'CANT YOU HEAR THE SHOOTING?' - DEATH AND VIOLENCE IN PALESTINIAN- AMERICAN LITERATURE ON THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

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Abstract

Approaching the problem of continuous violence in the Middle East Conflict through the lens of Hannah Arendt's canonical essay "On Violence," the author analyzes a poem by the Palestinian-American author Naomi Shihab Nye and a Hip Hop song by the Arab-Israeli group The N.O.M.A.D.S. by putting them in conversation with each other. Whereas both texts center around the themes of death and violence as experienced in a conflict zone, they take on very different perspectives. Nye's poem "For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh, is written from a diasporic vantage point and explores the dialectics of the Other's inhumanity versus one's own assumed humanity through commemorating the death of a Palestinian girl. "Moot," a song by The N.O.M.A.D.S., on the other hand, deliberately blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator by fusing these categories in the figure of an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian suicide bomber thereby asking us to complicate our understanding of the conflict.

"*Can't you hear the shooting?"* We are asked by a haunting poem from the Palestinian-American author Lisa Suheir Majaj.[1] This question contains a core part of the Palestinian experience. Life in the occupied territories is marked by a continuous presence of death and violence, a bitter reality that the Palestinian Diaspora in America has responded to by producing literature, music and art dealing with the siege under which they compatriots live. In the following, I want to present you with two such artistic reflections on violent deaths, a poem by Palestinian-American writer Naomi Shihab Nye and a Hip Hop song by the Arab-American group called The N.O.M.A.D.S.[2]

But before delving into the literary and musical reflections on death and violence, I will approach them as theoretical concepts. Hannah Arendt's understanding of violence, as developed in her essay "On Violence," is particularly helpful when trying to understand physical aggression not merely as irrational, but as phenomenon that may be rooted in a deep dissatisfaction with a particular status quo. When political conflicts, such as the situation in Israel and the occupied territories, turn violent it could be indicative of a deeply felt hopelessness by those who resort to violence; but those who deem another group as unworthy of

[1] Lisa Suheir Majaj, "What She Said." Geographies of Light. (Manuscript to be Published) 15 and Naomi Shihab Nye, "For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh." 19 Varieties of a Gazelle. Poems of the Middle East. (New York: Greenwillow Books) 53.
[2] The N.O.M.A.D.S.,"Moot." Poets for Palestine. Ed. Remi Kanazi. (New York: Al Jisser Group, 2008) 34.

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freedom and respect may also employ force as an instrument of oppression. Arendt understands violence as primarily instrumental and refuses to accept the often drawn parallel between aggressive behavior in humans and animals. Rather than viewing aggression as an instinctual reaction to a provocation, Arendt describes violence as a tool that is used for a specific purpose and is rational to a certain extent by that definition. [3] But by ascertaining the rationality behind violence, Arendt does not deny the influence of affect behind aggressive behavior. Rather, she rejects an apologetic and naturalizing stance on violence that renders those who use it mere victims of their instincts. In order to maintain the often rational reasoning behind aggressive action, Arendt differentiates between violence and rage. In opposite to violence, as an implementation of strength, rage according to her, is a reaction to an offended sense of justice.[4]

When understanding violence as an omnipresent part of the Middle East conflict, the question of its origins can be answered at least in part, by Arendt's distinction between power and violence. "Power is never the property of an individual," writes Arendt, "it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together."[5] She defines power as "always in need of numbers" and observes that it arises out of the "human ability […] to act in concert."[6] Power, for Arendt, is strongly linked to the idea of collective acting in agreement and at its core is thus a deep sense of *legitimacy*.[7]

These reflections on power as legitimate are helpful in respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because they offer an ideal that can be contrasted to a form power that has become illegitimate, as in the case of the relationship between Palestinians and Israelis. Such a perverted form of power, lacking the support of the collective, both turns into violence and provokes it. Israel's power rests on feet of clay, because it is not representative of the whole population. Instead, the state is exclusive from its beginnings: Israel's declaration of independence on May 14th 1948 thus reads: "We hereby proclaim the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine, to be called Medinath Yisrael (The State of Israel)."[8] The nation was conceived as Jewish and as a safe haven for the persecuted Jews who had survived the Shoah. Sammy Smooha describes such an exclusive form of government as an "ethnic democracy, […] because of the definition of the

[3] Hannah Arendt, On Violence. (New York: Harvest, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970) Part II, 46.
[4] Arendt, 63.
[5] Arendt, 44.
[6] Arendt, 44.
[7] But although this sense of a legitimate power is integral to Arendt's thinking, she also hints at a perverted form of power: "The extreme form of power is all against one." Cf. Arendt, 42.
[8] State of Israel, "Declaration of Independence," The Israel-Arab Reader. Eds. Walter Laqueur and Barry Ruben 7th Edition, (New York: Penguin Books, 2008.) 81-82.

