

Resisting the “Empirical” Empire: Reclaiming Palestinian Knowing in a Time of *Scholasticide*

Abstract

Scholasticide is a term that connotes the systematic racist attack against Palestinian knowledge and education. During the ongoing genocide, this scholasticide has intensified to an unimaginable degree, evidenced, for example, by Israel murdering thousands of Palestinian professors and students, destroying all universities and schools across Gaza. In this paper, I seek to reveal and analyze critical elements of scholasticide as I, myself, was being pushed out of a US-based university due to anti-Palestinian racism. I share my response to a statement written against me by two anonymous psychology department colleagues in my university who succeeded in advocating for the initial denial of my tenure. Central to their argument was that my scholarship on Palestinian trauma, grief, and decolonial healing was not “empirical” enough. In my response, I challenge this commonplace academic practice of defending “empiricism” while masking underlying racism that delegitimizes decolonial knowledges worldwide.

Introduction

I write this piece as part of a wider struggle to fight the *scholasticide*¹ being waged against Palestinian knowing and learning. Palestinians have been giving voice to the reality of *scholasticide* for more than 15 years (Viner, 2009), which is a term that connotes the deliberate and systematic assault on Palestinian knowledge and education and is connected to broader patterns of colonial violence against Indigenous knowing and survivance. *Scholasticide* was first used by

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1 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>

Dr. Karma Nabulsi in “reference to a pattern of Israeli colonial attacks on Palestinian scholars, students, and educational institutions going back to the Nakba of 1948, and expanding after the 1967 war on Palestine and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon” (Scholars Against the War on Palestine, 2024, p. 3). Ever since October 2023, this *scholasticide* has intensified to an unimaginable degree, at which point in the Gaza Strip, all universities and schools have been destroyed and hundreds of educators and tens of thousands of students have been murdered by the state of Israel (Palestinian Feminist Collective, 2024).

With my pen, I write in this moment as we are all witness to one of the most morally indefensible and horrific violences of the 21st Century where Israel is forcibly starving the population of Gaza, maximizing Palestinian death and suffering, with children being one of the groups most impacted by such an evil policy of colonially-enforced famine (Ashour et al., 2025). We are witnessing daily mass murder and complete disregard for Palestinian life in the brutal systematic ethnic cleansing from Beit Lahia to Beit Hanoun to Rafah and beyond with nearly two years now of genocide committed against every corner of the Gaza Strip (Abdulhaq, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). We are also witnessing several months of increased colonial violence against Palestinians in the West Bank (Al-Haq, 2025), and more than 75 years of the Zionist colonial capture over all of historic Palestine (Pappé, 2006).

I write this article as university campuses across the USA are called upon to become instruments of state repression where in “a Jan. 29 executive order, for instance, Trump directed government agencies to target pro-Palestine students and staff for deportation and prosecution, in part by enlisting universities as censors and snitches” (Khalidi, 2025, para. 4), which led to unlawful arrests of students such as Mahmoud Khalil, who was abducted from his university apartment at Columbia University on March 8, 2025 for expressing his views affirming Palestinian human rights. On this same weekend in early March 2025 that Mahmoud Khalil was arrested, Ihmoud (2025) wrote a statement in response to a presentation of her scholarship that focuses on Palestinian women’s voices in Gaza, which was set to take place on International Women’s Day at Sandford University, yet was suddenly ‘postponed’ due to Zionist threats and intimidation. In her statement responding to Stanford University’s decision to ‘postpone’ her talk, Ihmoud (2025, para. 1) writes that she interprets the tactics of silencing and intimidating students and scholars alike as part of “a growing climate of anti-Palestinian racism and the repression of academic freedom for those who speak against Israeli settler colonial violence...[and that] this repression is inseparable from the genocide itself”.

In this paper, I share my own experience as a diaspora Palestinian scholar working from within a USA-based institution of higher education, where I have applied for

tenure² in this moment of genocide and the linked escalated repression against my people, against our allies, against our voices, and against our scholarship. My scholarship, over the past decade, has focused on resisting not only Zionist colonial (un)logics, but settler colonial psychologies transnationally, towards contributing to revolutionizing theory, teaching, research, and practice from Indigenous and Global South perspectives. I theorize interlocking colonial violences as I, myself, was being actively pushed out of my university in a racist attack against me and my scholarship as a Palestinian academic in the USA.

I write this article as part of a record of resistance to the coloniality of knowledge production relevant especially to a Palestinian psychology of liberation, yet also directly interrelated to critical psychologies of Black and Indigenous peoples transnationally. In this paper, I scrutinize the construct of “empiricism” and how it is conceptualized towards continuing colonial hierarchies and epistemic injustices. In doing so, I share insights into my experiences in one particular situation, which unfolded in my tenure review process during 2024 to 2025. I share my story – or rather, I share my process, analysis, and response – as a multiracial, diaspora Palestinian scholar of clinical community psychology working within a USA academic context, and how I am seeking to defend Palestinian knowingness and beingness in this time of genocide and linked *scholasticide*.

In doing so, I seek to shed light on the tenure review process itself, which is made to be private and internal, yet is too often weaponized as a process against certain bodies – people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups of junior faculty (Peña, 2022). Palestinian faculty, and our allies who support Palestinian liberation are often directly targeted during the tenure processes or even after tenure (Lennard, 2024). Psychology programs in particular are toxic spaces for Palestinian faculty, students, and our allies, evidenced in, for example in the targeting of Dr. Lara Sheehi during her time as faculty at George Washington University (George Washington University’s Office of the President, 2023; Sheehi, 2024). It is important to highlight that Dr. Sheehi was acquitted of all bogus charges laid against her (see Organizing Collective of USACBI, 2023).

