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“Fear of an Arab Planet”: The Sounds and Rhythms of Afro-Arab Internationalism

conscious comrade
there's a place uglier than uptown's slum
where the people are just as beautiful
struggling sister
there's a debke beat funky as P. E.'s riffs
signalin revolution liberation and freedom.
(Suheir Hammad, *born Palestinian, born Black*)

Comparisons

In 2010, after a disastrous earthquake shook the country of Haiti, non-governmental organizations as well as international relief agencies organized events to raise funds to donate to the impoverished nation. In my community of Albuquerque, local schools collected change and held bake sales. At the University, faculty led public readings of Haitian literature while auctioning off everything from free books to tutorial services. U.S. public culture was consumed by telethons, humanitarian anthems, and appeals from our political leaders to aid the Haitian people. U.S. humanitarian aid was framed as the best example of the benevolent nature of U.S. foreign engagement. Indeed it signified a successful attempt at winning “hearts and minds.” As President Obama wrote in *Newsweek* shortly after the earthquake:

we act [to provide aid] for a very simple reason: in times of tragedy, the United States of America steps forward and helps. That is who we are. That is what we do. For decades, America's leadership has been founded

in part on the fact that we do not use our power to subjugate others, we use it to lift them up (Obama)

But if the U.S. State's humanitarian aid somehow legitimated the liberal face of U.S. global supremacy, the same was not said of other international efforts at aiding the earthquake victims. One of the donations to arrive in Haiti came from Palestinian refugees living in Gaza, many of whom have relatives confined in Israeli prisons. Aid from Gaza included money, as well as blankets, food and milk for children—all staple commodities to which Gazans themselves have little access. The Israeli blockade of Gaza prevented the Red Cross from accepting the donation of food and milk for children, and therefore it could only accept the financial donation.

Head of the Gazan Committee to Break the Siege Jamal Al-Khudary, in explaining his donation, articulated a particularly interesting comparative perspective. "People may be astonished at our ability to collect donations from our people [in Gaza]; we tell them that this is a humanitarian campaign and our people love life and peace We are here today supporting the victims of Haiti . . . we feel for them the most because we were exposed to our own earthquake during Israel's war on Gaza" ("Gazans Raise Aid"). Gaza's donation to Haiti was an opportunity to engage in a profound comparison that linked the Palestinian and Haitian refugee in what Ramon Saldivar, in a different context, has called a "community of shared fate"—this is a very different transnational relationship than that offered by U.S.A.I.D. ("Gazans Raise Aid").

A similar comparison was made in 2005, when, in response to the catastrophic destruction of poor people's housing and communities during Hurricane Katrina, an unlikely donation came to the displaced residents of New Orleans. Palestinian refugees from the Amari refugee camp near Ramallah raised \$10,000 for Katrina's exiles. Jihad Tomeleh, one of the organizers of the fund-raising drive, noted, "Palestinian refugees who have lived more than fifty years displaced from our homes are very sensitive to the Katrina victims." At the ceremony to donate the funds, Rafik Hussein, an aide to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, referred to what happened in New Orleans as a *naqba*, the Arabic word for "catastrophe" that is used to describe the devastating outcome of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

About the donation Abbas said, "On behalf of the Palestinian people and, in particular, the refugee communities of the West Bank and Gaza

Strip, I wish to express our deepest sympathy with the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. With our humble donation, we feel it is important to show our concern since Palestinians know all too well the pain and hardship caused by being a refugee. We pray that they will soon be able to return to their homes.” For its part, the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem sought to depoliticize the donation by publicizing it not as a signal of international solidarity among refugees but instead as a donation from one poor group to another. Jake Walles, the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem, said the donation was especially significant “because we know it came from poor people” (Lubin, *We are all Israelis*).

