
NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

The reverie of resistance

Stephen Sheehi*¹  and Lara Sheehi² 

¹William & Mary, USA

²George Washington University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this short piece, we discuss the importance of reverie, a psychoanalytic concept, but also, a central logic in *sumud*. Using direct testimony from Palestinians in Gaza and freed political prisoners, we conceptualize how reverie affirms Palestinian life, willfulness, and resistance against the backdrop of settler colonial violence and, currently, active genocide.

KEYWORDS: Palestine; settler colonialism; resistance; reverie; Wilfred Bion; Christopher Bollas; psychoanalysis

‘The world should know about these children who were murdered by Israel because they are not numbers, but names, stories and dreams killed by the Israeli occupation in Gaza’ (Alsaafin & Amer, 2023, para. 7). Contemplating the unfathomable world in which her children are forced to live, Sara al-Khalidi was horrified by and initially rejected the idea of writing the names of her four children on their limbs. Yet, in escaping from Gaza City to Khan Younis, she wrote their names, as did other Palestinian parents such as Muhammad Abu Odeh, who said, ‘Writing my children’s names on their bodies is the solution so that [they are not just numbers but] the world will know them’ (para. 24).

The writing of names on the living bodies of Palestinian children in Gaza compels us to think of the discussions within psychoanalysis about how our personalities, internal worlds and personal and social relationships are built through passing messages, information, and knowledge (true or imagined) between generations; how feelings of safety, security, or anxiety are passed between parents and children. We deploy these psychoanalytic terms, like

*Contact details: spsheehi@wm.edu

paranoia, not to pathologize but to describe, for example, that ‘paranoia’ is also reality-based, especially under fascism, structural oppression, and an increase in global surveillance. The parents writing of these children’s name remind us how ‘good’ objects are or are not forged, internalized, or introjected, and how these sociogenic objects may be part of a larger fabric of communities.

To be more concrete, the writing of names on living Palestinian children elevates their bodies under settler colonialism and, currently, genocidal war, *as a site of re-producing social meaning*. The bodies of children, here, in addition to being ‘political capital’, as Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) reminds us, then, also are etched with the signs of life. Their bodies, under the crush of settler colonialism, come to hold proof of life, not just as once was, but also, as signifiers of an ongoing-ness in refusal to testify to who and what did the murdering. Gazan children’s bodies therefore do the work of testifying to their own life where death and *liberation* are *imminent* potentials.

One would be mistaken to consider the genocidal Israeli campaign in Gaza as an exception rather than a grotesque and horrific extension of the Zionist settler colonial regime writ large; a regime and ideology that has intended to eliminate the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine from their lands since before 1948. While we remember Patrick Wolfe’s (1999) settler colonialism adage, he specifically says that ‘invasion is a structure not an event’ (p. 2). Elsewhere, with David Lloyd, Wolfe (2016) offers a psychoanalytic extension of this analysis, noting that,

settler colonial violence is at once law-making, and therefore constitutive of a certain kind of sovereignty, and a ‘free and ruthless’ use of force... The corollary to this perpetual reconstitution of law-making violence, which does not allow the ‘forgetting’ of the law’s origins in appropriation, is the persistence of a *psychic ‘state of siege’*: the representation of the world as a surround populated by uncivil peoples who pose what, in the language of neoconservatism as of Zionism, is understood as an ‘existential threat’ to civil subjects. With the impeccable logic of the paranoid, the ‘free and ruthless force’ inflicted on those evicted ‘beyond the line’ is projected onto its objects. (Lloyd & Wolfe, 2016, p. 114)

We can on the one hand think of the psychic state of siege of which Wolfe and Lloyd speak, as concretized—and in Gaza, epidermalized, in the writing of the children’s names on their bodies. On the other hand, however, we can also understand, as Abu Odeh reminds us, that this is an act that refuses to accept being ‘evicted beyond the line’, the line beyond which you cease to be human and merely a number. While the ‘free and ruthless’ force is therefore very real, the imagined eviction not just out of place, but out of mind, out of memory, and out of existence is willfully refused.

In our book, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* (Routledge, 2022), we discuss a series of cases of suicide in Gaza, the West Bank, and occupied Jerusalem. The life and death of Basil al-Araj, revolutionary intellectual, who, hunted as a fugitive for months by the Israeli Occupation army, was murdered in cold blood after he ran

out of ammunition. Muhannad Younis, a promising writer in Gaza with an abusive father, committed suicide after he was prohibited from leaving Gaza by the Israeli Occupation regime to pursue his studies in Jerusalem where he had won a scholarship. More recently, only ten days before October 7, 2023, Muhammad al-Najjar, another young, acclaimed poet, completed suicide, debilitated by the depression from the loss of his father as a child (Yaghi, 2023). In our book, coupling Basil's and Muhannad's lives, writings, and deaths, allows us to also place suicide alongside state-murder, and the willfulness of living and dying next to a critical interrogation of victimization, trauma, and agentic defiance (Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022).

Adjacent to the stories of Muhannad and Basil, the recounting of parents tagging their children as archives of the living stories and dreams of their children and their people redirects us from a shift in Gaza's conditions from the previous consideration of slow death in Gaza (as Jasbir Puar writes) to the incendiary necro-scape of the current siege and invasion; from the previous assumption settler-colonial omnipresence and carceral logic to a denuded fragility of colonial control, exposed on October 7. Within this cleavage, we are pressed to think about the relationship between Palestinian life and settler state-sponsored death, and how anticolonial strategies of *sumud*, and philosophies of 'livability' are passed *between and within Palestinian generations* to bind and buttress them against the eliminatory logics and goals of settler colonialism.

