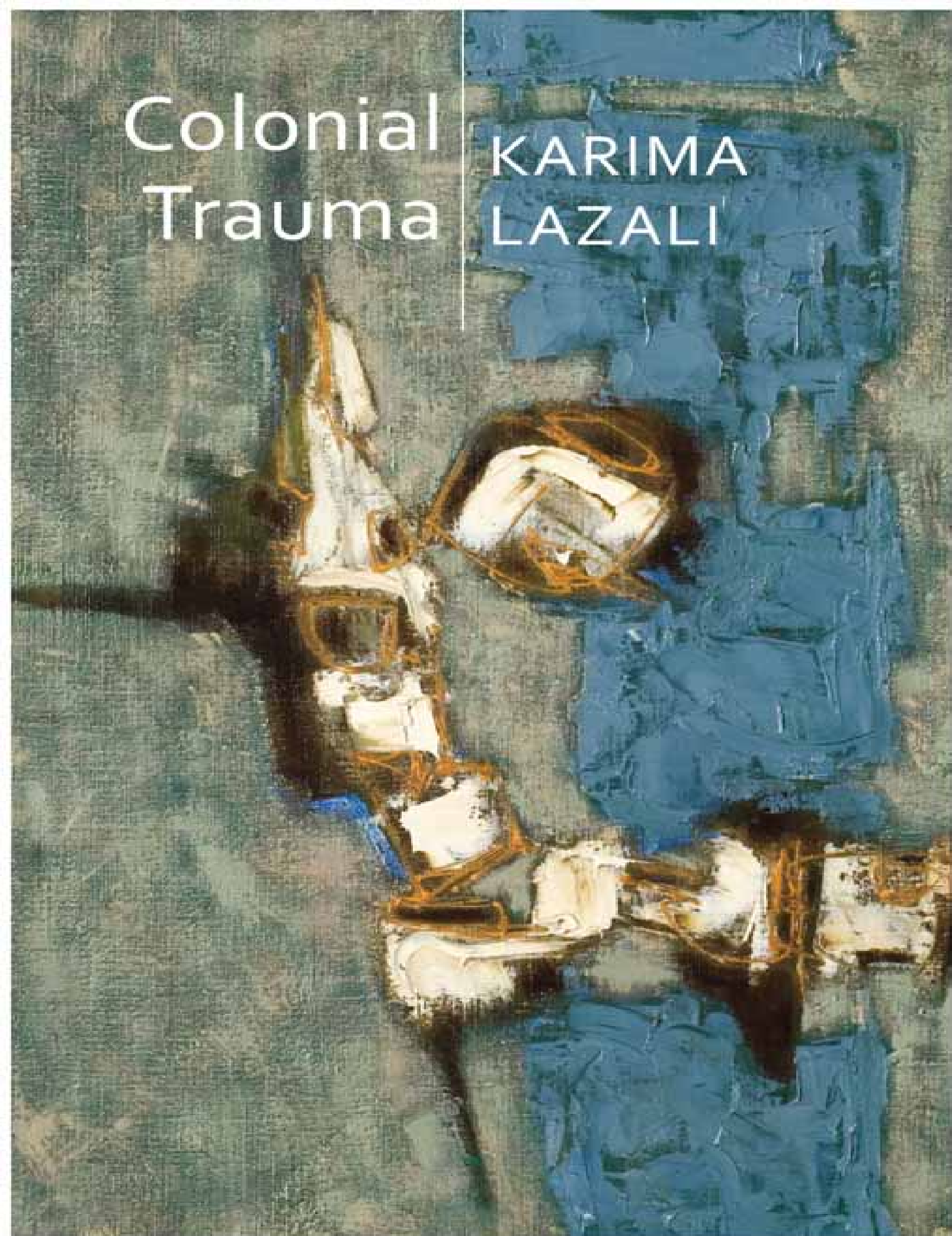


# Colonial Trauma

KARIMA  
LAZALI



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# **Colonial Trauma**

## **A Study of the Psychic and Political Consequences of Colonial Oppression in Algeria**

Karima Lazali

Translated by Matthew B. Smith

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# **Dedication**

To my son, Badri.

