



Poisoning the Wells: A Response to Daniel Burston and Cary Nelson

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Why bother?

I would have liked to begin by acknowledging the virtues of Burston and Nelson's paper, prior to offering some reflections on their achievement. This, however, is difficult, faced with a text intended to damage a much-valued colleague, Lara Sheehi, which, moreover, ignores her substantive contributions, never moving beyond a selectively presented history of social media posts, campus politics and quotations pulled out of context and nuance¹. Uninformed readers must be bewildered: how has this latter-day Boudica, leading hordes of savage warriors to burn our once-orderly outpost of civilisation to the ground, managed to establish herself as a serious thinker at all?

The paper purports to frame (in more than one sense) Sheehi's stance as an expression of 'Critical Social Justice Theory' (CSJT). Burston and Nelson invite the psychoanalytic community to feel existentially threatened by a tribe who, they suggest, have donned civilised garb the better to lure their intended victims into a lethal trap. The following paragraphs summarise Burston and Nelson's portrait of Sheehi and those who think like her:

They are devotees of a dogma through which they proselytise a novel form of conversion therapy. Incapable of 'genuine dialogue and debate', adherents operate by 'group coercion' to impose their rigid belief that all mental distress is to be understood as an expression of social inequalities. Their monomania, reducing everything to the influence of gender, race and class hierarchies, threatens the disappearance of psychoanalysis: so antithetical are their ideas to psychoanalytic paradigms that only the naïve would attempt their integration.

Intellectually challenged, they cannot tolerate the 'ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty' that characterise true psychoanalysis. Moralising and confrontational, they bully and intimidate, where possible publicly humiliating their opponents. They are conspiratorial, operating some kind of group discipline, 'merely pay[ing] lip service' to established concepts, the better to advance their destructive programme. They work to a 'CSJT playbook for taking over...organisations' such as the American Psychoanalytic Association.

'Critical Social Justice Theory' is not a phrase recognised by its supposed adherents (whose work is never engaged with in the article). Seeking to give the concept ballast, Burston and Nelson can refer only to the self-published collection *Cynical Therapies*:

¹ There are echoes of the hounding of Stephen Salaita, where the expletives he used to describe what was happening in Gaza were deemed by Nelson more alarming than were the atrocities to which they referred (Lloyd 2014). Lara Sheehi has herself responded to her critics regarding the tenor of her social media posts (Sheehi 2023).

Perspectives on the Antitherapeutic Nature of Critical Social Justice (2023), edited by Val Thomas. Contributors are linked to the website Critical Therapy Antidote², to which Nelson has contributed posts about Sheehi.

Thomas describes how the group behind *Cynical Therapies* coalesced in reaction to the many anti-racist initiatives that followed George Floyd's murder in 2020. What I experienced as a novel period in which the conversation about institutional racism moved from being a peripheral to a core concern within the profession (though it proved still incapable of engaging with anti-Palestinian racism), they perceive as the moment when CSJT triumphed over good sense. For Thomas, 'CSJT' is 'wokeness in common parlance'. The mission of *Cynical Therapies* is to restore the 'colour blindness approach' to racism, protect men (as CSJT 'promotes emasculation'), and heterosexuality (as CSJT 'insists that heteronormative sex practices need to be challenged as they are merely expressions of a dominant power system') (ibid). Psychotherapists are the unwitting victims of a hostile conspiracy:

... the revolutionaries *already are* Western elites, *already are* firmly entrenched in power, and their 'revolution' is largely a *smoke-and-mirrors show* employed in the service of getting a tighter grip on it...' (ibid)

The CSJT faction – now the ruling Establishment – is indoctrinating patients, offering them a 'moral re-education' 'designed to produce activists ... serving the interests of an authoritarian elite' (ibid).

CSJT threatens capitalism itself. Black Lives Matter's 'Marxist affiliation' is reported as if a liability; CSJT is 'a collectivist ideology ... antithetical to the principles of Western liberal democracies'. They describe a threat to Western society indulged by those whose duty it was to nurture the core truths of a wholesome client-centered psychotherapeutic practice. Their mission, clearly, advanced by exposing the tentacles of CSJT operating within North American and British mental health organisations, is to MAKE PSYCHOTHERAPY GREAT AGAIN!

This is to be achieved by reinstating an impermeable barrier between an (acceptable) focus on psychic phenomena generated within the nuclear family and face-to-face relationships, and an (unacceptable) extension of interest into the psychic implications of meanings, about self and other, that originates in the milieu within which nuclear families exist (and within which psychotherapeutic cultures develop). (I am reminded of Thatcher's 'there is no such thing as society'.) To my mind, this approach threatens stagnation, a reactionary practice maintained by an inquisitorial intolerance that stands in direct opposition to the psychoanalytic ideal of knowing oneself, of knowing ourselves, of recognising who and what we are and do.

At this point, one is inclined to walk away. The energy spent debunking such an uninspiring political outlook might seem to lend it substance. The sole reason for persevering lies in the regrettable truth that 'Under Siege' uses it as a base from which to press the normalisation of white supremacy, apartheid and settler colonialism, a project – to my mind – truly antithetical to the ethical foundations of psychoanalysis. It

² <https://criticaltherapyantidote.org/>

contributes to a pernicious discourse that will damage colleagues, impede intellectual work and further imperil a colonised people already living in circumstances of inconceivable precarity. Nelson is a veteran fire-fighter, intervening wherever necessary to extinguish what he regards as incendiary views about Zionism and Israel. And so, reluctantly, ignoring the sense of doing something demeaning, I shall persist, in the hope of demonstrating why the mindset informing ‘Under Siege’ is the real interloper here.

