

Drowning Out and Breathing In: Water as a Vessel for Palestinian Memory and Resistance in Hala Alyan’s “Hamra” and Suheir Hammad’s “a prayer band”

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Abstract

Throughout contemporary Palestinian-American poetry, various symbolic representations of water take on central roles in the poetic mediation of traumatic memories of occupation, genocide, and exile, bearing witness to the historical and ongoing oppression of Palestinian communities. This essay analyzes the hydropolitics of Suheir

Hammad’s “a prayer band” (2005) and Hala Alyan’s “Hamra” (2016) through a focus on the transnational and postgenerational mediation of these repressed and erased memories to show how the poets resist Zionist narratives and resurface Palestinian agency, resilience, and hope.

Introduction

The continual resilience of Palestinian communities, and their resistance to Zionist narratives, both in (Occupied) Palestine and the diaspora, has produced a rich legacy of resistance poetry, which poets Hala Alyan and Suheir Hammad have both contributed to. In comparison to the land-based imagery of olive trees which is often centered in ecocritical readings of their poetry, water is an unexpected motif which flows through their bodies of work, taking on paradoxical roles—a place of refuge or a site of violence, scarce or overflowing. Alyan and Hammad are both second generation Palestinian immigrants who draw on their own families' experiences of occupation and displacement, publishing in English in the US. In Alyan's "Hamra" (2016), where a hungry sea swallows houses, and in Hammad's "a prayer band" (2005), where flooding in Palestine is compared to the environmental racism experienced by Black communities in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, water imagery is especially central.

I argue that the recurring symbol of water that both poets employ, acts as a powerful means of expression that gives a voice to Palestinian communities who have been rendered and represented as voiceless. Their poetry mediates accessible and affective counter-narratives which stretch the boundaries of what language can achieve, allowing them to communicate transnational and postgenerational trauma and simultaneously express the impossibility of fully doing so.

Two Streams Merge: The Intersection of Water and Memory

The recurring theme of water in Palestinian literature has recently become recognized as a field of literary and cultural analysis, most comprehensively by environmental humanities researcher Hannah Boast's *Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature* (2020). Boast argues for the importance of recontextualizing the so-called water wars, or competition for the scarce resources of the region, as instead produced by Israel's occupation and siege of Palestinian communities, colonial extractivism, and inequitable water

distribution, emphasizing that literary imaginations may be instrumental in doing so (2-4). Mediating memory through poetry has the power to challenge the dominant Orientalist and Zionist framing of Palestine as an uninhabited desert which requires restoration, and the contemporary greenwashing of Israel's genocidal project. As such, I follow Boast's call to read literary texts through centering "hydrosocial relations"—the complex interactions between political, social, and material human systems, subjectivities, and water (3).

I also link my analysis to insights provided by Isabel Hofmeyr and her colleagues in their article "Reading for Water" (2022). Here, they analyze South African literature by reading for wide varieties of bodies of water, allowing them to engage with "wet ontologies and to rethink definitions of space [...] as well as time [...] in the aftermath of postcolonial critical vocabularies which encouraged land-based articulations and epistemological preoccupations" (317). As their analysis thematizes issues of racism and apartheid, it verbalizes how water can be read in relation to these topics, which are relevant for the historical and contemporary context of Palestine.

Discussions around access to the control of water—in terms of literal access but also in terms of being able to control narratives surrounding water—are always linked to discussions of power and memory.

Marianne Hirsch's 2008 article "The Generation of Postmemory" examines the role of the photograph in generating postmemory as it affectively bears witness through the transgenerational, embodied mediation of traumatic historical events. Using postmemory to think through the symbolically dense image of water, especially in combination with the two poets' invocation of their parents' experiences of exile and violent colonization, can help us understand how this concept allows the postgeneration, the children of those who have experienced a historical trauma, to make sense of a history full of ruptures, and express a Palestinian-American memory and identity. Hirsch's article focuses specifically on the experience of the postgeneration of Jewish Holocaust survivors, and the literal and symbolic destruction of archives and memory by Nazi Germany. I argue that

postmemory is relevant in the context of Palestinian-American poetry because a similar process of erasure is happening, in which historical memory is only accessible through moments of rupture.

