

## Re-reading Suheir Hammad's *The Gaza Suite* in 2024

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### ABSTRACT

In light of the ongoing annihilation of Gaza and decades of international indifference to the Palestinian struggle against occupation, this is an invitation to re-read Suheir Hammad's *the gaza suite* fifteen years after it was written. The powerful series of five poems embodies the language of the crisis that Gaza was in 2009, and is evermore today, fleshing out the violence of colonialism and the breaking point of Western modernity in that strip of besieged land.

### Keywords

Gaza; Suheir Hammad; language of crisis; Palestinian American poetry

During the 2008-2009 Israeli attack on Gaza, Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad wrote a series of five poems, which she later collected under the title *the gaza suite* (Hammad 2010).<sup>1</sup> Hammad read these poems in an extremely moving performance at the 2009 Palestine Festival of Literature, in Ramallah.<sup>2</sup> As she says in her introduction to the reading, “each poem decided to name itself after a city in Gaza”: they take us into a burning geography of Gaza, Jabaliya, Rafah, Tal el-Hawa, and Zeitoun. So, the map unfolds and re-crumple in coordinates and names that have currently become familiar in news reports, and yet remain distant; their horrific reality almost invariably shamelessly censored in mainstream Western media.

“gaza” is the opening poem, hauntingly resonating:

a great miracle happened here  
 a festival of lights  
 a casting of lead upon children  
 an army feasting on epiphany  
 (Hammad 2010, 87)

As Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman observes, “[t]he imagery here reminds us that the war coincided with the Jewish holiday Hanukkah. It is a holiday that centers on the miracle of a biblical victory against the Syrians – emphasizing the mythology of Jews as David fighting the Syrian Goliath and often imagined in present-day terms” (Knopf-Newman 2011, 172). The common association of candle-lighting with this holiday is transformed, by Hammad, into a

horrific “festival of lights / a casting of lead upon children”; the lights are tragically the bombs dropping and the casting of lead is a clear reference to the name of the Israeli attack, “Cast Lead” (Knopf-Newman 2011, 172). The inversion – or tragic irony – used by Hammad in these first four lines already lays bare the context, discourse, and materiality of the undisturbed, ongoing *nakba* then, and the undisturbed, ongoing annihilation today, as I write.

Further down in the poem, an image so hauntingly current, it becomes disorienting:

medics killed schools hit convoys bombed  
the injured are dying the dead are buried in three  
hours the people pray together and curse the people  
mourn loud and quiet always too loud not enough  
some must die because they are the vicinity  
some must die because it was written  
(Hammad 2010, 88)

The scene today is exactly the same as fifteen years ago, when the poem was written. The words on the page could have been written yesterday, this morning, or back then. The raw horror reverberates the same screaming injustice in Hammad’s voice, in the video recording of her reading at the PalFest in 2009. It is, for sure, the total horror of any description of bombings and of the violence of any war. The same universal pain, and the same specific pain of Gaza. And yet, it is not the same. Precisely because it is repeating, in what Noam Chomsky back in 2009 called the “familiarity” of Israeli-US crimes in Gaza, the only possible category in which they might fit, historically and politically (Chomsky 2010, 89), in an exponential increase in the number of Palestinians killed, then, now, over and over again. Repetition must tell us something here. So, we read *the gaza suite* again, and again, and again.

We can and should, indeed, ask if and how poetry, literature, art, reading and even writing can make a difference, in the face of material destruction of lives and livelihoods. Of course, words do not stop bombs, do not erase massacres. And yet, language insists, and the language of states of emergency perhaps is poetic language itself, to follow Julia Kristeva’s work on the “pre-symbolic” as the space of “revolt”; it is the semiotic “chora” where signification is disrupted (Kristeva 1974). Elaborating on this concept, poetry may be read as the articulation of the instinctual, fluid, corporeal and pre-logical language, that necessity that pre-exists, exceeds and remains, and repeats, and re-surfaces to disrupt grammar and rules, in the crisis.

To think of Gaza as a crisis might then be a useful means to read the colonial mechanisms that this strip of land exposes in a time in which the West has apparently concluded its direct colonialism (and indicatively begun its decline in economic terms), seemingly able to shift to more sophisticated and slow forms of violence any- and everywhere

it can. Everywhere, that is, except for those 365 square kilometers on the Mediterranean Sea; a tiny strip of land where colonialism has been and is allowed and mandated, a strip of territory that shows the real face of the violent matrix of Western modernity and thus stands there, its very existence an act of resistance – a crisis, and its language.

