



Response to Burston and Nelson

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How does one argue against a fantasy?

The paper on which I am to comment should not, in my view, be before you in this venue. It does not meet what I would regard as basic standards of academic integrity, honesty, or evidence. I see it as a breach of academic ethics on the part of Burston and Nelson, and on the part of the editors of this journal, Jacobsen and Morgan. In 2009, the American Association of University Professors, under the presidency of Nelson, revised and adopted a statement of ethical standards for professors. The first provision of these standards includes the imperative that professors must “practice intellectual honesty” (American Association of University Professors, 2009, Section 1). Nelson has failed to uphold the standard he himself approved, as has Burston.

I have approached my response as a kind of peer review that wasn’t (False—EDS.) I will begin by demonstrating the extent to which Burston and Nelson refuse to engage in the most basic form of ethical academic practice—making an argument based on evidence. (That one’s evidence should be reliable and valid should be obvious, but cannot be taken for granted in the present case). I will illustrate how, when it comes to the core premise of their argument, they make no effort to offer evidence—which, I will argue, is because evidence for this premise does not exist. I will further illustrate how Burston and Nelson’s article is an act not of scholarship, but of propaganda, indeed propaganda that is part of a concerted, bigoted effort to turf out Lara Sheehi. I will offer a general discussion of my sense of why targeting Sheehi, and scholars like her (viz: Zeavin, 2022, O’Loughlin & Voela, 2023, O’Loughlin & Voela, 2021) has become a key objective of right-wing propagandists within and beyond psychoanalysis, including Tucker Carlson (Soch Lo, 2021, June 11th).

In sum, I am arguing that this article is bullshit. I am using the term “bullshit” in a technically specific philosophical sense; I know that Burston and Nelson evince a horror of profanity in their article, but this is the proper academic term of art regardless of their sensitivities. Following Frankfurt (2009), I am using bullshit to refer to a rhetorical mode that is fundamentally indifferent to the truth, and that is deceptive in an effort to disguise its actual purpose. Bullshitting involves saying whatever you want to say without regard for how true any particular aspect of what you are saying might be, because you are invested in the gestalt. It is, necessarily, unethical. Bullshit often involves lying, but whatever lying is involved is subordinate to a larger purpose—namely, fashioning a version of reality that serves the purposes of the bullshitter. Bullshit is always to some extent a form of propaganda, even if it is only the narcissistic propaganda of a self-aggrandizing individual. In this particular case, the bullshit in question is a form of disinformation, one with obvious affinities with a larger right-wing disinformation machine, as I will show.

Responding to bullshitters is an unenviable task. Scholars of mis- and disinformation have written often in recent years about what they call the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle—“the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it” (Williamson, 2016). Refuting bullshit claims takes far more effort than making them, to such an extent that it can be a functional impossibility within the space constraints of, for example, an academic journal. If we take the order of magnitude metaphor literally, I would need 350 pages to properly respond to Burston and Nelson’s article¹. As it is, responding to this article has been more laborious than any academic task I have previously undertaken, so extensive is the amount of bullshit demanding a response. As Williamson argues, though, refuting bullshit is an ethical imperative of scholars; I will conclude with a reflection of why this is especially true for psychoanalysis at the present moment.

This article is bullshit. Burston and Nelson are bullshitting. Let me show you how, and consider an explanation as to why.

Logical Fallacies, Lack of Evidence, and Refusals to Support Premises of the Argument.

I should begin by demonstrating that Burston and Nelson know what a logical fallacy is; that both are professors would suggest I should not need to confirm this, but the spirit of the present exercise is that one should prove one’s points. In commenting on a couple of Sheehi’s tweets, Nelson and Burston aver that

Indeed, this is an example of the logical fallacy known as *pars pro toto*, in which the behavior and attitudes of a sub-set of people in a particular group are deemed representative of the group as a whole.

It is uncontroversial to suggest that what is true of some members of a particular group cannot necessarily be assumed to generalize to that group as a whole. While we will sometimes need to generalize as academics, and as people, we should generally do so cautiously, and while taking pains to illustrate the evidentiary and theoretical bases on which we are generalizing.

Burston and Nelson relentlessly refuse to do this throughout their article, even as they critique other people (real and imagined) for what they contend are their own malign overgeneralizations and refusals of factual argumentation. Here is a non-exhaustive selection of overgeneralized factual claims they make without any citation of evidence:

The recent more aggressive commitment to CSJT as an imperative cause can have troubling consequences in therapy. While CSJT therapists can be expected to show sympathy for patients’ experiences, history, and self-identified problems, they can encourage—or even impose—broad social explanations for these matters that leave patients with few options for truly differentiated self-understanding and even fewer options for changing their circumstances [. . .]

¹ It is fortunate that I have a book under contract on this topic that will allow me to address some of the issues raised in this response in more depth.

This is often the consequence of embracing the CJST insistence that all human interactions that are fraught with conflict or disagreement are reducible to power dynamics. Some CJST advocates refuse to consider these risks or even to discuss them with colleagues [. . .]

Yet they [Sheehi's students] never received either satisfactory due process or a professionally credible account of their supposed deficiencies [. . .]

Thus far, George Washington University has refused to release Crowell & Moring's report to the public, although on March 27, 2023, the President of GWU, Mark Wrighton, did release a summary of the law firm's "findings" that is riddled with factual errors and deliberate obfuscation . . .

In their book and accompanying YouTube interviews, the Sheehis repeatedly assert that "all Zionists are mentally ill" and/or that "Zionism is a psychosis."²

[The Sheehis are] staunchly defending Islamism [. . .]

Somewhere around 80% of Jews worldwide are Zionists.

These are not matters of opinion, they are matters of verifiable fact. Burston and Nelson do not verify their claims, because many of them appear not to be facts. If I received a paper from an undergraduate that included statements thus framed, I would underline them in red ink and write in the margins: "Show, don't tell! Where are your citations?" Or, to quote Burston and Nelson back to themselves: "Where is [sic] the data to support such a sweeping conclusion?"

The predicate upon which Burston and Nelson base their entire paper is the idea that there exists something called Critical Social Justice Theory. According to them,

By contrast with the traditional model, Critical Social Justice Theory (CSJT) is a much more recent approach which insists that the patient's growth depends chiefly on their acquiring insight into their "positionality" vis a vis oppressed racial and sexual minorities, and the (White, male, heteronormative, cisgender) privileged social groups that oppress them.

Nobody, to my knowledge, has ever written a book or article developing or advocating what Burston and Nelson describe as "Critical Social Justice Theory." A search of the University of Pennsylvania library catalogue for this search term and cognates yields but one citation actually containing the term "Critical Social Justice Theory", for an obscure Indian government news agency wire story about a podcast appearance by an assistant professor of the University of South Dakota (India eGov Newswire, 2020).

Critical Social Justice Theory is not a thing. Nobody identifies themselves as a proponent of such a theory, as one might with self psychology or ego psychology. Burston and Nelson do not actually demonstrate a single piece of literature or evidence to

² Neither of these quoted phrases appear in *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* (2022), so it is a lie to suggest that these quoted statements are "repeatedly assert[ed]" "in their book." Nor does the phrase "boundless cruelty and power," which Burston and Nelson put in quotation marks and attribute to *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* (2022).

support their claim that “CSJT” exists as they describe it. Look at their references section: they show no evidence that such a body of theory and practice exists. If such a widespread theoretical tradition is taking over a major academic discipline, surely there would be lots to cite? They cannot attribute the characterizations they make to any person or text; they have no one, and nothing, to quote. They are, in other words, inventing words to put in other people’s mouths, caricaturing an imagined opponent in order to make an argument against them.

