Special Issue: 'Psychoanalysis and the Middle East: Discourses and Encounters'

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

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Arguably, psychoanalysis has yet to fully grapple with its geo-historical and geo-political location, mired as it is in a parochialism that has assumed the centrality of Western European intellectual traditions in the formation of the psychoanalytic canon. Within these intellectual formations, the non-West often makes its appearance only as an afterthought – producing exemplars but rarely epistemologies (Arondekar & Patel, 2016, p. 152). This is evidenced in citational

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practices in which theoretical production is presumed to be European, while sites like Argentina and India can only inflect empirical trajectories of psychoanalysis presumed to have already taken place in the West.

In this special issue we eschew an approach that would simply add the Middle East to psychoanalysis in order to ascertain what variations occur within a preconceived mold. Instead we ask, what alchemical transformations take place within psychoanalysis through its encounter with the Middle East and with Islam? Such an approach entails a working through of psychoanalysis *otherwise*, both as theory and practice, in a geopolitical elsewhere. Can intellectual formations, religious traditions, and political imaginaries centered outside of Europe exert pressure on the so-called canon of psychoanalytic thought?

Reopening the archive of psychoanalysis necessitates supplementing and proliferating the core texts of the psychoanalytic tradition with unexpected interlocutors. There are precedents, of course, for this practice. Jacques Lacan engaged with medieval mystical thought, including with the thought of Ibn ᶜArabi, which he learned of by way of the Islamicist Henry Corbin – an assignation most evident in Lacan's *Encore* seminar (Copjec, this issue). We continue this tradition, and the articles assembled here engage Schelling, the German idealist philosopher, in conjunction with mystical apophatic theology; a Moroccan imam in counterpoint to Fouad Benchekroun, a Lacanian psychoanalyst and psychiatrist; the Egyptian-born and French-trained psychoanalyst Sami-Ali in conversation with postwar prostitutes in Cairo and the medieval Islamic mystic Ibn ᶜArabi; the Iraqi sociologist ᶜAli al-Wardi addressing Sigmund Freud's notion of the unconscious in combination with an Islamic revolutionary tradition; the analyst Jessica Benjamin contrasted with Palestinian mental health workers; and the contemporary Paris-based Tunisian analyst Fethi Benslama juxtaposed to the so-called 'modernizer' of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba.

Joan Copjec, in 'Cloud, Precinct of the Theological-Historical,' explores 'the links connecting Islamic philosophy, German Idealism, and psychoanalysis, which all take their bearings from the esoteric or mystical idea of an unconscious abyss.' Receptive to the thought 'that Islamic philosophy might open [her] eyes to Freud and Lacan as often as the other way around,' she contemplates the interconnections between the German idealists' notion of *Abgrund* or *Ungrund* (the concept of an abyss or groundlessness) and the 'reconceptualization of God as the *ens manifestativium sui*, that being whose essence is to reveal itself' as analogous to Sufi mystical theology regarding 'the Hidden God who yearned to be known.' Such a philosophical rethinking brings to bear lucidity on the question of cause through 'the ontological priority of the One,' where being is not grounded in a prior substance, and any originating origin is absolutely undisclosed. The temporality of the Cloud allows Copjec to re-read the Freud–Jung debate over *Nachträglichkeit* in a novel fashion. Here we see not a historicist unraveling of the question of *après coup*, but a philosophical meditation on the abyss structuring psychoanalytic thought and mysticism alike.

If Copjec takes seriously the challenge presented to psychoanalysis by Islamic philosophy, Stefania Pandolfo likewise proposes, following Jacques Lacan, an '*experimentum mentis* … The experiment consist[s] in adopting the point of view of the Last Judgement' (Lacan, 1992[1959–60], p. 313). Such an experiment thinks through psychoanalysis alongside *jihad al-nafs* or the Islamic concept of the struggle of the soul, from the point of view of the Last Judgement, in light of a postcolonial agony and the inevitability that is death. Here the human subject is not a given – the 'becoming human' of the soul can take place only through ethical cultivation and purification (Pandolfo, this issue). Madness is a risk intrinsic to this ordeal. Practitioners such as the Moroccan imam, a *murshid* (religious guide) and *muᶜlij* (therapist), think through madness as an extimacy – an ordeal at once intimate to and removed from the self, that echoes the Divine ordeal that all believers must face. In her own *experimentum mentis*, Pandolfo brings the imam into conversation with the psychoanalyst Fouad Benchekroun, staging an encounter between psychoanalysis and the imam's theological-ethical-political approach. In pairing psychoanalysis with other traditions of the soul, it is clear that psychoanalysis is not merely translated into Morocco; it is radically rethought there.

