Writing for Gaza:

Textual (Dis)Embodiment, Creative Resistance and Social Justice in Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine and Hedaya Shamun's "The Taste of Coffee in Gaza"*

Brinda Mehta

Abstract
This essay examines the trope of creative resistance in the writings of a young generation of writers from Gaza focusing particularly on women authors from Refaat Alareer's collection, *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine* and Hedaya Shamun's short story, "The Taste of Coffee in Gaza." Their writings represent a de-colonial act of resistance to war and occupation through the power of narrative. These 'resisting textualities' are a form of *littérature engagée* that documents the experiences of Palestinians in exile and under occupation. Consequently, writing as resistance is an anti-colonial praxis that situates these authors as freedom fighters in a complex landscape of loss and reclamation. The act of "writing back" is twofold — a de-colonial response to mediated Western and Zionist propaganda about Palestine, and a writing back to an older generation that remains disconnected from the hopes and aspirations of Palestinian youth.

Keywords: Gaza, creative resistance, war, occupation, memory, cyber activism, short stories.

Double-blind peer-reviewed article

Writing/Fighting for Gaza: Context
Contemporary Palestinian writings chronicle the physical and psychological devastation experienced by the ongoing Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, the subsequent hardships of everyday life in the occupied territories, and the fearless resistance to the negating politics of Zionism. Authors as diverse as Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, Sahar Khalife, Liana Badr, Mourid Barghouti, and Suad Amiry, among others, embrace a poetics of decolonization in their social justice narratives that reveal the infringement of Palestinian rights; the trauma of territorial displacement and exile; the tyranny of social and political oppression; the abjection of 'perpetual' war; the right to memory, dignity and identity; and the fight for sovereignty.[1] Their

'resisting textualities' represent a form of *littérature engagée* that documents the experiences of Palestinians in exile and under occupation. Consequently, writing as resistance is an anti-colonial praxis that situates these authors as freedom fighters in a complex landscape of loss and reclamation.

While the above-mentioned authors represent a venerable generation of elders, this essay demonstrates how a younger cohort of Palestinian writers inscribes their voices in an important literary heritage of civic engagement and social responsibility. Their youthful perspectives underscore their engagement with "unruly critique" (Chakravorty, 2010, p. 116) and meaningful "disobedience to a directive" (Danticat, 2010, p. 11) as they both depict and contest the power-driven machinations of occupation and the ongoing material impact of colonization. Refaat Alareer's edited volume of short stories, *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine* (2013) and an individual short story, "The Taste of Coffee in Gaza" by Gazan writer Hedaya Shamun, represent the war cries of Palestinian youth who articulate their protest in a discursive "ululation for survival" (Husain, 2006, p. 12). Their voices represent the present and future in the form of a powerful 'Palestine in-creation,' whereby "telling stories is resistance, and [those] stories shape our memories ... stories outlive every human experience" (Alareer, 2013, p.14).

I argue that the very creation of this anthology is an act of resistance by Alareer in his efforts to give visibility to a new generation of writers that are not included in standardized anthologies of Palestinian literature, and thereby remain invisible in mainstream literary and media discourses. A professor of English at the Islamic University in Gaza, Alareer is the guiding force behind the anthology. Inspired by the deep commitment to writing and literature demonstrated by the students from his creative writing and fiction classes, Alareer encouraged them to start documenting their experiences under the Israeli occupation in English. None of them had written fiction before; they were avid bloggers, though. As their mentor, Alareer discovered that:

> [W]orking closely with many young talents in Gaza has proven to me that all they need is proper encouragement, practical training, and close attention in order to blossom. These stories present the unmediated voices of young people who are fed up with the occupation, the international community, and the aging Palestinian leadership. Embedded in these stories are rich layers of discourse and worldviews. Such worldviews sometimes echo old narratives or certain parts of them, but mostly they are unique [...] in giving profound insights into the Palestinian plight (pp. 18-19).

The act of "writing back" is twofold — a de-colonial response to mediated Western and Zionist propaganda about Palestine and a writing back to an older generation of:

> [M]ainly 'grumpy old people' of famous statuses appearing on TV and talking about Palestine. Young Palestinians realize quite well that these people do not truly represent the Palestinian plight or even hopes and desires either because they live in ivory towers or because they represent factional opinions (Alareer, personal communication, May 27, 2016).

195.0 x 265.0 mm

This resistance-in-writing to the internal dysfunction of an ageing patriarchal leadership, these "grumpy old men," and the external delimitations of war and occupation are further evidenced by the structural composition of the volume and the final selection of stories. There are 23 stories that represent a "counterattack narrative" (Alareer, 2013, p. 25) to the 23 days of the Israeli aggression of 2008, to be discussed later. Each story represents a simultaneous indictment and commemoration of each day of the attack, culminating in poignant personal and collective testimonials on death, destruction, survival, and resistance. In addition, the stories are written in English as an act of self-representation, subjectivity and autonomy, and as an explicit political choice clearly outlined by Alareer (2016):

> Therefore, a generation of young Palestinians who speak excellent English stepped up to shatter the myth of 'they can't represent themselves; they must be represented'. In the past 10 years, there have been thousands of articles and pieces written in English by Palestinians and hundreds of thousands if not millions of tweets and Facebook statuses. Their spectrum of views and concerns have shown the whole world how rich and diverse the Palestinian society is. And I strongly believe that was a major cause why we have been witnessing this tremendous change of heart in the West and why more and more people from around the world are joining and supporting the battle for Justice for Palestine (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

On the one hand, by speaking directly from the heart in uninhibited English, the authors from this anthology undermine confinement to an exclusive Arabic-speaking audience by reaching out to a more global readership. On the other hand, they elude the dangers of mistranslation and mediation by non-Palestinian sources when they claim sole authorship of their narratives.

