

Breaking Dichotomies: Counter-Narratives in the Spoken Word Poetry of Suheir Hammad

Author Denijal Jegić

Abstract: This article analyzes the spoken word poetry of the Palestinian-American author, Suheir Hammad, who attempts to deconstruct dichotomies between Arabs and Americans and to create a concept of transnational humanness. Through cultural criticism, Hammad reverses the process of Othering when she humanizes Palestinians and detaches suffering from national belonging. Her creative resistance represents a renegotiation of Americanness and its relation to Islam and Arabs, and opens up de-nationalized spaces of comparison.

Keywords: Spoken Word; Palestinian-American Literature; Suheir Hammad; Orientalism

Introduction

Discussing the US-American suffering in the aftermath of 9/11, Suheir Hammad proclaims in a spoken word performance: “If there are any people on earth who understand how New York is feeling right now, they are in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip” (“First Writing Since”). Countering widespread cultural dichotomies between the US and its perception of the Arab world, Hammad constructs a transnational link between the sufferings of two different peoples by substituting geographical distance with emotional proximity. She erases perceived ethno-national differences and instead conceptualizes new forms of transnational co-existence. In poetry, prose, and most significantly in spoken word, Hammad presents narratives of dispossession and dislocation, discussing questions of identity from local and transnational points of view, identifying simultaneously as Palestinian, African, and American, while relocating the Palestinian struggle within a transnational framework of shared suffering. She advocates a de-nationalized feeling of subjugation through a global experience of colonialism and powerlessness within hegemonic discourses.

Suheir Hammad herself becomes the central figure in her poem “First Writing Since,” which she wrote in the aftermath of 9/11 and performed at *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* in

2002. As a first-person narrator, Hammad engages within a tension between hegemonic authority and subaltern narratives when she voices an Arab-American sentiment on 9/11 as a broader transnational articulation of frustration with American exceptionalism. This article analyzes Hammad's spoken word attempt to reverse cultural stereotyping through her rejection of ethnic or national categorizations from both an American and a Palestinian perspective. I will highlight Hammad's contestation of binary dichotomies and her vision of a more general humankind, in which humane identification is adopted to oppose ideologies of racial supremacy.

Between Victim(s) and Perpetrator(s)

In "First Writing Since," the performer's words are those of a victim, when she recalls seeing the planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers: "Evident out my window and abstract reality / sky where once was steel / smoke where once was flesh" ("First Writing Since"). Hammad reacts to her own mourning over the victims with fear, exclaiming: "Please God / let it be a mistake / the pilot's heart / the plane's engine / God please / don't let it be anyone who looks like my brothers" ("First Writing Since"). Hammad's traumatic moment of witnessing 9/11 is overshadowed by her awareness of a present anti-Arab and islamophobic stereotyping. An internally antithetical cultural hybridity becomes evident when Hammad apprehends that she herself will become a victim of cultural generalizations because the society in which she lives will most likely see her as a representative of the evil which has just happened. As a representative of Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular, Hammad becomes the 'Other.' The incidents on September 11, 2001 have had a destructive impact on the Arab-American community. As Ghada Qaisi Audi notes, immediately after the attacks, there had been a high increase in hate crimes against American individuals who were "perceived to be Muslim, Arab, Afghani, Middle Eastern or South Asian" (15). Concurrently, Hammad falls out of the collective of victims when she is exteriorly determined as the 'Other.' In Hammad's Arab-American experience, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are loose.

Still, Hammad re-localizes herself within the collective of US-American victims through her distance from physical and or politically motivated violence in general: "I don't know how

bad a life has to break in order to kill / I've never been so hungry that I willed hunger / never so angry as to control a gun over a pen / Not really," emphasizing, "even as a woman, a Palestinian / Never this broken" ("First Writing Since"). In both style and content, Hammad literally connects two geographically distant locations of subjugation by comparing the geopolitical circumstances of individuals in New York with the Palestinian cause, suggesting new forms of transnational co-existence in which she expresses the contemporary suffering of a globally colonized people.

The misunderstanding of the Palestinian cause in the Western public sphere is both a concern within Hammad's work and a barrier towards the appreciation of Palestinian-American literature. I suggest that Hammad's word performance is an attempt of subaltern narration. Stressing 9/11 as a significant event for Arab-American literature, Lisa Suhair Majaj points out that Arab-Americans were forced to "grapple with their identity and with the 'write or be written' imperative: Define yourself or others will define you" (64). Especially when referring to the Palestinian cause, authors are generally confronted with the prevalence of widespread myths and a negatively politicized issue since "in American political discourses, lies about Palestine are made to sound truthful [...] and crimes are made respectable" (Khalidi 129). In Hammad's work, writing and speaking (out) becomes a mere necessity toward the affirmation, preservation, and reconceptualization of identity.

