You start where you are: Literary spaces of Palestine solidarity

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Abstract
This essay discusses the contributions that three of the most prominent diasporic Palestinian Anglophone spoken word poets—Suheir Hammad (US), Remi Kanazi (US), and Rafeef Ziadah (Tunisia/Canada/UK)—have made to a contemporary literature of Palestine solidarity, in relation to the tension between liberationist and humanitarian articulations of solidarity that characterizes many contemporary appeals for solidarity with Palestine. I focus on their political and stylistic commitment to plain speaking, an approach that distances their work from the stylistic conventions of human rights advocacy and literary modernism, which both tend to discourage the explicit articulation of political belief. These poets demand that the listener/reader “start where you are,” as Hammad puts it, and conceive of the Palestine solidarity movement as part of a global liberation struggle in which we are all implicated. An examination of how each poet constructs the solidarity relation through their creative uses of analogy, address, voice, and performance helps us to see how this forthright invitation to the listener/reader works in practice.

Keywords
liberation, literature, Palestine, solidarity, spoken word poetry

Introduction
Literature, film, and other art forms are indispensable to solidarity movements. Artistic works raise awareness of the ongoing struggle, affirm its central ideas and principles, sustain its participants through defeats and setbacks, inspire new members to take part, and envision the movement’s

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future victory. For international movements that seek support across geographical, racial, economic, and cultural distance, like the Palestinian solidarity movement, art makes it possible to forge imaginative connections between the struggle’s main actors and their supporters, defying the obstacles that are ranged against such alliances (Bernard, 2017: 368). As the organizers of Palestine Writes, a major literature festival held online in December 2020, put it, “art challenges repression and creates bonds between Palestine and the rest of the world,” despite “lack of linguistic access, the severe restrictions on the movement of Palestinians, and the censorship and repression of Palestinian speech” (Palestine Writes, 2020c). The ability of texts, films, and other forms to circulate widely online means that art now has the capacity to reach broader and more dispersed audiences than ever before, strengthening its capacity to build solidarity across distance.

At the same time that we affirm the fundamental role of art in fostering solidarity with Palestine, however, it is useful to reflect on the kind of solidarity relation that specific works seek to promote in particular contexts, and how they go about doing it. This is not only so that we can identify the forms and techniques that are most effective in sustaining and growing the movement—as important as this is—but also to help make the very capacious term “solidarity” a little less opaque. In recent texts and films from or about Palestine that have been circulated among metropolitan³ Palestine solidarity activists, there is a noticeable tension between the different kinds of appeal that these works put forward, a tension that appears even—and in fact, often—within a single work. These works sometimes solicit support for the Palestinian struggle based on common ideological commitments, but they also advocate a defense of rights regardless of the victim’s politics. This tension mirrors Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s (1998: 15) influential distinction between solidarity activism and human rights advocacy, which I conceive as liberationist versus humanitarian approaches to solidarity. The first endorses the radical overthrow of existing structures of oppression, drawing inspiration from the anticolonial national liberation struggles that took place across Africa and Asia in the mid-20th century. The second focuses on the suffering of individuals and groups and seeks to end or ameliorate it through appeals to international legal and governmental institutions. These two approaches to the Palestinian struggle are not incompatible—for instance, Palestinian human rights organizations like al-Haq have seen human rights advocacy as a tool of national liberation (Allen, 2013: 58; Shehadeh, 1982)—but they imply different understandings of what it means for a non-Palestinian to be in solidarity with the Palestinian movement. To put it bluntly, does my solidarity come from a belief that Palestinian activists and I are engaged in a wider struggle for justice and equality, or is it motivated by a charitable desire to “help” Palestinian victims on the basis of our common humanity? This distinction is related to current proposals that non-Black people who want to support Black liberation struggles should strive to act as “accomplices” and “co-conspirators” rather than “allies.” Like liberationist solidarity, the idea of being an accomplice or co-conspirator emphasizes the idea of the solidarity activist’s membership in a collective movement, as well as their willingness to put themselves at risk (Powell and Kelly, 2017; see also Keck, 1995).

