

‘Suheir Hammad’s Negotiated Historiography of  
Arab America

التأريخ التوافقي للأدب العربي الأمريكي فى أشعار سهير حماد

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## Abstract

The paper deals with the rise and restoration of the Arab American agency from a place of potential exile into a negotiated space of cultural existence. The attempt to create a realm of art that negotiates ethnic and racial specificity as it carves a space for itself represents the foundational logic of Suheir Hammad’s artistry. The study argues that objectification in Arab American representation conditions the psychotic foreclosure of history of the Arab American self. It is a process premised upon the inability to assimilate historical precepts- not that history does not exist, but that one’s present perception falls short of envisioning it into wholesomeness, owing to a breach, or a willful rejection of an incompatible instance that occurred in the past.

A confrontation with western historiography as the normative mode of narrativization is suggested in the study as a necessary starting point for reclaiming an authentic version of a true Arab American past. The reclamation of a mediated history of self and otherness outside of the patriarchal structure of western hegemony and the initiation of a relationship with the language of the Diaspora through hybridization lead to the conditioned birth of a new Arab American voice consciousness. A deconstructive negotiated historiography should deal with a direct engagement with difference not as a contested category of discord but as one that allows for a trajectory of cultural and historical emergence and intellectualization of vistas of Arab culture. The paper postulates that Suheir Hammad’s *Born Palestinian Born Black*, *Breaking Poems* and *Zataar Diva* rearticulate such negotiated historiography of Arab American cultural consciousness. Analysis of selected poems from the three volumes locate such new cultural consciousness.

### Key words:

Arab American Agency- narrativization- historiography- wholesomeness - hybridization

## Suheir Hammad's Negotiated Historiography of Arab America

*(historicization of memory)?  
don't wanna be your exotic  
some delicate fragile colorful bird  
imprisoned caged  
in a land foreign to the stretch of  
her  
wings.  
From Born Palestinian Born  
Black*

This paper contends that Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian Born Black*, *Breaking Poems* and *Zataar Diva* rearticulate a negotiated historiography of Arab America. Attempting to turn catastrophe into challenge, Hammad's new engagement with history is rife with the throes of revival of an Arab American literary canon that adopts subjectification as a mode of Arab American representation and guards against the dire consequences of objectification. In order to institute a category for the excluded, western historiography sanctioned objectification as a mode of diasporic representation that put Arab Americans under erasure. Moreover, it customized a narrative that conditioned Arab American othering hence contributing to the problematic of psychotic foreclosure of history. The misappropriation of history, silencing and foreclosure and attempts to neutralize them as modes of representation are discussed in the course of this study.

Are Arab Americans a hyphen that never ends? A query that echoes at the core of almost all Arab American literary and political writing pre and post 9/11. Arabs in the United States have always inhabited problematic spaces of cultural consciousness and psychic displacement before the cataclysmic event of September 2001. Barbra Aziz comments on the Arab's sense of displacement and inherent loss by proclaiming that "something is always missing. Even if we do not say so, we feel it. What is missing is me" (Aziz xii). Over the past two and a half

centuries, Arab immigrants to the United States maintained the dual process of identification and dissociation from American society. The first generation immigrants stressed the condition that ‘they are white but not quite’ (Suleiman 15) as they sought their assimilation into American society. Along with Arab immigrants’ need to belong came a melting pot ideology that attempted to strategize absencing Arabs in America in that Arab immigrants’ introduction in American society was conditioned upon playing the role of 'transmitters of western civilization'; (MAJAJ, POST 324); an equation that dictated cultural and historical erasure of group consciousness. Moreover, Arabs’ acceptance of their whiteness was later questioned by their absence from the discourse of white ethnicity which further complicated their positionality within American mainstream culture and made them inhabit what Therese Saliba refers to as a 'space of ambiguity' (Saliba 318).

Although once labeled "the invisible of the invisibles" (Kadi xx) the shock of ground zero brought the Arab Diaspora the most unwanted attention; a reductive gaze that transfixed the Arab Diaspora in an impossible phrase of objectification. Western discourses of homogenization and totalization of Arab culture became the west’s best defensive strategy against a minority that experienced myriad forms of atrocious racialization. Arabs in America typified “a danger zone” (MAJAJ, POST 326) that attracted assault and assassination.<sup>1</sup> Although Arabs once resisted categorization as blacks in the early Twentieth Century<sup>2</sup>, they were so often associated with blackness. Steven Salaita refers to Arabs of the Diaspora as “sand niggers” (Salaita, Arab 19) measured against a white majority culture. Islamophobia or the unrealistic fear of Islamicization of America that Steven Salaita argues in *Anti Arab Racism in the USA* encapsulates the modus operandi behind the western strategy of containment. America, with its rainbow of cultures, dictates ‘representational monochrome’ on its Arab American community; an appropriated presence of otherization marked by monolithic representations that deny the possibility of plurality (Salaita,

Arab 1) and that eventually perpetrate mythologization and stereotyping of Arabs as discursive tropes worthy of marginalization.