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state as belonging to a particular religious or ethnic group."[9] Through its exclusive constitution, Israel offers insufficient forums of democratic representation, civil and political rights to its Palestinian inhabitants.[10] The Israeli state has effectively transformed Palestinians into second class citizens; the resulting inequality between Israelis and Palestinians as well as the lack of rights of the Arab minority, renders the state's power questionable, if not illegitimate. This leads to violence both on the side of the Palestinians, who view themselves as an oppressed native people and the State of Israel that is suspicious of its Palestinian population. The harsh control exercised by the Israeli Defense Forces over the Palestinian territories is not only a sign of a deeply rooted mistrust toward them, but must also be seen as a form violence that severely delimits Palestinian civil rights. The excessive control mechanisms that the State of Israeli employs vis-à-vis the Palestinians demonstrates the way that the Arab minority is viewed by the state – as a potential danger – and betrays the obvious need to affirm assumedly threatened state power. Or, as Arendt has put it: "Violence appears where power is in jeopardy […]."[11]

In reference to states resorting to violence, Arendt's observes that "[…] in foreign relations as in domestic affairs violence appears as a *last resort* (my emphasis) to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers, the foreign enemy, the native criminal."[12] It is worthwhile to pay close attention to Arendt's phrasing here; she speaks of violence as a last resort and thus argues that a state involuntarily reveals its own desperation when it chooses violence as its instrument to maintain its questionable hegemony. State induced violence therefore brings to light the government's attitude toward those it is used against, as enemies of the state, but it also inevitably indicates that its power is no longer legitimate. And it is against this illegitimate use of force and subjection to an oppressive state power that many Palestinian-American poems speak up against. With Arendt, I have attempted to find one of many possible explanations for continuing bloodshed of the Middle East conflict, keeping in mind that whereas violence is instrumental in character, it is by no means monocausal in its origins. Thinking through physical aggression as the result of an affect, Arendt arrives at rage as a human emotion. Reflecting on what might trigger rage Arendt suggests an offended sense of justice ignites such an emotion in humans. But singling out the last straw that transforms the "engages into enrages" Arendt argues that it is "not injustice that ranks first but hypocrisy."[13] In the Palestinian-American poem and

[9] Sammy Smooha, "Minority Status in an Ethnic Democracy. The Status of the Arab Minority in Israel," Ethnic and Racial Studies. 13.3 July 1990: 389, 391.
[10] Cf. Smooha, 391-392. The close to 700.000 Israeli Palestinians must be considered second class citizens, because "their citizenship does not assure them equality in law […] The West Bank and Gaza Strip are actually incorporated into Israel, while their Palestinian inhabitants are denied civil and political rights."
[11] Arendt, 56.
[12] Arendt, 47.
[13] Arendt, 65.

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song that I will be analyzing today, the line between violence and rage is not always so clear cut, but Arendt's definitions can be helpful; the poem and song that I will present you with are grappling with an overwhelming sense of injustice and fierce rage, while negotiating the dehumanizing effects of violence.

While rage and injustice are recurring themes in Palestinian-American poems dealing with violence, solidarity is also prominent. Whereas a perceived injustice may become a motor for rage and rage in turn may be transformed into violence, solidarity can be understood as a possible effect of being surrounded by violence. Arendt aptly describes this phenomenon as an emerging "brotherhood on the battlefield," referring to Fanon who writes that "the practice of violence binds men together."[14] This moment of solidarity, as evident in many Palestinian-American poems, does not only arise amongst those who practice violence, but also among those who are subject to it. A striking side-effect of this solidarity against another, either a victim, or perpetrator, is the (momentarily) waning individual consciousness. Rather than focusing on individual reactions toward violence, some of the Palestinian-American texts highlight suffering as a collective rather than individualizing effect. But solidarity is not limited to those who are directly exposed to violence, in the Palestinian-American texts that speak up for their compatriots solidarity also becomes a transnational practice of the Diaspora.