The Palestinian Nakba in Historical and Contemporary Perspective

The expulsion of the indigenous Palestinians from their homeland is referred to as *Nakba* (Arabic for *catastrophe*)—a concept that has ever since constituted Palestinian nationhood and collective memory. The experience of the Nakba seems central to the self-understanding of the Palestinians as a collectively oppressed people, while they mostly find themselves within a transnational diaspora. It serves as a reoccurring leitmotif for Hammad's literature because it symbolizes both the historic loss of Palestine as well as the presently ongoing colonization. An engagement with the history of the Palestinian suffering is inevitable for the comprehension of Arab-American literature.

Until 1948, Palestinians had been one of the most vibrant and developed societies in the Arab world with a high and tranquil civilization that was largely able to escape European colonialism (Sanbar 89). However, in May 1948 “a country and its people disappeared from both maps and dictionaries,” when more than 700,000 Palestinians were violently expelled in “a murderous terrorist campaign that claimed the lives of many Arab civilians” (Palumbo 34; cf. Morris 589). Between December 1947 and November 1948, the Zionist colonialist project conducted numerous massacres all over Palestine, employing various forms of violence and indiscriminate killing through the strategy of a “terrorist war” against the native population and the present British authorities (Kupperman and Trent 18; cf. Abdel Jawad 82). According to Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, an ethnic cleansing took place all over Palestine through concrete violence carried out by destroying villages and by expelling the population (Pappé, *State of Denial* 74; *Ethnic Cleansing* 39). Consequently, as a sum of these events, “al-Nakba represents the abrupt and unnatural disruption” of Palestinian civil life and the starting point of “an inescapable story of loss, dispossession and a great historic injustice that targeted the most precious characteristic of any people: its identity” (Ashrawi).

In 2015, Palestine is still under military occupation and colonization. Former Attorney General of Israel, Michael Ben-Yair, outlines the colonial reality of Israel/Palestine and the country’s responsibility for the deliberately conducted occupation:

We enthusiastically chose to become a colonial society, ignoring international treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the occupied territories, engaging in theft and finding justification for all these activities. Passionately desiring to keep the occupied territories, we developed two judicial systems: one - progressive, liberal - in Israel; and the other - cruel, injurious - in the occupied territories. In effect, we established an apartheid regime in the occupied territories immediately following their capture. That oppressive regime exists to this day. (Ben-Yair)

According to former US President Carter, Israel attempts to systematically “isolate [Palestinians] from the outside world” (Carter 195). Carter argues that by utilizing their political and military dominance, Israeli leaders are “imposing a system of partial withdrawal, encapsulation, and apartheid on the Muslim and Christian citizens of the

occupied territories” (189). Judith Butler introduces the concept of ‘concentrative colonialism’ to describe contemporary policies of the Israeli state apparatus:

The use of the word *concentrative* in the early forties might have carried some terrifying resonances, given its association with the German *Konzentrationslager*; but it becomes all the more worrisome when we see the 'success' of concentrative colonialism in the West Bank and, most emphatically, in Gaza, where living conditions are cramped and impoverished in accord with the concentrative model (37).

Continuously, Palestinians are targeted, such as in the so-called *Operation Cast Lead* in 2008-09, in which the Israeli military employed the Dahiya doctrine “involving the application of disproportionate force and the causing of great damage and destruction to civilian property and infrastructure, and suffering to civilian populations” (UNHCR 24). The doctrine “explicitly advocates the use of terror to achieve political aims” (Mason 117). Very well examined in the so-called *Goldstone Report* submitted to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the method included the destruction of the national infrastructure, while the operation employed deliberate attacks against civilians, thus breaking fundamental rules of international law (cf. UNHRC 17, 20-23, 44-45, 93, 99-100, 108, 111). Civilians, among them children, were strategically used as human shields (UNHRC 151). The operation was characterized by a collective humiliation of the civil population, as Israeli journalist Amira Hass has witnessed:

[I]t was manifest in the point-blank killing of civilians in front of their families; preventing the arrival of rescuers, including shooting and killing them; stopping civilians fleeing the neighborhood from taking the injured with them . . . shooting at people waving a white flag; using human shields (in a home that was turned into a temporary a command post); destroying homes, greenhouses and agricultural areas; spraying graffiti on walls, with “Kill the Arabs” being the most innocuous of the messages left behind; and leaving filthy homes that had been used as bases.

Trying to classify the raid on Gaza, Noam Chomsky sarcastically assesses that “[t]he new crimes that the United States and Israel were committing in Gaza as 2009 opened do not fit easily into any standard category—except for the category of familiarity” (Chomsky and Pappé 89). He rejects the usage of the term ‘terrorism’ as inadequate, claiming “some new

term is needed for the sadistic and cowardly torture of people caged with no possibility of escape, while they are being pounded to dust by the most sophisticated products of U.S. military technology” (Chomsky and Pappé 90).