Reductive racial representations of the sort are sustained by the substantial backing of colonial discourse that claims that Arabs are "transplants" living outside of history and therefore maintain no claim to civilized existence. According to the postcolonial western mindset, Arabs have "centuries of experience but no wisdom. As a collective entity, then, the Arab accumulates no existential or even semantical thickness. He remains the same." <sup>3</sup>William H. Leuchtenburg argues in *The American Perception of the Arab World* to an almost similar vein:

from the perspective of the American historian, the most striking aspect of the relationship between Arab and American cultures, is that, to Americans the Arabs are a people who have lived outside of history---- for one may read any standard account of this history of America, until the most recent times and derive from it the impression either that the Arabs have had no history or that it was only of the most inconsequential sort. (15)

Leuchtenburg's argument can be read as a justification for western patriarchy that conditioned the East's reduction to fragments. Positional superiority that echoes in the text states a claim for the rehabilitation of Arab backwardness at the hands of a know all- a stance that perpetrates Arabs' invisibility. About the permission to narrate, Edward Said argues that the right to narrate becomes limited to the dynamics of power that exclude the consciousness of the less privileged who are in turn forced to succumb to the will of a majority that is reductive of their being.

This is not to say, of course, that dominance in history is unsustainable: of course it is, but it is far from being the only point of view or the only history. There has always been a contest--between the victor and vanquished; history tends to be written from the point of view of the victor. But one of the hallmarks of modern historical consciousness is its interest in

what Gramsci called the phenomenon of the subaltern, those whose struggle against the dominant mode has hitherto either been confined to silence or misrepresented in the confident accents of the directive classes (Said, *Reflections* 523).

Although Said’s reference is loaded with heavy colonial baggage, it still abounds as a struggle for the cultural will and consciousness of a minority vis a vis a dominant majority that aims at their silencing and the misappropriation of their history. To broaden the scope of concern, Spivak draws on the Lacanian model of foreclosure<sup>4</sup> to develop the argument that “historical silencing” (311) or “the rendering impossible of another narrative” (Spivak, *Critique* 6) befalls the “subaltern” or “the native informant” who in turn represents “the mark of expulsion” (Spivak, *Critique* 4) and leads to foreclosure of history (Spivak, *Critique* 6). Foreclosure, in this context, marks a process premised upon the inability to assimilate historical precepts- not that history does not exist, but that one’s present perception falls short of envisioning it, owing to a breach, or a willful rejection of an incompatible instance that occurred in the past. Historical foreclosure, if one draws upon the Lacanian argument, is triggered pursuant upon a confrontation with a lack or an absence that cannot be transcended; the lack that is argued in this context is that of a country of origin that represents the name of the father, or the Borromean knot that places within perspective the three worlds of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. Although subalternity may fall short of representing the Arab American Diaspora for being the educated elite; there is still truth in the fact that the native informant or “the learned story teller” is excluded at will from the western discourse of power, thus “writing the self at its othermost” (Spivak, *Death* 91).

I would like to propose that what gets foreclosed in this context is both the informant himself/ herself as ‘a position of erasure of identity’ (Spivak, *Post* 476) and the history of the Diaspora that the informant represents. The Arab American self emerges as a site of psychotic foreclosure of history representing a struggle of wills of two peoples, one

that threatens with cultural annihilation and the other being threatened works up defensive mechanisms that in turn assimilate a true past as a replacement of a real past that was owned by their ancestry and inherited through storytelling. Therefore, historical representation is misappropriated both ways rendering a strategy of identity building outside of the western patriarchal structure suspect. Moreover, foreclosure takes a heavy toll on the literalization of history. Arab American canon building is aggravated by some factors namely the constant adoption of defensive mechanisms of response to western otherness that writes Arab Americans off their narrative. Another critical entrapment of engaging with memory is that Arab Americans are sometimes caught in certain static representational structures namely excessive indulgence in remembrance and attachment to the past which may be deemed a fixation that impedes Arabs of the Diaspora to transcend the attitude of victimology precluding possible change. Lisa Suheir Majaj shares her concern to the same effect that

celebration of and longing for the past are not, --- sufficient; nostalgic longing for return to origins privileges a static conception of identity unamenable to change. Moreover, the metonymic slippage in nostalgic texts between family, community, tradition, ethnicity, and the past implicitly affirms patriarchy as an ethnic value (Majaj, *Memory* 271).