In this article, I analyze Alyan's and Hammad's poetic mediation of (literal and metaphorical) drowning and resilience to colonial violence and exile. Both poems portray water as a horrifying force which destroys communities through flooding, symbolizing the genocidal violence of the Israeli state in conjunction with settlers in Palestine. Although Alyan's use of the sea is clearly symbolic, it is also evocative of recognizable images of rising sea levels caused by anthropogenic climate change, especially of how this phenomenon will continue to create climate refugees, inequitably impacting already marginalized communities. Hammad's poem draws this parallel more explicitly, as she reflects on the impact of environmental racism on Black communities in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina, transnationally linking this memory to flooding in Palestine and the violent displacement of Palestinians by Israeli settler-colonialism. These (ongoing) events and histories are addressed seriously and impactfully, but both poems also shimmer with moments of hope and resilience.

“Hamra”: The Sea as a Fluid Screen Memory

Alyan's "Hamra," published in her 2016 poetry collection *Hijra*, focuses on a woman's lived experience enduring misogynistic and colonial violence as well as the difficulties of displacement and exile, themes which she addresses through drawing on her own family's histories. Hamra, the poem's namesake, is an Israeli settlement located in the West Bank, considered illegal under international law. It was founded in 1971, built on land stolen from the Palestinian village Furush Beit Dajan. Today, the village's inhabitants continue to be terrorized by settler violence supported by the Israeli Defense Forces, the segmenting of the land by an apartheid wall and a checkpoint, and the destruction of infrastructure and homes (ARIJ 14-16). This violence reverberates throughout the poem, in its references to the bombing of

a residential street, laughing intruding Israeli settlers, a man bleeding out, and a woman crying out her daughter's name (52-53). The speaker describes these occurrences in a numb, straightforward tone that suggests both the detachment indicative of traumatic experience and the routine nature of settler violence.

Most haunting, though, is the imagery of the sea that flows throughout "Hamra," swallowing houses and cities, symbolizing the destruction of Palestinian communities by Israeli settler-colonialism. In an analysis of Alyan's novel *Salt Houses* (2017), in which houses are also swallowed by the sea, Arab literary scholar Yousef Awad writes that the "dichotomy" between the sea and the houses can be read as the struggle between "exile and displacement" and "belonging and rootedness" in Palestine (25). Awad points out that the Mediterranean Sea plays a fundamental role within Zionist discourse as a "European passageway," a typically orientalist narrative of colonization, where the sea is not a space of its own but only a reflection of the possibility of an Israeli state on Palestinian land (39-40). Water and the sea are not arbitrary images—the Mediterranean has come to embody Zionist narratives. It has witnessed incomprehensible violence in Gaza and the drowning of refugees crossing it, as the international community continues to disregard and fund the suffering of Palestinians.

The speaker of "Hamra," while bombing continues outside, watches the news: "It has taken decades for this city to die, the newscaster says. Her / own house has been swallowed by sea, and she shakes sand from / her collarbone on air" (52). The decades-long death which the newscaster describes refers to the insidious process of land grabbing and settler expansion, which Palestinian communities have continuously resisted. Today, the Hamra settlement continues to encroach on the Palestinian land surrounding it. In the lines above, Alyan describes the bodily impact the trauma of displacement generates: the sand of the shoreline which has slowly grown closer now weighs on the newscaster's collarbone. Hirsch writes that when re-mediating postmemory, it can be impossible to access a linear, clear narrative of history as we tend to understand it. Quoting Eva Hoffman, a Holocaust memory studies scholar, she elaborates that

“[s]urvivors [...] express not exactly ‘memories’ but [...] ‘flashes of imagery’ and ‘broken refrains,’ transmitted through ‘the language of the body’” (111). In “Hamra,” this is evoked through the speaker’s description of the newscaster’s body. The absence of quotation marks to indicate the newscaster’s speech blurs the boundaries between inner and outer worlds—it is unclear whether the newscaster is saying that her house has been ‘swallowed,’ or whether this is an extension of the speaker’s own description.

