"I Refuse to Tell the Story of Myself That I Never Was"

A dialogue on the children of Gaza that became an act of anti-colonial psychology

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The Palestine-Global Mental Health Network's dialogue of 30 April 2026, chaired by Fida Elian, took up the article Contesting the Dominant Frameworks of Trauma and Personal Testimony: Narratives of Palestinian Children from Within Contemporary Genocide, *by Bisan Nteel, Dr. Sama Dawani, Dr. Rania Jawad, and Dr. Said Shehadeh, with Lama Abu Awda and Razan Al-Saqqa speaking from the floor. The full English transcript is linked at the end.*

I keep returning to the meeting we held on the thirtieth of April, and to a feeling I have not been able to name. For an hour and a half, a poet on the shore at Deir al-Balah, two psychologists who had worked through the genocide, and the rest of us between the West Bank and the diaspora were inside one conversation, in Arabic, while the world was let in to listen. By the end I understood that we had not been studying the children of Gaza, and we had not been gathering their pain for a file. We had been making knowledge with them, and with each other, in the one way that has ever felt true to me, by staying in the room until the line between the one who helps and the one who is helped wore away. This is what I want to say about that evening before anything else. It was not a conversation about a method. It was the method. For as long as it lasted it gave us a way of knowing that the clinic I was trained in has no word for, and that our people have carried all along.

A child in Gaza, one of his limbs amputated, is asked what he wants to be. A doctor, he says, so that he can find a solution for his own amputated hand.

You can hear that sentence in two ways. A clinic trained in the dominant psychology might hear a symptom: denial, or the magical thinking of trauma, something to be assessed and managed. The people who gathered on the thirtieth of April to speak about Gaza's children heard something else. They heard an act of resistance, and the making of meaning. The whole evening turned on the distance between those two hearings. By its end the dialogue had become the thing it set out to describe: an act of liberatory, anti-colonial psychology, performed rather than explained.

The conversation was convened by the Palestine-Global Mental Health Network and chaired by Fida Elian, who set its terms at the outset. This is not a traditional academic seminar, she said. The question pressing on all of us is not only how we live but how we *know* life, how we name it, narrate it, and make meaning from it, at a time when the language of colonial power wants to reduce us to numbers, to victims, to diagnoses.

That question carries a discipline behind it. There is a long lineage, call it liberation psychology, or anti-colonial psychology, that begins from one unsettling claim: that the psychology exported from the global North, for all its apparatus, tends to lodge suffering inside the individual, and so leaves the world that produced the suffering untouched. Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist of the Algerian revolution, understood the colonial situation itself as pathogenic, and the colonized person's "disorder" as often the sane response to an unliveable order. Ignacio Martín-Baró, the Jesuit psychologist killed by a US-trained battalion in El Salvador in 1989, gave the tradition its name and its task: to de-ideologize everyday life, to recover a people's historical memory, to stand with the oppressed rather than school them in adjusting to their oppression. More recently Lara and Stephen Sheehi, in *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation* (2022), have shown how clinical work in Palestine becomes, of necessity, a practice of resistance, of what they call de-alienation. This was the tradition the participants were working in. By the end it was the tradition they were enlarging.

The un-homing

Dr. Rania Jawad began where the genocide does its quietest work, in language. Her subject was reading: the vast body of writing pouring out of Gaza across social media, produced amid what she named as Zionist practices of destruction and erasure. To read it, she said, is not to slow down and take the words in. It is to feel time and meaning break, the way a strike or an uprising or a historic rupture snaps a continuum that had passed for ordinary. In the act of reading, the plainest words come loose from their moorings: *I*, *home*, *the martyred*, *displacement*, *the rain*, *the street*, *the walls*, *bread*. The destruction of Gaza, she argued, is a disfigurement of Palestinian life in both space and time, and it can be tracked in language itself. The genocide displaces a people not only from the land and their houses but from themselves, from what they recognize. The sidewalk becomes a cemetery. The cement wall of a home becomes the rubble that will bury it.