If solidarity is a possible effect of being forced to endure violence, death is the ultimate threat posed by this form of violent transgression. When writing about the countless violent escalations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinian-American authors inevitably have to confront that which represents an ultimate frontier to our knowledge: death. The finality of death that Shakespeare captured so well in the metaphor of "The undiscovered country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns" represents a challenge for those writers who confront the topic in their texts.[15] But much like Hamlet, many Palestinian-American poets are nevertheless haunted by their dead. In the Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh," the speaker admits that the dead girl has come to inhabit her dreams. Death, as in the aforementioned poem by Nye and also Nathalie Handal's "Twelve Deaths at Noon," is also represented as a moment of irreversible separation.[16] Witnessing the death of another, therefore inevitably means to be left behind. As a survivor, one stands before a locked door without the keys to enter. The impossibility of traversing this final frontier becomes visible in a poetic

[14] Fanon as quoted in Arendt, 67.
[15] William Shakespeare, Hamlet. Act 3, Scene 1, 1600-1601. Cf. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, 2005, http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/Hamlet/8.html , 20 October 2008.
[16] Cf. Naomi Shihab Nye, "For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh." 19 Varieties of a Gazelle. Poems of the Middle East. (New York: Greenwillow Books) 53 and Nathalie Handal, "Twelve Deaths at Noon," The Lives of Rain. (Northampton Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2005.) 15.

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motion away from the dead and towards the living, as we shall later see in Nye's poem about the death of Ibtisam Bozieh. That death remains incomprehensible to a certain extent might also be a reason for the importance given to contextual information. Nye's poem thus focuses on the very moment of death but afterwards quickly becomes an introspective meditation on the implications of witnessing Palestinian suffering from the safe distance of a diasporic homeland. Also "Moot," the hip-hop track written by The N.O.M.A.D.S, traces the pathway that finally leads a so-called "freedom fighter," to the decision to die. Although the narrator's death is the inevitable end of the song, the circumstances that lead to his death are actually the central focus.

The anthropologist Linda M. Pitcher has written about ritual, symbolization and narrative of the practice of martyrdom in Palestinian culture, and shown that the telling of a martyr's death is part of the ritual surrounding the funeral. During her research she lived with various Palestinian families and recorded their stories about martyrdom. Pitcher's research demonstrates that news of one killed by the Israeli Defense Forces spreads fast in the affected Palestinian neighborhood. The story of the martyr is repeatedly told and thus becomes part of an oral tradition. Although Pitcher focuses on Intifada martyrs in particular, her research is helpful to frame our understanding of the textual witnesses of Palestinian deaths. In order to describe the function of these accounts of the martyr's death, Pitcher introduces the act of witnessing, drawing on the Arabic concept of "shahada," which translates into "to bear witness." In many ways, the artifacts produced in the Palestinian Diaspora represent such a practice of witnessing. They produce literature, music and movies that bear witness to what their compatriots endure in their lost homeland. Witnessing may thus be described as a Diasporic practice of solidarity.[17] Reading Palestinian-American literature within this frame of a Palestinian tradition of bearing witness may help us to think through the various implications of such an act of witnessing. Unfortunately, the issue of witnessing can only be touched upon in this talk; I want to leave it at briefly pointing out two possible consequences of witnessing, which are acute in both the texts that shall be analyzed in the following: firstly, witnessing Palestinian suffering – and especially from a Diasporic viewpoint – is a means of rendering it visible to a broader Anglophone audience that might otherwise be unaware of it; and secondly, to witness the suffering of others also brings in an ethical responsibility to attend to it.[18] Where justice seems impossible a sense of guilt arises, as can be found in Nye's poem on the death of Ibtisam Bozieh.[19]

[17] Linda M. Pitcher. '"The Divine Impatience." Ritual, Narrative and Symbolization in the Practice of Martyrdom Palestine.' Medical Anthropology Quarterly. 12.1. The Embodiment of Violence, March 1998, 8-30.
[18] Narration is an instrument of witnessing; Nye's poem therefore claims to narrate what happened to Ibtisam Bozieh.
[19] Naomi Shihab Nye, "For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh." 19 Varieties of a Gazelle. Poems of the Middle East. (New York: Greenwillow Books) 53.

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Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh," can be understood as textual witness to the death of a 13 year old Palestinian girl. The title initially confronts the readers with an irresolvable tension between a claim for individuality and a statistically ascertainable number, an anonymous casualty of the war. The succession of words in the title suggests that first of all Ibtisam Bozieh's death has a representative function. Thus, the title seems to suggest that Ibtisam's death is not significant in itself, or because it is in anyway more remarkable than others, but because coincidentally she happened to be the 500th victim of Mid East conflict. But although Nye's poem focuses on her death because it is the 500th, it also rescues Ibtisam Bozieh from the obscurity of forgetting, or becoming an abstract one of countless victims, Nye's lines preserve and broadcast some of Ibtisam Bozieh's individuality to its readers that would have been lost otherwise.

