

## Radical Others in the New “Contact Zone”: Tensions, Breaks, Relations

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**Abstract:** Drawing from recent conceptualizations of translation as an open, fragmentary, and unpredictable process (Simon, 2006; Bassnett, 1998), in this article, I employ creolization as a theoretical paradigm of transnational significance to explore the ways in which Other cultures translate cultures, by paying particular attention to the breaks, tensions, and relations that these translations both reveal and produce. The essay examines and compares three creolized ‘texts’: the cycle of paintings “Changing Perceptions” (2005) by Arab-American visual artist Helen Zughaib; the collection *breaking poems* (2008) by Arab-American poet Suheir Hammad; and the libretto *Imoinda or She Who Will Lose her Name* (2008) by African-Caribbean-British writer Joan Anim-Addo. The main goal of the paper is to test the potential of creolization as a transnational poetics and practice and a theoretical tool to read and critically interrogate the creolized texts produced by today’s “signifying minorities” (Anim-Addo, 2009) within the British and US nations, and by extension within an increasingly interconnected, heterogeneous, and “uneven” (Radhakrishnan, 2003) world.

In his introduction to the PMLA Special Topic *America: The Idea, the Literature*, Djelal Kadir writes:

In an age of inexorably, and often tragically, globalized military, fiscal, and political entanglements,...perils of erasure, subsumption, or elision are no longer limited to the intranational United States of America or to the inter-American bicontinental hemisphere....To guard against such perils, our theorization, scholarly investigations, critique, and teaching must not shun the tumult of disruptive epistemologies and must not evade, even at the risk of being considered un-American, interrogating parochial or nationalistic epistemes or regimes of truth. Our perspective must be translocal and relational, rather than fixed or naturalized.

(22)

Kadir’s invitation to scholars, critics, and teachers alike to inhabit an intellectual location that is “supple, mobile, transnational” (22), is, I believe, of great importance, if we want to examine and perhaps also illuminate through our work certain dark aspects that characterize today’s increasingly

interconnected, heterogeneous, and “uneven” (Radhakrishnan, 2003) world. Translation, both as a theory and a practice, plays a crucial role in this essay. In her introduction to *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era* (2000), Sherry Simon outlines translation as a dynamic process and writes: “In a phrase which has been widely echoed, Salman Rushdie claimed that migrants are ‘translated beings.’ ... But migrants are also active agents of cultural exchange; they “translate” as they are ‘translated’” (28). Translation, as Simon suggests, is an ambivalent and complex practice, one that raises questions of power and privilege, while at the same time promoting cultural (ex)change and destabilizing existing hierarchies. Translation today can no longer be understood as a unilateral transfer from a particular language or text to a different one; it is no longer based on clear-cut binaries such as original/derivative, source/target text, oral/written language. On the contrary, translation is a precarious practice unevenly shifting between mediation and contestation, a “process rather than a product” (Simon, 2006: 17), which reflects the historical, political, and economic asymmetries, the generative potentials but also the breaking points of our contemporary world. Reflecting on the recent translational turn in cultural studies, Susan Bassnett confirms this idea, by stating: “translation as a sign of fragmentation, of cultural destabilization and negotiation is a powerful image for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (137). This is why translation occupies a central part in my argument about intercultural contacts and the manifold tensions they give birth to.

My own location in this paper cannot but be, to quote Kadir again, “translocal and relational” (22); it mirrors the nature of the texts themselves, which are marked by these two crucial features. Édouard Glissant’s conceptualization of *creolization* as “un mouvement perpétuel d’interpénétrabilité culturelle et linguistique qui fait qu’on ne débouche pas sur une définition de l’être” (21) [a perpetual movement of cultural and linguistic interpenetration that is never definitive] is a fundamental tool I employ to explore some of the fundamental tensions that traverse the chosen texts, such as the tense relation between local and global spheres, “minor” and “dominant” cultures, Global South and US or British nations. In particular, by applying creolization to texts that have been produced outside the Caribbean, I wish to extend traditional conceptualizations of creolization, as a poetics and practice situated in a specific cultural, historical, and racial context—namely that of the Caribbean—and use it as a *travelling concept*, a transnational mode of analysis that travels from the Caribbean to the US and Europe to illuminate the ways in which Other cultures within the Anglophone US and British nations translate their own as well as other cultures. Looking closely at transnational cultural practices through the lens of creolization, and more specifically through Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, enables

