



# The colonial republic of psychoanalysis: how psychoanalysis polices the psychic sovereignty of “Others”

Stephen Sheehi<sup>1</sup>  · Lara Sheehi<sup>2,3,4</sup>

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**Abstract** This article uses a scholarly case to analyze how psychoanalytic soft power is extended to govern and regulate the “psychic sovereignty” of “non-normative” subjects, especially racialized, gendered and sexualized subjects in, from and of the Global South. In using an example from the ways psychoanalysis circulates within France (in particular within contemporary debates of what constitutes someone who is truly “French”), we consider how the “French intellectual tradition” mobilizes –despite its critique of them–universalizing concepts of secularism and citizenry to shore up, what we call, the *colonial republic of psychoanalysis*. Psychoanalysis itself is a formation that collaborates and colludes with colonial power (especially in its most liberal form) through its claim to the right over the psychic sovereignty of both individuals and nations who are in proximity to French colonial and neocolonial rule. Through close critique of the recent work of Élisabeth Roudinesco (and a handful of others) as a generalized but accurate case study, this article considers how psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts police sovereignty and “innocently” lodge themselves in liberal state discourse to control, manage and designate what psyches, bodies and subjects are deserving of empathy,

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For Special Issue: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism, edited by David Cuellar and Robert Beshara.

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Soi-même comme un roi: Essai sur les dérives identitaires.

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✉ Stephen Sheehi  
[spsheehi@wm.edu](mailto:spsheehi@wm.edu)

Lara Sheehi  
[lara\\_m@gwu.edu](mailto:lara_m@gwu.edu)

<sup>1</sup> Williamsburg, VA 23185, USA

<sup>2</sup> Doha, Qatar

<sup>3</sup> Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar

<sup>4</sup> University of South Africa, Johannesburg/Cape Town, South Africa



rights, and psychological consideration. We explore how psychoanalysis as a normative method and practice designates who is perverse and who is deviant, who are genuinely good and bad objects, and is worthy of saving or worthy of expelling.

**Keywords** colonialism · power · sovereignty · Palestine · France · psychoanalysis

## An Innocent Conference

On May 6–8 2005, Université Saint-Joseph sponsored a conference on “*Psychanalyse dans le monde arabe et islamique*.<sup>1</sup>” Among its invitees were two of psychoanalysis’s most well-known Islamophobes, Élisabeth Roudinesco and Fathi Benslama, along with Lebanon’s most classical liberal Ghassan Tueni (editor and owner of the Lebanese center-right newspaper *an-Nahar*) and Samir Kassir, the reformed left-wing turned neoliberal intellectual, who was assassinated only a month after the conference.<sup>2</sup> As the daughter of Jenny Aubry, one of Lacan’s most well-known women protégés, Roudinesco grew up privileged in the intellectual circles of Paris, eventually joining Lacan’s *École freudienne de Paris* of which her mother was a member as well. This is a pedigree that is worth noting considering her continual referencing of it. Roudinesco opens up her 2021 publication, *Soi-même comme un roi*, with an account of the conference in Beirut. The narrative move is obvious as her imperious tone regarding Lebanese sectarianism sets up her polemic against the “identitarianism” and “identity politics” of Arabs, Muslims, black people and queer folk in France.

We meet in the first pages of *Soi-même comme un roi* (2021) the “erudite and elegant” Ghassan Tueni, “the grand denizen of the [Lebanese] press”<sup>3</sup> (p. 24), who welcomes Roudinesco to his home, identifying her warmly as an Eastern Orthodox sibling. Roudinesco is scandalized by Tueni’s sectarian tone. No matter how affable, his “identitarianism” belies his reputation as a liberal and freethinker, she says. Retorting, she sermonizes to Tueni that this “configuration” of siblinghood poses identity “not as a matter of religion or any faith whatsoever, but as a matter of membership: as a tribe, a clan, an ethnicity” (Roudinesco, 2021, p. 28). Tueni, who made a lifelong political career in holding sectarian identity and liberalism in the same hand, charmingly retorts that he still sees her as fellow Orthodox. Whether this was wry humor to stave off her aggressive imperial cosmopolitanism, a refusal to accept her erasure of a formative part of his identity, or a gesture of warmth extended to her, Roudinesco imperiously reports to her reader, “Coming from a Lebanese … this statement was not surprising. Moreover, such an exchange could only take place with a foreigner. Indeed, to question a Lebanese compatriot about

<sup>1</sup> The proceedings of this *colloque*, including the opening remarks, are reproduced *La psychanalyse dans le monde arabe et islamique* (Azouri & Roudinesco, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Roudinesco’s Islamophobia, see Joan Wallach Scott’s *The Politics of the Veil* (2010). For an erudite critique of French and American political liberal and neoliberal discourses around the veil, “saving Muslim women,” and putative democratic principles, see Anne Norton’s *On the Muslim Question* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> All translations from French to English are our own.



his identity is a major incongruity [with the Lebanese identity], since, in that [sectarian] universe, belonging to a religious community is a given" (2021, p. 27).

In an account of the Beirut conference that appeared in the Francophone Lebanese daily *L'Orient-Le Jour*, also owned by Ghassan Tueni,<sup>4</sup> May Makarem (2005) reports that Roudinesco "emphasized democracy" as a "major determinant" for the establishment of psychoanalysis in a country. The French Ambassador to Lebanon, Bernard Émié, we are told, "emphasized the calling of his country to promote abroad 'contemporary developments in French thought, within the framework of the dialogue of civilizations.'" In closing, Émié lectures the Lebanese in a classic colonial tenor:

It is upon the Lebanese people and their leaders to discuss and find solutions. We see well, in taking up the lessons of Ernest Renan, that if a nation is a soul, a nation is also a solidarity, which presuppose three elements in unity: the unambiguous desire to live together, the will to define a common project for the future, and, finally, the capacity to integrate one's past, while knowing to forget certain pages. (quoted in Makarem, 2005)

In his account of the conference, Joseph Massad (2015) recounts that Roudinesco repeated several hackneyed Orientalist tropes at the Beirut conference that replicate themselves in Lebanese nationalist and liberal discourses. Massad states that Roudinesco "saw no irony in speaking about the relationship between psychoanalysis and democracy and freedom, but not colonialism, at a conference hosted by a Jesuit university set up initially as a French colonial institution and under the aegis of the French government, the former colonial and current neocolonial master of Lebanon" (2015, p. 309). Massad importantly notes Roudinesco's claim that psychoanalysis would inaugurate a "new sovereignty" in Lebanon "as it had done in Europe" (2015, p. 309).

