

‘Mic Check. Can You Hear Me?’

Suheir Hammad and the Politics of Spoken Word Poetry

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“Mic check? One-two. One-two. Can you hear me?” asks spoken-word artist and poet Suheir Hammad onstage (Lathan, 2007). Make no mistake about this question; it is not part of the sound check, nor is it part of a rehearsal. This is her poem. The audience can obviously hear her, but the question is not as straightforward as it appears. Here, Hammad blends the art of emcee-ing (one of the four main elements of hip-hop culture), with the typical language of a sound check and her experience of being racially profiled in, presumably, an American airport. In this vein, “mic” is not only short for microphone, but also the name of the United States’ Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer, named “Mike”, who searches her bags. The question, “Can you hear me?”, is directed not only at the audience, but also at “Mike”. Hammad’s double speak continues throughout the poem, “Mic Check”, where she mobilizes the language of hip-hop to promulgate a stringent critique of the links between the United States’ historical relationship to imperialism and racial profiling targeted toward Arabs and those who supposedly appear Arab.

Much of Hammad’s *oeuvre* decries social and political injustices perpetuated against various marginalized groups, including people of color and women. For instance, her first collection, published in 1996, *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, builds cross-cultural bridges most prominently with African Americans and Puerto Ricans; it also reaches out to other ethnic enclaves in 1980s Brooklyn, New York, and beyond. Within that collection, Hammad rethinks social issues in terms of the global minoritization experienced by people of color. *ZaatarDiva*, her second collection, published in 2005, brings similar issues to the fore, with a premium focus on global women’s issues. In both collections, Hammad’s work highlights the ways in which marginalized groups are both manipulated and dismissed for political gain. Hammad pinpoints the way that marginalized groups experience this manipulation and dismissal as part of a larger narrative that renders them simultaneously visible and invisible. In the pages that follow, I intend to trace the way that Hammad works against this simultaneous visibility and invisibility in both collections of poetry, as well as in Hammad’s performances on HBO’s television series “Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry” or, as it is commonly known, “Def Poetry Jam”. Rather than offer an exhaustive reading, I focus on two pieces specifically, “One Stop (hebron revisited)” from *Born Palestinian, Born Black* and “Mic Check” from *ZaatarDiva* the latter has been performed on Broadway and on the “Def Poetry Jam” series. I argue that the violence in “One Stop (hebron revisited)” and the

double speak in “Mic Check” both constitute a discursive battle – and I use the word “battle” deliberately to refer to the way in which emcees in hip-hop culture battle or attempt to verbally outdo one another – against the invisibility of Arab Americans.¹ I have chosen these two poems because they epitomize Hammad’s other work, wherein the destruction of Hebron and ransacking through her luggage make Arabs and Arab Americans highly visible as objects to fear. Yet, this is a vexed visibility in that it does not recognize people as individuals, as human, but rather as objects and, in so doing, reinscribes them into being part of a dangerous and invisible mass. In addition, these pieces pinpoint the narratives that obscure individuality in favor of thinking of Arabs and Arab Americans as a mass threat to national security in the post-9/11 United States and worldwide.

Before discussing the poems themselves, the term “Arab American” deserves some concretization, as my usage of it is very much deliberate. It is in many ways a tenuous term in that it seeks to reconcile two identities, which appear to be in serious cultural conflict; “Arab American” also appears to be a dubious neologism, coined in the wake of United States’ political turmoil with countries in the Arab world (Abdelrazek, 2007). Some scholars have chosen to complicate the term, preferring to use the phrase “Arabs in America” instead (Suleiman, 2000). Hammad disavows the term as applicable to herself, asking “What the fuck is Arab American?” (Knopf-Newman, 2006). Instead, she points to her being Arab and being American as particular parts of her “composite” identity, choosing to label herself Brooklyn and Palestinian² (Knopf-Newman, 2006; Hammad, 2002). Because of the tension it highlights and the political turmoil it brings to the fore, I find the term “Arab American” particularly apropos for Hammad’s work. She veers away from relegating her topics to perpetual foreignness with the term Arab or falsely subscribing to assimilationist or utopic multiculturalist rhetoric. More to the point, Hammad’s poetry (and her memoir, *Drops of this Story*), through its discussion of Palestine, hip-hop, Islam, and a myriad other issues, complicates the understanding of the terms Arab and American as simple issues of national origin and puts critical pressure on what occurs when the two are conjoined in one space.