Brief description of my tenure review process: a Palestinian scholar’s story of discrimination and decolonial struggle inside the academy

Throughout my tenure review process, the light has been on me – my senior colleagues and university administrators have taken an enhanced examination of the history of my work throughout the many years I have been at the university as

2 For readers unfamiliar with the tenure review process in the USA: Typically, the tenure review process takes a full academic year to complete in the USA, and it begins at the end of the individual faculty members’ probationary period (after usually around 6 or 7 years of employment). If the tenure review process is successful, the faculty member achieves an indefinite appointment. If tenure is denied, then the faculty member will lose their job, and is let go after their employment contract with the university ends.

an assistant professor of psychology. As my body of scholarship is transformed into an object of scrutiny, those perspectives of the senior faculty and administrators who are evaluating me remain in obscurity. In this paper, I seek to challenge this process itself, and pull the tiny minority of my colleagues who delegitimized my work out of obscurity, holding these colleagues and administrators accountable for their discriminatory bias and actions against me and my scholarship. In doing so, I share a statement below, which I wrote in response to an attempt to delegitimize my scholarship on Palestinian trauma, grief, healing, and resistance that unfolded during my tenure review process over this past year.

More specifically, a tiny subgroup of colleagues of mine (only two individuals from the psychology department) wrote what they called a “Dissenting Opinion”, which was attached to my file in my application process for promotion and tenure at my US-based institution of higher education. The content of this “Dissenting Opinion” suggested that my research was not “empirical” enough, and that I should not be awarded tenure. Make no mistake: in this article, I am *not* seeking to defend the value of my scholarship. I refuse to engage in the indignity of defending the value of my scholarship because it has already been sufficiently lauded by external reviewers and all levels of internal review. In fact, in total, by the time my file reached the desk of the Provost who makes the final decision, 21 out of 23 official faculty reviewers across the university had considered my scholarship strong enough to indicate that I would be meeting the criteria for tenure and promotion. There is no need for unanimous perspectives, and differences in opinion amongst faculty are expected. There is nothing remarkable that two individuals did not find my scholarship to be strong enough. What is remarkable, and in many ways, unprecedented, is that the opinion of these two individuals, against the principles of shared governance, directly impacted my tenure review process. In other words, all my colleagues and administrators at my university who reviewed my work at levels prior to the Provost, with the exception of the two individuals who wrote the “Dissenting Opinion”, overwhelmingly expressed their assessment that my scholarship was strong or excellent, and that I should be awarded tenure and that my employment should be continued. Despite this overwhelming support of my scholarship, the Provost decided to initially deny my tenure, stating in his letter to me that he made his decision that my scholarship was “Less than Strength”, whereby he used the arguments in the “Dissenting Opinion” to back up his claim.

A mainstream, or whitestream reading of the “Dissenting Opinion” can lead a reader to assume that the authors were primarily concerned with defending the importance of “empiricism” or “research rigor” outside of any pressing political polemics, racial bias, or current social justice dilemmas most directly relevant in this moment in time in psychology and beyond. On the contrary, for me, it was immediately clear that the authors of the “Dissenting Opinion” were either unwilling to contend with, or unaware of,

the reality of the discriminatory patterns and the historical tensions around “empiricism” most relevant to my Indigenous scholarship in Palestine and related works rooted in Global South psychologies.

Consequently, I wrote a response to the “Dissenting Opinion” where I expressed a serious concern about what I perceived to be a discriminatory, unnamed epistemological stance and a lack of awarenesses of critical academic debates in the field, which devalued the Indigenous and decolonial approaches that I applied to my Palestinian community-engaged scholarship. Indeed, the emphasis on the value of “empiricism” in research has historically been used to undermine the legitimacy of scholarship that challenges racism and the coloniality of power. It is a way for those who seek to defend hegemonic power structures in academia to delegitimize and police the work of historically marginalized and underrepresented scholars who struggle to transform the University into a more equitable space of learning and social action. Therefore, I wrote my response to the “Dissenting Opinion” as an act of resistance, and I included this response in my official tenure file.

In this paper, I tell my story, and I share directly with readers what I wrote in my response, not to single out my story. On the contrary, in this paper I hope to make visible broader tensions for engagement in public discourse and to increase collective awarenesses around the *scholasticide* and explore the roles and relevance of everyday struggles inside and out of the colonial academy. On May 9, 2025, I received the letter from the Provost denying my tenure and informing me that I would be pushed out of the institution. Nearly five months later, after enacting a resistance campaign to challenge the university administration's decision to deny my tenure, with incredible levels of support from my family, from beloved colleagues, from courageous union representatives, and from insightful outside counsel, on September 30, 2025, the Provost reconsidered his original decision. He is now recommending that I be awarded tenure. This is a victory for Palestinian, Black and Indigenous knowledges rising in psychology and related disciplines.

However, this paper is not about whether I keep my job or not. The *scholasticide* against Palestinian knowing continues whether or not I am tenured. No matter what happens, my incredible graduate students, and future faculty members who engage in related work, will likely face similar challenges related to being targeted by Zionists who wage anti-Palestinian racism to delegitimize scholarship focused on Palestinian rights and resistance. Of course, the outcome of my tenure review process has no impact on the protection and support of courageous student and faculty activists on university campuses who led encampments and engaged in direct revolutionary action as part of solidarity moments for the liberation of Palestine. Furthermore, it goes without saying that Palestinian students and professors in the homeland will continue to fight for their

survival, education and right to know and to speak against an occupying army that transforms educational institutions into frontlines of colonial conquest. Like Khalida Jarrar, a researcher in Birzeit University's Muwatin Institute for Democracy and Human Rights who was imprisoned for several years in Israeli prisons, and who was released as part of the January 2025 ceasefire (The New Arab Staff, 2025).