In the first line, the dead girl is addressed by the speaker as 'Little sister Ibtisam,' thereby transforming her into a part of the Palestinian collective while simultaneously constituting the collective as a family.[20] Ibtisam's name, thus the first verse continues, haunts the sleep of Palestinians, i.e. she is not forgotten, or, in a more bold reading, she becomes part of the Palestinian subconscious.

Line four and five of the first verse report the specificities of her death: "Dead at 13, for staring through/ the window into a gun barrel/ which did not know you wanted to be/ a doctor."[21] Her young age stands out and conveys a sense of innocence to the readers that is underscored by the grotesque causality established by the forth line. She is dead, "for staring through/ a window into a gun barrel," for an utterly innocent act.[22] Next to constituting Ibtisam Bozieh as an innocent victim, these lines also create a crass image. By making the reader envision the face of a young girl opposite a gun barrel, this verse creates a narrative of the innocent victim versus a guilty perpetrator. Strikingly, the one who pulled the trigger remains invisible in this poem; rather Nye establishes an opposition in terms of human vs. machine. But whereas this opposition effectively emphasizes Ibtisam Bozieh's humanity, it also makes it impossible to see the killer in human terms. As simple as this observation may appear, it points to the crux of a conflict, in which it has become impossible to see the other as human, in which one's own humanity is asserted through the denial of the Other's.

The gun, the instrument of Ibtisam Bozieh's death, remains wholly inhumane although it is personified in the following line, where we learn that the gun was unaware she wanted "to be/ a

[20] Nye, 53.
[21] Nye, 53.
[22] Nye, 53.

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doctor."[23] Line six and seven draw on the girl's obliterated future, her dream of becoming a doctor, and thereby remind the readers of her lost potential. Moreover, these lines also capture the blindness of armed conflict, which becomes evident in the fundamental callousness at work when innocent children are murdered. In addition, the girl's wish to become a doctor creates another contrast, in opposite to her killer; she aspired to a career that would be centered on healing rather than destruction.

The second and third stanzas are suffused by a sense of survivor's guilt felt by the speaker who reveals herself as an exiled Palestinian: "Had I stayed in your land,/ I might have been dead too […] guiltily, you, not me."[24] Ibtisam Bozieh's death is transformed into an occasion on which the speaker contemplates her own mortality; her death becomes a memento mori for those who she left behind. But rather than stopping short at contemplating her own mortality, the speaker also reflects on her own privileged position as part of Diasporic community whose life is not rendered fragile by a continuous armed conflict. This fundamental difference between life in the Diaspora and life in Israel/Palestine as well as the death of the girl cause the speaker to experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness that is triggered by two factors: the spatial distance from the scene of events that renders any form of direct intervention impossible and, maybe more importantly, a profound helplessness in the face of death's finality. Out of this felt inadequacy in light of the tragedy, an angered grief arises:

> I would smooth your life in my hands, pull your back. […]
> throwing this ragged grief into the street,
> scissoring news stories free from the page
> but they live on my desk with letters, not cries.[25]

The conditional form used in the first two lines of the second verse, accentuate the tension between a deep desire to undo the girl's death, and the impossibility of realizing that wish.

Nye's poem also inquires into the ethical implications of witnessing the death of one's people from the save haven of exile. The spatial distance to the site of the conflict produces a guilty conscience for not being there, as I have shown before, but also creates a moment of diasporic solidarity. Thus, Nye's poem can be understood both as a practice of diasporic solidarity and a tribute to those Palestinians who remained in their homeland. The final lines of the last verse circle around an insurmountable detachment from homeland; letters become the abstract

[23] Nye, 53.
[24] Nye, 53.
[25] Nye, 53.

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representatives of real felt pain. The letters inadequately substitute the unattainable reality of life experience. The Palestinian homeland has become an abstract concept, rather than a sensually experienced reality. But these last lines of the poem also demonstrate a deep yearning, if not obsession to stay informed about the events in the homeland. The speaker thus cuts out the news stories about Palestinian lives and much like she removes them from their original context - the newspaper page - these reports become displaced from their site of origin, displaced like the speaker who collects them. A close look at the lines shows that they can be read as an allegory for exile. In case of the Palestinian diaspora, the process of being displaced must be understood as violent in the sense that one is forcefully removed from one's origins and liberating (the speaker refers to the process of cutting as freeing) in the sense that one is removed from the site of a dangerous and violent conflict. If Nye's poem is an act of witnessing the death of an otherwise forgotten girl, it also functions as a prism of displacement.