‘Under Siege’ and the logic of settler colonialism

Since March 2023, Lara Sheehi has been the target of a ruthless campaign to isolate her as a clinician and academic. She joins a long and honourable line of public intellectuals and organisations similarly smeared with accusations of anti-Semitism for transgressing the prohibition on discussing actually-existing Zionism. Here are some of those who immediately come to mind:

Judith Butler, Judge Richard Goldstone, Roger Waters, Jeremy Corbyn, Moshe Machover, Achille Mbembe, Black Lives Matter, Richard Falk, John Adams, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, Shahd Abusalama, Angela Davis, Michael Rosen, Bernie Sanders, Rabab Abdulhadi, Stephen Sizer, Caryl Churchill, Emma Watson, Amnesty International, the UN Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch, Jewish Voice for Peace, the UN, Barak Obama, Gerald Kaufman, Jimmy Carter, Ruchama Marton, Airbnb, Ken Loach, Edward Said, Ilhan Omar, the cities of Oslo and Barcelona, Norman Finkelstein, Francesca Albanese, Marc Wadsworth, Banksy, Kenneth Roth, Mark Ruffalo, the International Criminal Court, Malia Bouattia, Forensic Architecture, Ben & Jerry’s...

We might add the hundreds of academics, public figures and NGOs listed on such lobby websites as NGO Watch³ and Canary Mission⁴, dedicated to cleansing public life of those advocating for equal rights for Palestinians⁵.

‘Under Siege’, then, is an unremarkable pebble on a large stony shoal. The attribute each pebble shares is a determination to impose upon global discourse a cultural complex already dominant in Jewish Israeli society. This complex is founded on an inversion of historical truth and political reality, and has the purpose of rendering State terror palpable by a clear process of projective identification, systematically recasting colonial aggression as a defensive reaction to Palestinian terrorism: ‘the Palestinians are perceived as violent, murderous, and immoral, keeping the Israeli self-perception of morality and goodness intact’ (Lakh 2022).

³ <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/ngos/>

⁴ <http+s://canarymission.org/>

⁵ Nor is Sheehi the first psychotherapist to rouse the ire of the Zionist lobby. Berger and Jabr (2020) describe a number of instances of silencing within mental health organisations, including the case of Hammam Farah, a Canadian of Palestinian background who had been targeted by Canary Mission’s malicious website in 2018. See Berger (2021) for details of the bizarre attempt to damage Farah’s career. In Britain, the Government has appointed an ‘Anti-Semitism Tsar’, Lord Mann, who has interfered in discussions on a private listserve of members of a UK psychotherapy association (Daniel 2023b, Kemp and Pinto 2023).

Maintaining this complex results in further characteristic acts of inversion evidenced in this paper. First, the spectre of powerful alien subversives allows our authors to pose as underdogs fighting oppression: in fact, Western Governments are energetically legislating to disable the Palestinian solidarity movement⁶. Second, they suggest ‘CSJT’ therapists have ulterior motives for ‘changing definitions of terms like racism’, while it is their position that rests on a ‘new anti-Semitism’, exemplified by the IHRA, institutionalising the fallacious claim that anti-Zionism = anti-Semitism (see, for example, Abdallar et al 2020). (They claim Freud as an ally, yet Freud directly and repeatedly rejected the assertion that Zionism was an aspect of Jewish identity (Freud 1939/1955, Kemp and Pinto 2023)). Finally, ignoring the injuries inflicted on those persecuted by the lobby, they reproach ‘CSJT’ operatives for forcing their innocent victims to ‘capitulate ... for fear of being shamed or discredited’.⁷

The logic of colonial oppression bleeds into the work of the Zionist lobby, which refers constantly to Palestinians, labelling and slandering them, but does not talk to them, and which attempts to close down opportunities for Palestinians to speak for themselves. Burston and Nelson present themselves as the guardians of open negotiation⁸ while at the same time insisting, in effect, that ‘there is no partner for peace’ – that there can be no basis for reconciliation between the over-simplified and polarised perspectives they offer of ‘mainstream psychoanalysis’ and ‘CSJT’. All the virtues belong to the former, which has successfully incorporated anything of value contained within earlier, now respectable, left-wing critiques, leaving ‘CSJT’, and Sheehi, as the quintessence of all that needs to be purged. Their enemy resembles a virus, like the virus of ‘terrorism’, against which any excess of violence is justified to ensure its eradication, here from professional life. Their dismissal of the prospect of integrating different emphases in psychoanalytic work echoes the anathema with which Zionists react to calls for the genuine normalisation of relations between Jewish Israeli and Palestinian societies in a unitary democratic state offering equal rights and protections to all (see Karmi 2023, ODSC n.d.).

Attending to the superficial and facile arguments presented by the lobbyists, however, serves as a fatal distraction from what is truly important. Nelson and his colleagues take up their pens to exclude awareness of Zionism and its consequences wherever their influence holds sway: they strive with varying levels of success to

⁶ As I write, the UK Government is pushing through Parliament an act depriving public institutions of the right to boycott regimes on grounds of conscience (See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-public-bodies-banned-from-imposing-their-own-boycotts-against-foreign-countries>), joining 37 State legislatures in the USA which have already passed anti-BDS laws (Jewish Virtual Library n.d.).