1. I deliberately choose to violate grammatical convention and not use a hyphen for Arab American and African American because the categories should be viewed as distinct and not already or always interlocking and intertwined. Certainly, they are intertwined in this case, but a hyphen suggests a neater combination than is present.

2. The term “Brooklyn and Palestinian” violates the parallelism rules of conventional grammar. In an interview with Marcy-Jane Knopf-Newman, Hammad stated, “... I mean, I didn’t grow up Arab American - what the fuck is Arab American? I grew up Palestinian and Brooklyn, really specifically”.

“One Stop (hebron revisited)” provides a combustible example of conjoining Arab and American because it insists on the presence of Palestinians qua Palestinians. That is, it takes for granted the existence of a group of people whose identity undermines the validity of the state of Israel. The poem describes a fantasy of violence toward Baruch Goldstein, the US-born Jewish doctor responsible for the February 25, 1994 *Cave of the Patriarchs* massacre of Palestinians. The title, in its parenthetical use of revisited, becomes not just a moment of mourning or, perhaps, a discursive enactment of the Right to Return, but also a moment that emphasizes the importance of the massacre. In so doing, this piece revises history by creating a response filled with the outrage of those affected. This outrage echoes in that the parenthetical phrase “hebron revisited” is juxtaposed with the phrase “one stop”. Such juxtaposition becomes ironic; after all, the acts of revisiting signal that there is more than one stop at this moment. Given that the “one stop” in the stanzas refers to the movement of a train, the juxtaposition of “revisited” also emphasizes the multiple moments of contemplation leading to the end of the line, both the end of the train’s line and the end of the poetic line. In other words, the last lines of the poem or the speaker’s menacing promise – “the train you on got/one stop/the train you on got only one stop/and im’a be there when/you get off” – interplays

with the possibility of revisiting Hebron in Goldstein's thoughts multiple times before that last stop (Hammad, 1996a, p. 25). Here, an insistence on revisiting and stopping at these moments allows the poem to be a discursive space for writing Palestinian identity into existence.

One might argue that the violence within the poem makes the project of writing Palestine a difficult one, to say the least. To say more, critics might point out that the violence within the poem undermines the ability of the poem to resonate with anyone other than Palestinians and, even more specifically, Palestinians that were affected by the 1994 massacre. I find this particular standpoint shortsighted, as it presupposes that Palestinian existence cannot be defined by anger and that the discursive space created for Palestinians must avoid anger to be considered valid. In its complexity, Hammad's work overall, as well as in this specific poem, adheres to a dictum made by Langston Hughes in his seminal essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. [...] We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (cited in Gayle, 1972, p. 17). In "One Stop (hebron revisited)", Hammad (1996a) combines beautiful and ugly in order to, in Hughes' words, stand free. For example, the second stanza finds the speaker with "some fake nails" with which she will "carve out [his] green heart [...] and thro[w] it on the tracks" (p. 23). The hip-hop aesthetic in the late 1980s and early 1990s hailed long nails – whether glued on or grown – as the latest in style; the transformation that takes place when the speaker uses the fake nails highlights the links to American culture and harnesses the power of being both beautiful and ugly. In addition, the speaker stomps to the *debke*, a Palestinian folk dance, as she "[wraps] that stethoscope round [his] neck/til [his] eyes rolled under [her] feet" (Hammad, 1996a, p. 24). Combining the beauty of the folk dance with the horrors of asphyxiation allows for a space to express the desire for vengeance in a way that is culturally specific in its beauty, and as Hughes pointed out, quite human in its ugliness.

In uniting such beauty and ugliness, Hammad resists the narrative that privileges the voices of women of color over their male counterparts, a narrative that suggests women of color need to be liberated from their male oppressors. Nada Elia (2006) elucidates this discussion with respect to Arab American women, illustrating how imperialism and western feminism make strange bedfellows in silencing the voices of Arab American women. She argues that despite the plethora of forums newly available to Arab and Arab American women, they still find themselves within the double bind of racism and sexism: that is, the privileged voices are the ones that participate in the demonization of their own culture and upbraid Arab masculinity at the expense of more amplified discussions about western imperialism. Elia's discussion emphasizes the necessity for a – dare I say it – Arab American feminism that refuses to brook racist or sexist ideology with its use of simplistic narratives. Hammad's "One Stop (hebron revisited)" answers the call with its blatant use of sexuality. The poetic 'I' says that she "woulda/opened [her] blouse so you coulda/opened your pants" (1996a, p.23); the act of opening of her blouse, as metonymic for her sexuality, gainsays the narratives about Arab women's supposed sexual repression and presents her as very much in control of her sexuality (Hammad, 1996a). The line breaks, which would be pauses if spoken, are moments of an ironic sensuality, especially because the open blouse is