For these writers, resistance-in-writing is the quest for meaningful change in a disordered world that is nevertheless given shape, context and meaning through literature:

> Literature defies all acts of suppression and oppression because oppressors are always dull and repetitive while instigators of art are creative and innovative. Literature stands out as a testimony for the generations to come. But literature is also a powerful means of both self-expression and a sharp reflection on the world we live in, be it just, oppressive, repressive or falling apart! Therefore, naturally as Palestinians we are involved in this creative process of expressing ourselves. The short fiction pieces in *Gaza Writes Back* were compiled with the intention to make it a witness of determination to live and resist occupation and oppression for the future Palestinians just like we now read Ghassan Kanafani more than history books (Alareer, personal communication, May 27, 2016).

The 'writing as testimonial' trope takes on a larger than life existence in these writings through its humanizing "glocal" perspective highlighted by Alareer (2016): "*Gaza Writes Back* humanizes the Palestinian plight and universalizes it. It gives voice to the voiceless and face and name to the faceless and usually mute nameless victims at a time when the all-powerful Israeli narrative is distorting facts and figures (personal

communication, May 27, 2016). The intersectional insider/outsider aspect of these stories as a contrapuntal positioning raises the following questions: How do these writers undermine a bourgeois "art for art's sake" ethic through a more democratic engagement with literature? How do they problematize the scope of resistance by expanding the parameters of "literariness" through the use of social media and the Internet that broadens their activist base? As Alareer argues:

> The majority of the activism for Palestine now is done by young people – they are leading the struggle over the internet on Facebook, Twitter and blogs. They are also leading this by organizing BDS campaigns, boycotting events – rather than the old generation (quoted in Schaeffer, 2014).

"A Palestinian writer is often asked: Are you a writer or a freedom fighter?" affirms author Ghassan Kanafani (as cited in Masoud, 2010). Kanafani highlights the intimate connections between writing and fighting in a situation where the power of words and bodily resistance are graphic markers of endurance and a "refusal to surrender" to the imperialist agendas of Zionism (Alareer quoted in al-Saadi, 2014). Similarly, Nawal El Sadaawi uses the Arabic term *al-munadil* to describe the dissident writer as a resistor who joins a coalition of fighters in the battle for social justice (Mehta, 2007, p. 153). *Gaza Writes Back* provides an example of one such coalition of young writers that uses literature as a means to document their lives and experiences amid the inhumanity of occupation and Israel's repeated assaults on Gaza. The stories highlight the ways in which everyday life in Gaza has been fractured and marked by a destructive politic punctuated by "a series of very appalling days and altogether horrendous nights … nights of immense horror and fear," as stated by the narrator of Jehan Alfarra's story, "Please Shoot to Kill" (2013, p. 93). These nights of horror are pungent with the smell of "burned flesh," as revealed in Nour Al-Sousi's "Will I Ever Get Out" (2013, p. 72). This overpowering odor blocks the senses, making it difficult to breathe in "my confinement". At the same time, these stories also focus on the daily acts of survival needed to "un-occupy" Gaza through the ordinariness of a routine that nevertheless gives structure and meaning to life in an imposed cartography of death. As stated by Al-Sousi's narrator who is employed as a gravedigger in Rafah:

> The digging was taking place under the houses near the border. The only thing I was thinking of was how my body would endure being in a grave more than twenty meters deep. The fifty shekels at the end of the day, and the bags I brought home that drew smiles on the faces of my mother and little brothers and only sister, made the task a bit easier (Alareer, 2013, pp. 72-73).

Accordingly, the act of writing to chronicle these stories of loving, living, and dying in Gaza makes the duty of survival "a bit easier" through the refusal to capitulate.

In his introduction, Alareer states that the majority of the writers in *Gaza Writes Back* are young women who want to 'write Gaza' through a gendered sensibility. Writing gives them a sense of participatory ownership in the articulation of 'the Gaza story' that must include the voices of men, women, and children: "As a Palestinian living in Gaza City, I have always believed that every Palestinian life is a story worth telling," states Tasnim Hammouda (al-Saadi, 2014), thereby claiming the Palestinian right to

identity, humanity, and subjectivity. Hammouda underscores the urgency of writing as testimony to both chronicle and indict the ongoing devastation of Gaza by the Israeli army and Zionist politics. The stories are intended to provide first-hand eyewitness accounts of the devastation of Gaza through a poetics of creative resistance. They emerge from the specific context of Israel's 23-day offensive, Operation Cast Lead, in Gaza in 2008-2009 and are foreshadowed in the recent tragedy of the summer of 2014, euphemistically termed Operation Protective Edge.[2] As stated by Alareer (2013), these narratives "resist Israel's attempts to murder these emerging voices, to squander the suffering of the martyrs, to bleach the blood, to dam the tears, and to smother the screams" (pp. 13-14).

How then do these authors write under permanent siege? How does creative resistance assume an explicitly political turn amid rubble, uninhabitable refugee camps, squalor and sensory deprivation without "any electricity, any phone lines, any food" ("Please Shoot To Kill," Alfarra in Alareer, 2013, p. 95)? How does writing both survive and transcend the Israeli blockade of Gaza by creating moveable scripts that contest borders and boundaries? As stated by Hanan Habashi, one of the writers from the collection:

> It doesn't sound right that wars inspire, but it did in our case. In one way or the other, the war was behind most of [...] [the stories] [...] Recognizing the vulnerability of our own lives in the face of the Israeli war machines, helplessness took hold of us, and writing pain down helped us realize the might of our words (al-Saadi, 2014).