CSJT is bullshit. Burston and Nelson are tilting at a windmill.

Such tilting is part of engaging a straw man fallacy. In a straw man fallacy, you invent an opponent who does not exist, and then you argue against things that this imagined opponent (necessarily has not actually) said or done. This is not some Socratic rhetorical device; it is an actual truth claim about the existence of a real thing in the real world. This is, of course, a form of lying—you are pretending that something exists when it does not. You are not supposed to lie in academic journals. The editors of academic journals are not supposed to publish lies, because they are supposed to be identified by a process of peer review, a process to which Burston and Nelson’s article was not, to the best of my knowledge, subjected³; when lies are found *post hoc*, journals are supposed to issue retractions and corrections.

This is a clear breach of the “intellectual honesty” called for in the AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics.

“CSJT,” as Burston and Nelson fantasize it, is a kind of leftist bogeyman, one on which they project all manner of unsupported attributions. For example, they define “CSJT” practitioners in contradistinction to “traditional” psychoanalysts as follows:

instead of exploring family history and the lingering reverberations of early childhood experience or adolescent identity struggles on adult development, CSJT-oriented analysts *tend to* locate the source of patients’ suffering chiefly in ‘systemic’ social and political trends. Essentialized identity groupings can have benefits in social analysis but their relevance in psychoanalysis is limited. (Emphasis added).

Where is such a turning away from family and childhood histories to be found in the psychoanalytic literature? Where is the evidence that these alleged CSJT psychoanalysts are “tending” to do one thing “instead of” another? If one actually reads classic texts in the general area of social psychoanalysis—for example Saketopoulou (2011), Corbett

³ My correspondence with Jacobsen and Morgan, and the fact that my response here was not peer reviewed, had led me to infer that Burston and Nelson’s piece was not peer reviewed. When I wrote to Jacobsen and Morgan during the proofing process and directly asked them if they had peer reviewed Burston and Nelson’s paper, they did not reply to my question. (After 4 months of berating us, in no small part based on the unbidden conviction that the Burston/Nelson paper was unrefereed, the author finally got around to asking if it were true, but only a short time before publication and long after his paper was turned in and after any good will between us evaporated. His starting assumption remains an important exhibit in this fray—EDS.)

(2009), Layton & Leavy-Sperounis (2020), Holmes (2006), Sheehi & Sheehi (2021), Suchet (2006), Altman (2009), Eng & Han (2019), Leary (2000), and one could go on and on—what you will find are papers and books that take pains to consider the imbrication, overdetermination, and mutual influence of matters of psychodynamics and sociocultural, historical, and political context in the lives of real patients. There is no either/or choice being posited, demanded, or made by these real authors. Here is the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle in action—I could pull quotations and close read any of these articles I just cited to prove my point, but doing so comprehensively would be an article (indeed, a monograph) unto itself. I am citing them instead, like a normal academic, because you can go read them yourself and find that what I am saying is true.

Here is how Burston and Nelson describe their fantasied “CSJT”:

But what exactly is Critical Social Justice Theory? According to most observers, it is an approach that evolved gradually from the Liberation Psychology of Ignacio Martín-Báro, but which recently took on board some intricately intertwined theories derived from Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory and the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) and de-colonialization movements. While all these movements originated in the late 20th century, they only coalesced in their present form in the 21st century, transforming university curricula in various domains and disciplines.

To a normal academic, it is very bizarre to see someone insistently critiquing a body of theory that they never actually cite, deferring instead to an *ad populeum* fallacy of “most” unnamed and uncited “observers”—who are they? One cannot help but hear the rhetorical echo of Donald Trump’s constant antidemocratic and conspiratorial claims about what “a lot of people are saying” (Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). The way we normally undertake intellectual disagreements in psychoanalysis, and in academia generally, is to identify something another scholar actually wrote, and then argue why it is in some sense insufficient or mistaken. Burston and Nelson do not do this at all in the first half of their essay in which they claim that CSJT is a (bad) thing. If “most observers” were real, and not a hallucinated *ad populeum* fantasy, they could cite them.

The simplest explanation for this absence of real discussion of real psychoanalytic work is that Burston and Nelson are completely ignorant in this area and have no idea what they are talking about. The evidence for this hypothesis comes straight from a talk Burston gave, in which he read the Burston and Nelson paper virtually verbatim; when the question time arrived, he was obliged to confess that “well, to be honest with you Ilene, I’m not, I’m not really all that well-versed in contemporary psychoanalysis” (Don Carveth, 2023, August 15th).

You can’t make this shit up.

In Nelson’s case, this evidently willful refusal to actually engage with the work of other scholars is part of a pattern. Consider Lloyd’s critique of another Nelson publication: “neither response shows any signs of having seriously read and considered what the essays in the forum actually propose. When they do even refer to them, their misreadings are so egregious that one would almost prefer to presume malice than

to impute obtuseness to a colleague” (Lloyd, 2013, p. 1). Ten years ago, Lloyd was in the unenviable position I am in now—trying to respond to a paper that flagrantly breaks the conventional rules of academic argumentation and evidence, trying to parse whether his interlocutor is motivated by “malice” or “obtuseness” and not sure which is the more alarming possibility. He ran up against the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle.

I would suggest that Burston and Nelson do not cite actual authors because, in addition to the fact that by Burston’s own account they “are not all that well-versed in contemporary psychoanalysis” (Don Carveth, 2023, August 15th), any author they could cite does not say or do what Burston and Nelson are invested in pretending people like them are saying or doing. Surely, if you want to critique someone for saying something you think is stupid, it is advantageous to quote them? This is why I quote Burston and Nelson so extensively throughout this essay, because their own words show their argument to be frankly ridiculous; it is also why Burston and Nelson cherry-pick and decontextualize the most inflammatory-seeming things Sheehi has ever written as if they amounted to a smoking gun.

By this stage, the reader who might tend towards sympathy with Burston and Nelson’s argument might be asking: but what about the fact that they spend so many pages addressing the work of Lara Sheehi? There is much to be said about this, most of which I am deferring to a later section for purposes of clarity. In brief, for now: it is no accident that Burston and Nelson organize the first half of their argument around a morally panicked account of the dangers of the alleged CSJT. They frame Sheehi’s work, indeed her very personhood, as an illustration of the problem they are diagnosing. In their own words: “The potential drawbacks to the CSJT approach are reflected in the impact of one of a newly famous and controversial *representative of this trend* who has become a public figure, namely, Dr. Lara Sheehi” (emphasis added). But, as I have shown, they never actually substantiate their claim that CSJT is a thing, or a “trend,” at all.

This is the deceptive aporia at the core of Burston and Nelson’s bullshit argument. They do not actually identify any theorists or texts of CSJT to discuss and critique. They are not able to draw on any published or presented clinical vignettes to support the idea that supposed CSJT therapists are practicing in the manner they assert. They do not bother to actually engage with any of the dozens of psychoanalytic authors whose bodies of work they are implicitly categorizing as CSJT, that is, authors in psychoanalysis who grapple with the psychosocial, *perhaps because they do not even know who they are* (Don Carveth, 2023, August 15th). Even their reading of Sheehi & Sheehi (2022) fails to prove their point about the alleged CSJT, because it is actually a thoughtful, carefully argued, highly technical book that clearly illustrates the value of considering the complex interactions between the soma, the psyche, the social, and the structural. I would particularly direct the reader to the Sheehis’ lengthy discussion of the case of Amjad (2022, pp. 45-65 especially) to illustrate my point.