In this poem, the sea takes on the role of Hirsch’s photographic screen memories, allowing the postgeneration and other readers to engage with a historical memory of Palestine and bring this awareness to the present day. Hirsch defines screen memories as a creative projection of present-day subjectivity onto a fundamentally unknowable traumatic past, which protects the postgeneration while still allowing them to connect with this history (120). Alyan uses the sea as a screen memory, maintaining the gaps in traumatic memory, while simultaneously giving “a glimpse of [the past’s] enormity and power” (Hirsch 117). The surreal image of an all-consuming sea allows Alyan to attempt to represent the extremity of experiences of displacement and genocide.

Since the full impact of these experiences is incomprehensible, the sea in “Hamra” becomes a site of violence which is only indirectly addressed—all figures in the poem, their location, and even the time period in which the poem takes place are left unnamed. Traumatic history cannot be straightforwardly referenced. However, the lack of references also points towards the gaps left in memory due to erasure within institutional archives by the Israeli re-writing of history through Zionist mythology. Only the name of the Israeli settlement is hauntingly omnipresent, as the title of the poem: “Hamra,” in its fragmented and surreal nature, captures both this systemic erasure of history, as well as the difficulty of fully communicating traumatic experiences.

I argue that the poem’s water imagery communicates the repressed and erased trauma of genocide and exile by affectively gesturing towards the experience of displacement. The poem’s hybrid form, which

manifests as surreal prose poetry, allows Alyan to “practice in a creative and innovative encounter with what language and form might do in favor of an idea, a concept, a feeling, or a fight against the dogmatic tide” (Al Qaisi & Al Khadra 2266), bringing erased histories and current realities back into public conversations.

The closing of “Hamra” powerfully subverts the Zionist narratives and realities surrounding the Mediterranean, utilizing the inherently creative and therefore malleable quality of screen memories to express radical hope for a free Palestine:

I used to think trees lived on the bottom of
the ocean, the lover says. Not coral reef, kelp, but cottonwoods
and elms, women with magenta hair planting onion bulbs into
the seabed. We mock him. What about spores, we ask, what about
oxygen and loam?

He shrugs. Even without sunlight they would bloom. (53)

“Hamra”’s surreal nature allows Alyan to rewrite the screen memory of the sea as a place of rootedness, growth, and healing, where the lover imagines a liberated space for Palestine, powerfully reclaiming the Mediterranean. Hofmeyr and her colleagues write about the possibility of decolonizing knowledge through “going underwater,” to prompt an “ontological shift” (315) which “relativis[es] colonial constructions” (313). As such, the inhabitants of the sea can be read as “an erased or concealed indigeneity that continues ‘alongside and in spite of settler colonial ruin,’” in a place of “refuge” away from the “patriarchal and racist territorialities embedded in the nation-state” (315-6). The final line of the poem is isolated, further emphasizing the lover’s strange but beautiful faith in a different world where “[e]ven without sunlight they would bloom” (Alyan 53). Since it is ambiguous who or what the lover is referring to in this final line, a surreal image of women ‘blooming’ alongside trees on the ocean floor is evoked.

Palestinian resistance poetry is both past- and future-oriented, working against “forgetfulness” and “reject[ing] frozen trauma; it

ignites the creation of an alternative space” (Al Qaisi & Al Khadra 2265). This alternative space is celebrated in “Hamra,” and is also created in Hammad’s poetry, to which I will now turn, through her linking of transnational solidarity between communities.

“a prayer band”: Mobilizing Memory and Breath

Hammad wrote and performed her poem “a prayer band” in 2005, as part of a fundraising event, Refugees for Refugees, which she organized for communities impacted by Hurricane Katrina. The poem celebrates the culture of New Orleans, while simultaneously mourning the places and people that have been lost. It also criticizes the racist policies of the U.S. government in creating segregated neighborhoods along the Gulf coast where Black Americans live in cheaper, more flood-prone areas (Morse 1, 9). Along with the U.S. government’s failure to organize an adequate evacuation and disaster response (15-17), this systemic racism led to the disproportionate impact Hurricane Katrina has had on Black communities in New Orleans (Fatherree).