Mighty words provide these writers with a defense against the annihilating consequences of their siege, wherein words construct a vital narrative of lost or stolen memories in the form of a (narrative) scream for justice. In Gaza, resistance writing boldly confronts the fear of erasure by affirming the right to create in the face of death. Lead produced bombs and missiles morph into lead pencils in an affirming life-over-death directive, whereby "I came to realize the power of the written word and the importance of having our voices heard. At this point writing about Palestine grew out of the 'writing as healing' shell and became more of a moral duty towards our just cause," affirms Habashi (al-Saadi, 2014). In other words, these stories are part of a peaceful resistance strategy to reveal the censored realities of Palestine in mainstream Euro-American-Zionist discourses, truths that must be spoken by these 'voices from within' in order to "heal some of the pain caused by the horrendous memories. And no matter how beautiful the spirit of resistance that overwhelmed us, this beauty should never override the ugliness of pure injustice," states Sameeha Elwan (Alareer, 2013, p. 17). These multi-textured writings are layered with the painful grafting of bitter memories that nevertheless energize revolutionary texts: "Telling the story," confirms Alareer (2013) "thereby itself becomes an act of life" (p. 24).

The trajectory of telling and witnessing is best described in another relevant short story, "The Taste of Coffee in Gaza," by Gazan writer Hedaya Shamun. This story can be found on the daily blog "Arab Literature" (in translation, 2014). It was written in the form of personal reflections on the thirteenth day of the 2014 "Offensive Operation Protective Edge". In this story, Shamun (2014) compares the violated Gaza Strip to a 'deathscape' of broken bodies, sensory alterations, trauma, and tragedy, wherein "war changes the taste of coffee." The reference to coffee is crucial given the vital role

of coffee in Palestinian cultural life and in daily rituals of hospitality. As a signifier of national and diasporic identity (Shomali, 2001), coffee symbolizes a sense of deep connectedness to the land in a ritualized claiming of memory amid territorial and political dispossession.[3] Coffee provides sustenance to endure the trauma of loss; its bitter grounds can nevertheless be sweetened by the taste of resistance to the negating politics of un-homing concretized by occupation. When war changes the taste of coffee, it imposes its usurping rights to dismember the Palestinian imaginary in Gaza when "it wants to plunder what remains" (Shamun, 2014, ¶ 9). The taste of the acrid coffee parallels the smell of burning flesh and the blinding smoke from continuous bombardment by "those loaded Apaches firing over their houses non-stop, or one of those blood-thirsty, monster-like Merkava tanks" ("Please Shoot to Kill," Alfarra in Alareer, 2013, p. 95). These targeted strategies to provoke death by bombardment, forgetfulness through asphyxiation, and vision loss through smoke toxicity lead to a profound alteration of the senses in a bitter power struggle to impair Palestinian memory.

The bitterness of memory inscribes itself in the bitterness of Palestinian history described in terms of fragmented body parts and dispersed human remains in Shamun's short story. Israel's protracted wars against Palestine represent its repeated attempts to thwart Palestinian efforts at remembering, revealed in the following incident at Rafah:

> I hear about a young man from Rafah, and I cannot believe only his lower half has reached the hospital. The artillery shell divided him, while still inside his house, into two halves. The lower half reached the hospital the next day, but the upper one is still lost. The head, the chest, the back, and the hands have not yet left his home. A day is gone and the body hasn't been joined together to be carried in the white shroud, to get a final farewell from his friends, or even just to be buried. (Shamun, 2014, ¶ 2)

The indignities of war and occupation create binary distinctions between what Judith Butler (2010) calls "grievable" and "un-grievable" lives. She states:

> If certain populations — and the Palestinians are certainly prominent among them — do not count as living beings, if their very bodies are construed as instruments of war or pure vessels of attack, then they are already deprived of life before they are killed, transformed into inert matter or destructive instrumentalities, and so buried before they have had a chance to live, to become worthy of destruction, paradoxically, in the name of life (p. xxix).

The "ungrievability" of Palestinian lives in the Zionist war machine condones their dehumanization in life and death. These dismembered bodies negate the wholeness of Palestinian history in images of historical, cultural, and physical truncation as a precursor to irretrievable loss and imminent death: "You think you are still alive, but in fact you are tricking life and waiting in a long queue, unaware of where death might come from," cautions Shamun's narrator (Shamun, 2014). In this death-dedicated landscape, Gazans morph into moveable and immoveable targets that are forced to play a dangerous hide-and-seek game with death in these indeterminate war zones punctuated by the terror of the unknown: "The paradox of life and death must have been created in Gaza," (¶ 7) states the narrator.

> Death bluffs you, but then he makes you wait on his schedule. If you ignore Death and have fun, then you arouse his anger. He will keep you hovering around until you surrender to him, when he will leave you to rave and recite prayers. Death leaves you, but his image controls your imagination (Shuman, 2014).

The insecurity underlining this waiting game represents the core ethos of siege where Death scores its checkmate victories in an unnerving human chess game.

These authors engage in testimonial writing as a form of witnessing; they affirm their right to memory when devastated landscapes, trauma, and shock are intended to erase primal memories through sensorial manipulations. They redefine the very meaning of the archive in the Palestinian context by initiating a strategy of what Beshara Doumani calls an "archival democracy," as part of the documenting process. Doumani (2009) argues:

> Digitalization and the internet have made it possible for the masses [...] to engage in archival activity. Anyone with access to a digital camera and/or sound recorder and a computer can share data files with millions of others and create a dense network of connections that can transcend geography if not always language and class (p. 4).

The Derridean *mal d'archive* (Derrida, 1995) or "archive fever" (Prenowitz, 1996) takes on an explicitly urgent dimension for Palestinians who must not only document the past but also the present because they "are still incapable of stopping the continued and accelerating erasure of the two greatest archives of all: the physical landscape, and the bonds of daily life that constitute an organic social formation" (Doumani, 2009, p. 4). The archive symbolizes a living, palpable and recurring wound for these writers, a corporeal signifier of the historical dispersal of land and body through time. It cannot be limited to an elitist institution or confined to a state-appropriated or -corporatized space that negates the popular or 'vernacular' dimensions of the archive found in the land, nature, memory, orality, and communal history.