On June 14, 2008, three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the U.S. Gulf of Mexico coastline, a diverse range of people from New Orleans (NOLA) crowded into a local arts studio for a unique hip-hop concert. Featuring poetry and music that focused on structural racism in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the enduring Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, “liberation hip-hop” forged comparisons between the conditions of Blacks in NOLA and Arabs in Palestine, marking an important moment of activism for Palestinian-American, Palestinian, and African American grassroots activists. The event featured readings of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s writing as well as presentations by community activists in New Orleans. After the poetry reading, the hip-hop began. New Orleans-Palestinian hip-hopppers, Shaheed and Arabian Outlaw, took to the stage to rap about structural inequalities in NOLA and Palestine. New Orleans-based African American artists, Truth Universal and Sess 4-5, took the stage next to rap about African-American self-determination and the struggle against housing discrimination in NOLA. The concert concluded with a performance by Mohammed Al-Farah, of the first Gazan hip-hop group, “Palestinian Rapperz.”

In these three cases, Palestinian refugees saw the necessity of comparison and solidarity, sharing the inadequacy of the U.S. government’s feeble attempts to aid the mostly Black victims of Katrina and Haiti. While the Palestinian refugee and the displaced person from Katrina or the Haitian earthquake have different relationships to state violence and colonial rule, they share the experiences of being forced to leave their homes, having to live in a foreign home as outsiders, and having little or no support from their political representatives. The Palestinians’ recognition of their similarities to Katrina and Haitian victims forces a com-

parison on us; it makes us consider how Palestinian refugees fall victim to state violence and racism, and about how much places like Port au Prince and New Orleans constitute socialized “third world” refugee sites.

In this essay I am primarily interested in the cultural politics of comparisons, especially those articulated in the forms of Palestinian hip hop and spoken word poetry. I take the comparative politics of “liberation hip hop” seriously not because I want to make a case that Palestinian refugees and African American residents of New Orleans are indeed *the same* but rather, because these communities’ own attempts at comparisons reveal something important about globalization as well as the transnational ways that Arab American identities are made.

Comparing Palestine to NOLA (and Port au Prince) emerged organically from within the NOLA and Palestinian communities, and is not a comparison imposed from the outside. Refugees in Gaza and the West Bank saw common cause and comparative possibilities in the African American experience in the U.S. and Caribbean. If we take seriously these comparisons as not merely arbitrary, but highly structured and deliberate, we can begin to read acts of transnational solidarity such as “liberation hip hop” as an important articulation of transnational connection and identification. The scholarly question that interests me is what constitutes the *substance* of this comparison and how might we productively develop scholarship that doesn’t merely impose order on comparisons but that takes “liberation hip hop” as theory and analysis on its own merits? And finally, this essay is interested in what comparisons reveal about the transnational composition of Arab American identities.

The Geography of Sound

Hip-hop has, from its genesis, been an effective medium for articulating global connections and imaginaries. It is a syncretic cultural form produced through sampling transnational musical archives as well as splicing different genres and beats in the “breaks” of songs and rhythms. Hip-hop’s technologies can serve as modes of trans-local and transnational engagement constituted by a pastiche of local sounds and beats produced over globalized corporate and commercial networks. In hip-

hop the local is always and already formed by transnational migrations of sound.

Scholars of Black American hip-hop locate its origins in globalized Brooklyn, NY, where Jamaican toasting combined with local vernaculars to produce new aesthetic and sonic formations. Hip-hop's sampling of global sounds, as well as its reliance on global corporate distribution, make it uniquely capable of articulating solidarities and extra-national belongings, while also being grounded in specific localities.¹ Thus hip-hop is not merely broadcast globally but is constituted by global sounds and beats.

Analyzing hip-hop connections—both musical and imaginary—linking Palestinians and African Americans requires confronting entrenched scholarly frameworks for understanding the terms of cultural politics and geopolitical awareness. First, from the perspective of understanding the Palestinian struggle for existence, one might question the utility of popular culture and cultural studies to the existential crisis faced by many Palestinians. As Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg point out in their essay, “Popular Culture, Relational History, and the Question of Power in Palestine and Israel,” in the area of scholarship on Israel/Palestine, Birmingham cultural studies has had to confront structural Marxist approaches that view culture as superstructural, as well as nationalist frameworks that view popular culture merely as globalized consumer culture. Perhaps most challenging, Palestinians' persistent existential struggle for survival makes a study of Palestinian popular culture seem apolitical, at best. As Stein and Swedenburg point out, “the violence and catastrophe that so frequently characterize the landscape of Palestine and Israel give added weight to analytical tendencies to read culture as outside and/or strictly determined by the realm of the political—and thus of subsidiary importance to the radical scholarly agenda” (Stein and Swedenburg, “Popular Culture” 8).²

Birmingham school cultural studies, however, conceived of cultural politics very much within the intellectual trajectory of Marxism. Rather

¹ There are many excellent histories of hip-hop. Among the best studies are: Rose's *Black Noise*; Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*; Kelley's *Race Rebels*; and Murray's and Neal's *The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*.