This article drills down on this deployment of "sovereignty" and the way it crosses between political authority, the power of psychoanalysis, and the "psychoanalytic power" to "name the psychology of another" (Hegarty, 2007, p. 29). We consider the work psychoanalysis (and psychoanalysts) does to police the sovereignty of the liberal state in controlling, managing, and designating what psyches, bodies and subjects are deserving of empathy, rights, and, indeed, psychological consideration. At the same time, we reveal that psychoanalysis itself considers its own sovereignty to extend globally, holding the exclusive authority to designate who is perverse and who is deviant, regardless of context, time and space. While this article was largely written before October 7, 2023, since then a global audience witnessed the shameless *psychopathologizing* of all Palestinians writ large, the ease by which psychologists in North America, Europe and apartheid Israel continue to feel entitled to make psychoanalytic diagnosis of a people experiencing genocide corroborate the assertions of this article. In other words, who are genuinely good and bad objects, worthy of saving and worthy of expelling. Paul Preciado

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<sup>4</sup> May Makarem, "Colloque - Psychanalyse dans le monde arabe et islamique La vérité peut également guérir un peuple," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 8 Mai, 2005; found at

[https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/501501/Colloque\\_-\\_Psychanalyse\\_dans\\_le\\_monde\\_arabe\\_et\\_islamique\\_La\\_verite\\_peut\\_egalement\\_guerir\\_un\\_peuple.html](https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/501501/Colloque_-_Psychanalyse_dans_le_monde_arabe_et_islamique_La_verite_peut_egalement_guerir_un_peuple.html).



(2021) speaks of this very sovereignty in marking how psychoanalysis enforces “the universality of sex, gender and sexual difference and heterosexual reproduction” (p. 99). But also, we want to consider what we might call, referring to “the French tradition,” as the *colonial republic of psychoanalysis* that claims sovereignty over both individuals and nations. We call this the colonial sovereignty of psychoanalysis. Vertically, this sovereignty extends to psychoanalysis’s pretension to “name the psychology of another,” and to claim the rights to the interiority of everyone/anyone everywhere. Horizontally, psychoanalysis claims sovereignty across the globe, demanding the universalized comportment of the liberal, individuated, post-Oedipal self.

Roudinesco claims that “the implantation of psychoanalysis” is not possible “without the major determinant” of liberal democracy. Such a statement invites us to approach Roudinesco as a case study. This article should not be understood as an ad hominem attack but a fascination with work that exemplifies an imperial arrogance inherent to psychoanalysis; a body of work that so clearly shows us that the sovereignty of psychoanalysis relies, we will show, on its “innocence.” Psychoanalysis, we will discuss, is not an innocent, neutral, or objective formation of mechanisms, apparatuses, functions, and configurations within a universal psyche. Like Katherine McKittrick (2020) details, psychoanalysis as a set of theoretical formulations and suppositions and a practice does not only collude with neoliberal political economy of racial capitalism and state power; rather, it capitalizes on (and draws authority from) the conditions that racial capitalism creates, conditions that make psychoanalysis *possible* and a *necessary* mode of regulation and stabilization.

## Why *Soi-même comme un roi* as Case Study

In this article, therefore, we dwell Élisabeth Roudinesco’s *Soi-même comme un roi* because it is recent and it has generated considerable discussion in the Francophone world and has recently been published in English, not coincidentally as *The Sovereign Self* (2022).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, her high profile in France, her reputation, character, and her expressed political opinions stand as public record.<sup>6</sup> *Soi-même comme un roi* perfectly demonstrates the bad faith in how the humanist liberalism of psychoanalysis is selectively distributed and, as such, an example of the recent attacks in Europe and North America on “identity politics,” writ-large.<sup>7</sup> More

<sup>5</sup> Dropping its overtly aggressive title in attacking “identity politics.”

<sup>6</sup> We avoid engaging in Roudinesco’s political opinions that she has made public for two decades especially regarding Muslims and Arabs in France. While we are not focusing on or really concerned with the considerable scholarship of one of France’s most prominent psychoanalytic public intellectuals, Nathalie Jaudel has written two books critiquing her scholarship, *Roudinesco, plagiaire de soi-même (suivi de: Lacan, Maurras et les Juifs)* (2011) and *La légende noire de Jacques Lacan: Élisabeth Roudinesco et sa méthode historique* (2014).

<sup>7</sup> For a critique of the “left-leaning” polemic against what is pedantically called “identity politics”, see Stephen Sheehi (in press), “What Objects Should We Carry?: Identity Politics and The Carceral Logic of Generic Left in the Era of Covid.”



specifically, *Soi-même comme un roi* is a schematic of how psychoanalysis *polices*, regulates, and manages the limits of liberalism. This may be the case in terms of race, sexuality, gender and ability in general. In regard to France, where identity politics are saturated with colonialism and French republican ideology as well as race, gender and sexuality, psychoanalysis functions, strictly, within the “configuration” of *laïcité* (the statist concept of secularism and nationalism) to regulate the universality subjectivity of the French “citizen.” *Soi-même comme un roi* articulates the way psychoanalytic discourse participates in and draws authority from a liberal political-intellectual discourse regarding “identity politics” of racialized black, brown and trans French, which is dominant in France today; the same milieu in which Frantz Fanon came to learn that he was black not “French.”<sup>8</sup> Within this context, Roudinesco’s book is representative of a psychoanalytic imagination that seamlessly blends the myths and disciplinary functions of psychoanalytic neutrality with the universalism of “the ethnoclass of man,” as Sylvia Wynter (2003) tell us, which is central to French state power, central to maintaining whiteness at the heart of French identity politics.

