating drainage of large

portions of the marshes and the destruction of most of the lifeways supported there. Reynolds traces how the “melancholy muse” of botanical death filled out floristic surveys and herbaria with vanishing plant forms that fueled more bio-prospecting. While el Guabli critiques the privileging of certain, official narratives of “true” absence, Stamatopoulou-Robbins remains at the edges of absence’s black hole to keep transformation in view. Gruskin cautions that archival absences, such as X-ray films in her case study, risk pulling scholarly and political energy “back” into the rhetorics of colonial power that produced the original absence. Echoing McManus’s call to turn away from the centers of authoritative presence in scholarship, many contributors acknowledge the chronological distinction of events (once something was present, then it was/is absent) without locking them into known plotlines.

The communities and individuals who appear in the special section’s articles thus follow from absence, yet their actions in relation to it vary, from turning away in refusal to leveraging absencing as a strategy of survival. Essays that foreground landscapes and botany reframe following as a movement through spaces and texts, responsive to nonhuman forms of materiality. Several contributors document people situating loss or absence to stymie state projects of development in infrastructure and resource extraction. The material elements of such landscapes—the movements of mineral dust, plants, water—call into question foundational juridical categories such as harm, political boundaries, and private property. Contributions in literary studies, meanwhile, follow on longstanding theorizations of absence in trauma studies, existentialism, and psychoanalysis, the latter of which inflected Fanon’s writing on the psychic forms of racial violence.<sup>42</sup>

The scholar’s distance, even absence, to what they follow—a topic of renewed relevance in the wake of both COVID-19 and the disruptions and destructions by war and politics to many field sites and archives—invites reflexive attention to the act of naming absence in the present. To this end, we learn from Walter Benjamin’s constellation, allowing sites and experiences of absence to cluster and render relations perceptible without making claims to an essential presence or re-assembling the fragmentary and residual.<sup>43</sup> This approach invites the reader to “pause at stations of reflection” on absence, an image that evokes the classical topos of lingering at the abandoned traces of the campsite (*atlatl*) in Arabic poetry.<sup>44</sup>

The point is not to finally lay hold of the absented or a concept of absence itself. Indeed, this special section takes care *not* to propose a unified theory of absence for, or from, the MENA. This decision is theoretically and ethically driven. Defined by negation, fragments, and residues absence eludes systematization. It is internally diverse and unfixable in content; living with it comprises uncountable individual, situated experiences. Following absences in the contemporary MENA shares in the work of “illuminat[ing] the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead.”<sup>45</sup> The region remains a primary target for forces of annihilation—variously dubbed in contemporary theory as necropolitics, savage ecologies, environmental terrorism, or ruin— which dominate the global present and reveal its genealogies with the colonial past.<sup>46</sup>

Other voices, such as Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh, lay claim to absence as politically generative: “an essential dimension of the world, society and the soul” that must be affirmed against xenophobic populism and Salafism alike.<sup>47</sup> The very centrality of absence in regional thought and art rebuffs critiques that to think absence beyond material violence is to dabble in abstraction.<sup>48</sup> Underscoring that the absent (what remains hidden, *al-ghaib*) is a “call to knowledge but also an invitation to humility,” Saleh celebrates its “democratic potential.”<sup>49</sup>

In what follows, the relations across sites, texts, and case studies are sketched rather than fixed, strung like threads of a web that proliferates beyond the scope of the articles that follow. According to the history of mathematics, “the hoop of zero” is far from a stable signifier of an equally stable nothingness but rather a window onto shifting forms of thought and experience.<sup>50</sup> Put otherwise, absence is a concept on the move. We retain, therefore, the mobility that Michel de Certeau evokes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* when he suggests that absence’s ambiguities are not problems to be solved but constitutive of its lives.<sup>51</sup> At times, absence can be productive of new practices and knowledges. At others, notably in relation to subjects who have been and/or continue to be absented, the ambiguities of nonpresence only heighten the central conundrum of seeking justice for injuries that cannot yet be measured or perhaps even articulated in current vocabularies for suffering and redress.