In “a prayer band,” Hammad focuses on representing the difficulties of displacement and loss through the imagery of flooding—experiences which she directly relates to the struggle of the Palestinian people. The speaker, repeating the phrase “i have known,” describes their own experience of displacement: “i have known of fleeing desperate / with children on hips in arms on backs / / of house keys strung on necks / of water weighed shoes / disintegrated official papers / leases certificates births deaths / taxes” (lines 62-68). Despite being surrounded by destruction, these lines make hope for a rebuilding of Palestinian communities explicit through referencing the next generation of children and house keys, an iconic symbol of the intent to return after involuntary exile. This hope is maintained even in the face of the urgency evoked by the asyndeton of children carried ‘on hips in arms on backs’ and the ‘disintegrat[ion] [of] official papers’ by the flood water, which may also symbolize the erasure of memory and destruction of life, similarly to the sea in Alyan’s “Hamra.”

However, these lines can also be read as a literal description of flooding. According to the Assessment Capacities Project, throughout winter, its most rainy season, Gaza is often hit by flood, which is made more severe by Israeli destruction of drainage networks and storm water basins (1, 3). This flooding and the systematic destruction of infrastructure also cause a spread of sewage and wastewater, polluting the ocean and contaminating Gaza's limited clean water resource (4). Since this pollution threatens Israel's greenwashed self-presentation as a 'civilized' and environmentally conscious nation, Zionist narratives hypocritically blame Palestinians themselves for the situation Israel has caused: Israeli politicians have referred to the flooding as a "sewage intifada" (Boast 13).

As the speaker in the poem continues: "there is water every where / and there is no thing clean to drink" (lines 19-20). Each word, with the exception of "water" and "every," is only one syllable long, adding to the affective weight "a prayer band" carries. The segmentation of the words "every where" and "no thing," as well as the anaphora of "there is" breaks the flowing and previously uninterrupted rhythm of the poem. In an interview, Hammad speaks of the "struggle" of "finding appropriate language [...] it's the horrific abundance of true fear, authentic fear that we're living with [something] that language has no words for" (75). The space between compound words and the spacing between lines of this stanza is an acknowledgement that language can break down. Amina ElHalawani, analyzing the rhythm and the breaks within Hammad's poetry, writes that "[t]he other side of the break [...] lies in carrying continuity [...] since the percussion continues both rupture and continuity coexist in these moments" (12). In its unwillingness to be filled in specific language which essentializes traumatic events, the space also signals a continued engagement with the complexity of transnational witnessing and of postmemory. As Hirsch writes, postmemory is defined by its "uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" with memory itself (106). Through this description of flooding and the lack of uncontaminated water, "a prayer band" encourages a reflection on the impact of discriminatory systems which cause and exacerbate so-called natural disasters

for marginalized communities. This inequitable impact must be denaturalized. Hofmeyr and her colleagues write that “[c]limate crises cannot be divorced from questions of historical, political and economic justice,” describing an “urgent need to draw together decolonial and environmental approaches” (304). Such an approach should be supplemented by a focus on how the memory of these questions of justice can be and has been mediated despite repression, entering public discourse through poetry.

Hammad achieves this through developing a multidirectional memory which builds solidarity between refugees of different contexts, as they have semi-comparable experiences due to racist and colonial power structures. “Water links global communities [...] through the unequal burden of pollution and rising seas on the Global South that is a direct result of settler colonialism and globalization,” notes Danielle Haque (66), a similar burden which the Black community of New Orleans has had to endure.