The stories establish the corporeality of the archive as a sensory text imbued with sound and feeling. They also reference the important role played by women in archiving the human condition in Gaza. The exclusion of women in the framing of the authoritative (traditional) archive calls for the recognition of counter-archives, these ambulatory archive-within-archive textualities or Derridian "archiving archives" (Prenowitz, 1996, p. 17) that are inclusive of a "highly diverse constellation of sources" (Doumani, 2009, p. 9). Accordingly, the stories represent a re-imagined archival palimpsest that includes marginalized popular perspectives, such as the voices of young women who create their own sources of documentation in a non-conventional 'supra body language' of pain and hope. This transcendent language of resistance both contests and undermines the manipulative "governmentalities" (Appadurai, 2003) of the official archive and its regulations and represents an evolving work-in-progress rather than a static "authorizing discursive field that naturalizes some stories about the past and, by implication, silences others" (Doumani, 2009, p. 6). Arjun Appadurai further identifies the archive as a communal project that re-members and re-inscribes memory's collective scope "as an aspiration rather than a recollection. This deep function of the archive has been obscured by that officializing mentality, closely

connected to the governmentalities of the nation-state," he argues (2003). The one-sidedness of the "officializing mentality" compromises a synchronic, multi-textured archive that remains devoid of democratic intent.

The democratization of the archive acquires a particular salience in instances of war and occupation. Zionist hegemony, partisan nationalist politics, and Palestinian cynicism in the face of the leadership's inefficiency and inability to protect "their own people, much less salvag[ing] the Palestinian past and prepar[ing] for the future" (Doumani, 2009, p. 5) require decolonized/denationalized anti-racist, anti-patriarchal forms of framing collective memory through multidimensional prismatic sensibilities. The writers from Gaza articulate this consciousness in their richly diverse narratives. At the same time, they also claim their subjectivity as intrepid bloggers and tweeters who decolonize borders in cyberspace: "Cyberspace, as a newly centralized space in which the act of storytelling is constantly in process, provides scattered Palestinians with a place which holds new possibilities of forging new ways of belonging and place-making," states Sameeha Elwan, one of the contributors to *Gaza Writes Back* (in Alareer, 2013). The electronic mapping of identity, place, and belonging in the borderless world of cyberspace is a politicized act of creative dissidence wherein "instant messages/ignite revolutions" (Dunya, 2013, p. 33).[4] Instant messaging incites the call to revolution through the immediacy of action and reaction by "never surrendering to pain or death," (Alareer, 2013, p. 14).

In the collection, the women are at the forefront of what I call 'archival cyber-textualities' as witnessed by the fact that "more young female writers in Gaza use social media and write literature, particularly in English, than do their male counterparts" (Alareer, 2013, p. 20). These 'cyber guerrillas' use whatever mediums of social media are at their disposal to "take the initiative and play a significant role in preserving the Palestinian identity, resisting the occupation, and building a more open Palestinian society in which women and men are equal" (Alareer, 2013, p. 20). They take the lead in claiming cyberspace knowing full well that the colonization of the Gaza story found in Zionist and male-centered nationalist narratives cannot be decolonized without their protesting gendered interventions documented in different forms – blogs, text messages, short stories, Twitter and Instagram posts, videograms, photography, and "memorial literature" (Doumani, 2009, p. 4) among other tools. At the same time, cyberspace also invites infiltration and cooptation by reactionary oppositional forces like the government and the military, which is why these authors write and rewrite the 'Gaza story' with urgent consistency to keep alive the 'threat' represented by their multidimensional narrative insurgencies. Their cyber-activism complements their revolutionary writings in texts like *Gaza Writes Back* to show how these young women endorse a different kind of witnessing and documenting located in the in-betweenness of the local and the global as a form of 'glocal consciousness', a unique awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence of struggle. In turn, Alareer (2016) highlights the importance of these 'cyber visions' in the conception and organization of his anthology:

> Social media outlets whether on forums, blogs, Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter have empowered the young voices twice silenced, by the occupation and by the older generation. Young Palestinians started to voice their concerns and dreams and even solutions to end the occupation. These voices started to attract even

> the mainstream media outlets and major websites who started to realize the importance of talking to these young Palestinians. And it was through social media that I started my writing sessions with some of my students. We used to post writings on an online forum we had and they we would discuss these pieces. Later, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs made it possible for these writings to reach wider audiences. Some alternative media outlets such as *Mondoweiss* and the *Electronic Intifada* started picking and publishing some of these stories and even asking the writers for more pieces.
>
> In my viewpoint, social media tools turned the hierarchy upside-down and gave the prominence to the young people to speak up for Palestine. And we have seen, for example, how in Israel's aggression on Gaza in 2012 and 2014 the battle in social media, mainly Twitter, was won fair and square by Palestinians. That happened because young Palestinians have made the best of social media and have stepped up their efforts to represent themselves and Palestine (Alareer, personal communication, May 27, 2016).

At the same time, these writings also serve as forceful indictments of war crimes against civilians, especially defenseless children, who are compelled to confront the onslaught of a sophisticated war system with their bare hands and broken feet. The narrator of Shamun's story states: "An entire army directs its spines at Gaza: at her hair, at her chest, and even at her face. An entire army fully equipped, fights a Palestinian child in Gaza, whose ancestors lost their land, their country, and their memories" (Shuman, 2014). Shamun underscores the multiple traumas faced by the children of Gaza who grow up in this painful landscape of hurt. War dominates the life trajectory of these children in the form of ravaging death spans: "Our children grow, but those who've reached ten years of age have witnessed the Israeli attacks destroying everything three times in their still-short lives. How dare we tell them about childhood memories?" (Shuman, 2014). While chronicling these violations, the story also reveals how Gaza's archives cannot exist in the form of well-preserved centralized data banks of knowledge when there is evidence of Gaza's "vertical and horizontal" abjection everywhere, both in the past and the present (Doumani, 2009, p. 5). A centralized archive can thereby only document a one-dimensional untruth in the absence of a "vast but highly fragmented constellation of archives" (Doumani, 2009, p. 7) that provide a multiplicity of reflecting truths about Palestine and her children.