Consequently, the struggle between the Palestinian people and the Zionist hegemony is characterized by the fatal discrepancy in their power relations. While Israel is a regional superpower, the Palestinians are a subjugated third world people. Not only do Palestinians not have access to cultural imperialism, the Palestinian subalternity is also characterized by a collective silencing and of their narrative and a simultaneous perpetuation of their plight. Since the sources of Palestinian suffering did not enter Western historiography, the Nakba remains a subaltern narrative, even after the enlightening research conducted by the ‘New Historians’ in Israel in the second half of the 20th century (H. Cohen, B. Kimmerling, B. Morris, I. Pappé, T. Segev, and A. Shlaim). Nur Masalha states that “the Palestinian Nakba is rarely acknowledged in Western academic discourses and never mentioned within the context of Trauma Studies and Genocide Studies” (11-12).

The subjugation of Palestinians and their narrative complicates the situation of Palestinian-Americans. While they are able to embrace privileges as citizens, it is their “tax dollars” that are used to perpetuate the subjugation of the population in Palestine, as Hammad points out in one of her early writings (*Born Palestinian Born Black* 27). She refers to the United States’ imperative support for Israel and its policies directed against the Palestinian people. Chomsky views the U.S.-mentored “peace talks” as a way for Israel to continue its human rights violations and to ensure that “there will be no viable Palestinian state ever” (Chomsky & Pappé 8). The idea of a *pax americana* in Palestine has always resulted in “a constant and curious disregard of the Palestinian point of view,” according to Pappé (ibid. 49). Khalidi points out that “beyond underwriting and defending the process of subjugating the Palestinian people and subjecting them to this system, the United States had played a key historical role in enabling and echoing both counterreality and denial” (120). According to Pappé, in the US, terms such as ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘expulsion’ are still today totally alien to politicians, journalists, and common people alike because “[t]he relevant chapters of the

past that would justify categorically the application of such terms to Israeli origins are either distorted in the recollection of people or totally absent” (Chomsky and Pappé 71). Yet, it is exactly the perpetuation of this past and the ongoing Nakba that shapes Palestinian and Palestinian-American identity and the reflection thereof in literature. As Rosemary Sayigh outlines, the Nakba “has to be understood in terms of a *continuing* state of rightlessness, with all the varieties of abuse and violence that rightlessness exposes people to” (56). Accordingly, the Nakba is “not merely a traumatic memory,” but “continually generates new disasters, voiding the present of any sense of security, and blacking out the future altogether” (56).

Construction and De-Construction of Binary Dichotomies

The Nakba is a reoccurring theme in most of Hammad’s work which emerges from the exclusion of Palestinians from the mainstream American public sphere. Hammad introduces the Palestinian and Palestinian-American suffering to an anglophone audience when she portrays individuals as victims of white ethnocentrism, thus implying a humanization of Palestinians. While Hammad seems marginalized and racialized as a Palestinian-American in the US, she sees the incidents and circumstances of 9/11 as an intersection between the suffering of New Yorkers and Palestinians. Speaking out loud in a rhythm filled with heavy emotion, she proclaims that it is Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who understand the suffering of the inhabitants of New York. Hammad neutralizes the dichotomy between perceived victims and perpetrators when she suggests a global possibility of weakness and victimhood. Regarding Palestine in a colonial context, the author’s comparison suggests that the relationship of a colonizer and colonized turns into a transnational connection of victims. Hammad’s poetry appeals to a common concepts of suffering.

Describing the anti-Arab outcry of patriotism and racism which she was witnessing directly after 9/11, Hammad voices her resistance against the collective demand for revenge: “Ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca ‘I will feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there.’ A woman crying in a car parked and stranded and hurt / I offered comfort / A hand she did not see before she said ‘We’re gonna burn them so bad’” (“First Writing Since”). Hammad emphasizes the outbreak of the simple-minded dichotomies which

has been at least unconsciously present before. The contemporary re-emergence of dichotomies in American media and political rhetoric reaffirms the importance of Edward Said's theorization of the so-called Orient and Occident. In 1981, Edward Said claims: "It is still possible to say things about Islam that are simply unacceptable for Judaism, for other Asians, or for blacks, and it is still possible to write studies of Islamic history and society that blithely ignore every major advance in interpretative theory since Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud" (*Covering Islam* 148). In *Orientalism*, Said argues that standardization and cultural stereotyping has significantly shaped the view on the Orient. He claims that the lack of understanding of the Orient in the Western world has led to the emergence of a dichotomy in which the self-perceived ideal of a Western civilization stands as an antagonism to barbarian—at best exotic—'Others.' Among the different realizations that Said attributes to the term 'Orientalism,' one is clearly formulated as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, *Orientalism* 3). Hence, the relationship between the Occident and Orient is one "of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5), exercised by the Western world. 'Orientalism' serves to define a difference between 'us' Europeans and 'those' non-Europeans while claiming European identity as superior to other peoples and cultures (7). The last centuries have been marked by the lack of an accurate academic field of study of the Middle Eastern, Arab, and Islamic world. Consequently, one of Said's major arguments is that representations of Orientalism—transmitted to the Western individual through literary texts—are mere subjective representations (21). The two individuals in Hammad's narrative are identifying themselves as part of a national, probably white, US-American 'we,' while simultaneously putting themselves in opposition to those they consider responsible for the attacks. Hence, the perpetrators, or, the perceived representatives of the perpetrators, are placed into the category of the 'Other.'