An advantage of thinking about solidarity in relation to liberationism and humanitarianism is that it enables us to situate these forms of relationship and position-taking in a longer timescale. These different contemporary articulations of solidarity can be traced to the broader transformation that took place in metropolitan activism and institutions in the 1970s, when, as Moyn (2010) has influentially argued, the dominant notion of rights shifted from state-based politics to “the morality of the globe” (p. 43) and from the idea of collective liberation and self-determination to “individual protection against the state” (p. 4). This move can be seen clearly in the historical trajectory of Palestine solidarity. In the 1960s and early 70s, the Palestine Liberation Organization’s “global offensive,” to cite Chamberlin (2012), was characterized by its alliances with other third-worldist anticolonial liberation movements. From the late 1970s onwards, the global “NGOization” of political activism” (Allen, 2013: 12) has fueled the representation of Palestinians as victims in need of international aid and diplomacy, and increasingly, solidaristic civil disobedience, which since 2005 has been channeled through the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The BDS movement itself, as a Palestinian-led appeal for global solidarity, draws on both languages of solidarity in its campaign literature. For example, the English-language website asserts that “Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as the rest of humanity” and describes the movement as a call to “pressure Israel to comply with international law,” but it also names Israel as a settler-colonial and apartheid state and lists radical internationalist activists like Angela Davis among its supporters (BDS Movement, n.d.).

The humanitarian turn has had a corollary impact on the kinds of literary works by and about Palestinians that enter into global circulation, especially in English. Explicitly liberationist texts by writers like Leila Khaled (1973), and Jean Genet (1973, 1983, 1986), which were a late expression of a revolutionary internationalist idea of world literature, became less common from the 1980s onwards, and works that were more concerned with the demonstration of Palestinians’ humanity, like Said and Mohr (1999) and Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s (1992) Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature, began to take their place. This change in tactics responded in the first instance to the sudden international visibility of the Palestinian cause after the massacre of Palestinian civilians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in September 1982. But it also reflects a strategic decision by Palestinians and their supporters to make use of
the increasingly dominant idiom of human rights, at a time when the armed Palestinian resistance movement had been comprehensively defeated (see also Bernard, 2018: 275–276; Khalili, 2007). Today, while there is not a Palestine solidarity or BDS literature as such—apart from campaign texts like the BDS co-founder Omar Barghouti’s (2011) manifesto Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions—the literary texts that have circulated in concert with the call for BDS have drawn, like the movement itself, on both modes of being in solidarity with Palestinians. This combined approach has become increasingly visible in the last decade, a period in which cynicism about the effectiveness of human rights-based activism has been mounting and a liberationist vocabulary has returned to mainstream metropolitan public discourse.

In what follows, I discuss the contributions that three of the most prominent diasporic Palestinian Anglophone spoken word poets—Suheir Hammad (US), Remi Kanazi (US), and Rafeef Ziadah (Tunisia/Canada/UK)—have made to a contemporary literature of Palestine solidarity, in relation to the tension between liberationist and humanitarian articulations of solidarity that I have been describing. I focus on the specific properties of spoken word as a genre that foregrounds the relationship between performer and audience, considering the ways in which each poet mobilizes the form’s characteristic emphasis on directness and sincerity to solicit not just the reader’s empathy, but also their anger and sense of political responsibility. This work is read, listened to, and used in various sites of metropolitan Palestine solidarity activism—university campuses and classrooms, churches and general assemblies, city halls and grocery cooperatives—and it travels even more widely through online platforms like YouTube. Their poetry thus highlights the capacity of literature and its circuits of circulation to serve as a space of solidarity production, and to promote a solidarity with the Palestinian struggle that is simultaneously self-reflexive and committed.

**Spoken word poetry and Palestine solidarity**

Spoken word poetry, in performance and in print, has been an especially important genre for Palestine solidarity in general and the BDS campaign in particular, especially in the United States and Britain. This is partly because spoken word is already associated with the struggles of marginalized groups in these countries, but also because as an inherently pedagogical form, spoken word lends itself to the solidarity-building tactics of awareness-raising and persuasion (Endsley, 2016: xvi–xxi; Hoffman, 2011: 9–10). As Somers-Willet (2009) has argued, the success of a spoken word poem depends on its communication of realness, authenticity, and identity, and on how well it engages and instructs its audience. Spoken word poets make their political arguments explicit, and they seek to persuade their audience to share their point of view (Somers-Willet, 2009: 7, 19–20). The genre thus deploys many of the stylistic features of 20th-century anticolonial revolutionary literature—didacticism, overt statements of political commitment, a rhetoric of conviction and sincerity—without necessarily sharing the liberationist politics of the movements that produced this earlier work.

