Special Issue:
Arab American Literature

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Special Issue: Arab American Literature

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Introduction

Salah D. Hassan
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i am an arab,
alienated from american,
sitting on the other side of that hyphen

—Laila Shereen

One effect of the US War on Terror has been a growing interest in Arabs in the US. This interest has been expressed on an academic level by the impulse to include writing by Arab Americans in US ethnic literature courses, incorporate panels on Arab American culture into national conferences, and to publish edited volumes on the histories of Arab Americans. But prior to 9/11 Arab American writing received scant critical treatment and remained on the outer margins of US literary studies. Despite the increased interest resulting from US domestic and foreign policies, Arab American cultural production continues to sit largely beyond the scope of cultural criticism. Contemporary Arab American writing by authors like Diana Abu-Jaber may be achieving a certain degree of public attention, but such attention has done little to produce a broader sense of contemporary Arab American cultural production and the politics that have contributed to its growth since the 1960s.

In some ways this issue of MELUS grew out of concerns apparent in the post-9/11 context: pressures to educate students and the general public and also to intervene in the dominant discourses on Arabs in the US. In order to situate Arab American literature,
we asked contributors to engage with representational issues of Arabs in the US as well as the contestation around Arab self-representation. The articles selected for publication provide a range of historical and political perspectives on Arab American intellectual and cultural work in the US. While the issue is primarily focused on literary expression, several of the articles address the racialization of Arabs in the US subsequent to 9/11. The conceptual motivation behind this issue is, however, to question the status of Arab American cultural production and gauge the state of critical inquiry in the emerging field of Arab American studies.

One problem with collecting essays for such an issue lies in the definition of the subject. Despite the efforts of many creative writers and academics to give specificity to the cultural category of Arab American, Arab Americananness resists ethnic and racial determination. The excerpt from Laila Shereen’s poem, which serves as an epigraph to this introduction, points to the problematics of ethnic or cultural hyphenation for Arab Americans. In the multiculturalist context of the contemporary US, the hyphen in a term such as “Arab-American” ostensibly serves to bridge racial otherness or to naturalize the alien, but its net effect is political accommodation within the nation. The dilemma of the hyphen is familiar to scholars who work in the fields of race and ethnic literatures and question the politics of a multiculturalism which often conceals all manner of exclusions behind a pretense of cultural inclusion. Determining an Arab American subjectivity is also complicated by the Arab side of the hyphen. Arabness has in the past operated as a marker of national belonging, notably in connection with the Pan-Arab movements that developed in opposition to colonialism in the mid-twentieth century. But even at the high point of Pan-Arab nationalism, defining Arabness was an elusive endeavor, complicated by regionalisms, petty nationalisms, and religious affiliations. In this issue, our goal is to provoke a more informed discussion of the limitations and tensions surrounding the construction of Arab American subjectivity.

More specifically, this special issue seeks to contribute to the project of building an academic field of study that has yet to achieve critical maturity and significant formal recognition. While there is increased commitment to the project of Arab American studies and several important collections have been published
providing evidence of new work in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history, and literature, Arab American studies does not possess the status of an academic field. There are few monographs of Arab American studies and, as we note below, most critical work tends to be published in edited volumes or journals. In some cases, a limited anthologizing approach has also conditioned literary publications.

Contemporary Arab American cultural production appears, however, to be in advance of the academic work on Arab Americans. In other words, the quantity and quality of creative work produced by Arabs in the US exceeds the work being done by academics in the nascent field of Arab American studies. In fact, academics who study Arab Americans have in the past focused on the sociological narrative of migration and as a result were methodologically and thematically stuck in a particular foundational moment that repeated itself with each new generation of Arab immigrants. This is not to say that the story of immigration to the US, a story that is didactically retold in a permanent exhibit at the Arab American Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, is not crucial to understanding the formation of Arab American subjectivity. However, a critical understanding of Arabs in the US must move beyond the unifying story of migration, and the concomitant stories of assimilation and acculturation, which place so much emphasis on cultural particularisms and neglect the political determinations of Arabs both in terms of US domestic racial policies and foreign affairs.

There is a disabling disconnect between the political determination of Arabs in the US, their cultural production, and the academic study of Arab Americans. This disconnect can only be overcome through an unrelenting critique of the racialization of Arabs in the US and at the same time a thoughtful scrutiny of the political and cultural self representation of Arabs. Myths about Arabs abound, and it is certainly the case that Arabs in the US, in an effort to educate the general public, have contributed to the circulation of myths. Any effort to challenge a myth by asserting a more authentic representation risks the production of a new myth. We recognize this risk and ask: what are the implications of labeling a body of literature Arab American? Can cultural criticism of Arab American literature challenge the political determination of Arab
American subjectivity? In what ways does the editorial project of this special issue risk reproducing the myths of an Arab American identity?

As Ella Shohat argues, there are certainly problems with the very act of segmenting and differentiating among various American ethnic identities; Shohat urges "a relational approach to multicultural studies that does not segregate historical periods and geographical regions into neatly fenced off areas of expertise, and which does not speak of communities in isolation, but 'in relation'" (88). Though we concur with her call to move beyond such borders, to understand Arab American literary production in relation to other literatures and cultures in the US and beyond, we must assess the concerns and issues that have become central to Arab American cultural politics. Thus, the objective of this introduction and this issue more generally is not to cordon off Arab American literature in isolation from other literatures, but rather to provide scholars and teachers with some elementary tools for analyzing and comprehending literature by Arabs in the US in relation to other minority literatures, as well as in relation to US policies at home and abroad.

The history of Arab American writing has typically been associated with the immigration of Arabs to the United States in the late nineteenth century. Early Arab American writers such as Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Asifa Karam wrote in Arabic and sometimes in English; they published their work in literary journals, newspapers, and books. Although this literature is often a point of departure in determining Arab American subjectivity, this modern minor literary movement has been ignored by most scholars of US culture.

From the beginning, Arab writers in the US used a variety of methods to make their voices known. For example, there was an early Arab American literary scene known as al-mahjar. Mahjar, which means immigrant, was institutionalized as The Pen League or al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya and lasted through the 1940s. Between 1890 and 1940, Arab immigrants published numerous Arabic language newspapers in the US, the first of which was launched in 1892. These publications are a modern archive of Arab American writing. Independent organizations and periodicals have continued to play a significant role in Arab American writing during the latter
part of the twentieth century. For the past ten years, *Al Jadid: A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts* has published literature and criticism, including works by leading Arab American writers. In 1999, playwright Kathryn Haddad founded the literary journal *Mizna: Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America*, which also plays an important role in publishing works by established and emerging authors.

