

# **“O My Language, Help me to Learn / So That I May Embrace the Universe”: Transnational Feminist Communities in the Work of Palestinian Women Writers**

Benay Blend, Retired Professor of American and Native American History, USA

## **Abstract:**

In the title quote, Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) expresses his desire for a space that preserves Palestinian identity within a wider culture. Rather than leaving ties to Palestine behind, Darwish, like writers included in this article – Susan Abulhawa, Hala Alyan, Randa Jarrar, and Naomi Shihab Nye, to name a few – puts his homeland within a framework of diasporic space. Similarly, Rana Barakat views exile as both an individual “shipwreck” and a communal journey, a stance that reflects intersectional feminist values. Negotiating “the isolation of the individual within our shared collective condition,” Barakat offers what Anna Ball terms a “transnational feminist approach”. She joins a larger body of post 1948 writers who construct what the “poet of witness” Caroline Forché calls “assembled communities”, groups of friends who, she says, are “varied in the universe” but come together via various kinds of communication in order to discuss common issues. This article seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which transcend difference by standing together for justice, equality, and peace. How might feminist writers and activists negotiate a balance between connecting to their homeland but also recognize the potential that arises from the transnationalism of Avtar Brah’s concept of “diasporic space?” As a place marked by hybridity, where tradition is continually transformed, this theoretical concept addresses the confluence of migrating populations, capital, commodities and culture. This article also builds on Steven Salaita’s *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* (2016), a work that explores how such dialogues across borders offer a viable means of resistance. As Cynthia Franklin, editor of *Biography*’s special issue “Life in Occupied Palestine” (2014), notes, while *sumoud* (steadfastness) is a Palestinian tradition, it gains strength when Palestinians ally with social groups who are interconnected via various means of oppression.

1 In the title quote, Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) expresses his desire for a space that preserves Palestinian identity within a wider context (*Almond Blossoms and Beyond* 56). Theorizing home as a physical, but also as a psychological space, he problematizes allegiance to place. Rather than leaving ties to Palestine behind, Darwish, like writers included in this essay – Susan Abulhawa, Suheir Hammad, Hala Alyan, and Randa Jarrar, to name a few – puts his homeland within a framework of Avtar Brah’s ‘diasporic space’, a transnational arena in which multiple structures of gendered, economic, political and social power intersect to form a mesh of solidarities and differences among inhabitants. As a place marked by hybridity, where tradition is continually transformed, this theoretical concept, according to Brah, offers new ways of finding common ground with others who also struggle against oppression (242). The Palestinian diaspora

spreads across the world, creating new communities that sound a call for novel forms of transnational solidarity (Ball 145). This paper draws attention to class and gender differences both amongst and between these communities, and to the conditions under which members attempt to bridge the barriers separating them from each other as well other ethnic groups. Wherever strife appears, these writers situate Palestine within international paradigms.

2 This paper focuses on a variety of borders: barriers that are specific to the Occupation that separate communities from each other and from their land; distances that alienate post-1948 refugees from Palestine; and the separation between exilic communities that are scattered throughout the world. The concept of diasporic space also includes configurations of power, including class and gender, which differentiate communities internally in addition to one another. As the increase in migration creates new communities, so does the language of ‘borders’ and ‘Diasporas’ further acquire meaning. For example, in *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa, writing from her own experiences growing up at the border between Southwest Texas and Mexico, constructs a natural connection between women like herself and others who feel marginalized by society (60). This essay explores several such theories, including Anzaldúa’s ‘borderlands theory’ (*Borderlands / La Frontera* 1987), Carol Fadda-Conrey’s ‘ethnic borderlands’ (“Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*”, and Avtar Brah’s ‘diasporic space’ (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 1996). It also draws on Steven Salaita’s concept of “reciprocal communalism”, a process which, in Salaita’s words, focuses on an indigenous rather than a postcolonial or postmodern perspective. Forging interethnic comparisons, reciprocal communalism, according to Salaita, “move[s] beyond dialogue into a more defined cross-cultural political consciousness” (*Holy Lands in Transit* 21). This linking of struggles is reenacted throughout the writing selected for this paper. While tied to their space of homeland, designated writers demonstrate a commitment to mutual liberation founded on reciprocal opposition to colonial power wherever it exists.

3 Embedded within the notion of diaspora is Brah’s concept of ‘border,’ a construct that she views as a political entity as well as an analytical theory (15). Her notion of diasporic space offers a critique of fixed identity while acknowledging that refugees living in scattered communities might still relate to their homeland as a place of origin (10). Born to parents from Lyd and Ramleh who sought sanctuary in the United States after 1948, Suheir Hammad, for example, links her own experience of exile within a larger history of imperialism and colonialism that has separated people from their homelands (Abuelhiga 7). Her work examines both the

notion of her own heritage as Palestinian-American but also the diasporic landscape that offers the possibility of forging wider bonds of connection (2). Pondering ways to liberate herself from boundaries others set, Hammad writes: “Too bad we gotta call ourselves by man-made’ labels” (*Drops of this story* 91). Such borders – between individuals, communities, nations, cultures and movements – are precisely what Hammad seeks to smash. Drawing from a Black Consciousness perspective, notes Christopher Brown, Hammad unites all people of color who are under the burden of white supremacy (7). While affirming a fluid identity that is integral to political solidarity, Palestine remains at the heart of her work (Ball 153). “If I didn’t name myself Palestinian,” asks Hammad, “who would?” (*Drops of This Story* 91). Remaining true to her Palestinian heritage, Hammad’s solidarity reflects her homeland’s desire for self-determination, claims Ball, but it also presents a recognition that Palestine’s status remains connected to colonized people around the world. In this way, Hammad’s writing displays an exchange between personal and communal perspectives of belonging (148). “No wall is forever,” Hammad affirmed in a recent interview. “This I know. So what happens then?” (Knopf-Newman 71). The deconstruction of such barriers, according to Soraya Abuelhiga, that separate marginalized cultures from each other, serves as a focus of Hammad’s work. “Her literary gesturing towards universal self-identification” (2), concludes Abuelhiga, most often highlights other communities of color, in this case the borders between Palestinian American, African American, and Puerto Rican. Here, Hammad articulates a particular fluidity of expression that crosses borders, and this intercommunal identity proves integral in her political work. Sounding a call for new forms of political solidarity, Hammad joins other writers who are exploring what possibilities exist for resistance writing when communities are increasingly displaced.