In so many ways, my personal outcome in my tenure review process is beside the point. Even with another ceasefire that may or may not come, the Israeli army will continue to reinvade Palestinian communities and silence Palestinian voices and knowledges. However, Palestinians in the homeland keep returning to their neighborhoods and lands, keep waging their voices, even in the face of the ongoing catastrophic famine in Gaza. People in Gaza fight every moment of every day to snatch hold of any possible chance to defend Palestinian life, dying by starvation or by firing squad when searching for food. Palestinians continue to make shelter on top of the ruins of their homes, besides the bodies of their beloveds still buried under the rubble. Therefore, I write this paper not to defend my tenure and individual employment. I write, instead, to wage my voice with resistance and grief, and to find ways to defend Palestinian voices and knowledges as linked to defending of Palestinian aliveness. Despite consequences against me, I write with rage for an international order that collaborates to create the conditions that continue to ethnically cleanse, starve, torture, and annihilate my people.

What is our role and responsibility as Palestinian scholars, students, and educators in the *shataat* (diaspora in Arabic), and those of us who hold citizenships from a diverse range of nation-states that adds a layer of security to our daily life compared to our Palestinian brothers and sisters who remain stateless or with precarious immigration statutes? How do we draw strength and inspiration across communities in struggle, such as from South African scholarly traditions? In fact, rooted in grassroots anti-apartheid movements, "psychology in South Africa experienced its own internal crisis and struggle... triggered in part by the following reasons: a growing recognition of South African psychology's complicity with colonialism, oppressive ideological discourse, and practices" (Seedat & Lazarus, 2014, p. 244). Inspired by critical writings of Biko (1998) and Fanon (1964) and others, over many decades, South African scholars and activists worked to expose the silences within psychology, and to shift in ways that pushed the field towards liberatory praxis transnationally (Seedat & Lazarus, 2014).

As the South African psychologist Kopano Ratele (2024, p. 469) recently wrote: "Delinking from American psychology is an option to consider...[while] rethinking the entire enterprise we call psychology". The author argues that theorizing against 'conceptional incarceration' and in ways that are "grounded in the place and time in which we exist is the basis of epistemic decolonization and freedom" (p.472). Striving towards creating the conditions that we need in our work to think freely, requires conditions to feel and relate

to one another freely. I continue to be inspired and nurtured by South African colleagues who not only uplift decolonial scholars and speak out against the Israeli genocide against Palestinians, but many of my South African psychology colleagues who have worked to create a sanctuary and affective bridge of care and connection for Palestinian scholars. Central to my own story is my experience having benefited from the radical solidarity of my South African colleagues who teach the world how a meaningful divide between despair and hope, incarceration and emancipation, is made only by a bridge of decolonial love.

As a Palestinian psychologist and psychotherapist, healer and professor based in the USA, I am continually nurtured by my South Africa colleagues, and by my own allies in the USA-based university and psychology program where I work. Even while there are a minority of colleagues in my psychology department (two individuals) who have attempted to delegitimize my work and push me out of the academy, the mentorship, the allyship, and support from colleagues within my university has been incredible.

In addition, it is important for me to highlight that as I share this example of the discriminatory actions and delegitimization of my work that I experienced from a couple of colleagues from within my own department, I do not seek to compare my experiences those to any Palestinian student or professor in Gaza, the West Bank, or within the 48 (the Israeli state). I am not comparing, but I am seeking to uncover the linkages and the transnational nature of colonialism itself. *Scholasticide* respects no boundaries, as it is a core dimension of the imperial quality of genocide – the attempt to crush revolutionary knowledges. I seek to publish this paper to contribute to the shifting of the terms of the conversation, inspired in particular by South African traditions in psychology, to offer a tool towards further opening up decolonial action. Ironically, decolonization is a term that is itself often used as a kind of rhetoric, but when put into practice, as is my case, then its practitioners are often punished for doing so.

Brief outline of my response statement to the “Dissenting Opinion”

In my response statement to the “Dissenting Opinion” below, which I share in this article below, was submitted to be included in my tenure file back in 2024. The reader will notice that I began my response with a section on the contextual background of my tenure review process in order to provide more information to my colleagues and administrators at my institution about how being a Palestinian scholar of clinical community psychology in a time of genocide impacted the praxis of my scholarship overall. Subsequently, I provided a brief history of the origins of academic tenure in the USA, and I expanded on my exploration of the roots of the colonial assumptions of “empiricism”. Next, I presented more information on the current debates in the field, and I strove towards defending the value of Palestinian knowledges, and the Black, decolonial, feminist, and Indigenous epistemologies that intersect and shape my work locally and transnationally.

I ask readers to keep in mind that I wrote this statement to share with my university colleagues and administrators in October of 2024, which is nearly a year ago *before* this current moment of publication, and more than a year *after* the beginning of the genocide against Gaza and increased escalation of colonial violence in the West Bank. I wrote this statement below as I was grappling with the question: *how can I keep fighting, as a Palestinian scholar, to protect and practice our collective brilliance, our creative knowing, and our critical inquiry when our pasts, our present, and our futures are chained to a lineage of perpetual loss and unrelenting annihilation?* Throughout my work during this time of genocide, I strive to live into this question, orienting myself towards the foraging of medicines that protect love's survival in the face of the colonizer's unrelenting determination to bring about a world without Palestinians (Atallah & Ihmoud, 2024). In doing this work, I have come to imagine Palestinian healing as infrastructure for liberated futures. Even if a few colleagues at my university do not value these critical infrastructures, which I have been a part of building throughout my scholarship, I will keep fighting towards a future that will.

My Response to the “Dissenting Opinion”³

Contextual Background

I would like to highlight a few issues regarding context, language, and terminology before continuing. First, in the context in which I work and study as a scholar, and in the context of my own identity, the term “Palestinian” is synonymous with the term “Indigenous”. To be a Palestinian scholar studying Palestinian Psychology is to be an Indigenous scholar studying an Indigenous psychology. Second, the term “decolonial approaches”, which is used in this statement, along with “decoloniality”, are in dialectic with the terms “colonial approaches” and “coloniality”. For example, “decoloniality” is a term that seeks to encapsulate all the “challenge[s] to the temporal, spatial, and subjective axis of the modern/colonial world and its institutions, including the university and the state” (Maldonado-Torres, 2018, p. 4).