Psychoanalysis, like all fields, set of theories and professional practices, is produced through social forces. It is the product of social relations that are structural but also function in particular ways contextually, which are historically and geographically situated. As such, it should not be strange to anyone that, while it also contains multitudes of potentiality for radical analysis and even the undoing of those social relations, psychoanalysis is prone for the reproduction of those social relations, while expanding them to accommodate social changes that make its concept of “the psyche” and “self” not obsolete. Relevant to psychoanalysis’s complicity in racial politics, gender roles, and state power, *Soi-même comme un roi* (and Roudinesco’s work, by and large) operationalizes the well-worn “liberal” schema of what is a healthy “universal” self to codify who may or may not constitute a worthy or healthy, national citizen. But more to the point of this article, *Soi-même comme un roi* narrates what happens when, what we are calling, psychoanalytic sovereignty is challenged by universalism’s Others. In other words, what happens to its liberal humanism when it is confronted by the resistance, for example, of Palestinians in Palestine and Arabs, Muslims and black people in France, who refuse “to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 184).

If we are to consider the power to “name another’s psychology,” the power to set the frame of psychoanalytic work, to include what is and is not “healthy” and “natural,” we are not asked which pages should be integrated and which should be forgotten. In this logic, we are asked to forget that Renan, referred to by the French ambassador in the Beirut conference, was a rabid racist and virulent antisemite and that his analysis of national identity structured the colonial world and the very national identitarianism that Roudinesco finds so disagreeable.

Let us return to the beginning, where Roudinesco’s choice to open her critique of “identitarianism” in Lebanon not France is a calculated and racialized move about the ways in which conceptions of imperial sovereignty saturate not only the French

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<sup>8</sup> See Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1986).



concept of *laïcité* but psychoanalysis itself. Whether from the accounts of Massad (2015), Makarem (2005), the French Ambassador, or Roudinesco herself, the conference on psychoanalysis and Islam in Beirut functioned as a bully pulpit for her and Fathi Benslama to belittle the “clannish,” “tribal” or “ethnic” native. But, also, it functioned as a recruitment bureau to conscript the “good” liberal Lebanese who “do not approve of this [sectarian] system and whose preferences lean to the French Enlightenment, to secularism and to a citizen conception of democracy very far removed from all forms of confessional organization, of which they were both the victims, the heirs and the protagonists” (Roudinesco, 2021, p. 27). Whether Daniel Sibony (2003), Benslama, or Roudinesco, psychoanalytic liberalism’s insistence on the universality of psychoanalytic developmental frameworks and processes asks us to “forget,” to willfully disavow, undeniable material realities to be given full citizenship in the sovereign realms of psychoanalysis while at the same time, assist psychoanalysis in politically extending the “new sovereignty” of neoliberal state recognizable to France.

While we will concentrate on the parallel between the abjectification of Palestinians in Palestine and racialized subjects in France, as Lebanese intellectuals, it is incumbent on us to recognize that the disavowals that necessitate psychoanalytic sovereignty appear in Roudinesco’s contradictory paternalism regarding Lebanon. That is to say, in the same breath of indicting Lebanese for their inability to act outside of their own sectarian identities, “this communitarian system,” she says, is not endemic to Lebanese-Arab society but, in actuality, “put in place by the French mandatory powers *with the best intentions in the world* [emphasis added]” (Roudinesco, 2021, p. 27). This comment crystallizes “psychoanalytic innocence,” as we have discussed elsewhere (Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022), demanding those who live the afterlives of colonialism to willfully forget reality and accept “the best of intentions” of the benevolent colonizer.

## Violent Innocence

Aimé Césaire (2004) reminds us that “no one colonizes innocently” (p. 19). Césaire also reminds us that a nation who colonizes, a civilization that justifies colonization … [leaps] from denial to denial” (2004, p. 19). Césaire’s insights enable us to perceive the ideological processes underway—processes that psychoanalysis allows us to identify if deployed in the service of the oppressed (not the oppressor)—how white supremacy, colonial power and bourgeois capitalist modernity reproduce themselves through a series of denials, foreclosures, displacements and projections. Christopher Bollas’s (1993) concept of “violent innocence” aids us to consider the structures at play when psychoanalysis is wielded as a moralistic and political cudgel in order to enforce the authority and “innocence” of liberalism and its complicity in regulating and enforcing colonial and imperial power (including white supremacy). “**Violent innocence**” is a means of “disavowing responsibility”, passing one’s “crime into the other, who now stands accused” (Bollas, 1993, p. 168). He tells us that



by being innocent, the subject provokes the other to speak the truth and sometime sustains innocence in order to maintain some contact with the repudiated content. By provoking the other, the violent innocent stirs up distress, ideation density, and emotional turbulence in the other, a simple self-sponsored by the sadistically cool and “objective” complex self, detached from the other’s anguish. (Bollas, 1993, p. 169)

The work of psychoanalyst Stephen Portuges (2009) definitively critiques the retrenched claim to “neutrality” and “objectivity” that still pervades psychoanalytic theory and how, despite claims otherwise, these pretenses to neutrality are successively reproduced in scholarship and clinical practice. The pretenses to objectivity and neutrality, he illuminates, are a disciplined *ideological* position which “has turned out to be a technical intervention that obfuscates the recognition and elucidation of the role of ideologically constructed factors in the psychoanalytic theory of treatment that contribute to patients’ psychological difficulties” (Portuges, 2009, p. 70).

Roudinesco is not the originator of psychoanalytic innocence or the sanctimonious weaponizing of psychoanalysis to denigrate Arabs (Muslims and Christians) and other colonial subjects. Psychoanalytic innocence is part of a larger configuration within what Gloria Wekker (2016) maps as the mechanics of white innocence. More specifically, Wekker notes how aggression arises when Dutch liberal society is confronted by the harm and violence of its colonial history and racial reality. Wekker shows that innocence is maintained by *consciously* constructing what are intended to be claimed—and indeed are carefully used—as organic categories of dominance. As noted by L. Sheehi (2022) elsewhere, “these categories rely on the non-presence of the Other even as white colonial dominance is sustained through hyper-attention to the Other. In order to make sense of this dissonance, a sustained practice of innocence is necessary, what comes to deployed as a conscious and unconscious egress for guilt” (p. 603). In fact, there has been a maintenance of varied forms of exploitation and dominance, paramount of which is racial aggression. For Wekker, as for Fanon (1952/1986), “*it is the racist who creates his inferior*” (p. 83, italics in original). In so doing, the racist also constructs what Fanon terms “a racial distribution of guilt” (1952/1986, p. 103). Sheehi (2022) continues, “in this configuration, *continuous and corporeal presence* is very much needed, as much to sustain the colonized/racialized, as to disrupt the violent logics of power that masquerade in innocence” (p. 603).