Questions of theology likewise animate 'Psychoanalysis and the Imaginary,' where Omnia El Shakry explores the work of Sami-Ali, the Arabic translator of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, author of a large body of psychoanalytic theory, and translator of Sufi masters. In his early theoretical writings, Sami-Ali rethinks the category of the imaginary as distinct from both phenomenology and Lacanian theory. Structured by an Islamic apophatic theology, such a notion of the imaginary conceptualized psychic reality as a space of conjoined opposites, much like the dream world, marking a reality which both exists and does not exist. This theologically informed notion of imagination, more expansive than those of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, or even Freud, highlighted the importance of *non-savoir* (non-knowledge) and creative forces beyond those of the human subject. Such theoretical work cannot be understood, however, outside of its wider context, and El Shakry maintains that Sami-Ali's clinical encounters with incarcerated female prostitutes in 1950s Cairo constituted the ground of his theorization of the role of the imaginary within the embodied subject.

In ''ᶜAli al-Wardi and the Miracles of the Unconscious,' Sara Pursley explores how the Iraqi sociologist ᶜAli al-Wardi engaged, in the 1950s, with studies in parapsychology alongside Sufi conceptions of the hidden dimensions of the soul to explore creative forces that disrupted what al-Wardi criticized as the abstract reason of both contemporary Islamic and European Enlightenment thought. While asserting that Freudian theory had revolutionized understandings of the human psyche – especially by showing how the *nafs* or self is irreducibly 'plural' (*mutaᶜaddida*) – al-Wardi also questioned what he saw as Freud's exaggerated emphasis on the negative effects of the unconscious and his neglect of its miraculous or supernatural dimensions. This project took on explicitly political implications in some of his works, which envisioned an Islamic

revolutionary tradition that repeatedly disrupted the abstract reason of the state by drawing on the irrational but politically effective powers at the core of the human. Al-Wardi thus provides an early articulation of a concept we might term, following Christopher Bollas, 'unconscious creativity' (Bollas, 2007).

By engaging Islamic theology and psychoanalysis simultaneously, the aforementioned articles challenge 'the political unconscious of psychoanalysis itself as a secular science and a secular clinic' (Toscano, 2010, p. 149). Rather than place 'Islam' on the couch, as conservative theorists would have us do, this approach brings Islamic philosophical and theological concepts into the fold of the psychoanalytic tradition. The Cloud ('which the Divine Being exhaled and in which He originally was') supplements debates about the temporality and causality of *Nachträglichkeit* (Corbin, 1969, p. 185; Copjec, this issue); Ibn ᶜArabi's notion of the *barzakh*, a liminal space between existence and non-existence, sleeping and waking life, is conceptualized alongside the dreamwork and the reveries of quotidian life (El Shakry, this issue); *jihad al-nafs*, the battleground of the self, reanimates Lacan's notion of ethics as 'the relation between action and the desire that inhabits it' (Lacan, 1992[1959–60], p. 313; Pandolfo, this issue); and the unconscious (*al-la-shuᶜur*) appears within a theodicy of Islamic revolutionary thought as a source of the miraculous power of unreason to change history (Pursley, this issue).

Such creative cross-fertilizations stand diametrically opposed to the thought of Fethi Benslama, a contemporary psychoanalyst for whom Islamic radicalization is 'a symptom of something gone awry in Islamic civilization from within' (Gana, this issue). As Alberto Toscano asks, 'What are the pitfalls of "secularizing" the psychoanalytic subject, and of turning psychoanalysis into a secular clinic, a move whose political payoff would be to welcome recalcitrant cultures into a disenchanted West?' (Toscano, 2010, pp. 162–3; cf. Massad, 2009).