“a prayer band” “testifies to the Palestinians’ identification with the poor ethnic minority of New Orleans” (Sharaf 518), as the speaker of the poem shares that they can deeply relate to their pain: “someone whose beloved has drowned / knows what water can do / what water will do to once animated / things” (lines 54-57). The alliterative anaphora of “what water can do / what water will do” emphasizes the emotional weight of this stanza. Replacing “can” with “will” in the repetition makes tragedy feel inescapable. Therí Pickens writes that Hammad’s work often “links the fragility of the body [...] with the construction of narratives” about specific communities, while always portraying “bodily presence” as “evidence of the fundamental value of human life” (36). Using the word “things” to refer to human bodies here contrasts her previous attentive and tender specificity that flows in descriptions such as holding “children on hips in arms on backs” (line 63). This may point towards both the emotional detachment caused by trauma and the systemic erasure of the suffering of specific marginalized groups through processes of racialized dehumanization.

The speaker’s mourning for the loss of human life is so deep that it is transnationally echoed by bodies of water themselves: “tonight

the tigris and the mississippi moan / for each other as sisters” (lines 79-80). Personifying these rivers through their relation to each other underlines the global environmental damage caused by settler-colonialism and racial capitalism: both Palestine and the U.S. have been framed as uninhabited land which required (European) human control. One of the narratives regarding the colonization of the regions of West Asia and North Africa involved controlling the floods of Tigris so the area would become “a safer place to invest capital in” (Haque 70). Similarly, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Canal promised to deliver economic prosperity (Freudenburg et al. 497). However, this only benefited a few already wealthy individuals while predominantly causing “environmental damage” by “destroying wetlands that had formerly protected New Orleans from hurricanes” (497), ultimately increasing Hurricane Katrina’s force. These transnational connections show that water demands a “radical rethinking of [...] space,” which considers complex networks of material relationality across human-imposed national boundaries, as Hofmeyr et al. point out (306).

Hammad’s choice to bring memories of Palestine and New Orleans together results in a powerful act of resistance to colonial, Zionist narratives. As she writes in her preface to *Born Palestinian, Born Black*: “Borders are manmade, and I refuse to respect them unless I have a say in their formation” (lines 12-13). This mobile agency allows her to utilize language beyond its typical limits of representation in capturing such traumatic events, similarly to Alyan in “Hamra.” The title of the poem, “a prayer band,” refers to a community “who view prayer and song as their sacred duty” which “connect[s] them to one another, to their culture, and to God” (Fosua et al. 13), an important tradition within Black sacred music, which has a rich history in New Orleans. In transcending language through communal song, new connections are made, just like the transnational connections made throughout the poem.

Her writing also carries a musical, rhythmic quality: “every thing i can / think to do / to say i feel / is buoyant / / every thing is below water” (lines 12-15). The gaps left between the words “every” and “thing,” the short lines, monosyllabic words, and the stanza break

all contribute to a steady, fragmented rhythm evocative of the act of breathing in and out, especially evident when the poem is performed out loud. As Pickens argues, Hammad's poetry "mobilizes breath [...] as an act of resistance" (21), and in this poem, the continuation of breath also literally represents surviving the horror of flooding, staying 'buoyant,' even when this feels precarious.

Conclusion

The poems discussed in this essay employ representations of water to mediate Palestinian memory—resisting the Zionist erasure of Palestine, mourning what has been lost, and moving towards the future of a free Palestine with hope. Water transcends colonial conceptions of how history is recorded through linear time and space, in order to mediate both postgenerational and transnational memory of environmental racism and inequitable access to water, as well as experiences of occupation and exile.

However, I also warn that a focus exclusively on water may drown out the representation of other experiences that fall within the aim of this research, such as direct physical violence by Israeli settlers. Water imagery serves more to express the impact of such traumatic experience on memory and history, and to describe narratives of displacement and exile, than to directly convey the experience of violence.

Nonetheless, this focus can provide an understanding of how colonial states present themselves, and subsequently how these narratives can be resisted, as well as how repressed and erased memories of colonized communities can be resurfaced through the mediation of postmemory and the cultivation of transnational solidarity. The invisibilized violence of environmental racism, settler colonialism, and apartheid must be de-naturalized and questioned so that a struggle for justice can continue.

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Biography

Ollie Köhn-Haskins is an RMA student of Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University. They call on you to participate in a boycott of companies complicit in the ongoing genocide of Palestinians, and an academic and cultural boycott of Israel. Pressure the institutions you are a part of to do the same.