The Othering of the Palestinians has caused a highly prevalent and simple myth based on dichotomy. Usually the Israeli is depicted to be part of Western civilization, a representative of the Occident, while the Palestinian, as the Israeli's opponent, is portrayed as the radical opposite. There exist various realizations of this dichotomy, however, in Western media the myth is generally naturalized as that of "Americans and Israelis together on one side

representing power, success, and another step forward for civilized humanity; on the other side were Arabs, who were weak, incompetent, backward, and morally undeserving of controlling their own destiny” (Cainkar 85). Raphael-Hernandez constitutes: “[F]or the longest time, media had helped to create an image of people of Arab descent that was so saturated with stereotypes that it was not only ridiculous but also dangerous because of its widespread influence on people’s ideas and opinions” (Raphael-Hernandez 121). These representations perpetuate the image of Arab people as the Others who are a complete opposite to the American self. Mass media has significantly supported the construction of a prevalent image of the foreign Arab terrorist.

The Arab(-American) ‘Other’ Between Assimilation and Alienation

Visibly Arab, Hammad narrates how she herself is being linked to the terrorists by random people: “One more person asked me if I knew the hijackers / One more motherfucker asked me what navy my brother is in / One more person assumed no Arabs or Muslims were killed” (“First Writing Since”). Obviously, like many other people whose racial appearance seems to fulfill the widespread cultural stereotype of ‘Arab,’ Hammad becomes a victim of racism when people establish a connection between her racial background and the assumed racial background of those responsible for 9/11. Hammad’s being linked to the hijackers implies the assumption that there is a collective culpability: this thought implies that all people who visually appear to fit a common racial ‘Arab’ stereotype belong to a threatening collective bearing the same ideas that are overall against what America stands for. Following this logic, Arabness is identified with anti-American sentiment and connoted with anger, aggression, and terrorism in the mainstream public sphere.

As a collective, Arab-Americans have had to face severe forms of racism. Although they have largely been able to pass as a ‘white’ part of American society, Arab-Americans have increasingly been racialized politically. The racial diversity within the population of Arab immigrants challenged US ethnocentrism early on, as skin color had long been the determining factor for the eligibility of citizenship which was based on whiteness. At the beginning of the 20th century, Arabs were mostly described as “white persons,” however, this was regularly disputed in several court cases (cf. Schmidt 177). For the most part, they

were given the privileges that came with being white, which enabled them to enjoy high social, political, and economic inclusion in the United States:

Although marginal whites ... Arab Americans were largely embraced by the structural perquisites of whiteness, which included understandings of individual uniqueness and personal (not collective) culpability [...] They achieved a degree of economic success, experienced upward social mobility, and led social lives that were intertwined with members of other ethnic groups, often resulting in intermarriage [...] [They] experienced levels of social and political inclusion and economic mobility largely reserved for whites and denied to negatively racialized groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos) (Cainkar 73f.).

Still the view on Arab-Americans changed significantly. Considering the highly favorable inclusion Arab-Americans have been able to embrace, one has to raise the question why they are confronted with a rather destructive image nowadays. Joanna Kadi points out: “Our race is simultaneously emphasized and ignored. For long periods of time no one can remember that Arabs even exist [...] this forgetfulness changes once there is another 'crisis in the Middle East.' [...] During crises, Arabs can be reassured we exist as a distinct racial group” (xvi). The visibility of Arab-Americans as a distinct ethnic group is thus related to political dimensions. One can then conclude a primarily political perception of Arab-Americans as a collective in the public sphere.

Hammad protests, “[they] assumed they know me, or that I represent a people, or that a people represent an evil, or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page” (“First Writing Since”), pointing to the generally forgotten yet omnipresent discrepancy between a national collective and a human being who needs to be comprehended through individual uniqueness. She reminds the audience that evil is always committed by people, not by a people. The idea of individual culpability has transformed into a fundamental generalization: “While as individuals they have become prominent for their contribution in all walks of their life in these United States, as a community they are one of the only ethnic groups that can still be stereotyped and maligned with impunity” (McCarus 7). In the public sphere, Arab-Americans are often understood as a collective that can be addressed through ridicule, dismissal, and an outright racism, in a way considered unacceptable to address

any other ethnic group (cf. Salaita 151). Hammad rejects the illusion of sameness and crosses ethnocentric borders when she verbally attacks those very stereotypes. Sirene Harb argues that Hammad's work “challenges narrow and exclusivist perceptions of Americanness as a category excluding Arab Americans” (Harb 2011, 10).