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## Notes

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1. El-Wardany, *How to Disappear*, 57.
2. Busch, *How to Disappear*; Ahearn, *How to Disappear*.
3. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 43; on resilience, see Khayyat, *War Remains*; on ecologies of practice, see Khayyat, *Landscape of War*, which develops the term from Isabelle Stengers.
4. Environmentalists use similar narrative strategies of naming and re-animating individual animals or species as they are moving into absence through extinction. See van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; Heise, *Imagining Extinction*.
5. E.g., Ghosh, *Great Derangement*; Povinelli, *Geontologies*; Weizman and Sheikh, *Conflict Shoreline*; Bubandt, "Haunted Geologies"; Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*; Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia*; Gordillo, *Rubble*.
6. Khayyat, *Landscape of War*, 128.
7. On arks, see Cohen and Yates, *Noah's Arkive*; on grief, see Wylie, "Absence"; Raffles, *Book of Unconformities*.
8. Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 1; see also Rao, "Future in Ruins"; Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*; DeSilvey, "Observed Decay"; Hage, *Decay*.
9. Wylie, "Absence," 277.
10. Searle, "Absence," 167; on sediments, see Lemenager, "Sediment"; on time and the imagination, see Ghosh, *Great Derangement*; Chakrabarty, "Climate of History."
11. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, *Extinction Studies*; van Dooren, *Flight Ways*; Wolfe, foreword to *Extinction Studies*; Heise, *Imagining Extinction*; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*; Lowe, "Extinction Is Forever"; Sodikoff, "Accumulating Absence"; Yusoff, "Aesthetics of Loss."
12. Meister, *After Evil*.
13. Nixon, *Slow Violence*; see also Touhouliotis, "Weak Seed."
14. Nieuwenhuis and Nassar, "Losing Ground," 1; see also Gordillo, *Rubble*.
15. Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come*.
16. Sacks, *Iterations of Loss*, 37.
17. Darwish quoted in Sacks, *Iterations of Loss*, 37.
18. Beydoun quoted in Khayyat, *War Remains*, 1–2.
19. On the "phantom pains" and material effects of that which is materially absent, see Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen, *An Anthropology of Absence*, 3.
20. Searle, "Absence," 167.
21. Searle, "Absence," 167, emphases in original.
22. Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence*.
23. S. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 7–8, emphasis in original.
24. S. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2; see also Connolly and Fuen-tes, "From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?"
25. Navaro, "Aftermath of Mass Violence," 164.
26. Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 3; see also Taleghani, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature*.
27. Jarvis, *Decolonizing Memory*, 2.
28. G. Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge," 537.
29. Brodsky, *In the Place of Language*, 8.
30. S. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12; Wacjman, *L'objet du siècle*, 150.
31. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 2.
32. Davis, "Hauntology, Spectres, and Phantoms," 373.
33. Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," 38.
34. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
35. Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," 39.
36. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2–3.
37. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103. Certeau's disassociation of the modifier "proper" from the nouns of place, name, or pronoun



usually connected to them reveals the intertwined linguistic and spatial operations he theorizes as “pedestrian speech acts.” In other words, trajectories of walking, he notes, “only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by” (97).

38. Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*, 78–79.

39. Navaro et al., *Reverberations*, 8.

40. Feldman's objects of absence, while not as hidden or “bright” as the objects of violence traced by Gáston Gordillo in the Argentine Andes, nevertheless “pierce through their everyday opacity to reveal, and mark in space, the spatial and cultural sedimentation of a historical legacy of violence, whose material residues both attract and repel.” Gordillo, *Rubble*, 185.

41. On this methodological problem, see also Scott, “Evidence of Experience.”

42. G. Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge”; Fuery, *Theory of Absence*; Lazali, *Colonial Trauma*; Moten, *Universal Machine*, 140–56; Marriott, *Whither Fanon?* For an overview of absence and the ways it figures presence in strands of European existentialism, see Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen, *Anthropology of Absence*, 4–7.

43. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 4, 11.

44. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 4; see also Stetkevych, *Zephyrs of Najd*; Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins*. As scholars of Palestinian literature have recently noted, Benjamin's “constellation” can “make apparent once-invisible structures.” Abu-Remaileh, “Three Enigmas of Palestinian Literature,” 23.

45. S. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4.

46. Mbembe writes, “Nearly everywhere the political order is reconstituting itself as a form of organization for death.” Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 7. Sloterdijk defines environmental terrorism as “new procedures for removing the preconditions for the enemy's life by targeting his environment.” Sloterdijk, *Foams*, 90. See also Grove, *Savage Ecologies*; Stoler, *Imperial Debris*. Henni, “Against the Regime of ‘Emptiness,’” describes how MENA's deserts have been particularly conceived as places “absent of life” and thus subject to “various forms of anthropogenic exploitation” (11).

47. Saleh, “al-Ightiyab wa-l-taghyib wa-l-ghaib,” n.p.

48. Navaro, “Aftermath of Mass Violence,” 166.

49. Saleh, “al-Ightiyab wa-l-taghyib wa-l-ghaib,” n.p.

50. Kaplan, *The Nothing That Is*, 142.

51. See Certeau, *Practices of Everyday Life*, part three (“Spatial Practices”) and especially chapter 7 (“Walking in the City”).

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