“Can’t you hear the shooting?”
Death and Violence in Palestinian-American Literature on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

“Can’t you hear the shooting?” we are asked in a haunting poem by Palestinian-American author Lisa Suhair Majaj. This plea to hear the bullets fired in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict pertains to a core part of the Palestinian experience: life in the occupied territories is marked by the omnipresence of violence and death, a bitter reality that the Palestinian diaspora in America calls our attention to by producing literature, music and art dealing with the siege under which their compatriots live. These diasporic reflections are not produced in a neutral environment; they have to be understood as situated within the wider discursive field describing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the United States. The literature and art produced on the conflict in the American diaspora, I argue, responds to the reality in Israel/Palestine on the one hand, but it is also an intervention into a one-sided representation and perception of the conflict in the US and other Western countries that traditionally side with Israel. The American discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is characteristically simplistic and shaped by a partial political approach that is also present in the American mainstream media’s biased reporting. In her study of American foreign policy and the mainstream media’s reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Marda Dunsky shows how both media and politics contribute to an abridged and partisan public discourse on the subject. She documents the media’s failure to develop an independent perspective on the conflict and concludes that coverage rarely “goes beyond superficial details,” thereby “leaving the American public without important contextual information of why the conflict remains so intractable.”

2 In the chapter “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique,” Judith Butler shows how difficult it is to criticize Israel in America. Her demand that critical thinking about Israel has to be possible without being met with the automated accusation of Anti-Semitism is based on the recognition of a problematic and impossible conflation between Israel and all Jews. Judith Butler, “The Charge of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and the Risks of Public Critique,” Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, eds. Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 249-265.
mate struggle to represent the other side of the conflict by filling the discursive voids with what they feel is left unsaid. They urge us to hear “the shots fired,” they plead with us to recognize their compatriots as human beings rather than the frenzied terrorists or stone-throwing radicals that the media often make them out to be. Moreover, by narrating the injustices committed against a people that has long lived under military occupation, they work to jolt us from our complacency and communicate their indignation about the ongoing suffering produced by the conflict.

In this analysis, I will present two such aesthetic reflections on violent death, the most brutal facet of armed conflict: a poem by Palestinian-American writer Naomi Shihab Nye and a song by an Arab-American hip hop group called The N.O.M.A.D.S.⁴ To dispel any misconceptions about my own position at the outset, I want to clarify that although my theoretical engagement with Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon and Talal Asad seeks to shed some light on the conflict’s bloodshed by understanding its preconditions and mechanisms, I do not condone any acts of violence, regardless of who commits them and no matter what the justifications are. But as long as simplistic views on the conflict and its dynamic prevail, hopes for a solution to the ongoing suffering are likely to be naïve or illusory. Many artistic productions concerned with this conflict – in particular those of the Palestinian and Jewish diasporas – aim to puncture prevailing perceptions, thereby contributing to a more complicated and nuanced view. I argue that the literary and musical pieces I will discuss here represent discursive interventions that enable us to test our own convictions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: they provide us with alternate narratives of how violence arises, how it affects those who are subject to it and those who commit it. As aesthetic negotiations, they present us with perspectives differing sharply from the mere coverage of facts and the worn-out tone of political rhetoric.

To develop an instructive understanding of how violence arises, I have chosen Hannah Arendt’s seminal essay “On Violence” as my primary framework. Her conceptualization of violence is particularly helpful in relation to the conflict, because she urges us to understand it as a rational phenomenon.⁵ She insists that violent acts are mostly based on rational considerations, rath-

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⁴ Naomi Shihab Nye, “For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh,” 19 Varieties of Gazelle. Poems of the Middle East (New York: Greenwillow Books, 2005), 53-54; The N.O.M.A.D.S., “Moot,” Poets for Palestine, ed. Remi Kanazi (New York: Al Jisser Group, 2008), 34-36. The N.O.M.A.D.S. is short for Notoriously Offensive Male Arabs Discussing Shit. On their myspace page they introduce themselves as follows: “Always on the Offensive, Open-Minded, Tactfull, Tastefull, & Talented beyond belief type-tip... Notoriously Offensive Male Arabs Discussing Sh*t – the N.O.M.A.D.S. Omar Offendum and Mr.Tibbz, partners in rhyme since grade 7, bring an Arab/African American voice to Hip-Hop culture...No we don't claim to be the first to have done it... but we are the best...Shaaalom suckaz...” http://www.myspace.com/thenomads.

⁵ As a German Jew thinking about the history of European violence from an American diasporic position, Arendt is situated in a similar position to the Palestinian-American diaspora that looks back at their home country trying to understand the violent conflict that bears down on the country.
er than describing them as irrational reactions, thereby making it difficult to dismiss them as instinctual and hence beyond the realm of reason. Arendt’s assertion forces us to approach violence as a rational phenomenon that we must try to comprehend. In order to understand her conception of violence, it is crucial to realize that she grounds it in a political scenario where power and violence form a conceptual but mutually exclusive pair. As I will demonstrate later, she maps out an ideal form of shared and legitimate power to contrast it with its sinister opposition, a mode of domination that inevitably leads to violence. Her understanding of violence is thus inevitably connected to an analysis of the political conditions out of which it arises. I contend that Arendt’s thoughts on violence can be put in a fruitful dialogue with the situation in Israel/Palestine as they are born out of a deep and historically grounded concernment with political conditions leading to violence – conditions, to be sure, that are not comparable to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Arendt’s need to test her considerations within the realm of contemporary political predicaments lead her to view writing as a mode of action, “a moral injunction (...) an act of justice” that always had to be guided by the goal of putting theory into the service of a contested and problematic reality. Similarly, I propose to read the literary texts dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as political actions and deliberate interventions into a current political struggle.