Burston and Nelson invent a disturbing “trend,” and then offer up Sheehi as an illustration of this non-existent trend. But if the trend does not exist, how can Sheehi

possibly be an exemplar of it? This defies formal logic. It also begs two further questions: where are they getting the term CSJT from in the first place? And what is the utility of pretending that Sheehi is an exemplar of it?

Propaganda.

If no one, in psychoanalysis or otherwise, is a proponent of something called “Critical Social Justice Theory,” and if no real academic references to such a theory can be found in one of the largest libraries in the world, where does this term come from? It comes from an ecosystem of far-right and often fascist⁴ propaganda outlets that promotes antisemitic, racist, and homo- and transphobic conspiracy theories. What I will endeavor to do here is sketch a diagram of the propaganda ecosystem in which Burston and Nelson’s paper is situated, showing the route these bullshit ideas have traveled from the farthest reaches of the fascist internet to a psychoanalytic journal.

“CSJT” is not an original coinage of Burston and Nelson’s. When one Googles the term, what one finds is a depressing archipelago of blog posts and Youtube videos from a small world of far-right activists who seem to spend much of their time interviewing each other for videotaped podcasts. The term “Critical Social Justice Theory” mainly appears on very small-scale Youtube channels such as that of The Radical Center, which posts videos including “It’s ok to be white⁵. A discussion of anti-white rhetoric” (2023, May 1st) and “Pronouns: Why We Should Not Play Along” (2023, May 9th)⁶.

The term “CSJT” also appears frequently on a website called Critical Therapy Antidote, which mainly functions as a clearinghouse for interviews with a handful of therapists who are critical of efforts to consider matters like race and gender as germane to the work of therapy. Critical Therapy Antidote publishes numerous anti-transgender articles, and resource guides for how to do things like “detrans” your child out of the “gender cult” (Sefein & Snyder, 2023, April 30th). Critical Therapy Antidote has posted a number of different blog posts about Lara Sheehi (viz: Nelson, April 5th, 2023 and Critical Therapy Antidote, April 28th, 2023) that bear a striking resemblance to Burston and Nelson’s, with titles like “The Crisis in American Psychoanalysis” (viz: Critical Therapy Antidote, May 31st, 2023) headlined with an image that the stock photo

⁴ Lest I be accused of the leftist habit of calling anything I dislike fascist, let me stipulate that I am using the term in the narrowly defined sense favored by scholars of fascism, that is, an authoritarian politics of grievance predicated upon a social identitarian us/them dichotomy that the dominant group “solves” through ethnonationalism directed by charismatic leaders who venerate violence (see Sharlet, 2023, and McLean, 2023, April 7th).

⁵ According to the Anti-Defamation League, “it’s okay to be white” is a longstanding White Supremacist “hate slogan” (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). Are we sounding radically centrist yet?

⁶ This video was based on an essay published on Critical Therapy Antidote entitled “Preferred Pronouns: Neo-Etiquette or Radical Self-Rejection?” (Elliott, 2022, March 19th).

company that licenses it calls “A Burning House Covered With Flames”⁷ (viz: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/a-burning-house-covered-with-flames-11688880/>). They also published frequent updates on the “case”, including publishing e-mails from the APSaA listserv—when Burston and Nelson cite Sulkowicz’s resignation letter in their references section, they cite Critical Therapy Antidote’s publication of it.

These Critical Therapy Antidote posts are, you will see, mainly written without attribution, a major departure from normal academic practice. When articles are written without attribution, numerous articles can be written by one person or by a small group of people to give the impression that a concern about an issue is more widely held than it actually is. This is a technique favored by propagandists, as is publishing the same basic material across multiple non-peer reviewed blogs to give the false impression of an active discussion or “scandal”. Critical Therapy Antidote also does not list a masthead or editorial board, making it impossible to know who is soliciting, editing, or publishing most of what the site hosts.

As of this writing, most of the recent posts on Critical Therapy Antidote are podcast-style interviews with authors who contributed to a volume called “Cynical Therapies: Perspectives on the Antitherapeutic Nature of Critical Social Justice” (Thomas, 2023). This volume, which misleadingly styles itself as an academic text, was published by an Australian self-publishing company called Ocean Reeve—that is, a vanity press, the sort that my elderly relatives have used to self-publish their memoirs to distribute at family reunions⁸. It is not an academic book, even though it is pretending to be one. Books published by vanity presses are not subject to scholarly editing or peer review the way academic press books are. They are also, consequently, not usually understood to be sufficiently reliable sources to cite in legitimate academic articles in legitimate academic journals as authoritative texts.

Such skepticism is particularly warranted in this case. While the volume is nominally edited by Val Thomas, Thomas makes clear that the project is deeply indebted to one Helen Pluckrose. Indeed, the volume is dedicated to Pluckrose, and I will reproduce the dedication in full here.

Many people have made helpful contributions to the authors’ chapters contained within this edited book. *Although they are not identified by name here, they know who they are.* The authors are very grateful for their input.

There is one person, though, to whom all of us have reason to be especially grateful, and that is Helen Pluckrose. In the middle of a very heavy workload, Helen made time to review all the chapters in the light of Critical Social Justice

⁷ Another post is headed with an image the licensing company describes as “Bonfire Photo” (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/bonfire-photo-776113/>)

⁸ When using a vanity press, the author typically needs to pay for the publication of the book upfront. This cost would likely run into the thousands of dollars. I sought a quote from Ocean Reeve in which I inquired as to what it would cost to print a volume that was comparable to “Cynical Therapies”; the quote with which they furnished me was for \$3995. One wonders who footed the bill for “Cynical Therapies” (2023), and to whom its profits (if any) are distributed?

theories. Her comments and observations helped us all refine and develop the arguments and perspectives presented here on the antitherapeutic nature of Critical Social Justice and the existential threat this ideology poses to traditional therapy. (Thomas, 2023, p. V, emphasis added).

So who is Helen Pluckrose? Her main claim to fame is submitting hoax articles to academic journals⁹ (Christensen, October 5th, 2018). This hoax relied on an apt recognition that editorial standards, particularly in more marginal journals, could allow for total bullshit to make it through a weak peer review process¹⁰—*plus ça change*. In this hoax, as well as in the book “Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender and Identity—And Why This Harms Everyone” (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020), Pluckrose’s constant collaborator is one James Lindsay¹¹.

Lindsay’s profile in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Extremist Files indicates that he “regularly shares conspiracy theories about the supposed communist takeover of the world (especially in the United States), promotes ‘groomer’ rhetoric against the LGBT community and spreads the ‘white genocide’ theory that Marxists want to eradicate the white race” (SPLC, n.d.), the last being an antisemitic conspiracy theory that is primarily popular with neo-Nazis (Georgetown University Bridge Initiative Team, 2020). The SPLC identifies Lindsay as “among the top fearmongers of critical race theory” (n.d.). Lindsay’s SPLC entry quotes Chris Rufo, the architect of the rash of anti-“CRT” bills promulgated in Republican-led states (Wallace-Wells, 2021), as saying the following of Lindsay:

James is really the theory expert. James is an encyclopedia of theory connecting all the dots laying out the case ... creating this giant content to guide all of us into this world. And then I think I come in as a complement to what James is doing, really following his lead with the praxis or the practice, which is translating the theory into the realm of practical politics and then translating this kind of esoteric knowledge that *school moms and school dads can use at school board meetings and hammer their school boards with* (SPLC, n.d., emphasis added).

⁹ Revealing the weak editorial practices of journals is a worthwhile activity; it is something I am of course aiming to do here.