4 “More than anything else I just want my poetry to ask questions” (*Drops of This Story* 91), Hammad explains, and that stance extends to other writers. Some are internationally known, including Susan Abulhawa, others are part of a new generation of activists and intellectuals. While these individual writers reflect different cultural contexts, locations and careers, what draws them together is a vision of interconnectness as well as concern for global issues. “Palestine is so urgent and so terrible,” explains Hammad, “that we do not make the connections” (Knopf-Newman 75) to others’ struggles. Turning her critique of American racism toward a global framework, she offers what Anna Ball terms a “transnational feminist approach” (135). Drawing attention to the universal within the particular, Hammad claims that “borders are manmade” (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 13). Because she grew up immersed in hip hop,

Hammad continues, she learned early to make connections (Knopf-Newman 76). But she also refuses to limit her identity to what others expect her to be. According to Abuelhiga, Hammad's poetry reflects various experiences in her life, including her parents' displacement, exposure to African American and Puerto Rican cultures while growing up in Brooklyn, and the myriad kinds of violence that she has witnessed. From police brutality in Brooklyn to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hammad identifies many commonalities across cultures which nevertheless retain particularities (3). "Through the construction and contemplation of a multitude of identities" (5), writes Abuelhiga, Hammad appreciates this legacy of shared suffering that underscores her own. While she participates in broader communities of struggles, she avoids erasing the diversity of individual human experience. A poet who refuses to respect borders, Hammad qualifies that boundaries are legitimate only if she has a "say in their formation" (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 13), thus recognizing that the particular within the universal, too, bears notice as a means to avoid essentialism.

5 Similarly, Rana Barakat, a professor at Birzeit University, experiences exile as both her own personal "shipwreck" and a communal journey (136), a stance that affirms Brah's assertion that diasporas form out of "migrations of collectivities" (193). For millions of Palestinians living in the Diaspora, writes Rima Najjar, Israel refuses to recognize the "inalienable and internationally" acknowledged right of return of Palestinians to their homeland (Litvan 9). While exile might be "strangely compelling to think about," as Edward Said notes (173), it also invokes the imagery of trauma. Nevertheless, diasporic space often emerges as a site of hope and new beginnings. "I have always argued that exile can produce rancor and regret," writes Said, but it can also "provide a different set of lens" (xxxv). Accordingly, Hammad instructs her readers to "read Baraka and listen to Malcolm", drawing attention here to the language of North American resistance. At the same time, she suggests "let's read Darwish" (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 28), the poet who reminds her of a childhood nourished by collective memory. Hers is a complex language that communicates both nostalgia for a homeland and desire to forge new alliances. She shares, however, suspicion of mainstream feminism. As Chandra Mohanty writes, assumptions of universality have led to suppression of Third World women within the feminist paradigm (257). A professor of Race and Resistance Studies at San Francisco State University, Rabab Abdulhadi explains that Palestinian women are doubly marginalized because of gender discrimination but also as a consequence of the Nakba (Palestinian catastrophe in 1948). Abdulhadi concludes that this position creates obstacles for an effective women's movement both in exile and in their

homeland (172). When Arab women do challenge patriarchy within their culture, Tanyss Ludescher, a scholar of ethnic and postcolonial literatures, reiterates that they face their own unique problems. When they criticize the patriarchal elements of their society, they are often charged with abandoning their own culture in favor of Western modes of thought. Moreover, Ludescher notes, Arab activists often associate a position viewed as anti-religious and anti-nationalist (106).

6 Other factors add to misgivings about feminism in the Arab world. Because the position of Arab women fuels propaganda in the Western media, Ludescher notes that even valid criticism of patriarchy lends itself to reinforcing anti-Arab stereotypes (106). Nevertheless, as Abdelhadi writes, Palestinian women have a long history of struggling against injustice: against the crusades, the Ottoman Empire, the English, with enough strength left to fight patriarchy in their own culture. Despite this long record of activism, British and American feminists, Abdulhadi claims, fail to acknowledge this history because it falls outside the mainstream Western model of what constitutes feminism (171, 172). How are we to deal with racism of one feminist group toward another racialized group, asks Avtar Brah, each drawing on their own experience, “as if all experience transparently reflected a given ‘truth’” (116)?