I write this statement as a Palestinian scholar on the campus of an educational institution in the USA during an extraordinary moment in history. As I write this statement, all Palestinian educational institutions in the Gaza Strip have been damaged or destroyed by the Israeli military with direct support of allied governments, including the USA, which continues to send increases in military aid and weapons “in flagrant violation of international law, which requires third states to do everything in their power to prevent genocide and not to aid and abet war crimes” (Hawari, 2024, p. 2). I write this statement in the wake of a movement in which students, staff, and faculty at universities across the USA have interrupted their own teaching and learning or ‘business-as-usual’

3 With the exception of a brief concluding section at the end of this paper, the remaining text below is the content of the statement that I wrote as my response to the “Dissenting Opinion”, which I asked the university to include in my tenure application file in October 2024.

to organize, demonstrate, and protest in a widespread student-led struggle calling on their administrations to divest from investments that are complicit with the ongoing genocide against Palestinians.

The origins of these events did not begin in the 21st Century – they date back nearly one hundred years, principally as a result of the *Nakba*⁴: the ethnic cleansing and genocidal violence waged against Palestinians in 1948 which led to the creation of the current settler nation-state of Israel (Pappé, 2006). Remarkably, for the first time since the *Nakba*, Palestinian students in Gaza did not begin their school year this Fall of 2024 because of the genocidal conditions that make all aspects of Palestinian life unbearable, including education. In fact, students across Gaza have not been able to attend school for over a year. Like many Palestinians across the world, my own work, teaching, scholarship, and service has been reshaped over the past year since the beginning of the genocide. The normalized hatred against Palestinians and the daily grief and discrimination that I experience, however, is extremely minor in comparison to what my people face in Palestine, where hundreds of faculty members have been murdered along with their families, thousands of Palestinian students blown to pieces and burned alive in schools serving as makeshift shelters, and Palestinian scholars and students transnationally (and our allies seeking to support movements for justice for Palestinians) have been arrested, fired, and/or silenced for researching, writing, studying, or speaking out against the ongoing genocide. This unique dimension of colonial violence waged against Palestinian voices, knowledge systems, and education is known as *scholasticide*, and manifests as a critical element of settler colonialism more broadly. The delegitimization of my Indigenous scholarship in the “Dissenting Opinion” is part of this broader *scholasticide* against Palestinian knowing in a time of genocide.

The systematic attack on Indigenous knowledge production has long been central to the settler colonial project across sites of conquest over the past 500 years of European and Euro-American domination (Quijano, 2000). The devaluation and/or destruction of Indigenous scholarship and the delegitimization of disobedient decolonial scholars and knowledges is one of the core sites of struggle for social justice within any settler colonial context. The colonial (un)reasoning is simple: the white settler has knowledge, while the Indigenous person has folklore, superstitions, “anecdotes” or subjective experiences, spicy foods, and exotic dances. The colonizer has science, while the person of color has culture. These are the colonial logics that are central to scientific racism.

Here in the USA, although most universities have upheld these colonial logics, higher education has also been a site of social justice struggle and the promotion of liberated futures. In fact, my university itself is an institution emerged out of social justice struggles

4 <https://www.un.org/unispal/about-the-nakba/>

during the civil rights movement and holds a unique history, role, and charge because of it. This fact is one of the reasons in which I was drawn to return to my university to work here, after I myself was a student here decades ago. Now, in my sixth year as a faculty here, I am currently in the process of applying for promotion to level of Associate Professor, and a tenured position within this academy.

Tenure, Empiricism, and Empire in a Modern/Colonial World

Academic tenure in the USA has a fraught history, one which is deeply impacted by coloniality in complex ways, and “can be traced to a scandal that erupted at Stanford University at the turn of the last century” (De Witte, 2023). The scandal began when Stanford professor of economics Edward Ross departed the university apparently connected to his critiques of the railroad industry’s classist economic structures, from which the Stanford family made their millions. This history and critique is complicated by the fact that Professor Ross was not simply advocating for the rights of working class families against an abusive capitalist industry-university coalition and monopoly, but he was also advocating for the expulsion of Japanese immigrants from the United States, speaking and writing with deeply spiteful anti-Asian hatred. Soon afterwards, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) was funded and created a Joint Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure, which laid out the principles to be followed at universities nationwide (American Association of University Professors, 1915).

A key failing of the document written in 1915 by the Joint Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure was the lack of understandings of intersecting systems of oppression in the *coloniality of knowledge*, as well as the fact that the importance of academics having “freedom” was “predicated on the idea of a common good that was never described” (Levine, 2023). This Joint Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure “laid out a set of formal guidelines for academic freedom that protected tenured faculty from removal for controversial speech or inquiry. However, the American version came with a significant downside: While the document outlined what the freedom is from, it never spelled out what the freedom is for” (Stanford Historical Society, 2023).

Relatedly, the idea that ‘empiricism’ is somehow inherently linked to a knowledge that is free from social-political accountability is embedded in the academy, from the beginning of the creation of this Joint Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure in 1915 until now. The irony that Professor Ross was not only a critic to a colonial, classist industry of the railroads, but that he supported anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, eugenics and scientific racism, relates to this issue. Eugenics and scientific racism used “empiricism” to strengthen not simply colonial knowledge, but colonial violence. The ways in which unchecked and unmarked racism shows up in academic elevation for

a narrow definition of empiricism is rooted in this history. In the dissenting statement written by my colleagues for rejecting my promotion and tenure, these dynamics are not only prevalent, but they feel to me to be repressive and racist. I perceive that the argument that my body of scholarship is not empirical enough for excellence in research in this institution is based on anti-Palestinian racism and a wide range of colonial ideas on knowledge production, which are rooted in a long history of scientific racism against Indigenous knowledge.