¹⁰ It also bears noting that the hoaxers’ characterizations of some of the papers that wound up published are misleading. A paper that nearly made it into Affilia was characterized by the hoaxers as a thinly veiled version of Mein Kampf, but this paper actually went through three rounds of aggressive peer review, by the end of which it bore no such resemblance in content or style (Christensen, August 15th, 2018). In other words, the hoaxers were bullshitting about the actual nature of the Affilia paper, *quelle surprise*.

¹¹ They had a third collaborator, Peter Boghossian, the only actual professor of the bunch. Boghossian faced disciplinary action from Portland State University for this hoax because the university’s IRB found he had committed research misconduct by calling the hoax academic research without submitting or receiving IRB approval, despite the fact that the exercise obviously involved human subjects (Flaherty, 2019, January 7th).

More recently—indeed, as I was finalizing the draft of this response—Rufo posted a screenshot on his Twitter feed of a slate of junior scholars giving a panel at the APA annual conference on trauma and queer populations. The accompanying text read “psychotherapy has become a pseudo-discipline to advance left-wing ideology in a therapeutic package” (Rufo, 2023).

Rufo and Lindsay are two of the primary propagandists of a movement that seeks to, in the parlance of the DeSantis administration in Florida, Stop WOKE (Brasch, 2022, November 17th). Pluckrose has frankly noted that “Critical Social Justice” is “colloquially referred to as wokeism” (Pluckrose, 2020, February 12th)—that is, that those who categorize vast tracts of intellectually diverse scholarship as iterations of “Critical Social Justice” are trying to give an academic gloss to what people like Pluckrose, Lindsay, Rufo, and DeSantis would otherwise call anti-“woke” activism when talking to their own partisans.

This anti-“woke” movement that the aforementioned actors are pursuing is specifically fascist, in the view of experts on fascism, and relies on techniques first honed by European fascists (McLean, April 7th, 2023). It works to restrict the participation of minorities in American public life; to treat critics of the state as illegitimate and dangerously hostile to the white majority, and banning them from saying anything that might somehow cause white people “guilt [or] anguish¹²” (Brasch, 2022, November 17th); and to treat gender and sexual minorities as perverts and pedophiles, blood libels that were originally used to target Jews and have been repurposed for the persecution of queer people (Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism, 2023, January 24th). Florida’s Stop WOKE act attempts¹³ to ban public school instruction of anything it deems “critical race theory.” It is just one of a spreading rash of legislation that attempts to block public school instruction of “divisive concepts” (The National Coalition for History, n.d.) In the Florida context, it is part of a multi-pronged legislative push to refuse to teach broadly accepted historical and psychological research on issues related to race, gender, and sexuality, including pieces of the AP Psychology curriculum about gender and sexuality that are approved by the APA (The College Board, 2023, August 3rd), as well as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill that restrict[s] discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools (Thoreson, n.d.).

These are red-baiting efforts to target teachers and minorities as public enemies, up to the point of labeling us as pedophile “groomers,” an epithet that Lindsay took credit for popularizing (SPLC, n.d.). This is precisely the kind of authoritarian attack on the professoriate against which the AAUP is meant to defend us. What are we to make of the Association’s erstwhile president building his own arguments in this article atop the rhetorical infrastructure created by fascists to take down teachers?

¹² We should countenance, with horror, the potential democracy-demolishing consequences of a “guilt and anguish” exception to the First Amendment.

¹³ I say “attempts” because some of the operative aspects of the legislation are currently under federal injunction (Brasch, 2022, November 17th).

Part of the problem with writing about propaganda is that you can begin to look like the movie archetype of a crazy person trying to crack the case with a corkboard covered in red yarn; it is a particularly unfortunate feature of the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle. I take the time to lay this intellectual genealogy out here because it is important to recognize that what could, to a casual observer, look like reliable academic sources or debates are, in fact, the tip of an iceberg of a bigoted propaganda machine that is actively working to promote fascist white nationalism in the US and abroad.

Here's the rub: "Cynical Therapies" is among the *only* books that Burston and Nelson cite other than Lara and Stephen Sheehi's "Psychoanalysis Under Occupation" (2022) in their exceptionally sparse References section; in the original draft of their manuscript to which I was first asked to respond¹⁴, it was literally the only book they cited besides the Sheehis'. They now make glancing reference to an old book by Wilhelm Reich, and Burston cites a volume he co-edited with Jon Mills, one of the leading lights¹⁵ of Critical Therapy Antidote, on which Nelson has also published posts about Sheehi that reference "Cynical Therapies". "Cynical Therapies" is a volume composed of chapters by the frequent flyers of Critical Therapy Antidote, dedicated to a preeminent right-wing propagandist who for the last five years has virtually always collaborated with a proponent of white genocide and "groomer" conspiracy theories on the radar of the SPLC¹⁶. The chapter (Alderman, 2023, in Thomas, 2023) Burston and Nelson cite is written by an apparently unlicensed¹⁷ Jungian life coach who is suggesting that people irrationally pursue civil rights activism as a substitute for religious faith, and ends with a lengthy critique of gender-affirming care.

How on Earth did anything of this nature make it into a psychoanalytic journal that supposedly engages in peer review?

¹⁴ I was originally asked to respond to a draft of the Burston and Nelson article on June 6th, 2023, and received a copy from Jacobsen and Morgan of a 25-page article, with the file name "UNDERSEIGE Final Draft BurstonNelson". Then, on July 13th, I received an e-mail from Jacobsen and Morgan providing an "updated and final draft" with the file name "Under SeigeHolmes UPDATED", fully ten pages longer and majorly revised. Jacobsen and Morgan wrote "You don't have to refer to it if you already have completed your own response piece." (Which omits that the editors also lifted word limits and added delivery time to suit all who needed extensions as a result - EDS.)

¹⁵ To say that a light is leading is not to imply that it is bright.

¹⁶ Given that Lindsay is Pluckrose's constant collaborator, and that "Cynical Therapies" is a kind of sequel to Pluckrose and Lindsay's "Cynical Theories" (2020)—the titular similarity is presumably not coincidental—one might reasonably wonder if Lindsay is one of the "helpful contribut[ors]" referred to anonymously in the "Cynical Therapies" dedication. Have you ever seen an academic book in which scholarly colleagues who helped with the book go uncredited, with the secretive coda that "they know who they are"?

¹⁷ As of this writing, I could find no license listed under the author's name in his home state of California's Department of Consumer Affairs license registry.

Disinformation.

As a scholar, I study far-right political violence, white supremacy, and the online networks of propaganda and disinformation that promote it (Carter, 2021, Carter, in press). Online propaganda networks and their propagandists generally work to attract amenable viewers by fashioning themselves as neutral and reasonable. They often describe themselves as offering a balancing, countervailing perspective to what they suggest is radical leftist ideology¹⁸; sometimes, like Pluckrose and Lindsay, they describe themselves as currently or formerly liberal, and as trying to correct the excesses of their own supposed¹⁹ side. They tend to bury their more obviously bigoted content—the stuff that suggests that being trans is a mental illness stoked by seductive perverts from which parents must rescue their (often adult) children, or that whites are a persecuted racial group whose persecution has gone unrecognized because of a cultural Marxist (read: Jewish) campaign—deeper in their catalogues, in order to preserve their veneer of respectability and legitimacy. They try to keep the top of the funnel looking reasonable so that, by the time one reaches the frankly bigoted bottom of the funnel, the reader is warmed up and amenable. No less an authority than the former white supremacist propagandist Derek Black²⁰ has talked about how he learned to do this kind of sophist seduction as an avatar of neo-Nazi organizations like Stormfront, the website run by Black’s father Don, a Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (Saslow, 2018).