7 Understandably, then, feminism has sometimes been suspect within the Arab world. For Abdulhadi the core concern remains whether mainstream feminists (a liberal movement that focuses on legal and political reform), “enabled by their privileged position” (173), respect the right of other women to differ. In “colonized spaces”, Abdelhadi notes, there exists a “more collective sense of self” than in Western culture. Though she blames the dominant society for viewing those who fall outside the norm through a single lens, Abdulhadi views collective memory as a “powerful tool, a strategy for resistance” (173). For example, in Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Nur, the granddaughter of the Baraka family, grows up in exile, alone and longing for her roots in Gaza. But upon return she finds herself caught between living by her own rules, a very Western stance, and conforming to the social rules laid down by the family she has always wanted. Nzinga, the social worker who saves her from abusive foster care then later becomes a friend and mentor, understands her plight. Perhaps because coming from South Africa, she shares similar social values and histories of oppression (265). For example, when Nzinga meets Nur’s grandfather for the first time, she is surprised that he refers to her as “my daughter” (92), an African linguistic term that refers to strangers as relatives. Moreover, Nur later recognizes her own African genes when she notes that “we [her family] all

had brown skin and curly hair” (224), a legacy perhaps of African roots. Finally, when Nur decides to leave Palestine so as not to bring shame upon her family when she has her baby, Nzinga arranges a grant for her through South African government offices. “You know,” Nzinga tells her, “the African National Congress has always been supportive of the Palestinian struggle” (266), so such programs are reserved in particular for Palestinians.

8 As Abdulhadi claims, collective narratives inspire a group’s determination to resist revisionist history (173); therefore, while feminists might stress the freedom of the individual to resist oppressive dictums, Nur chooses to live by new social rules to protect her family whose strong female members provide a safety net that she has never known. For example, when Nur discovers that she is going to have her lover’s baby, she knows that her Palestinian family would be appalled. “You’ve always lived your life the way you wanted”, Nzinga, her friend and mentor, tells her. She continues, “That’s the thing you got from not having family” (265). Now that she has the family that she always wanted, Nur must decide whether to live by her own rules or leave Palestine until the baby is born in order spare her family shame. In the end she chooses collective values over the individualism that she had learned abroad (265).

9 This fictional plight illustrates the real dilemma of Palestinian activists who seek to negotiate a balance between connecting to their homeland but also recognize the potential that arises from the transnationalism of Avtar Brah’s ‘diasporic space.’ It also offers insights into how different cultures define a woman’s role in anti-colonial struggles. Both Nur and her ally Nzinga come from cultures that stress collective memory over freedom of the individual to follow his/her own rules. This stance places the colonial struggle at the very least on a par with women’s issues. While Nur finds a comrade in Nzinga because they share similar perspectives, other feminists might dismiss such positions as unacceptable. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa writes in the preface to *This Bridge Called Home*: “Activism is the courage to act consciously on our ideas, to extract power in resistance to ideological pressure. Foremost, she warns that women who seek empowerment might have to undergo the “risk [of] leaving home” (5). For Anzaldúa, then, healing quite often entails rejecting the “injunctions of culture, groups, family, and ego” (5). For Nur, this privileging of the individual no longer works when it results in actions that might bring shame upon her family.

10 All of the writers included here share what the “poet of witness” Caroline Forché calls “assembled communities”, groups of friends who, she says, are “varied in the universe” but come together via various means of communication to discuss common concerns (Wright, “An

Interview with Carolyn Forché by David Wright” 1). This essay seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which transcend historical and cultural difference by standing together for justice, equality and peace. Hammad locates her individuality within such communal struggles, thus she writes in *Drops of This Story* that “I is we” (14), a space marked by collective memory of a particular group that intersects with commonalities of experience across cultures. “I plaited this story”, she continues, long ago, into the braid of her hair, a weave that includes the stories also of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, both writers who have heavily influenced her writing (62). Grounded in justice for Palestine, Hammad extends the boundaries of place by fusing concerns for Palestine with those of others.

11 Grounded in justice for Palestine, Hammad’s transnational poetic voice features collective resistance against hegemonic structures of power. As Cynthia Franklin, editor of *Biography’s* special issue, “Life in Occupied Palestine” (2014) contends, while *sumoud* (steadfastness) is a Palestinian tradition, it gains strength through international solidarity (xi). Expanding on this idea, Yoav Litvin asserts that “steadfastness’ is one of the hallmarks of the Palestinian struggle for justice” (1). In an interview with two members of the diaspora, Rima Najjar, a retired English professor, and Ramzy Baroud, a journalist who has written about the Middle East for many years, Litvin asserts that those living in exile are “indispensable to the collective struggle” (1) for liberation. They serve as mediators between Israeli Palestinians and those living in the occupied territories, and, finally, with the larger world. They also lobby their respective governments for justice, offer counter-narratives to Israeli propaganda, and spearhead campaigns, such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (1). For her part, Najjar concludes that the most important contribution of Palestinians in exile is steadfastness. For decades, the estimated six million Palestinians who are registered refugees have maintained their identities as well as fought for the “inalienable and internationally recognized right of return” (8). Though born in Jordan, then residing in America for many years, Najjar does not acknowledge borders between herself and Palestine, no matter her current status as Palestinian American. “I know in my bones what it is to be Palestinian” (4), she explains, thus describing, too, the porous boundaries that exist for Palestinians in the diaspora.

12 As the increase in migration creates new Diasporas, so also does the theory of borders undergo transformation. In *A Map of Home*, Randa Jarrar creates the quintessential “check point heroine”, a term invoked by Anna Ball to describe the condition that Palestinian women confront when they are faced with double struggles of national and gender autonomy (108). In this

coming-of-age novel, Nidali, born to an Egyptian mother and Palestinian father, spends her life fleeing war-torn areas in the Middle East until her family settles in Texas. A marginalized young woman whose name derives from the feminization of an Arabic word for struggle, Nidali occupies a tenuous position within her patriarchal family and the larger world (8, 9). Nevertheless, while she appears to inhabit what Anzaldúa might term the social margins (60), Nidali negotiates both a psychological and literal space that she claims as her own.