# Epigraph

Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

# Foreword

## Mariana Wikinski

In their ways of arresting time and encompassing space, these novels are not only irreplaceable tools of contextualization; they also create meaning out of the opacity of this colonial war and its afterlives. How can historians do their work without having read them?

Benjamin Stora, from his preface to the book *Memoria(s) de Argelia. La literatura francófona-argelina y francesa al servicio de la historia*

When children hear the voice of the dead, these are most often the voices of those who died without burial, without a rite.

Lionel Bailly, quoted by Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière in *History beyond Trauma*

Suddenly a phrase interrupts the rhythm of my reading and forces me to pause. Its familiarity surprises me: “*to kill death.*” “*Matar la muerte*”: this is the title of a text published in Buenos Aires in 1986 by the Argentine psychoanalyst Gilou García Reinoso and cited by Karima Lazali in its French translation (as “*Tuer la mort,*” 1988). I begin this foreword in what might be an excessively self-referential way, inevitably, in order to give an account of what it meant for me to feel such a surprisingly strong sense of familiarity in the very place where I was expecting to undergo a certain estrangement.<sup>1</sup> My practice as an Argentine psychoanalyst, working with a human rights organization and in a post-dictatorship context since 1984, and Karima Lazali’s practice, working in Paris and Algeria since 2002 and 2006, respectively, converge all of a sudden in this eloquent phrase, which alludes to the wretched phenomenon that is the systematic disappearance of

persons. “*To kill death*” thus functions symbolically as a historical and geographical bridge between two experiences that are politically very different: the Argentine and the Algerian. And it is precisely the differences between these experiences that prompt two acknowledgments. The first of these is that, anywhere on the planet, the setting to work of a psychoanalytic apparatus requires us to think the subject in the context of its moment and its historical and political determinations, to prevent *blanks* in the subject’s psychic constitution from being replicated in the form of “holes” within the therapeutic process.<sup>2</sup> The second acknowledgment is that the effects of the systematic method involving the disappearance of persons, both in Algeria and in Argentina, have been devastating; we are dealing with a biopolitical tool of domination, a tool for the control of subjectivities and bodies in systems of terror. With profound sensitivity, Lazali shows that the disappearance of persons always generates an erasure at the level of memory that cuts across generations and corrosively impedes the work of mourning.

But does this allow us to conclude that Argentina’s history and Algeria’s are somehow homologous? Definitely not. In this, her second book, written after *La parole oubliée* (2015), Lazali unravels the elements of Algeria’s specificity: the traces of trauma and the psychic transpositions of the destruction that French colonialism left in Algerian society.

French colonialism and its dramatic historical consequences – events that were scandalous in their scale, their cruelty, and their persistence – left an indelible mark on Algerian history. This history is also marked – and this makes it radically different from the history of Argentina – by the absence of investigations into and justice for the innumerable crimes committed under colonialism, during the War of Liberation and the civil wars, and even today:

disappearances, genocide, the mutilation of bodies, expropriations, and the disappearance of children. These are deaths, Lazali indicates, that are deprived of bodily integrity, becoming unrecognizable. The disappearance of persons is thus not only a matter of the spectral condition of what cannot be seen; it also results from what is excessively visible but not identifiable: disfigured and mutilated bodies, deprived of any possibility of being granted an identity.

If we could think of reality itself as a laboratory functioning at the planetary scale, then comparing the subjective effects of the systematic disappearance of persons in two countries, Argentina and Algeria, might offer us definitive proof of the place of thirdness that justice creates in the ordering of social bonds. As is well known, in Argentina, the Trial of the Juntas (*Juicio a las Juntas Militares*) began in 1985, under the new democracy formed after the end of the dictatorship – which lasted from 1976 to 1983, used torture as a systematic method for social control, and disappeared 30,000 people. The trial led to the sentencing of commanding officers. The trials of hundreds of others responsible for state terrorism during the dictatorship continue even today (marked by interruptions and political vicissitudes that are too numerous to discuss in detail in this context), in cases of crimes against humanity that are still pending or that have already concluded in cities throughout the country. This process prompted me to write the following about the statements made during these trials:

“And one day they didn’t come back,” some witnesses say, family members of the disappeared. ... But when, *on what day*, did they not come back? How can we indicate *that day*, if all days until today are in fact that day? How can we define the absence of absence? Can we understand that those responsible are being tried for “disappearances” and not for “deaths”? What do we need in order to name the unnameable, identify the unidentifiable, specify the unspecifiable, locate the unlocatable? How can we date and provide coordinates for what never took place? How could the witness acknowledge the existence of a crime that was never definitively committed, because it keeps being committed? (Wikinski, 2016, p. 88)

In Algeria, as Lazali explains, the fate of the bodies that were torn apart or disappeared has never been investigated. Nor have there been investigations to determine who was responsible during each of the phases in which these crimes took place.

Lazali lucidly describes terror as a *psychic state* that, unlike trauma, does not allow for forgetting or repression, that does not lead to the emergence of a new subjective position, but instead blurs the boundaries between the psychic apparatus and the biological body, between the singular and the collective, between the inside and the outside. Terror remains untethered; it cannot be circumscribed. It is perhaps a matter of an encrustation without a subject, of a devastation that can even prevent the recognition of the state of terror by the subject who is undergoing and suffering from it.

The author can distinguish between trauma and terror in this way and can demonstrate that the notion of trauma is insufficient for explaining the effects of colonial violence because she fluently traverses the fields of subjective singularity, collective phenomena, the clinic, literature, and



politics, and because she clearly identifies present, historical, and trans-subjective phenomena. In this way, she reveals the traces of colonialism on both the social and subjective levels, considering an event that was by all accounts unlimited in its effects, one that resounds deafeningly in the subjective journeys of many generations throughout Algerian history. We do not find in Lazali's work any fictitious distinction between the individual and the collective; nor do we find a failure to distinguish between these realms. Instead, we confront a profoundly Freudian way of thinking in which an articulation between these spaces is constantly produced, in a fabric of numerous determinations that are always interwoven with one another.

In this sense, Lazali can be seen to be indebted to the work of Frantz Fanon, who, writing while events were still unfolding, was able to address the implantation of alienation in the psyches of the colonized as well as the improbable work of subjective decolonization that it entailed.

There will always be an expropriation of the self when colonization is imposed. What cannot be spoken of in the space of psychoanalysis, the subjective dimension in history, the unthought that finds expression in literature: it is in these recesses, Lazali tells us, that we can perhaps find the keys for understanding the subjective effects of a history of devastation whose beginning will soon mark its two-hundredth anniversary.

Many figures of the negative – negation, denegation, foreclosure, the “hole,” disavowal, repudiation – can be adduced to give an account of this blank, or what is at times, according to Lazali, a “black silence” that marks what “it is impossible to forget.”

The author refers to Francophone Algerian literature – a corpus that includes several clearly autobiographical works – to glean what cannot be said from the *critical deviations* (*détournements*) of this literature’s language and from its use of transliteration. Deviation for its own sake becomes a value, a process that makes “the untranslatable” into an object to be transmitted. Lazali also finds resources in these novels that can be used to oppose the censorship of thought and language that has marked colonial and postcolonial history. “How could psychoanalysts work without having read them?” Lazali might thus wonder, paraphrasing Benjamin Stora.

Lazali reads the works of Kateb Yacine, Nabile Farès, Jean El Mouhoub Amrouche, Malek Haddad, Yamina Mechakra, Chawki Amari, Rachid Mimouni, Mansour Kedidir, Mohammed Dib, Samir Toumi, Amin Zaoui, Kamel Daoud, Mouloud Feraoun, and Albert Camus in order to shed light on the zones rendered invisible by colonialism and by the leveling “*mise sous totalité*” of postcoloniality.