It is the most dearly held goal of far-right propagandists to launder their disinformation into outlets that are widely seen as legitimate and mainstream. They do things like buying up copies of their own (often self-published) books to help get them onto bestseller lists, like the one at the New York Times. And, in the present case, they work to create and then capitalize up manufactured “scandals”—like the canard of “Critical Social Justice Theory” or “grievance studies” (Christensen, October 5th, 2018) as a major problem in academia—into the mainstream discourse. This kind of propaganda strategy is an example of a practice called astroturfing. The goal of astroturfing is to manufacture an appearance of grassroots distress and organizing for political projects that are actually driven by powerful actors and interest groups, whose identities (and the skepticism they would likely arise) can be obscured.

¹⁸ These bogeymen, the “radical left” and “cultural Marxists,” are well known antisemitic dogwhistles (Berkowitz, 2003, August 15th).

¹⁹ The fact that Lindsay promotes antisemitic, racist, and queer-phobic conspiracy theories while claiming to be a “left-leaning liberal” suggests that he is bullshitting about his supposed liberalism.

²⁰ An alumnus of the New College of Florida, where he reports he was dissuaded from his neo-Nazi beliefs. It is noteworthy that New College was among the first targets of Ron DeSantis’s anti-“woke” campaign in Florida public education. He appointed the aforementioned Chris Rufo to its board of directors in order to remake the college in the image of conservative Christian Hillsdale College (Green, 2023), including by doing away with gender studies. Evidently an institution capable of talking someone out of being a neo-Nazi was not operating properly, in the view of DeSantis and Rufo.

Nelson is an emeritus professor and former president of the AAUP; Burston seems to have been an associate professor for decades. They are public figures with significant professional seniority. They either are too naïve and credulous to know what they have been a party to, or they are knowingly participating in this sort of effort; I am at a loss to imagine a third option. Like Lloyd ten years ago, I am left to wonder if this bullshit is a matter of “obtuseness” or “malice” (Lloyd, 2013). Either is deeply troubling. And Jacobsen and Morgan have been derelict in their duty as editors of what is usually, supposedly, a peer-reviewed scholarly journal in not ferreting this out during their editorial process, and in choosing to publish the piece anyway once the issue was brought to their attention.

Why Lara Sheehi?

“The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to.” (Frankfurt, 2009, p. 54).

The Bullshit Asymmetry Principle problem is at its most acute in Burston and Nelson’s discussion of Lara Sheehi. A full accounting of the bullshit in this section would exceed what is feasible in an article-length response. Kemp (this issue) ably illustrates the bad faith reading of the Sheehis’ work, and how this kind of bad faith reading is a common tactic of people whose primary objective is to neutralize criticism of authoritarian regimes, particularly in and of Israel. I trust the critical reader will notice that Burston and Nelson do not quote or cite anything besides the Holmes Commission that seems favorable to Sheehi, her work or her personhood. They acknowledge the existence of supportive statements (like Gentile, 2023, on behalf of the Editorial Board of Studies in Gender & Sexuality; O’Loughlin & Voela, 2023, on behalf of the Editorial Board of Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society; Middle Eastern Studies Association, 2023, January 31st; the letter from hundreds of Jewish colleagues, myself included, posted by Palestine-Global Mental Health Network, 2023; the USACBI letter signed by over 2000 people, many of them prominent professors; the letter by Israeli academics under the aegis of Academia for Equality, 2023; or the letter from the Board of Directors of APA Division 39 published by the Editors of Parapraxis Magazine, 2023²¹) but do not dare quote or cite them, even as they cite anonymous criticism from Critical Therapy Antidote. I encourage the critical reader who is sufficiently interested in these issues to go to Sheehi’s work directly and see for themselves that the characterization Burston and Nelson offer bears little resemblance to the work itself.

The critical reader also deserves a full disclosure of my own relationship to Lara Sheehi. She is my dear friend and longtime colleague; our scholarly interests overlap considerably, so we often collaborate, including on the editorial boards of Studies in

²¹ Of which, in the interest of full disclosure, I will proudly share that I was an author.

Gender & Sexuality and Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society, and in APA Division 39. I hired her to serve on my teaching team at the Smith College School for Social Work, where she received the best student evaluations I ever saw in my years of supervising fellow professors. She is someone my wife and I (both Jewish, my wife the Israeli granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor) gladly welcome into our home, where she plays wonderfully with my young children. Neither my wife nor I are in the habit of letting committed antisemites into our home, to say nothing of letting them play with our kids.

If the characterization that Burston and Nelson offer of Sheehi were true, I would not be her friend, and she would be most unlikely to want to be mine.

The fact that she is my dear friend, and that I (unlike Burston and Nelson) have extensive firsthand and empirical knowledge of her teaching, is not sufficient here, though. Burston and Nelson's arguments about Sheehi should not just be refuted with appeals to *ethos*; you should not simply take my word for the fact that she is a wonderful person, a committed antifascist opponent of antisemitism, and a dear friend and colleague to hundreds of Jewish colleagues who wrote a letter attesting to all of the above. There is ample basis on which to break them down through an appeal to *logos* as well—that is, through recourse to facts and reason that do not only derive from my direct experience.

My critique of Burston and Nelson's discussion of Sheehi and her writings will be in two main parts. First, I will illustrate that their "analysis" of the situation frankly contradicts the argument and ethical stance they propose earlier in their own paper. I will then demonstrate that their discussion of the issue mainly consists of an appeal to *pathos*, that is, an emotional and often bigoted appeal that is characteristic of propaganda.

On the matter of logical inconsistency, Burston and Nelson seem to take as axiomatic that what Sheehi's students said should be afforded a presumption of truthfulness, and they do not actually contend with a fact pattern that contradicted this contention. Indeed, their limited engagement with this fact pattern involves apparent intellectual dishonesty. They only attend to the third-party law firm Crowell & Moring's investigation that exonerates Sheehi by alleging that the published summary of its findings²² is "riddled with factual errors and deliberate obfuscation." They support this

²² I would encourage the reader to go and review the fact pattern detailed in these findings for themselves (George Washington University Office of the President, 2023, March 27th). The reports main conclusion is described as follows: "At the conclusion of its review, Crowell found no evidence substantiating the allegations of discriminatory and retaliatory conduct alleged in the complaint. Many of the statements the complaint alleges were made by Dr. Sheehi were, according to those who heard them, either inaccurate or taken out of context and misrepresented." This is a direct quotation from the report itself, and I would note that attorneys can be disbarred for misrepresenting evidence. I would also note that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act places strict limits on the kinds of potentially identifying information about students that universities can disclose, and that caution about FERPA (and, *pari passu*, concerns about student and employee privacy) could be an obvious and non-malign interpretation for why the report itself was not released.

claim through reference to a Times of Israel blog post by Nelson, entitled “GW Law Firm Delivers What It Was Paid For”²³ (Nelson, 2023, April 21st), implying through citation that this blog post identifies factual errors in the report. If you review the post yourself, you will find that it actually does not identify factual errors. Rather, it is an account of why Nelson has a different interpretation of the definition of antisemitism than what he contends (without clear evidence) is the definition Crowell & Moring²⁴ use. These are not “factual errors,” they are differences of opinion; even Nelson himself in the post concedes that these competing definitions of antisemitism “are a valid subject for debate” (Nelson, 2023). This intellectual dishonesty arguably amounts to falsification of evidence, which can be grounds for a paper being withdrawn from a journal and can warrant the firing for cause of even a tenured professor.

Returning, though, to the presumption of truth aporia: I would argue that Burston and Nelson ran afoul of their own dictum that one should be wary of “false positives” in allegations of bigotry. The fact that one’s students characterize something in a particular way is not automatically an indication that the characterization is true. We have a robust scholarly literature demonstrating that the evaluation of women of color in academia is almost irreparably undermined by bigoted bias, for example (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, González & Harris, 2012, Flores Niemann, Gutiérrez y Muhs & González, 2020).