One of the most important developments for Arab American writers has been RAWI, Radius of Arab-American Writers Incorporated ("rawii" also means storyteller in Arabic). RAWI, which grew out of a 1992 meeting of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), aims, among other things, to encourage Arab youth to write, to create a professional network of writers, and to publish works in mainstream publications. Through its newsletter and its annual meetings and conferences, RAWI creates a community of Arab American writers. As Lisa Suhair Majaj explains, “Before RAWI, Arab-American writers were almost entirely invisible on the broader American literary scene, and they were just as invisible to each other” ("Of Stories" 26). Organizing literary bodies and publishing periodicals are two of the ways that writers have sought to give definition to a collective Arab American cultural identity.

With a similar objective of making visible a minority presence in the US, several anthologies have collected work by Arab American writers. These anthologies strive to intervene in the field of US literary studies by bringing into circulation Arab American writing. *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988), one of the first significant anthologies, edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, brought early Arab American writers such as Mikhail Naimy, Gibran, and Rihani together with poets like D. H. Melhem, Samuel Hazo, Elmaz Abinader, and Etel Adnan. It would be five years before a second such volume would appear with a feminist and North American slant. Joanna Kadi’s *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994) was equally significant. As with Orfalea and Elmusa’s texts, this one brings together prominent writers such as D. H. Melhem and Naomi Shihab Nye while introducing the next generation of authors such as Lisa Suhair Majaj, Pauline Kaldas, and Laila Halaby. Both anthologies rely
up upon food imagery to organize or introduce their volumes, a familiar strategy of other immigrant ethnic groups, but one that also operates at a level that is familiar and disarming to a general public that might otherwise be hostile to Arabs. In other words, the reference to food can be seen as a trope of accommodation, as these anthologies seek to make accessible an Arab culture that is generally approached in an adversarial manner in the US.

More recent collections of Arab American writing suggest a departure from these pioneering anthologies. With more experimental aesthetic choices represented in the literature, Arab American writers in volumes such as Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa’s *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999) are not merely constructing an identity but remaking identities. Authors in this volume such as Nathalie Handal, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber, Khaled Mattawa, and Suheir Hammad, among others, push writing in new directions that form divergent subjectivities. As the “post” in the title suggests, this anthology is presented as a volume that moves beyond the early traditions of late nineteenth-century Arab American al-mahjar literary styles, although the volume does also include standard fixtures of Arab American writers such as Nye, Adnan, Hazo, and Abinader to situate the collection in the context of more established authors. Importantly, this book grew out of a special issue of the journal *Jusoor: The Arab-American Journal of Cultural Exchange and Thought for the Future*. Many of the writers in this collection came together through the connections made through RAWI. More recently, the anthology of Arab American short fiction, *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*, edited by Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa, reviewed in this issue, employs a similar strategy as *Post-Gibran*, though this volume limits the works to one literary genre.

While these anthologies are significant because they carve out an historic and emerging literary tradition within a particular immigrant community, they do not position Arab American literature “in relation to” other minor literatures in the US and are awkwardly situated in relation to traditions within Arab literature. Consider Akash and Mattawa’s inclusion of writings by modern Arab authors, such as Mahmoud Darwish and Tawfiq al-Hakim, in the appendix of *Post-Gibran*. These writers may have had a
significant influence on Arab American writing, but they never left the Arab world for America and their work was originally published in Arabic. Along similar lines, Elmaz Abinader asserts the Arab origins of an Arab American literary tradition: “People don’t understand that literature started in the Arab world. . . . The short story was invented in Egypt. When people talk about Arab American literature as ‘new’ . . . it’s not. This is a literature that has a tradition longer than Western literature. There were Arab women poets in the seventh century” (qtd. in Curiel). The need to make the connection between Arab writers in the Arab World and Arab American literature can be understood in terms of a diasporic awakening not unlike the national awakening that affected the Arab World at the turn of the twentieth century. Majaj has noted that publications of Arab American literature “resurrect a forgotten or suppressed cultural essence, identify precursors, and celebrate traditions.” She goes on to underscore that the recovery of an Arab American literary subject is incomplete and partial: “Such ‘awakenings,’ however, suggest that the category of ‘Arab American’ refers to an identity still constructing itself” (“Arab American Literature” 268).

But this model of national awakening, whether it be in terms of a minority ethnic community in the US or a resistant anticolonial movement in the Arab world, points to another important issue raised by the late Edward Said, who asked readers to reconsider the conceptual structure employed by scholars to categorize literary subjects: “Two aspects of these intellectual frameworks in particular seem more in need of revision than others—first, the idea that literature exists within a national framework and, second, the assumption that a literary object exists in some sort of stable or at least consistently identifiable form” (64). Although anthologies of ethnic literatures are always oppositional in relation to existing national canons, they too contribute to canon formation, even as they seek to overcome a history of exclusions; not all Arab American authors can be included in the anthologies and more importantly these anthologies are largely limited to Arab writers in the US, and therefore persist in working within a limited national framework.

As was the case with the emergence of other fields of ethnic studies, such as Asian American studies, which was conditioned by
similar international and domestic concerns, the legal, historical, and political contexts were central to giving meaning to the cultural production. It would be impossible to teach John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, for example, without knowing the intricacies of Japanese internment during World War II. Or consider how difficult it would be to teach Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* without offering students a background about the Chinese Exclusion Act. When it comes to exploring how political contexts are manifested in Arab American narratives, especially since World War II, it is necessary to understand how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the rise of militant Islamic movements, the wars against Iraq, and US oil interests have shaped Arab subjectivity in the US. As Nadine Naber explains, “What distinguishes this new racism (which is based upon politics) from traditional forms of racism (which are based upon biology or phenotype) is that Arab Americans who choose to be active in Palestinian or Arab issues or organizations may be subjected to political racism, whereas those who choose not to be politically active may not” (42).