Relations of this History & Context to the “Dissenting Opinion” & to My Scholarship

My scholarship anchors in narratives and relationships, and seeks to elevate understandings of healing and liberation through research that grows out of my qualitative, ethnographic, and decolonial approaches to critical inquiry in colonized settings of extreme violence and in partnership with communities in the West Bank and more recently, in Gaza and Palestinian communities in the *shataat* (diaspora in Arabic). This work is made possible because of my own embodied knowledges as an Indigenous scholar and the experiences of the communities I partner with in my research, not only in Palestine but also in South America, in Boston, and across the *shataat*.

In this light, my work broadens the scope and vision of who is an agent of Palestinian knowledge production, in a long tradition of decolonial feminist scholarship in Psychology and related disciplines. As Palestinian feminist scholar Ihmoud (2022, p. 10) articulates: “In a context where the production of knowledge has been inextricably linked to the settler colonial project, the very production of our Indigenous histories, theories, and knowledge is inherently a feminist political act. Our colleagues in occupied territory are forced to navigate the materialities of colonial violence and to push beyond the mere production of insurgent knowledge into anticolonial praxis”. In this moment of genocide, I strive to work alongside and in struggle with my colleagues in the occupied territories, sharing in the role and responsibility to push beyond existing frameworks, to rethink ‘data’ and ‘research’ in ways that include methods and an “empiricism” that is more accountable to ending empire.

Decoloniality and transnational feminisms, including Palestinian feminist praxes, have an extensive history of refusing to detach knowledge from action, feeling from thinking, the epistemological from the political, the individual body from the social body, and the land from the ontological (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017). Indigenous perspectives on scholarship and “research” in Psychology and across the social sciences seek to integrate land-based knowledges with methodologies of critical inquiry with grief and healing journeys, with creative expressions, with anticolonial movements, and with critical consciousness building and radical relationality. This is the work I have aimed to bring to our Psychology Department, to my students here at the university, and to the communities I work with. As the Fanonian scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2018,

p. 7) articulates, “decolonial knowledge production and critique are part of an entirely different paradigm of being, acting, and knowing in the world”.

The authors of the “Dissenting Opinion” seem to be unaware of these tensions, debates, or movements within Psychology to recognize and address the oppressive epistemological violence that has become normalized in our field⁵. The authors begin with an acknowledgment of the importance of my work in Palestine. However, they then go on in their statement to immediately and unambiguously dismiss and devalue my decolonial and Indigenous scholarship in Palestine by excluding any mention of this work that I have done while a faculty here at the university. Since I began as an assistant professor here in 2019, I have published fourteen academic publications, a community-engaged Indigenous intervention manual, and four public-facing articles. The vast majority of this work has focused on Palestinian mental health, grief, and healing in the face of devastating colonial violence. However, the authors of the “Dissenting Opinion” note only two papers of mine as being “empirical” enough to consider since I started at Umass in 2019 – one of which was connected to my work in Boston with youth of color, and the other with Peruvian immigrants to Chile. Both papers that they choose are unrelated to my work in Palestine or with Palestinian communities transnationally. Is the reader of the “Dissenting Opinion”, after taking into account the full range of contents of my tenure portfolio, supposed to believe that my focus on developing theory-from-the-flesh, embodied understandings, and lived knowledges of an Indigenous community – my own people as a Palestinian scholar myself – is somehow not as scientifically rigorous as doing traditional interviews or running standardized data analyses? Is this to be believed even in light of critical analysis within Psychology calling for such foci?

We are in a new era, and it is time to let go of tendencies to defend unmarked and unchecked colonial perspectives on science and methods that remain so prevalent in academia. The ongoing debates in Psychology point towards the need for a different read: to move the field towards decolonial, feminist, critical antiracist praxes (e.g. Beals et al., 2021; Bell, 2022; Dutta & Atallah, 2023). These debates are vibrant from Chile (González et al., 2022) to Australia (Dudgeon et al., 2017) to Africa (see Oppong, 2023) to North America (see Gone, 2011) and beyond. In fact, in Canada, Goghari (2022, p. 169) argues for a new approach to Clinical Psychology altogether, demanding “an inclusive science”, claiming that we must recruit and retain diverse faculty and “broaden our conception of science and knowledge systems”.

5 As reflected, for instance, in the APA Guidelines on Race and Ethnicity in Psychology, which state “Implementing this guideline [on Indigenous/ethnocultural sources of healing] may require an epistemological and power shift in which psychologists acknowledge that local Indigenous/ethnocultural epistemologies and systems of healing are viable approaches through which to address the mental health and wellness of individuals and communities (Gone, 2010).” The shift within the field is also reflected in the forthcoming special issue of *American Psychologist*, which recognizes participatory action research, testimony, autoethnography, and poetry emerging from reflexive thematic analysis as qualitative methodology.

These are the new waves in Psychology that are actively re-envisioning how to study, practice, and train against the systems of oppression that are so deeply embedded within the modern/colonial world. My Indigenous healing workbook “CURCUM’s Trees” (see Atallah et al., 2022; Atallah, Abu-Rayyan, Masud, & Hakim, 2025) that I co-created with colleagues in Palestine, and my related scholarship that I have completed locally with Palestinians in the Boston area (see Atallah & Awartani, 2024), are exemplars of precisely what these new directions are calling for.

Of course, my work and approaches are not new by any means. The Black psychiatrist and scholar-activist Frantz Fanon, whose revolutionary scholarship was grounded in his clinical practice and community activism, was one of the founders of decolonial approaches in psychology. Fanon was concerned with similar questions as me, including: identity and racialization, grief and rage, embodiment and trauma, dehumanization and resistance – all within settler colonial settings from the Caribbean to the Arab World and beyond (Fanon, 1952, 1964). Even in the mid 20th-century when Fanon was working and writing, scientists were divided on to the utility of applying Western, modern/colonial theories and methods to scholarship in colonized communities (McCulloch, 1983).

In many ways, like various decolonial, Black, feminists of color, queer, and Indigenous scholar-activists before me, my work requires that I reconfigure the critical vantage point itself – or what feminist scholar Seylan Benhabib (1986) called ‘transfigurations’. In fact, Benhabib challenged the use of traditional empirical observation in her critical praxis by advocating for investigations to be “risked” through “political love” and a dialectical approach to inquiry that re-envision everyday communities of need and solidarity as working together.