Let me invite you into the following thought experiment, in which we consider a selection of quotations from Burston’s Rate My Professor page (<https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/professor/772926>).

“This is the worst professor I have ever had at Duquesne [. . .] he unprofessionally professes his political beliefs that have nothing to do with class[.]”

“Burston is by far the worst professor I have had at Duquesne.”

“Dr. Burston is by far the worst professor I have ever had [. . .] Often times, his facts are wrong.”

²³ In this blog post, Nelson attributes a quotation to Sheehi in which he writes “Sheehi frequently tells us she has friends among ‘good Jews’” (Nelson, 2023, April 21st). Can he prove that Sheehi has said this? If not, putting the remark in quotation marks and attributing it to her is a lie, and citing it as evidence in an academic article is academic dishonesty and falsification of evidence.

²⁴ Both in the blog post and in the present article, Nelson (and here, Burston) contend that Crowell & Moring is an illegitimate adjudicator of this issue because they have a variety of eminently critique-able areas of practice. I share their critical stance towards Crowell & Moring, but I would also note a glaring omission in their characterization of the firm: namely, that it has a whole practice in antiboycott law with cases focused on the Arab League boycott of Israel (<https://www.crowell.com/en/services/practices/international-trade/antiboycott-legislation>). If we are wondering about fairness, one would legitimately wonder about the fairness, on GWU’s part, of hiring a firm with a pro-Israel antiboycott practice to evaluate an internationally prominent BDS advocate. If anything, I think a reasonable reader should see Crowell & Moring’s decisive finding in Sheehi’s favor *despite* the firm’s antiboycott commitments as indicative of the very clear fact pattern they identified in the available evidence.

“By far the worst class I have ever taken, and it is solely due to this professor. He is absolutely AWFUL.”

“Don’t take this class if you are used to someone teaching.”

“STAY AWAY, STAY AWAY! Awful professor[.]”

“HORRIBLE TEACHER.”

Should we automatically presume that these assessments are correct, as outsiders without access to the full universe of the facts? They are certainly numerous, emphatic, and consistent; 0% of raters (n=31) said they would take Burston’s classes again, a sample and finding which could have statistical significance and power if we assume solid reliability and validity²⁵. It would be tempting to give these reviews automatic credence, particularly if the impression they gave was consistent with a prior assumption one might have had about the person that made the complaint seem plausible, for example if they have behaved like an uninformed hostile crank in other contexts. However, I would urge caution; Burston and Nelson rightly note that an automatic assumption that negative characterizations of a person are correct is not prudent. The problem is that, when it comes to Sheehi, they seem entirely incapable of taking their own advice.

Turning, now, to the matter of Burston and Nelson’s criticism of Sheehi and her associates as amounting to propagandistic appeals to *pathos*. I will do my best here to offer a close reading of this section, with a particular eye towards Burston and Nelson’s use of emotional appeals. If you review their section on Sheehi, you will find that they frequently and gratuitously reach for emotionally saturated language that is likely to agitate and alarm a reader. This is a classic technique favored by propagandists, according to Routledge’s *Encyclopedia of Propaganda* (Cole, 1997). To wit: consider how Burston and Nelson write about Sheehi’s legal team. They write that the ADC “leapt to her defense,” that the ADC were “protesting angrily” and “manning the barricades on [their client’s] behalf.”

But aren’t all lawyers supposed to “defend” their clients, to “protest” when they are mistreated? What is the difference between a lawyer acting as a capable advocate for their client and “manning the barricades”²⁶? Are all lawyers engaging in an “intimidation strategy” when they demand the retention of documents that could be involved in litigation? How would you establish the difference between such actions as normal legal practice or rash, angry intimidation on a war footing?

Consider, as well, the way Burston and Nelson describe what transpired in professional organizations like APA Division 39 and APSaA. “All hell was breaking loose” on the listservs. The objections of people supporting Sheehi are described as “vehement” and “strenuous,” the Holmes Commission’s response as “rapid,” a response that allegedly had a “chilling effect” on disagreement, though they can offer no evidence of this alleged chilling. Burston and Nelson only quote people who support their own

²⁵ Which, in the case of Rate My Professor, I would not necessarily assume for reasons of both instrumental and sampling bias.

²⁶ A reference with both martial and anarchist implications.

perspective, and they characterize these people as reasonable, in contradistinction to their supposedly enraged, irrational interlocutors, who are always moving much too fast.

Burston and Nelson use this conflict as a lead-in to a discussion of their objections to the theoretical flaws of CSJT. But, as we have established, CSJT is not a thing, and they do not demonstrate that it is. Again, we have them using inflammatory storytelling as evidence for the flaws of a thing that doesn't actually exist. They are back to putting words in the straw man's mouth. To wit: "the proponents of CSJT sometimes seem to have forgotten this, especially when they attempt to explain complex and ambiguous interactions by invoking nebulous generalizations about 'White culture' and 'Black culture'." Who are they quoting here? They do not cite anyone "attempt[ing] to explain complex and ambiguous interactions" at all; putting "White culture" and "Black culture" here implies that they are quoting an interlocutor, when they are not.

From here, Burston and Nelson start in on cherry-picking several of Sheehi's tweets that read as inflammatory, particularly out of context. But, more importantly, they go on to argue that "such statements go well beyond the 'structural critiques of the State of Israel' that her defenders attribute to her." Again—which "defenders" are they quoting when they put "structural critiques of the State of Israel" in quotation marks? And, perhaps more importantly: are these tweets not structural critiques? They are profane and casual in their language, but it seems to me that they are obviously critical statements about structural issues such as ideology, state formation, and state violence. The fact that they are profane has no bearing on whether they are intellectually valid or invalid; focusing on the profanity is a way of making the statements seem *prima facie* emotional, hostile, and thus irrational, which is an odd thing for a psychoanalyst to do.

This hysterical stance towards Sheehi's tweets extends to her history of arguing that activism is an ethical imperative for clinicians. Is she not entitled, as a scholar and clinician, to make an argument for what should be ethically imperative for her fellow-professionals? Indeed, this is precisely what ethicists do in the development of professional codes of ethics—they argue in favor of particular universal ethical imperatives for a particular profession. That is what the American Association of University Professors, under Nelson's presidency, did when they revised and published a statement of ethical principles (2009) that are understood to apply to the whole professoriate. But Burston and Nelson do not treat Sheehi's thinking this way, as the same as what Nelson and his colleagues do—they refer to it, emotionally, as a "call to arms," making her quite ordinary scholarly activity out to be an emotional, violent, alarming thing to do.

A key appeal to *pathos* that Burston and Nelson and the other propagandists I have cited here engage in is introducing particularly provocative violent language to describe Sheehi, along with a clear misinterpretation of her own use of violent metaphors. The effect is to make Sheehi seem frighteningly violent and irrational. To wit: the reference to Sheehi's supposed "call to arms" is connected to a discussion of her use of the concept of suicide. I can readily understand why a casual reader would see this as provocative; again, context makes all the difference. As Burston and Nelson must know,

because they represent themselves as having read *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* (2022), the metaphor of suicide has a particular usage in the philosophical tradition in which the Sheehis work²⁷. It has been used by many scholars before, particularly the Bissau-Guinean public intellectual and decolonial leader Amilcar Cabral in his work on class suicide (Cabral, 1966), as a metaphor for a process of killing off destructive introjects and identifications; when Mbuqe, a South African psychologist, writes in his report that psychoanalysis must “give up your form and open yourself to dying” (Mbuqe, 2023, p. 8) he is alluding to the same philosophical tradition. It is actually a substantively psychoanalytic concept and usage in this respect.