Hammad's language, her disrupted syntax and measures – always emerging from the page with the vibrancy of spoken-word art – summons the pain, the destruction, and the injustice:

no army does not apologize has never  
apologized authority chases paper assembly  
occupation settles deeper  
(Hammad 2011, 88)

The poet summons, too, the women of the land; their bodies are the core, once again, of severance and resistance. Those bodies that invariably fail to raise empathy in Western eyes. Mothers of dispensable lives, their sartorial practices shrouding the selective universality of humanity and humanitarianism. For Hammad, the severed ties to land and offspring are captured in women's bodies:

an army feasting on epiphany  
driving future into history  
carrying torches into women  
(Hammad 2010, 88)

And then, in "jabaliya" the geopolitics of the region (and the world) in the rhythm of poetic language issue a tragic report:

weapons for advancing armies clearing forests sprayed onto a city  
o sage tree human skin contact explosion these are our children  
she chimes through nablus back yaffa backs shot under  
spotlight phosphorous murdered libeled public relations  
public  
relation  
(Hammad 2010, 89)

In the PalFest performance, these last two words slow down the rhythm almost to a pause, powerfully re-framing and undoing the tenets of political analysis and its formation.

The question of Palestine and the *nakba* become re-framed then and inevitably now, when, in the poem "rafah", the words stand on the deliberately multilayered ground that is

produced also by the choice of using only low-cap letters, implicating states and States in the ambiguity of signifiers:

people in a high valence state  
that's when breathing feeds burns  
that's where settlers take high ground  
that's how villages bulldozed betwixt  
holidays before your eyes  
high violence holy children lamb  
an experience no longer inherited  
actual  
(Hammad 2010, 90)

In 2009, the disaster, the destruction, the *nakba*, Hammad wrote, was “an experience no longer inherited / actual”. Today, we re-read this poem, and it carries the inconceivable weight of repetition, of tenfold increase in the “actual” experience. It carries a question of injustice and tragedy, but also of history. Time is condensed, again, “driving future into history” (Hammad 2010, 88), fixing the marks of what Judith Butler has called “concentrative colonialism” (Butler 2012, 37; see also Jević 2015), epitomized in Gaza; its very existence, once again, a crisis speaking to and of modernity. These five cities and five poems speak of a conundrum – the *crisis* that is Gaza – in which time has passed and things are the same, and yet the very passing of time itself changes the meaning of that fixity, that unchanging. What does it mean, then, for this time to pass, for this space to be (unevenly) re-mapped; is it only a change in generations, once more, no longer “inheriting”, but “actual”, and actually living through it, again?

In the end of the suite, Hammad names the tunnel: the violent politics of territorial control – what we’ve heard for months and years would be the target of Israeli attacks by all means – the bowels of the terrorists, to be flooded or detonated. The underground system, astonishingly well-known on all sides: this becomes, now, the answer and embodiment of the final poem, that asks insistently (with no question mark), “where from here” (Hammad 2010, 92). The poet is now the carrier and the vessel, with the closing line from the suite:

i am all tunnel  
(Hammad 2010, 92)

We read *the gaza suite* in 2024 to find form before logic, to recognize the crisis and its language, outside logics, before the *logos* of all our explanations. To recognize this language and listen. Are we paying attention?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Born in Amman to Palestinian parents and having moved with her family to New York as a child, Hammad is a spoken-word poet, has published 5 books of poetry and is the protagonist of Annemarie Jacir's film *Salt of This Sea* (2008). As in Arabic there are no capitalized letters, so does Hammad use all low-caps letters in her published poems.

<sup>2</sup> The Palestine Festival of Literature, also referred to as PalFest, is held every year in different cities in the West Bank, occupied East Jerusalem, and Gaza. As stated in the Festival website: "The Palestine Festival of Literature (PalFest) is a cultural initiative committed to the creation of language and ideas for combating colonialism in the 21st century. The festival was created as an act of cultural solidarity with Palestine by a group of international cultural figures brought together by Founding Chair, Ahdaf Soueif, in 2008." (<https://www.palfest.org/about-us>). Hammad's performance is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju\\_i5-NDhnQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju_i5-NDhnQ).

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