If, having read this extraordinary book, we had to choose *one* word with which to express compellingly the effects of colonialism on both sides of the Mediterranean, we would surely choose the French word *effacement*, meaning erasure. This is an erasure that is political in its origins, of course, begun by French colonialism, with its need to deny the fact that it deposited this abject remainder of the monarchy, which was “exported” to the colony. Identity, language, tradition, genealogy, patronyms: all were demolished as if Algeria had no history. But Lazali suggests that the erasure also includes internal and fratricidal confrontations and postcolonial state terror. This was an erasure or non-inscription, then, of all genealogy, alterity, and difference, for, Lazali suggests, such heterogeneity threatens the work of constructing a “we,” the coerced

effort to create a uniform national essence or way of being that begins with the Algerian War of Liberation.

The celebration of the figure of the hero or martyr in the War of Liberation offers nothing more than an alibi, a distraction from the intensification of this erasure. This was a matter of refounding Algeria, erasing the colonial past, not “deconstructing” but rather “reconstructing,” Lazali indicates. This reconstruction presupposes the creation of a heroic gesture of liberation, and it presumes that deaths caused by internal wars should not be surveyed. The postcolonial imposition of one language, Arabic, and of one religion, Islam, in Algeria led to the production of a myth: the myth of the birth of a nation that, again, arbitrary and denialist, erases the past and seeks to establish a point of origin or degree zero for history.

Perhaps this blank in the history of a colonizing (republican?) France, which denies the shameful, monarchic remainder that determined its strategy for occupation, corresponds to a historical blank in Algeria, a denial of the shameful history of responsibility for internal wars. This leads to a paradoxical effect on the way to liberation: the historiography of Algeria at first refers almost exclusively back to colonization, and a pure, urgent, extreme, and totalizing nationalism emerges to heal the damage done. As Lazali explains, an *excess of memory* also emerges in relation to colonialism, an excess that is in the service of erasure, that safeguards the blank in memory itself, like a spotlight that sheds *too much* light and so dazzles us. Thus a gradual transformation takes place: colonial trauma becomes social trauma.

Lazali writes:

With a political agenda predicated on eradicating all forms of alterity, coloniality has inflamed hatred by seeking to preserve the One by killing the Other. To what extent does the rise of “nationalism” in Algeria coincide with the barring of alterity? And what impact has colonialism’s negation of the paternal function had on contemporary politics? (p. 101)

These turn out to be central questions for the development of her argument. The advent of colonialism destroyed the paternal function, defined as a *symbolic function* and a *function of thirdness* that organizes the social bond, genealogy, the delineation of communities of belonging, and the constitution of identity on the basis of the assignment of a name. This function has been systematically and deliberately obstructed in Algeria since the historical break represented by colonialism. Deaths, disappearances, and the changing of names have made it impossible to determine who is who, whose child is whose, whose sibling is whose.

The advent of this disaffiliation led not only to the fragmentation of the social body by France and the War of Liberation. The internal wars that marked Algeria’s history during the War of Liberation and continued after it, reaching their height in the 1990s, compel us to ask what the model for such incessantly repeated killing among brothers might be, and what might account for this ongoing search for and repeated removal of the figure of the father. Lazali critically revisits Freud’s theory, developed in *Totem and Taboo* (she mentions James Jasper Atkinson’s competing theory as well), and she wonders why the removal of the father and founder of Algerian nationalism, Messali Hadj, and the killing of Ramdane Abane (a leader in the National Liberation Front [*Front de Libération Nationale*, or FLN]) in 1957 did not result in the formation of an alliance among brothers, but instead resulted in a

bitter and fratricidal internal war that brutally pitted the FLN against Messali Hadj's followers and FLN combatants against one another, leading to a series of killings and ousters throughout Algeria's subsequent history.

In *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (2015), Giorgio Agamben accounts for the development of civil wars by referring to a permanent and unresolvable tension between the *oikos* (the house, the family) and the *polis*, in which civil war functions as a threshold between politicized family relations and the *polis* redefined in familial terms. It would seem that in this case of conflict between "us" and "them," at this threshold of difference and foreignness, a particular instance of what Agamben calls the *irresolvable* is at work. This is no longer the irresolvable tension between an "inside" (*oikos*) and an "outside" (*polis*), but rather a tension between a precolonial heterogeneity, excessively open to colonial invasion, and a reactive *us* whose formation required the suppression of even the most minimal divergence from the aim of constructing an illusory, unbreakable One.