When political conflicts, such as the situation in Israel and the occupied territories, repeatedly escalate in violence this could be indicative of a deeply felt hopelessness by those who view violent intervention as their last resort. Another reason for using violence may lie in perceiving the opponent as essentially unworthy of freedom and respect. As I have mentioned before, Arendt deliberately describes violence as a tool that is used for a specific purpose and is rational by that definition (Arendt 46). However, by ascertaining the calculating reason that often backs violent action she does not deny the

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6 Another proponent of denaturalizing our understanding of violence, particularly in respect to war, is Michael Walzer, who argues in his book *Just and Unjust Wars* that the “references to necessity and duress” when it comes to the use of violence in war function as “a kind of apology” with which we attempt to relieve ourselves of our moral responsibility. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 4.

7 As J. Peter Euben shows in his essay “Arendt’s Hellenism,” the model for this shared power was Athenian democracy which Arendt viewed as unmitigated and based on the principles of participation. In her idealized vision of Athenian democracy, Arendt chose to overlook the deeply unequal traits of a democracy that was reserved to an elite, excluding such minorities as women and slaves from the beginning. J. Peter Euben, “Arendt’s Hellenism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 151-164.


influence of affect. Rather, she rejects a naturalizing and thereby apologetic stance on violence in order to avoid the possibility of describing perpetrators as mere victims of their instincts. In order to distinguish between a rationally guided form of aggression and one that is provoked by affect, Arendt differentiates between violence and rage. According to this distinction, violence is an implementation of strength while rage is the result of an offended sense of justice. This differentiation will be important in the interpretation of the primary texts I present later (63).

The origins of the omnipresent violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can best be discussed by considering Arendt’s distinction between power and violence. “Power is never the property of an individual,” she maintains, instead “it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (44). She claims that power is “always in need of numbers” and observes that it arises out of the “human ability […] to act in concert” (ibid.). Accordingly for Arendt, power as a negotiated and shared property is strongly linked to the idea of a collective acting together, and at its core is thus a democratic sense of legitimacy.10 Much in line with my own reading of Arendt’s thoughts on the matter, Paul Ricœur suggests that her work consciously establishes power as an ideal, a shared property that is continually negotiated. 11 For Ricœur, her recovery of power is based on the equality of the citizens who hold it and goes against the grain of “a political philosophy (…) for which political relations are defined as relations of domination” a school of thought for which “power (…) remains the power to constrain” (Ricœur 21). In Arendt’s thought this definition of power is misleading, because it has forgotten its democratic foundations and has a limited vision of “the power to constrain, as the power of man over man” (ibid.). According to Arendt, the misuse of power leads to its inevitable disintegration, ultimate self-destruction and the decline into violence. The Arendtian definition of power as legitimate and fundamentally democratic presents an ideal that we can juxtapose to a form of power struggling on the cusp of illegitimacy, as in the case of the unequal relationship between Palestinians and Israelis. Such a contested form of power, lacking the support of a large part of those who are subject to it qua military occupation, both turns violent and provokes violence in response. Following this argument, Israel’s power is constantly under threat, since it does not represent a large part of its constituency, because

10 Although this sense of a legitimate power is integral to Arendt’s thinking, she also hints at a perverted form of power: “The extreme form of power is all against one” (42). Arendt’s recovery of such a shared and democratic form of power is closely linked to her idea of political action which is realized in “persuasive speech (…) argument and deliberation” that testifies to the plurality of perspectives onto the “public thing.” This Arendtian definition of political action allows us to see the literary texts on the conflict not only as expressions of alternative perspectives and counter narratives on the matter, but also permits us to describe the texts themselves as a form of political action. Dana Villa, “Heideggerian Themes in The Human Condition,” Hannah Arendt: Verborgene Tradition – Unzeitgemässe Aktualität?, ed. Heinrich Böll Stiftung (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), 90.

it has labored to remove the Palestinians from the public political space and continues to deny them the right to self-determination. From the beginning, the Israeli state has thus been envisioned as exclusive.\textsuperscript{12} Israel’s declaration of independence on May 14 1948 reads: “We hereby proclaim the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine, to be called Medinath Yisrael (The State of Israel).”\textsuperscript{13} The nation was conceived as Jewish, as a safe haven for Jewish survivors of the Shoah and as a home for the wider Jewish diaspora. Political theorist Sammy Smooha defines such an exclusive form of government as an “ethnic democracy, […] because of the definition of the state as belonging to a particular religious or ethnic group.”\textsuperscript{14} It is because of this exclusive constitution that Israel offers insufficient forums for democratic representation and civil rights to the Palestinians.\textsuperscript{15} By way of its constitutional document, the Israeli state has effectively transformed Palestinians into second-class citizens in their own country; the resulting inequality between Israelis and Palestinians renders the state’s power precarious.\textsuperscript{16} This leads to violence both on the side of the Palestinians, who consider themselves the oppressed natives and the State of Israel that is suspicious of its Palestinian population and views them as a security risk. The state’s deeply rooted mistrust expresses itself, for example, in the harsh control exercised by the Israeli Defense Forces over the Palestinian territories that constitutes violence, because it severely delimits Palestinian civil rights. The state’s manifold control mechanisms vis-à-vis the Palestinians indicate that the Arab minority is viewed as a potential danger that must be subjected to constant surveillance. These disciplining measures reveal the state’s need to affirm its assumedly threatened power. Or, as Arendt put it: “Violence appears where power is in jeopardy” (56).

Speaking of state brutality, Arendt observes that “in foreign relations as in domestic affairs violence appears as a\textsuperscript{a last resort} to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers, the foreign enemy, the native crimi-


\textsuperscript{15} The close to 700,000 Israeli Palestinians must be considered second-class citizens, because “their citizenship does not assure them equality in law […] The West Bank and Gaza Strip are actually incorporated into Israel, while their Palestinian inhabitants are denied civil and political rights” (Smooha 391f.).