Hammad, Kanazi, and Ziadah are not the only Anglophone Palestinian poets working in this form, but they are probably the best known. Hammad was born in Amman in 1973 and immigrated to Brooklyn, New York with her family when she was 5 years old. She first came to prominence when her poem “First Writing Since,” written as an immediate response to the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, went viral by email (Hopkinson, 2002). The poem’s enthusiastic reception landed her a slot in the television premiere of the slam poetry showcase Def Poetry Jam on HBO, which led to her participation in a 2-year run of the show on Broadway. She has now published three collections of poetry and a memoir (Hammad, 1996, 2005, 2008, 2010a), and is regularly cited as an inspiration by Palestinian and other Arab-American and Anglophone Arab poets who have come after her, including Kanazi and Ziadah (Palestine Writes, 2020b). Kanazi was born in the United States in 1981; he grew up in Massachusetts and moved to New York City as a young adult. By his own account, after going to a Broadway performance of Def Poetry Jam, he turned to poetry in order to be a more effective activist: “I figured that the average 19-year-old did not necessarily want to read an op-ed or watch cable news, but they would listen to a spoken word piece” (Alfarra, 2017). He has published two volumes of poems and edited an anthology of Palestinian poetry (Kanazi, 2008, 2011, 2015). Ziadah was born in Beirut in 1979; after the 1982 siege of Beirut, her family left for Tunisia, where they remained stateless refugees. Ziadah moved to Canada to study for her PhD and was subsequently granted Canadian citizenship (Farooq, 2012). She now lives in London, where she teaches in the Politics department at SOAS University of London. Ziadah releases her work in album form rather than print (Ziadah, 2009, Ziadah, 2015, Ziadah, 2020c), emphasizing her desire for her audience to hear the poems instead of encountering them on the page. Like Kanazi, she describes her poetry and activism as intertwined: “I see myself as one person that writes and organizes, and both influence each other very very much” (Electronic Intifada, 2015).

In their interviews and in the poetry itself, each poet expressly presents their work as an appeal for solidarity with Palestinians, by which I mean that they seek to persuade a listener who is undecided to support the cause and to inspire those who are already committed, drawing significantly on the authority provided by their diasporic identity. Each of them also combines humanitarian and liberationist modes of appeal: they dramatize victim testimonies and draw attention to the suffering of women, children, and the elderly, yet they also frequently invoke a collective struggle and draw
analyses with predecessor movements like the US Black civil rights movement and the struggle against South African apartheid. They thus mobilize a “cultural politics of comparison” that Lubin (2013: 246) identifies as central to the “transnational construction” of Palestinian and other Arab-American identities (see also Lubin, 2014).

Their most striking shared characteristic, however, is their political and stylistic commitment to plain speaking. Brennan (2018) associates this technique with an anti-modernist tradition of “civic letters,” which I understand to include both spoken word poetry and the literature of the national liberation movements. Such works “say[y] plainly, with anger, that these words have not a single figurative element to them and that they disable all attempts at multiple interpretations” (Brennan, 2018: 34). While directness and anger do not indicate a politics in themselves, these poets’ use of this approach distances their work from the stylistic conventions of human rights advocacy and literary modernism, by which I mean the aesthetic sensibility privileging subtlety, complexity, and indirection that remains dominant in English-language literature (cf. Brennan, 2014: 381). Both of these orientations tend to discourage the explicit articulation of political belief. By contrast, Hammad, Kanazi, and Ziadh challenge their listeners and readers to examine their own position with the same clarity that they each seek in their work. They refuse to accept a passive “solidarity from afar like a sick joke” (Ziadah, 2016a) that would allow the listener or reader to receive their work cathartically without taking any further action. Instead, they demand that “you start where you are,” as Hammad puts it (Al-Jazeera, 2009), and conceive of the Palestine solidarity movement as part of a global liberation struggle in which we are all implicated. A closer examination of how each poet constructs the solidarity relation through their creative uses of analogy, address, voice, and performance helps us to see how this forthright invitation to the listener/reader works in practice.

“Normalize this!”: Remi Kanazi’s adversarial advocacy

An emphasis on direct speech and confrontation is evident in Kanazi (2014)’s poem “This Divestment Bill Hurts My Feelings,” which anticipates and refutes objections to campus BDS activism (pp. 47–50). The poem is structured as a response to a series of objections to calls for divestment: “this divestment bill / hurts my feelings,” “but we need / a positive / campus climate,” “but this divestment bill / it’s DIVISIVE!” and so on. It challenges these statements by providing information about Caterpillar and HP’s complicity with the occupation, and by drawing analogies between BDS and earlier domestic and international struggles whose justice now seems self-evident, including the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, US desegregation, and the struggle against apartheid. This final site of comparison allows Kanazi to move from an argument based on the extension of political principles—if you support these past movements, then you should support BDS—to an argument derived from international humanitarian law: “it’s apartheid by definition / fits the ’73 convention / by law / it is a crime / against humanity” (2015: 48). This is perhaps the most explicit juxtaposition of liberationist and humanitarian solidarities in the poem. Although the two arguments are potentially contradictory, they are presented as mutually reinforcing. The poem demands solidarity with Palestine on both moral and legal grounds, which together far outweigh the sense of discomfort voiced by Kanazi’s imagined antagonist.