In my scholarship, I strive to study the hidden and the mundane, the everyday, the otherwise unnoticed – all unfolding in a landscape of survivance of the racialized enduring as everyday collective emancipation. My work is inspired by antiracism scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (2022, p. 12), who articulates a defiant epistemology – one that seeks “to illuminate the practice of everyday life – specifically, tactics of resistance and refusal, modes of self-fashioning, and figurations of freedom – and to investigate the construction of the subject and social relations” which she does by attending to ways of knowing that are often disguised, silent, or outside of interviews or formal ‘data’ collection. Her method addresses the “host of problems regarding the construction of voice” by investigators imagining Black speech through a traditional “empiricism” detached from the everyday resistance and refusal of the racialized. This often involves “turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate”. In fact, when engaging in scholarship on what Hartman (2022, p. 11) calls the “shifting registers of racial subjection”, it is reckless to rely on narrow colonial criteria on “empiricism”, which is what I perceive as the underlying epistemological stance of the “Dissenting Opinion”.

Furthermore, during an active *scholasticide* against Palestinian knowledge creation and education transnationally, applying pre-determined narrow colonial criteria for the acceptability of research on Palestinian psychologies is not only upsetting, but it adds insult to injury. In fact, this act of ignoring and delegitimizing my work during an active genocide feels to me as interwoven into the broader *scholasticide* against Palestinian knowing in this time of our vanishing. Palestinian epistemologies are not alone in this regard. Racialized and Indigenous scholars worldwide who challenge colonial knowledge production are too often delegitimized, while faculty who are retained are ones who themselves legitimize the criteria for research “rigor” in their own work that is already recognized in rankings and falls in line with the “expected roles from the university establishment” and the “ossified criteria of excellence” (Maldonado-Torres, 2018, p. 3); these issues have been extensively critiqued as steeped in colonial histories and epistemic violence (Mignolo, 2009). Universities frequently attack the legitimacy of decolonial approaches by punishing those who actually engage, publish, and focus their time and resources on community-engaged scholarship and the time-consuming relational work required for Indigenous knowledge systems to be centered and integrated into the project of the academy in concrete ways.

In this response I want to be abundantly clear that I am not interested in trying to argue that my work is “empirical” or “empirical enough” by the standards of the authors of the dissenting opinion. I am grounded in the excellence and quality of my work and my record towards the co-creation of community-engaged, Indigenous knowledges and practices within Palestinian communities in particular in this time of genocide. In this response, I am most interested in defending the value of Palestinian knowledges, and Black, decolonial, feminist, queer, and Indigenous epistemologies across colonized communities everywhere. This is simultaneously directly connected to and independent of my own tenure review. A related question is “*Why are there so few Palestinian faculty in tenured positions in a Clinical Psychology PhD training program anywhere across the USA right now, or at any other previous time in history?*” If I earn tenure here at the university, then I may very well be the *first* and the *only* (as I know of no other), Palestinian tenured scholar in a Clinical Psychology PhD program in the USA.

Lastly, I would like to share my appreciation to all the faculty in my workplace who put so much energy and labor into writing and re-writing statements of support, in particular, in validating and recognizing my scholarship on Palestinian resistance, grief, and healing. Furthermore, I write this response statement from a place of deep appreciation for all the people I have had the honor to work with over the past two decades in Palestine, in Chile, and in Boston, with special joy and respect to my students. Finally, none of my work would have been possible without the echoes of love in the legacies of my grandparents Miriam and Jamil Atallah, *Allah Yarhamhum*, who taught me how to love the land and how to respect my own beingness as a Palestinian man. I am here, taking up space in a

Clinical Psychology PhD Program, and moving with courage to speak up, to grieve, and to keep loving and knowing in the face of forces that view so much of my scholarship as unempirical, or not empirical enough, at least, for this empire. I suppose that I am right where I am supposed to be. Precarity is part and parcel of the everyday condition of the colonized. I know that in the face of a colonial genocide, Indigenous survival is not a promise. However, the land always remains, and so do our seeds.

Conclusion

I close this paper with a series of reflections, questions, and a poem. Part of resisting traditions of Eurocentric methodologies can, at times, include the incorporation of poetry in reflection. Overall, in this paper, I have attempted towards waging a psychic revolt as a Palestinian scholar working and living in the *shataat* (diaspora), challenging the ongoing genocide and interrelated *scholasticide*. I am not alone in this effort. In fact, despite the “Dissenting Opinion” written against me by a small subset of colleagues (two individuals), it is important to recognize how a large majority of my colleagues in the psychology department and across the broader college of liberal arts at my university have affirmed the importance of Palestinian scholarship and decolonial perspectives and have engaged in tireless advocacy and acts of solidarity when fighting against the procedural injustices in my tenure review process. It is impossible for the colonizer to kill our togetherness when we remain rooted in the fluidity of love’s mutiny rising in our revolutionary acts of solidarity, sourced from deep within the power of our collective grief.

In this paper, I have sought to contribute, even in a small way, to the struggle to reclaim Palestinian knowing while I have been strengthened and supported by my allies at my university, and across the USA, South America, and South Africa in particular, while we all have remained inspired by Palestinian students and professors on the frontlines in the homeland. I continue to strive towards stepping outside the field of power of Zionism and the settler colonial gaze that scrutinizes and attempts at erasing the legitimacy of decolonial Palestinian scholarship and what my work ultimately represents, reveals, and resists. I critique the seemingly commonplace academic rituals of defending the importance of “empiricism”, “scientific rigor”, or “academic excellence” for their masking of more systemic racism geared toward delegitimizing Indigenous scholarship and vibrant ecologies of knowledge emergent from decolonial praxes and liberatory movements.