Overall, an offended narrator rejects to be held responsible for 9/11. Even more, Hammad makes the significant point that evil cannot be grasped easily, especially not through national, ethnical, or religious stereotyping, attacking the double standards of Western societies, which, according to her reasoning, are notably implied through the media. Accordingly, while Muslims and Arabs are being collectively blamed for the actions of individuals, white Christians are respected with differentiation: “We did not vilify white men when McVeigh bombed Oklahoma, give out his family's address or church or blame the bible or Patt fucking Robertson” (“First Writing Since”). Hammad argues that actions of white American individuals are usually not interpreted as representative of ethnicity, nationality, or religion. Rather, perpetrators are identified by their name and expected to take the responsibility themselves without the involvement of a collective group. Hammad criticizes the post-9/11 conclusion drawn by a large part of the media that Islam would represent evil, when she contrasts it to the way media deals with comparable crimes committed by non-Muslim individuals: “And when we talk about holy books, hooded men, and death / why never mention the KKK?” (“First Writing Since”). She points to the fact that terrorist collectives such as the Ku Klux Klan have always been perceived as a collective outside of the mainstream society and hence as a contradiction to the values a society represents. Obviously, terms such as 'Christian Terrorist' are not applied on the same level as 'Muslim Terrorist.'

Said states that while most of the world appears to have accepted the United States' imperial role in the world, the only sign of resistance can be found in the Islamic world, arguing that “we have an efflorescence of cultural and religious attacks on Islam from individuals and groups whose interests are informed with the idea of the West (and the United States, as its leader) as the standard for enlightened modernity” (*Covering Islam* xxix). The American difficulty with Islam is rooted in the fact that Islam “had never really

been pacified or defeated” (Said, *Covering Islam* 30). Furthermore, Said suggests that to Westerners and Americans, Islam might appear as a concept that represents “a resurgent atavism, which suggests not only the threat of a return to the Middle Ages but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the Western world” (*Covering Islam* 55). When she is identified as a perpetrator due to her racial appearance and due to the society’s stereotyping tendencies, Hammad experiences a double victimization. She is both part of the collective of victims of 9/11 and simultaneously a victim of the social backlash against Muslims and Arabs. Viewed from this angle, 9/11 has produced a new category of victims.

The trauma combined with a general ignorance about Islam might have made it easy for individuals to conflate Islam with terrorism and attach to it the undifferentiated notions spread through media coverage. Hammad suggests that the reason therefore can be found in the media, when she criticizes “correspondence added images / archives facilitate lazy journalism,” (“First Writing Since”) implying that news networks do not report accurately. Said attributes a major responsibility to the media coverage of Islam in the Western world which he considers “a one-sided activity that obscures what ‘we’ do, and highlights instead what Muslims and Arabs by their very flawed nature are” (*Covering Islam* xxii). He claims uninformed journalism to be a major cause for the perpetuation of dichotomies, explaining that Western awareness of the non-Western world is determined mostly by crises or unconditional ethnocentrism, and that information about the Middle East is regularly based on clichés and narrowly defined self-interest due to the fact that interactions with the diverse Islamic peoples have been reduced to and shaped by oil and politics (cf. *Covering Islam* 107).

Contesting Otherness through Creative Resistance

Examining the impact the anti-Arab approach in mainstream American society has had on Arab-Americans themselves, one can argue that it changed their position in the USA significantly. Raphael-Hernandez argues that the media representation of Arab-Americans as foreign others contributed to the evolution of a concept of an Arab American identity, which she assesses to be “more an artificial construction born out of forced reaction to

government policies, discrimination, hate crimes, and stereotyping media images” (Raphael-Hernandez 122). The Arab-Israeli conflict has confined Arab-Americans from whites and distinguished them from generally positively accepted ethnic groups. Furthermore, the conflict politicized Arab-Americans:

Palestine mobilized Arab Americans to reject total assimilation and embrace an alternate cultural positioning based on identification with the Middle East. By virtue of America’s uncritical support for Israel, Palestine necessarily transformed Arab Americans from a rapidly acculturating immigrant group into a radical, anti-mainstream community. (Salaita 165)

The first decade of the twenty-first century marked a significant marginalization of Arab-Americans, not only through continuously negative representation in the media, but even more through discriminatory politics and racial profiling. Quaisi Audi notices that Americans of Middle Eastern decent “were targeted for acts of hate, violence, discrimination, racial profiling, and economic ruin as a direct result of the heightened negative generalized media and government scrutiny of Arabs” (9). As Arabs in the US have become negatively racialized, they have developed a continued need to conceptualize and reassess their own identity and ethnic as well as national classification.