A recorded video of Kanazi performing this poem, currently available on YouTube (Kanazi, 2014), enhances the clarity and appeal of his argument. The video was produced in collaboration with Suhel Nafar, one of the members of the leading Palestinian hip-hop group DAM. Kanazi appears in front of a backdrop of fast-moving graphics that highlight key concepts and illustrate his lists of Israeli atrocities and sites of historical comparison. (The graphics also occasionally provide light relief: a cartoon figure of Benjamin Netanyahu produces speech bubbles that say “I’m uncomfortable habibi” and “We’re democratic yo!). Kanazi’s exaggerated facial expressions and pauses for emphasis indicate his earnestness and conviction, while also giving the impression of a personal encounter with the poet that Somers-Willet identifies as integral to the spoken word tradition (2009: 17). The hip-hop-influenced rhyme and rhythm structure further emphasizes the poem’s relationship to this tradition and increases its sense of urgency and momentum. This effect comes across to a certain extent in the print version of the poem, but far more in performance, where Kanazi shifts between the more natural (if whiny) cadence of his hapless interlocutor and the smooth and rapid fluency of his responses: “access to education / 50 laws of discrimination / 67 years of colonization / 27,000 homes demolished / nearly a million arrested / since ’67” (2014: 2015: 49). While the poem’s subject matter implies a university campus audience, the video’s presence on YouTube allows it to reach well beyond this demographic. The video’s comments section affirms the poem’s effectiveness in gathering and maintaining support for the broader cause (rather than BDS specifically, in most cases). The comments manifest in print the oral expressions of audience appreciation and accord that might take place at a live performance: viewers write “Keep up the great work!” “Truth!” “Excellent!” Several respondents indicate their intention to amplify the message by sharing the video—one writes “I’ll continue to add and shar[e] as long as there’s breath in my lungs”—while others name themselves as fellow participants in the international solidarity movement: “Love and support from your Irish comrades!” (Kanazi, 2014).

“This Divestment Bill” shares with a number of Kanazi’s other poems (2011, 2015) an address to a second-person interlocutor who is not the implied reader, but a figure that
the poet and reader are assumed to jointly oppose. Sometimes this adversarial “you” is Israel itself, as in “Normalize This!”: “you are a proxy for empire / a 1950s ethnocracy trapped / in 21st-century clothing […] your system of injustice / is coming to an end / and whether you / recognize it or not yet / it will be liberating for you too” (2015: 34). This personification of the Israeli state assigns agency and responsibility (as well as vulnerability) to the regime, challenging the representation of Palestinian suffering as an agentless tragedy in mainstream metropolitan news media and in some humanitarian advocacy publications. In other poems, however, the “you” is not a political antagonist but an apparent comrade who could very well be one of Kanazi’s readers. “Solidarity” addresses this figure with particular venom:

I am not looking for you academic savior know-it-all solidarity activist condescending anti-Zionist owe you nothing for introspection will award you no medal as you shout your own name at the top of your lungs (2015: 55)

It is hard for the non-Palestinian solidarity activist not to feel implicated in this criticism, which is extended in the subsequent poem, “Appetite for Appropriation,” to self-arterculations of solidarity with Black struggles by non-Black people of color. This near-targeting of the reader might seem to work against the poet’s efforts to recruit supporters for the Palestinian cause. Encountered alongside Kanazi’s other works, however—whether in performance or the print collections—such poems can be read as part of the effort to build a more equitable and sustainable solidarity movement, and a request that the audience recognize the difficulty of this kind of work. They encourage the reader to identify and explore their own motivations for wanting to act in solidarity with Palestinians, and to check self-congratulatory or patronizing impulses: “your contribution is just that, a contribution […] Palestinians are not victims / that need to be saved” (2015: 56).

In addition to advocating a practice of self-criticism, Kanazi also often explicitly asks his audience to take part in the BDS campaign, as in “This Poem Will Not End Apartheid”: “it is time / to boycott all / Israeli products / and go to the root / of the conflict” (2015: 18). By “root of the conflict,” Kanazi means Israel’s formation as a settler-colonial state, as the next stanzas make clear. It is worth noting, however, that this understanding of the solidarity relation as a coming together in opposition leaves open the question of what the positive ideological grounds for solidarity might be. “This Divestment Bill” ends with a similarly overt call to participate in BDS, but also, surprisingly, with a disavowal of national liberation: “divestment is the next step / this is not about / a nation or a people / but what is being done / to people […] vote YES for divestment” (2015: 50). This formulation promotes solidarity with Palestinians on the basis of our common humanity rather than more specific shared political commitments like the right to self-determination, as Kanazi has also asserted elsewhere (Billet, 2011). It thus downplays one of the key contributions of the Palestinian struggle to a global emancipatory politics, as a site where the idea of national liberation continues to motivate the popular struggle long after this project has come to seem outdated or defeated in so many other places. Rather than being necessarily depoliticizing, however, this conclusion might be seen as a strategic performance of “universal, borderless, and stateless humanity” that deliberately appeals to a broad audience, as Karkabi (2018: 174, 180) has argued in relation to contemporary Palestinian music, and thus helps to make listeners/readers potentially more receptive to the poem’s more combative moments.