⁷ Cherie Blair was once made to apologise for suggesting that it might be important to ask why Palestinians were carrying out suicide bombings. An example from July 2023: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/nora-barrows-friedman/pramila-jayapal-caves-israel-lobby>

⁸ Their assertion that the Sheehi’s are against dialogue is based on a blatant misreading of Stephen Sheehi’s critique of ‘dialogue initiatives’ (Sheehi, S. 2018, see also Kemp and Pinto 2023).

neutralise mainstream media, internet communication, academia⁹ and the professions. In other words, they strive to ensure that civil society remains *unconscious*¹⁰ of social reality, unable to form meaningful moral assessments of human experience, trapping many in an unknowing collusion with social evil.

This suggests a worthy purpose in responding: to ignite curiosity, perhaps indignation, perhaps questions about how to mobilise a compassionate solidarity, by bringing into the discussion just those aspects of reality the lobby seeks to expunge from collective awareness. I shall, therefore, refer to events that took place in or in relation to Palestine that occurred during the summer of 2023, as I was reflecting on Burston and Nelson's article. This period was unexceptional: the whole point is that these reports typify the relationship between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian people. It is information easily available to anyone who takes the trouble to look¹¹.

As the lobby operates by poisoning the wells upon which a healthy academic and intellectual life depend, the first event to note took place on July 26th 2023, when Israeli forces poured concrete into several natural water sources on farms in the South Hebron Hills, in the West Bank. This vandalism was not a one-off occurrence:

The destruction of water wells and tanks is a cornerstone of the Civil Administration's demolition activities. When one wishes to cleanse an area and expel people, one must first deprive them of water (Levy 2023).¹²

An understanding of what lies behind such ghastly acts is essential to appreciating the true nature of 'Under Siege'.

Zionism and psychotic thinking

Burston and Nelson are incensed that Sheehi referred to Zionism as a psychosis. Perhaps over-excited at the prospect of delivering a true *coup de grace*, (surprised, maybe, that Sheehi has not already succumbed), they suggest that her position threatens Jews *en masse* being refused access to psychoanalytic trainings, on account of their poor mental health. (They make a reference here, of course, to the exclusion of Jews from the

⁹ An example from August 2023 is the cancellation by San Francisco University of the course 'Palestine: An Ethnic Studies Perspective' to have been taught by Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi, Director and Senior Scholar of Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas (AMED) Studies. See: <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/demand-an-end-to-sfsus-aggression-and-hostility-towards-amed-studies>

¹⁰ This is not a reference to Freud's repressed unconscious, but to the systematic and structured lacunae that characterise received 'common sense' – something we need 'CSJT' to appreciate and decode!

¹¹ Readers will notice that Haaretz, the Israeli daily paper, is a valuable source of information that is generally ignored by the Western media. One can subscribe also to Electronic Intifada, Mondoweiss, +972 Magazine, ICAHD, the UK-Palestine Mental Health Network and other outlets to receive regular updates.

¹² See also McKernan (2023). For control of water as an aspect of settler colonialism see Amnesty (2017). The sealing of the wells can be viewed at: <https://twitter.com/QudsNen/status/1684231413481054209?s=20>

professions in Nazi Germany.) Animus, or desperation perhaps, or living within an echo chamber in which one only hears the views of people who share your own convictions, has here led them wildly astray¹³.

Let us pause, though, on the question of whether it is actually outrageous to contemplate the Zionist movement through the prism of psychopathology¹⁴. When somebody lives within their dream, or nightmare, and relates to external reality in terms dictated by it, irrespective of the social and human implications of their behaviour, we would hopefully engage them with great sympathy and concern – mindful of the traumatic suffering that might lie behind the illness – yet still recognise that their delusions pose a potential threat to themselves and others. What should we make, then, of an ideology that, when it took shape in late 19th Century Europe, envisaged transforming a land, for centuries home to a secure native Arab people of Muslims, Jews and Christians, one which had known no significant intercommunal conflict in 400 years of Ottoman rule (Cohen 2016), into a racially-exclusive State for European Jews? Psychoanalytic theorists, after all, do not generally view positively messianic ideologies that envisage such radical social transformations¹⁵. Advance to the present, and followers of the same ideology persist in their quest to manufacture a State with a guaranteed Jewish majority in a territory in which only half the inhabitants are Jewish, (not counting the several million Palestinians refugees living nearby, with the right to return). Its ideologues still work assiduously to erase the obstacle in the way of their dystopian dream: the Palestinian people (Karma 2023)¹⁶.

When engaging a person suffering from delusions, do we generally indulge their imaginings, suppressing our own critical and moral faculties if necessary, to the point of excusing whatever violence they might employ to bring reality into conformity with their fantasy? This is what much of the world is doing, in order to square the circle of upholding universal humanism as a ‘Western value’, while embracing and normalising Jewish supremacism in Palestine. The means used to achieve this is a functional racism directed against Palestinian Arabs, a phenomenon that characterises Western, including psychoanalytic, approaches to Palestine, all the more effective for being as yet largely unnamed and unrecognized (Kemp and Pinto 2023).

¹³ Religious and political ideologies seldom conform to any standards of balance or truth and, indeed, often incorporate convictions so out of touch with observable reality, and so cruelly disregarding of their human implications, as to invite assessment in psychiatric terms. We are all aware that such conceptual maps of the world, however absurd to the sceptic, can be freely embraced without risk to the believer’s sanity.

¹⁴ An approach, of course, adopted by Freud to account for religious mythology and other social phenomena.