\textsuperscript{16} For a detailed description of the devastating effects of the military occupation on the Palestinian population see Saree Makdisi’s history of the occupation, \textit{Palestine Inside Out. An Everyday Occupation}. The ousting of Palestinians from the political process and the public arena is spatially expressed in the building of a wall separating the occupied territories from Israel. By 2008 the “projected length of (the) West Bank wall,” was estimated at “437 miles.” Saree Makdisi, \textit{Palestine Inside Out} (New York: Norton, 2008), 23. Fencing off the Palestinian population in such a fashion is a clear visual reminder that they are not seen as potential citizens but rather as a danger to the state that must be ‘reigned in.’
It is worthwhile to pay close attention to Arendt’s phrasing here. She speaks of violence as a *last resort* and thus argues that by choosing violence to maintain its troubled hegemony, a state involuntarily reveals that all other means have failed. In a more sinister reading, assuming that the state has no such inhibitions to use force as a political tool, one could also argue that other means are simply not considered, since they might appear to be less efficient means for the quick achievement of goals. According to Arendt, however, state-induced violence brings to light the government’s attitude toward those it uses it against, as enemies of the state. Moreover, the use of force indicates that the state’s power does not stand unquestioned, that its monopoly is under attack. It is this unjust and unjustified use of force by an oppressive state power that many Palestinian-American writers and artists raise their voices against. I propose to read these indignant voices as an archive of aesthetic resistance against violence’s muting power, its ability “to disperse, silence and isolate people.”

As aesthetic expressions of the Palestinian diaspora, these poems, songs and other art forms produce and reproduce a sense of illegitimacy with respect to the occupying power. With Arendt, I have provided a possible explanation for the continuing bloodshed of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, keeping in mind that whereas violence is instrumental in character, it is rarely monocausal in its origins. Finally, Arendt also considers the affective undercurrents that provoke aggression: focusing on rage, she singles out an offended sense of justice as a trigger capable of igniting such an emotion in humans. Pointing to the last straw that transforms the “engages into enrages,” Arendt argues that it is “not injustice that ranks first but hypocrisy” (65). In the Palestinian-American poem and song that I will be analyzing here, the line between violence and rage is not always so clear-cut. However, Arendt’s considerations on violence and rage constitute an illuminating backdrop against which the poem and song can be understood: they are grappling with an overwhelming sense of injustice and rage in negotiating the dehumanizing effects of violence.

While rage and injustice are recurring themes in Palestinian-American literature dealing with violence, solidarity also features prominently. Whereas a perceived injustice can ignite rage and rage in turn seeks violent outlets, solidarity can be understood as another possible effect of being exposed to violence and exposing others to it. Arendt describes this phenomenon as an emerging “brotherhood on the battlefield,” echoing Franz Fanon’s assertion...
tion that “the practice of violence binds men together” (qtd. in Arendt 67). Many Palestinian-American poems demonstrate the multiple solidarities created on the battlefield: the solidarity of violent perpetrators, the solidarity of victims among themselves and the transatlantic solidarity expressed by the Palestinian diaspora for their compatriots in the homeland. A striking side-effect of this solidarity against another, either a victim or perpetrator, is the (momentarily) waning individual consciousness. Instead of focusing on individual responses to violence, most Palestinian-American texts highlight collective suffering. Fanon testifies to the same collectivizing effect in the decolonization struggle declaring that “Individualism is the first to disappear,” when the “native (…) has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom.”20 Finally, I want to stress that in the Palestinian-American texts speaking up for their compatriots, solidarity is not limited to those exposed to violence, but becomes what I call a transnational diasporic practice.21

Returning to violence, I will briefly focus on its most gruesome outcome: the termination of a human life. If solidarity is an effect of being subjected to violence or committing it, death is the ultimate threat posed by armed conflict. When writing about the countless violent escalations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinian-American authors have to confront the ultimate frontier of our knowledge: death. The finality of death that Shakespeare captured in the metaphor of “The undiscovered country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns” poses a challenge for the writers who confront the topic in their works.22 But although death epitomizes irreversible physical separation, many Palestinian-American poets, much like Hamlet, are haunted by their dead. In Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh,” the speaker admits that the dead girl inhabits her dreams. The rupture of death implies that witnessing another dying inevitably means to be left behind. As a survivor, one stands before a locked door without the keys to enter. This impossibility of traversing the barrier of physical separation is performed in a poetic motion away from the dead and towards the living, as we shall later see in Nye’s poem about Ibtisam Bozieh’s death. Death’s insuperableness also explains the importance given to contextual information in the reflections on it. Nye’s poem briefly hones in on the moment of death, only to proceed to an introspective meditation on the implications of witnessing Palestinian suffering from the distance of a diasporic home. “Moot,” the hip hop track written by The N.O.M.A.D.S., too focuses on the path leading up to death, rather than the actual moment of dying.  

20 Frantz Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 47.
The anthropologist Linda M. Pitcher has studied the ritual, symbolization and narrative of martyrdom in Palestinian culture.\textsuperscript{23} Pitcher has shown that the telling of a martyr’s death is an integral part of the funeral. During her research she lived with numerous Palestinian families and recorded their stories about the practice of martyrdom. Pitcher’s research demonstrates that news of someone killed by the Israeli Defense Forces spreads fast in the affected Palestinian neighborhood. In this process, the news of the death is transformed into the story of the martyr that is repeatedly told and thereby transformed into an oral tradition. Although Pitcher focuses particularly on what are called the “Intifada martyrs,” her findings are helpful to frame our understanding of textual, diasporic witness practices of Palestinian deaths.

To describe the function of these accounts of the martyr’s death, Pitcher introduces the act of witnessing, drawing on the Arabic concept of \textit{shahada} – to bear witness. I contend that the aesthetic reflections produced in the Palestinian diaspora are practices of witnessing in their own right, albeit in other genres. They produce literature, music and movies that bear witness to their compatriots’ suffering in a land that they have left behind. Crucially however, these texts do not witness the deaths directly. Instead, they testify to the agony they cause to the Palestinian community, while also broadcasting them beyond the walls of occupied territories that might otherwise prevent us from ever hearing of the turmoil inside. I propose to read these aesthetic modes of witnessing as a diasporic practice of solidarity that becomes the ethical and communicative hinge connecting globally dispersed peoples. Reading Palestinian-American literature in the context of a Palestinian witnessing tradition helps us to consider the various implications of such a practice. But despite contextualizing this practice in a Palestinian \textit{shahada} tradition, the diasporic texts also perform a labor that must be recognized in its difference that I have marked as a transnational practice of solidarity.