**Affiliative solidarity: Suheir Hammad’s Born Palestinian, Born Black**

Suheir Hammad, whose first collection Born Palestinian, Born Black (1996; second edition 2010a) predates the BDS movement by a decade, shares Kanazi’s effort to link the Palestinian struggle to other past and present mass movements while also critically interrogating the form and content of contemporary Palestine solidarity. However, she frames this inquiry in a more personal and confessional narrative mode, in keeping with the emphasis on first-person testimony that is characteristic of both spoken word poetry and more conventionally “literary” work by metropolitan ethnic minority poets (Somers-Willett, 2009: 9, 20; LoLordo, 2004), as well as humanitarian advocacy. Nearly all of the poems from the first edition of the collection are written in an autobiographical first-person singular or plural voice, moving from vignettes of Hammad’s young adulthood in Brooklyn to scenes of violence and dispossession in Palestine, in which the poet sometimes speaks as herself and sometimes channels the voices of Palestinian victims. She thus positions herself as both a diasporic Palestinian and an American of color, using the sequential presentation of the poems in the collection to juxtapose and integrate these identities.

Yet this identitarian self-positioning is only a starting point for the construction of a broader understanding of solidarity, which moves from and through Hammad’s ethnic and cultural location “to configure affiliations based on choice and a sense of responsibility” (Harb, 2014: 86). The title of Hammad’s collection famously comes from an iconic line in the Black American poet June Jordan’s (1985) volume Living Room, itself a declaration of Jordan’s solidarity with Palestine: “I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian” (p. 134). Hammad (2010a) writes in her author’s preface that her encounter with this stanza...
“changed my life” because of its assertion of “a deep understanding of humanity […] something no label can touch” (p. 13). In Hammad’s reading of Jordan’s statement, then, the analogy between Palestinian and Black identities leads us from a specific site of solidarity to a broader invocation of a common humanity. Importantly, however, Hammad’s poetry presents the idea of humanity not as an abstraction, but as an aggregation of specific interconnected identities and histories, in keeping with Angela Davis’ (2016) recent characterization of solidarity as “a dialectical process that requires us to constantly retell our stories” in relation to the stories of others (loc. 1846; see also Harb, 2014: 85).

Hammad’s shifting and experimental use of the first-person speaker helps to flesh out how this relational and open-ended understanding of solidarity might work. Hammad frequently uses the first-person plural, sometimes to indicate a Palestinian “we”—as in the line, “we call back to the phalasteen / of folk songs and village dances” in the poem “blood stitched time” (2010a: 25)—and sometimes a broader “we” of the dispossessed, as in “open poem to those who rather we not read… or breathe”:

we children of children exiled from homelands
descendants of immigrants denied jobs and toilets
carry continents in our eyes
survivors of the middle passage
we stand

This poem asserts not simply a comparison but a commonality of experience between second-generation exiles (who are not named as Palestinians, but the reference is implied by the word “homelands”), immigrants without a livelihood, and Black Americans. Like Jordan, Hammad makes these links to assert that these constituencies are engaged in a common struggle for survival and for an unspecified form of radical change. Moreover, like both Jordan and Kanazi, Hammad’s mode of address is often both angry and explicit, refusing elaborate imagery or extended metaphors and insisting that the poem’s claims be taken at face value. “open poem” continues: “in a state of police / cops act as pigs treat men as dogs / mothers as whores / the bold youth of a nation hungry and cold / an entire nation of youth behind bars grown old” (2010a: 74). Yet the bleak rage of this portrayal is immediately followed by a reference to the collective action needed to challenge the current dispensation: “we / witness and demand a return to humanity” (2010a: 74). What Hammad means by “humanity” is steadily forged in the course of the poem itself, in each iteration of the “we.” This “we” is made up of indigenous people and migrants; people with piercings, tattoos, and headdresses; prisoners, warriors, lovers, musicians, readers, and thinkers. This list of attributes indicates a membership based on both circumstance and choice, as in Jordan’s declaration of solidarity with Palestine. But the poem’s “we” is defined above all by its shared demands for equal pay and distribution of resources, dignified work, access to education, and an end to police brutality. While the poem’s details and vocabulary locate this “nation” in the United States, the political vision it offers resonates more widely, drawing connections among “localized articulations of globalized colonial modernity” (Lubin, 2013: 250) and the conscious affiliations across difference that are required to fight its depredations. “open poem” ends with an affirmation of the enduring nature of this resistant and resourceful collective: ‘fashion is passing / style is everlasting / we” (2010a: 75).