us, I believe, to see a text not only as a web of meaningful relations that are within the text itself but also as the product of more external and far-reaching relations that the text entertains, for instance, with other texts, and with the spatial, temporal, and cultural dimensions that represent its corollary.

Diasporic, creolized, and relational texts thus represent the focus of my analysis and the composite terrain on which I will test Glissant’s poetics. In her thought-provoking article, “Net Work: Area Studies, Comparison, and Connectivity,” Vilashini Cooppan recognizes “the hallmark” of Glissant’s poetics and practice in his unorthodox gesture of juxtaposing and reading together “official and hidden stories, past and present horizons, small and large scales, nodal points and networked links” (620). In line with Glissant’s poetics and practice, I bring together and critically read three creolized texts that have been produced within the metropolitan “contact zone” (Pratt 37) of the US and British nations and that carefully register in a hybrid, multi-layered, and passionate way<sup>1</sup> “slowly sedimented traumatic shocks, displacements, and losses with explosive creations” (Cooppan 616).

In line with the creolized nature of the texts I discuss, I will combine theoretical reflections with more concrete descriptions of my own and the research group’s collaborative teaching practices and take into examination both visual and written ‘texts.’ Starting with my experience as a teacher of Italian to migrant students and adult learners and following with examples drawn from the research group’s shared teaching practice in Washington D.C. and my personal on-going research on Arab-American poetry, I explore the ways in which “Other cultures within” the US and British nations generate intercultural exchanges, paying particular attention to the breaks, tensions, and affiliations that these practices reveal and produce. My analysis focuses on three creolized texts: the cycle of paintings “Changing Perceptions” (2005) by Arab-American visual artist Helen Zughuib; the collection *breaking poems* (2008) by Arab-American poet Suheir Hammad; and the libretto *Imoinda or She Who Will Lose her Name* (2008) by African-Caribbean-British writer Joan Anim-Addo. My goal in this article is mainly to test the potential of creolization to read and critically interrogate diasporic texts that have been produced by the members of “signifying minorities” (Anim-Addo, 2009) living in the metropolitan borderlands of the US and British nations. Taking the texts as a point of departure, I intend to reflect on certain trends and tensions that traverse today’s global world, reading each single text as a nodal point from which to develop a series of reflections that concern the text itself as well as the world at large. Together with Cooppan, I indeed believe that, “[o]nce thought in relation, any nodal point privileged or not, becomes a place from which we can imagine the larger totality of area, region,

or world while simultaneously perceiving, as if in some ghostly recession, the prehistories that constituted both the point and its orbit” (617).

**Helene Zughaib’s Cycle “Changing Perceptions”:  
The Classroom as a “Contact Zone”**

As a teacher of Italian to migrant students and adult learners, in my pedagogical practice my position constantly shifts between two opposite poles: translator and translated being. In the classroom, I translate the Italian language and culture to members belonging to other cultures, while students translate their own as well as the Italian culture to me and to their colleagues, tirelessly attempting to bridge the gap that separates each single culture from others. Translation in this context becomes a useful means to orient oneself towards Others and learn to navigate an increasingly complex and intertwined world. Through translation, students belonging to the so-called “signifying minorities” (Anim-Addo, 2009) within the Italian nation give an account of themselves and of their cultures, promoting at the same time mutual recognition and contesting dominant narratives that tend to eclipse them. For example, whenever I ask students to role-play a job interview, they surprise me with their capacity to parody – and therefore to replicate while subverting – forms of cultural domination and exclusion that have been directed against them during real, and not artificially re-enacted, job interviews. Through their performance, students belonging to other cultures within the Italian nation rewrite the dominant culture and the hegemonic narratives that have been developed on and around them from their specific “minor” perspective, thus contributing to uncover and destabilize structures of dominance and inequality. By effect of their retranslations, the classroom becomes – to quote Mary Louise Pratt – a “contact zone,” a site of cultural contact and clash, the place of recognition but also “of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique” (39).