Shamun refers to three defining historical periods that have marked and compressed the children's lives between fatal operations and military attacks – Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009), Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012), and Operation Protective Edge (July 2014). Confined to militarized zones as a familiar carceral landscape, these children are a living testimony to the ravages of war evidenced by the reality of "living under shelling, without electricity, water, safety, sleep or even one's body" (Shamun, 2014). The fierce pounding of artillery shells and the acrid odor of death shatter the security of childhood represented by safety and sleep. The violated landscape physically projects the irreversible inner traumas that scar the children's mindscapes. In fact, death lurks within the recesses of a pre-natal temporality that attempts to erase the past and future historicity of Gaza symbolized by "women, children and even fetuses" (Shuman, 2014).

The violation of Gaza's children is a premeditated strategy of war destined to undermine and destroy Palestine's future through the death, trauma, and the disabling of young children. Tasnim Hamouda's story "Neverland" is located in a children's cancer ward where "death has become a normality, an everyday experience" (Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, p. 137). The irony and bitterness of the title highlights the fate of Gaza's vulnerable children who are exposed daily to the lethal effects of chemical warfare. "Neverland" refers to a utopian place for children who have the privilege of remaining forever young in this fictionalized "never never land" immortalized in author J. M. Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. This tale of the boy who never grows up and spends his never-ending childhood on the small island of Neverland" (Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, p. 139) is a metaphor for eternal youth, childishness, immortality and paradise. The transformation of paradise into a death ward reflects the cruel irony of fate for Gaza's dying children who will never see adulthood or experience paradise on earth due to cancer's crippling effects. The narrator is a nurse in the children's ward. She faces the trauma of witnessing the rapid decimation of an entire generation of cancer-stricken children who remain nameless:

> Sooner than anyone expects, faster than it takes to memorize their names, death would perch on the ward, extend its wings right and left, and claim them all. A week, two weeks – a month maximum – and new faces would replace the previous ones. Similar faces with different names all would share the same fate (Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, pp. 137-138).

Like the annihilating Zionist war machine, the cancer machine follows a similar trajectory of erasure, dehumanization, and anonymity. The children die before they can be remembered by their proper names. Their premature deaths cannot be memorialized in the absence of named and identifiable subjective bodies. This erasure feeds the ideology of "necropolitics" (Mbembe, 2003) and its anti-naming ethos because "names create memories. Names form attachment" (Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, p. 137). The children ingest the noxious toxicity of war in this losing battle against cancer in which a highly corporatized industry fights a one-sided war against "bruised arms" and "hairless heads" (Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, p. 138).

The children's exposure to deadly carcinogens reveals the perverse attempt to destroy 'offending' bodies in an aggressive war politic. Condemned as future terrorists and a threat to Israeli security, the children are killed prematurely by a dehumanizing war strategy. As stated by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2014):

> Israel is aware of the power that each Palestinian child possesses by virtue of their mere existence, and therefore, they need to keep children under constant threat of disappearing … Palestinian children are viewed as security threats and therefore thrust outside the accepted and established human rights framework — one that sanctions the high civilian death toll that has been experienced in Gaza […] — and into a discriminatory structure of power (¶11).

In other words, the children are politically targeted to further dispossess Palestinian families and communities through a 'lost' generation of children. While Barrie's Peter

Pan represents a young boy who is lost to childhood, Gaza's Peter Pan is vanquished by death.[5] These deliberate and chemically induced assaults on the body are a politicized form of 'corporeal occupation,' a tactic that strengthens claims made by Evelyne Accad, Audre Lorde, Susan Sontag and other cancer activists that cancer, like war, is an engineered disease. Accad concludes that war and cancer constitute two major traumas of the 20th and 21st centuries (2012, p. 21). In fact, war and cancer fight for dominance over the vulnerable bodies of children in a nullifying patriarchal war game, as highlighted in the story.

These death-dedicated collusions are nevertheless contested by daily acts of humanity performed by the nurse in "Neverland." She fights the predatory angel of death that hovers over the children like the menacing "Apaches, F16s, tanks, bullets, soldiers, and blood" ("Please Shoot to Kill" Alfarra in Alareer, 2013, p. 99), through her loving care for her young patients, "she simply couldn't detach herself from those little passing clouds" ("Neverland," Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, p. 138). Her ethic of humanity is a life affirming, non-violent politics of resistance that ensures the peaceful passing of these "little clouds" into the eternity of a liberated Palestinian "neverland." In Barrie's play, "Neverland" also represents the expansiveness of a child's imagination that refuses to be limited by borders and controls. In a parallel act of resistance, a young patient referred to simply as "b" ("Neverland," Hamouda in Alareer, 2013, p. 139) also finds a way of resisting the occupation of his body by imagining an alternative cancer-free life. He finds strength in the Neverland story that motivates him to fight a relentless private battle with a tenacious hydra-headed adult enemy. This adversary is committed to destroying all hopes of paradise for the living and the unborn in a situation of eternal hell.

At the same time, the boy also initiates a change of heart for the nurse who hitherto referred to her young patients only as "little boy" or "little girl." The nurse who insists on not knowing the names of the little ones seems to be changing her attitude here and maybe changing for good, as suggested by Alareer (personal communication, May 27, 2016). For a split second, she seemed indifferent to the death of this boy, casually addressing him as "little boy." No sooner had she uttered the "b" in boy than she decided to address him as Peter Pan, the name he seemed to love because of the story he was reading. In this way, the story positions children as instigators of change and personal growth. This vulnerable child confronts death with his own 'resisting' attitude of staying calm and reading the book. In doing so, he guides the older generation represented by the nurse by teaching her to never give up hope for a free Palestinian Neverland nor to be desensitized to human suffering. He shows her how the "idea" of Neverland remains alive for the children in life and in the afterlife:

> Even in the rubble, subjected to vicious shelling and an uncertain atmosphere of uprooting and loss, children find a way to draw their homes, whether or not they actually still have a physical house, and speak out against the Israeli oppression by refusing to stop singing. These children find new ways to live, to play, to bring back the sun and create life (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014, ¶13).