Majaj captures the instance of an Arab American past presented outside of what Amrijit Singh refers to as the “loop of assimilation” (17) as one that allows for memory, counter memory and nostalgia to preclude the presentation of history. Unconditional immersion into things Arab like metaphors of food and the kitchen, music and dancing, and family culture and togetherness when taken to excess may mark such an example of stasis. To counter the specter of limitation and to help build a new literary canon of consciousness, Arab Americans draw upon a tradition of historical recovery by legitimizing narrative as a communicative medium of integration that helps them grow culturally



into themselves as they attempt to re-inscribe a history that they dedicate to themselves. To achieve this double bind of narrativization, memory is introduced in Arab American literature as a negotiation of identity (Majaj, *Memory* 266) and as activation in the face of stasis. Memory in this context is far from being a fixture; it represents an entity that is in a constant state of flux. It interacts with images and realities of those who remember and is therefore reproduced and reconstructed in ways that may be representational of a symbolic past. What emerges in fact is a multiplicity of memorial representations that piece together a history that was initially inherited in stories handed down by posterity and measure it up against a present that takes into account the western gaze.

A confrontation with western historiography as the normative mode of narrativization is a necessary starting point for the negotiation of history. A deconstructive negotiated historiography or what Amal Abdel Razik refers to as a “rearticulated politics of difference” (68) emerges as a possibility of re-narrativization of Arab American history. Such historiography may negotiate a direct engagement with difference not as a contested category of discord but as one that allows for a trajectory of cultural and historical emergence and intellectualization of vistas of Arab culture. The shift from objectification to subjectification (Salaita, *Arab* 38) of Arabs is an attempt toward locating a politics of cultural representation and recontextualization of Arab Americans. The new literature of consciousness introduces an embracing rhetoric of relational images presenting an affiliative model of identification that deals with limitation as it charts a new course of subjectification.

Hammad skillfully constructs a discursive space of subjective representation through the introduction of a new spokesperson and a mediator of history with “hip edgy voice” (Darraj 3) and “the urban, hip hop style of expression” (Darraj 79). As a woman with a dual cultural affiliation, Hammad “creates an alternate self in autobiographical act” (Conrey 156) that engages first and third world consciousness recreating

a fourth world consciousness. In *Directing my Pen Inward*, Hammad introduces a story of a self “like many people who decide to write their way out of poverty, oppression and solitude and all the isms, I thought I could bury myself deep enough in a story, I might come out the other side in a different world” (81). The fear of loss of memory marks Hammad’s verse like her Arab American counterparts. Hammad voices the concern of being “a sixty year old reader who cannot remember what it is like to be Palestinian American poet half a lifetime ago” (*Directing* 81). The paradigm of a female emerging from Hammad's work is not that of a silent, crushed woman but one with transcendental consciousness that stands for communal autobiographical presence thus becoming an agent of her own history; pieced at will from shards that represent a hybrid self in transit.

Deft metaphorical configurations borrowed from Arabic music contained within structure and language become a venue for cultural and historical bonding and a site for Hammad’s sense of shifting individuality. Hammad talks back in language that neutralizes the Eurocentric conceptual framework of Arabia as it creates its own hybridization of register that celebrates cultural alterity. The marriage of Arabic vernacular to the English language in Hammad’s verse magnifies the dialectics of language as absent presence. Language in Hammad’s volumes talks back in myriad tongues that capture the phrasings of Arabic poetry with its foreclosed cultural history.

*Zaatar Diva* opens with *bag of zaatar*, a poem about the revoicing of tacit Arab history. Two voices are heard, the author’s and an imaginary voice of an otherness that the author does not clearly define yet challenges to partake of such an experience of self definition. The poem houses an agglomeration of identity markers for the speaker all contained in a brown paper bag. The speaker’s injunction “open up my bag” is pregnant with a tone of militancy that verges on aggression as it opens up a venue for sharing unspoken history that is represented in the

contents of the bag. Dismembered items from the author's personal life in east and west are what one attends to including, "baby teeth, hair, lots of hair, pieces of colored glass, sea beads broken." A curious instance is that the poem defeats its own title; at no time does the bag of zaatar include any traces of zaatar. Part of the history of the self is foreclosed; a condition in which silence is the only means of self representation. However, in order for her to reverse self erasure, she challenges the reader/other to voice her experience in "open my bag/tell me what you see." As though the author sets the merger of the two voices of east and west as the condition for the dual process of deconstruction and reconstruction of Arab history of the Diaspora. The rewriting of Arab history becomes a shared act of will, a joined vision and a united consciousness rather than an isolated endeavor.

open up my bag  
out will spill  
---  
baby teeth sesame  
hair lots of hair  
open up and seek  
secrets closets  
whispers whips hyssop  
things deciduous  
dead things breathing  
---  
sweet oils sandals  
honey rocks and earth  
champagne chocolates  
good chocolates  
music music sweet  
open up my bag  
tell me what you see (17).