The pitfalls are indeed many and in 'Jihad on the Couch' Nouri Gana criticizes Benslama's assumption of secular modernity as 'the unquestioned ideological framework' for psychoanalyzing the hyper-pious figure Benslama identifies with the ills of Islam: the surmusulman. For Benslama, the surmusulman is driven to self-sacrifice by a melancholic yearning for an ideal lost object, a pristine Islamic civilization. Benslama's view of melancholia is a negative one, which he identifies selectively in the 'recalcitrant culture' of Islamic subjects. Yet Gana finds that an advocate of precisely the secularization Benslama has called for, Tunisia's postcolonial president Habib Bourguiba, in fact drew on a similarly unconsciously melancholite logic. Bourguiba saw the abandonment of Islamic attachments as the condition for Muslims' entry into modernity. Gana finds in Bourguiba's failed identification with a supposedly universal secular ideal the contradictions of secularism, which 'conscripts subjects whom it fundamentally rejects' (Gana, this issue).

The recognition of the ways in which particular forms of secularism (*laïcité*) masquerade as universal escapes Benslama, determined as he is to undertake de-radicalization campaigns in the French banlieues as a mode of civilizing

mission. The diagnosis of Islamic radicalism functions as a screen allegory for a wider critique of what he terms 'the primal fictions of Islam and the workings of its symbolic systems' (Benslama, 2009, p. vii). Yet, as Pursley's article shows, some of the same 'primal fictions' that Benslama pathologizes within contemporary Islamist movements were invoked by anticolonial leftist intellectuals of the 1950s, a political milieu Benslama has celebrated as the antithesis of later Islamism. These fictions include retelling the story of the Prophet's grandson Husayn as one who actively sought death through martyrdom, whose act must be repeated and not just remembered, a fiction that Benslama – missing the longer history of its retelling – psychoanalyzes and essentializes as symptomatic of a melancholic yearning for a lost Islamic ideal.

Benslama's work forcefully brings to the fore the question of clinical practice within the postcolony and metropole alike. What are the political implications of psychoanalytic work, and what is its complicity with hegemonic political formations? If Benslama purports to seamlessly translate between geopolitical formations and clinical encounters, it is because he does not heed psychoanalysis's most profound insights. As Joan Copjec remarks:

> psychoanalysis recasts the debate regarding the viability of Western values and judgments and the role they ought or ought not to play in territories outside their own … To state it in a (too) summary way, against the universalists, who believe that certain values have managed to shake off the soil of particularity in which they sprouted in order to assert themselves abstractly, as universals, psychoanalysis maintains that we do not really know what values we hold or why we hold them. Our task is thus not to divest them of their particularity, but to create particular forms in which they can be recognized, by ourselves and by others. (Copjec, 2009, p. 9)

Significantly, it is the space of the clinic which highlights the particularity and materiality of psychoanalysis as an embedded social practice. In 'Psychoanalysis Under Occupation,' Stephen Sheehi takes Jessica Benjamin to task for her translation from the scene of the clinic to the scene of politics through the use of 'dialogue initiatives,' which he criticizes as 'the psychic extension of Israel's Apartheid closure system and as an act of "extractive introjection."' We could say that Benjamin, like the third co-created space she advocates for, fails to 'restor[e] the symptom to its sociopolitical context' (Marriott, 2018, p. 56). In response, Sheehi, drawing on Lena Meari and Palestinian mental health workers, posits that *sumud* or steadfastness in the face of material and psychic violence functions as a psychological defense against the sociopolitical realities of Israel's closure system in the West Bank and Gaza. This political formation calls into question the concept of 'third space' as not just a muddied misrecognition of sociopolitical realities, but also as an attempt to insert the Israeli ideal as an introject into the historically politically resistant Palestinian psyche.