This description of the classroom as an ambivalent space traversed by tension, and therefore punctuated with potential breaks but also creative energies aptly illustrates, I believe, the collaborative teaching practice we performed as a research group at Howard University in Washington D.C. On that occasion, we wanted to test our research hypothesis, namely the idea that other cultures generate creolized texts to translate their own as well as Other cultures in meaningful ways. During our workshop, I circulated in the classroom two paintings by Arab-American artist Helen Zughaib, which belong to the cycle “Changing Perceptions” (2005). After providing students with some background information on the artist, I asked them to reflect on and discuss in small groups the following questions: How does Zughaib translate aspects of her Middle Eastern/Islamic culture to a supposedly

Western audience? What are the strategies she employs to communicate her discomfort of living as an Arab woman in the US after 9/11? What are the effects of her translations? As an Italian and European researcher presenting Arab-American artifacts, I was myself located within an ambivalent liminal position. I had to translate, for instance, Arab culture – which is other for me – to a predominantly African-American audience to which I did not belong; as an Italian, moreover, I was myself a representative of a “minor” culture within the US, although as a teacher my position was one of hegemony with respect to the students.

Zughaib is an Arab-American artist born in Beirut who left Lebanon at the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. She and her family migrated first to France and later to the US where she now lives and works. Her art has been displayed in the US, Europe, and the Arab world, and has also been included in private and public collections: the White House and the Library of Congress, to name only two.<sup>2</sup> The responses collected at the end of the teaching session were very heterogeneous and reflected, I believe, the risks and challenges we encounter each time we are involved in translation and have to deal with heterogeneous texts as the ones developed in the diaspora. According to Pratt, a text produced in the “contact zone” is “heterogeneous on the reception end as well as the production end: it will read differently to people in different positions in the contact zone” (36-37). As predicted by Pratt, the two paintings provoked a variety of responses: some students defined the paintings as “puzzling at first,” others as “shocking.” Zughaib, indeed, de-familiarizes the familiar and familiarizes us with what we normally perceive as Other (the veiled Arab woman, in this specific case); she further travels and makes us travel across national borders, mixes a variety of cultural references, and borrows her material from different cultural traditions, in part voluntarily disorienting the viewer and leading him/her astray. In her paintings, Zughaib consciously mixes “East and West in a bid to bridge the gap between these two opposites” (Majzoub 38) and disrupts the dominant image of the Veiled Woman, providing the viewer with a more heterogeneous, fragmentary, and unstable rather than fixed picture. For example, in one of the paintings, Roy Lichtenstein’s blond heroine *Crying Girl* (1963) – an icon of the American pop art movement – wears the *abaya* (the traditional Middle Eastern head covering); with pink and crying eyes, she theatrically states: “I am not what you think I am.” This powerful yet paradoxical assertion, together with the image of an American comic strip idol wearing the veil, contribute to blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, visibility and invisibility, self-narration and representation and to muddle fixed geographical spaces such as the Middle East and the US. Both Zughaib’s translations and the retranslations that students performed on and around her