The issue of witnessing can only be touched upon here; I want to leave it at summarizing two possible consequences of witnessing, which are acutely present in both texts that will be analyzed in the following. Firstly, witnessing the Palestinian plight from a diasporic position is a means of rendering it visible not only to one’s own community, but also to a broader Anglophone audience that might otherwise be unaware of it. Secondly, to bear witness to suffering evokes our ethical responsibility to attend to it. To become aware of the absence of justice in the occupied territories produces a sense of guilt and indignation, both in the reader and the writer, as my reading of Nye’s poem on the death of Ibtisam Bozieh will show.

Nye’s poem “For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh” explicitly presents itself as textual witness to the death of a 13-year-old Palestinian girl. The title immediately confronts the readers with an irresolvable tension between a claim for individuality and a statistical number, an anonymous

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casualty of the war. The title’s word succession suggests that Ibtisam Bozieh’s death has a primarily representative function: she seems to owe the honor of having a poem written for her not to her death’s individual significance, or to the fact that it is more remarkable than others, but to being the 500th victim of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, despite its initial focus on her death as the 500th in this enduring strife, Nye’s poem also rescues Ibtisam Bozieh from the obscurity of being forgotten or becoming an abstract number, one of countless victims. Nye’s lines preserve and broadcast some of Ibtisam Bozieh’s individuality that would have been lost otherwise, performing a balancing act between individuality and representativeness. In the first line, the speaker addresses the dead girl as “Little sister Ibtisam Bozieh,” transforming her into a part of the Palestinian collective while in the same breath constituting the collective as a family (Nye 53). By calling her a sister, Nye’s poem invokes the solidarity engendered among the oppressed and the diaspora that witnesses their distant suffering. Fanon notes a very similar change of vocabulary in the colonial environment, a rhetoric of familial ties that testifies to the rise of a collective consciousness in the face of the colonizer.24 Ibtisam Bozieh’s name, the first verse continues, haunts the sleep of Palestinians; she cannot be forgotten, or, in a more bold reading, she enters the Palestinian subconscious.

Line four and five of the first stanza report the specificities of her death: “Dead at 13, for staring through/ the window into a gun barrel/ which did not know you wanted to be/ a doctor” (ibid.). Her youth stands out and emphasizes her innocence to the readers, an innocence that is underscored by the grotesque causality established by the forth line. She is dead, “for staring through the window,” an innocuous activity (ibid.). Next to constituting Ibtisam Bozieh as a victim, these lines also create a crass image. By making the reader envision the face of a girl opposite a gun barrel, the verse creates a stark opposition between the child victim and the ruthless perpetrator. Killing Ibtisam Bozieh is depicted as a heinous act that underscores the cruelty and injustice of her assassin. Through the prism of Arendt’s analysis, the perpetrator, who is not so much an individual actor as he is a member of the state’s army, is exposed as abusing his superior power. When children become military targets, the legitimacy of a government using force against an occupied civilian population appears in a questionable light. By stressing the injustice of Ibtisam Bozieh’s death, the poem also attempts to antagonize its readers against the perpetrators of such crimes, or, to put it in Arendtian terminology, the text labors to transform the readers into enraged secondary witnesses of an unjust killing that is claimed to be representative of many others. Further promoting the readers’ sympathy for the girl, the shooter remains invisible throughout the poem; Nye establishes this fatal encounter as an antinomy between human and machine. Whereas this opposition suc-

24 Fanon narrates the rise of a family-centered vocabulary among the colonized as a mode of resistance against the colonizer who attempts to isolate the colonized in order to weaken their ability to act in concert and rise against him (47).
ceeds in establishing Ibtisam Bozieh’s vulnerable humanity, it also prevents
the readers from seeing the killer in human terms. Simple as this observation
may appear, it points to the crux of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which
the other is hardly visible as human, in which one’s own humanity is as-
serted too frequently through a fundamental denial of the other’s.

The gun, the instrument of Ibtisam Bozieh’s death, remains wholly inhu-
mane although it is personified when we learn that the gun was unaware the
girl wanted “to be/ a doctor.” Lines six and seven draw on the girl’s obliterated
future, her dream of becoming a doctor, and thereby remind the readers
of her lost potential, the void that has replaced hope. Moreover, these lines
also capture the blindness of armed conflict as evident in the callousness at
work when innocent children are murdered. The girl’s wish to become a doc-
tor creates a further contrast: whereas the shooter is an agent of destruction,
she aspired to a career that would be centered on saving lives rather than
taking them.

The second and third stanzas are suffused by a sense of survivor’s guilt
felt by the speaker who reveals herself to be an exiled Palestinian: “Had I
stayed in your land,/ I might have been dead too […] guiltily, you, not me”
(ibid.). Ibtisam Bozieh’s death is transformed into an occasion on which the
poem’s speaker contemplates her own mortality; her premature end becomes
a memento mori for those left behind. Rather than stopping short at contem-
plating her own mortality, the speaker proceeds to reflect on her own privile-
eged position as part of a diasporic community whose life is not rendered
fragile by a continuous armed conflict. This fundamental difference between
life in the diaspora and in Israel/Palestine as well as the girl’s death cause
the speaker to experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness that is
triggered by two factors: the spatial distance from the scene of events that
renders any form of direct intervention impossible and, maybe more impor-
tantly, a profound helplessness in the face of death’s finality. This perceived
inadequacy in light of the tragedy produces a self-conscious grief that always
already knows its insufficiency:

I would smooth your life in my hands, pull you back. […]
Throwing this ragged grief into the street,
scissoring news stories free from the page
but they live on my desk with letters, not cries (ibid.).