This is Fanon's insight in a new key: colonial violence does not stop at the body but reaches into the very structures by which a person knows the world and knows herself. Jawad quoted a question Bisan had asked in an earlier Birzeit University

dialogue, in May 2024: *what new words, what language, must be formed to describe our selves and our experiences?* Then she drew the distinction the whole article turns on. Testimony, as a genre, is built for a use, to document, or to stand as evidence of a crime, and either way it fixes the narrator as a victim, the representative of a single enframed moment of violence. What Bisan was doing with the children was something else. She was not pinning them as victim-witnesses but tracing how life and language were being remade, and how language still strained to make meaning from inside the catastrophe.

The diagnosis turned around

If Jawad began with language, Dr. Sama Dawani turned the diagnostic gaze back onto diagnosis. Language is never neutral, she said; it carries an ideology. The dominant frameworks, Euro-American, built on the medical model, are individualist by design. They place responsibility inside the person, recast political suffering as private illness or personality flaw, and instruct the individual to work on himself while the structures that wound him go unnamed. Out of this logic grows the whole industry of "resilience." Citing Rita Giacaman's critique of funded psychosocial programs as neoliberal in philosophy, and her colleague Najla Othman's observation that mental health is measured by how well a person adapts to the existing order, Dawani described a psychology whose effect is to leave the patient blaming herself for failing to fit a reality that should never have been imposed. It is, almost word for word, the complicity Martín-Baró spent his life refusing.

She pointed to an essay by Gaza academics, *When Psychological Resilience Becomes a Burden* (Dader, Shwaikh, Shoman & Hamdan, 2026). To call Palestinians "resilient," they argue, is to romanticize the cost of settler-colonial violence and to beautify *sumud*, which is at bottom only the need to survive. If a people can always endure, then nothing about their condition seems to demand to be stopped. The story soothes the distant reader and excuses him from acting.

From there Dawani reached for the uncanny, Freud's *unheimlich*, in Arabic *al-lā-baytiyya*, "un-homeliness," by way of Inas Al-Haj's study of the "wounded therapists" who work inside Israeli mental health institutions in the lands occupied in 1948, and who refuse to sever the inside from the outside or to deny the colonial ground they share with those they treat. Externally funded trauma programs that ignore the politics of the violence, she said, become a second violence. They wound the child on three levels at once: the body, in the literal amputations of this war; the psyche, in loss, displacement, starvation, fear, trauma turned into a weapon; and the spirit, when care speaks past the lived reality and so deepens the

alienation it claims to heal. Against this she set the Sheehis' practice of de-alienation and Winnicott's potential space reimagined as a decolonial home: a clinical and a research space that can become a dwelling for everyone in it, where the line between the one who helps and the one who is helped flattens, and healing moves both ways. Colonialism, she said, is first of all a psychic project, a systematic assault on consciousness meant to disable collective memory and the power to imagine a future. In Wilfred Bion's terms, what such an assault attacks is the container itself, the psychic and communal apparatus through which raw, unbearable experience is metabolized into something that can be thought, mourned, and handed on. Its destruction is what Bion called *nameless dread*. Yet trauma does not abolish agency. Agency only finds other forms.

What the children built

Bisan Nteel gathered the children's stories almost by accident, sitting on the shore at Deir al-Balah running activities for the displaced. She put down her clipboard and her training and became, she said, a child again, asking *and what else happened?*, until her voice and theirs ran together. The method is a kind of communal alpha-function, the slow work of taking the raw, wordless material of catastrophe and giving it back as something that can be told, survived, shared. What she read aloud was unbearable and, somehow, full of life.

Layan was displaced from a school in Tel al-Hawa through what the army called a "safe corridor," safe only in name, a road lined with people stripped of their clothes, prayer robes torn from girls, corpses on every side. In Shifa hospital, she said, the displaced were ordered to keep their eyes open or be killed, made to watch, so that, in Bisan's words, the memory would carry the scenes of one's own death even after surviving it. She was somewhere between ten and fourteen when she was made to gather the body parts of a relative so the girl could be buried.

