

“Contrapuntalism and Rupture: Suheir Hammad’s *breaking poems* and the Poetics of an Afro-Arab Diaspora”

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This paper takes Palestinian American poet and activist Suheir Hammad’s recent collection *breaking poems* (2008) as an occasion to reconsider questions of continuity and break in the poetic configurations of an Afro-Arab diaspora. It starts by locating Hammad’s collection within the historical practices linking Arab and Black diasporic imaginaries, before moving to consider contemporary aesthetic practices of black diasporic radicalism, those practices described by Fred Moten as “remixed, expanded, distilled, and radically faithful to the forces its encounters carry, break, and constitute.”

Hammad’s critically-acclaimed collections *Born Palestinian Born Black* (1996) and *ZaatarDiva* (2005) deftly engaged the aesthetics of hip hop performance poetry to link Brooklyn and Gaza, an imaginative geography of social justice across communities of color as much as across national borders. In this sense, these earlier collections invited a reading practice Edward Said described as “contrapuntal,” linking overlapping characters and interdependent histories in order to imagine both a critique of and a radical response to white supremacy’s violence against memory, against the gendered and racialized body, against history.

This paper reads the aesthetic practices in *breaking poems* as operating otherwise, however, representing a far messier cultural politics of the break, escape, and fugitivity. In this post-civil rights moment of racialized crisis and war, with its retrenched logics of colorblind calculus, these practices pose a departure from nascent popular cultural forms by challenging any smooth commodification into neoliberalism’s multicultural tropes. A cultural politics of connection, in other words, is insufficient to the crisis of the contemporary conjuncture. Rather, reading *breaking poems* into a longer genealogy of Afro-Arab diasporic connections and ruptures instead produces a radically decentered and slippery site of translation, critique, emergence, and transformation.