² Also cf. Stein and Swedenburg's important edited collection, *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*.

than viewing popular culture as merely superstructural, the Birmingham school embraced Antonio Gramsci's analysis of culture as the site of negotiation between dominant and subordinate groups. In this way, culture was figured as a site of contest that constituted, rather than reflected, the terms of power and authority. Seen in these terms, as a Gramscian "war of position," popular culture can be understood as the crucial nexus of state power as well as subaltern resistance. Palestinian hip-hop—as it is practiced in occupied Palestine and in the Palestinian Diaspora—can therefore be analyzed as an integral site for negotiating the terms of resistance to Israeli occupation in ways that often articulate relational and transnational solidarities and new geographies, while simultaneously being fixed to local and national political economies.³

While Palestinian hip-hop may seem to reveal little about Palestinians' material needs, to some scholars of U.S. hip-hop, Palestinian hip hop may be understood as inauthentic and appropriative of black American culture. In this reading of hip-hop, globalized hip-hop is understood as either the migration of African American culture and aesthetics globally or in terms of global capitalisms' appropriation of African American culture. At stake in this debate are the terms for understanding how local and regional Black American political economies become, in hip-hop culture, transformed through global consumption and how Arab and Arab American cultural productions are produced within a globalized economy of black American culture.

Debates about the meaning of globalized hip-hop ultimately engage the question of hip-hop's origins. Paul Gilroy famously located hip-hop in a black Atlantic culture that is never authentically "American" or "African" but always defined by global routes and migrations that constitute the Black Atlantic (72-110). Yet, for hip-hop scholar Imani Perry, appeals to the diasporic nature of Black cultural formations too often overlook the local and regional conditions of Black Americans. Moreover, Perry argues that hip-hop is "essentially" black American music,

³ Some of the key texts of the Birmingham School are Hall, ed., *Policing the Crisis* and Raymond Williams, *Keywords*. Hall and Williams drew heavily on Gramsci's understanding of cultural hegemony and "war of position" which can be found in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. An excellent example of Birmingham cultural studies in American Studies can be found in George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn, and Learning to Listen."

even as she recognizes the transnational routes that constitute Black American hip-hop.⁴

For scholars like Perry, the globalization of hip-hop is both about transnational solidarity and appropriation of Black American music. Similarly, in *Spectacular Vernaculars*, Russell Potter cautions that globalized hip-hop may appropriate African American authenticity:

As [hip-hop] gains audiences around the world, there is always the danger that it will be appropriated in such a way that its histories will be obscured, and its messages replaced with others. . . . Even as it remains a global music, it is firmly rooted in the local and the temporal; it is music about 'where I'm from,' and as such proposes a new kind of universality. (146)

Although the debate about origins and implications of globalized hip-hop is not a central concern of this essay, I am concerned with how critiques of cultural studies emanating from scholars of Palestine/Israel and hip-hop scholars' concern with cultural theft illuminate a problematic for my analysis of the "liberation hip-hop" event. Rather than assuming that Palestinian hip-hop is merely superstructural to the material conditions of Palestinians and rather than assuming that Palestinian hip-hop is an appropriation of Black American hip-hop aesthetics, I read events like "liberation hip-hop" as a cultural politics emerging from comparative borderlands.