The conditional form used in the first two lines of the second stanza, accentu-
ate the tension between the desire to undo the girl’s death and the impossibil-
ity of realizing that wish.

Nye’s poem also inquires into the ethical implications of witnessing the
death of one’s people from the diasporic distance. Being removed from the
site of the conflict can produce a guilty conscience for not being there, but it
also creates a moment of diasporic solidarity. Thus, Nye’s poem can be under-
stood both as a practice of diasporic solidarity and a tribute to the Palestin-
ians who remained in their homeland. The final lines of the last stanza circle
around an insurmountable detachment from the homeland; letters become
the abstract representatives of actual felt pain. They are inadequate substi-
tutes for the unattainable reality of lived experience; Palestine has become an abstract concept, rather than a sensually experienced reality. However, these last lines of the poem also demonstrate a deep yearning and perhaps even an obsession to stay informed about the events in the homeland. By cutting out news stories about Palestine, the speaker removes them from their original site, the newspaper. Similarly, she herself has been removed from her original context by being expelled from Palestine. Therefore, I propose to read the cutting out of news stories about a distant land as an allegory for being exiled. For the Palestinian diaspora, the process of being displaced was and is violent, as it renders them forcefully removed from their origins. But having to leave Palestine is also liberating (the speaker refers to the process of cutting as freeing) because it means being removed from the site of a potentially life-threatening conflict. Through these reflections on removal Nye’s poem functions as a prism of displacement.

In the following, I will contrast Nye’s poem about Ibtisam Bozieh’s death with the self-determined deaths of the so-called martyrs, or the shaheed, as they are called according to a Palestinian tradition. The concept of martyrdom is as hard to approach as it is to understand, because a martyr defies the rationality of self-preservation and forces us to enter into mental spaces that we usually eschew. Pitcher argues that it is ill-considered “to forsake [our] fundamental responsibility to foster an understanding of phenomena that affronts, offends or questions our own cultural norms and assumptions” (8). To stop short at our initial revulsion would also mean to ignore a practice that has developed into a gory ritual performed by radicalized Palestinians. By discussing a hip hop piece, I am accounting for the fact that Palestinian-American artists choose diverse media for expressing their views. Hip hop is only one of the art forms of choice for young artists in the Palestinian diaspora. The N.O.M.A.D.S., an Arab-American hip hop group, have written a song entitled “Moot” that features two opposing monologues – one by an Israeli soldier, and another by a Palestinian suicide bomber. Strikingly, both roles are spoken by one and the same persona, Mr. Tibbz.25 As the title suggests, the tone of the song is aggressive and belligerent; the language is colloquial and engages in verbal saber-rattling, heavily drawing on slang. Speaking back to Arendt’s account of what circumstances may generate violent behavior, the self-proclaimed freedom fighter in “Moot” tells us how the injustice of living under military occupation lead him to become a suicide bomber. In contrast to Nye’s poem, “Moot” takes on both sides of the conflict by lending a voice not only to a Palestinian, but also to an Israeli soldier. This dual perspective on the conflict is significant as it represents an attempt to escape the confines of unilateral partisanship. It does so by juxtaposing two stories, two evolutionary histories of violence, thereby displaying the ability to go beyond one’s own concerns by taking an imaginary leap into the

25 Choosing the same speaker for both the Israeli soldier and the Palestinian suicide bomber is a provocative underscoring of their commonalities, as both have lost family through the conflict and have to deal with the resulting grief and aggression.
mind of the enemy. Through this narrative strategy, “Moot” points to the lack of dialogue, the unwillingness to confront the other’s suffering that is so central to the conflict’s longevity. The song – an introduction followed by the monologues of the Israeli soldier and the “freedom fighter” – maintains the monological form thereby neither glossing over the lack of communication nor fading out these contesting voices. The task of generating a dialogue is left to the reader, who is encouraged to think beyond the limitations of a one-sided view.

Subverting the equality of voices, the song begins with an introduction by Omar Offendum, who expresses his solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians and insists on a bond between the disenfranchised, be they “Blacks” or “Native Americans.” By locating the Palestinian struggle within a wider struggle for decolonization, the speaker frames the colonizers as enemies that have to be fought: “Rocks in fists ready to topple these regimes despite/ Odds that would have made the general poker player think twice” (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 34). Offendum continues this generalizing rhetoric by speaking of colonial, or imperial regimes in the plural, but simultaneously returns to a concrete example: that the war he speaks of is fought with stones associates it with the Intifada, the Palestinian uprisings of 1987 and 2000, the first of which was also known as the War of Stones. Tallying with Arendt’s observation that violence is more often employed as a means to an end than it is the result of an instinctual reaction, Offendum describes the Palestinian uprising against their oppressors as goal-oriented and therefore instrumental in nature. As the song deals with violence in a setting that is described as colonial, Frantz Fanon’s considerations in The Wretched of the Earth (1963) provide a helpful background for its analysis. For Fanon, the decolonization process is necessarily marked by violence:

National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon (79).

His description of the colonial space is reflected in the introduction to “Moot,” when the speaker informs us that all he can see is suffering, that his Palestinian cousins are malnourished, their backs bear the “marks of oppression” and their land is taken from them (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 34). Depicting a similarly destitute landscape, Fanon describes the town of the natives as “a place filled of ill fame (...) The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of light. The native town is a crouching village (...), a town on its knees. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs” (Fanon 39). This theme of destitution is repeated in reference to the Palestinian space, not only in the introduction but also in the “freedom fighter’s” account of his life.