¹⁵ Freud warned the psychoanalytic movement of the dangers of becoming embroiled with utopian ideologies in ‘The Question of a Psychoanalytic Weltanschauung’. See Kemp and Pinto (2023) for thoughts on how Freud’s ideas relate to the state of contemporary psychoanalysis.

¹⁶ One is reminded here of Chasseguet-Smirgel’s suggestion that violent political extremism, resulting in untold human suffering, often contains and enacts an infantile wish to purify the maternal body (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1976).

The Palestinians have been rendered not only superfluous, but toxic, made into ‘terrorists’, who can be disposed of at will, without consequences. Evidencing this deep anti-Palestinian racism (Abu-Laban and Bakan, 2022 and n.d.), the Palestinians are erased from the minds of Western societies, just as they are being erased from the lands coveted by Zionist settlers in Palestine. When an Israeli spokesperson, defending the massacres in Gaza, asks ‘what would you do if rockets were being launched against towns in your country?’, they are appealing to this racism – certain they are unlikely to hear in reply: yes, but what would we do if we were subject to the conditions under which Israel has held Palestinians in Gaza for decades?

White Fragility and Settler Colonialism

‘White fragility’ describes a sensitivity to issues around racial privilege that works to silence the voices of marginalised communities. Anti-‘CSJT’ thinkers like Burston and Nelson reject the concept, perhaps because it has explanatory value regarding a tactic repeatedly employed by the Zionist lobby. This is the assertion that discussion of Israel’s ‘misdeeds’ (to employ Burston and Nelson’s euphemism) is distressing for ‘Jews’, and therefore socially divisive and racist. The formula is itself anti-Semitic, disregarding Jewish people who are appalled at Israel’s behaviour and who are not invested in Zionist ideology, (and the many millions of non-Jewish Zionists who are). Still, the appeal to ‘Jewish’ sensibilities has been highly effective as, for example, when UK Lawyers for Israel successfully pressed for the removal of paintings by Palestinian children from the walls of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, on the grounds that they might offend Jewish patients (UKLFI 2023, Baroud, 2023; Daniel, 2023a).

This pressure to protect Zionists’ vulnerabilities inhibits our engagement with critical voices within Jewish Israeli society – from listening to the whole spectrum of Jewish opinion, in other words. In May 2023 Eran Rolnik, historian of Israeli psychoanalysis, wrote in Haaretz (commenting on mental health workers’ participation in protests against Netanyahu’s ‘reform’ of the Supreme Court):

It’s easier for them to raise an outcry over Israeli children being forced to stay in bomb shelters than to take a professional and moral stand over the Jewish state’s inconceivable cruelty toward Palestinian children or migrant workers’ children, or over the occupation’s long-term impact on the psyche of both Palestinians and Jews. (Rolnik 2023)¹⁷

Or that of Jungian analyst Elana Lakh, who has evidenced the phobic responses of Israeli society, from taxi drivers to political leaders, at the prospect of encountering mental health workers in Gaza as human beings (Lakh 2022).

These are not insights that the Zionist lobby in the West wants us be aware of. They are incompatible with the version of ‘Israel’ that they seek to impose on Western consciousness.

¹⁷ See also Fruchtman (2023).

A specific example of White fragility is found in the Guardian report on the ‘Sheehi affair’ cited in ‘Under Siege’,¹⁸ where we hear a plea from Alan Hack, a New York psychologist who

asked why anti-Zionists were describing Israel as “settler-colonialist” when some Jews had objected. “Please do not invalidate my claim to how sad and triggering this is to me,” he wrote. (Conroy 2023)

We may also regard this as an example of White innocence (Wekker 2016). New York State, where this psychologist is based, is currently ‘aiding and abetting violation of international law’ by giving tax-deductible status to charities that channel ‘hundreds of millions of dollars ... for the purposes of expelling Palestinians out of their generational homes and land’ (Not on Our Dime! n.d.).

But let us pause to consider exactly what is being requested here. And then ask ourselves: how far should we go in remaining silent about what is happening in Palestine so that New York psychologists do not feel sad or triggered? (In any case, how does voicing opinions of which he disapproves ‘invalidate’ his right to his feelings?) More to the point, ‘settler colonialism’ is not an insult, it’s a concept of scholarly analysis (Merip 2022, Wolfe 2015).

The dismissal of ‘settler colonialism’ as a necessary explanatory tool for understanding developments in Palestine sits ill with news of what is happening on the ground.¹⁹ On June 19th 2023, groups of armed Zionist settlers descended on seventeen villages in the West Bank, lighting dozens of homes and cars. The settlers were protected by the Israeli Occupation Army. A superficially short-term perspective would find sufficient explanation for these attacks in the killing, the previous day, of four residents of the illegal colony of Eli by Palestinian militants (itself a retaliation for a lethal raid on Jenin the day before that). One can always generate boredom, and justify passivity, by pointing to ‘the endless cycle of violence’ in Palestine, by failing to attend to the transformative dynamic inherent in the Zionist project, and within which settler attacks have become endemic (Hass 2023a):

Data collected by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reveals that there have been at least 570 attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank this year – an average of three attacks a day ... In practice, settler presence pushes Palestinians out of huge tracts of agricultural and pasturing land and hiking grounds that have served their communities for years. (Hass 2023b)

¹⁸ Lobby group Camera UK (formerly ‘UK Media Watch and BBC Watch’) attacked the Guardian for publishing this balanced and open piece (allowing the protagonists to speak for themselves), on the grounds that it defended ‘terror supporter Lara Sheehi’ (Camera UK 2023).