Born Palestinian, Born Black was reissued by the Brooklyn-based publisher UpSet Press in 2010, with the addition of Hammad’s Gaza Suite, a magisterial quintet of poems responding to Israel’s invasion of Gaza in 2008–2009. The scale of the material and human devastation of Gaza gave the recently inaugurated BDS movement fresh momentum, as participants in mass demonstrations against the assault all over the world helped to extend the reach of Palestine solidarity activism. The Gaza Suite poems integrate jeremiadic condemnation with documentation of humanitarian violations more fluidly than the earlier poems in the collection:

children on hospital floor mother beside
them the father in shock this is my family
i have failed them this is my family i did
not raise their heads i have buried them
my family what will i do now my family is bread

The speaker is ostensibly adopting the voice of the father whose family has just been killed—potentially in reference to the murder of Izzedine Abuelaish’s three daughters in Gaza in January 2009, which received widespread international coverage—but the use of the first-person singular is ambiguous. It implicates the speaker, and potentially the reader, as a person who has also failed the dead. The stanza thus combines a demand for empathy with women and children, the quintessential victims of humanitarian campaigns, with an accusation of our collective failure to prevent this atrocity. Hammad suggests, as the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr wrote in his collaboration with Edward Said, that “The Israelis are not solely to blame, we are all guilty” (Said and Mohr, 1999: 8).

A recording of a performance of the Gaza Suite, held in Ramallah as part of the Palfest literature festival in 2009, is available online at the time of writing (Hammad, 2010b). Palfest is an annual festival that brings together Palestinian and international authors at public events in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. Recordings of some of the readings and performances are then made available on YouTube and on Palfest’s website in both English and Arabic, emphasizing the festival’s effort to reach both international and regional audiences. Hammad prefaced her reading by saying that she worked hard on these poems
on the page “because I wanted them to be able to go anywhere. I wanted the craft and the language to be so tight that even the rhythm couldn’t stop them from seeing what I was saying” (Hammad, 2010b). This formulation importantly links an affirmation of art’s particular powers of persuasion to the poet’s resistance to multiple interpretations of her work. She invokes the practice of poetic craft as a means to an end: namely, communicating as clearly as possible to as wide and diverse an audience as possible. The Gaza Suite offers its account of atrocity plainly, sometimes graphically, and it does not allow the reader the luxury of “an elegiac reading of the work” that prioritizes mourning for the dead over “outrage at the social, political, and historical conditions” that killed them (Harb, 2014: 89). In the Palfest recording, as Hammad reads each poem, her cadence speeds up and her delivery and facial expressions shift from sorrowful (and sometimes tearful) to furious, modeling the emotional journey that she intends her listeners to take and the assumption of political responsibility that the work demands. The final poem of the quintet, “zeitoun,” is set in the aftermath of the bombings: “where from here / a ribbon of land smoking / within the girl’s hair smoking / wire wood word smoking.” Yet the poem does not end with the ruined landscape, but with the repetition of the line “where from here,” and with the reintroduction of the ambiguous first-person speaker: “i am all tunnel” (2010a: 92). This conclusion reiterates the invitation to move from mourning to resistance, enlisting both the poet-speaker and the listener/reader in the same struggle as those who bring arms and supplies through the tunnels between Egypt and Gaza.

“Is anyone out there?”: Rafeef Ziadah’s poetics of rage

Rafeef Ziadah’s work also prioritizes the clarity of the message, arguably to an even greater degree than either Hammad or Kanazi. In an interview with the Electronic Intifada, Ziadah says that she chose spoken word as a form “because it is about communication to an audience […] It’s about having an audience understand you and feel something when they’re hearing it” (Electronic Intifada, 2015). (During her recent online performance at the Palestine Writes festival, Ziadah noted apologetically that “it’s really hard to read these poems alone in your room” (Palestine Writes, 2020b)). Her three albums, along with a dozen of her videos, are available to stream on her website, and many more recorded live performances appear on YouTube and other online platforms. Unlike most of Kanazi and Hammad’s performances, Ziadah’s are often set to music: her second and third albums are a collaboration with the Lebanese-Australian producer and guitarist Phil Monsour, linking her poetry to the long tradition of Palestinian resistance music. Like Kanazi, Ziadah often addresses her poems to an imagined antagonist: the journalist who asks for “a human story” in “We Teach Life” (2011b); the fellow student who kicked her and told her she deserved to be raped at a campus Palestine solidarity demonstration in “Shades of Anger” (2011a); Donald Trump (“orange man”) in “In Jerusalem” (2018). The poems are blunt and succinct, and frequently openly ask both the addressee and the listener to confront their own complicity and take action, as in the closing lines of her performance of “Hadeel” at the 2016 International Literature Festival in Dublin: “just give me one moment of sincere resistance / where you get up, stop watching us on your evening news, and do something” (Ziadah, 2016a).

