

## **Born Palestinian, Born Black – Hip Hop as a Means of Criticism of Palestinian Marginalization in Suheir Hammad’s *breaking poems***

### **1. Introduction**

In her poetry collection *breaking poems* (2008), Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad breaks new ground by introducing to poetry techniques associated with hip hop, a form of cultural expression rooted in the African American community. Hammad’s oeuvre has always been concerned with thematic parallels between the experience of African Americans and that of Palestinians (see, for instance, her first poetry collection, *Born Palestinian, Born Black*). Nor was she a stranger to hip hop prior to *breaking poems*; as a spoken work artist and original cast member of *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* as well as of the HBO show of the same name, Hammad’s performance style is closely associated with hip hop. The innovation of her latest poetry collection *breaking poems* lies in the fact that Hammad has stylistically appropriated hip hop techniques such as the **break (or break beat)** in writing these poems.

In the following, I trace Hammad’s employment of hip hop techniques in selected poems, to then discuss what this fusion of poetry and hip hop achieves. Let me briefly synopsise my argument. I argue that Hammad’s fusion of poetry and hip hop has two effects: first, having emerged as the cultural medium with which those most marginalized in American society expressed their grievances, i.e. black kids in urban ghettos, hip hop has been popular culture’s central medium of dissent to America’s dominant social structure for decades; creating a powerful parallelism between content and form, Hammad uses techniques associated with hip hop to draw attention to and criticize the lot of one of the world’s most marginalized people today, i.e. Palestinians. Second, using hip hop techniques, Hammad creates a simultaneity between past and present, i.e. traces the present condition Palestinians find themselves in to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and to the occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967 – just like black rappers have traced the precarious position many African Americans find themselves in to the traumatic origin of their community: slavery. While various marginalized groups are referenced in *breaking poems*, such as Iraqis, American Indians, blacks in South Africa, etc., my presentation will focus on the parallel between the experience of Palestinians and that of African Americans which Hammad suggests. I conclude my presentation with a few remarks on the productivity of including the study of Palestinian American and other Arab American issues in Asian American Studies.

## 2. Hip Hop – Style and Cultural Significance

Let me now briefly comment on the cultural significance of hip hop and introduce its central techniques. In her seminal analysis of hip hop culture, *Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), Tricia Rose characterizes hip hop as a phenomenon of “voices from the margins”; hip hop, that is rap music, mc-ing, break dancing et cetera, emerged in the 1970s as the cultural mode in which black kids in urban ghettos expressed their grievances and those of the African American community at large; at the same time, the local hip hop scenes were social stages on which these kids sought to gain respect and recognition from their peers – in most cases, “street credibility” and “authenticity” were the only forms of recognition these kids could aspire to, since the signifiers of social status in mainstream society (education, economic success etc.) were largely beyond their reach. MCs typically rapped about daily life in the black ghetto, police brutality, their community’s grappling with the legacy of slavery, and race relations [There also were problematic themes such as misogyny and glorification of violence, but it is beyond this presentation’s scope to go into this.] Hip hop’s look at American society from below soon attracted audiences beyond the black urban ghetto and the African American community. It soon became popular culture’s central medium of dissent to the existing social and economic order in the U.S. [By now, of course, one can argue that significant parts of the American hip hop scene have bought into the capitalist agenda, making them agents rather than critics of the U.S.’ economic order.] But there still are influential hip hop artists today whose work is decidedly political, such as Mos Def, The Roots, and the grand seigneurs of old school hip hop, Public Enemy.

As for hip hop techniques,

**-sampling** denotes isolating an excerpt, or sample, of one sound recording and reproducing it; an example would be the reproduction of a guitar riff from another song or of a quote from a movie in a rap song;

**-loop** denotes the multiple repetition of a sound sample;

-the loop, that is the multiple repetition of a sound sample, creates the **break** or **break beat**, which Tricia Rose calls a “repetition in rupture”; the break, according to Rose, creates a balance between past and present. This balance between past and present, Rose argues, expresses African and African American culture’s conception of time, differing sharply from European culture’s conception of time which is fixated on progress and sees repetition as

stagnation. [This argument, of course, references Paul Gilroy's argument in *Black Atlantic* that the syncopation to be found in African music is expressive of a specific conception of time which stands in strong opposition to the European conception of time.]

Let me now turn to the discussion of Suheir Hammad's appropriation of hip hop techniques in *breaking poems*.