*Bag of Zataar* chronicles a tug of war between western hegemonic discourse and that of Arab America represented in the protagonist's resistance. Both fates intersect and the voicing of the tale that the reader never hears is one told by the western other. Hammad skillfully displays her inability to articulate as she carries out this double bind of extending an invitation to the other to speak followed by the other's silencing. The need to exist through otherness is presented in the poem yet countered by imposed silencing of otherness, as though to testify that foreclosure works both ways.

Hammad's reportorial style introduced in *Bag of Zaatar* is countered by her need for a story line as an attempt to heal the trauma. History is often introduced as collective mosaic of many people; a ritual repetition in song that is silent. In *Sawah*, a poem that commemorates a song by the famous Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafez, Hammad captures Spivak's argument as she defines the space 'between history and hope' as a space of silence and of journey and growth of hunting for the self. This poem attempts to unify time as past represented in history and as future baptized in hope of a reversal of wrong doing.

this is what poets do  
fall in love over and out

they break hearts poets  
do and then wail when  
their own are bruised

words carry no weight  
meaning is in silence  
in the space  
between history and hope (30).

The word 'sawah' in Arabic means an exile by will and not by circumstance; a person roaming around on the look out for something that is elusive at best. Recollection and nostalgia become the dominant mode of the poem in "he will remember me as/a poet and as/a pair of

eyes/a set of hands.” Despite the need to go back, Hammad does not risk being caught in static representational structures; instead she travels the expanse of time as she acknowledges loss. Physical dismemberment of the poet as “eyes” and “hands” testifies to a reductionism that threatens her survival and hence the survival of her story. While the search in the poem is one of love, the hunt involves more than just emotion. Loss of the poet’s love is concomitant upon loss of historical moorings. The hope identified in the poem is of a future that bridges the past with all its pains as it connects to a present that borrows meaning from the wholesomeness of time.

*Bint El- Neel* celebrates the story of Om Kalthom’s rise from the rags of poverty to the riches of stardom. In her existence is summarized the story of Arab love and resistance. Often known as the daughter of the Nile, she shines as a metaphor of Arab nationalism and unity ‘a bird you sang/ from your belly to soar over/ all of Egypt/ in the delta’s villages/ muwlad’s weddings/ ramadan breakfasts.’ Hammad draws upon the autobiographical as she chronicles a story that started small and inconsequential then miraculously expanded to represent a consciousness of a country. The poem is constructed in the form of a song replicating the repetitiveness of Om Kalthom’s songs. “Allah’s word” or religious precept becomes the springboard to an incantation that conditioned Om Kalthom’s entry into the world of riches and political and artistic stardom. Hammad compares her to a ‘bird that sang from her belly’ stressing the depth and scope of the song that is later characterized as a ‘burning in your mouth’ that invaded Egyptian muwalads and Ramadan fests.

you were young and a novelty  
voice so big baba dressed you  
a boy and you traveled  
to the ears  
of rich men learned men  
men of leisure with shillings and servants  
entrances for you to shadow

Although Hammad presents her as a miracle voice, she takes liberty in voicing her dislike of the singer because she brought tears to her mother's eyes, as though Hammad wishes to remember but not to be held hostage to the memory and the pain that it impregnates. Resistance to pain of memory represents an act of neutralization and an awareness of her present condition. Hammad's hybridization of Arabic in yaaallaaah emphasizes religiosity as a central notion not just to faith but to life in general along with a commitment to conjure up language as a context that preserves memory. Idolization of Om Kalthom echoes in the stretching of the 'aaallaaah' which signifies unsurpassed beauty to which the name of God is a possible equivalent. The sense of utter alienation from language rises as a wall that sends Hammad the child into exile from history, coupled with her mother's tears, amounts to hatred of an emotion that she failed to assimilate both psychologically and mentally.

listen  
ya naceeni  
oh you who have forgotten  
it has never crossed your mind to ask after  
me  
----  
wa inti ala bali  
you are on my mind  
  
i have not forgotten  
and though it was men and  
their gods started it  
you sang for women  
for my mother and her daughters (32,3).