Speaking to the process of normalizing domination, Wekker posits a psychoanalytic interpretation that is useful: “What cannot be admitted, what is, in other words, repressed but always feared, is the permeability of the boundaries, the fact that [dominant groups] are never securely in place and have to be made and remade until the difference between the self and the subordinate Other appears natural and thus fixed” (2016, p. 343). One can be fixed in their racialization, in their gender, in their ability status, and also, in psychoanalytic theorizing and technique, in their psychic organization as well as in their trauma—a trauma that also demands an “allocation of guilt.” Fellows & Razack (1998) remind us, “When we view ourselves as innocent, we cannot confront the hierarchies that operate among us” (p.



335). Therefore, when innocence is at play, the distribution is never held by those in power, but rather, reinterpreted through a “deficit model [that focuses on] the psychological at the expense of the political” (Burstow, 2003, p. 1311).

Within this vein, Roudinesco is a purveyor of psychoanalytic innocence in as much as she has explicitly made a career in weaponizing her psychoanalytic credentials and her deep and intimate knowledge of psychoanalytic theory in the service of liberalism, in a dynamic that David Eng (2016) calls the “colonial object relations” of psychoanalysis. Eng demonstrates two essential features in psychoanalysis and liberal modernity; the anxiety of its inherent violence is structural to modernity itself (of which psychoanalysis emerges and has been charged with analyzing if not mending its harm.) More specifically, “colonial modernity frames not only the material development but also the psychic emergence of liberal subjectivity … and affect is unevenly distributed in the history of liberal empire and reason” (Eng, 2016, p. 2). Also, this anxiety communicates that modernity’s “others” (namely non-Eurocentric and non-normative subjects qua objects of control) exist outside of the psychic economy of Wynter’s (2003) “ethnklass of Man.”

Psychoanalysis had a role in the standardization of the criteria for this ethnklass, defining selfhood, individuality, individuation, ability/disability, and mental health (e.g., Brickman, 2018). This is the cultural and subjective “assimilation” that Amilcar Cabral (1979) alerts us to; assimilation into the universalized psyche of this ethnklass produced through the asymmetrical collaboration of colonialism and its civilizing mission and the colluding national bourgeoisie. This contradiction, like all contradictions that compose capitalist modernity, collapses upon itself, where the guilt of the colonizer, as Eng (2016) observes, seeks reparation through acknowledgement, indeed forgiveness, by the aggrieved (not the opposite) in order to integrate their selves (seen as reintegrated it) into their own humanity. What concerns us in this article is not the ways in which psychoanalytic innocence is a mechanism by which the “normative” Eurocentric/Western self seeks repair by requiring its victims to assuage the guilt they feel. Rather, we are concerned with the ways that psychoanalytic innocence is spread consciously and unconsciously via the “new sovereignty” of psychoanalysis, not only by European and American psychoanalysts but also those Arab, Muslim and/or Black analysts who are conscripted to extend (and enforce) this sovereignty. This sovereignty, as Audra Simpson (2020) shares with us, is one defined through the prism of “western exceptional and dominance,” reproducing a language and criteria to “aspire to control territory, memberships, and jurisdiction” (pp. 686–687). To be clear, we want to acknowledge how psychoanalysis is used to deracinate black and brown people from their own psychic authority just as psychoanalytic thinkers so frequently collaborate in the dispossession of the Palestinian people from their own psychic (and geographic and political) sovereignty (Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022).

Roudinesco’s handling of Arabs and Muslims in France (as well as “French” queer and trans folks) replicates precisely the ways in which racialized subjects are asked to consider themselves perpetrators of their own victimization when they attend to their psychic and social wounds communally rather than recognize the systemic origins of this violence. What are Palestinians and Lebanese, or Muslims,



black, queer and trans folk in France, supposed to forget and what are they demanded to remember? Before we proceed, let us remember that just as Roudinesco is not the originator of psychoanalytic innocence, she is shored up by legions of Arab psychoanalysts who willfully and genuinely reproduce the racist violent innocence of psychoanalysis as an authoritative philosophy and mental health practice.

We should recall that the “*Psychanalyse dans le monde arabe et islamique*” conference occurred in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Hariri was heralded in the symposium as the paragon of liberalism and progress and was a close ally of Ghassan Tueni. He was, in fact, a sectarian leader responsible for generating one of the highest national debts in the world (double Lebanon’s GDP at the time) and enflaming sectarian rivalry especially between the Shiite and Sunni communities. In its relevant to note that, while Hariri was presaged by liberals as a reformer, this national debt incurred from postwar reconstruction was not to the World Bank, the IMF or international lending agencies but to internal Lebanese banks, which he himself, his family, or his political allies owned. Furthermore, this great “liberal” Prime Minister was personally responsible for engineering and retooling the Lebanese political-economic kleptocratic oligarchy that consisted of old sectarian families, recently wealthy sectarian warlords and a whole new class of neoliberal nouveau riche that, to this day, control the country *through* exacerbating quite illiberal sectarian politics (S. Sheehi, 2021). The conference was not one about the state of psychoanalysis in the Arab or Muslim world, but rather a conference that pathologized Lebanon, the Arab world and Muslims *tout court*. More specifically, the conference repeatedly displaced the consequences of a colonial sectarian system, effects of neoliberal structural adjustments, and systems of capitalist heteropatriarchy that prop up neoliberal capitalist regimes and political systems onto the regressed Arab and Muslim subject not the shenanigans of the ruling elites. The backward, sectarian Lebanese herd-subject is pinned against the “normative” ethnoclasse of the liberal human subject, exemplified by neoliberal indigenous elites like Tueni and Hariri. Arab and Muslim psychoanalyst “obscurers,” as Césaire (2004, p. 39) names them, like Benslama and others at the conference, only further confusive ahistoricity and “objective neutrality.” These psychologists deploy and animate “their opinions about the “primitivism,” their “directed investigations, their interested generalizations, their tendentious speculations, their insistence on the character distinct from non-Whites” (Césaire, 2004, p. 40)