¹⁹ ‘In mere months, entire Palestinian communities between Ramallah and Jericho have been chased out by settler violence and state policies — paving the way for a total Israeli takeover of thousands of acres of land’: from Oren Ziv’s account of the relationship between ethnic cleansing and recent settler violence in the West Bank (Ziv 2023).

Also in June 2023, documents were published describing how, in 1972, lands had been expropriated from the Palestinian village of Aqraba for the illegal colony of Gitit:

The first step was dispossessing residents of the nearby Palestinian village of their land under the false pretext of making it a military training zone. When the Palestinians insisted on cultivating the land, Israeli soldiers sabotaged their tools. Soldiers were later ordered to use vehicles to destroy the crops. A radical solution was employed when this failed: a crop duster spread a toxic chemical. The substance was lethal for animals and dangerous for humans. (Aderet 2023)

Such processes of expropriation, sometimes with a quasi-legal gloss, sometimes not, have characterised policies towards Palestinian property rights since 1948. The Israeli Government knew that such policies needed to be reconfigured for international consumption. Prime Minister Golda Meir told the Cabinet, regarding the colonisation of occupied Palestinian territory:

... I'm asking the ministers for the sake of our homeland to hold back, talk less, and do as much as possible. But the main thing, as much as possible, is to talk less. (ibid)

Back to June 2023, as the violence in the West Bank escalated, Israeli Security Minister Ben-Gvir spoke to residents of another illegal colony:

... I grant you complete support and cover. A complete settlement must be built here, and on every surrounding hill. The country must be settled in parallel with movement toward a military operation that will include the destruction of [Palestinian] buildings and the purge of terrorists, not one or two, but dozens and hundreds and, if necessary, we must kill thousands. (Cole 2023)

In a characteristic inversion already alluded to, state terror is described as a campaign to destroy 'terrorists'. The sentiments expressed here by Ben-Gvir are consistent with the supremacist 2018 Jewish Nation-State Law, which asserts that only Jews have the right to self-determination in historic Palestine, and declares that 'The State regards settlement [ie the judaisation of Palestinian land] as a national value, and will act to encourage it and to promote and to consolidate its establishment' (Adalah 2020).

All this evidences the appropriateness of settler colonialism as an analytic tool, and also offers some sense of the dynamic, the momentum, behind a colonial process as it becomes increasingly extreme and openly fanatical. This intensification links directly to the recent civil unrest within the Jewish Israeli population itself (Bishara 2023). Given the tragic, and often genocidal, outcomes resulting from former examples of settler colonialism, is it obtuse to suggest that mental health workers pay close attention to what is happening in Palestine, and review seriously their institutional relationship to it?

'The History of Israel'

In his career as an anti-Palestinian activist, Nelson has co-edited a 500-page tome called *The case against Academic Boycotts of Israel* (Nelson et al 2015). It contains a short 'History of Israel' co-authored by Nelson that vividly evidences the biases informing

‘Under Siege’ and other lobby activities. A detailed analysis would be educational, but only the briefest comments can be made here²⁰.

The title itself is a misnomer indicative of its colonialist perspective: it is a history of the Zionist movement and the growth of the Jewish Israeli community in Palestine. The indigenous population, half of those now ruled over by the Israeli State, are bit-players, commented upon only when they intrude on the lives or prospects of the settlers. It conforms to the hegemonic narrative within Israel in which the joint themes of biblical ‘history’ and defensive reactions against Palestinian ‘opposition or enmity’ (never understood from a Palestinian perspective) – combine to justify all that Israel does (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 2021).

‘Arab’ resistance to Zionism is frequently referenced: Jewish enterprises are subject to ‘theft and ... local violence’ (Nelson et al p395); it ‘plagues’ the constructive projects of the settlers (p398); ‘Arab forces’ attack their settlements (ibid). Such hostility *goads* the new arrivals into a reactively creating paramilitary units, thereafter used in self-defence (ibid p399). Palestinian resistance is never regarded as a meaningful response to Zionist encroachments. The devastating implications of the Zionist project – the ethnic cleansing of Palestine²¹ (in 1917, Jews accounted for around 10% of the Palestinian population²²) – is nowhere remarked upon, though Palestinians (and more outspoken Zionists²³) were aware of the danger from the beginning (Qumsiyeh 2011, Khalidi 2020, Achcar 2011). But because Nelson et al are committed to presenting the Zionist vision as

²⁰ It would be helpful if ‘The History of Israel’ chapter could be made accessible to Free Associations readers online. It belongs to the same genre as Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774) and Lewis Cass’s articles on the ‘Indian problem’ in the *North American Review* in the 1830s. And *The History of Rhodesia*, a textbook that I discovered in the stockroom of the school in Zimbabwe where I taught in the mid-1980s, which I used when covering the painful story of Southern Africa’s colonisation by the British to show the children evidence of another functional racism that had been fed to their parents and elder siblings in the same classrooms just a few years before.

²¹ As is now conceded by Zionist writers like Ari Shavit (2013), Benny Morris (Shavit 2004). See also Karmi (2023) ch1.

²² See ‘Jewish and Non-Jewish Population of Israel/Palestine’ Jewish Virtual Library at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-and-non-jewish-population-of-israel-palestine-1517-present>. It is unclear what proportion of the 10% were Zionist settlers and how many Arab-Palestinian Jews.