While hip-hop may be considered a local articulation of a complex global political economy, we must remember that global routes of people, ideas and aesthetics, always constitute the local. In this sense, hip-hop produces, and is produced by, local and global culture simultaneously, whether it comes from Compton, California, or Khan Younis, Gaza. In this essay, I am interested in how various locals, such as New Orleans and Gaza, can be productively brought into a comparative frame in order to understand conditions of inequality as linked globally. The *substance* of this comparison, however, is not *symmetry* between Palestine and African American urban geographies, but is instead an imagined sense of sameness, or, a shared structure of feeling. In the remainder of this essay, I examine hip-hop as a geographical imaginary, as

⁴ Cf. her book *Prophets of the Hood*.

much as a musical aesthetic, linking people transnationally in borderlands. It is geography—produced through sound—that borrows, in often-unequal ways, beats, aesthetics, and analyses to produce commonality across space. Globalized hip-hop is both local and global, just as Palestinian rap is both produced *in* Palestine *and* in places like East L.A.

“Liberation hip-hop” was an event that engaged a longstanding imaginary linking questions of Palestinian and Black American exile and subjugation.⁵ While the history of hip-hop has been well documented, my interest is in the ways Palestinian hip-hop, a relatively new contribution to Palestinian post-colonial aesthetics, engages a genealogy of Afro-Arab politics. “Liberation hip-hop,” Palestinian hip-hop, and spoken word poetry link questions of Palestinian refugees, their exilic politics and right of return, to the colonial geographies of the United States, in which New Orleans, and the plight of Black residents of the lower ninth ward, is a crucial nexus. This geographic linkage is not merely a simplistic politics of comparison, but is, I contend, an attempt to reconfigure the geographies of modernity in ways that make Gaza and the lower ninth ward localized articulations of globalized colonial modernity. The comparison emerges organically from particular geographies, and is not merely a facile attempt at linking transnational counterpublics.

The Geography of Identity

Rather than treating Afro-Arab politics as instances of transnational solidarity or internationalism, organized around shared understandings of racism and anti-Black modernity, my current research considers Afro-Arab internationalism over the last century as an aesthetic politics produced within the borders of the colonial world. Borders, in this study, are not merely geopolitical and national, but are also comprised of what Latin American cultural critique Walter D. Mignolo terms, “the colonial difference” produced within modernity. “Colonial difference” refers to Walter D. Mignolo’s observation that the modern Eurocentric world is constituted by a circuit of colonial borderlands producing “colonial

⁵ This is an argument I am developing in my forthcoming book *Liberation Geographies*.

differences” among various classifications of populations. In the United States, the historic importance of slave labor that was racialized as black, is an example of a colonial difference. Similarly, the expulsion of nearly 800,000 Palestinians in 1947-1948 from what would become the modern State of Israel, constitutes the creation of a colonial difference. Mignolo seeks to understand the racialization of groups under colonialism not merely as local articulations of political economy, but also as global process of colonial modernity, which for him, are at the core of Occidentalism.

The key point, for my purpose, is Mignolo’s recognition that the borderlands of colonialism are not merely spaces of repression, but are also “loci of enunciation”; they are sites of subaltern reason that often restructure the geographies of modernity in ways that place the subaltern in power. Thus, for Mignolo, and for me, viewing the borderlands of modernity as sites of both colonial difference and subaltern resistance enables a global understanding of subaltern politics arising from the borderlands. For example, I am not arguing that U.S. settler colonialism and Israeli settler colonialism are the same; indeed they emerge at very different historical junctions. Nor am I arguing that Palestinians and U.S. Blacks are the same; rather, the key point is that U.S. Blacks and Palestinians are each subject to “the colonial difference,” and live within borderlands constituted by the colonial world. Events like “liberation hip-hop” and donations from Gaza to Port au Prince are not just acts of international solidarity, but also profound enunciations from global borderlands that reconfigure the world from the standpoint of the oppressed.

The recognition of, and identification with, populations similarly located in the borderlands of colonialism constitutes an important mode of comparative politics. The transnational projects that encouraged Palestinians and U.S. Blacks to find common political cause is comprised by the shared structures of feeling that emerge from the borderlands of coloniality. These emergent cultural formations, what Walter Mignolo calls “border epistemologies,” are often animated by profound revisions of colonial modernity in ways that illustrates the subalterns desires for

radically different aesthetic and political realities.⁶ In this way, the recognition of comparability becomes a new geopolitical awareness that reconfigures the terms of identity. Arab and Black become delinked from national histories, and become global signs of decolonial thinking with considerable political potential.