Moving from being an inconspicuous part of US mainstream society to becoming a politically racialized group, within the last one hundred years, Arab-American voices have moved “from a stance of defensiveness to self-assertion” (Majaj 82). Majaj elaborates on the various approaches toward a definition of Arab-American literature. According to one viewpoint, Arab American identity is a transplanted Arab identity which preserves Arab culture, language, and sensibilities, with Arab-American literature being defined as an Arab writing in English (74). Another approach states that Arab American identity is essentially US American, as it originates on US soil and is articulated in relationship to US ethnicity and multiculturalism. Moreover, there is considerable disagreement on whether and to which extent Arab-American literature is defined through 'ethnic' thematics (74). One can conclude that the question of Arab-American identity cannot be answered in a monolithic manner. Rather, it always includes at least two different nuances of identification which complement one another, with the hyphen linking two cultures or worlds. What is generally valuable for Arab-American literature is the fact that it can be defined through its necessarily

transnational involvement with politics. Unsurprisingly, many writers have been targeted due to their politically critical writing. Many have had work rejected because of their Arab identity, or the traumatic content of their work (cf. Majaj 64), which, if thematizing politics, might include references to the ethnic cleansing in Palestine or criticism of the presence of the US in the Arab world.

Hammad attempts to re-locate herself within a transnational concept of identity when she negotiates Americanness. She does neither demonize the political US, nor does she attribute the role of the victim to any collective exclusively. Dismissing the evolvment of any categorization, the only distinction Hammad draws is the inevitable divergence of political and human levels of reasoning. Consequently, Hammad raises the claim to mourn the victims of 9/11 as an American, but even more simply as a human being when she rejects rhetorical attacks against human beings, opposing the people who were “saying this was about to happen, let's not forget US transgressions” (ibid.). Instead of political assessments, Hammad focuses on her representation of humanity and individuality. She declares, “I live here, these are my friends, and fam / Me in those buildings / And we are not bad people, do not support America’s bullying” (ibid.). The author places herself metonymically into the World Trade Center, implying that due to her inalienable social belonging to New York she is a victim as much as a ‘white’ American is, and hence she is embracing complete identification with the violently attacked society of New York.

Referring to her family and friends, she positions herself as a vital part of the US. She is not an ‘Other.’ She belongs. By presenting the ‘other’ side, including herself, as a human one, Hammad creates an intersection between the white, American ‘self’ and the Palestinian, Arab ‘other’ on a level of shared and de-nationalized suffering. Mita Banerjee argues that Arab American literature can be seen as the “other side” (100) of stereotypical projections. Hence, Palestinian-American literature can serve as a way to humanize the ‘Other,’ when it reconstructs the concept of the Othered Arab-American and simultaneously actively reverses the process of ‘Othering’ through the introduction of Arabs as a sociologically vital part of the US. Hammad’s poetry builds as an antithesis to Orientalism. One can then see

Arab-American literature as a counter-narrative against the social consequences of political difficulties they had to experience.

Hammad's spoken word implies a categorical rejection of classifications built on dichotomies. In an attempt to reverse the reduction of Palestinian- and Arab-American diversity, Hammad strongly affirms that 'American' and 'Arab' are not to be separated since Arabs form a significant part of US-American culture, demography, and history. Her younger brother, who serves the US Navy, is "praying five times a day the orders he will take are righteous and will not weigh his soul down from the afterlife" ("First Writing Since"). Hammad deconstructs the dichotomy between the US and Islam and furthermore reverses it by turning the alleged contradiction between 'American' and 'Arab' / 'Muslim' into an inevitable unity. Her brother is an example of how Islam is and can be part of the US culture. This connection symbolizes a resistance to cultural essentialism.

Hammad lowers and softens her voice when she addresses the Palestinian-Americans' fear of the omnipresence of racism directed against them, stressing her concern that her brothers might become victims of racism anytime due to their visibly 'Arab' appearance: "Both my brothers / My heart stops / Not a beat disturbs my fear / Muslim gentle men / Born in Brooklyn / And their faces are of *the* Arab man / All eyelashes and nose and beautiful color and stubborn hair / What will their lives be like now over there / is over here" (spoken emphasis in the original, "First Writing Since"). Hammad redefines Americanness as what it demographically is: a transnational concept. Her work "answers the needs of a specific historical moment in which Arabness, Arab Americanness, and Islam are vilified and made invisibly visible" (Harb 2011, 8).