²³ ‘Ze’ev Zaborinsky, the founder of the Zionist revisionist movement, which represents the ideological roots of the current right-wing government, outlined this colonial logic when he wrote in 1923 that “Every native population in the world resists colonists as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being colonized. That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope.” (Mantovani 2023a). Mantovani’s two-part article explores how this translates into a policy to destroy Palestinian childhood and children today: ‘After a year-long battle, the Israeli military destroyed the school of Ein Samiya in the central West Bank, just days before the start of the school year in Palestine. This is only one of 44 Palestinian schools under immediate threat of demolition. School demolitions are only one of the many ways in which Israel targets Palestinian children.’ (Mantovani 2023b)

moral and redemptive they cannot address this issue, and can only treat opposition to it as capricious or malevolent. No responsibility must come to rest at the feet of those who came to implement the replacement project that has, subsequently, confirmed Palestinians' worst fears.

Many states have been born in atrocity, and construct myths that serve to validate the achievement while idealising the founders. The problem, in the case of Israel, is that Zionist objectives have not yet been securely achieved, so the myths²⁴ are justifying and rationalising crimes that continue as I write (and you read). Nelson et al's treatment of state crimes are particularly significant in this respect: I shall refer to only one, to illustrate the means by which a sanitised version of Israel is being proffered to us²⁵.

In 1956, 48 villagers from Kafr Qasim, including 23 children, were massacred by Israeli soldiers as they returned home from work. They had not been informed that a military curfew had been imposed. The perpetrators were convicted and imprisoned, providing Nelson et al with an upbeat note on which to end their reportage: 'their sentences were commuted, but a legal precedent was set in Israel making it unacceptable to follow an illegal order' (Nelson et al p413). In other words, a resolution that reinforced Israel's status as a civilised and law-abiding society.

They do not mention that the killers were out of prison within a year, an outcome that carries the very opposite message, that the extra-judicial execution of Palestinians can proceed without consequences²⁶. It is this reading, not Nelson et al's, that helps explain the terrible death toll inflicted on Palestinian civilians over the following decades²⁷. Even when the crime is filmed, the lesson of Kafr Qasim repeats itself, as we saw with the murder of Abdel Fattah al-Sharif in 2017. Elor Azaria was videoed killing the already wounded and incapacitated al-Sharif (who was not, by any meaningful definition, a 'terrorist' – he had attacked a member of an army in occupation). Azaria was convicted, but released after serving 9 months of an 18-month sentence (Al Jazeera 2018). In the same year, Ahed Tamimi, a 16-year old Palestinian girl, was imprisoned for 8 months for slapping an Israeli soldier in the face.

Reports from the United Nations, exposés by NGOs such as Save the Children and Oxfam, analyses by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, and the evidence produced

²⁴ That Palestinians chose to leave their homes in 1948, that a reading of ancient history can justify a modern political movement, that Israel made the desert bloom, that the IDF is the most moral army in the world, that Israel is a democracy etc...

²⁵ In stark contrast to treatment of Palestinian acts of resistance, every reprehensible act by an Israeli Jew is rationalised: the 1948 massacre at Deir Yassin happened when troops sent to 'clear it... encountered unexpected resistance' (Nelson et al p408). (No mention is made of mass killings as a strategy to expel the population (ibid p407-8; cf Pappé 2007)). About Baruch Goldstein, the fanatic who gunned down 29 worshippers in the Hebron mosque in 1994, now revered by many Israelis, they write 'he was among the first to minister to settler victims of violence, and that may have helped drive him insane' (Nelson et al p435), surely a clear instance of victim-blaming.

²⁶ This August confirmed in a report from Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2023)

²⁷ Browse the pages of the 'Israel/Palestine Timeline' website, which gives details of each person killed in political violence in Palestine since 2002, (Israel-Palestine Timeline n.d.)

on a weekly basis by Palestinian and Israeli human rights agencies, all evidence the war of attrition against civilian communities resulting from the drive to take the land but exclude its native inhabitants: nothing to do with combatting ‘terrorism’. The task facing the Zionist lobby is to place all this evidence which, one might think, ought to raise profound concerns within the international mental health community, behind a firewall. Fundamentally, it is the purpose of ‘Under Siege’ and the wider campaign against Lara Sheehi to further this objective.

Why Lara Sheehi?

Reviewing psychoanalytic papers designed to normalise Zionist doctrines, Kemp and Pinto noted their poor literary and academic qualities, suggesting that this might reflect their anti-intellectual objective of narrowing and policing public discourse (Kemp and Pinto 2023). The same judgement applies to Burston and Nelson’s piece, a combination of self-referential opinion, unreferenced assertions, quotes taken out of context, and so on, that does not warrant the expense of effort necessary to address in detail. The only difference lies in the personal vendetta pursued in ‘Under Siege’.

The fantastical assertion that Sheehi’s ideas would result in discrimination against Jewish trainees has already been addressed. Burston and Nelson also imply that she and her husband support the tactic of suicide bombing²⁸, and that they are supportive of Islamist ideologies and movements. In one draft, attention was drawn to Sheehi’s possibly precarious legal status in the USA. Such insinuations are potentially profoundly damaging to the life and career of one of our colleagues, and reflect on the qualities of their authors who yet, remarkably, put *civility* at the centre of their argument.