Much like Arendt’s analysis – and Fanon in his description of the decolonizing struggle – “Moot” also reminds us that each violent escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian strife is accompanied by a rational explanation underpinning and justifying the action. However, echoing the Arendtian conception of violence as both rationally guided and emotionally sustained, The...
N.O.M.A.D.S. also make clear that even when violence supposedly serves a specific purpose, i.e. ridding oneself of the oppressor, it is never exclusively based on rationality. Thus, we learn that the odds of winning this fight would have made the “average poker player think twice” (34). The Palestinians’ determination to fight despite their slim chances against a much stronger opponent is thus obviously not based on reason alone, as rational consideration would speak against it. Their emotional state is such that further inaction seems unbearable; their existence, Offendum claims in the introduction, is reduced to suffering. As “uttering a cry for help is pretty useless” (ibid.), they are resolved to fight for themselves. Their struggle is thus less based on rational considerations than on an emotional necessity that keeps them going.

Following this introduction by a voice from the Palestinian side, “Moot” introduces a second speaker, identified as an “Israeli Soldier.” His angry monologue reveals that he hates the Palestinians because they are responsible for the death of his fiancé and that he too has a good reason to go to war. Telling us what happened to Tara, his bride, the soldiers says “The bastards shot my bride-to-be the day before my marriage” (ibid. 35). The trauma of losing his fiancé – an innocent civilian – makes the young man join the army willingly. He is driven by the desire to avenge her death:

I wish I had a Kalashnikov so I could let off some pressure.
Run in the mosque during Fajr,
And split the bastards wide open like a secretary does a letter (ibid.).

His own life has been marked by Palestinian violence through the killing of his bride and in turn, he now wishes to unleash violence on those whom he blames for her death. The Palestinians as enemies exist only in the plural; they are all the same, all murderous madmen. He is fighting them “for Tara.” In The Human Condition, Arendt thinks about vengeance and forgiveness as antithetical. Whereas vengeance is inevitably caught up in a “chain reaction,” a spiral of violence, forgiveness lifts those who practice it out of the vicious circle. Resisting one’s urge to retaliate therefore means to affirm one’s self-determined agency, one’s ability to rise above the desire for revenge. As we shall see, “Moot” constructs the Israeli soldier as winning the battle against his vengefulness at least in part. But his individual resolution to break the cycle of violence is just a drop in the ocean. His own life has been marked by Palestinian violence through the killing of his bride and in turn, he now wishes to unleash violence on those whom he blames for her death. The Palestinians as enemies exist only in the plural; they are all the same, all murderous madmen. He is fighting them “for Tara.” In The Human Condition, Arendt thinks about vengeance and forgiveness as antithetical. Whereas vengeance is inevitably caught up in a “chain reaction,” a spiral of violence, forgiveness lifts those who practice it out of the vicious circle. Resisting one’s urge to retaliate therefore means to affirm one’s self-determined agency, one’s ability to rise above the desire for revenge. As we shall see, “Moot” constructs the Israeli soldier as winning the battle against his vengefulness at least in part. But his individual resolution to break the cycle of violence is just a drop in the ocean. That the soldier creates an analogy between shooting up the mosque visitors and a secretary opening a letter is a further key to the mechanics of violence. By likening the killing of human beings to the treatment of an envelope, the song shows how a reification of the other frames them as inhuman objects and renders violence against them permissible. Their annihilation is not a murderous act anymore, but appears as a useful procedure that will – like the opening of the

letter – help the actor to get what he wants. Indoctrination further prepares the path to accept the oppression and destruction of the Palestinians as the only way of dealing with them. The Israeli soldier reiterates a classic racist image of the other as animal-like: “They’re nothing but animals crawling on all fours, so when they attack we react with armed force” (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 35). Just like reifying them by comparing them to objects, calling them animals is a strategic dehumanization which justifies their inhumane treatment. Fanon sees this dehumanization of the native by the settler as a consequence of colonialism’s mental architecture when he writes:

At times this Manicheanism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms (42).

“Moot’s” introduction puts a further twist on the settler’s animalization of the native by showing that the latter partially adapts or at least reflects this demeaning vocabulary in his self-description. Despite Offedum’s defiant declaration that the Palestinians “ain’t no mice,” the listeners are also informed that “Still sometimes I’m feeling like a lab rat/The type that scientists like to stab at” (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 34). Comparing himself to an animal, Offendum performs the corrosiveness of the colonial ideology that eventually infects the self-perception of the natives as well.

The soldier’s account of his relationship to the Palestinians is insightful because it illustrates that our judgment of the other is restricted to our own experiential horizon. For the speaker, having been subjected to Palestinian violence results in a hostile collectivization of a whole group that forecloses a differentiated view of the conflict. In addition, the conviction that one’s own side merely reacts to enemy provocations helps to view oneself as acting in self-defense, whereas the others are described as attackers. This Manichean opposition of self and other is evident in the following statement of the soldier: “It’s never enough, we give them land and they want more/ They must be nuts, we give them peace and they want war” (ibid.). In these lines the speaker portrays the Israelis as giving and peaceful in opposition to the Palestinians, who have insatiable demands and are belligerent. Fanon registers the same dichotomic dynamic when writing about the colonizer’s description of the native as a morally decrepit force: the “settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil (…) he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values” (41). As the analysis of the “freedom fighter’s” monologue shows, the same condemning rhetoric is not only employed by the settler vis-à-vis the native, but also vice versa.

The Israeli soldier’s monologue comes to a surprising halt when he distances himself explicitly from his drill sergeant: although he has a clear-cut image of the enemy, he reacts defensively when confronted with a mirror image of his own xenophobia. Recalling his entry into the army, he tells us:

The first day the drill sergeant told us cadets, he said
“The Arabs are your enemy, Palestinians especially,
And wiping them all out – that’s the safest remedy” (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 35).
Fanon’s diagnosis of the settler’s condemnation of the native as quintessentially evil and inhuman is taken to its logical conclusion in these lines: the drill sergeant’s words expose the genocidal potential of a view that posits the annihilation of Palestinians as a safety operation. Fanon describes this twisted logic by citing the Manichean division of the colonial world in which ridding oneself of what is described as absolute evil is consequently seen as a good deed. In the instance where the Israeli soldier’s hatred is mirrored back to him and taken a step further by suggesting the annihilation of a whole collective, he dissociates himself from such hate speech. It is not forgiveness, then, that moves him to break the cycle of violence and abstain from revenge, but an amplification of his own murderous desires. Amending Arendt’s theory of how to escape the perpetuation of violence, “Moot” suggests that forgiveness is not the only way of ending it. Instead, being confronted with the final consequences of one’s own conception of the other as inhuman can suffice. Finally, being exposed to discriminatory propaganda has a surprising effect on the soldier who ends up rejecting the hatred of his superiors:

That’s what they keep telling me
But I ain’t that way.
So I’ma chill at this East Tel Aviv café (ibid.).