Despite the fact that the addressee in the poem is originally the lover deserter 'oh you who have forgotten me,' the scope of Hammad's metaphor widens to include the western other- the distant stranger whose forgetfulness is both willful and painful. It becomes an identity marker of

the Arab as an outcast whose fate lies between rejection and erasure. The poem voices blame to the western other- the ‘you’ who forgets that is yet controlled by the ‘I’ commentator who has not forgotten. The poem attests to subjectification of Arab American representation as it rewrites the ‘I’ from being the object of naming to the subject that points fingers of blame. One witnesses a moment in which the disadvantaged ‘I’ adopts the discourse of power without being caught in the intricacies of western hegemonic discourse. It is the power of the ownership of little histories of the east that guide this endeavor. Hammad also draws a direct parallel with Om Kalthom; she too made her mother cry and she too knows the word of God. Moreover, she credits herself with a reversal of the act of forgetfulness in ‘we enti ala bali,’ ‘you are on my mind;’ as though proclaiming that the East always remembers scars that time incurred. It is also the east that retrieves its own history of hurts as it transcends them most gracefully by the power of love of both God and art.

*The Givers* testifies to Hammad’s continued search for history that one collects from the odds and ends at turning every corner in life. The Arab setting of drinking tea and telling stories contextualizes history in an eastern framework. History is an elusive presence that requires meditation to capture. Hammad attempts to search for history that has fallen between the cracks of forgetfulness in “neon lights” and “billboards.” She embarks on a query to hunt for history that went unchronicled in the little lives of things, the people who are gone and whose stories are inscribed in plants, in the universal unconscious of nature and the world that gives rise to it. She finally concludes that history may be found “in the blood below my/ feet, the spirits in/the wind, on me/ under every stone a myth/ behind every branch a prophesy” (74).

Hammad expands on the personal pronoun ‘I’ as she refers to a collectivity in *Love Poem*; a poem that counters Israeli shootings of Palestinian children in the head. The ‘I’ in the poem towers over the ‘you’ introduced in the previous poem by virtue of the I’s healing

potential. Time in the poem is deconstructed to constant presentness; a moment that deflates the past and all its atrocities along with the future and its uncertainties. It is in the now of the poem that hurt can be healed.

i want to be open and hide  
the children of palestine within me  
head first i would bear down  
bring them into me  
an act of desperate love  
the israeli army shoots children in the head

The 'I' in this poem stands for a communal autobiographical presence "situating the poetic I within a we" (Hammad Interview 2004) of the Palestinian people. Hammad emerges as a mother guardian who protects Palestinian children against genocide and who counters through blood sacrifice the desecration of Palestinian bodies in "i would shelter them where/it is warm where limbs meet/where life is where babies/come from horizon dawning" (40). Warmth and compassion draw an image of beginning of a life that baptizes the poem in love countering the coldness of exile. At the close of the poem, Hammad prays that these children "grow up fall in love/ make love everywhere always/be human be alive" (41). Being alive is an incantation that closes a curtain on the history of atrocities and opens up a door of hope for the survival of childhood in Palestine.

History to Hammad is a hurt, a scar that needs attending to and a story that has to be told involving the you and I as conditions to each other's existence. Hammad insists that the 'I' be the story teller and the bearer of witness and in that challenging the notion of silence. In *Over Waffles*, the 'I' takes precedence over the you only to emerge as one with otherness towards the end of the poem. Time for the story is the present and the voice heard is one of a collectivity, of the poet and her people; 'a veteran of several wars like most of my people.' *Over Waffles* promises no sharing of sweetness; rather it emerges as Hammad's talisman of Arab



American history reenacted. The poem is a journey of transit on a train in which the “I” and the “you” travel from one point of consciousness to another. Hammad faces the western other named ‘sir’ in the poem as a superior turned peer. Negotiation of identity is the hallmark of the poem as the protagonist seeks a partnership of equals with otherness. She attempts to self explain what has become of her to both herself and her listener and to expose her tragedy and that of her people.

An act of sharing opens the poem as the poet turned armored soldier tells her story and discloses the contents of a bag that she carries. Hammad takes the liberty of introducing herself to the you other and unravels the mystery of her story: “i have been left battered by battles i did not elect to participate in/ and there is no pension to keep company” (52). She clarifies that fatigue of a life style forced rather than craved conditions depression and the inability to seek comfort in taking up a role she never wants for herself :“i am tired and this ride so lonely this outfit, this smile, are a/ uniform armor of cloth and enamel i was not born a soldier sir” (52). She decisively concludes that she is a “poet and poor at war but can defend myself” (52). Hers is a dream to commune with nature, “eat watermelon and watch the sky” (52). However, her acknowledgement of pain does not discourage her from opening up her bag “filled with/ genuine all i got good stuff and i will share it with you” (52); an act that represents a transcendence over pain. This temporary victory reverses foreclosure as it finds a voice that acknowledges difference and pain and finds a way to triumph over them.