### 3. The appropriation of hip hop techniques in *breaking poems*

This poetry collection can be characterized as emulating on the level of language/style the suffering that the breaking of people entails. Breaking is to be understood as both the breaking of bodies (injury, violation, killing) and the breaking of people's spirit. Ordinary language, Hammad proposes, does not capture this intense suffering which Palestinians, African Americans and other marginalized people are systematically subjected to. A new language is in order. Hammad introduces this theme in the first poem of the collection, simply entitled "break".

--- - break - ---

“(nyc)  
[...]  
i am looking for my body  
for my form in the foreign  
in translation  
what am I trying  
[...]  
here is the poem  
[...]  
what had happened was i wrote myself out of damage  
this is the body of words and spaces  
i have found to re-construct  
[...]  
(deheisha) [Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank]<sup>1</sup>  
my home  
girl is there now the air is thick  
people don't breathe well hold their  
tongues against cursing all of existence  
all that would carry on living during this

she wakes to news just the beginning  
the same story the one which leaves bodies  
behind as tokens of nothing  
one family

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<sup>1</sup> Comments in angular parentheses are mine; the power point presentation will not include those comments, I will merely make them orally; moreover, I will use more generous spacing for the power point presentation

roasting corn  
now all husk  
silk  
spraying  
wind  
[...]

(gaza)  
a woman's hand cups bloodied sand bits scalp ooze  
to the camera and says this is my family

(khan younis) [Palestinian refugee camp in the southern Gaza strip]  
Yamaaaaaaaaa [Arabic for *mama, mommy* ]  
yamaaaaaa"  
[p. 11ff.]

In this first poem, we already see what Hammad is centrally concerned with in her collection of poems: the fragility of life, of human bodies – healthy and alive one minute, blown to “bloodied sand bits” by a bomb blast the next minute – which she emulates on the level of form. Secondly, the trope of the unity of the speaker, her poem and Palestine likewise runs throughout the collection. In other words, the poet translates the destruction of Palestinians, which brings her to the verge of a “breakdown,” into “breaking” poems. The notion that conventional language does not capture the suffering that the systematic destruction of human life incurs – and the difficulties of relating these injustices to the “mainstream” – is reinforced throughout the whole collection of poems. Let's take a brief look at break (word).

“corner the corniche  
stop lean against  
a railing wave foreigners goodbye  
turn and walk into a bomb  
we no longer know language  
[...]  
words are against us  
there is a math only subtracts”  
[p. 19]

The 38 poems all contain “break” in their titles; this is the first manifestation of sampling which, as you may recall, denotes the reproduction of one sound recording in another; this pays tribute to the underlying common theme of all poems in the collection. As you saw in the poems cited so far, Hammad completely dispenses with capitalization. One could argue that Hammad deliberately breaks the rules of syntax and orthography to mirror the level of content on the level of form; but lack of capitalization is Hammad's “specialty,” her earlier works are in accordance. I have interpreted this elsewhere as expressing a desire for de-hierarchization

and democratization, disrupting the pattern in which we automatically imbue the signifieds of capitalized signifiers (God, President, etc.) with higher meaning. Moreover, in *breaking poems*, one poem is separated from the next only by the title of the new poem – as you already saw in the poems presented thus far, there are no punctuation marks in any of the poems. Or, to be more specific, there are no commas, periods, exclamation marks, question marks, etc. However, one occasionally finds double spaces where one would expect a comma or a period.

I argue that Hammad's use of double spaces in lieu of commas and periods has the effect Tricia Rose ascribes to the break (beat) in hip hop. Linguistics posits that the verb (which either expresses an action or a state) has the highest valence in a sentence; based on this premise, a comma, or a period signify that an action is completed before another action begins. The use of double spaces instead of commas and periods, on the other hand, signifies that a new action may begin while the effect of the previous action still lingers. Like the break (beat), double spaces in lieu of commas and periods enable a simultaneity of past and present. Hammad achieves this effect not only with the dispensation with punctuation, but also literally emulates the loop by using sampling. Thus, Hammad's gaze is one that locates the lingering effects of the past in the present. For Hammad, in the present conditions Palestinians find themselves in always resonates the long history of oppression of this people (starting with colonization by the Ottoman empire and later by the British empire, and taking a decided turn to the worse with the declaration of independence of the state of Israel in 1948, and finally the occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967). Let's take a look at break (naher el bared):

----- - **break (naher el bared)** - -----

cool river burning [*naher el bared* is the name of a Palestinian refugee camp in North Lebanon; the name means *cool river*]

ana threading wounded knee [ana is Arabic for *I*]  
salt water breaking

[...]  
shabab drum face jaded [shabab is Arabic for *young people*]  
stoned eyes domed wa hodded [wa is Arabic for *and*]