13 Taught early by her father to draw the map of Palestine from memory, Nidali comes to recognize that borders are arbitrary constructions that are controlled at will by the occupying force. “That map is from a certain year,” explains Baba, referring to his daughter’s drawing. “The map that came earlier looked different”. Because, as Baba says, “there’s no telling where home starts and where it ends” (193), Nidali develops a tolerance for contradictions. For Anzaldúa, the female subject situated at the intersection of cultural, gendered and social boundaries, must find her own way home. Significantly, Nidali takes the map to her room where she erases the Western and Northern borders. Leaving thus a blank page except for the Galilee, the blankness of the map blended into the whiteness of her sheets (193). “You are here” (100), declares Nidali, here and everywhere, a condition akin to Anzaldúa’s *La Mestiza*, a woman of mixed racial heritage who sustains contradictions by making alliances with other outcasts but also by finding home within herself. “Mother, homeland, self, that could all be taken away”, Nidali claims. “But school? School remained” (257) her refuge, a place where she would not be running, but instead a place where even in exile she could be at home.

14 Anzaldúa speaks of borders as simultaneously geographic, cultural and social, barriers that the fictional Nidali learns to negotiate in order to chart her way home. For Nidali, living in what Anzaldúa terms the borderlands offers new ways of being in the world. A space, claims Anzaldúa, where different cultures collide, it offers new ways of finding common ground with others who struggle against oppression. Despite ongoing violence since the *Nakba* (catastrophe of 1948), which created approximately 8 million refugees, these exiles, like the fictional Nidali, find allegiances, too, with other Palestinians who continue to define what it means to retain an identity while far away from their homeland. As Avtar Brah explains, the relationship of subsequent generations to their homeland remains different than their parents, mediated as it is by witnesses to what was left behind (194). Always being in motion, always moving, defines what it means to be Palestinian for Nidali’s father. “Our people carry the homeland in our souls” (9), he tells his daughter, leading her to conclude that exiles must have very heavy souls.

15 This “situated knowledge”, as Ursula Heine describes it (30), speaks to transnational bonds expressed by Palestinian refugees. In *Drops of This Story*, Suheir Hammad “write[s] of longing for a land I have yet to feel under my feet” (9), but at the same time she is conscious of “the want of [her] feet for...Brooklyn concrete” (88), too. Displacement takes a nuanced meaning; Hammad’s story flows from “the love of a faraway nation” (92) mitigated by efforts to negotiate new alliances beyond the Palestinian community. Rejecting whiteness, Hammad chooses an in-between status akin to Anzaldúa’s *La Mestiza* (100), in this case not a woman of mixed racial origins herself but who relates most positively to other people of color. Declaring Barbie “dead; “decapitated,” in need of an “obituary” (*Drops of This Story* 100) to free all women like herself who seek self-acceptance, Hammad looks instead to poets like June Jordan, whose “Moving Toward Home,” she writes, transformed her life. From Jordan, a black woman who “was born a Black woman / and / [now became] a Palestinian” (Knopf-Newman 77), Hammad learned to make powerful intertextual connections in her own work, weaving an engagement with Palestine into a web of indigenous liberation movements around the world.

16 For Palestinian people, cultural production remains grounded in a specific place despite living far away. “I’m Palestinian” (*Drops of This Story* 85), writes Hammad, even though she does not live there. Though Resolution 194, passed by the United Nations in 1948, guaranteed the “right of return” to refugees displaced by violence, Israel continues to bar people from returning to their homes (Ball 172). Because the desire for a nation-state remains a powerful symbol for Palestinians around the world, Anzaldúa’s celebration of the borderland, according to Anna Ball, represents at times “a source of disenfranchisement rather than liberation”. A Palestinian border theory, Ball concludes, exposes areas of conflict as well as overlap with Anzaldúa’s theorization of the borderlands (128). In *This is Not a Border: Reportage and Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature*, a compilation gathered from ten years of PalFest’s cultural production, the editors Ahdaf Souceif and Omar Robert Hamilton assert that restrictions on freedom of movement are never-ending (3). “Military barriers separate everything from everything”, writes Mahmoud Darwish in his “welcome” to the first PalFest in 2008. “And everything – even the landscape” is temporary and vulnerable. Even though, as Darwish concludes, “life here is less than life, it is an approaching death”, he asserts that writers continue to “gather the fragments of this place” (8) into a literary whole. Similarly, participants in PalFest often travel from abroad to break through Israeli boundaries and local borders in order to bring art to rural areas. For the millions of refugees outside of Palestine’s borders, the distance from their homeland’s boundaries

is greater than the barriers faced by writers traveling with PalFest. This section seeks to explore a variety of transformative dialogues which take place within what Carol Fadda-Conrey terms the “ethnic borderland”, a place which draws upon Anzaldúa’s theory by focusing on cultures intersecting within the same geographic space (187). While including all of the usual markers that Anzaldúa notes in *Borderlands / La Frontera* – psychological, sexual and spiritual spaces (19) – Fadda-Conrey’s ethnic borderlands goes further by placing all of these groups in transformative conversations that break through existing barriers (197).