However, reciprocity of goodwill on part of otherness is far from being possible. A shadow of ‘the day dream over’ is cast as a specter that separates the ‘I’ and the ‘you.’ A wall rises between east and west as contradictions rule the mode of poetic articulation in ‘and there is something about your arms familiar their/circle round me and the/ distance they keep me.’ The curt phraseology of this section of the poem announces an awareness that contrasts the first section as it toys with the

paradox of closeness and distance. Wound inflicted on the 'I' speaker automatically plagues the 'you' in the poem who is almost non-existent except in the tale told by the 'I' speaker. Reductionism is depicted in "the uniform frayed" and in "you too tall for them pants" as though to proclaim that the underlying intention of war is just as worn out as the outfit of war.

i am stronger than i appear  
enough to walk from  
want if it ain't  
need finally  
and softer to the touch  
than imagined

on the verge of falling  
in love my wounds are  
healing into bouquet worthy  
tissue flowers tender buds  
gem colored reflected  
in your eyes (52,3)

The tension of dramatic realization of oneness with otherness comes to a crescendo in 'how do i what do i/ say when these hands/ my own aided enemies against me,' a moment of reckoning of a self creating its own destruction eases off in the romance of the image of the 'I' falling in love with the you other accompanied by healing of a scar. Love is the only emotion that bridges the gash that foreclosure causes through reciprocity and continuity of history. Self and other, though pit against each other, find a niche in which they can deal with their differences.

In *Breaking Poems*, history is represented in the body; the search for self as corporeal existence. In *Break*, Hammad translates herself in the context of otherness as she searches for rubble of the self.

I am looking for my body  
For my form in the foreign  
In translation

What I am trying

To say is that I sit in this body dream  
In this body expel  
In this body inherit

Here is the poem

I left a long time ago  
Remember stubble remember unwanted remember  
touch

I cannot remember where i left my body

---

What had happened was  
I wrote myself out of damage  
this is the body of words and spaces  
I found to re-construct  
my home (11, 12).

Repetition reins as the mode of representation in this poem, as though the author is trying to recall against all odds the memory of existence. Trauma characterizes the process of recall in this poem. Repetition of the word body reflects growing anger in the poem especially with the escalated progression of ‘body dream,’ ‘body expel,’ ‘body inherit’ as it sets the world of fantasy against that of the real. In her reference to “body inherit,” the speaker proclaims ownership of an inheritance that she is not responsible for. A sense of loss of identity pervades the text coupled by a need to relocate it. Fear of damage destroyed her ability to exist in her body and conditioned writing herself

out of existence. A reversal of erasure is sought at the end of the poem in the process of self reconstruction. The body that emerges at the end of the poem is one of prosody that makes the best use of spaces and silences that make up the protagonist's consciousness.

*Born Palestinian Born Black* announces self as an anathema of exclusion expressed in the color of blackness as a site of racialization. *Argela Remembrance* in *Born Palestinian Born Black* presents a strong definition of self represented in hunting for history in personal memory, song and religion. The poem opens with a ritual of family sharing of the argela and of the story of a people who are one with nature and who are eventually exiled from both land and history. The search for history is synonymous with that of God.

we are a people  
stood on the edge of the sea  
asked her to kiss our toes goodnight  
she kissed them good-bye  
we departed  
with those sea and hibiscus kisses  
yellow hibiscus kisses shadowing  
our path good-by  
we read futures in search of our past  
in coffee grinds and tea leaves  
in upturned hands grasping  
for prayer

The poem is punctuated with sighs and desperation in the absence of security in the present moment. Seeking protection in the unknown in 'we read futures in search of our past in coffee grinds and tea leaves' can not stop pain from flooding the consciousness of the poem. The existence of the past according to the poem is conditioned upon the existence of a future that has not yet come into being. Time cannot materialize as continuity in this text; the vaporization of the past is a testimonial on its

foreclosure. Seeking the wholesomeness of time can only be made possible by rereading it in ‘memory of the soil once, laid under our nails.’ Palestinian land is desecrated and transformed from being the metaphor of nurture to that of dirt under the speaker’s finger nails representing a memorial of belonging to an existence that no longer abounds. Fragmentation of collective memory of Palestine is most ingeniously pitted against ‘we the people’ reducing their togetherness to a mosaic that is metaphorically whole yet holed and literally pulverized at the will of the western other. The father’s tearful declaration as he smokes the argela and shares his story with Hammad in “we once stood on the edge of our sea/ but they made us leave” (32) cuts through the poem as a gripping realization that relocation is both painful and inevitable.