Hammad expresses her own grief, "I cried when I saw those buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart / I have never owned pain that needs to spread like that" ("First Writing Since"). Through this, she appears as an ordinary inhabitant of New York who is surprised and overwhelmed by the attacks, even as a Palestinian with a refugee background – thus, as someone victimized by the US foreign policy. Hammad voices the need for hope, which never seemed to have disappeared. Accordingly, the strength to initiate change and to build

up from the ruins lies in those who refuse hatred and rather seek for peace and understanding. Hammad concludes that life, through the mere fact of being able to breathe, is what connects all individuals transnationally: “Affirm life / Affirm life / We got to carry each other now / You are either with life / Or against it / Affirm life” (“First Writing Since”). Instead of opposing ideological concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ Hammad constructs an antithetical concept of life and death, suggesting that people within the US, but also across the globe, should remember the fact that they have enough to share with one another. Hence, a population or a people can never be responsible for political actions. Instead of dividing the world into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ Hammad demands to differentiate between those who aim for life and those who want someone else to be dead.

Transnational Humanity as a Counter-narrative

Hammad’s solution is an inherently strong tendency to move between identities, as it is highlighted in her prosaic autobiography *Drops of This Story*. Hammad was born in Amman, Jordan to a family of Palestinian refugees who had been expelled from Lod/al-Ludd in the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine. After briefly resettling in Beirut, Lebanon, Hammad arrived in Brooklyn, NY in her early childhood. Growing up among multicultural communities, and being perceived as Latina, Puerto Rican, Hindi, Bengali, Black, Pakistani, and African (Hammad, *Drops of This Story* 73), she developed a flexible understanding of identity which always includes at least two different layers of identification. When characterized as an Arab, Hammad was viewed in the context of a racialized ‘Other,’ and hence was often confronted with collective stereotypes, such as “gypsies who hijack planes,” “animals,” and “murderers” (ibid. 74). Yet, Hammad’s non-inclusion appears transnational. When visiting her family in Jordan, she is perceived as “just another American tourist” (ibid. 33). In the US, however, she is seen as “just another immigrant; a waste of food stamps” (ibid. 33). Altogether, her national and ethnic identity is exteriorly attributed through her Otherness. Hammad’s identity can never be national. Rather, negative experiences of both migration and exclusion force a transnational framework upon Hammad. Discussing contemporary definitions of Arab-American identity, Schmidt claims that the hyphen in the case of Arab Americans is “by far not as stable as is the case with other ethnic groups” (Schmidt 176). Consequently, Arab-American identity is subject to constant change and

might have various implications for each individual, from assimilation to alienation. Simultaneously, it seems to constitute a protest against the experienced marginalization.

In her performance, Hammad is remembering and simultaneously predicting awful consequences for those who already are or would still become victims of US transnational aggressions in the aftermath of 9/11: “My hand went to my head and my head to the dead Iraqi children, the dead in Nicaragua, in Rwanda, Kuwait [...] for America's attention” (“First Writing Since”). It seems that Hammad's own experience as a Palestinian refugee and the omnipresence of the Nakba provides her with a strong sensitivity about geo-political mechanisms. Moreover, from her marginalized position, Hammad looks beyond the geographic borders of the US. She identifies with the ‘Others’ who are excluded from or victimized by white US supremacy, and most likely not mourned publicly. Like Palestinians, they stay faceless in the public sphere. Judith Butler points to the collective dehumanization of Palestinians through the media, conceptualizing the Palestinian as the faceless Other and protesting that one can never render a whole population as faceless or undeserving of humanness. Butler suggests that the very human principle of caring for the Other is disrupted as dominant media and geopolitical violence mandate an ideology of ‘living apart’ instead:

[H]ow do we think of the obligation of the other when the face, quite literally, can no longer be seen, when the media does not show the face, when *Haaretz* raises money for the poor in Israel with the assistance of graphic photos, but not for those who are subject to malnutrition within the violently policed borders of Gaza, whose suffering is systematically shrouded? (50)

Butler illustrates that during the US-supported Israeli wars in Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2008-09), the Israeli media was merely discussing how effective the military is and how it could be more successful, while the question whether those attacks were actually justified or not was completely ignored. Butler realizes the discrepancy in perception of Israeli military personnel and Palestinian and Lebanese civilians: “It is striking when the lives of Israeli soldiers were personified, given names and families, and openly mourned, when the lives of Lebanese and Palestinian soldiers and civilians remained nameless, effectively

unmournable” (97). Hence, by addressing the pain of third-world individuals, Hammad attempts to translate their subaltern narratives into a mainstream Western context and to give them the face that they are usually deprived of.