It was the Martinican psychiatrist and theorist Frantz Fanon who, in thinking through the space of the clinic as a psychodrama, best theorized the interconnections between the clinical and the political (Marriott, 2018;

Fanon, 1967[1952]; Fanon, 1963[1961]). It was precisely through his encounter with metropolitan racism in France and settler colonialism in Algeria that Fanon addressed the question of remedy 'not solely [as] a hermeneutic problem, but a question of how the symptom is *lived* as collective experience' (Marriott, 2018, p. 56). Fanon developed a *socialthérapie* 'founded on that of the group where the patient-actor is compelled to give up their defenses and commit themselves to a new articulation of self, subject, and world' (Marriott, 2018, p. 41).[1] As David Marriott notes, '[f]rom the clinical perspective, *socialthérapie* is thus a question of ending the division between individual alienation and group paranoia, thereby restoring the symptom to its sociopolitical context' (2018, p. 56). Such an insight echoes the work of Fouad Benchekroun: 'We cannot ask a question to a patient without questioning the social world in which he was born or lives; we cannot ask a question to a patient without positing the question of politics, politics in the noble sense of the term, of life in a collectivity' (Pandolfo, this issue).

Psychoanalysis thus brings into sharp relief the question of the personal and the collective, emerging as it does from the 'debris of minor and obliterated traditions' (Pandolfo, 2009, p. 77). Such a delicate interplay between the psychic and the sociopolitical resonates with the artwork *Cellules* (2012–2013) by Mona Hatoum on the cover of this issue.[2] At a concrete and literal level, the combination of the cage-like structures and amorphous red glass cells evokes questions of captivity, surveillance, and the longing for freedom within the Israeli closure system meant to 'disarm' the Palestinians (Sheehi, this issue). Likewise, it evokes the dialectic between the imprisonment of prostitutes in 1950s Cairo and the expansive nature of the unconscious imagination demonstrated in their freestyle drawings (El Shakry, this issue). More subtly, and at an abstract level, the combination of steel cage structures and organ-like objects evokes more generally the tensions between the autonomy and heteronomy, closure and openness, transparency and opacity, of the human subject – questions perhaps best grappled with through the discourse and methods of psychoanalysis.

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1. 'What accounts for the specific character of Fanon's *socialthérapie* … was the constant interrogation of the group as a veridical dimension of the real, since it sought to make being-there part of a group process wherein an awareness of the patient's "phantasms" "force[d] him to confront reality on a new register"' (Marriott, 2018, p. 46).

2. This discussion represents our own interpretation of Hatoum's artwork which is, of course, not necessarily how the artist intended the work to be read. We are grateful to Mona Hatoum and to Galerie Chantal Crousel (Paris) for permission to use this image on the cover.

and the Middle East: Discourses and Encounters,' and to Greta Scharnweber for organizing the event. Special thanks are due as well to discussants and participants at the symposium and to the peer reviewers of articles for their insightful comments, and to Eliza Wright for her careful copyediting of this special issue.

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ABSTRACT

This special issue stages an encounter between psychoanalysis and the Middle East. Taking seriously the possibility of an alchemical transformation of psychoanalytic thought through its encounter with the Middle East and with Islam, chapters reopen the psychoanalytic canon to consider key concepts through unexpected interlocutors, religious traditions, and intellectual formations. This includes bringing medieval Islamic philosophical concepts of the Cloud to bear on conceptions of causality and *après coup*; and thinking from the point of view of the Last Judgment in dialogue with the therapeutic work of a Moroccan imam and the Lacanian analyst Fouad Benchekroun. Authors also recover lesser known histories of psychoanalytic theory: in the work of Egyptian psychoanalytic theorist Sami-Ali, who developed a distinctly expansive theory of the imaginary influenced by Islamic apophatic theology and his own clinical work; and in Iraqi sociologist ᶜAli al-Wardi's critical re-evaluation of the unconscious, via the Islamic revolutionary tradition, as a source of the miraculous. Moving to the contemporary era, chapters tackle the various uses of psychoanalysis in 'dialogue initiatives' that delegitimize Palestinians' use of violence in Palestine/Israel; and in efforts to 'lay on the couch' the figure of the jihadi in contemporary France in the service of a secular modernizing project. Engaging critical theory, history, anthropology, literary studies, and Islamic studies, this special issue will be of interest to all those concerned with psychoanalysis in relation to a geopolitical elsewhere.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, geopolitics, Islamic philosophy, epistemology, secularism, clinic, the Middle East