Readers will hopefully want to judge Lara Sheehi’s work by encountering it in the original, in particular in the award-winning *Psychoanalysis under occupation: Practicing resistance in Palestine* (Sheehi and Sheehi 2022). I shall not attempt an assessment of this scholarly work here: an indication of its scope and depth can be found in the reviews that have appeared in the psychoanalytic press (eg Parker 2022, Burman 2022, Baitinger 2022, Grose 2022).

I first heard Lara Sheehi when she delivered an enthralling paper at Birkbeck University in 2019. She presented a clinical case that she had supervised undertaken by psychotherapist Yoad Ghanadry²⁹, working at the Palestine Counselling Centre. To my

²⁸ We have an obligation to understand the circumstances that lead young Palestinians to risk their lives in desperate acts of resistance (Jabr 2023). But more than this, it ill-becomes those who seek to normalise the Occupation, and who devote themselves to opposing the only effective non-violent, grass-roots campaign to uphold Palestinian rights, to be insinuating that others are ‘soft’ on terrorism. For on what grounds can those who strive to prohibit such Gandhian approaches complain when despair and rage find more destructive outlets? When a Palestinian man drives his van into a group of Israeli civilians at a bus stop, then all those involved need to be seen as victims of settler colonialism. And Western powers that have provided Israel with *carte blanche* approval over recent decades carry a heavy burden of responsibility.

²⁹ The case is recounted in Sheehi and Sheehi (2022), and is described in the review by Grose (2022).

mind, Sheehi was taking the debate about psychoanalysis and the social contexts within which it is practiced into new realms of clarity and complexity that were at once exciting and challenging. This conclusion has only been confirmed by the subsequent occasions that I have been privileged to listen to her and read her work³⁰. At no point have I felt my core training and clinical experience, firmly rooted in what Burston/Nelson describe as ‘traditional psychoanalysis’, threatened with being displaced by engaging with her work, only enriched.

Sheehi, it seemed to me, was offering a framework for exploring the neglected relationship between the psychoanalytic profession and its cultural location, critical to its capacity to match its pro-social stance with ethically responsible behaviour. Her work presents an obvious challenge to the ‘see no evil, hear no evil’ attitude that has long characterised mainstream psychoanalytic culture. A lecture on ‘psychoanalytic innocence’ (Sheehi 2021) in October 2021 took this further, speaking to my own concern that psychoanalytic essays into the field of social justice frequently rested on an idealised view of psychoanalysis itself. This seemed to me to facilitate a self-satisfied but politically sterile discourse (explored in terms of a ‘pseudo-humanism’ in Kemp and Pinto 2023)³¹. In this, even those individuals and groups whose activities evidence an interest in the interface between psychoanalysis and social phenomenon, in particular social and racial injustice, conveniently avoid any sustained interest in any actually-occurring controversial issue, certainly not the crimes against humanity committed by the State of Israel (ibid).

Lara Sheehi is not alone in challenging this absence, but she has been the most effective and consistent in confronting the anti-Palestinian racism to which it gives rise. She has not played it safe, but has rather crossed the line of respectability by working with Palestinian colleagues, bringing their work to an international public, even inviting them to speak in the hallowed lecture halls of a leading American university. She sweeps aside the two-dimensional, absolutely ‘othered’, representations of Palestinians constructed by apologists of Israeli colonialism. In doing this she was, surely, doing what psychoanalysts ought to do: getting alongside, listening, making formulations, exploring the meaning in what her Palestinian associates brought to their encounters, undoing the dehumanisation and demonisation to which this specific ethnic group are subjected in our cultures. Sheehi’s background and linguistic skills enable her to act as an effective bridge to a minority community within a society with which psychoanalysis has been deeply engaged since the 1930s, yet which it has comprehensively ignored. Bringing to our attention the lives and work of Palestinian colleagues inevitably involves naming and describing Israel’s settler colonial and apartheid society, and identifying the psychological well-being of the Palestinians as a specific target of Israeli violence. We are deeply indebted to her.

³⁰ Particularly illuminating was her conversation with Foluke Taylor, ‘Questioning Diversity in Psychoanalysis’, part of a series on ‘Decolonising Psychotherapy’ hosted by The Guild of Psychotherapists in July 2022.

³¹ Her presentation followed quickly after a Psychoanalysis and the Social Sphere conference entitled ‘Is Social Justice an Obscure Object of Desire?’, that illustrated these shortcomings: papers reproduced at https://freeassociations.org.uk/FA_New/OJS/index.php/fa/issue/view/35)

This is the reason for the assault on Lara Sheehi.

The solidarity shown towards Sheehi in recent months has been impressive. Generally, when the Zionist lobby has chosen a target, the world re-arranges itself accordingly: invitations are withdrawn, offered awards are abruptly withheld, universities discipline their staff and alter their curricula, publishers pulp their books, political parties expel their members, bookings are cancelled, great operas go unperformed, venues become inaccessible, children's paintings are hidden away, friends remain silent. It is to the credit of psychoanalysis in the United States that this script was torn up, that so many spoke up against the accusers, refusing to bow before those determined to boycott Palestinian voices. It is a specific rebuke to the charges laid against her by Burston and Nelson that those who rallied to her defence constituted such a cultural rainbow, including endorsements from the Palestine Global Mental Health Network, Jewish Voice for Peace, and a 'Letter of support' from 239 'Jewish clinical psychologists, psychoanalysts, social workers, psychiatrists, and psychoanalytic scholar colleagues'³². Perhaps, hopefully, this is an indication that Sheehi's approach to Palestinian liberation is no longer as controversial and outlandish as Burston and Nelson would like it to be.