Ironically, it is precisely at the café where he dissociates himself from the genocidal rhetoric of his superiors that he will have a fatal encounter with the song’s other protagonist, the self-proclaimed “freedom fighter” whose monologue I will analyze in the following.

Instead of speaking about the suicide bomber, The N.O.M.A.D.S. wrote his part in the first-person singular as well. This narrative strategy fosters the illusion that we as listeners/readers gain an undisguised insight into the mind of the “freedom-fighter.” As a formal choice, the first-person narrative breaks a taboo; instead of keeping a safe distance to the suicide bomber and thereby allowing us to dismiss him as pathological, we are forced to trace his thoughts that end in a suicide attack. In On Suicide Bombing, Talal Asad observes that Western attempts to understand the motives of suicide bombers generally describe them as “pathological (...) as being alienated – that is not properly integrated into Western society” (41). “Moot” complicates this book, Talal Asad traces the epistemological labor of distinguishing between terrorism and war and he is also concerned with the accounts that the West gives of suicide bombing. He notes that the question of whether we accept a killing as legitimate or condemn it as a terrorist act depends on the way we frame it. His “argument is directed against thinking of terrorism simply as an illegal and immoral form of violence and advocates an examination of what the discourse of terror – and the perpetration of terror – does in the world of power.” Talal Asad, On Suicide Bombing (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), 26. Similarly, The N.O.M.A.D.S. also force us to see that even if we do not agree with it, certain circumstances are fertile ground for the rise of terrorism. By offering a fictional history of a suicide bomber as a first-person account, the Hip Hop group shows that from his perspective, the Israeli state’s treatment of his people looks like terrorism to him: he describes in some detail how he and his family are terrorized by the occupying force.
these facile explanations. Instead of a pathological individual alienated from our horizon of understanding, the “freedom fighter’s” decision to become a suicide bomber is the reluctant outcome of a history of suffering and political disenfranchisement. First and foremost, he appears as a desperate man whose integration into Western society has been his life-long submission to military occupation. In his study of Western approaches to suicide attacks, Asad demonstrates that most readings of suicide bombers follow a schema of “finding the culprit as well as the religious sources that feed his criminality” (45). This simplified explanation is a facile way of othering that absolves us from the difficult task of understanding suicide attacks in a wider context of political conflicts from which we might not be as detached as we hope. “Moot” objects to this stereotypical approach by presenting us with a personal history of suffering and political disillusionment that motivates the “freedom fighter’s” to become a suicide bomber. Rather than describing him only in terms of a perpetrator, his monologue shows that he has been victimized as well. Beginning with a negation, “Never had a home/ My country wasn’t mine,” the Palestinian suicide bomber describes a life of abjection and oppression (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 35). In his lamentation, he asserts the omnipresence of violence in the occupied territories by informing us that he has already lost his father and his brother. The “freedom fighter’s” description of conditions in Gaza echoes Fanon’s vision of the native town as a desperate and violent space: “Not a day passed, without my mother crying/They shot the protesters, that’s more brothers dying,” and continues to inform us that he was raised by his mother “’cause I never knew my father,/ They shot him and my brother in the first intifada” (ibid.). But his monologue does not stop short at deploring a life of privations. He continues to curse those who he sees as the culprits. Telling us that “the Zionists” euphemistically call the fenced-in and intensely controlled Palestinian territories “crowd containment camps,” the speaker gives us his opinion of them: “But we all know a Zionist is nothing but a lying bitch” (ibid.). The “freedom fighter’s” indignation about the euphemistic language used to describe Palestinian territories attests to Arendt’s analysis that it is not primarily an offended sense of justice that will trigger rage, but the exposure to hypocrisy that most likely transforms an engaged individual into an enraged warrior. In an escalation of hate speech, the speaker reveals the full extent of his anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism: “Fuck the Jews, Americans too. All they do is shoot us up and then brag about it on the news” (ibid. 36). Cursing the Jews as a collective bespeaks his inability to differentiate: Jews for him are all the same. This epistemological violence that was also performed by the Israeli soldier rhymes with Fanon’s observation that the colonial zone is not only compartmentalized spatially but also an antithetical space:

29 The word “camps” also conjures up the image of a concentration camp, a reference that further complicates the label given to the occupied territories, but that I cannot elaborate on here due to space constraints.
In this colonial context there is no truthful behavior, and the good is quite simply that which is evil for ‘them.’ Thus we see that the primary Manicheanism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization; that is to say the settler never ceases to be the enemy, the foe that must be overthrown (50f.).

“Moot” stages this Manichean conception of self and other, demonstrating how both figures, the Israeli soldier and the Palestinian “freedom fighter” fail to see the other as anything other than an enemy. In addition, both speakers are firmly convinced that their own actions are mere reactions, that the violence that they commit is self-defense against the other’s onslaught.

As listeners we are tracing the “freedom fighter’s” inflamed hatred toward “the Jews” and “the Americans” and his increasing desperation that ends in him joining Hamas, a choice that represents his determination to bring about change:

By 9:30 I’m on the streets of East Tel Aviv.
Final prayer to god “A-yo Allah help me please,
I didn’t want to kill but Israel won’t let me be.”
Count to three – take my last steps.
Get in the café – take my last breath.
Set of the detonator – big blast effect.
My life was pure hell so in death I rest (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 36).