17 Fadda-Conrey draws on Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge We Call Home*, co-edited with Analouise Keating, a volume that Fadda-Conrey says calls for “radical inclusion” (192) of previously omitted white and Arab American voices. The sections in *This Bridge We Call Home* by Nathalie Handel, Rabab Abdelhadi and Reem Abdulhadi are foundational to the editor’s call for a “transformative, coalitional consciousness” that encourages both “new alliances” and calls for “‘white’ middle-class feminists” to own and “rectify their racism, their classism and other biases” (19). Included in *This Bridge We Call Home*, the email dialogue between Reem and her sister Rabab focuses on connections with other groups but also in this case includes internal markers that distinguish one individual from another. The sisters, despite the different spelling of their last names, an anomaly that Reem attributes to colonial language, each holds a different stance towards exile (165). As Fadda-Conrey notes, food serves often as a connecting avenue between ethnicities while also “highlighting the internal distinctions” (189) between various groups of people. For Rabab, life in exile allows her to challenge essentialist definitions of her people. “I like not having to always say that I only enjoy Arabic food”, she explains, “because frankly it is not true” (167). Chinese, Tai, and Puerto Rican cuisine rate just as high, in her opinion, but she is careful to reject postmodern interpretations of her stance. While admitting that a “nomadic existence can be ok”, she rejects what might be termed a “cosmopolitan existence”, implying, as she says, a binary between “us” – “provincial backward creatures” – and “them” – those who belong to a “superior”, in fact, dominant culture (167).

18 Recognizing the differences within Palestinian enclaves challenges the dominant groups’ homogenization of minority groups that tends to render them invisible. As Fadda-Conrey explains, establishing links between communities also requires a recognition of commonalities and difference. In this way the search for ties between communities bypasses ethnic stereotypes in favor of complex enclaves whose porous borders render border-crossing easy. In the ethnic borderland food is often a favored mediator that connects individuals within a group as well as

between normally separate enclaves (191). While sometimes carving out difference between communities, food preparation becomes a connective bridge in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water* and brings together a community forcibly displaced to Gaza. At the center stands the beekeeper's widow, a lively woman whose familiar dishes bring people together despite war, displacement and loss of material goods (47). No matter previous status, war had reduced all families to an equal status, giving rise to a "subculture" marked by "adamant pride, defiance", and recreation of home, a physical refuge but also a symbol of *sumoud* (steadfastness) (47). Soon familiar smells of "onions, rosemary, cinnamon, cardamom and cilantro" infuse the air with memories of home but also hope that life will go on, nourished by the widow's care for her community (49).

19 The beekeeper's reconstruction of communal spaces remains incomplete without members of the community sharing the preparation of familiar dishes. These characters' presence within her home ensures a revival of the spirit of community. In the writing of Suheir Hammad, food acts as a bridge between many cultures resulting in the transformation and enlargement of the ethnic borderland. "Smells of the East, the Caribbean, and the South suffused her apartment building", Hammad recalls, leaving her with memories of "fried foods, spoiled fruits, and garbage". The smells of this interethnic borderland find their way into Hammad's poetry, a borderland in which "the assault of colors, smells, and sounds of the Caribbean in Brooklyn" create a complex mixture of interlocking groups (*Drops of This Story* 44).

19 In her poetry Hammad renders porous the otherwise rigid borders that separate various groups and pit members of one group against another. For Hammad, sensual imagery transports her, too, to the lost world of her parents. In *Drops of This Story*, the food that she invokes is not so much a link to Palestine as a recreation of the culture that her mother tried to replicate by cooking traditional meals. This story, Hammad notes, "lives on the back of my tongue". It is a circuitous route, however, that leads Hammad to a place of self-acceptance and pride. Remembering fondly how her mother "pounded the garlic and peppers of my father's fava beans" for Sunday breakfast, she wondered at the time why her family could not "eat pancakes and bacon like everybody else?" As an adult Hammad realized that she was "just another immigrant kid, trying to fit in" a mainstream culture that she rejected as much as the culture itself excluded her. "I never liked mayonnaise and cheese anyway" (51), she claims, recalling foods symbolic of conventional American cuisine. "Never liked hot dogs and apple pie" (52). Instead of trading her *labneh* (Arabic recipe for cheese made from strained yoghurt) sandwich for peanut butter and

jelly, as she did sometimes at recess, she chooses now to create her story out of falafel and hummus, singular tastes that mingle with the bites of plantain and curry (51), all connected by a bridge that transcends limits that difference might engender.

21 Writing about food as a concept of personal identity does not go without its critics. According to Sarah Hassan and Marcy Newman, immigrant groups often write about familiar foodways because it relates in a safe manner to a readership that otherwise might be hostile. While Hassan and Newman view reliance on culinary tropes as accommodationist (8), other scholars have explored how contemporary women of diverse cultures have used writing about foodways to reclaim a female identity within a specific ethnic heritage. Because recipes, like culture, are handed down from generation to generation by way of oral history, culinary literature conveys a sense of how food sharing creates solidarity but also allows women to speak across cultures. By claiming food as a serious literary subject, Suheir Hammad also explores the ways that it validates a relational understanding of the self. Her poetry invokes a sense of place and belonging through the familiar foods of home. By infusing the “dates, pomegranates, figs and cactus” that her father brought home into the “nectar of [her story]” (*Drops of This Story* 52), Hammad overcomes a mediated, rather than straightforward, loss of home.

22 While Hassan and Newman claim that Arabic food writing exists as an isolated genre, failing to position itself vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in an innovative manner (8), Hammad’s work does just that. By fusing a blend of hip hop, Caribbean and Palestinian rhythms, she creates an intertextual gumbo while simultaneously encoding an affirmation of cultural specificity and autobiographical presence. As Anne Goldman notes, writing about foodways may communicate more than just focusing on cuisine (169). Indeed, Hammad’s mention of specific dishes signals her participation in the larger struggle for Palestinian nationhood. In this way she becomes part of the “diasporic awakening” (8) called for by Hassan and Newman, a transnational movement that connects exiled Palestinians around the globe with each other as well as with other groups in struggle.