If opening up this issue within our associations has a disturbing impact, we should not be surprised (Barghouti 2023). It is not so much divisive, as revealing of divisions that exist and whose presence has been denied, or suppressed by authoritarian measures. Alongside support for Israel and Zionism, my experience suggests that there is widespread, if infrequently articulated, concern amongst psychotherapists both with Israel's subjugation of the Palestinians, and dismay at the attempts to suppress free speech about Israel within professional arenas. Jewish colleagues who share these views are not represented by the likes of Burston and Nelson, who would silence them too. Bringing this out can only be good for the profession, perhaps contributing to a democratisation of its culture, as well as opening up the possibility of building our relationships with Palestinian colleagues and, yes, to debating the request by Palestinian civil society that we cease to normalise their oppression.

Concluding thoughts

If pressed to squeeze some virtue from Burston and Nelson's paper, and its 'CSJT' fantasy, we might commend it for locating of the movement for the liberation of Palestine as one amongst many struggles against racism and other forms of oppression confronting the world today. We take opposing philosophical and ideological positions: they agitate for less, I believe in more, professional attention to areas of enduring social injustice, generative of profound and preventable psychological pain. Palestine is here to be regarded as one integral element in a movement comprising numerous campaigns for racial equality and decolonisation across the planet, many of which are met with similar kinds of suppression and erasure.

As an issue facing global civil society, including the mental health professions, Palestine will not go away. While Israeli society maintains its commitment to Zionism,

³² <https://www.pgmhn.org/statements/letter-of-support-for-dr-lara-sheehi-by-jewish-colleagues>

the crimes that accompany the attempt to realise its objectives will persist. Perhaps lulled by Western states' apparently bottomless capacity for indulging its anachronistic ideology and its disregard for legal norms, Israeli actions clearly and on a daily basis belie the narrative of a beleaguered democracy acting in self-defence. The deepening public disquiet, expressed in extending support for the Palestine solidarity movement, has been met by an increasingly high-pitched mis-use of our deep sensitivity to and anxiety regarding anti-Semitism (Aked 2023, Palestine Legal Centre for Constitutional Rights 2015). In 'Under Siege', Burston and Nelson attempt to press this delusional and racist apparatus within and upon psychoanalysis, and it is this that constitutes a threat to the integrity of our professional life.

Clinicians in different countries, some organised within a linked group of Mental Health Networks³³, are joining together on a different basis, and in the belief that psychoanalysts and other clinicians cannot ignore what is actually happening between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea without compromising their moral identity as health workers. This position is elaborated on their websites, and the publications of their members, and is encapsulated in their jointly-issued 'Do No Harm' letter (UKPMHN 2021).

There is a historical aspect to this concern. There have been periods during the last century when individuals and associations have had to respond to extreme socio-political repression – in various European countries in the 1930s, and various Latin American countries in the 1970s and 1980s. There are texts that describe how psychoanalysts responded, including Nitzschke (2003), Fischer (2016), Jimenez (1989), Derrida and Nicholson-Smith (1991), and of course Marie Langer (1989), whose professional and political life spanned both those eras. There is little sense that the profession has actively reflected on those experiences, to determine whether its behaviour then was sufficient and reputable, whether it might have acted differently, and what it might do next time. Or this time.

There are pressing questions to be debated. In an age where ruling elites far and wide seem once again enchanted by fascist precepts, doesn't this assault on Lara Sheehi set a precedent: who knows which other group or opinion, considered integral to the psychoanalytic community today, might fall foul of a narrowing intolerance in the years ahead? If the IHRA is accepted as 'nonpolitical' today, what other damaging piece of sectarian dogma³⁴ might psychoanalysts have to ingest tomorrow? How can it be that the psychoanalytic community assumes a 'business as usual' approach to a society designated as a crime against humanity by a consensus of human rights organisations? Why have there been no official delegations to report on conditions there?

When I read articles such as 'Under Siege', knowing what influence their like exercise to ensure that such questions remain unasked (let alone answered), and when I

³³ Including the Palestine-Global Mental Health Network (<https://www.pgmhn.org/>), and sibling groups in the UK (<https://ukpalmhn.com/>), the USA (<https://usapalmhn.org/>) and Ireland (<https://ipmhn.com/>).

³⁴ See BSEMS and ELSC (2023) and BSEMS (2023) on the impact of the IHRA on academic life in the UK.

try to reconcile their content with the experience of being in Palestine, of talking and working with Palestinian clinicians and Jewish Israeli dissidents, or just reading the daily news of terror and death and expropriation, my head swims. The ready propagation of anti-Palestinian prejudice is infuriating and deeply distressing to anyone who cannot numb themselves to its terrible human consequences. At times it makes one weep, at others to curse.

I do not much like swearing in public. It's another issue on which I might share some common ground with Burston and Nelson. But give me swearing any day over the mugging of an extraordinarily creative spirit and original clinician and theoretician, undertaken to obstruct public cognizance of the theory and practice of an apartheid settler colonial regime. Any fucking day.

NOTE: Warm thanks to Elizabeth Berger, Gwyn Daniel, Brooke Madox, Eliana Pinto and Thomas Kemp for commenting on earlier drafts. I wish to dedicate this rather inappropriate piece to my friend Frank Lowe, recently retired from a distinguished career at the Tavistock, with whom I began a conversation about psychoanalysis, the rich spectrum of human experience, and racial justice, over thirty years ago, before either of us trained.

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