This reference has no more relationship to real individual suicide than common phrases like “you killed it” have to do with murder, or the Jungian notion of the devouring mother (Jung, 1981) has with cannibalism or infanticide. When I write about bullshit here, no one assumes I am writing about bovine feces.²⁸ Burston and Nelson have either misunderstood what they read, or they are deliberately mischaracterizing it. I am inclined towards the latter hypothesis, because their discussion flows into an accusation that the Sheehis “valoriz[e] . . . suicide.” They go on to coyly suggest that, “[r]eading between the lines, one can’t help but wonder if the Sheehis are stealthily trying to normalize and justify the states of mind, the actions and utterances of the suicide bomber.”

This is absolutely racist bullshit. The implication that Arabs and Muslims are “stealthily” (that is, sneakily) trying to “justify” suicide bombing plays on longstanding Islamophobic tropes about terrorism, terrorist sympathizing, and “Bad Muslims” (Mamdani, 2005, see also and ironically Sheehi, 2011). And this bigoted trope is not confined to Burston and Nelson’s paper. Consider the choice of Critical Therapy Antidote to headline articles about Sheehi with pictures of burning buildings. It does not take a semiotician to see that all these choices—the emotional angry words, the implications of violence and madness and deceitfulness, the pearl-clutching about the wish to destroy the “traditional” (read: Western civilizational) model, the pictures of burning buildings—amount to an effort to incite moral panic about the Arab as terrorist.

This is propaganda, an emotional appeal engineered to agitate and alarm the reader. It is also a particularly irritating instance of bullshit because, earlier in the same

²⁷ Burston and Nelson also engage in a plainly disingenuous reading of the Sheehis work on psychosis. Unless they are very uninformed, they must know that the concept of psychosis as it is used in psychoanalysis is only distantly related to the biomedical notion of “mental illness” with which they cynically conflate it. When a psychoanalyst says that someone is using a psychotic defense, they are not implying that this person has a severe mental illness; they are acknowledging that their defensive compromise formation requires them to grossly distort reality in some way. This is common knowledge in psychoanalysis, and is obviously the usage of the term that the Sheehis engage in *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* (2022) and elsewhere; they are in the company of many other psychoanalysts who think about supremacist ideologies as psychotic in nature (including me, see Carter, in press).

²⁸ Though, as a cattle farmer, I do have particular expertise in this area; writing this article is hardly my only experience shoveling bullshit.

section, Burston and Nelson contend that “[n]eedless to say, a philosopher or a literary critic could easily make this kind of claim regarding suicide. Indeed, many have done so in other contexts.²⁹ But on reflection, it is quite odd for a clinical psychologist or a psychoanalyst to do so, especially when these professions expend so much thought and effort in suicide prevention, developing suicide awareness.” Why, exactly, should a clinician not be entitled to the same kind of philosophical discussion that any other scholar might be? Can’t one be a clinician and a philosopher at the same time, like Julia Kristeva—or, for that matter, Burston and Nelson’s compatriot Jon Mills, whose website calls him a “philosopher-psychoanalyst” (<https://www.philosophypschoanalysis.com/>)? Are psychoanalysts not philosophical thinkers who engage provocative metaphors to explore human experience, or work outside the confines of their discipline? Nelson has a Ph.D in English, yet here he is writing in a psychoanalytic journal about clinical matters—should we see this as “quite odd” too? One imagines Freud taking considerable umbrage at this; it is like suggesting that he should not have written about infantile sexuality or the Oedipus complex because his profession is invested in preventing incest.

In light of the preceding analysis, I expect it is clear that the critique of Sheehi that Burston and Nelson offer is not intellectually legitimate—that is, it is bullshit. What incentive would scholars like Burston and Nelson have to expend so much effort to make such a demonstrably bad argument, and one that could in principle land them in hot water for violations of academic honesty? How does authoring this slovenly hit job on a respected colleague serve them? To understand this, one needs to consider the larger context of fascist propaganda and legislative action in which this work is situated.

Useful Idiots

Fascist propagandists face a major rhetorical dilemma. Their actual politics are plainly bigoted—racist, antisemitic, homo- and transphobic. They are trying to win over a public that, due to decades of diligent postwar efforts by civil rights activists, has deeply internalized the idea that being racist and antisemitic is very bad. Indeed, I would hazard that most people these days may have a nearly phobic reaction to being called racist or antisemitic, because it is associated (wrongly, in my view) with fundamentally bad character. Burston and Nelson themselves spend a lot of time worrying over sparing white colleagues this phobic response³⁰, and legislation in Florida specifically seeks to legally ban anything that could possibly engender such “anguish” (Brasch, 2022, November 17th). So, how does the enterprising fascist propagandist win people over to their side who would not, in theory, want anything to do with them?

One of the tactics these propagandists are trying out is finding people on the left whom they can accuse of being the real bigots. Kemp (this issue) illustrates clearly how such accusations of antisemitism against leftists have been lodged by people and entities associated with far-right politics, including against some of the most prominent Jewish

²⁹ Whither citations?

³⁰ Viz: their discussion of “frivolous” “false positive” allegations of racism and their alleged emotional effects.

politicians in the world (c.f. Bernie Sanders). The same technique is at work in efforts to characterize critics of white supremacy as the real racists (see Mills, 2022, and my rebuttal to it, Carter, in press, and the flurry of bans on “critical race theory” across the United States). To be clear, I am not arguing that any or all leftists are somehow innocent of racism or antisemitism—indeed, I would regard racism and antisemitism as unavoidable introjects in the Euro-American context (see Davids, 2011, Layton & Leavy-Sperounis, 2020, Dalal, 2002, Carter, in press). But the introjection or expression of bigoted ideas at a normative unconscious level, while bad, is not comparable to a politics that actually promotes the systematic and legislative devaluation and endangerment of minorities.

Finding leftists to accuse of being the real bigots is an extremely efficient defensive maneuver; a psychoanalyst can easily admire it in the abstract. It locates the bigotry in the person most assertively advocating against bigotry, and in so doing makes that person and the movement(s) they represent out to be pathetically hypocritical and worthy of scorn, an emperor without clothes. It also provides a legitimating basis for the harassment and institutional expulsion of that person, which is the most effective way to neutralize their ability to effectively work against real discrimination in contexts in which they could hold actual power, both by banishing them and by distracting them with relentless harassment³¹ that impinges upon their ability to do their scholarly and professional work.

To get a bit more concrete: imagine that you were part of a fascist campaign that wanted to make beachheads in academia and medicine. Psychoanalysis would be a two-for-one deal, one that would be useful in both your academic campaigns against antiracism and your medical campaigns against transgender people. If you were such a fascist, wouldn't it be very advantageous to identify the most powerful, avowedly antifascist leader in that profession, which Sheehi obviously is, and neutralize her? If you were a committed antisemite, or working in common cause with such people, wouldn't it be a win if you could call such an antifascist and antiracist leader the *real* antisemite, and in so doing position yourself as the *real* protector of the Jews?