23 Suheir Hammad’s poetry communicates stories of individual and group identities, thus locating itself in an ethnic borderland that recognizes the complexity of groups involved. Her affirmation of culinary sharing as a ritual uniting women across social borders nevertheless is sometimes open for debate. As Goldman asks: “When does recipe sharing become recipe borrowing, with only a coerced ‘consent’ from the domestic ‘help’?” (171). No stranger to what Goldman terms “culture plunderer[s]” (171), Hammad swallowed her anger, she claims, when

she overheard some “white girls” order falafel in their “oh-so-cute voices” (*Drops of This Story* 72), culinary choices made without understanding the culture or the context in which their cuisine was made. In this case Hammad apparently uses foodways to refer to larger issues, specifically what Steven Salaita refers to as Israel’s “project of ‘erasure’”, a deliberate theft of Palestinian cuisine in order to “validate settler colonization”. Indeed, Salaita warns against focusing on individual consumption. Instead, he suggests looking at systematic efforts by the Israeli state to render Palestinians invisible (“‘Israeli’ Hummus is theft, not Appropriation”). In this vein, Hammad turns the tables. When students at her school replaced “their hair Barbie straight” and “jeans skin tight” with “baseball caps and baggy jeans”, she concluded that “they had no center” (*Drops of This Story* 76). It is the appropriator who had no culture, claims Hammad, not the Other whose identity has become a commodity. “I’d feel sorry for them”, Hammad recalls, “in their fake tans, fake hair, fake selves”, until they asked if she could “cook curry” (*Drops of This Story* 76), displaying their inability to recognize an authentic Palestinian identity.

24 In Hammad’s work, culinary metaphors raise complex questions related to cultural identity, national belonging and the limits of border—crossing within the ethnic borderland. As Salaita claims, when “Zionists claim Arabic food as Israeli”, it’s not a celebration of “intercultural harmony” (“‘Israeli’ Hummus is Theft, Not Appropriation” 3) but rather the systemic erasure of Palestinian culture. The same conclusion could be drawn regarding “culture plunderers” who steal another’s customs in order to make up for the perceived lack of a culture of their own. Such differences, according to Avtar Brah, are not simply the consequence of culture clashes within “diasporic space”. Instead, these relationships are marked by a number of factors, including gender, economic class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality (Brah 84). In her work, then, Hammad, among others included here, writes about what Brah terms the “multiaxiality of power”, a “cartography of the politics of intersectionality” (6) that allows for solidarity within and across groups but also divisions based on inequalities of power.

25 How and in what ways do diasporic journeys intersect – in what places, spaces and historical conjectures? Among all the writers examined here, Suheir Hammad emerges as an artist most preoccupied with transnational resistance. As Hammad observes, the structures within and between the United States and Israeli systems of oppression enable her to join dissenting voices in her own country (“I will not / dance to your war / drum” [*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 60]), while also remaining grounded in the Palestinian solidarity movement (“I will not forget where I came from. I / will craft my own drum” [ibid.]). The context of diaspora, as Najat

Rahman notes, carries with it a subtext of “home”, a concept that references those indigenous to the region (50, 51). While Palestinians living in scattered communities might still relate to the homeland as their place of origin, this stance does not preclude claiming a positionality that becomes the means to join a struggle with other oppressed people.

26 According to Rahman, Hammad seeks such a belonging based on solidarity rather than fixed identity (39). It follows then that Hammad’s analytic frame of reference would follow multiple, intersecting lines. Much like Brah’s theory of diasporic space, a place where “border[s]” and the “politics of location” (212) intersect, Hammad looks to several political strands – queer theory, colonialism, imperialism – to determine “who are the most marginalized, the most demonized” (Knopf-Newman 76) groups in society. “A space of / for theoretical crossovers”, in Brah’s terms, such a “theoretical creolization” (210) highlights complex webs of power. Moreover, it encompasses strands of Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory along with Hassan and Newman’s “ethnic borderlands”, but goes further to include insights drawn from colonialism and imperialism that are essential to understanding the ongoing Nakba (catastrophe) of the Palestinians.

27 Given the global nature of the economic system, writes Blah, feminism must be framed within an international context. Nevertheless, she continues, the feminist mantra “sisterhood is global” (84) appears outdated. Failing to note how individuals are marked by a variety of subject positions – sexuality, economic, class, ethnicity, to name a few – it assumes a homogeneity based solely on the subject’s gender. Brah’s concept of diasporic space, on the other hand, contributes toward the development of a feminist position that is both local and global, a politics that appreciates how the experiences of various categories of women exist within intersecting “relations of power” (89). At the core of diasporic space is the way in which collective signifiers are configured and mobilized in the service of solidarity / differentiation within and without the group.

28 Diasporic space offers an important site where solidarity / difference can be observed within gendered areas of class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality and age. In Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, the Palestinian diaspora is a mixture of individual, collective, and sometimes disparate narratives. Abulhawa makes clear in this novel that Palestinians never feel at home. Shuffled from one foster home to the next, after the death of her grandfather, Nur informs her social worker, Nzinga, that “there’s nothing holding her together”. Exiled from a place of no return, a mythic place of desire that she knows only from family stories, Nur describes herself as

“made up of a bunch of pieces from different places”, a precarious whole that threatens to “rip apart” (103) if she acts outside accepted social norms. Diasporic space, as Brah explains, is different from the notion of diaspora, contains not only refugees like Nur, but also those who inhabit the dominant sphere (16). While Nur differs very much from mainstream society, she shares certain aspects of Nzinga’s culture; both Palestinians and South Africans have been subjected to similar colonial forces, and Palestinians are now struggling against an apartheid regime very much like the South African government from which Nzinga’s people won their freedom.