As long as heterogeneity, otherness, and the foreign appear as threats, the social and subjective effects will be incalculable. This is not only because the Other will always be defined as an enemy, will always be regarded with suspicion, but also because, Lazali suggests, otherness instills psychic functioning, and thus the Other within is also experienced as a threat and as an obstacle. Lazali cites Albert Memmi, who argues, in perfect agreement with Fanon, that the task of subjective decolonization, the eradication of both the part of the self that is colonizing and the part that is colonized, is the tragic destiny of the colonized subject. Neither the colonizing nor the colonized part of the self belongs entirely to the self. This is a matter of a doubling at the level of identity that never produces mixing or confluence but instead leads to dissociation.

How, then, Lazali wonders, could we be the inheritors of what preceded our existence and what we cannot speak of, for reasons we do not know? *Hogra* (an insult, the humiliation that resulted from colonialism and crystallized its effects) is thus necessary as a signifier that gives shape to history. But it also fulfills an aiding and abetting function in that it persists, unaltered and unmodifiable, in the psychic life of future generations. Ultimately, Lazali asks, wasn't this what colonialism sought to achieve? Wasn't this the mental territory and the language of generational transmission that colonialism sought to occupy?

The customary tools of psychoanalysis are thwarted, since, in this regard, the subject of speech, even in the sense of repression, has not been constituted. What is at stake, then, is precisely the coming into being of the subject, the subject of a history not so much censored as erased, reduced to nothing, and yet inevitably existing. (Davoine and Gaudillière, 2004, p. 47)

Samir Toumi's novel *L'Effacement*, which Lazali cites, was published in 2016. In it, Toumi, a young writer born six years after the end of the War of Liberation, gives an account of the impossibility of appropriating and of transforming the voids and erasures that, transmitted from one generation to another, remain inscribed as pure repetition outside the "interpreting apparatus" of the receiving subject.

Analyzing postcolonialism and the role of a particular form of Islamism in the eradication of the traces of the colonial, Lazali enters a symbolic world that is enormously complex, one in which language, religion, and politics mutually determine one another, in a superimposition that Lazali condenses in the name that she gives to this apparatus: the *LRP*. In this way, she analyzes the power of the apparatus to shape the psyche: Islamism's religious morality becomes

a substitute for politics in its regulation of what is permitted and what is forbidden, what is thinkable and what is unthinkable, such that the figure of the citizen blurs into the figure of the believer.

We know that language does not reflect but rather constitutes thought. As Lazali explains, the apparatus of the LRP operates at an intrapsychic level, such that it is not possible to distinguish, in analysis, between social and internal prohibitions. The analyst must approach the work of analysis mindful that the subject protects its most intimate thoughts from confiscation, in order to prevent them from appearing in free association. Religious morality and psychic censorship overlap such that it is not possible to determine whether subjects ultimately speak for themselves or are spoken by the community to which they belong.

In a lucid assessment, Lazali reveals a psychic alibi or displacement that replaces an “inner revolution” (the uprising that the subject stages against itself) with another, already completed, revolution: the War of Liberation. This subject’s only oppressor is the oppressor from whom it has already been freed.

The Argentine psychoanalyst Silvia Bleichmar<sup>3</sup> (2009) distinguishes between two concepts that she also defines: the *constitution of the psyche* and the *production of subjectivity*. The former refers to the universals that contribute to psychic constitution (the unconscious, repression), and the latter names the historical processes that determine the constitution of the *social* subject. These latter processes are articulated with the processes of psychic constitution as well as with social, ideological, historical, and political variables. According to this description, the apparatus of the LRP would operate at the level of the *production of subjectivity*.