In this issue, Keith Feldman’s “The (Il)legible Arab Body and the Fantasy of National Democracy” addresses the formation of an Arab political subject in the US by providing readers with a history of Arab immigration and oppression. Feldman specifically explores the ways in which anti-Arab discrimination is fixated on the body in terms of its whiteness or its invisibility. The legal and historical context not only grounds the literary works discussed in this volume, but it also helps us to rethink the field of Arab American studies. Similarly, Samaa Abdurraqib’s “Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature” examines gender issues for Muslim writers in a post-9/11 context. Through the poetry of Mohja Kahf, Abdurraqib unravels many of the myths and stereotypes of Muslim women globally, historically, and in the contemporary United States.

Judging by the submissions to this issue, Arab American literary studies appears to be following a trajectory of emergence established by other ethnic literary studies. One example is the tendency to canonize a particular woman author—such as Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, or Louise Erdrich—who becomes a representative figure and is made to
carry the burden of the cultural tradition. This particular tendency suggests a gendering of ethnic literatures in the US. To point out this trend does not detract from the literary merits of these women writers; it simply underscores the repetition of a particular development that is shared across US ethnic literatures. To a certain degree, Diana Abu-Jaber has emerged as the central figure in Arab American literature, which is confirmed in part by the large number of articles that we received that treat her literary works. We have included three essays and an interview that explore her fiction. Carol Fadda-Conrey’s “Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber’s Crescent” applies Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderland theory as a way to analyze the politics of various immigrant communities within Abu-Jaber’s novel. Of course, as Fadda-Conrey acknowledges, before her death Anzaldúa revisited the book she edited with Cherríe Moraga, This Bridge Called My Back. The new volume, this bridge we call home, co-edited with AnaLouise Keating, includes essays by Arab American feminists not included in the first groundbreaking volume of writings by radical women of color. Michelle Hartman’s essay, “this sweet / sweet music”: Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities,” draws other analogies between Arab American and African American cultural production. Hartman’s essay does not limit itself to Abu-Jaber’s novel, Arabian Jazz, however. Rather, she compares the ways in which Arabian Jazz, Etel Adnan’s “Beirut-Hell Express,” and Suheir Hammad’s poem “daddy’s song” invoke African American music symbolically as a metonym for Black America; Hartman suggests that jazz, or music more generally, can build cross-cultural solidarities as well as complicate Arab American identities. Pauline Kaldas’s essay, “Beyond Stereotypes: Representational Dilemmas in Arabian Jazz” explores how Abu-Jaber represents stereotypes in the context of the 1991 Gulf War.

But if these articles on Abu-Jaber resonate with the more familiar experiences of cultural otherness explored in African American and Chicano writing, Hosam Aboul-Ela attempts to disrupt the cultural comfort zone produced by easy analogies. Moving beyond the literary self-fashioning that is characteristic of some Arab American literature and cultural criticism, Aboul-Ela questions the received ideas associated with Arab Americanness.
His essay, “Edward Said’s Out of Place: Criticism, Polemic, and Arab American Identity,” opens a debate with Arab Americans who seek to reduce Arab cultural identity to a set of common ethnic traits or habits. Focusing on Said’s memoir, Aboul-Ela emphasizes the relationship between the text and the context, between Arab American identity and US foreign policy.

Gregory Orfalea’s contribution provides a distinct angle on Arab American literature and publishing today. A creative writer who has worked extensively to promote the works of Arabs living in the US, Orfalea is uniquely positioned to consider with a certain degree of intimacy the paradoxes of Arab American writing. His reflections offer a transition from the critical essays to the interviews with three prominent Arab American writers, Diana Abu-Jaber, Suheir Hammad, and Khaled Mattawa.

This special issue of MELUS is a modest contribution to the expansion of the field of Arab American literary studies and has the simple ambition of serving as a resource for future critical work. We expect that the essays, interviews, and book reviews included will open a broader discussion in ethnic literary studies about the place of Arab American writing, but also push scholars and teachers toward the development of a critical sensibility with regards to the conditions of Arabs in the US and with regard to Arab American writing.

Notes

1. Additional information about the mission of RAWI can be found at: http://shems.info/rawi/.

Works Cited


Interview with Suheir Hammad

Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman
American University of Beirut

Palestinian poet Suheir Hammad was born in a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan in 1973. The daughter of 1948 Palestinians, her family moved to Beirut before settling in Brooklyn in 1978, when she was five. Hammad grew up in a home infused with poetry from the Qur’an and from Palestinian poets Fadwa Tuqan and Mahmoud Darwish; her family home was also rich with the melodies of singers Abdel Halim Hafiz, Om Kalthom, and Sam Cooke. The sounds of her neighborhood, which included the emerging hip-hop music scene from groups like Public Enemy, also influenced her aesthetic.

She attended Hunter College, where she won the Audre Lorde Writing Award for her poetry. She is also the recipient of the Morris Center for Healing Poetry Award, a New York Mills Artist Residency, a Van Lier Fellowship, and an Emerging Artist Award from the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Institute at New York University. At the age of twenty-three she published two books, a memoir called Drops of This Story (1996) and a book of poems, Born Palestinian, Born Black (1996). She has performed her work on college campuses, at spoken word poetry venues, at rap concerts, on Broadway in the Tony-award-winning Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam, as well as with several musical groups. Her poetry can be found in numerous collections of poetry, including In Defense of Mumia, Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing, Bum Rush the Page, The Poetry of Arab Women, Listen Up!: Spoken Word Poetry, and Def Poetry Jam on
Broadway, as well as in the HBO series Def Poetry Jam. Her most recent volume of poetry, Zaatardiva, was published in 2005.

Hammad lives in New York where she continues to write and where she performs her poems on the HBO series Def Poetry Jam. Hammad auditioned for the program, but was initially turned away. But after 9/11, Hammad's poem "first writing since," which responded to the terrorist attack in the US, circulated widely on the Internet and she subsequently appeared on the first episode of the show. Her poetry works against the grain of American media, which represents Palestinians only as terrorists. Her style fuses Arabic poetic rhythms with hip-hop aesthetics and builds on the politics and poetics of the Black Arts Movement. Her play with language and images reverses the dominant discourse in the US media about representations of Arabs and Muslims and asks her audience to think critically about what the media tells them.

This interview was conducted in New York City on February 26, 2005.