29 Judging from this list, groups in diaspora do not intersect solely on the basis of shared oppression. When Nzinga visits Nur in Gaza, after she returns home, Teta Nazmiyeh tells her friend from South Africa that she will always have a home in Gaza because, in addition to sharing in liberation struggles they hold in common a similar communal culture (97). In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Abulhawa problematizes the concept of minority / majority relationships. Minorities are positioned vis-à-vis each other, as in the case of Nzinga and Nur, but when economic class becomes a factor, minorities with more access to wealth within the Gazan diaspora assume a position of power. When Nur’s family visits the home of Jamal, the doctor who enabled Nur’s return to Gaza, then has a brief affair with her, it becomes clear that the Palestinian community contains a matrix of economic, political and cultural relationships. “A showy thing in an expensive neighborhood”, at odds with “the world’s biggest ghetto” (185) surrounding it, the doctor’s house, implies Abulhawa, symbolizes class division within an already impoverished people. Concomitant with status, the doctor’s wife does not conform to the mores of Palestinian society. Elegantly dressed, her hair uncovered, Maisa’s presence presents a barrier across which Nur and her family do not wish to pass. Adding yet another layer, Maisa has domestic help from the Shati refugee camp to help with dinner. “We do what we can to help” (186), Maisa explains, at which point, Nazmiyeh, Nur and Alwan silently express a mutual desire to go home.

30 What Avtar Brah terms “the multi-axiality of power” (6) also plays a role in Hala Alyan’s *Salt Houses*. In this novel about a family’s multiple journeys from Jaffa to Nablus and then scattered to various diasporas, multiple modalities of gender, class, generation and country of origin are at play both within and between communities of displaced people. Uprooted after 1948 and again during the Six-Day War in 1967, Salma’s family benefitted from wealth that allowed them to establish a life free of the crowded camps. An “armor of wealth” (6), Salma believes,

separates her family from the camps skirting the outskirts of Nablus. Although all Palestinians in this novel are oppressed by the dominant Israeli society, they are positioned in relation not only to the Occupation, but also with respect to one another. Salma knows of the misery in Balata camp from her housekeeper, Raja, but she prefers to remain ignorant of its existence. Salma feels guilty over her “queasiness” (11) about the camps, but she believes that it is only random luck that keeps her family comfortable.

31 At the core of Alyan’s novel is the notion of a journey. As Avtar Brah explains, “diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down” (182), about putting down roots somewhere else. The concept of diaspora in *Salt Houses* concerns variable forms of connections within the group, as in the case of Salma and Raja. It is also about relations of power between Salma’s son-in-law Atef and the family’s “pillar”, Prija. Considered the “center of the house” (81) by Atef, Prija still remains a servant who returns to India every two years to see her real family: her husband and two children. In the case of Raja and Prija, and their connections to Salma’s family, itself displaced by the Israeli government, relationships of power differentiate them both internally (Raja) as well as externally (Prija) across different diasporic constellations.

32 Such differences, notes Avtar Brah, are formulated within the “interstices of socio-political and economic relations” (18). On the other hand, Brah goes on to state that difference does not necessarily prove unbridgeable among various groups of people. Diasporic spaces are marked by a variety of factors, she continues – “geography, environment, psychological, psychic and social” (91) – so that at a particular point in time, all groups experience certain common forces that promote sharing across “engendered borders”. “Parallel lives”, thinks Salma, about her status in relation to the Balata camp. “One person having lamb for supper, the other cucumbers”, with “fate”, she believes, being the “random” (11) arbiter. What Salma neglects to say, however, is that our fates are linked within a common economic system, which is not driven by fate at all but instead human choices. Gender, class, ethnicity, and so on, combine with global economic forces to decide who eats what for dinner. Significantly, however, the other native Nabulsi women whom Salma employs from time to time do not make her as uneasy as Raja, perhaps because only Raja knows the ballads that Salma’s own mother used to sing (11). While the simple fact of being women does not make them sisters, both Salma and her servant share a common maternal culture that is separate from economic status and other forms of oppression.

33 This article has sought to highlight both the commonalities and individual differences embodied in the Palestinian diaspora in order to explore, through this community’s literary

output, how ethnic communities coexist and communicate within diasporic space. As Avtar Brah explains, inherent within the concept of diaspora is the concept of the border, thus drawing attention to interethnic bridging that may reinforce or undermine inherent differences within and between ethnic communities (198). “The road I’ve traveled, the land beneath my feet” is for Suheir Hammad many paths that transcend exclusionary limits. Along the way, however, she “make[s] [her] own way home” (*Born Palestinian, Born Black* 13). By encouraging a search for commonality that respects individual difference, Hammad displays a form of empathy that is inherently anti-essentialist.