After reading through my response to the “Dissenting Opinion”, I invite readers to reflect on what are the realities of which my work seeks to “empirically” examine? What does “data” and “empiricism” even mean in the face of genocide, and this linked *scholasticide*? According to the Merriam-Webster⁶ dictionary, one of the

6 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empiricism>

meanings of “Empiricism” in English is: *“the practice of relying on observation and experiment especially in the natural sciences”*. What does it mean to rely on observation for understanding what we are all observing in reel time? What is the meaning of “empiricism” and “observation” in the social sciences as we all witness a live-streamed colonial conquest in the 21st century, with all the social evils of the world’s cooperative apathy, and the dehumanizing inability of the international human rights frameworks and institutions to put a stop to Israeli’s recurring genocide that knows no borders and no social accountability? What more is there to observe? What does observing the brutality of the local and foreign policies waged against Palestinians in this moment mean for scholars studying and promoting liberatory praxis in psychology and beyond? What implications does the use of “empiricism” to evaluate and regulate the excellence of the work of scholars like myself, who dedicate our work to listening and attending to Palestinian experiences in times of genocide? What does it mean for anyone who identifies as a social justice scholar working right now while engaging in strategic and intentional witnessing and speaking against colonial violence? As Dutta (2024, p. 9) articulates:

A key feature of this kind of witnessing is that it involves going against the grain of institutional power. It requires bearing witness to truths that demand to be heard, regardless of how uncomfortable or inconvenient it may be – not only for those in positions of authority, but also for those who are bearing witness themselves.

What is at stake for the continuity of scholarship determined to continue witnessing, and to continue forging possibilities of futures of Palestinian healing and liberation? What role does autoethnography and radical qualitative analyses offer in the works of Palestinian scholars who are close to the genocidal wounds and decolonial practices themselves?

Lastly, rather than addressing these sets of questions in my closing section of this paper, I will address a different question – one posed by an administrator at my university after they reviewed my tenure file, including the “Dissenting Opinion” and “My Response to the Dissenting Opinion” (which I shared above). Notably, in a memorandum sent to the Provost of my university, this administrator posed the question of why, in the psychology department at our university, has the notion of “empiricism” or “data” only in my personal case become debatable or a controversial concept? As I conclude this paper, I would like to address this question that my university administrator has asked.

In doing so, first, it is important to understand how definitions of “data” and knowledge production are critical sites of struggle in the colonizer-colonized dialectic. In fact, as Adams et al. (2017, p. 534) suggest, drawing on the works of Palestinian scholar Edward

Said, epistemic freedom and the process of re-thinking research altogether has long been a central pillar to Indigenous resistance. The authors argue that “as Said’s (1978) analysis of Orientalism suggests, an increase in research attention to Other settings will typically re-affirm, rather than disrupt, the colonality of knowledge unless accompanied by a shift in epistemic standpoint that turns the analytic lens (and the colonial gaze) from colonized Other to re-think knowledge and practices of the colonial research apparatus”. Furthermore, in Ratele’s (2024, p. 464) powerful paper on African epistemic freedom, the author argues:

Characterised by a deep appreciation that knowledge and its modes of production can serve oppression, the quest for epistemic freedom enables us to see more clearly how we arrive at knowledge, what is it we know, and the ends to which we use knowledge. When we are epistemically emancipated we are able to recognise that, for example, knowledge can be used to oppress or to resist...

When exploring how knowledge can be used to resist, Canham (2018, p. 327) argues that one of the ways that research reveals itself as praxis is when “knowledge production occurs in concert with community action”. The author argues that decolonial scholarship and “research should take us beyond the walls of the academy and into the smouldering streets” (Canham, 2018, p.328). Working in these “smouldering streets” requires us to rethink not only our knowledge production, but also our research ethics and methodological standards of excellence as a way to fight “against the exclusion and silence of researchers and researched” from colonized communities (Malherbe et al., 2024). Moreover, Carolissen et al. (2017, p. 496) warn that “dominant hegemonic practices that privilege individualism, whiteness, and a Euro-American canon of psychology remain intact”, and therefore, “expanding our knowledge ecologies is thus part of the decolonial turn” (p. 497).

This does *not* mean that any scholarship and activism completed primarily within the walls of the academy is automatically somehow divorced from praxis. When gazing South, towards the example of psychology in South African contexts in particular, I notice how a decolonial turn that expands knowledge ecologies requires courage and commitment to contend with deep-rooted disunity and intradisciplinary conflict which often unfolds within academic departments, behind closed doors during faculty recruitment processes, while policies are created and contested, and yes, while tensions in tenure and promotion are fought out.

Malherbe et al. (2024, p. 441) highlight that important transformation can manifest while core psychological disciplinary perspectives are changed. For example, the authors describe how “Eurocentric psychology in SA [South Africa] has forged a commitment,

among many of today's psychologists, to realising another kind of psychology, one that does not seek out unity in Eurocentrism". The authors suggests that many scholars and practitioners in psychology "may wish well to avoid contestation, believing that they risk vilification if they engage in debate....[h]owever, even when contestation is not overt, it is present, perhaps persisting latently.... [and if] we ignore, repress or turn away from psychology's internal tensions, these tensions may be left unresolved and can escalate into destructive forces..." (Malherbe et al., 2024, p.443). The authors go on to give an example of contestation in psychology in South Africa, where responses to "positions on Palestinian solidarity have, over the years, been hostile, antipathetic and ultimately regressive with respect to anti-oppressive practices and the opposition to the normalisation of violence" (p. 443).