“We Teach Life” expresses what Allen (2013) has called the politics of cynicism toward human rights discourse. This stance has become increasingly common among Palestinians and some of their supporters since the 1993 Oslo Accords, as international NGOs have proliferated in the occupied territories while the Palestinians’ political prospects have dramatically deteriorated. “We Teach Life” was the first of Ziadah’s poems to reach a wide audience, when a recording of her 2011 performance at a London Palestine Solidarity Campaign event (where Kanazi was the headline performer) went viral; at the time of writing, the video has over a million hits on YouTube (Electronic Intifada, 2015; Ziadah, 2011b). The poem rails against the demand for “soundbites and word limits filled with enough statistics.” It enumerates Palestinian grievances, but makes it clear from the outset that it does not to solicit the listener’s empathy, but to command their rage:

I recount, I recount a hundred dead, a thousand dead.
Is anyone out there?
Will anyone listen?
I wish I could wall over their bodies.
I wish I could just run barefoot in every refugee camp and hold every child, cover their ears so they wouldn’t have to hear bombing for the rest of their life the way I do.
Today, my body was a TV’d massacre.
And let me just tell you, there’s nothing your UN resolutions have ever done about this.
And no soundbite, no soundbite I come up with, no matter how good my English gets, no soundbite, no soundbite, no soundbite, no soundbite will bring them back to life. (Ziadah, 2011b)

The poem’s emotional impact derives significantly from its use of repetition and refrain, in which key phrases (“my body was a TV’d massacre,” “no soundbite,” “UN resolutions”) are looped throughout the poem, building to a climax of pain and anger that is reinforced by Ziadah’s impassioned delivery. But the poem’s political argument is equally arresting, in its categorical refusal of the voyeuristic demand for portrayals of Palestinian suffering as a condition of support for the cause. Ziadah (2020a) reaffirms this stance in other contexts, for instance in “Don’t Share,” a poem for the 3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Shenu (Aylan Kurdi) who drowned crossing the...
Mediterranean in 2015. In this regard, Ziadah goes further than either Kanazi or Hammad in rejecting an appeal for solidarity on humanitarian grounds. She presents ample evidence of Israeli atrocities and Palestinian harm in her poetry, but she consistently invites her audience to get angry, not sad, about the violence carried out on their watch. She further demands that we collectively do something about that anger, a responsibility that includes persuading the people around us to get angry too. As she puts it in her opening remarks before the Dublin performance of “If My Words”: “it now takes thousands of deaths for people to get angry. I hope that there can be action, serious action, and solidarity before the next round of thousands being massacred on TV screens” (Ziadah, 2016b).

Like Kanazi, however, Ziadah also warns against an appropriative solidarity of any political stripe that seeks to speak for Palestinians instead of allowing them to speak for themselves. She makes this point explicitly in “If My Words”—“Get out of the limelight! Let Gaza speak! Let Rafah speak! Let Jenin speak!” (2016b)—but she also presents her own work as an avenue for such self-representation. The title track from her latest album “Three Generations” begins, “I am three generations of women who never made it past forty / Erased one way or another” (2020b). Here, Ziadah employs an autobiographical first-person voice, speaking as a Palestinian refugee herself and as a representative of other Palestinian women. The poem lyrically evokes the varied experiences of this collective in list form, moving from refugee border crossings to life under occupation and siege: “I am their every sigh by a window / every bus ride to the prison waiting room / every hug long enough to be broken by a soldier / every trembling hand searching in the ruins / every candle / every notebook / every za’atar sandwich between the notebooks.” The video incorporates self-portraits of Palestinian women “from Palestine and all geographies of exile, despite Covid19 and lockdowns,” as the acknowledgements put it, all of whom look steadily into the camera while Ziadah recites the poem. The video thus conveys a more inclusive and expansive space of performance than the others I have mentioned. Rather than focusing on the solitary figure of the poet on stage in front of a live metropolitan audience, it posits a collective Palestinian “I” that addresses each of its online audience members directly, emphasizing the network of relationships that might thereby be formed.