## Innocent Geopsychoanalysis

Massad marks the Islamophobic, racist, and anti-Palestinian character of Arab psychoanalytic liberalism as exemplified in the work of Fethi Benslama (2002), most infamously in Benslama’s opportunistic post-9/11, *La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam*, the innocence of which is matched by Jacques Derrida’s liberal query, “*Pourquoi la psychanalyse ne prend-elle jamais pied dans le vaste*



*territoire de la culture arabo-islamique?”* as (as cited in Chamoun, 2005, p. 3).<sup>9</sup> Benslama is not alone, as Massad meticulously notes. More appropriate to this conference and its prosecutorial tone, one can look at and read the works of the Arab presenters, who themselves provide legitimacy as native-informant clinicians to the innocent liberalism of psychoanalysis. Particularly, we are thinking of the work of Arab psychoanalysts and psychiatrists such as Chawki Azouri, Mounir Chamoun, Souad Ayada, Ali Aouattah and others.<sup>10</sup> Many Arab psychoanalysts or psychoanalytic scholars tend to ponder psychoanalysis as a liberatory tool, not because of technique or because they believe in the tenets of liberation psychologists such as Martín Baró, but because they believe that psychoanalysis is a practice of “progress” and “modernity” that holds the keys to developing a “modern” (secular) “democratic” society.

Tellingly, the critique of gender and sexuality is central to the “native” psychoanalyst’s critique of the sexism and misogyny that Islam, which is claimed to be central in the perpetuation of misogynistic, racist, and queerphobic patriarchy ingrained in Arabo-Muslim society and culture, apparently much more than in Euro-American liberal society.<sup>11</sup> Ashish Nandy (1989) speaks to this when he tells us of “the homology between sexual and political dominance, which Western colonialism invariably used ... was not an accidental by-product of colonial history” (p. 3). Psychic sovereignty is extended by colonialism’s ability to overlap with particular cultural codes, thereby, for example, producing “a cultural consensus in which political and socioeconomic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity” (Nandy, 1989, p. 4). In doing so, Nandy carefully shows us that colonization does not only rely on the political economy of brute force but works through establishing an epistemological and eventual ideological dominance by cultivating the colonized identifications with their colonial aggressor. “The culture of colonialism,” Nandy (1989) tells us, “presumes a particular style of managing dissent. Obviously, a colonial system perpetuates itself by inducing the colonized, through socioeconomic and psychological rewards and punishments, to accept new social norms and cognitive categories” that can only be realized as tools of “oppression and domination” through the dissonance caused by “the inner resistance to recognizing the ultimate violence” of colonialism (p. 3).

These “homologies” are the basis of psychoanalysis’s aggressive moves to normalize its “global” sovereignty over universalized minds. Psychoanalysis in the hands of people like Roudinesco, Ghassan Tueni and the French Ambassador, Bernard Emié, is valuable because of its instrumental role in developing and “liberating” minds as itself a *mission civilisatrice*. This is not to tar each of these

<sup>9</sup> For a critique, see Massad (2015, pp. 275–311).

<sup>10</sup> See Chawki Azouri’s contribution to Azouri and Roudinesco (2005), Chamoun’s (2005) paper “Islam et Psychanalyse dans la culture arabo-musulmane,” Souâd Ayada’s (2005) conference contribution “Voile et dévoilement: la représentation en islam” and Ali Aouattah’s (2007), “De quelques résistances à la pratique psychanalytique dans la culture arabo-musulmane.”

<sup>11</sup> See Avgi Saketopoulou & Ann Pellegrini’s *Gender Without Identity* (2023) for an exceptionally ethical and systematic recounting of transhomophobia in both liberal and conservative analytic frameworks and methods.



Arab psychoanalytic thinkers with the broad brush of Islamophobia and Arabophobia, nor is it to say that they are all anti-Palestinian. They do, however, perform the work of white supremacy, reproducing the conditions for violent psychoanalytic innocence to continue not only unimpeded but as essential magnanimity for the benefit of Arab and Muslim peoples. In so doing, they also reproduce the liberal contours of psychoanalysis that repudiates its own violence, placing this violence within the racialized other while keeping that other close enough to confirm the legitimacy and authority of its own neutrality, objectivity, and universality.

Indeed, if Chamoun (2005) opens with Derrida's question, he does not heed, for example, Derrida's admonitions and warnings. Far before the global transformation of Islamophobia as a blatantly racist discourse into a sanctioned political analysis, Derrida (1998) approached the global reach and relevance of psychoanalysis very carefully, understanding how its deployment "may serve as a conduit for these new forms of violence," warning that psychoanalysis "is in danger of becoming nothing more than a perverse and sophisticated appropriation of violence, or at best merely a new weapon in the symbolic arsenal" (p. 75). Derrida's remarks were made in reference to the recently ratified constitution of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) where the association's geographical areas were defined at that time as Europe, North America, north of the United-States–Mexican border; all America south of that border; and "the rest of the world," which, Derrida remarks "connotes all that virgin psychoanalysis, to put it bluntly, has never set foot" (1998, p. 65).

"The rest of the world" in the IPA Constitution, Derrida observes, "is thus a title, name and a location" that "lies beyond the boundaries of psychoanalysis" which "has yet to be opened." It therefore is a "foreign body named, incorporated, and circumscribed ahead of time by an IPA Constitution rehearsing, as it were, the psychoanalytic colonization of a non-American rest-of-the-world, the conquest of a virginity parenthetically married to Europe" (1998, p. 66). Rather than releasing Derrida from the sexist-cisgender normative metaphor he instrumentalizes, let us dwell in it for a moment to think that this formulation is pointing precisely to an exacting form of normative reproduction of psychoanalytic theory. Derrida identifies psychoanalysis's invasive, missionary repetition compulsion, one that aims to colonize the bodies of others in order to establish sovereignty over the universality of the psyche. What we find telling is that the IPA's Constitution was ratified in Jerusalem in 1977, a city under an internationally recognized occupation. This makes us consider then, which "foreign bodies" become identifiable, categorizable, and recognizable let alone worthy of receiving the conquest of psychoanalysis.