THE SOCIOGENY OF REVERIE

In psychoanalysis, we might think of those parents, friends, and even the Resistance as engaging in *reverie*, for children and for each other, subjected to the sheer unmetabolizable nature of violence around them. This reverie, Wilfred Bion (1962/1984) teaches us, opens a psychic space to hold and 'contain' the overwhelming nature of reality, where the parent interpolates that reality back to the child in ways that allow them not to be overpowered or psychologically debilitated.

If good objects are both socially and inter-psychically formed and passed from one to another, we may also consider the sociogeny of a sense of reverie internalized by the Palestinians in the form of those who hold their pain. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian show us how Palestinians 'speak life' to death, in practices of *sumud* and revolutionary love in communities, in prisons, in schools, and even in solidarity in the streets. Within these acts, we can identify acts of 'holding and containment', of fear and dread, a reverie that is baked into the complex social practices of *sumud*. We may witness the anguish of parents, who initially refuse to register the potential death of their children on their limbs, morph into a holding and containment of what Christopher Bollas (2000) would call the 'unthought known'—in this case the unthought known of the violent uncertainty for the child.

REVERIE AS SECURING FUTURES

There has been considerable work on the practice of *sumud* of Palestinian political prisoners (see, for example, Abdo-Zubi, 2014; Ajour, 2021; Nashif, 2008; Norman, 2021), the psychological, physical, and material support and care of one another within the prison, the practice of remembering family on the outside, the attempts to remain grounded in the knowledge of their relationship to the land and one another, even under torture. In thinking of this social fabric from which Palestinian reverie emerges, we can map out a non-deterministic network of interpersonal, social, cultural, and psychological sources of reverie. These sources may build onto, replicate, or even supplement or surpass psychoanalysis' heteronormative obsession with the Oedipal parent—or the racist notions that somehow Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims cannot but collapse into the most regressed and unidimensional versions of their deprived interiority (see L. Sheehi, 2019).

Whether from prisons or schools or family homes, the Resistance itself—its long tradition especially since 1967—provides a psychic source of reverie, of holding and containment of pain in struggle, a place where 'good objects' are held as organizing and affirming objects of Palestinian selfhood (see S. Sheehi, in press).

Hanan "Im 'Inad" al-Barghouthi was released on November 24, 2023, after three months of illegal detention without charges or trial—a practice that is common for the settler state now known as Israel. She is the sister of Nael, the longest serving female Palestinian political prisoner (43 years), sister of political prisoner Omar Barghouti (serving 30 years), and the mother of four sons, all of whom remain in jail under administrative detention, with no charges or trial. Upon her release, Im 'Inad describes the debasing conditions and degrading treatment of female prisoners by their settler colonial Apartheid jailers, especially since October 7, 2023:

We were living in isolated confinement, shut off from the world. Sometimes a woman prisoner would come in and give us news. Sometimes we could get news from a small transistor radio. Every night they'd come in, take the radio. They'd beat us. They'd spray us with gas, because we were proud, and strong. We were deprived of food and drink. But our food was the people of Gaza. Our drink was the people of Gaza. We were deprived of air, but the air of Gaza reached us, with joy, dignity, and with absolute pride in the Resistance. From the smallest child, we embrace all of them [the Resistance and People of Gaza] with complete greetings, God reward them with goodness...If it were not for the people of Gaza, we would not have seen freedom. Even in the last minute before our release, they locked us in a horrible cell that was moldy, we were inside, eating bitterness. They were sadists. They insulted us and humiliated us, but our pride is high and our dignity is elevated, thanks to the Resistance. (TRT, 2023)

Settler colonial ideology with its 'psychic state of siege' prohibits settlers from imagining better worlds, and attempts, through psychic intrusion, and physical punishment to prohibit indigenous imaginations. The reverie of Palestinian elders, of prisoners like Hanan, and of parents like al-Khalidi and Abu Odeh, as well as that of the Resistance, refuses the siege and

facilitates life-sustaining imagination. In more concrete terms, as we heard from Hanan, the Resistance did not only free these illegally detained women and children from settler colonial Apartheid jails, but also, their news, whether from women prisoners or a small transistor radio, held and contained them under Israeli torture and abuse.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Stephen Sheehi (اسطفان شيجا-he/him) is Sultan Qaboos professor of Middle East studies in the Asian and Middle East Studies Program (AMES) and Arabic Studies Program in Modern Languages and Literatures Department at William & Mary, Pamunkey Confederacy Territory USA. He is also the founding director of the Decolonizing Humanities Project.

In addition to numerous articles and book chapters, Sheehi is the author of five books about the Arab world, photography, and psychoanalysis, as well as Islamophobia and racism in North America. Most recently, he is co-author of *Palestine: 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, 2022). He and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian are co-editing a special issue of *State Crime Journal*, 'Settler-Colonialism As State-Crime: Abolitionist Perspectives' (December 2023).



Lara Sheehi, PsyD (she/her) is an assistant professor of clinical psychology at the George Washington University's Professional Psychology Program where she is the founding faculty director of the Psychoanalysis and the Arab World Lab. Lara's work takes up decolonial and anti-oppressive 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* and co-editor of *Counterspace in Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*. Lara is also a contributing editor to the Psychosocial Foundation's *Parapraxis Magazine* and on the advisory board for the USA–Palestine Mental Health Network. Lara is currently working on her forthcoming book, *From the Clinic to the Street: Psychoanalysis for Revolutionary Futures* (Pluto Press, 2025).