34 “Stories are songs”, writes Suheir Hammad, and “singers are prophets. Those stories are one”, she continues, “our story” (*Drops of This Story*, “Author’s Note” n.p.), referring to all those who are engaged with issues of freedom and justice. In his “Welcome” to *This is Not a Border*, Mahmoud Darwish discusses this issue of personal responsibility in the wake of gross injustice. The writer’s role, Darwish explains, consists of a “search for truth” (7), a quest that takes on particular meaning for Palestinians who, he claims, are erased from the history of their own country. Susan Abulhawa agrees. In “Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem”, she explains how she left a lucrative career to become a storyteller. Because “someone stole [her] story”, she explains, and “retold the truth of [her] as a lie” (61), Abulhawa found solace in setting that record straight. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, she sets straight the history of Deir El Hawa, her “namesake” and “the landscape of [her] DNA (“Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem” 62). “Stories matter,” Mamdouh tell his granddaughter Nur, in this semi-autobiographical novel recounting the history of Abulhawa’s people. “We are comprised of our stories” (62). But how much better, writes Suheir Hammad, when the task is not placed only on the Arabs. “To have this kind of solidarity created through writing” (Knopf-Newman 78), she concludes, generates the possibility for viewing similar struggles in different spheres, a strategy for honoring uniqueness while participating in acts of interethnic bridging. Born the year before Golda Meir declared: “I cannot sleep at night knowing how many Arab babies are being born this same night” (Knopf-Newman 72), Hammad understands the urgency of switching this particular narrative. By connecting the dots to other causes, different anti-colonial movements around the world, she joins others in this essay whose cultural production furthers change. Embodying what Darwish calls the writer’s role, Nathalie Handal finds in words a refuge to create change. “A place where words have no boundaries and titles change”, books constitute for her “a place of many places, different names,

endless endings, and beginnings” (165) – indeed, an ethnic borderland where cultures are translated and maintained.

## Works Cited

- Abdelhadi, Rabab and Reem Abdulhadi. "Nomadic Existence: Exile, Gender, and Palestine (an E-mail Conversation Between Sisters)." *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating. Routledge, 2002, pp. 165-176.
- Abuelhiga, Soraya. "Woman Walking Heavy / Brown Worlds in her Face": Global(ized) Identities and Universal Patriotism in the Poetry of Suheir Hammad." *The Postcolonialist*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2013, pp. 1-14, [www.woman-walking-heavybrown-worlds-in-her-face-globalized-identities-and-universal-patriotism-in-the-poetry-of-suheir-hammad](http://www.woman-walking-heavybrown-worlds-in-her-face-globalized-identities-and-universal-patriotism-in-the-poetry-of-suheir-hammad). Accessed 22 October 2017.
- Abulhawa, Susan. *Drops of This Story*. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- . "Once Upon a Time in Palestine." *This is Not a Border: Reportage and Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature*, edited by Ahdaf Soueif and Omar Robert Hamilton, Bloomsbury, 2017, 59-65.
- Alyan, Hala. *Salt Houses*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Ball, Anna. *Palestinian Literature and Film in Postcolonial Perspective*. Routledge, 2012.
- Barakat, Rana. "The Right to Wait: Exile, Home and Return." In *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Home and Exile*, edited by Penny Johnson and Raga Shehadeh, pp. 135-152. Inderpuri, New Delhi, Raj Press, 2012, pp. 135-152.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
- Brown, Christopher. "Interview with Suheir Hammad." *The Electronic Intifada*, 8 June 2006, [www.electronicintifada.net/content/interview-suheir-hammad/6013](http://www.electronicintifada.net/content/interview-suheir-hammad/6013). Accessed 22 October 2017.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*. Translated by Mohammad Shaheen, Interlink Publishing Group, Ind., 2009.
- . "Welcome." *This is Not a Border: Reportage and Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature*, edited by Ahdaf Soueif and Omar Robert Hamilton, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 7-11.

- Fadda-Conrey, Carol. "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*." *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 31, No. 4, 2006, pp. 187-207.
- Franklin, Cynthia G., Morgan Cooper and Ibrahim G. Aoudé. "Life in Occupied Palestine: Three Cafés and a Special Issue." *Biography*, vol. 37, 2014, pp. vii-vliii.
- Goldman, Anne. "'I Yam what I yam': Cooking, Culture and Colonialism." *Decolonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 169-196.
- Handal, Nathalie. "Shades of a Bridge's Breath." *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating, Routledge, 2002, pp. 158-165.
- Hammad, Suheir. *Born Palestinian, Born Black and The Gaza Suite*. UpSet Press, 2010.
- . *Drops of This Story*. Harlem River Press, 1996.
- Hassan, Sarah and Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman. "Introduction." *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 31, No. 4, 2006, pp. 3-15.
- Jarrar, Rhonda. *A Map of Home*. Penguin Books, 2009.
- Knopf-Newman, Marcy Jane. "An Interview with Suheir Hammad." *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 31, No. 4, 2006, pp. 71-93.
- Litvin, Yoav. "Voices of the Palestinian Diaspora: Ramzy Baroud and Rima Najjar on Identity and Resistance." *Truthout*, 17 August 2017, [Truth-out.Org/opinion/item/41644-voices-of-the-palestinian-diaspora](http://Truth-out.Org/opinion/item/41644-voices-of-the-palestinian-diaspora). Accessed 14 Sept. 2017.
- Ludescher, Tanyss. "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature." *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 31, No. 4, 2006, pp. 93-115.
- Mohanty, Chandra. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 255-278.
- Rahman, Najat. *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists after Darwish*. Syracuse University Press, 2015.

- Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Howard University Press, 2002.
- Salaita, Steven. *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan*. Syracuse University Press, 2006.
- . *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- “‘Israeli’ Hummus is Theft, Not Appropriation.” *The New Arab*, 4 Sept. 2017, [alaraby.co.uk/English/comment](http://alaraby.co.uk/English/comment). Accessed 13 Sept. 2017.
- Souceif, Ahdaf. “Introduction.” *This is Not a Border: Reportage and Reflection from the Palestine Festival of Literature*, edited by Ahdaf Soueif and Omar Robert Hamilton, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 1-7.
- Wright, David. “An Interview with Carolyn Forché by David Wright.” *Modern American Poetry*, 20 Feb. 2000, [english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/forche/wrightinterview](http://english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/forche/wrightinterview). Accessed 28 Sept. 2017.