Fadda Corney argues that "the pull of Palestine as home land occupies a central place in their consciousness, opening up a tension between here (the present) and there (the past) even when there is a place that is purely constructed from stories handed down from one exilic generation to another" (170). She points out that absence and perversion rule the mode of articulation and pervades aspects of Palestinian relocation:

The absence of a home place is reflected in fragments symbolizing the larger whole that was left behind. Planting plastic potted plants, an act that embodies the truncation and rootlessness of exile, mirrors the artificiality of the speaker's surroundings (171).

However, it is the sense of rootlessness that gives rise to the need for a nation of “replaceable imagination”<sup>5</sup> as an alternative to a present that is foreclosed at will. Nation as replaceable imagination is a simulation of an existence that may not be referred to as artificial. It refers to belonging to a virtual place of memory rooted in spaces of consciousness that acts as a cushion against the simultaneity of dimensions of awareness that outcasts experience giving them a new

hope at adjusting to their newly adopted home and at rewriting their narrative. Nation as replaceable imagination, in this context, is encapsulated in the naming of the self as an act of locating identity and history.

In *Exotic* Hammad's rejection of exoticism in 'don't wanna be your exotic some delicate fragile colorful bird imprisoned caged in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings' is not only a rejection of fetishization but also a denouncement of the way her foreignness is read by the other culminating in an enforced mode of exile. The paradoxical engagement between imprisonment and the stretch of the bird's wings challenges the uncanny reality that a creature of daring is reduced to chains of paralysis. Hammad's definition of exoticism is rather curious in this poem; it seems that the poem picks up on all the orientalist paraphernalia of the harem girl and the belly dancer by way of denouncing the misappropriation of western influence in the retelling of the story of Arab femininity. The poem rolls toward the end with the power of proclamation that 'I am dead to you;' a statement that acts as both a reinforcement and a challenge of Spivak's argument of historical silencing.

don't wanna be your exotic  
your loving of my beauty ain't more than  
funky fornication plain pink perversion  
in fact nasty necrophilia  
cause my beauty is dead to you  
i am dead to you  
---  
don't wanna be  
your erotic  
not your exotic (69,70).

*Bleached and Bleeding* stages a confrontation with western history along with a clear definition of the 'you' aggressor who is eventually humbled. The title of the poem echoes the importance of

shedding one's skin color represented in bleaching as an act of whiteness that eventually leads to the disintegration of such skin represented in bleeding. The poem focuses on self hate and self destruction as by products of western appropriation. The you and the we are set apart on a battlefield adopting a similar language of aggression.

you molest  
you rape  
you blame us  
we blame ourselves  
we hate ourselves  
we kill ourselves  
you dominate  
detain  
you dehumanize  
we come to you  
tired and poor  
bleached and bleeding  
we come to you  
inhaling your hatred  
yearning to breathe  
free  
you pat us on the head  
bed us for the night  
give us our book of food stamps  
kick us in the belly. (75,6)

Although the poem insists on the language of separation and enmity, oneness of the emotion of hatred in 'inhaling your hatred' reflects an act of sharing of a state of mind and consciousness. The panoply of giving in 'you pat us on the head/ bed us for the night' followed by an avalanche of deprivation and aggression in 'kick us in the belly' summarizes the relationship of colonizer and colonized in a jingle;

it is a relationship based on no trust, no love even when giving is exercised.

*Patience* presents waiting as the only answer that modulates into the need to settle the score. The poem empowers the speaker to exercise discretion; time in the poem is not only a healer but also a corrector of wrongs. It is time coming full circle that allows the speaker to settle an old score through the desecration of the body. The insistence in repetition of 'I await you' in " i await you tonight/ with my spirit sharp as a blade/ ready to slice" (85), "i await you in silence" (85) and "i await you in sunlight" (85) charges the poem with the energy of vengeance. The lower casing of "i" is relatively ironic as it takes account of western reduction of the 'i' as it regains its powers through aggression. The motivating power in the poem is rendered through "my people's screams and cries of horror/mixing with the sound of crickets" that make settling the score exceptionally sweet.

i wait for you  
these fields & shadows  
this spirit & life  
belong to this land  
and you cannot own us  
and for you we wait (85).

Adopting a language of violence represents the inseparability of Diaspora and western discourse of power. It is in the moment of aggression that the urgent need for separation is emphasized to no avail. Such negativity is only verbalized to be neutralized in *Bekafe* as it testifies to oneness in "and i carry you not/ in my pocket i carry/ you in my heart." Transcendence of the hurt and the will to work out pain into growth is a decision made and sealed in the heart of the protagonist.