[...]  
refugees rewind exile

poem is **my** body **my** language **my** country

wa bas ana closed to tourism [wa: *and*; bas: *stop it!*]  
ana closed to journalists wa bas  
ana closed to translation”  
[p. 49]

First off, let me give you a little background information; Naher el Bared was a UN refugee camp in North Lebanon in existence since the late 1940s in which 30,000 Palestinian refugees lived. Out of this camp, Fatah al Islam operates, a radical Islamic underground organization which has existed since 2006. In 2007, severe fighting between the Lebanese army and Fatah al Islam members occurred, which almost completely destroyed the camp. Besides losses on every side, 42 civilians were killed, and countless people living in this camp fled to other refugee camps. So the first line, which startles us as an oxymoron – How can a river burn? – refers to the fighting in and destruction of Naher el Bared in 2007. This fighting between radical Islamists and the Lebanese army had tremendous consequences for the civilian population of this refugee camp: not only did 42 civilians lose their lives; the majority of the refugees had to flee, yet again – “refugees rewind exile,” denoting the repetition of the exile experience. While dominant discourses in the West made it seem as though the whole population of Naher el Bared were radical Islamists, the majority was, in fact, peaceful civilians now doubly victimized after a two-fold exile experience. In the same vein, the speaker asks in break (clean): “how many times can you refugee”

But back to break (naher al bared): The last stanza makes ample use of sampling. The speaker equates her poetry with herself/her body, her language and her country. The multiple repetition of the sample “ana closed to” serve as reminders of just how deprived living conditions in the Palestinian territories are and historically have been, especially in Gaza which has been under siege since 2008. The poem ends in a pessimistic tone: “ana closed to translation” – I am closed to translation. The speaker, yet again, thematizes the difficulty of relating the situation Palestinians live in to the rest of the world, especially against the background noise generated by discourses which create the impression that all Palestinians are radical Islamists and thus “get what they deserve.”

I would now like to turn to a poem dedicated to the African American community, break (bayou). The poem has the situation of impoverished African Americans in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina as its starting point, but soon moves on to locate the flooding of the Ninth Ward as but the latest manifestation of the historic mistreatment of black people in the United States.

----- - **break (bayou)** - -----

view our lives through  
the prism hurricane

check what got flooded  
check what salt preserved  
check what wind kissed

you feeling me

see how we waded  
see how we waited

monarchs danced around us

muttered lies  
murdered in fives  
and tens and twenties  
[...]

[we] forced paths irrigated soil  
migrated bloodlines coiled  
around our aching spines  
[...]

check how we crunk  
check how we dip  
check how we slide

we loud and muted  
you hear me”  
[p. 25]

Sampling is again used to convey the intensity of suffering - the extensive damage and loss of human life through Hurricane Katrina (“check what”), and the despair of those left behind in the Ninth Ward (the homophones “see how we waded/see how we waited”). The dancing monarchs is a reference to the members of the Bush administration who “muttered lies” – promising extensive and rapid help to the population of New Orleans –, but acted, as is widely known, much too late and too indecisively so that thousands died in the hurricane and its aftermath (the number of death victims is listed as at least 1800). The speaker goes so far as to call the Bush administration “murderers.”

Subsequently, the speaker goes on to thematize the history of blacks’ exploitation in the U.S., references slavery, then demanding physical labor for starvation wages. She goes on to portray the precarious conditions in which many African Americans find themselves today – again, the threefold repetition of the sample “check how” evokes the intensity of the

destitution many urban black kids face – out of which alcohol and drugs seem to offer the only escape (“crunk”). Despite the community’s being vocal about these issues – I’m thinking of the African American hip hop artists previously mentioned, I’m thinking of organizations like the NAACP – the stories of blacks’ marginalization are often drowned out of dominant U.S. discourses (“we loud and muted”). So in the end, the poem’s first line – “View our lives through the prism hurricane” – perfectly captures the poem’s agenda: the treatment of African Americans in New Orleans’ Ninth Ward may be read as an allegory for how blacks have been treated in the U.S. since the community’s origin in slavery.