The "passing clouds" of Hamouda's story join forces with the sun to shed light on the darkness of occupation as an act of revelation and condemnation, while keeping

alive the hope of decolonization in an as-yet-to-be realized Palestinian Neverland.[6] At the same time, writing about the children gives this cartography of loss a sense of structure in text as a counter-history of resistance articulated by the dispossessed, a strategy highlighted by Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod (2007):

> Memory is one of the few weapons available to those against whom the tide of history has turned. It can slip in to rattle the wall. Palestinian memory is, by dint of its preservation and social production under the conditions of its silencing by the thundering story of Zionism, dissident memory, counter-memory. It contributes to a counter history (p. 6).

Memory thereby etches its sensorial presence on this landscape of disfigurement through an anti-positionality expressed by "a bitter taste [that] settles into our eyes and our hearts" (Shamun, 2014). This bitterness is given texture in the altered taste of the coffee: "War changes the taste of coffee," Shamun's narrator reminds us as she highlights the Palestinian predicament in Gaza. Writing performs a salvaging mission when anonymous "children's bodies and the fetuses in their mothers' wombs" are given visibility in narrative form as an affirmation of presence whereby "we are humans exactly like you" (Shamun, 2014). This call for humanity and subjectivity is nevertheless inscribed in an acrimonious land politic where coffee bears the burden of history in an acrid aftertaste. The narrator concludes: "In Gaza, there is torment … Is another night of war enough to feel us?" (Shamun, 2014).

What then does it mean for these "tormented" writers from Gaza to bear the burden of history through their acts of witnessing, while coping with their own traumas of survival at the same time? What is their connection to the land that archives the political, literary, and cultural historicity of Palestine in palimpsest-like form? How does the land provide visible documentation of the ravages of Palestinian history through its fractured topography? These writers reveal the extent to which ongoing wars and occupation have physically etched their presence in the form of a severely scarred landscape marked by the power maps of colonization (Mehta, 2012, p. 473). The landscape has been transformed into a road map of alienation for Palestinians, one of spatial impasse, uncertainty, and loss. The narrator of "The Story of the Land" describes the violated landscape during the Operation Cast Lead attack:

> All they saw as they walked was ruined Lands filled with bulldozed, dead trees … They saw more toppled trees, feeble and defeated … Simply put, our trees were no exception. Our trees were gone […] My father's faith, I could tell, was smashed into little pieces. The world seemed like an ugly place (Ali in Alareer, 2013, p. 61).

The wanton destruction of olive trees is a monumental act of defilement, a war crime in Palestinian eyes, and a violent assault on Palestinian identity. Dating back to Roman times, olive trees have been a major source of livelihood and communal identification in many Arab countries. In the Palestinian context, olive trees embody the very soul of Palestine as they offer a deep-rooted connection between the land and the people, while establishing genealogical roots. The destruction of these trees is tantamount to defiling not only Palestinian land, but Palestinian memory and history as the trees are "mercilessly uprooted" (p. 62).

In addition, olive trees have borne witness to the painful trajectories of Palestinian history in their role as natural "sites of memory" (Nora, 1989, p. 9). The felling of a tree equals the killing of what Hamdi calls an "inward witness because, unlike other tragedies, the abysmal truth has been intentionally concealed or distorted" (Hamdi, 2011, p. 24). The urgency of witnessing on the Palestinian side nevertheless mobilizes a counter politic of destruction from the opposing Israeli camp to eliminate any incriminating evidence of its acts of criminality. This erasure takes the form of barren landscapes and images of felled trees; the land is nevertheless marked by the scarred traces of these uprooted ancestral imprints: "Between Palestinians and their Land is an unbreakable bond. By uprooting plants and cutting trees continually, Israel tries to break that bond and impose its own rules of despair on Palestinians," confirms the narrator (Ali in Alareer, 2013, p. 64). At the same time, the active destruction of the primal bonds with the land initiates an equally active reconstruction strategy to keep Palestinian memory alive: "By replanting trees over and over again, Palestinians are rejecting Israel's rules. "My Land, my rules," says Dad," affirms the narrator (Hamdi, 2011, p. 64), thereby demonstrating how the repeated resurrection of the "fallen" witness "is a writing back into history of what has been deliberately erased" (Hamdi, 2011, p. 24). The ongoing presence of the witness who sees, documents, and testifies is particularly crucial in the Palestinian context given that the archives of the Palestine Research Center in Beirut were transported to Tel Aviv during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon (Said, 1995, p. 119), thereby locating Palestinian memory 'elsewhere,' as one among many examples. The dislocation of the archives from Beirut to Tel Aviv is evidence of both the dislodging and colonizing of memory through its relocation to the heart of the Zionist capital. The transplantation of Palestinian memory is also an attempt to interrupt and embroil the story of Palestine through detours, textual doctoring, and obfuscation. As Said (1995) argues in *The Politics of Dispossession*: "The interesting thing is that there seems to be nothing in the world which sustains the story; unless you go on telling it, it will just drop and disappear" (pp. 118-119).