It is important to underscore here that in focusing on comparative politics, or post-national identities, I do not wish to ignore the incommensurability of comparisons. I recognize that U.S. Blacks and Palestinians do not share the same historical memories or relationships to juridical forms of redress. African Americans have citizenship while the Palestinians who find common cause are most often stateless refugees. Hence, in thinking through the question of comparisons, I am not merely celebrating a post-nationalist aesthetic; I recognize that one cannot wish nationalism and colonialism away by engaging in symbolic practices of solidarity. Indeed, borderlands politics are deeply invested in modernist notions of homeland and even “national liberation”; they work within the contexts of the world they hope to restructure and may never undo dominant formations. Yet, at the same time, I believe comparisons are emergent cultural formations that—regardless of the track they ultimately take—begin as “third spaces” or “gaps” within colonial modernity. In this way liberation geographies are both created within, and constituted by, colonial modernity.⁷

My contribution to Arab American cultural studies is to understand the geography of identity. Arab Americans are located globally, regardless of their country of nationality. Moreover, given the ways that anti-Arab and Muslim politics has dominated the U.S. public sphere, especially in the years following 9/11, Arab Americans have been racialized in ways that often questions Arab American loyalty to the U.S. and fitness for citizenship. Within the United States, it is therefore understandable that Arab Americans—often referred to as the “new Blacks” in the United States—would identify with African American culture and

⁶ On border epistemologies cf. Mignolo’s *Local Histories*. This is also similar to Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s formulation of a “migrant imaginary,” which can be found in *Migrant Imaginaries*.

⁷ This point echoes that of Brent Hayes Edwards, who argues in *The Practice of Diaspora*, that international politics are always structured by incommensurable realities of local histories and mistranslations.

politics in the United States. What is less obvious, however, is that Arab and African American peoples and cultures 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.

Fear of an Arab Planet

Hip-hop’s global reach impacts every continent, and Palestinian hip-hop is not unique as a subaltern praxis. What interests me is the ways that Palestinian hip-hop produced “over there” and “here” engages a particular geopolitical awareness of Afro-Arab internationalism. My analysis locates Palestinian rappers as organic intellectuals, who explicitly engage a genealogy of Afro-Arab internationalism. The comparison with which I opened this chapter, between New Orleans and Gaza or between Gaza and Port au Prince, is constituted by a deeply felt structure of feeling uniting Palestinians in a shared circuit with the conditions of urban Black communities in the West (and to a lesser extent, the recognition on the part of some African Americans of their similarity to Palestinians).

It is crucial to recognize that Palestinian hip-hop is both a phenomenon that is highly de-territorialized; it is created “over there,” in Palestine, and “here,” in places like Brooklyn and California’s Bay Area. There are hip-hop artists in the West Bank (Ramallah Underground), in Israel (DAM), in Gaza (Palestinian Rapperz), and multiple other sites throughout the Arab world, Europe, and the United States including East Los Angeles (Omar Ofendum and Ragtop) and Oakland (Iron Sheik). Today, the Palestinian Diaspora exists throughout the globe and Palestinian cultural politics are inherently global. It can be difficult to ascertain accurate data on Palestinian Diasporic population due to the often hidden nature of Palestinian identity in “host” countries. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, there are approximately 3.2 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; approximately 900,000 Palestinians in Israel, 2.2 million Palestinians in Jordan, 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon, 400,000 Palestinians in Syria, and 460,000 Palestinians in the United States (cf. “A Reading in the Sources”). Thus, Palestinian culture emerges from multiple loci of enunciation and local con-

texts. Palestinian hip-hop produced in Oakland, California is both local and global, reflecting the contexts of urban Oakland and the estrangement from, and existential threats to, Palestine. Moreover, the category "Palestine" is both a historical marker of a lost or conquered geography, as well as a place of future becoming. Palestinian culture is therefore always and already deterritorialized and global. Seen in the context of diasporic and migrant identities, scholarly debates about cultural authenticity seem rather far afield to the question of Palestinian hip-hop. More to the point, locating Palestinian hip-hoppers outside of Black America and the Black Diaspora reproduces a colonial geography that erases Islamic influences in North Africa, as well as elides the question of the Maghreb and other parts of North Africa as belonging to the African Diaspora. Similarly, insisting on the cultural authenticity of Black American rap ignores the confluence of African American, Caribbean, North African and Levantine geographies and cultures in the Black radical imaginary.