The bodies and psyches of Arabs, Muslims, black people, queer and trans folks, and the disabled are only permitted to live in "the rest of the world" if they submit themselves to the universality of psychoanalytic liberalism. But moreover, IPA as an institution chose to declare its missionary program from an occupied city in a settler colony itself. Surely with "best of intentions," echoing Roudinesco, the evangelical missionary of geopsychology to the "rest of the world" is ratified in a Jerusalem without Palestine, and a Palestine without Palestinians. These are the pages that psychoanalysis would like their colonial subjects to forget. Just as



identifying the violence of French Republican citizenship towards its black, brown, queer and trans subjects is pathologized by Roudinesco, remembering the geopolitical specificity of occupied Jerusalem is read perversely as delusional, regressive, and/or noncompliant by psychoanalytic theory and practice. In *not* forgetting, remembering becomes a life-affirming “preservation of the trauma,” according to Frankel (1998), in understanding that page in the larger story of one’s personal and communal identity, one’s lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt* for Husserl. What trauma is being preserved and how it is structured differs depending on who makes it legible and what subjective criteria we prioritize as constitutive as trauma itself—let alone which trauma is responded to in traumatophobic ways, as Saketopoulou (2023) highlights for us. When we begin to listen to indigenous scholars (whether they are in France, Palestine, or the settler colonies of the United States and Canada)—rather than conscript them to collude with the “coloniality of power” (Quijano & Ennis, 2000)—we learn that this “preservation” does not preserve trauma as shaped by the imperious borders of psychoanalysis or even psychology.

With this new focus, could it be, then, that the reason psychoanalysis never gained a “foothold” in the Arab-Islamic culture is that it could never find *them*? Could it be because psychoanalysis refuses to repudiate acknowledging them outside of the split object of bad Palestinian/terrorist and good Arab/collaborator/liberal (Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022)? Indeed, an aligned psychoanalyst may recognize this brand of psychoanalysis to be constitutively “ideologically misattuned” (Sheehi & Crane, 2021). If we follow Roudinesco that democracy is a “major determinant” for the implantation of psychoanalysis, we see that the IPA, the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysts and Psychotherapy (IARPP), the New Lacanian Society (NLS) and most international professional psychoanalytic associations are the forward guard of an ideologically-saturated “democracy” and “freedom” agenda, even if they willfully break calls from civil society by colonized people to refrain from holding international conferences in states that violate the very liberal principles they claim to purport. This “democracy” agenda requires particular forms of recognizable subjects: pliant, victimized traumatized subjects of generic conflict awaiting to be saved by the missionary promises of psychoanalytic liberalism.

With this pretense as a pretext itself for the dissemination of psychoanalysis, French and Arab psychanalysts continue to innocently ask “Why has psychoanalysis never taken a foothold in the vast territory of Arabo-Islamic culture?” We understand such facile questions as a smoke screen, considering that Arab intellectuals engaged psychoanalysis for a century (Sheehi & Sheehi, 1998). We may instead consider whether the failures and losses of psychoanalysis in Europe and North America are displaced instead on the Arab or Muslim world. This is especially true as psychology and psychiatry have become counter-dominated by “evidence-based” cognitive behaviorist schools and modalities that better align with pharmaceutical and insurance companies’ insistence on cost-effective treatments, whether public or privatized.

Our question here is less about the racist projection of the “failure” of psychoanalysis to take hold in the Global South and more concerned with counter-questions, such as *why would* psychoanalysis find a foothold in the Arabo-Islamic



world considering the flagrant anti-Arab and anti-Muslim language of individual psychoanalysts directed at Muslims and Arabs as being uniquely resistant to individualism and modernity? Why would psychoanalysis be internalized given the misuse of psychoanalytic theory to pathologize Muslims both in Europe, Southwest Asia and North Africa, South Asia and Africa, and the shameless institutional behavior of organizations like the IPA, the NLS and IARPP, who hold their international conferences in an apartheid settler colony? Why would psychoanalysis find a foothold anywhere in the Global South, especially by and for the racial global majority?

These questions are a necessary departure from the hackneyed Eurocentric starting points because, apart from taking no responsibility for its history, its categories, or its nomenclature, the psychoanalysis of the IPA and Lacanians are, in the words of Bollas (2000), “transference addicts.” That is, they demand universal and imperialist self-states and identifications with the authority of psychoanalysis writ-large as a *precondition* for being accepted into the ethnoclass of humanity itself. Psychoanalysis’s very arrival and its evangelical mission in the Global South, and especially in Palestine, catalyzes Bion (2013) attacks on linking, demanding disassociation and dissociation with one’s community, self and even body. Why would indigenous Palestinians forgo communal identifications mobilized through *sumud* and good internal objects as Gail Lewis (2020) reminds us, when these objects are routinely attacked as “primitive”?<sup>12</sup> More importantly, until recently, pushed upon by intellectually sharp leftist anti-Zionist and/or Arab psychoanalytic clinicians, what has psychoanalysis done to liberate Palestinians against the psychologically cruel conditions of Zionist settler colonialism? When has psychoanalysis ever mobilized for the liberation of Arab women against Israeli apartheid, American imperialism, and state-sponsored violence by repressive Western allies? In this way, we read the *refusal* for psychoanalysis to take a foothold in the *liberal universal human form it insists on holding* as an agentic and willful act that, most importantly, defies settler colonial moves to innocence that routinely masquerade in mental health efforts and claims to modernity vis-à-vis psychoanalysis.

This reading is especially true because contemporary psychoanalysis, this “global” or geopsychology, never misses an opportunity to be a missionary. In doing so, it fortifies its alliance with, and as, an oppressor in order to solidify the legitimacy of its sovereign authority. The violent innocence—often expressed by their aghast shock when called out for racism, transphobia, queerphobia, misogyny, ableism and Islamophobia—projects psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic “values” as oppressed and heroic victims in the face of “communitarianism” and “identitarianism.” Backed by the *force(s)* of institutions and governments (exemplified by sponsorship of the French Embassy and Institut Français du Liban of the psychoanalytic conference in Beirut), violent psychoanalytic innocence works to recenter the disruptions, the “distress, ideation density, and emotional turbulence” caused by the others it actively creates, psychically and otherwise. Psychoanalytic innocence, then, is a defense that produces and reproduces, as Bollas (1993) tells us, “a form of denial, but one is which we observe not the nature of the

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<sup>12</sup> Also see, Stephen Sheehi (2024) “Forging Revolutionary Objects.”



subject's denial of external perception, but the subject's denial of the other's perception" (p. 180).