Marcy Knopf-Newman: I was wondering if you could begin by talking about your birth in October 1973. What did you think about being born the same month as the Ramadan War?

Suheir Hammad: Well, actually, often the thing that stands out to me, as a Palestinian, about my birthday is that the year before on October 25, 1972, Golda Meir had delivered a speech where she says—and I am not paraphrasing—"I cannot sleep at night knowing how many Arab babies are being born this same night." This was a speech delivered to her countrymen and women as a nationalistic call to ethnic and national pride. It gave the sense that Palestinians' children's birth was the nightmare for the Israeli enterprise. This idea that we had so seeped into the subconscious and the fabric of creation of this state . . . would keep people up at night. That's what I think about most when I think about my birthday in the context of a Palestinian exile community and the children that have been born to the refugees. Every child has a story like that. I just happen to have that year, very specifically bookended, but I think any Palestinian child born since that statement was made was a reflection of humanity that Golda Meir and her comments tried to diminish.
I was raised in Brooklyn, New York City, I’m the eldest of five kids, and my parents are both from 1948 towns in Palestine. My father’s from a town called Lydd and my mother is from Ramleh and both of those are [in] the Tel Aviv area. But I grew up in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

MKN: After living in Amman and Beirut?

SH: Yes.

MKN: So you weren’t in southern Lebanon?

SH: No, we were in Beirut. My sister Sabrine was born there.

MKN: And did you leave because of the Civil War?

SH: Well, no. My parents at that point had three young daughters and no economic options in Jordan or in Lebanon. When we were in Beirut the plans were already in motion to come to the States. But my mom, was like, “I’m not having this baby in Jordan by myself!” and took my sister Suzanne and me, and Sabrine in her belly, to Beirut and had Sabrine there. So my first memories are actually of Beirut.

MKN: Have you been back to Lebanon? Have you visited the sites of the Sabra and Shatila massacres?

SH: No. A lot of my friends from the States have gone to work in the camps there to document the generation after the massacre and their children now. So I’ve seen a lot of footage and I’ve read a lot about it. And I would love to go back. But I have to get this urgent itch to go to Palestine out of me first.

MKN: I ask because I was thinking some of the work you did last summer when you went back to Palestine reminded me of Ghassan Kanafani’s widow [Anni Kanafani] and she’s doing similar kinds of work with art and children in Palestinian refugee camps all over Lebanon through her NGO, the Ghassan Kanafani Cultural Foundation.
SH: You know, outside of Idbea and Deheishe there's a mural of Ghassan Kanafani, and I think it's so amazing that we have this mural of this poet and novelist and, you know, just [an] all-around renaissance writer and the kids in the camps know who he is and where he came from, and they see his reflection in his work.

MKN: When you went to Lydd, you wrote about the kids you met who had no sense of Palestinian history or art. Do they have access to Palestinian writers?

SH: No. My friends in the rap group DAM grew up in Lydd and trace their families back several generations. They were raised in the Israeli school system, and they very specifically, and over and over again, said to me that there was no representation of a human Palestinian society. By saying that, I mean, there's acknowledgement that these people exist, that there's a problem, that we have to deal with them, but the idea that these people are writers and lovers and painters and dancers or complicated people does not exist for them. And so it makes sense. And the poorer you are, as in any situation in the world, the less access you have to your own history. I'm a product of the New York City public school system so I can definitely relate to one dominant narrative being projected onto a multi-ethnic, religious, gendered group of people. And that's what Palestinians are as well: within Palestinian culture we have so many different origins that come together into this nationalistic identity. But within our own society we have questions and identity related stuff, so you can imagine for a kid growing up within the 1948 borders—and then there's this schism between the Occupied Territories and the Israeli Arab citizens and then the diaspora at large. I think there's a lot of work to be done to tell the stories of every refugee camp, of every exile, of every kid who grew up within the state of Israel. And I think there's room for those stories. We need to begin within Palestinian society to tell those stories and listen to each other more because they're not going to listen to us just yet.

MKN: Your poems "Beyond Words" or "first writing since" offer us some ways to think about these curious connections. In particu-
lar, I think it is important for American readers of your work to witness the way you deal with cooption, taking back the meanings of words like occupation, liberation, terrorist, freedom fighter, and twisting them around and forcing people to see how it is on the other side.

**SH:** Well, it’s interesting because with both of those poems there’s this transparent struggle that I have with the poem about finding appropriate language. I don’t think it’s an inherent deficiency in the English language as much as I think it’s the horrific abundance of true fear, authentic fear that we’re living with [something] that no language has words for. There’s no language in the world that could have imagined the nuclear bomb and the threat of the nuclear bomb. It’s interesting because I was in Minnesota a year and a half ago and this really wonderful PA [production assistant] who worked with the theater and who was taking care of us actually asked me if there was a word in Arabic for thank you because she had been told that there wasn’t. And this is not a woman who has an agenda. This was not someone who was trying to hurt my feelings. She saw an opportunity to ask a question of someone whom she believed would tell her the truth. I just sat there thinking, “Wow! The fact that you could even put those words together to ask me that question!” I’m really scared right now about the state of our country, I mean, that someone is walking around telling people that within the Arab language there’s not one word for thank you. So when you see Palestinians on television or you see the Arab street, you know, or when you see black kids on the subway, or this idea that within our own languages we do not have compassion and civilization. That’s what it comes down to: who is and is not civilized and what civilization means.

I think I was really blessed to have been raised in a working-class, multicultural, of color community and to see all of these stories get excluded. And I think one of the things that’s happened in literature and in the Left, for so long, is that Palestine is so urgent and so terrible, I mean, on paper and in person—so fucked up that we do not make the connections to the other struggles that happen within the continental United States—and with Puerto Rico and Hawai‘i. We have liberation struggles throughout this entire nation and you have the environmental movement, you have the
movement to abolish prisons. And because I was raised at the time of the birth of hip hop, I was able to make those connections because I had to, you know. I mean, I was born a poet, so the way I think allowed me to automatically feel at home anywhere I went because I knew that there was something about these people I could not know about—something beautiful, something transformative, something that was going to resonate with me because I knew there were things about my own family that were not being said in mass media—for corporate media—you know, those horrible *Rambo* and flight hijacking movies. So I thought, okay, they’re not showing my father’s love for us, they’re not showing how hard he works, they don’t see how much we love our food, how we dance, so, and I think, as I got older, queer theory, and ideas of marginalization from communities that I was so separate from, you know, on paper, again, this idea that, well, how can queer theory help you understand the Palestinian issue? Well, how could it not? You know, who are the most marginalized, the most demonized? What I hope to do when I write about Palestine is to bring in as much of a challenge as possible with as much compassion as possible, because understanding as a young American reaches college age, they have been consciously trained, but subconsciously, within their fabric there is a fundamental racism towards all people.