The movement against erasure or forgetting is a creative and resisting act for the Gazan writer as activist and political witness in his/her "role of guardian of the society's historical past, its memory" (Calder, 2005, p. 14). Entrusted with the responsibility of encoding the past in text, this writer also documents the present and perceived future by "inevitably encapsulating her or his people's suffering, documenting it and producing an archive that would prove necessary for a mass witnessing" (Hamdi, 2011, p. 23). The past oversees the present in this form of witnessing to give Palestinians a sense of wholeness amid their history of exile and displacement beginning with the catastrophic Nakba or the creation of the state of Israel and the subsequent mass exodus of nearly 800,000 Palestinians from historical Palestine in 1948. As stated by Hamdi (2011), this exodus was a result of the fear of retaliation and violence resulting from the Deir Yassin massacre of 1948 carried out by the Zionist Irgun and the Stern Gang (p. 27). The recurring traumas of forced flight and dispersal are given expression and a cathartic outlet in the stories from Gaza. In other words, the 'idea' of Palestine is kept alive through repeated affirmations of its presence in narrative form as a creative reclaiming of a stolen identity and historicity. The straddling of the personal and the communal in order to remember, to be remembered and to help others remember is at the very core of "*sumud* or steadfastness that has long characterized Palestinian life. The notion of giving up, of surrendering to the

195.0 x 265.0 mm

occupation, to most Palestinians sounds quite repulsive," affirms Alareer (2013, p. 23) in a defiant stance against the politics of dispossession and injustice. These authors testify against and indict the politics of occupation. At the same time, they create memorable narratives that continually resist the occupation in their role as creative freedom fighters.

In conclusion, *Gaza Writes Back* and "The Taste of Coffee in Gaza" represent the creative resistance of young authors from Gaza that are determined to make a political statement about the ongoing colonization of Gaza through the power of their narratives. These writings are both testimonials and indictments of the industrial war complex that continues to dispossess and destroy Palestinians on a daily basis. As they try to imagine a more just and peaceful future for Palestine in their writings, these writers from Gaza also contest the stranglehold of colonization and occupation on their society. They interweave their concerns within dissonant geo-political structures enhanced by the machinations of war, occupation, and violence. At the same time, these writings are a testament to the human quest for peace and social justice in a badly fractured world. The youth perspectives are particularly urgent to keep 'the Gaza story' alive through the permanence of narrative, social media accessibility, a critique of outmoded internal governance, and the optimism of young people amid the disempowering circumstances of occupation. Short stories, Facebook postings, online forums, Twitter, Face Time, and other mediums invigorate Gaza's living archive of personal and communal memories, stories and history through everyday relevance. These modes of expression remain dynamic, mobile, open, and subject to revision unlike the immutable colonial and patriarchal discourses of the "grumpy old men" (Alareer, personal communication, May 27, 2016) on both sides of the occupation. "The self-criticism in *Gaza Writes Back* itself is a creative act, an act of regeneration but also reevaluation of the past sixty six years of struggle. And that surely helps revolutionize the cause and make it more lively and dynamic," according to Alareer (personal communication, Alareer, May 27 2016). The creative contributions of these writers orient them toward the possibility of a more enabling future for themselves in intersecting poetics and politics of engagement. At the same time, they are wary of the illusionary utopias of "neverland" even as they dream of a sovereign Palestine, "a dream yet to be fulfilled" (Alareer, 2013, p. 14). They know full well that the birthing of a free Palestine will only be realized through the labor pangs of complete decolonization from occupation, informed leadership, and international cooperation: The tension between the cherished dream and its realization provides these authors with the necessary impetus to write and fight until Palestine is unoccupied. Until then "Gaza writes back because writing is a nationalist obligation, a duty to humanity, and a moral responsibility," (2013, p. 26) concludes Alareer.

Brinda J. Mehta, Germaine Thompson Professor of French and Francophone Studies
Chair, Department of Languages and Literatures, Mills College, Oakland, CA 94613
Email: mehta@mills.edu

ENDNOTES

***** For Refaat Alareer and the brave hearted young writers of Gaza.
1. See Jayyusi's edited volume, Anthology of modern Palestinian literature (1992).
2. Israel's "Protective Edge" offensive led to an 'unprotected' Palestinian massacre culminating in the loss of over 1,650 civilian lives, mostly women and children, the wanton destruction of residential areas, schools, community centers and hospitals, the displacement of over 444,000 people, and a staggering count of 9,000 wounded, according to the UN (Al-Jazeera, 2014). In addition, Israel's total blockade of the Gaza Strip has confined the area's population of 1.8 million people to an isolated prison-like zone cut off from land, sea and aerial routes.
3. In his chapter, "Palestinians Under Siege," Edward Said (2001, p. 33) provides a brief outline of Palestinian history since the "Nakba" or catastrophe of 1948. He states that in 1948 Israel appropriated the majority of what was historical or Mandatory Palestine, destroying 521 Arab villages and uprooting its people. Two-thirds of the population was forcibly removed, creating the current diasporic situation of four million refugees today. The West Bank and Gaza went to Jordan and Egypt respectively. However, both territories were lost to Israel during the 1967 occupation and "remain under its control to this day, except for a few areas that operate under a highly circumscribed Palestinian "autonomy" [...] Israel took 78% of Palestine in 1948 and the remaining 22% in 1969. Only that 22% is in question now, and it excludes West Jerusalem (of 19,000 dunams there, Jews owned 4,830 and Arabs 11,190, the rest was state land), all of which Arafat conceded in advance to Israel at Camp David. The Oslo strategy was to re-divide and subdivide an already divided Palestinian territory."
4. This is a reference to the important role played by the social media in the Arab Spring uprisings. For more information see Choudhary, A., Hendrix, W., Lee, K., Palsetia, D. & Liao, W. (2012) and Lindsey, R.A. (2013).
5. In her essay, "The constant presence of death in the lives of Palestinian children," Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2014) provides startling statistics about the fate of Gaza's children. She writes: "Numerous publicized reports and documents published by international and local Israelis and Palestinian human rights and children's rights organizations teach us that politically motivated abuses against children are additional tools of Israel's colonial dispossession of the Palestinian people. According to an update from Defense for Children International-Palestine, citing statistics from the United Nations, over 400 Palestinian children have been killed since Israel began its military offensive on Gaza. Over one three-day period of the conflict, a Palestinian child was murdered every hour, according to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)." Kevorkian is referring to the July 2014 Operation Protective Edge offensive. Moreover, Operation Cast Lead resulted in severe birth defects due to the impact of phosphorous, depleted uranium and other chemically produced bombs. Birth defects and childhood cancers target the most vulnerable civilian populations while compromising the future of Palestine.
6. Neverland could also be a reference to Michael Jackson's palatial ranch estate in Los Olivos, California given the generation and pop culture savvy of these writers. Jackson's Neverland is a fantastical recreation of Disneyland, a utopian fantasy world for children. Having missed out on his own childhood and the pleasures of childhood as a result of early fame, Jackson wanted to withdraw to the womb of childhood in this fairytale dream-like palace. The ranch was Jackson's private retreat from the high profile visibility of stardom; he could isolate himself in this sheltered world of his own making surrounded by the recreated landscapes. I am grateful to the anonymous reader for this insight.