Every subject enters a *narcissistic contract* (Aulagnier, 2001)<sup>4</sup> with the family group into which it is born, but especially with the social body that gives shelter to, and that constitutes by cathecting, its subjects. This contract will become a link in and guarantee of the generational chain as long as the subject bears a sense of filiation, belonging, or social continuity. The psychic constitution of the *infans* takes place in a socio-cultural space that transcends the space of the family and makes “foundational statements,” which constitute the infrastructure of the social group that shelters him or her. These statements can be mythic, scientific, or sacred. The discourse of the sacred especially locates the origin and end of the social body in one and the same place: the place of eternal truth.

[F]rom his coming into the world, the group cathects the infant as a future voice that will be asked to repeat the statements of a dead voice and thus guarantee the qualitative and quantitative permanence of a body that will continuously regenerate itself. (Aulagnier, 2001, p. 111; translation modified)

As I have already indicated, in Algeria’s history, the guarantee of continuity at the level of filiation is broken by colonialism and its aftermath, by the disappearances, the fragmentation of bodies, the changing of names, the assaults on tribal forms of belonging, and the persistence of disaffiliating practices implemented by the wielders of political power after the War of Liberation. I wonder, then, if the apparatus of the LRP might operate *in the place of*, might function as a substitute for, the chain of filiation as the apparatus that guarantees the subject’s narcissistic contract with the society to which it belongs, even while this apparatus conditions the rules governing the production of thought and the subject’s psychic life.



It was Piera Aulagnier (1984) who described the state of alienation as the destination and destiny of the ego's thinking function, of the ego as it seeks to eliminate all conflict and psychic suffering, including conflict between the ego and its ideals and between the ego and its desires. A step short of psychic death, the state of alienation presupposes that the subject has decathected from thought inasmuch as thought is experienced as a risk. The narcissistic contract, the apparatus of the LRP, the state of alienation, and the state of terror might thus converge in establishing the categories of persecutor and persecuted as ways of organizing intra-psychic life and the social bond; they might converge in making suspicion decisive for the subject's relation to alterity, sustaining an effort to banish from the psyche all forms of conflict that might lead the subject to a confrontation with itself or to a confrontation with the world in which it lives. The forbidden governs both the subject's knowledge of external reality and its knowledge of psychic reality, Aulagnier suggests.

In these pages, I have tried to locate the specificity of the colonial trauma that Lazali analyzes with such clarity and sensitivity, a trauma that inescapably affects subjectivity, the social bond, and the practice of psychoanalysis in Algeria. And yet for all the specificity of Lazali's framework, throughout my reading of her extraordinary book I saw how close our experiences are to one another, as if we lived in the same social space and spoke the same language. If in all colonization we see an apparatus for suppression and the domination of difference at work, in this text, by contrast, we find an ethics of hospitality, an openness to the foreign and the other that gives us the sense of being sheltered and of offering shelter to an experience of contact with alterity. If this were to leave a lasting trace in our thought, it would undoubtedly work against the repetition of such a devastating history.

Buenos Aires, February 2020  
*Translated by Ramsey McGlazer*

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## Notes

- 1 In this connection, I quote from my book *El trabajo del testigo. Testimonio y experiencia traumática* (2016): "Jean-François Lyotard wondered whether it was the historian's task to attend not only to the damage of history, but also to the destruction of its documents. ...

Here there is a painful analogy with the disappeared in Argentina (where to disappear a person was also 'to kill death,' as Gilou García Reinoso wrote in 1986), who leave their traces in testimony as 'disappeared' and not only as 'dead,' perhaps without the law's being able to ask after this distinction" (p. 88).

2 *Translator's Note:* I have used the gender-neutral "it" to refer to "the subject" throughout this foreword, both to convey the general nature of this category and to preserve the genderlessness of the possessive pronoun in Spanish.

3 The work of Silvia Bleichmar (an Argentine psychoanalyst who died prematurely in 2007) has been translated into French and Portuguese but is not well known in the English-speaking world. Bleichmar's prolific work has been foundational in the Southern Cone, both because of its approach to the processes involved in the subject's constitution and because of its construction of a metapsychology that sheds light on the interconnections between the political and the subjective, without losing sight of an ethical dimension that is constitutive for the subject.