more appropriately thought of as a black widow's invitation, wrought with the promise of not sex, but violence. For those who would argue that this presentation belongs to the American side of Arab American, I must point out that the sexual identity that the speaker controls is one which is considered exotic. That is, the poetic 'I' relies on its use of an exotic sexuality in order to coerce the man to reveal his penis; the intended goal – to “[stomp] on [his] slimy flesh til/[he was] underground/with the rats” (Hammad, 1996a, p. 23) – becomes a violent repudiation of exoticized sexuality and constitutes a resistance to the narrative to which Elia refers, a narrative which reduces Arab American women's sexuality to being always in service of someone else's political agenda.

I want to be clear that I do not dismiss the Arab and Arab American women who speak up on their own behalf to condemn patriarchy and oppression within their own cultures. I do not wish to silence them by reducing their voices as subservient to an agenda not their own. My aim is to point out that Hammad's verse in “One Stop” inverts the narrative of exoticized sexuality to achieve a different rhetorical aim. Her use of an exoticized sexuality in “One Stop” remains consistent with her use of it in other poems. For example, in her poem “Exotic”, she eschews assumptions made by others about her sexuality and embraces having agency, saying “the beat of my lashes against each other/ain't some dark desert beat/it's just a blink/get over it” (Hammad, 1996, p. 69). Such an embrace of agency allows space for multiple voices and dovetails with Hammad's aim to complicate the narratives about Arabs. Specifically, this conundrum of whose voice is privileged (and, consequently, whose isn't) arises in Hammad's 2002 interview in the *Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (MELUS) where she points out that those who do not have control of the dominant narrative must discursively contend with the hegemonies that do, especially when they intend to subvert that narrative.

The double speak of “Mic Check” furthers Hammad's rejection of simplistic narratives as it relies on homonyms and double entendre to discuss the connection between imperialism and the United States national security procedures. The title, which appears as “Mike Check” in *ZaatarDiva*, “Mic Check” in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway ... and MORE*, and “Mike Check” when it aired on HBO's “Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry”, evinces that the homonym allows the poem to resonate on multiple registers (Hammad, 2005; Simmons, 2003; Lathan, 2007). The change only applies to the title; the differences between the poems, where they exist, are minor. The title “Mike Check” more closely aligns the poem with its critique of the TSA's implementation of random airport checks and other security measures in the interest of national security in the United States. It emphasizes racial profiling, and the misappropriation of Judeo-Christian ideology undergirding anti-Arab racism through the persona of Mike, a man who is, according to Hammad's poem, doing his job. The usage of “Mike”, which in its unabridged form, Michael, is a common name and a Biblical one, points to the ways in which anti-Arab sentiment has become as commonplace as the name “Mike”; the use of the abbreviated form also suggests a transformation of the Biblical archangel from being a protector and an adversary of evil. So transformed, “Mike” represents those who would uncritically follow in the footsteps of those who “stank so bad the/Indians smelled them/ mic check [...] before they landed” and further perpetuate racist ideology in the name of patriotism (Hammad, 2005, p. 62).

The version of the title and poem I've chosen to use, "Mic Check", points to Hammad's alignment with the spoken-word art form and hip-hop community. I use this version, published in *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway ... and MORE*, here because this discussion privileges her mobilization of hip-hop parlance for the purposes of socio-political critique. The poem begins with a call to the audience: "Mic check 1/2 can you hear me mic/check 1-2" (Simmons, 2003). In the tradition of emceeing or rapping as one of the four main elements of hip-hop, this call is not just a part of the sound check, but also a way to excite the crowd before a performance. For Hammad, this doubles as a way to not only excite the crowd but also as a litmus test to gauge the audience's responsiveness to her poem. She repeats the phrases "1-2", "mic check" and "can you hear me" throughout the poem and, at times, positions them next to the "Mike" character to ask "can you hear me Mike"; the result of these juxtapositions allows her to continuously gauge the audience's responsiveness to her message, especially during a performance. Furthermore, it relies on the sound check question to 'put Mike in check', or, translated from hip-hop slang, to question the validity of Mike's assumptions and, by extension, the assumptions of the crowd. So, "can you hear me?" is not simply a question about auditory engagement, but also emotional and cognitive estrangement. In other words, do you understand me? Can you relate to me? Or, to borrow a common phrase from the hip-hop community, do you feel me?