REFERENCES

Accad, E. (2012). Gender and two major traumas of 20th and 21st century: War and breast cancer. In F. Festic (Ed.), *Gender and trauma: Interdisciplinary dialogues* (pp. 21-42). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Alareer, R. (Ed.). (2013). *Gaza writes back: Short stories from young writers in Gaza, Palestine*. Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books.

Alareer, R. (2016, May 27). Private email communication with Brinda Mehta.

Ali, S. (2013). The story of the land. In R. Alareer (Ed.), *Gaza writes back: Short stories from young writers in Gaza, Palestine* (pp. 59-64). Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books.

Ali, T. (2003). *Bush in Babylon: The recolonization of Iraq*. London: Verso.

Al-Saadi, Y. (2014, 28 January). Gaza writers resist war and siege through fiction. *Alakhbar* English. Retrieved from http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18412

Al-Jazeera. (2014, August 2). In pictures: Gaza devastation. Al-Jazeera. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2014/08/pictures-gaza-devastation-20148292923446538.html Appadurai, A. (2003). Archive and aspiration. Retrieved from https://archivepublic.wordpress.com/texts/arjun-appadurai/

Butler, J. (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable*? London: Verso.

Calder, D.G. (2005). *Literature in the modern world: Literature and history*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

195.0 x 265.0 mm

Chakravorty, M. (2010). An emergent extradisciplinarity: Worlding Arabs, activist representation and the example of Ahdaf Soueif. In J. Parker, R. Samantrai, & M. Romero (Eds.), *Interdisciplinarity and social justice: Revisioning academic sccountability* (pp. 105-127). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Choudhary, A., Hendrix, W., Lee, K., Palsetia, D., & Liao, W. (2012). Social media evolution of the Egyptian Revolution. *Communications of the ACM, 55*(5), 74-80.

Danticat, E. (2010). *Create dangerously: The immigrant artist at work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Derrida, J. (1995). Mal d'archive. Paris: Editions Galilée. Translated by E. Prenowitz as Archive fever. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Doumani, B. (2009). Archiving Palestine and the Palestinians: The patrimony of Ihsan Nimr. The *Jerusalem Quarterly, 36*, 3-12. Retrieved from http://history.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/archiving_0.pdf

El Saadawi, N. (1995). Gender, Islam and Orientalism: Dissidence and creativity. *Women: A Cultural Review,* 6(1), 1-17.

Hamdi, T. (2011). Bearing witness in Palestinian resistance literature. *Race and Class, 52*(21), 21-42.

Husain, S. (2006). *Voices of resistance: Muslim women on war, faith and sexuality*. Emeryville: Seal Press.

Jayyusi, S.K. (Ed.). (1992). *Anthology of modern Palestinian literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lindsey, R.A. (2013, July 29). What the Arab Spring tells us about the future of social media in revolutionary movements. *Small Wars Journal*. Retrieved from http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/what-the-arab-spring-tells-us-about-the-future-of-social-media-in-revolutionary-movements.

Masoud, A. (2010, August 9). Remembering Mahmoud Darwish: How the revolution was written. *Ceasefire Magazine*. Retrieved from http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/remembering-mahmoud-darwish-how-the-revolution-was-written/

Mehta, B. (2007). *Rituals of memory in contemporary Arab women's writing*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Mehta, B. (2012). "'Ungrievable' lives? Contesting illegality in Suad Amiry's "border diary" Nothing to lose but your lives: An 18-hour journey with Murad. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 43, 458-483.

Mehta, B. (2012). Writing pain in Evelyne Accad's The wounded breast. In M. Ennaji (Ed.), *Migration et mondialisation* (pp. 239-262). Rabat: El Maarif Al Jadida.

Mehta, B. (2014). *Dissident writings of Arab women: Voices against violence*. New York and London: Routledge Press.

Mikhail, D. (2013). *The Iraqi nights*. Translated from the Arabic by K.J. Abu-Zeid. New York: New Directions Books.

Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. Translated by L. Meintjes. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, 26, 7-24.

Sa'di, A. & Abu-Lughod, L. (Eds.). (2007) *Nakba, Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Said, E. (1995). The politics of dispossession. New York: Vintage.

Said, E. (1996). Representations of the intellectual. New York: Vintage.

Said, E. (2001). Palestinians under siege. In R. Carey (Ed.), *The new Intifada: Resisting Israel's apartheid* (pp. 27-42). London: Verso.

Schaefer, M. (2014, April 10). Powerful fiction: An interview with the writers of "Gaza Writes Back." Acting in faith. Retrieved from http://afsc.org/friends/powerful-fiction-interview-writers-gaza-writes-back

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2014, August 22). The constant presence of death in the lives of Palestinian children. Mondoweiss: The war of ideas in the Middle East. Retrieved from http://mondoweiss.net/2014/08/presence-palestinian-children

Shamun, H. (2014). The taste of coffee in Gaza. Translated by Shaimaa Debes. Retrieved from https://arablit.org/2014/07/24/the-taste-of-coffee-in-gaza/

Shomali, M. (2001). Land, heritage and identity of the Palestinian people. Palestine-Israel Journal, 8(4). Retrieved from www.pij.org/details.php?id=804