4 Many psychoanalysts in Argentina, myself included, have engaged with the work of the French psychoanalyst Piera Aulagnier, not only in an effort to give an account of the constitutive matrix of the infant, but also as part of the work of thinking through the subjective effects of political phenomena. This means questioning our own practice and our ties to psychoanalytic institutions.

# **Introduction: The Difficulty of Acknowledging Colonial Trauma**

The idea behind this book came from comparing my experiences as a psychoanalyst in Algiers and Paris. The regular tools of this exercise in self-liberation whereby the subject discovers its own forms of alienation weren't sufficient for my patients in Algeria. They couldn't turn away from the demands made upon them by the private, social, and political spheres. The notion of "resistance" doesn't adequately describe their inability to escape censorship's hold over thinking and to live fully as distinct and singular beings. Clear therapeutic benefits were present during sessions, but, as psychoanalytic treatment always goes hand in hand with a revolution of the private sphere, no matter where that treatment takes place, in Algiers this repeatedly sought-after revolution remains an unachievable goal that is systematically and tirelessly stalled by an Other: family, politics, religion ... How to go about analyzing this private sphere deprived of its revolution? And what is this melancholy-filled grievance hiding?

Although subjectivity can never be hemmed in by any identity markers – be they political, linguistic, or historical – it nevertheless uses these to weave the invisible threads of a private self. The site of psychoanalysis must be reinvented on each occasion with each new patient, while taking into consideration the various elements "saturating" the subject. Rather than over-emphasizing cultural specificity, the question raised here concerns the politics underlying a psychoanalyst's practice. It is also worth considering how treatment may shed light on a central

socio-politico-linguistic dynamic at work in the larger society.

## **The history of French colonization in Algeria: a *blank space* in memory and politics**

My psychoanalytic practice takes place between different languages (French and Arabic) and locations (France and Algeria). This has probably sharpened my awareness of difference, and made me realize what difference reveals about the reach of politics in both places. It has also made me aware of the impact of this political reach on the formation of the subject. In Paris, the fact that a vast number of French patients who, caught in a generational confusion and stagnation, evoke at some point the signifier “Algeria” invites further reflection. These French patients, usually three generations removed from colonialism, express being weighed down by a colonial history experienced more often than not by their grandparents, who were involved in either colonization or the War of Liberation, but about which these patients know very little. It is surprising to see how they are grappling with questions of shame and responsibility due to this legacy. Expressing an acute sense of discomfort, they are caught in a history they never experienced, one that, more often than not, they inherited cloaked in silence. They are beset with a number of questions: how do you inherit a past you never bore witness to and which, for unknown reasons, you can’t even speak about? Where does this leave you? Where did their parents and grandparents really stand politically in relation to “coloniality,” a term that covers a long period (132 years) of domination and violence, whereas now their descendants are forbidden from thinking about it? How do

you develop your own story when this parental silence is met with a political *blank space*?

One might argue that Algeria crops up repeatedly in the discourse of patients because the analyst's familiarity with the matter invites it. But these patients initially came to her for a variety of symptoms that bore no *inherent* relation to this episode in History. And at some point over the course of several conversations they express the painful impression of being held hostage and left defenseless by an inaccessible past. Following the patterns traced by the signifier "Algeria" thus leads to a blank space in memory and politics. The work of historians can hardly help these patients come to terms with the ideological blind spots they inherited, for the formation of subjectivity is beyond the reach of the historical record. On the other hand, subjectivity needs and demands acknowledgment from the political order. Otherwise, the part of History refused by the political order continues to be transmitted from generation to generation and creates psychic mechanisms that entrap the subject in existential shame.

In Algeria today, the colonial question is so pervasive that we tend to think of it as a historical template. But its official history is frozen in time, one-dimensional and therefore lacking in nuance. It is a matter for politics, probably its lone and major preoccupation. Since the devastation wrought by colonialism is widely acknowledged, it is treated as though there is no point in exploring the matter any more deeply from an interdisciplinary perspective. There is no room for dispute: the matter of colonialism is, by unanimous decision, a closed affair.

The ideological blind spots shaping the current understanding of coloniality – both inside and outside of Algeria – provided the impetus for this book. The myth-