Poetic selections from Hammad's volumes *Breaking Poems*, *Zataar Diva* and *Born Palestinian Born Black* chronicle a journey from erasure to identification of self and from silence to proclamation. In the



three volumes negotiation of history takes the form of building of identity and defining the relationship to otherness. *Zaatar Diva* deals with nostalgia, loss of home, protection of Palestinian children, search for history and the relocation of memory in song and story represented in Om Kalthom and Abdel Halim and also in the poet’s blood. Confrontation with the western other tempered with love provides healing in the act of sharing of the self. Victory is announced over foreclosure in the form of transcendence over suffering. *Break* dramatizes the process of search for history as a search for the body. The volume reverses negativity of the damage incurred on the author as it finds a new means of rebuilding an existence in words. *Born Palestinian Born Black* acknowledges loss of Palestine as land as it makes up for it by conjuring up the notion of nation as shared imagination. Pain modulates in the volume to confrontation, aggression and vengeance that seek transcendence in love and interdependability.

Hammad’s newly found voice restores Arab American agency to a negotiated space of cultural existence as it reads in a plurality of voice. She successfully establishes a novel field of engaged self other relationship that destabilizes western hegemony through neutralization. Although her poetry features moments of silence and instances of struggle, aggression and defensiveness, it skillfully exposes misappropriation of history and resists being caught in static representational structures. The ‘I’ as a healer journeys across spaces of excruciating memory and debilitating difference bringing about transcendence. Poetry in this context is used as a medium of neutrality for the negotiation of history from a mediated perspective of self and other as she defines a new engagement with difference as emergence of a history that was once foreclosed. Hammad’s prosody manages to locate a proper vocal consciousness of Arab America that elevates it from objectification to subjectification. Self emerges as a sign that reverses psychosis of foreclosure into the fullness of nurturing the experience of history into being.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> After the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal building (an attempt carried out by Timothy McVeigh- a white American) several Arab American homes and businesses were raided and Arab Americans attacked, beaten and murdered as in the case of Alex Odeh, the west coast regional director for the Arab American Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) FBI director William Webster warned that Arab Americans and others advocating "Arab points of view come within the zone of danger" (Abraham 165)

<sup>2</sup> In 1929 a Syrian man was lynched in Florida after a car accident, the Syrian immigrant community responded with a defensive attempt to assert their whiteness and negate possible associations with blackness. A letter was published in a Syrian immigrant journal that claimed that "the Syrian is not a negro whom southerners feel they are justified in lynching when he is suspected of an attack on a white woman. The Syrian is a civilized white man who has excellent traditions and a glorious historical background" (Majaj, Post 325)

<sup>3</sup> Said is influenced by the writings of Gertrude Bell namely *The Desert and the Sown* and *From Her Personal Papers, 1889- 1914*. Reference is quoted in *Orientalism* p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan argues in "Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary on Freud's "Verneinung" published in *Ecrits* that foreclosure is a condition of psychosis caused by the patient's rejection of a notion from his symbolic structure leading to hallucinations and/ or delusions. Lacan defines foreclosure as the expulsion from an external signifier- a symbolic order that the ego rejects as an "incompatible idea" together with its affect and behaves as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all leading to a psychotic structure. Lacan relates the origin of psychosis to an exclusion of the father or name of the father from the family structure. The name of the father may be referred to as the giver of law and order, the signifier and the symbolic with the consequent reduction of the latter to mother and child relations. Lacan introduces the RSI diagram of three interlocking circles that are transparent and independent of one another representing real, the symbolic and the imaginary. They are linked by a Borromean knot- in such a way that severing any one link will untie the other

two. Lacan elaborates that it is therefore not the case of the separation of the three rings that is the result of some defect, because they are already separate. Where they are joined, they are connected by a fourth link, the name of the father (Grigg 18). When the name of the father is foreclosed, it leaves a hole in the symbolic order that nothing can fill. Sooner or later, when the foreclosed name of the father reappears in the real, the subject is unable to assimilate it and the result of this collision with the inassimilable signifier is entry into psychosis proper, characterized typically by the onset of hallucinations and or delusions (Lacan 323). In 1953 lecture called "Le Symbolique, L' Imaginaire et Le Réel" (The symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, Lacan insists "what did not come to light in the symbolic, appears in the real"(Ecrits 324). Foreclosure to Lacan refers to a confrontation with a certain lack that cannot be transcended that leads to the inability to distinguish between the symbolic and the real. Lacan gives the example of the stool that stands on three legs; "it will stand until it is confronted by this lack" (Grigg 14).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Nora introduced the concept of history as "replaceable imagination," (284) or the hybrid that represents the intersection of literary and historical memory thus attesting to truth rather than reality. The birth of this new kind of history, according to Nora, is caused by the disintegration of the line of demarcation that keeps literary and historical memory apart. Maintaining a new relationship with the past is represented as one of the hallmarks of history as replaceable imagination, or the third hybrid that represents the intersection of the two. (284)

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