## **Innocent Present–Absence of Palestine**

Roudinesco (2023) replicates this racial policing of the sovereignty of psychoanalysis in a high-profile attack on Boni and Mendelsohn's *Psychanalyse du reste du monde* (2023), a critical collection of chapters by scholars (including ourselves) that approach how psychoanalysis may function (or not) in the Global South. However, we have not taken up that missive as to avoid engaging Roudinesco's ad hominem attacks of certain analysts. More to the point, we grounded this article in Roudinesco's *Soi-même comme un roi* because her screed against "communitarian" identities ranging from brown and black people, to Muslims, queer or trans folks, demonstrates the sort of intellectualization at the heart of white supremacist racism that cuts through globalized capitalist modernity and its ideological (psychoanalytic) frame. The reason why we focus on her otherwise uninspiring work is because she specifically mobilizes and weaponizes her psychoanalytic bona fides to uphold liberal white innocence. In naming marginalized subjects and communities as intolerant of majoritarian, normative subjectivities, she decries that "followers of identity politics are inspired to identify all of their enemies likely to discriminate against or offend them" and weaponize the "vocabulary of psychiatry...since the word 'phobia' then designates a true pathology in the DSM" (Roudinesco, 2021, p. 181).

Furthermore, we are reminded, in classic Islamophobic script, that "if the list of new 'phobias' is endless, we must attribute to the neologism "Islamophobia" a special place in this constellation" (Roudinesco, 2021, p. 182). Roudinesco does not deny that there is anti-black sexism, racism, Islamophobia, trans or queerphobia. What she believes however, is that each "phobia" can be subsumed under the traditional blankets of "racism," "sexism," "homophobia," and antisemitism. That is, marginalized identities that narrate their experience are validated only when they are sanctioned by psychoanalytic liberalism and become generic under universal paradigms of victimization without systemic victims. Roudinesco states that this objective form of identifying sexism, racism, patriarchy, and antisemitism is opposite of the practice of producing knowledge by "talking about oneself, working on oneself, recounting one's most intimate life: such was the credo of a transmission of knowledge that necessarily included a kind of self-analysis – even autofiction – depending on whether one defined oneself as 'gendered', 'genderless', 'binary', 'non-binary', black, white, queer, etc." (2021, p. 182).

In *Soi-même comme un roi*, Palestine is ever-present but almost completely absent—a central mechanics of domination, as Wekker (2016) reminds us, since hyper-attention to the other is sustained in their ever-absence—what we might call a psychoanalytic displacement. Palestine is (not) discussed through a series of deflections, defenses, displacements and projections that always maneuver to blame the victim for blaming the victimizer. Despite appeals to authority of a long list of legendary French thinkers and psychoanalytic mentors and heavy referencing of right-leaning liberals and libertarian "philosophers" (e.g., Christopher Lasch,



Raymond Aron, Michel Houellebecq, Alain Finkielkraut, Jean Starobinski, etc.), the analytic thread of her “anti-identitarian” politics is simple: Racialized people are “one with the discourse of what we claim to denounce.” Hence, *they* are racist if not masochistic ones. They desire racialization, designating themselves as the enemy of the West, of “whiteness,” and Jews, who they suspect are “whitewashed by European imperialism” for the price of having obtained Palestine as a colony (Roudinesco, 2021, p. 197).

This critique by Roudinesco is explicitly aimed at Françoise Vergès and Houria Bouteldja, as both of their critiques powerfully dismantle the myth of French “color-blindness.” They further call out French feminism and homonationalism for the ways in which they both collaborate with and reproduce whiteness within structures of racial capitalist modernity. It is Palestine, however, that saturates Roudinesco’s critique, even if in the displacement. The black French citizen, the Arab French citizen, the queer French citizen all become stand-ins for Palestinians. Since October 7, 2023, we have seen these tropes mobilized with such ferocity as they have become denuded of any pretense. The mechanics of innocence are the same: when they claim their identity, the right to name their own identity, the right to their own psychic sovereignty, they are pathologized. In her critique of identity politics, her naming of the process by which marginalized people’s *desire to be victimized* in order to give them an identity, the colonization of Palestine emerges. Palestine emerges in her racial critique; Palestine emerges as a center to her Islamophobic critique of Muslims; and Palestine is repudiated when the “wages of whiteness” of European Jews are made visible, as Bouteldja (2016) shows us. Palestine appears when Bouteldja calls us to “shoot Sartre” precisely due to his failure to recognize the indigenous presence and priority of the Palestinian people.

Indeed, Roudinesco’s (2021, p. 109) critique of Josie Fanon’s removal of Sartre’s introduction to *Wretched of the Earth* as a result of his support of the settler colony now known as Israel during the 1967 war, detours from Palestine and the Palestinians into Roudinesco’s violent innocence. According to Roudinesco, Josie fails to identify what racism truly is. Contrarily, she rather trusts the insights of the French-Polish Zionist author, André Schwarz-Bart and his more talented Antillean novelist wife Simone Schwarz-Bart, who she uses as a counterpoint, to alert us to Fanon’s true sensibilities, which would exclude Fanon from being an anti-Zionist. Just as in Lebanon, Roudinesco presumes to teach us that “the widow of Fanon did not seem to care about the fundamental importance of the link that united the fight against racism and colonialism with the fight against antisemitism” (2021, p. 109). Palestine is always the locus for violent innocence. Palestine emerges always as a present absence, an unthought known, an instigation to violent innocence in the “form of denial,” as Bollas noted.

## Psychic Sovereignty of Palestinians

Ibrahim Makkawi (2012) reminds us: “community psychology, as a sub-discipline within psychology, emerged when critical psychologists realized that the genesis of mental health disorders among members of the oppressed and marginalized



communities are rooted in the objective conditions of oppression" (p. 371). In turning away from trauma-based diagnosis into a grassroots community of care, Rana Nashashibi (personal communication) reminds us: "everyone, including us as clinicians, are contending with their priorities: self or nation?"—especially in the context of life and death. Roudinesco's (and Sibony's) effacing psychoanalysis would have Palestinians "forget" communal identifications in order to align with a universal "healthy" individual subject that otherwise primitivizes collective identities. In this regard, the work of Rita Giacaman, Brian Barber and others shows us that psychoanalysis is deeply misguided. Giacaman shows communally transmitted values such as "justice, rights, dignity, and self-determination" undergird political and social cohesion and communal identity and as such serve as "key elements" for high "functioning" in the face of the concrete realities of day-to-day movement restrictions of apartheid (Barber et al., 2014, p. 90). What we have argued here is that the misguidedness of psychoanalysis is not innocent or even based within its own provincial limitations. Rather, psychoanalysis writ large—as a diverse intellectual and ideological formation and set of practices—operates along the logic and presumptions of a "colonial republic."