Mohammed Musa Abu Jiyab, fourteen, had lived between the school and the sea, *as if I were a fish inside the sea*, and was now kept from the water by gunboats. So he and his friends built a ship out of empty water jugs and floated it on the sand, rehearsing the four o'clock dawn when the fishermen used to set out, his feet on the shore, the patrol boat in front of his eyes.

A second **Mohammed**, twelve, with platinum in his shattered hand, reached for the pencil with his left hand. When at last he drew, after two years of holding nothing, he drew a missile coming down on a house, and his own injured hand. *I wanted to draw a tree and a sun, but I don't know how.* The children, Bisan said, ended up teaching the adults how to use the left hand.

And there was the **Mohammed** who worked a cart with his father and was struck by shrapnel in the head and the back, paralyzed, breathing through a tube at his throat. The doctors warned he might wake without memory. He woke remembering one thing: the name of a girl he used to drive, free of charge, to the school each day, and whom he now wanted only to know was safe. The occupation could take his body's powers, Bisan said. It could not take that.

The others arrive in fragments that are somehow whole. **Adham Abu al-Basit**, who lost the very concept of the land he once farmed, now reaches his family's whole agricultural past through a single lemon tree in his grandfather's yard: *in this season I'd be picking the lemons*. **Nisreen**, ten, displaced into one room with twenty-nine others, gathers seashells and invents her own rituals of safety, with no one to teach her. A six-year-old's largest wish in the world is a pair of flip-flops. Each of them is doing the same impossible thing, building a home out of the rubble of meaning, agency finding another form. The seashells, the jug ship, the lemon tree are transitional objects in something close to Winnicott's sense, the first *not-me* possessions through which a child holds the self together across an absence, except that here the absence is a whole vanished world, and the holding environment that should have made such objects bearable has itself been bombed. The child improvises the container the world has demolished.

Bisan was clear that the work is unfinished and racing time. Her friend Mohammed Sami Qreiqea, who used to send her the children's stories from the Baptist Hospital, was killed there. Once he and the children around him were gone, she said, the stories stopped, because the people who carried them were gone. *If something happens to these children, who will tell about them?* She set the gathering against the single image the world has been handed, the Gazan reduced to a figure trailing aid cans and weeping at a water line, and refused it: *you were a producer, an artist, a writer; your son went to school and excelled; we had hospitals; we had a life.* Her grandmother **Yusra**, displaced from al-Majdal at ten in 1948, never stopped telling al-Majdal, the loom, the alley, the dancing, so that, Bisan said, the coffee cup never sits beside you without that story. Of UNRWA she is unsparing: its camps, she feels, were their own quiet occupation, turning a producing people into a waiting one. Today's ten-year-olds will be grandmothers one day. *What will Layan tell her grandchildren about the body parts she gathered?*

It was Bisan who gave the evening its title, a refusal that still insists on being heard: *this is my story, the one that was imposed on me. That does not mean I accept it. I refuse it. But it does not mean I will not tell it, and that you will not hear it.*

Whose knowledge?

After the testimonies the discipline turned its instruments on itself. **Dr. Said Shehadeh**, trained in Western psychology in the United States, named the lineage aloud: this, he said, is what a liberatory psychology, *ʿilm al-nafs al-taḥarrurī*, calls for. The discourse one critiques politically outside the room walks straight into the therapy room, where the clinician is its interface, so the question cannot be avoided. Whose knowledge? Is what we practice imported, deepening the client's estrangement, or is it organic to this place? The concept of trauma itself, he argued, is too small. You cannot file a genocide of body and psyche under categories whose authors never imagined anything this wide. The only way through is to return to the field and to listen, and what he hears in Bisan's method is its refusal to sort people into the one who suffers and the one safely outside the suffering.