Poetically addressing the marginalization of Palestinians and the mistreatment of African Americans through the emulation of the break beat, Hammad suggests a parallel between the historical experiences of African Americans and those of Palestinians. I am aware that many immigrant communities in the U.S. have tried to gain recognition by suggesting similarities between their communities’ experiences and those of African Americans who – forgive me if this sounds a little polemical – are the United States’ minority group “number 1.” Without intending to comment on the validity of these other immigrant groups’ claims, I believe Hammad is right: the Palestinian experience lends itself to comparison with the African American experience. For both communities, one traumatic event (removal from Africa and enslavement in the one case, displacement in 1948 and occupation since 1967 in the other case), is followed by so many aftershocks (Jim Crow, poverty, police racism, etc. for African Americans, and living in refugee camps, discrimination by the Israeli army, Gaza under siege for Palestinians). These aftershocks always reference the original traumatic event (no Jim Crow without Africans being brought to the U.S. in bondage, no siege of Gaza without Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories), which makes the past so vital for the conditions these communities presently find themselves in. I think Suheir Hammad has succeeded in conveying the simultaneity of past and present through the emulation of the break beat, both by her dispensation with punctuation marks and by sampling. Moreover, Hammad’s use of hip hop, which has always voiced the grievances of those at the bottom of society, gives her voice the air of authenticity when it voices criticism on behalf of Palestinians, who arguably find themselves near the bottom of the International Community, in terms of power and esteem by other nations (at least the Western ones).

## **5. Infusion of English with Arabic**

Hammad also pays tribute to her community – Palestinian and Arab Americans – when she infuses English with Arabic. While artists of other communities have done this before – think



of the hip hop movement of the Nuyoricans – Hammad is the first Arab writer/hip hop artist to have done this, to my knowledge. This is not merely a nostalgic citing of items reminiscent of the homeland – for instance, falafel or arghileh [water pipe] and the like, which one finds quite often in Arab American fiction and poetry – but a stylistic rendering of a hybrid identity, feeling fortunate and guilty at the same time for living in safety in the United States while “one’s people” undergo suffering in Palestine.

This conference is entitled “A Conversation between African American and Asian American Studies.” I have talked at length about a Palestinian American subject matter. Since geographically, the Arab world is located in West Asia, I hope to have done so with some legitimacy. Most of you probably intuitively associate Asian American Studies with communities whose origins lie in South, Southeast and East Asia. But where, then, do Palestinian and other Arab American subject matters belong? I would like to make a few remarks on why I think it would be productive to include Arab American *topoi* in Asian American Studies.

#### **6. Inclusion of Arab American *topoi* in Asian American Studies**

Solidarity with the plight of the Palestinians is a central component of Arab American identity (cf. Naber 2000). Given the pro-Israeli leanings of American policy makers and the majority of the American public, such political views have historically put Arab Americans in a precarious position. In the “War on Terror” waged since 9/11, their situation has become even more precarious. Yet, while other ethnic minorities can count on academic institutions to produce scholarship that helps further their cause, there is currently only one “Arab American Studies” program, at the University of Michigan/Ann Arbor. It is unrealistic to think that more “Arab American Studies” programs will emerge in the future, given the budget crisis of higher education and the comparatively small number of Arab Americans (approximately four million). So we are facing the situation that there is a community who has a lot of important things to say – political and social discrimination against Muslims in the U.S., the war in Iraq, the situation in Palestine, etc. – but there is basically no institutional framework to study these experiences.

I think it would be productive to include the academic discussion of Arab American *topoi* in Asian American Studies for the following reasons: First, Orientalist stereotypes are employed in mainstream American discourses towards East Asians, South Asians, and Arabs alike. Some of these stereotypes are similar – the exoticization of women, charges of being cunning

and dishonest, others may vary – Arab men as brutal, East Asian men as effeminate. What all these stereotypes have in common, though – this is classic Said – is that the East is seen as a place where people have not learned to control their instincts and lacks the civilization the West has attained. Moreover, people whose religious backgrounds lie outside the U.S.’ Judeo-Christian tradition enjoy lower social recognition by other Americans. As this statistics by Robert Putnam and David Campbell of 2010 shows,<sup>2</sup> Americans feel considerably less positive about Hindus, Buddhists and especially Muslims than about Christians and Jews. Since it is a common agenda of Asian American scholarship and Arab American scholarship to expose Orientalist stereotypes as politically motivated constructs and to deconstruct misconceptions about Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, etc., fruitful academic discussions may arise from including Arab American scholarship in Asian American Studies. How vital this sort of coalition building is was demonstrated when Japanese American institutions declared their solidarity with Arab Americans in the “War on Terror,” because the Bush administration’s harassment and detention of Arabs and Muslims reminded them of World War II when Japanese Americans in the Western states were rounded up.

### Works Cited

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<sup>2</sup> I will include the statistics in my power point presentation.