The speaker, however, does not unequivocally affirm his suicide attack. He insists on his initial unwillingness to become a suicide bomber, thereby conveying the sense of being forced into this desperate act by the testing circumstances. Towards the end of his monologue, the lines become shorter, the beat slows down and the eerie rhythmical calm coincides with an increased introspection of the speaker. The victims of his attack are not even mentioned, they remain completely invisible, their deaths unmentioned. If the monologue was dominated by outrage, expressed in belligerent accusations against the perceived culprits, its last words suggest an overwhelming desire to escape the turmoil of a troubled Palestinian life, without repeating the wish to bring about change. Devoid of the hopeful notes that Fanon assigns to the violent uprising of the colonized, these last words express resignation. Contradicting Fanon’s idealization of anti-colonial violence, The N.O.M.A.D.S. do not depict the “freedom fighter’s” attack as “rehabilitative and healing,” unless, of course, to use Fanon’s medical vocabulary, one considers the death of a patient a medical success.30

Does this hip hop song suggest that there is a prototypical development of a martyr, or a suicide bomber? The form gives us a crucial hint; the first-person narration emphasizes the individuality of the speaker. Rather than providing us with a universally valid answer as to what motivates a person to kill him- or herself and others, “Moot” presents this anguished monologue as one possible story, the subjective tale of an individual marked

by the injustices of occupation and the sense of being politically betrayed. The “freedom fighter’s” monologue delineates a coherent development that is best described in terms of a role reversal: initially, the suicide bomber describes himself as a victim without agency, but the moment he joins Hamas represents a turning point. Becoming a member of Hamas, however, is depicted as an act of political frustration, the consequence of other local and international political actors failing him: he tells us that Arafat “talks smack but don’t deliver shit” and “The UN can’t help, they act like they ain’t go a clue” (The N.O.M.A.D.S. 36). To the “freedom fighter,” Hamas seems to represent the only possibility for concrete action, as he proclaims, “I’m gonna make a change and so I’m siding with Hamas” (ibid.). Siding with Hamas is equated with agency and becoming politically engaged. The “freedom fighter’s” decision to become a suicide bomber followed by a three-day fast is the culmination of self-control. A Palestinian man who was unable to lead a self-determined life under military occupation ironically reclaims his right to self-determination by choosing his own death and killing others. “Moot” describes the development of a suicide bomber as a journey from being a victim to becoming a perpetrator. Fanon writes of a similarly radical transformation, but for him the emphasis lies on becoming human through the struggle for one’s own liberation. He writes:

Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the “thing” which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself (80).31

Much like Frederick Douglass’ account of the fight he put up against his cruel master in which his “long-crushed spirit” rose once “cowardice departed” and “bold defiance took its place,” and he resolved “the day had passed forever when I could be a slave,” Fanon also celebrates the euphoria of violent struggle for one’s own liberation as a humanizing experience.32 For Fanon, as for Douglass, violence becomes the means of re-establishing one’s manhood, one’s humanity.33 In contrast, “Moot” takes a much more somber view of violent action. In “Moot,” violence is not a tool for self-renewal or the re-birth of a liberated subject, but the expression of man despairing. In the “freedom fighter’s” account of his suicide attack the motive of delivering himself from his miserable reality looms large, accordingly. Killing himself and others is less a revolutionary act in the struggle for decolonization than it is a sign of giving up, of misguided politics that ends in a murderous crime. From a

31 With the important difference that Fanon’s new man creates a new world for himself in this world, rather than leaving it through suicide.
33 Like Douglass’s liberation account, Fanon’s rhetoric of liberation also describes the struggle for freedom in deeply masculine terms, in which the emasculated subject transforms himself into a masculine agent through the use of his manly strength.
cynical perspective, one could even argue that he relieves the Israeli sergeant of his work by annihilating himself, thereby contributing to the lethal mission that the military official advocates.

Naomi Shihab Nye's poem “For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh,” and the song “Moot” by the hip hop group The N.O.M.A.D.S. tell stories of death and dying, of suffering under the shadow of violence, yet from very different vantage points. Nye's text describes the callously accepted collateral damage of an innocent girl while “Moot” deals with a struggling Israeli soldier and the suicide mission of a self-proclaimed freedom fighter. In Nye's poem, the death of Ibtisam Bozieh is told from an explicitly diasporic perspective that consciously reflects on distance as influencing the speaker's subject position and her perception of the girl's death, while The N.O.M.A.D.S.' song attempts to bridge the gap between the diasporic experience and Palestinian life in the homeland by taking an imaginary leap into the mind of an Israeli soldier and a suicide bomber. “Moot” works through the first-person narrative, which produces the illusion of an authentic insight into the minds of the suicide bomber and the soldier. If the circumstances of Ibtisam Bozieh's death transform her into the epitome of the innocent victim and highlight the injustice of her killing, the question of being a victim is more complicated in the case of the “freedom fighter.” In “Moot,” the listeners are confronted with an amalgamation of perpetrator and victim. Rather than representing perpetrator and victim as two principally exclusive concepts, The N.O.M.A.D.S. show how these seemingly contradictory roles coincide in one and the same person, thereby creating a moral grey area that cannot be described in terms of absolute guilt or pure innocence. Despite their difference, Nye's poem and The N.O.M.A.D.S.' song are both concerned with the prerequisites of killing. In Nye's poem it is based on the rejection of the other's humanity; in “Moot” it is the effect of hopeless conditions. In Nye's poem the killer appears as a mere machine, a faceless gun; in “Moot” the enemy's humanity falls prey to the harsh reality of conflict. We learn how the growing hate of collectives, such as “the Jews” and the “Americans” renders their deaths acceptable, perhaps even desirable. Despite their formal and thematic diversity, both texts share a common background – the Israeli-Palestinian strife – and are thus both concerned with the continuing cycle of violence. At the intersection of these texts, the suicide bomber and the girl's death have to be understood as effects of a downward spiral of hate. In the fog of war, the other's humanity becomes irrelevant, invisible.
Works Cited