Lid, Israel is a town within the State of Israel that is under existential threat from the expanding Tel Aviv airport and new Israeli urban construction. Lid is becoming an urban ghetto where Israeli Defense Forces target Palestinian residents, while the state attempts to eviscerate the historical memory of the '48 villages like Lid. Moreover, among the biggest social problems facing Lid is rampant drug use and trade. Yet within Lid, as in places like Compton, California in the 1980s, a relative new anthem pulses through crowded streets. It is the bass-filled beats of Da Arabian Mc's, or DAM, Palestine's first hip-hop group that blends the colonial geographies of modernity into a singular imaginary. Hip-hop has always been a means of unsanctioned political journalism as well as an aesthetic politics that articulates often-unarticulated structures of feeling. Chuck D of the highly influential U.S. hip-hop group, Public Enemy, once called hip-hop, the "CNN for urban youth." In the spirit of Chuck D's statement, we might argue that DAM is Black America's Al Jazeera counterpart.

DAM reproduces many of the aesthetic and political sensibilities of U.S. urban rap. Its debut album of 1998, while firmly situated in the context of Lid, was called "Stop selling Drugs." The title imitated the concerns of its U.S. counterpart's illicit drug trade and police control and violence. Yet, in a complex analysis, the artists in DAM argue that the U.S. drug war is not detached from their lives in Israel. Drug abuse

is rampant in most urban communities where there is little access to political power. DAM's album title is a provocative analysis of colonial modernity, in which drugs have become a central commodity within colonized settings.

DAM's follow-up album, "Who's the Terrorist?" was similarly political and engaged the heightened violence of U.S. and Israeli "wars on terror." "Who's the Terrorist" was popularized, in part, through a music video produced by Palestinian-American filmmaker Jackie Salloum, who created the documentary *Sling Shot Hip-Hop*. Salloum's DAM video makes explicit the trans-local connections between the U.S. urban ghetto and Lid, Israel, as the footage reproduces U.S. hip-hop aesthetics and a particular narrative of police and state violence that could be as much about the LA riots and the beating of Rodney King as everyday colonial violence in Lid ("Da Arabian Mc's.").

DAM's fan website lists a telling range of influences including Tupac Shakur, Malcolm X, Fairuz, Edward Said, The Notorious BIG, Nas, and KRS One. Thus DAM's own theoretical and sonic genealogy includes the sort of liberation geography with which I opened this essay. Included in the list of influences is Tupac Amaru Shakur, the rapper who was named after the Peruvian indigenous anticolonial leader and the son to two Black Panthers. Also included is Malcolm X, who found in Islam an anti-colonial discourse.⁸

Identifications with pan-African and indigenous anti-colonial registers are not arbitrary, but illustrate the shared structures of feeling produced out of colonial modernity. As Tamer Nafar, one of DAM's MC's articulates, "Growing up in Lid, 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.' Lid is a ghetto, the biggest crime and drug center in the Middle East. When I heard Tupac sing, 'It's a White Man's World,' I decided to take hip-hop seriously" ("Da Arabian Mc's.").

Nafar articulates a complex geopolitical awareness to his rap, linking the ghettoized and militarized spaces of the U.S. urban ghetto to the militarized and highly pathologized spaces of Lid, Israel. What links

⁸ For more on DAM and Palestinian hip-hop cf. Sunaina, "'We Ain't Missing.'"