Between Palestinian and Black

Hammad eventually chooses a socio-economically rooted black Palestinian identity which is closely attached to her transnational neighborhood in urban Brooklyn. Hammad concludes to identify with her direct social surroundings when she emotionally proclaims, “never felt less American and more Brooklyn these days / These stars and stripes represent the death as citizens first / Not family / Not lovers” (ibid.). She deconstructs the idea of America as a nation or national community, and rejects ideologically or emotionally rooted national concepts for the sake of a personally experienced and physically close community which is built on human consciousness rather than national identification. Hence, following a trauma, she does not consider herself as part of a national community, but rather as an active participant in her direct neighborhood where she affiliates with people on a human level rather than a national one. The author’s neighborhood in Brooklyn is then a de-nationalized location that does not fit ethnocentrist perceptions of Americanness. Harb describes Hammad’s Brooklyn as “a space marked by the presence of immigrant energies, whose embodied, racialized presence represents forms of deviance perceived as ‘not exactly’ American, since it is nonnormative” (Harb 2014, 75). Rather, the non-presence of essentialist Americanness is substituted by a shared communal commitment based on the shared structures of suffering. The emergence of Brooklyn as a substitution for the failed idea of the nation comes out of the necessity to create a place of belonging.

Palestinians are linked to ‘Others’ transnationally, i.e. other colonized peoples, through the experience of loss and dispossession and a general pattern of monolithic, mostly Western hegemony. Suffering is expressed through arts, notably in literature, poetry, and spoken word, but more so in music, particularly rap and hip hop. One can clearly characterize Hammad’s spoken word, which shares aesthetic structures with rap, as a kind of popular expression. In Brooklyn as well as in Palestine, hip hop can serve as a mode of transnational communication. In the US, hip hop is mainly produced by African-

Americans, while in Israel it originates from Palestinian ghettos. Far from Hammad's Brooklyn, the Palestinian hip hop group *DAM* makes use of urban American sounds to voice Palestinian anti-colonial lyrics. One of its members, Tamer Nafar claims: "Growing up in Lod, Israel, my reality is hip hop. I listened to the lyrics and felt they were describing me, my situation. You can exchange the word 'nigger' for 'Palestinian'" (qtd. in Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation* 166). In many ways, 'African-American' and 'Palestinian' are two inter-related categories of racialized Othering. Lubin outlines that the concepts of Arab-American and African-American are "already and always transnational; therefore, in order to understand Arab American cultural politics, one must delink 'American-ness' from the boundaries of the United States"" (Lubin, *Fear of an Arab Planet* 252-3). Hence, due to a common experience of marginalization, Palestinians regardless of their geographical position, might find a mirroring of their experience in the past (and present) living conditions and socio-political situation of African-American people. Increasingly, the solidarity between African-American and Palestinian communities is being expressed on different levels. Palestinianness and blackness seem more interchangeable socio-politically. Historically, both groups have been or still are negatively racialized subalterns in a colonized space.

Conclusion

By introducing Palestinians and Palestinian-Americans (and Arab-Americans in general) as emotionally suffering individuals to American culture in her spoken word poetry, Hammad deconstructs both the prevalent dichotomies and the unfavorable picture that mass media perpetuates on Arabs and Muslims and thereby simultaneously deconstructs the white monopoly to the victim role. Her account of 9/11 makes visible the double victimization of the Arab-American population. Hammad manages to reverse Otherness by not only taking Palestinians out of the category of the 'Other,' but even more by rejecting the idea of the 'Other' altogether for the sake of a transnational identity. She deconstructs the idea of Arabness being an anti-American concept. By doing so, Hammad successfully narrates a subaltern vision of the Palestinian people and of suffering people in general when she first introduces the Nakba as a major source of suffering and subsequently de-nationalizes violence.

The Nakba prosthetically extends to the US when the simple dichotomy of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is daily manifested in manifold ways throughout the media landscape. Hammad breaks the taboo of speaking out on Palestine when she introduces herself first and foremost as an individual, who at the same time is an American and a Palestinian but more significantly an active participant in the society in which she lives. Hammad’s work is more than an attempt to counter Said’s theoretical suggestion that it is merely impossible for people in the Western world to identify with Arabs and Islam. As a Western representative of the Palestinian people, Hammad is giving voice to the voiceless as her work transcends cultural and religious barriers, and writes against dominant narratives which are usually based on dichotomous concepts. She deconstructs essentialism while she engages in a discussion of transnational identity. Hammad’s work links ‘Others’ transnationally and hence introduces a novel form of global identification which could be conceptualized as the idea of a transnational subaltern.

Hammad’s cultural critique suggests that Palestinians have filled negatively racialized spaces formerly (and contemporarily) occupied by African Americans. In many ways, African American and Palestinian seem to be two different categories of Blackness. Academically, more work has to be done to identify points of Afro-Arab interrelatedness and the ways in which the African-American community and the Palestinian and Arab-American community identify with each other. This, however, presupposes an academic recognition of the Nakba and of the continuity of Palestinian suffering which is a leitmotif for Palestinian-American, and more generally Arab-American, cultural products.

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