I would like now to contrast Nye's poem about the accidental death of Ibtisam Bozieh, with the self-determined deaths of the so called martyrs, or the shaheed, as they are called by the Palestinians. The concept of martyrdom is equally hard to approach as it is to understand because a martyr defies the rationality of self-preservation and forces us to enter into mental spaces that we face with revulsion or incomprehension. But like Pitcher, I think that as scholars we are obliged to look where others chose to look away. The anthropologist phrases this obligation by writing about martyrdom that it is ill-considered "to forsake [our] fundamental responsibility to foster an understanding of phenomena that affronts, offends or questions our own cultural norms and assumptions."[26] To stop short at our initial revulsion would also mean to ignore a practice that has developed into a gory ritual performed by radicalized Palestinians.

Since Palestinian-American artists chose diverse media for debating the Middle East conflict, I want to bring in Hip Hop as one of the art forms of young artists in the Palestinian Diaspora. The N.O.M.A.D.S, an Arab-American Hip Hop group, have written a song entitled "Moot" that presents us with two opposing monologues - one by an Israeli soldier, and another by a Palestinian suicide bomber; strikingly both roles are spoken by Mr. Tibbz.[27] The song begins with an introduction by Omar Offendum, who expresses his solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians and insists on a bond between the disenfranchised, be they "blacks" or "Native

[26] Pitcher, 8
[27] Choosing the same speaker both for the Israeli soldier and the Palestinian suicide bomber is a provocative underscoring of their commonalities as both have lost family through the conflict and have to deal with the resulting grief and aggression.

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Americans."[28] In the following, I want to I want to look closely at the song's ostensible protagonist, the "freedom fighter."[29]

As the title suggests, the mood of the song is aggressive and belligerent; the language is colloquial and engages in verbal saber-rattling that draws on slang heavily. Rather than speaking *about* the suicide bomber, who is called a freedom fighter in the song, The N.O.M.A.D.S. wrote his part as a first-person singular narrative. Through this daring move, they create the illusion that we as listeners/readers gain an undisguised insight into the minds of both the Israeli soldier and the freedom fighter. Finally, the choice of narrative form can also be seen as breaking a taboo; rather than keeping a safe distance to the suicide bomber that allows us to maintain our treasured incomprehension of such an abhorrent mind, we are forced to trace the windings of his thoughts that lead to his decision to die and take others with him.

Beginning with a negation, "Never had a home/ My country wasn't mine," the Palestinian suicide bomber describes a life of abjuration, violence and oppression.[30] Blood and thunder, as the "Freedom Fighter" claims in his lamentation, are part of his everyday experience in Gaza. He tells us: "Not a day passed, without my mother crying/They shot the protesters, that's more brothers dying," and continues to inform us that he was raised by his mother "'cause I never knew my father,/ They shot him and my father in the first intifada."[31] However, his monologue does not stop short at lamenting a life full of privations; it continues to curse those who are singled out as the culprits. Telling us that the Zionist euphemistically call the fenced in an intensely controlled Palestinian territories "crowd containment camps," the speaker continues give us his opinion about those Zionists: "But we all know a Zionist is nothing but a lying bitch."[32] The "Freedom Fighter's" reaction to the euphemistic language used to describe Palestinian camps reflects Arendt's analysis that it is not primarily an offended sense of justice that will trigger rage, but that the exposure to shameless hypocrisy is most likely to transform an engaged individual into an enraged fighter. In an escalation of hate speech, the speaker discloses his anti-Semitic and anti-American stance: "Fuck the Jews, Americans too. All they do is shoot

[28] The N.O.M.A.D.S., "Moot." Poets for Palestine. Ed. Remi Kanazi. (New York: Al Jisser Group, 2008) 34-36. Due to limited space, the monologue of the Israeli soldier will not be analyzed here. However, it has to be mentioned that he too has lost family in the conflict and, at one point, seems to be overcome by vengeful feelings but finally distances himself from this impulse. What appears to makes him suspicious of his own prejudiced view of the Palestinians is that it prescribed by his superiors; thus he informs us that during his military training he was told by his superiors that the Palestinians are his enemies
[29] The N.O.M.A.D.S., 35.
[30] The N.O.M.A.D.S., 35.
[31] The N.O.M.A.D.S., 35.
[32] The N.O.M.A.D.S., 35.