In the poem’s final stanza, Ziadah revisits the opening lines and undoes their pessimism: “I am three generations of women who made it / In my every inhale / In my every exhale / They made it / We made it / We made it.” The poem and its performance thus construct a solidarity among the speaker and her subjects that is distinct from the solidarity that is requested of the listener/viewer. Ziadah portrays a collective steadfastness (sumoud) that is primarily a source of sustenance and hope for Palestinians themselves, inviting their supporters to learn from and be inspired by it. This assertion of Palestinian agency and strength is just as direct as Kanazi’s insistence that Palestinians are not victims who need to be saved, but Ziadah makes this claim positively rather than negatively. She affirms that the Palestinian struggle continues whether or not the world is watching, and enjoins everyone else to participate in the ways that Palestinians ask of us.

Conclusion

The poetics of plain speaking that Kanazi, Hammad, and Ziadah demonstrate should not be understood as something separate from the literary, but as a mode that expands the horizons of what we understand literature to be, disrupting what Brennan (2018: 35) calls “the safe cynicism of the modernist ethos.” Their poetry responds to the needs of their movement, making it impossible to separate its artistic aspirations from its politics. The Palestinian activist, legislator, and literary scholar Hanan Ashrawi, in her contribution to the Palestine Writes festival, states this idea even more strongly, asserting that literature has to be politically committed to really count as literature: “True artistic expression challenges the status quo. It has to be engaged, it has to be an instrument of change, and create and provide alternatives” (Palestine Writes, 2020a). Such art can be ephemeral, forgotten as soon as the particular crisis that engendered it has passed, but it can also outlast the movement itself, preserving its passion and vision as an inspiration to the movements that come after it. As Ziadah puts it: “I think there’s something extremely powerful about the role of art in sustaining us as human beings. If you look at social movements generally, what we remember of them is the poetry, the music, the art, the theater” (Electronic Intifada, 2015).

While the tension between liberationist and humanitarian solidarity with Palestine is not fully resolved in these poets’ work, this lack of resolution is itself productive. Their representations of Palestinian suffering do not allow “that cozy, comfortable feeling of solidarity with the ‘victims’” (Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2008: 114) that can make the listener/reader feel as if they’ve done something simply by becoming aware (or reaffirming their awareness) of the scale and extent of Palestinian dispossession. Instead, they insist that solidarity means taking responsibility—above all, for one’s complicity as a citizen of a country that fails to hold Israel to account—and taking part in the organized international resistance to Israel’s violent oppression of Palestinians, including the BDS movement. The poems’ often confrontational address and delivery reinforce this construction of the solidarity relation as active, demanding, and self-critical. At the same time, Kanazi, Hammad, and Ziadah’s use of the English language as their medium and their use of online
modes of distribution facilitate the travel of their work to the various virtual and physical sites of Anglophone metropolitan solidarity with Palestinians, enabling their poems to become tools of solidarity formation at a speed and across a geographical expanse that simply was not possible for earlier generations of Palestinian writers. To the remarkable archive of Palestinian fiction, poetry, visual art, and music produced since 1948, their contributions to the contemporary literature of Palestine solidarity offer a vision of the struggle that calls on us all to take part right here, right now.

Notes
1. A portion of this paper was previously presented at the 2018 Modern Languages Association Convention. I am grateful to Robert Ross and to the anonymous journal reviewers for their thoughtful comments on a previous draft.
2. By “metropolitan,” I mean activists based in the core capitalist countries, e.g. the United States, the United Kingdom, France, etc. For discussions of “south-south” solidarity with Palestine, see Stites Mor (2014) and Stites Mor (2016) (Latin America); Harirahan (2014) (India); and Jacobs and Josse (2015) (South Africa), among others.
3. Other diasporic Palestinian Anglophone spoken word poets include Ayah El-Fahmawi, Tariq Luthun, Tahani Salah, Fargh Thakhni, and Nizar Wattad (see Kanazi, 2008; Palestine Writes, 2020b).
4. While some critics see spoken word as part of hip-hop culture (Lubin, 2013: 256), others distinguish between the two forms (Endsley, 2016; Somers-Willett, 2009: 12). Hip-hop is a major cultural form in the Palestinian diaspora as well as the occupied Palestinian territories; it can be seen as an extension of the Arab social realist poetry tradition (Maira and Shihade, 2012: 2) as well as an indication of hip-hop’s global reach (see also Maira, 2013; McDonald, 2013).
5. On the depoliticizing effect of humanitarian representations of the Palestinian struggle, see Allen (2013); Fassin (2008); Jawad (2014); Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2008).
6. For overviews of the activist and scholarly literature identifying Israel as a settler-colonial state, see Salamanca et al. (2012) and Busbridge (2018).
7. For an account of the central role that music has played in the Palestinian struggle, see Kanaaneh et al. (2013) and McDonald (2013).

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