**MKN:** There is another cooptation that you talk about in your poetry dealing with the fact that you’re Semitic. It’s another erasure.

**SH:** Absolutely. Or I mean, just think about the Iraqi and Moroccan and Ethiopian and Yemeni Jews.

**MKN:** These people are also discriminated against within Israel.

**SH:** I try to use vernacular and aesthetics to humanize and to illuminate the Palestinian experience and I’ve written about honor killings in Palestinian society. I’ve written about gendered violence in Palestinian society, and so I’m certainly not one to romanticize a nationalist movement. I understand the need for it, but I also understand women’s historical places in nationalist movements.
MKN: There are some other really interesting comparisons to Arab and Arab American writers and other women writers in the different ways in which poets have influenced you. I know you’ve talked about Audre Lorde and June Jordan. How old were you when you read June Jordan?

SH: “Moving Towards Home” was the poem by June Jordan that changed my life. I was eighteen.

MKN: What drew you to her work?

SH: Well, I knew of her poetry. I’d come across little things from reading because I was a voracious reader as a child. Then I did research on “Moving Towards Home” because she wrote it after Sabra and Shatila. I found out it had been printed in The Village Voice and that she had gotten death threats, and The Voice has never received as much hate mail as they did from that poem. She ends that poem—and you know, she really doesn’t talk about Palestine—I mean, she doesn’t talk about the Right of Return. She talks about Sabra and Shatila. And she tells the story about this woman looking for her husband, Abu Fadi, and she takes a quote from The New York Times, and then she asks “Where’s Abu Fadi?” Then she begins this poem. And she says: we’re not going to talk about the bulldozed earth and the limbs. She ends this poem by saying, “I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian / against the relentless laughter of evil / there is less and less living room / . . . / It is time to make our way home.” And for an eighteen-year-old girl from Brooklyn to read this poem by this woman from Brooklyn—you know, she was an immigrant to Brooklyn—and to realize that it wasn’t about peace accords and borders and resolutions and justifications and rights. It was about humanity. This is what was dangerous—telling this story—that this woman would be looking for her husband. That’s what angered people. I love Audre Lorde’s work and it’s moved me on so many levels—but more and more I realize, God, the stand that June Jordan took to consistently bring up these people and in the eighties, you know—and to link it to Nicaragua, to link it to . . .
MKN: Guatemala . . .

SH: Guatemala—exactly. And to link it to all of these indigenous movements around the world—to link it to South Africa. Let’s talk about that! When the majority of the anti-Apartheid movement did not want to touch the resources that were available on the Israeli administration’s connection to South Africa—I mean reams!

MKN: I know, when everyone was divesting they were still there.

SH: Yes, and physical evidence of this relationship that the anti-Apartheid movement didn’t want to touch. So for her to stand up as a black woman, as an immigrant, as a lesbian, you know, as the daughter of working-class—all of the things that she was, and to take all of those things, and to say “I am now become Palestinian.” What is more powerful and transformative than that? To do that through a poem. And I was like, hey, I don’t really believe in hurtin’ nobody, you know, do what you gotta do, but me personally, I ain’t gonna pick up no gun. I’ll pick up a pen. I was moved and changed. And I am again and again when I read that kind of work. Not just June Jordan. There are people writing like that now. The time we’re living in [in] this country—it’s so important for progressive-thinking people to use their mediums whether it’s academia, scholarship, art, fashion. To understand how to renegotiate the dialogue, you know? To gain a footing in the conversation. To have a right to speak.

MKN: I see writers like Mahmoud Darwish and Naomi Shihab Nye doing that, but it is nice when the burden isn’t placed upon the Arab poet or thinker to do that and to have this kind of solidarity created through writing. How old were you when you first picked up the poet Mahmoud Darwish?

SH: Well, I grew up with Darwish because my parents would often sing nationalist songs. My father always sang these very nationalist PLO chants and shit, and a lot of it was poetry—and not just Darwish, but Fadwa Tuqan and her brother [Ibrahim Tuqan]. People who were guerillas that my father knew. You know, he’d
say my friend wrote this. They’d chant it in that oral tradition of Arabic poetry.

MKN: So where did your father’s resistance to your poetry come from? Does he now see your poetry as a part of that movement?

SH: I think television changes everything. I think for a long time it was very difficult, and understandably so, for my parents to understand the decisions I was making and to comprehend my life. I mean, you do not raise Palestinian daughters to travel eight months out of the year, you know, and to go do readings in very obscure places. Because hip-hop vernacular and aesthetics are at the core of my Americanness I was able to appreciate Naomi’s [Shihab Nye], Etel Adnan’s, and Darwish’s contributions, but I knew enough about myself to know that they weren’t speaking to my particular urban, lower-class experience. And I was too young to know that was okay. So I felt this need to document what I saw and to always do it from this very specific perspective as the daughter of Palestinian refugees, but to understand that my Puerto Rican and Haitian and Italian and Jewish neighbors were part of my story. You know what I’m saying? So I didn’t have that initial kind of Arab American writer’s reality of being in white suburbia or people not really knowing what you were. I was a part of colored kids who were being taught by white teachers. So there was a specific animosity towards me from certain teachers because I was Palestinian, but in general we were all in the same boat—and that’s a horrible pun. So I was able to right away know that Spanglish and Ebonies and all of these different grammars that we were all using around each other were legitimate, and so I never had the issue of how do I use proper English, because I was never taught proper English.

MKN: My students—I teach predominantly working-class, a lot of them older, a lot of them are in the military—many have families, they work, they’re going to school and so it’s interesting because on the one hand I’m trying to teach them about these struggles and on the other hand they’re so exhausted. They come to class wondering, “when do I have time to actually do something about this?” You know? I posted your poem “Beyond Words” on our class blog
for my students to read. One of my students responded: “It’s always been the job of writers to wake people up, to create movements and inspire change, but today the ability to actually affect people has become so difficult. How do you shake up people these days? How do you stop looking like a conspiracy theorist, and begin to reach people?”