Lama Abu Awda, a clinician in the United States, sharpened the point from the diaspora. The very word *trauma* presumes a past one recovers from, and so cannot hold a Nakba that has not stopped since 1948. She named a particular foreclosure. In American psychology, she said, even to state that a Palestinian suffers because of an Israeli is effectively forbidden, a "Zionist liberalism" so embedded in the professional bodies that even the broken frameworks are closed to Palestinians.

Then **Razan Al-Saqqa** spoke from inside Gaza, and the room changed. A psychologist who had worked through the genocide with men, women, children, the old, she found the inherited vocabulary failing her. Every definition the world thinks it knows, the man, the woman, the child, no longer describes what happened. Whom, she asked, is one even to mourn, the men, the women, the children, all of them wronged at once? It is the question of melancholia in Freud's sense, a grief that cannot complete because the loss has not stopped. As Judith Butler argues, the genocide withholds the very grievability that the frames of war distribute so unequally, which is, in the end, the frame the article set out to contest. She remembered an eighty-year-old who broke down in the tent begging to be taken home, and a girl, Marah, who had lost her whole family and whose only wish was *I want to go to mama*, and how she could not hold herself together asking how a child carries this without a single tear falling. Then she said the thing the diaspora hesitates to say, that the word *sumud* had come to provoke her. *No. We were not capable. We were forced.* What moved her most, she said, was simply to be somewhere she could speak freely, when in Palestine every letter has become something one is held to account for.

A dialogue that was its own method

Several of them said it in different words. The meeting was not a description of a method. It was the method. Liberation psychology rests on one claim, that knowledge worth having is made with people, side by side, from the ground of their lived experience, not extracted from them and carried off to be processed elsewhere. That is what the evening did. The voices were many and level, a poet on a shore, a psychologist in a tent, scholars in the West Bank and the diaspora, all speaking in Arabic while the world was let in to listen. Dr. Dawani said it as it happened: the role of the specialist is being redefined; when Razan sits in the tent beside the person she supports, the experience is already shared, the vertical line between giver and receiver already gone. Recovery, she said, is not the property of the therapy room, or of the therapist alone.

So when Razan said this was a place where she could finally speak, that was not an aside. It was the result. The dialogue had become the opposite of *al-lā-baytiyya*, a home while it lasted, the third space made real, the de-alienation the Sheehis describe, not theorized but lived for ninety minutes among people who refused to leave one another alone with it. The children build homes from seashells and water jugs and a lemon tree. The adults, for one evening, built one out of listening.

That is the epistemology, and it is also the politics. As Fida Elian closed the evening, she held up the question that has to stay alive, who decides what, and why, and when, and how, against what Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian has called *Ihala* (swarming), the thing one must confront everywhere and without rest. The Nakba keeps no distance. Yusra at ten in al-Majdal and Layan at ten on the road out of Gaza City are the same age across seventy-seven years, and the occupation's deepest work is to manufacture the distance between a people and that memory. This is the uncanny at the scale of a people, the home returning as the unhomely, the past not recalled but lived again, passed from one ten-year-old to the next. *Al-lā-baytiyya* is not only a clinical term. It is a description of history. The children, Fida said, exchange places with us. They take our hands. They tell us. Our task is to listen, not as spectators but, in the article's own words, as partners in the struggle. Or, in the line that opened the evening, from Ali Shariati: if you cannot lift the injustice, at least tell everyone about it.

The analyst Dori Laub argued that catastrophe is, at first, an event without a witness, and that testimony becomes possible only in the presence of another able to receive it. The listener is not incidental. The listener makes the telling possible. This is why a dialogue can be its own way of knowing, and why Bisan's refusal is a demand for someone to address. *It does not mean I will not tell it, and that you will not hear it.* She has decided to tell. The least the rest of us can do, having been told, is refuse to look away.

Read the full article, Contesting the Dominant Frameworks of Trauma and Personal Testimony: Narratives of Palestinian Children from Within Contemporary Genocide. *The article and the children's testimonies also appear in* How We Reassemble the Story *(Tamer Institute for Community Education). The full English translation of this dialogue is available here: [link to translated transcript].*

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