DAM and Public Enemy is not merely the beats and breaks of globalized hip-hop, but also the deeply felt structures of feeling produced within the context of a colonial modernity in which Blackness and Arabness are each public terrors.⁹

From Breakin' to Breaking Poems

Hip-hop culture is constituted not only by rap music, but also by spoken word, or "slam" poetry, which has been popularized in the United States by hip-hop producer Russell Simmons in MTV's Def Poetry Slam. Among the most popular slam poet in the United States is Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian-American poet who lives in Brooklyn and has recently starred in the film *Salt of this Sea*. Hammad is a regular on MTV's def poetry jams and is able to articulate an Afro-Arab imaginary through a poetry inspired by U.S. hip-hop culture as well as her parent's status as Palestinian refugees. In the introductory essay to her first book, *born Palestinian, born Black*, Hammad writes, "The last stanza of June Jordan's 'Moving Towards Home' changed my life. I remember feeling validated by her statement" (xi). The stanza to which Hammad refers articulates a geography that circulates around the trope of blackness. For Jordan, an expansive understanding of blackness enabled a profound articulation of an Afro-Arab world.

*I was born a black woman
and now
I am become a Palestinian
against the relentless laughter of evil
there is less and less living room
and where are my loved ones? (Hammad xi)*

Jordan's transformation from black woman to "become a Palestinian" signifies a shared community of fate, uniting around the signifying tropes of blackness and Palestinian.

⁹ In the larger version of this work I consider a much wider range of Palestinian hip-hop, including the collaborate work in the United States called *The Human Writes Project* and *The Arab Summit*.

ing—by exposing colonial ruptures, wrought by the wounds of uneven development and military violence. In this sense, breaking refers to the inability of narrative forms to enunciating Black/Palestinian estrangement. This is a similar argument made by Fred Moten in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Moten argues that Black radicalism is constituted by unarticulated sounds and feelings that refuse closure and are often produced in poetics and music: “Syncopation, performance, and the anarchic organization of phonic substance delineate an ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work” (85). Suheir Hammad engages the “breaks” of black radicalism, where subjectivity and personhood confront exile and homelessness. *Breaking Poems* is a singular poem, and yet it is “broken” by Hammad’s breaks—literally written as “break”—between sections, as well as by the Arabic words that literally connect the disparate English significations.

In the first part of *Breaking Poems*, Hammad dwells on the concept of “break” as a means to articulate a body torn apart through exile and homelessness. In showing the sorts of dismemberment entailed in exile, Hammad expresses a geopolitical awareness that links various sites of colonial modernity. The poem traces her body as it moves across national borders to expose a world of uneven development, violent exclusions, and “broken” bodies. These sites are: Deheisheh refugee camp, Beirut, Tel Aviv, Gaza, Khan Younis, NYC, Houston, Bombay, Brooklyn, New Orleans, Baghdad, and then finally, a deterritorialized place called “here,” which is simply, “my body.”

Through lyrical sequences in which she employs Anglicized Palestinian Arabic to suture together English words, Hammad articulates the spaces, broken, within modernist geographies, where Palestinians, stateless and homeless, reside. In the process of finding a language to express what cannot be otherwise identified, spoken or located on a map, Hammad finds a grammar that links similarly displaced bodies, including residents of NOLA and American Indians.

Hammad makes explicit a geography linking an Afro-Arab world by engaging U.S. urban hip-hop aesthetic and Palestinian poetics, as well as by engaging, directly, the question of Katrina’s refugees in her contribution to Joy James’ 2007 collection, *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*. In her poem, “of refuge and language,” Hammad dwells on the homelessness of Katrina victims in order to engage a comparative exercise in which Black NOLA is posed as Pales-

tinian refugees. The poem focuses on the inability of the word “refuge” and “refugee” to adequately convey the state of homelessness and dispossession. In the word “refuge” Hammad finds a public attempt to contain the narrative of displacement into a narrative of homecoming, of becoming, of sanctuary (James 2007).

I do not wish
To place words in living mouths
Or bury the dead dishonorably

I am not deaf to the cries escaping shelters
That citizens are not refugees
Refugees are not Americans

I will not use language
One way or another
To accommodate my comfort reference. (James 2007)

It is through her comparison to the refugee, that Hammad illustrates the incommensurability of comparing New Orleans’s desires for refuge and the refugee’s desire for homeland. Indeed, the failure of the comparison becomes productive of a different epistemology that reveals the structural limits of citizenship and the State to provide “refuge” for Black residents of New Orleans and Palestinian refugees, respectively.