SH: That’s a really . . . that’s such an amazing question, please thank her. There are different levels, obviously, of going about it. Be informed. You know, read as many different ideas as possible. I mean I read the liberal Jewish left’s media and publications. Simply because I’m Palestinian and stand up for Palestinian self-determination I automatically have to know these dates and these resolution numbers and answers to these ridiculous questions like, “why don’t they raise their sons differently?” Or, “do they know what happened to the Jews?” You know, questions that have nothing to do with the reality of the Occupation on a day-to-day level, but then [have] everything to do with it because these are the questions that are blocking people. They don’t have answers so people who are asking these questions, until they get the answers, are apathetic. You know, it’s like this catch-22; it’s like you’re asking me this question that has nothing to do with reality, so what do you want me to come out of my ass with an answer for you? “Oh, they raise their kids that way. . . .” [N]othing’s going to justify a suicide bomber.

MKN: You have to turn these questions around and say, well how do you raise your kids that way—boys, girls conscripted into the military, I mean, they’re enacting this.

SH: But we don’t have the power of the narrative, so at the point when you turn it around on someone they have an entire societal structure that says this is why. Because again there is no real answer. People don’t want to hear why a fifteen-year-old kid straps dynamite onto himself. That’s too complicated for them to understand. And we don’t ask these questions about Columbine, or we don’t ask these questions about our own American youth in the suburbs and outside of them. In the cities. This disregard for personal safety that young men and women have all over America.
Sometimes it’s an eating disorder, sometimes it’s unprotected sex. This disregard for their own sense of worth, and it’s just transposed on everyone else. And then God forbid you’re darker, you have an accent, you cover your hair, you know, all of these other things suddenly become detractors from your humanity. So it’s difficult to simply switch the question around, I think, we have to figure out how to artistically do that.

MKN: I understand you’ve written a children’s book, and I wonder how it might deal with some of the stereotypes children have about Arab people.

SH: I haven’t gotten any of them published . . . they’re just too cool for school, really. But, no, I wrote a kid’s book about prayer and how all kids pray and families pray differently. And there’s prayer within organized religion but there’s also prayer, you know, just sitting under a tree or just hoping to get a good grade or something. But I want to write more young adult stuff. And I’m really excited about young Palestinian American kids that I’ve met in my travels who are writing their experiences in New Orleans and St. Louis and Los Angeles. You know, completely different experiences than what I had, and who see *Drops of This Story* as I did, as the first of its kind and still the only one of its kind.

MKN: But it’s out of print . . .

SH: It’s out of print, but I have a new manuscript coming out in the fall. It’s been a financial burden not to reprint those books, but I never wanted to reprint *Born Palestinian* or *Drops* without a new collection out. I always felt that if I reprinted those books that I wrote when I was twenty-one that I would always be boxed into that voice. And that the poems that I’ve written since those books have come out are the poems of an evolving voice, of a maturing voice.

MKN: Fortunately, “first writing since” can be seen on DVD. I showed my African American literature students an episode of *Def Poetry Jam* in class last week. Your poems help my students to make larger connections about poetry, hip-hop culture, the black
Arts Movement, and current global, political issues. Why didn’t “first writing since” make it on Broadway?

**SH:** Oh, no. Oh, Broadway was such an experience, but you know, I did “Mic Check” on Broadway, which is a poem about being profiled in airports.

**MKN:** Yes. It’s in the anthology *Def Poetry Jam.*

**SH:** Yeah. First there were some logistical issues because “first writing since” is a very long poem and even for HBO I cut it by three minutes and then it was cut further another minute to just be able to get on. I completely understand that—I mean, we’re talking about cable, and just getting as many people on, as many voices on as possible.

**MKN:** Tell me about your college experience at Hunter.

**SH:** Well, I never graduated, but I had a great time. I wasn’t a writing major. I never took writing classes.

**MKN:** In reviews I’ve read of your readings on college campuses, they’re often amazed at your performative style.

**SH:** But it’s this balance because I read off the page, and I don’t really perform. It’s a recitation, but it’s dramatic, and it’s effective, I hope. I mean you have your good days and your bad days. But in the performance poetry world you have to memorize everything and everything has to have a formula and it’s very—I mean, it can be very manipulative as can the written. I believe that your students may never get to meet me, so on the page I have to be as clear and precise and beautiful as possible. And for those who do get to meet me I have to be that on stage too, you know? That’s what’s great about the HBO show because we have so many different aesthetics in this country and you know they’re rocker kids, they’re rap kids, they’re kids who are into Goth. But all of these young kids are worried about the draft, they’re all worried about taking care of their parents through social security and there are all these smoke screens of aesthetics and styles to separate us,
but they actually have the same issues, and they have the same concerns.

MKN: How are some of the new poems that you’re going to have in your forthcoming collection connected to the political work you’ve done with Critical Resistance?

SH: Well, I actually have the poem that was commissioned by Critical Resistance that I read when they had their conference in New York a few years ago. It’s called “Letter to Anthony,” and it’s written in the form of a letter to a friend of mine who’s in a federal penitentiary. And, you know, my correspondence with Mumia Abu-Jamal over the past ten years has humbled me and transformed me yet again into, you know, prioritizing because Mumia sends people all over the world letters and paintings and poems and correspondence while working to save his own life and the life of his comrades every single day and educating people and resisting and dissenting. In “Letter to Anthony” there is this refrain which is “I have always loved criminals”:

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i have always loved
criminals and not only the thugged
out bravado of rap videos and champagne
popping hustlers but my father
born an arab baby boy
on the forced way out
of his homeland his mother exiled
and pregnant gave birth in a camp

the world pointed and said
palestinians do not exist palestinians
are roaches palestinians are two legged dogs
and israel built jails and weapons and
a history based on the absence of a people
israel made itself holy and chosen
and my existence a crime

so I have always loved criminals
it is a love of self.
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And that kind of analysis is fundamentally what I think we really need to do in art as well as in activism and in organizing because you can sense—because when I do that poem for people in jail, they’ve never felt that anyone on the outside can understand that type of marginalization. And there is definitely some real, you know, concrete effects of being a felon in this country. But you know, you read Michel Foucault on prisons and you see where this concept of crime and prisons and even rehabilitation came from. And it comes from a very specific, once again, Western, male European paradigm—and it wasn’t in the rest of Europe. And it wasn’t always there, you know? But somehow this idea of separating someone from their community because of a transgression was the way to handle it. And that is how we handle everything. We separate. We build walls. And after we do that the greed comes in, and we use prison labor. I mean, you look at Palestinians in the West Bank who have to build [Israeli] settlements, who have to work on these sites. And you think of prisoners who have to make Victoria’s Secret underwear every single day for cents an hour. And how can people not make that connection?