Psychoanalysis's presumptions of liberalism, secularism and objectivity tend to confuse white supremacy for universal humanity, seeking to reify psychic structures and dynamics that can only find non-conforming, non-European subjects as perverse or lacking. Indeed, the assertion is indebted to the insights of black theorists of psychoanalysis and race from Frantz Fanon to Hortense Spillers (1996), who teaches that "in the classical narratives of psychoanalytic theory, the status quo" or normative "freezes and fixes subjectivity in a status of permanently achieved" (p. 732), a status where racialized subjects are found as "psychoanalytic difference that has yet to be articulated" (p. 712). Yet, the "rigorous curative framework" of "psychoanalytic hermeneutics" (Spillers, 1996, p. 733) is predicated also on an authority that assumes the natural right to adjudicate and pronounce on the internal worlds of "others"—that is, a sovereignty over all psyches.

We understand psychoanalysis as a purveyor of social orders that collude, crassly put, with imperial political and economic order. One need not refer to the shocking neglect and negation by Western powers to acknowledge the psychological and traumatic damage wrought on the Palestinian people, especially in the wake of Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, to understand how certain subjects are prohibited to enter the IPA's legible realm of the "rest of the world." In this regard, the sort of psychoanalysis that Rodinesco's work puts forward lacks the capacity to understand how psychosocial practices such as *sumud* can be read as anything other than primitive functioning. Palestine and Palestinians reveal the colonial pretenses of psychoanalytic thought, their claim to the psychic sovereignty of the whole population of the world, because the Palestinian political, social, and psychic matrix of life-affirming refusals intend to maintain psychic sovereignty that is otherwise under assault and siege in every aspect of their social and psychological lives. In their refusal to become worthy of empathy in the ways Lena Meari outlines—that is, as "broken" and "defeated" individuals separated from their Palestinian identity and community—Palestinians, just as other minorities, become Roudinesco's



victimizationally organized psychic Others, both hyper and hypo-visible under the imperious gaze of a universalizing and white supremacist psychoanalysis.

Geraldine Moane (2010) in *Gender and Colonialism* challenges us to consider how we might write about collective liberation, collective mental health, and collective wellbeing through, arguably, a theory of care that attends to individual suffering especially within communities of color, communities living the afterlives of colonialism, and communities living under settler colonialism and racial capitalism? How do we extricate the individual from the collective when talking about collective suffering without eliding the individuals own experience and psychic mechanisms? In elevating the sovereignty of Palestinian psychic lives and worlds, we have also insisted on a refusal of this universalizing gaze that is intent on contouring generic victims de-linked from their victimizers. In thinking of the ways in which Roudinesco (and others) “innocently” delegitimize black, brown, queer, and trans identities in France, which she considers as “communitarian” and “identarian,” we cannot help but see the violent innocence of psychoanalysis’s collusion with the dispossession and delegitimization of the lifeworlds of the Palestinian people and any Other in its/their “care.”

In conclusion, considering the imperialism of psychoanalysis’s universalist psyche as the gatekeeper for what constitutes the sovereignty of humanity, we encourage psychoanalysts to ask, following Cornel West’s (2016) introductory words to Houria Bouteldja’s brilliant *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous*, should “not the end of imperial innocence entail the rejection of social democracy or neoliberal politics—with their attendant ‘white good conscience,’ top-down [white, ‘civilizational’] feminism, bourgeois multiculturalism, and refusal to target a vicious Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and people?”<sup>13</sup>

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**Conflict of interest** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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<sup>13</sup> Cornel West, “The End of Imperial Innocence,” in *Whites, Jews, and Us* by Houria Boutledja (2016). For the original in French, see Houria Boutledja, *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous* (2016). Also, for a critique of white, civilizational feminism, see Francoise Vergès, *Un féminisme décolonial* (2019).



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**Stephen Sheehi** is Sultan Qaboos Professor of Middle East Studies and a member of the faculty of the Asian and Middle East Studies Program (AMES), Modern Languages and Literatures Department, and Asian and Pacific Islander Studies Program (APIA) at William & Mary. He is also the Director of the Decolonizing Humanities Project.

**Stephen Sheehi** is the author of five books about the modern Arab subjectivity, photography, and psychoanalysis, and Islamophobia and racism in Palestine and the settler colony now known as the United



States. Most recently, he is coauthor of *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* with Lara Sheehi (Routledge, 2022), which has won the Palestine Book Award for Best 2022 Academic Book on Palestine; and *Camera Palaestina: Photography and Displaced Histories*, co-authored with Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar (University of California Press, Fall, 2022).

Most recently, he and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian co-edited “Settler-Colonialism As State-Crime: Abolitionist Perspectives,” a special issue of *State Crime Journal*. (2024).

He is the editorial boards of *Trans-Asian Photography*, *Regards: Revue des arts du spectacle*, and Routledge’s *Decolonizing the Classics* series and the advisory boards of the USA–Palestine Mental Health Network. Lara Sheehi (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar, and a Research Fellow at the University of South Africa’s Institute for Social and Health Sciences. She is the founding faculty director of the Psychoanalysis and the Arab World Lab. Lara’s work takes up decolonial and antioppressive approaches to psychoanalysis, with a focus on liberation struggles in the Global South. She is co-author with Stephen Sheehi of *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* (Routledge, 2022) which won the Middle East Monitor’s 2022 Palestine Book Award for Best Academic Book. Lara is the President of the Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology (APA, Division 39), co-editor of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. Lara is on the advisory board for the USA–Palestine Mental Health Network and the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism. She is currently working on a new book, *From the Clinic to the Street: Psychoanalysis for Revolutionary Futures* (Pluto Press).