The answer to this question is not always affirmative. Tina Dolan (2006) notes the negative criticism Hammad and the other performance poets received during their stint on Broadway. She notes that one critic dismisses the poets' words as predictable, their views as "superficially controversial", and their words as safe. I would add that the reviewer relegates the poets' critique to being "commentary", and dismisses their poetry as "preaching". In addition, the reviewer's accusation that "preaching is easiest when directed toward the choir" (cited in Dolan 2006, p. 168) also homogenizes the audience and presumes that they all share the same opinion about the varied issues raised during the performance. Both comments shortchange all of the poets' writing; in the case of Hammad, it attempts to erase her words, making her perspective invisible, yet again. Nonetheless, Dolan's favorable assessment of the program makes a similar rhetorical move. By situating the performances in a discussion about utopic performances – those that are evocative of a feeling and cannot be transmitted past the stage – she implies that the performance has little resonance beyond the stage and that the language of the poet is rendered impotent after the performance ends. To think of Hammad in the tradition of hip-hop contradicts such an idea. Particularly as an emcee, Hammad's words permeate because the poetic verse, when thought of as lyrics, is meant to be repeated in the mouths of others. Much like Lemon, another poet in the Broadway cast, who recites Etheridge Knight's "I Sing of Shine", Hammad's words carry beyond the stage, and even beyond herself (Simmons, 2003). I do not dismiss the weight of the feeling engendered by her performance, but I emphasize the capacity that her words have to resist dissipation and create colloquy about socio-political issues, particularly in the hip-hop/spoken-word tradition.

The question becomes: in the midst of noxious criticism and implicit disavowals of her poetry's influence, what exactly does Hammad's work achieve? After all, despite the abundance of Arab and Arab American poets who complicate these narratives, she seems to be the only Brooklyn Palestinian spoken-wordsmith of our time; because she

holds this status, the pressure is on for her to represent the totality of a community whose voice is so often silenced or dismissed. However, as Bing-Canar and Zerkel (1998) explain with regard to their video *Benaat Chicago*, some topics and discussions are simply outside the scope of one's projects. Despite such pressures, Hammad's work continues to push the limits of discourse. For example, her poem about September 11, "First Writing Since", was published in the Winter of 2001 in the *Middle East Report Journal* (Aidi, 2002). Her inclusion in such a journal does the work of highlighting the Arab diaspora – even if the term Arab American brings discursive limits to the fore. In addition, Hammad's inclusion in poetic and literary anthologies like *Word: On Being a [Woman] Writer (On Writing Herself)*, *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant and a Prayer, Listen Up!*, *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, *Poets for Palestine* and, the documentary, *The Fourth World War*, among other collections, solidly places her in the realm of activism; each of these collections offers voices that condemn violence against women, encourage women's voices, and fight for social justice worldwide. Other collections, which I lack the space to mention, discuss issues pertinent to Islam. These collections also practice social justice by giving sales proceeds to organizations devoted to causes Hammad and her fellow authors support. Lest I give short shrift to their value as texts, it is imperative to mention that these works participate in a discursive moment that would otherwise delimit the boundaries of discussion without them.

Much like "One Stop (hebron revisited)" and "Mic Check", Hammad's other work questions the ideology of patriotism, which requires Arab American silence and complicity in the United States' activities in the Arab world. Prior to September 11th, patriotism for Arab Americans consisted of keeping quiet about their Arab heritage, assimilating to the so-called American way of life and disavowing whatever made them culturally conspicuous (Suleiman, 2000; Salaita, 2005). The violence of "One Stop (hebron revisited)" breaks this implicit code of conduct with its emphasis on Palestinian identity and a discursive enactment of the Right to Return. Hammad's verse denies others the comfort of her silence and her good behavior. In the wake of 9/11, "Mic Check" or "Mike Check" dares to challenge the desire for Arab American silence that accrued with fear and ignorance. Hammad's writing and, certainly, her performances insist that a patriot be redefined as someone who can challenge the country of her birth. When she sarcastically remarks "and I am always random/i understand" (Hammad, 2005, p. 62), the implicit question of the audience's patriotism is whether they understand the ramifications of the TSA officer's, and, by extension, of the behavior of the United States. Both poems engender scorn for their repudiation of the hostile social mores put in place for Arabs and Arab Americans, most especially because they disobey the rules and unmask the bigoted dogma upon which the rules are based.

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