MKN: Your poetry helps to bring urgent issues about the state of the world to the forefront. You know, one of the reasons we’re doing this special issue of MELUS is to try to get more Arab and Muslim voices into the canon, into the curriculum. But I think it needs to start in kindergarten.

SH: Yeah, and Naomi [Shihab Nye] has done a wonderful job with writing these children’s books.

MKN: Yeah, Habibi and Sitti’s Secrets are fantastic.

SH: I really admire and applaud her so much because again it goes back to having your craft be undeniable, you know. It’s not like publishers are clamoring to publish children’s stories about Arab kids, you know? But having it be so tight and, again using your privilege and your resources to consciously think of what you’re doing every time. I remember when [Naomi Shihab Nye’s collection of poems from the Middle East] The Space Between Our Footsteps came out...
MKN: Your poem “rice haiku” is in that anthology.

SH: There was conversation about the fact that there were Israeli writers in there, and I was like, “you guys, we have to have a long vision.” You don’t want to do what has been done. You don’t want to deny reality. We are at the [mercy] of reality, you know, people’s perceptions of whether or not we exist, how we exist, what our intentions are, you know, what is our fundamental makeup. I remember feeling, “God, she could have put another Arab writer in there,” or you know, she could have put someone else’s other poem in there, but never second guessing her—knowing there must have been a reason. And I really respect that. Again, it’s this sense of when you realize, or when you believe you’re a part of a continuum, knowing that all of the communities that you inhabit, you represent them, but you also have to challenge them.

I fundamentally believe an artist holds up a mirror to her societies. And the female mirror has always been the one to be the most warped, you know. To actually be created and manufactured for us to look into. So it’s this sense of holding up a mirror to Palestinian American society, which is what I come from. I mean, I’ve met Arab Americans—I mean, I didn’t grow up Arab American—what the fuck is Arab American? I grew up Palestinian and Brooklyn, really specifically. And my father’s like you’re not Hispanic, you’re not black, you’re not this, you’re not that. And then I’d meet other Palestinians and he’d be like, yeah, but you’re not like them either. You know, because it was a very specific immigrant experience at a very specific time, and I didn’t relate to the problems that were being written about. I didn’t have a half-white parent or a white parent. I didn’t have the sense of cultural clash in my body. I had it outside of my body. In my body I felt like, I look like everyone else I grew up with—whether they were Puerto Rican or Italian or light-skinned black people. I didn’t have the tools through literature that spoke specifically to me. And I had to create it as a kid, fifteen years old, writing raps, because that’s what we all did. We all wrote rhymes in our books. You know, everyone had a book. We all did graffiti—everyone had a tag, you know, you just—the way you dressed—it was an amazing time to grow up.
Yesterday when we taped *Def Poetry Jam* I did a poem about Brooklyn, and when I came out I said, “I’m from two Holy Lands. This poem’s for Brooklyn.” You know, it’s like you have to be a whole person. And people want to take you away from that. I think it’s very threatening for people—on Broadway—anywhere I go I’m introduced as from Brooklyn by way of Palestine. Because—and it could be the other way around—and I thought about it as a writer. But I’m like, really, that’s where I’m *from*, you know? People often want to limit you so if you’re Palestinian it’s this idea that my exiled refugee status meant that I did not contribute or was not influenced by anything around me. That I’m a static person who because I have a Right to Return—and I demand it—does not assimilate. It goes back to fundamental racism. The question, “Where are Jews going to be safe?” is a European obsession with Judaism that I’m on the periphery of, but I find very scary, you know? It’s this idea that how do we create a society—and through art a conversation—that asks about the most marginalized, the most hated, within every culture. So within Palestinian society who is the most hated? Is it women? Is it gay people? Is it darker people? Is it the Jews? I mean, who is it within our own society, within our own groupings, that we have our own issues with? It’s this idea that I’m not going to ask what happened to those people. The suicide bombings went down, who cares how it happened. No Wall is up forever. This I know. So what happens then? It’s like self-sabotage. Where it’s like they don’t even want to take the time to deal with their own issues about the Wall. I was in Abu Dies and I would have to say Abu Dies’s Wall is as bad as the Warsaw ghetto wall. I haven’t seen it since August. But when you go to a place like Abu Dies, I mean, what can be worse than that? I mean, there’s no sun.

**MKN:** But it’s taller than the Warsaw ghetto wall.

**SH:** Yeah, it completely circles the town. There’s only one way to get in and out now. It’s two o’clock in the afternoon and there’s no light. There’s no horizon. I mean, you just think about kids who are growing up with no horizon. What does that mean? And what happens when that Wall comes down? Who are those kids going to be? And who are they going to be to you? And most importantly,
to your own safety, who are you going to be to them? How are they going to see you? And it’s this idea that we are not responsible for those we push aside. I do believe in accountability on an individual level, but that can only exist legitimately within societies where we hold each other accountable as well. Every person makes their choice—whether you strap dynamite onto yourselves or you go and kill a settler’s kid, right? You go and you kill a five-year-old settler kid, that is a decision that you made to become that human being. But when we do not have a conversation about the settlers and the indigenous and all of their children then that murder becomes part of a vacuum. You know, it’s presented as something that happened in a vacuum and not something that I somehow—or you somehow—could have influenced. You know? Whether it’s talking to the Palestinian who goes in and does it and says, you know, little Sarah here may grow up to be the lawyer who grows up to protect your son and having that conversation on the other side.

MKN: What role can poetry play in elaborating these realities?