Therefore, building from these examples of academic work that can manifest directly as decolonial resistance, to respond to the administrator's question in my university of why, in the psychology department, has the notion of "data" or "empiricism" only in my case become debatable or controversial, requires an understanding of broader tensions that are prevalent, in particular, in psychologies across the Global South and in settings of active or recent anti-apartheid and decolonial struggle, from South Africa to Palestine and beyond. My work strives to serve as a resource to Indigenous resistance, remembrance, healing, and perseverance through autoethnographies and decolonial qualitative methods and has revealed that which has been ignored and repressed within psychology's internal tensions. Returning to the critical reflections of the South African psychologist Ratele (2024, p. 466), he reminds us:

Although the old troubles have yet to be fully surmounted, the epistemic (and information) terrain has become a major site of struggle. There are many questions here, for example: whose knowledge counts; what is the relationship between information and truth; how does interpretation relate to experience; and, indeed, what is it to know? Struggles against epistemic colonisation and for epistemic freedom are indubitably significant for those who were historically excluded from universities and knowledge creation opportunities, but who have, from a certain historical point, entered universities and taken up these opportunities.

In conclusion, when I, as a diaspora Palestinian scholar of psychology, engage in my research with an analytical lens that is grounded within Palestinian intimacies of surviving colonial violence and waging decolonial resistance, my work requires a re-thinking of theories, ethics, and methods while contesting what is considered 'data', 'empirical', and actionable knowledge in this time of active genocide (Atallah & Abu-Jamei, 2025). Therefore, when my work is brought into the open and into scrutiny, it often brings further precarity not just further clarity. As Indigenous scholars whose research is not only *about*

decolonial resistance, but is itself *an enactment* of decolonial resistance, we risk being pushed out of academy, punished, or silenced when our understandings are revealed to the colonial gaze. This is because Indigenous understandings “are reservoirs of meaning or epistemic resources upon which people in marginalized or colonized communities can draw to counteract the violence of colonialism” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 535).

I would like to emphasize once again that I write this article not to defend the quality of my scholarship. I believe that I have been discriminated against, and that my work has been delegitimized as a result of the opinions of two anonymous individuals in my department (whose motivations are easy to imagine). If my work is recognized as offering legitimate sources of “data”, it not only provides “empirical evidence” of the criminal and genocidal violences of Israel (and the complicity of the USA), my work also strengthens and contributes to a growing reservoir of Palestinian knowledge on survival and healing in the face of our own vanishing as an Indigenous people subjected to genocide in real time. In many ways, my work is part of a broader “Exhibit A”, exposing devastating psychological consequences and soul wounds caused by Israel (and its allies). I believe that this is one of the core root causes for why my work was devalued. This is why my position was marked for removal. After an extensive appeal process and resistance campaign in support of my work, the Provost has now reconsidered his original decision, and he has now decided to recommend my tenure. However, activists, students, and professors alike who are advocating for Palestinian aliveness and soulful belonging to the community of humanity continue to be targeted, detained, silenced, or fired. Destroying, displacing, and disappearing Palestinian life, Palestinian voices, and Palestinian knowledges are inextricably linked.

Therefore, when working against colonial violence as a Palestinian scholar in this moment, staying close to decolonial praxis means that my work demands a departure from the psychology discipline altogether if it remains tethered to a clenching colonial world that is desperately reaching to avoid its own irrelevance. The confusion of the notion of “data” and “empiricism” in relation to Palestinian psychology has emerged in my tenure review process because of the ways in which my scholarship offers critical understandings towards the decoloniality of knowing, healing, and persevering from a revolutionary Palestinian site of struggle. In fact, the processes to “decolonize knowledge by illuminating or providing consideration about worlds of possibility, rather than documenting (and legitimizing via naturalization) worlds as they appear from a particular hegemonic standpoint” has long been a cornerstone of decolonial praxis (Adams et al., 2017, p. 537). This is what my work has strived to accomplish for more than a decade: to illuminate worlds of possibility and livability in Palestine and beyond, which manifest as a decolonial “dataset”, refusing to collude with the violent forces that seek to forge a world without Palestinians (Atallah & Ihmoud, 2024). On the contrary, my scholarship, from its beginning, strives towards feeling and resisting for a future without settler colonialism

(Atallah, 2023). I end this piece with a poem and dedication to Dr. Omar Harb, the Palestinian academic, psychologist, and poet who was just killed by the Israeli-produced famine in Gaza on September 4, 2025 (Aladam, 2024). The most devastating element of the scholasticide is by far the assassination of not simply our knowledges, but the direct murdering of Palestinian scholars, like beloved Dr. Omar, *allah yirhamo*, and all the lives of our martyrs who protect the intergenerational means of our continuity as a people. As I spoke about with Dr. Nour Joudah over the phone recently, unlike our colleagues in Palestine, if we lose our jobs because of the ongoing scholasticide, we know as Palestinian academics in the shataat, that we will walk away with our lives, but make no mistake – the genocidal war machine is destroying the academy far beyond the shores of Gaza.

I reject the night

night is not night
night is still illumination
only by distant stars

(sometimes
by
mortars,
martyrs,
and moonlight)

I reject the night
(I reject this poem)

ya rab برأي

give me a word
that can snatch life from this life

I reject the night by Devin George Atallah

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Starting the Conversation: Exploring the Meaning, Scope and Contributions of AI and Its Implications for African Psychology

Abstract

This commentary aims to open up a critical debate on the meaning, scope, and contributions of artificial intelligence (AI) with special reference to its implications for African Psychology (AP). The paper sees the potential for collaboration between AI technologies, particularly generative AI and the continued development and evolution of the emerging field of African psychology. This conversation hopes to inspire the endurance of critical discussion on the importance of AI in offering new pathways for enhancing low-cost mental health services, bridging language barriers, fostering cross-cultural understanding and improving research, particularly here in continental Africa. Ethical considerations are also explored vis-à-vis the currently unstoppable influx of AI technologies in the various ramifications of national health systems, and the economy.

Introduction

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to reshape health systems and social dynamics globally, its implications for psychological theory and practice in Africa and the wider world remain underexplored. Yet Africa, in particular, stands at a critical juncture where emerging technologies like AI could significantly, if well understood and harnessed, enhance mental health service delivery across the continent by increasing access, reducing stigma, promoting primary health care, and supporting psychoeducation and early intervention. Despite these positive prospects, the prevailing insurgence of AI in Africa and the wider world raises crucial ethical, cultural and epistemological questions. Concerning African

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