No peoples ever choose to claim status of dispossessed
No people want pity above compassion
No enslaved peoples ever called themselves slaves

What do we pledge allegiance to?

A government that leaves its old
To die of thirst surrounded by water
Is a foreign government (reference?). (James 2007)

Here Hammad plays with the notion of foreignness, illustrating how the U.S. State’s inadequate attempt to comfort the Black citizens of New Orleans placed the U.S. state as foreign to NOLA citizens. Yet, she is also illustrating how despite the promise of citizenship, the liberal state is just as alienating and violent as are those to which the U.S. regularly looks to as foreign, exotic, backward.

Having created a space of both difference and similarity between refugees and Katrina survivors, Hammad refashions geographies in ways that link Palestine to Black America through both group's un-refuge and homelessness. In the final part of the poem, Hammad illustrates a geopolitical awareness that sutures refugees as a different kind of belonging. She writes of "Ahmad from Guinea" who makes her falafel sandwich in Brooklyn while questioning her about to whom and where she belongs. In her response to Ahmad, she answers to another foreigner/insider of the U.S. nation-state,

Yes Amadou this is my country

And these my people

Evacuated as if criminal

Rescued by neighbors

Shot by soldiers

Adamant they belong

The rest of the world can now see

What I have seen

Do not look away

The rest of the world lives here too

In America reference. (James 2007)

Here, the Palestinian refugee and the Katrina victim are merged, as both are "evacuated as if criminal, rescued by neighbors, shot by soldiers." While Hammad denies that there is "refuge" for either victims of Katrina or al Nakba, there is something that is structurally and qualitatively different that links both groups in a shared horizon: belonging. "These my people," Hammad writes, about the people of NOLA, but also about the Palestinian refugees throughout the globe to whom she is similarly different-yet-like. Hammad constructs a bond forged within the crucible of colonial modernity; Palestinians and Katrina refugees both wander across a landscape in which they are excluded. Yet, where the Black NOLA resident may find refuge, the Palestinian remains always and forever a refugee.

Key to Hammad's lyrical comparison between Palestine and New Orleans is the recognition of incommensurability. Ultimately comparing the Katrina victim and Palestinian refugee breaks down due to the recognition that Black Americans have some recourse to civil society, insufficient as this may be, while Palestinian refugees remain stateless. But underneath the incommensurable realities of citizenship and statelessness lies a more profound layer of similarity that is constituted by colonial modernity and border thinking. It is not that Palestinian and Katrina refugees are the same, it is that both the Nakba and the flood unearth a structure of feeling, a sense that the geographies of colonial modernity are broken, as the U.S. state's "protections" of citizenship and the United Nation's creation of the State of Israel are both exposed as violent ruptures.

The cultural politics that emerge from borderland geographies often reconfigure the geographies of identity and belonging. My case studies each illustrate geographies linking Black Americans and Palestinians within different configurations of colonial modernity. The geographic circuit that constitutes Afro-Arab geographies is forged by and within colonial modernity. While there has been a long trajectory of Afro-Arab intersections, in the contemporary period it is the global dimension of U.S. consumer products and culture that helps forge new routes of transnational encounter. Yet, the Afro-Arab connection is not merely a convergence of global capitalism and consumption, but is produced through a global phenomenon in which both groups confront a similar force of colonial modernity.

Within normative geographies of modernity, Arab and Black American identities get fixed within local and national contexts. Yes, it is therefore critically important to recognize the beats and breaks, the ever-present structures of feelings, which have constituted an Afro-Arab geographical imaginary. From Brooklyn to Beirut, from the Middle East to East L.A., subaltern aesthetic and political practices articulate geographies produced out of the wounds of colonial modernity. These creative arts of geopolitical awareness offer alternative global polarities that require that we view settler colonial sites within shared circuits of modernity; indeed, they enable us to see how Gaza is Port au Prince and Ramallah is New Orleans.

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