SH: I really believe that art will return to its fundamentals. It might not happen in my generation but I’m working towards that. But we’re all creative beings and we live in a time of destruction. And on an individual level people aren’t dancing. I mean, this is what war does, right? You don’t dance, you don’t paint, you don’t write, you don’t engage with your feelings, you don’t make love. You live your life on a daily level with only a percentage of your creativity used. So this idea that within Israeli, Palestinian, American society, we are all trying to make ends meet, keep our children safe, get an education that will give us the upper hand, you know, in any situation, and we’re losing our souls. And you see that in Israeli society right away. But the Occupation is killing Palestinian souls as well. And there’s like the physical structure of the Occupation. And within America it’s this idea that we’re not responsible, you know. Or the Christian right’s evangelical fervor over the messiah, or the Muslim extremists who feel like there’s never going to be peace. I mean, this exists. It’s mostly male, we can say that, but it’s not all male-centered. And it’s every aspect. And I think this is where the poet can kind of like step back and say,
what is my responsibility to this, in this particular community? What relationship do I have to Palestinian women in the Occupied Territories, as a feminist American raised as a global Southern woman? What is my responsibility when I go to Palestine? How do I behave differently? How do I present myself? You do that everywhere you go. I’m aware that if I enter a reformed synagogue to hear [Israeli] refusniks or to hear Israelis who are working toward the end of the Occupation, you know, I’m aware that I show up as an ally to them. But their enemies and people who are hostile to them will look at me as a representation of them. So how do I support them and the work that they’re doing, which has limitations for my own vision? But this is where we have a common ground so how do I support that as much as possible? But hopefully with academics and venue presenters and promoters and publishers as more and more work—not just on Phalasteen [Palestine in Arabic]—but on all of our social justice issues around the world as artists continue to take the responsibility to change the course of humanity through their art. I think that it’s up to the people who have access. You know, it’s the professors and the program administrators and the graduate students who are doing the research, to create a legacy.

MKN: Do you feel like you’re making an impact on youth culture through the hip-hop world in terms of opening their eyes about the situation and how urgent it is?

SH: Well I think you do it differently every time depending. You know, Saul Williams, who’s actually a poet, but who is now in regular rotation on MTV2 for his new album, I am the girl in his video. How crazy is that? To be the first Arab American love interest in a video, you know? Because I am aware of who I am to the Arab American community to still, hopefully, show it where I’m comfortable still presenting it to them, which doesn’t mean they’re going to be happy with it, but aware of the limitations and reactions of the Arab American community so that it is as effective as possible. It’s not just, oh, American kids are going to think that this is cool, but that Arab parents look at that video and they’re like, “yeah, I wouldn’t want my daughter to be in that video. I wouldn’t want her, you know, to be the love interest,” but given
that this is the case—she’s not naked, she’s not making out, you know, she’s not disrespecting herself, she’s not disrespecting her family. I long for the day, as we all do, that we don’t have to think about these things in our personal lives, like all the different pressures that are put upon us as women artists—from anywhere—but I live in reality. I wasn’t going to get “Beyond Words” on MTV2 as a poem video, and there are people who are willing to enable progressive thinking, to support you in your agenda and in your cause and they themselves have to think about how to best do it. And I think it’s happening. You know, Maysoon Zayid is a comedian; Betty Shamieh is a playwright. I mean, it’s not just in the Arab American community—in the South Asian and Desi community there’s work being done, and in the young Iranian community in America. And all of these young people under thirty-five, have made this connection specifically because within their time of growing up in America, brown people were seen as such a monolithic thing. You watched Chico and the Man because he was Mexican and as an Arab you could relate. You meet women of color all the time who have had these experiences where they were just so hungry for a reflection of themselves in popular culture and now we are in popular culture. If I happen to be that Arab face, I’m going to take that responsibly. I’m going to take that opportunity to think about how I can be most effective to just make people more compassionate.

**MKN:** But you need to also deal with the power of representation and that’s something that you’re doing in a different venue from other Palestinian poets while reaching a completely different audience. Do you think that the energy emanating from Russell Simmons’s hip-hop world and his New York-based political movements are important spaces for your poetry in terms of humanizing Palestinians and seeking political change?

**SH:** It’s the Rockefeller Laws and the Hip Hop Summit. I’ve just been so blessed. *Def Poetry Jam* toured thirty-five cities in two months this fall [2005]. And so on any given week I performed my poetry, that I wrote myself, before anywhere between five and ten thousand people a week all across America. I believe that I’m laying a foundation that the next generation of Arab American
women artists because I think there's a difference in the needs that the Arab American male artist have than the women artists have. There are many that are shared, but there are some that are very specific. And I hope that what I'm doing will allow younger Arab American women to not have to deal with some of the issues—they're going to have to deal with some of the issues—like the acute racism that I've dealt with. The pressure from both the Palestinian American community and the mainstream mass media to conform to what is palatable and pleasing at any given time, and I'm just hoping to lessen that a little bit so these young women have more time to create. You know, they're going to write better poetry than I ever did, they're going to perform so much tighter, they're going to be so much more effective, because there's going to be that little bit of pressure taken off of them. Just as it would have been far worse for me to do what I do if some other women hadn't already opened up some conversation for me to enter, and men as well. I'm excited to see what the young people are going to do with it. You know, how they're going to rap, how they're going to meld their music into their politics, and how they're going to analyze.

MKN: Absolutely. Your poetry pushes people in similar ways that the poets from the Black Arts Movement made people uncomfortable and in ways that hip hop sometimes offends people. Those poets and artists were political and reached a new group of people artistically, aesthetically, and politically, and this resonates with your poetry.

SH: Michael Franti, System of a Down, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and Dead Prez have consistently and continuously created amazing art around issues of social justice and have lent their names and their bodies to different causes and movements. And that's important too—that we're not alone—because it's very isolating to be the only Palestinian, for instance, in a book, or on stage, or in the interview and you know, you're dealing with all of these assumptions and projections, but to know that those people are going through the same experience in a different sphere so you don't feel as alone. Which is again, this point, and it goes back to this idea of militant Zionism saying that Jews will never be safe anywhere. It's
this power, [this] mental [feeling that we] will never fit in, be loved, be accepted. And we think about this a lot within feminism and again going back to this concept of re-understanding gender, the way people relate to each other that there are so many more questions to ask. And, I think, more than anything else I just want my poetry to ask questions.