Of course, for this to work, you would need to cannily manipulate the conflicting identifications between Whiteness and Jewishness that many American Jews struggle to manage (Carter, 2023a). You would also need to count on these White American Jews being sufficiently forgetful about their own history that they would not hear your recycled antisemitic dogwhistles about “cultural Marxism” (Berkowitz, 2003, August

³¹ If someone you had never met saved over 9000 of your tweets on his computer (Nelson, 2023, April 21st), figured out your maiden name (which even most of your friends do not know), and systematically scanned everything you had ever written to create a biography of you that he went on to use to write tens of thousands of unhinged derogatory words about you in marginal blogs frequented by people who went on to send revolting sexual insults to you and your husband, I expect you would feel harassed, and like what was going on was utterly beyond the pale of normal academic discourse and debate. Nelson's defensive insistence that he is not doxxing Sheehi (2023, April 21st) sounds like someone protesting too much.

15th) and how it is “ok to be white” (The Radical Center, 2023, May 1st, Anti-Defamation League, n.d.) and the like for what they were; you would hope that longstanding political and cultural divisions among White American Jews would lead some percentage of the more conservative ones to disregard something like, for instance, a letter signed by hundreds of Jewish colleagues attesting to Sheehi’s ally bona fides (Palestine-Global Mental Health Network, 2023, January 26th) as the work of self-hating Jews alone.

If you could thread all these needles, though, the prize would be positively glittering. You would have a foothold in a powerful academic and medical discipline with major cultural cachet and brand recognition—whatever our profession’s failings, “psychoanalysis” is still synonymous with fancy smart therapy for many people. If you could gin up a scandal in psychoanalysis, in part by relentlessly calling something a scandal in the subject lines of listserv e-mails until you made people believe it was one (Critical Therapy Antidote 2023, March 26th), you could stir up a lot of florid e-mail discussion that would help you identify sympathetic psychoanalysts who might be amenable to your racism and transphobia. Such people would be formidable useful idiots in a propaganda war against the rights of transgender people to get medical care that might help them avoid persecution, to say nothing of the rights of people of color to teach and learn from our own history of fighting fascists and kicking their asses.

Propagandists and their useful idiots have aligned interests. For people like Burston and Nelson, who are moribund academics, serving as mouthpieces for fascist disinformation can yield far more attention and citation than they would otherwise achieve³². For people like Jacobsen and Morgan, editors of backwater journals like Free Associations, it can drive attention to their journals and make them seem provocative and relevant. Young people these days have a term for this: they call it clout chasing. The journal edition you are reading is being driven by clout-chasing useful idiots who are committing a kind of academic arson³³ for their own narrow professional advantage.

Such clout-chasing useful idiots in academia are a boon for propagandists. They help establish a beachhead for right-wing propaganda in academic institutions, like journals, that would normally have a strong enough immune response to keep bullshit out. The benefit of the doubt that academic colleagues tend to give each other, which Burston and Nelson describe as essential to the healthy functioning of a discipline, can be easily manipulated to introduce propaganda into academic discourse. Once bullshit is lodged in academic discourse—once it is published in a journal, even a marginal one that is hardly read—propagandists can then trumpet the inclusion of these ideas in respectable academic discourses, bolstering the notion that fascist ideas are a legitimate position in an ongoing debate. It is a form of intellectual money laundering that helps to open the Overton window to allow fascist propaganda in.

³² This informed my reluctance to write this response; I did not want to help drive this attention. In the unlikely event that this article winds up widely cited, I will be rather annoyed about it, not wanting this journal to get the clout.

³³ In this light, we might see the choice of an image of a burning building as the image accompanying a bullshit article about Sheehi as a revealing projection.

Pluckrose and Lindsay cannily identified this vulnerability in academic institutions. They made their names through the academic hoax in which they submitted preposterous journal articles, rightly assuming that they might be accepted. To be clear, not all journals did—some had a strong enough immune response to bullshit to keep fake work out, including by editing it exhaustively until it turned into something different and basically acceptable, like *Affilia* did. But once Pluckrose and Lindsay found that they could end around the weak checks of marginal academic journals, one has to wonder if they realized that such a vulnerability could be fruitfully exploited to introduce anti-“woke” propaganda into such venues too. All it would require is publishing propaganda in plausible-seeming books, which could then be reviewed and cited in journals by sympathetic academics.

Et voilà.

Check Yourself, or Get Checked.

I expect that some readers may be taken aback by the tone of this article. I have been obviously pugilistic and profane in my reply in a manner that is quite unconventional in a venue such as this. I am critiquing Burston and Nelson’s propagandistic use of emotional appeals, but I am obviously not unemotional myself. This is, of course, a deliberate decision on my part, and one that is grounded in a specifically antifascist ethical praxis. Let me explain the reasoning underwriting this mode of engagement, in hopes that the reader might be persuaded of its value in their own professional life.

Fascist propaganda frequently involves what Bollas has called “violent innocence” (Bollas, 1992). It is frankly hostile and out of bounds, but it rhetorically styles itself as decorous and respectable in a cynical effort to demand inclusion in mainstream discourse. *Who, me, racist? Well, I never!* If the reader needs any further illustration of this besides Burston and Nelson’s article, I would direct them to the interview Marc Lamont Hill did with Lindsay and Boghossian, in which Lindsay po-facedly pretends to be offended by the word “folks,” obliging Hill (briefly) to play along out of good manners (TheGrio Politics, 2021, June 14th).

It is a losing strategy to play along with obviously bad faith violent innocence out of one’s own commitment to the ordinary rules of the game. One has to recognize that propagandists are brazenly violating the rules of that game, even (indeed, especially) if they are doing so while wearing the game’s customary jerseys. Responding to propagandists as if they are normal colleagues gives credence to the idea that they are behaving like normal colleagues, when they are not. The appropriate ethical response in such a situation is for one to adhere devotedly to the ethically substantive rules of the game—in this case, a commitment to intellectual honesty and trustworthiness, proving one’s points and citing one’s sources—while giving oneself the freedom to talk and write back in a way that plainly acknowledges the unethical con that is underway.

Thus, calling bullshit.

One function of Burston and Nelson's paper is to harangue and pillory a prominent woman of color in our field (Carter, 2023a, Sheehi, 2023). They have been allowed to get away with this by Jacobsen and Morgan under a specious pretense of debate. As a profession, we cannot give credence to this specious premise; we have become so unaccustomed to real debate in psychoanalysis that we might mistake this farcical exercise for debate, when in fact it is debased. Conduct like this cannot be sanctioned by the professional organs of psychoanalysis, or by normal academics.

So, when propagandists break the rules of the game, when they make an unethical (figurative) hit on our colleague, responsible people need to figuratively, and ethically, hit back. I grew up in a family of hockey players. In hockey, it is a longstanding norm of the game for certain players to play the role they call "enforcers," who are tasked with providing a deterrent against dirty or dangerously violent play. As a hockey player, you know that if you make a dirty hit on an opposing player, it is a certainty that their team's enforcer will make sure you pay for it. This is not just wanton aggression; it is part of enforcing upstanding sporting conduct in a game that by design involves some aggression, but not too much.

Psychoanalysis has had far too few ethical enforcers over the years. As a field, we have been bedeviled by rank discrimination (Carter et al, 2023, Holmes Commission, 2023), constant sexual boundary violations (Dimen, 2011, Celenza & Gabbard, 2003, Gabbard & Peltz, 2001), exploitative arrangements between senior and junior colleagues (Carter, 2023b, Carter et al, 2023, Kirsner, 2009, Schechter, 2014), and violations of academic freedom and normal ethical academic practice (Carter, 2023b, Carter, 2023c). We have lacked a viable response to such violations, with the result that they became baked into our culture. Colleagues who broke the rules of the game rarely, if ever, faced real penalties. If psychoanalysis is to thrive, this must change. We need more ethical enforcers, particularly to protect the more vulnerable players of our game, people of color and junior colleagues and our intellectual leaders who have the highest prices on their heads.

If you violate our shared ethical convictions, you need to know that you will be formidably checked.

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