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us up and then brag about it on the news."[33] As readers and listeners we are tracing both the speaker's increasing hate toward those he believes to be his enemies and a growing sense of desperation that ends in him joining the Hamas that represents his determination to bring upon change:

> By 9:30 I'm on the streets of East Tel Aviv.
> Final prayer to god "A-yo Allah help me please,
> I didn't want to kill but Israel won't let me be."
> Count to three – take my last steps.
> Get in the café – take my last breath.
> Set of the detonator – big blast effect.
> My life was pure hell so in death I rest[34]

The change that is ushered on by the detonating of the explosives is death, an end to the fighter's life and, as readers and listeners we must assume, to those who were in his vicinity in the moment of the explosion. But rather than unequivocally affirming this action, the speaker insists on his initial unwillingness to die and kill. He conveys the sense of being pressured into this desperate act by the circumstances. Toward the end of the monologue, the lines become shorter, the beat slows down and an eerie rhythmical calm sets in that coincides with an increased introspection of the speaker. The people who will be the victim of the speaker's attack are not even mentioned, they remain completely invisible, their death unspoken. If the monologue was dominated by a sense of outrage framed by aggressive accusations against the perceived culprits, the last words are decidedly apolitical and suggest an overwhelming desire to escape the turmoil of a troubled Palestinian life in Israel, without repeating the wish to bring change. Rather than hope, the last words express resignation.

Does this Hip Hop song then suggest that there is something like a genealogy of a martyr, or a suicide bomber? In order to answer this question, the form gives us a crucial hint; the first person narration underscores the subjectivity of the speaker. Rather than providing us with a universally valid answer as to what motivates this man to kill himself and others in the end, the song presents itself as one possible story, the subjective tale of a tormented individual. Nevertheless, the "Freedom Fighter's" monologue suggests a coherent development that can be described as a role reversal: initially, the suicide bomber describes himself as a victim without agency. The moment where he decides to join the Hamas represents a turning point; he regains agency by becoming politically active. The decision to die that follows a three day fast can be seen as a moment of ultimate self-control. A young Palestinian man, who was unable to lead a self-determined life under military occupation, ironically reclaims his right to self-determination

[33] The N.O.M.A.D.S., 36.
[34] The N.O.M.A.D.S., 36.

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by choosing his own death. “Moot” describes the genealogy of a martyr as a journey from being a victim to becoming a perpetrator.

Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “For the 500th Dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh” and the song “Moot,” by the Hip Hop group The N.O.M.A.D.S both tell stories of death and dying, yet from very different vantage points. Whereas one describes the accidental if callously accepted casualty of an innocent girl, the other deals with a suicide bomber. If in Nye’s poem the death of Ibtisam Bozieh is narrated from the Diasporic position and consciously reflects this distance as influencing both the speaker’s subject position and her perception of the girl’s death, The N.O.M.A.D.S. song attempts to bridge the distance between the Diasporic experience and Palestinian life in the homeland, by taking an imaginary leap into the mind of a suicide bomber. Formally, this leap is realized through the first person narrative which produces the illusion of an authentic insight into a suicide bombers’ mind. If the innocence of Ibtisam Bozieh renders her death unjust, the question of being a victim becomes complicated in the case of the “freedom fighter.” In “Moot,” readers and listeners are confronted with a complex amalgamation of perpetrator and victim. Rather than representing perpetrator and victim as two principally exclusive concepts, the N.O.M.A.D.S. show how these seemingly contradictory roles fuse in one person, thus creating a moral grey area that cannot be easily described in terms of absolute guilt or innocence. Despite the difference in themes, Nye’s poem and The N.O.M.A.D.S. song refer to a pre-condition for killing; the rejection of the Other’s humanity. In Nye’s poem the killer is represented as a mere machine, a faceless gun; in “Moot,” we learn how the growing hate of collective, such as the “Jews” and the “Americans” can render their deaths acceptable, if not desirable. Antithetic as Nye’s poem and The N.O.M.A.D.S song appear at first, they share as a common background: the Israeli-Palestinian strife and are thus both concerned with the ensuing violence. At the intersection of these texts both the suicide bomber and the girl’s death have to be understood as effects of a downward spiral of hate. In the fog of war, the Other’s humanity becomes irrelevant, invisible.

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