paintings were equally hybrid and contributed to transforming the classroom in a laboratory of “transculturation, critique, collaboration, [...and] imaginary dialogue” (Pratt 37). On the other hand, however, the group discussions also revealed a certain degree of “miscomprehension” and “incomprehension”, which Pratt includes among “some of the perils” of the contact zone (37). In her paintings, as I said, Zughaib relates, translates, and merges cultural elements belonging to different traditions; she further performs and foregrounds cultural exchanges across national borders, thereby refusing to supply a unitary, monolithic picture of the Arab woman and by extension of the Arab world. As she moves across ethnic, racial, religious, and national boundaries and articulates a network of intercultural, transnational, and interracial affiliations, she arguably employs only her gendered perspective as unifying element. Still, by privileging a woman’s perspective, Zughaib further expresses the difficulty of living in a man’s world within a woman’s body – as suggested by the crying woman with pink eyes on the blue background – and the desire to break free from the crippling representations that have so far portrayed the Arab woman as a silent and monochrome Other, by providing instead an alternative, almost carnivalesque and therefore highly subversive, illustration.<sup>3</sup> Her cycle, as the provocative and programmatic title “Changing Perceptions” suggests, invites a rethinking of fixed and monolithic terms such as Arabness, Americanness, and Europeaness from her distinctive and shifting “minor/dominant” location.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, through her colorful and unorthodox translations, Zughaib opens up a space for silenced voices and covered up bodies, stories, and cultures to emerge, while simultaneously destabilizing fixed binary oppositions such as Self/Other, local/global, Western/Arab, center/periphery, dominant/minor. Her paintings, I argue, respond to the fundamental need to re-tell Middle Eastern but also US cultures, in alternative, more dialogic, and creolized ways; each painting, I want to suggest, functions as a metaphorical “window” (“Shubbak” in Arabic),<sup>5</sup> an in-between liminal space (at the same time internal and external, a Derridean threshold, so to say) from which to observe both Arab and American cultures and the fruitful, albeit at times conflicting, relations they entertain with each other. From the particular standpoint of “the other-within,” Arab culture appears less threatening, impenetrable, and Other, and American culture less hegemonic, secure, and homogeneous than we have so far imagined them to be.

**Suheir Hammad’s *breaking poems*:  
Global Violence and Transnational Forms of Solidarity**

As our shared teaching practice demonstrates, at present, not only creolized texts but also classrooms, metropolises, and nations have become new zones of cultural contact, sites of potential intercultural relations and ruptures where other cultures link and mix linguistic and cultural strands to

undo fixed binary oppositions and negotiate a more hospitable in-between space. This idea is confirmed by Simon who convincingly argues: “increasingly...we find that Western society as a whole has turned into an immense contact zone, where intercultural relations contribute to the internal life of all nations” (58). To recognize and celebrate the heterogeneity, relational nature, and creative potential of contemporary cultures does not mean, however, forgetting or neglecting the historical, cultural, and economic inequalities and fractures that also constitute and traverse them.

Suheir Hammad offers, through her collection *breaking poems*, the occasion to reflect on this double-bind, particularly if we consider the “creative friction” (see Brathwaite) but also the points of rupture that mark her poetic production. The daughter of Palestinian refugees, Hammad was born in Jordan and spent her childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. In 1978, she moved to the US, growing up with her family in Brooklyn, where she came into contact with “the emerging hip-hop music scene” (Knopf-Newmann 71). As Keith P. Feldman rightly notes, Hammad’s previous as well as her latest collection “engage the aesthetics of hip hop performance poetry and the Black Arts movement to register affective, material, and geographical linkages between the racialization of blackness and the facts and fate of Palestine and Palestinians” (159-160). In order to better understand Hammad’s inclination to build alliances with the African-American group, it may be useful to recollect US racist construction of Arab-Americans as racially ambiguous subjects and the histories of racial discrimination and violence Arab-Americans have endured together with African-Americans, albeit in a different way.<sup>6</sup> Among others, Michelle Hartman has extensively explored this topic and has observed that “being marked as different, alien, and generally understood as non-white or outside mainstream in the United States has prompted many Arab Americans to seek out and build links with other groups of color, including African Americans” (146). As Salah D. Hassan has recently argued, however, the transnational interracial traffic of cultural forms in the contemporary hip-hop music scene, for instance, is not immune to prejudices and stereotypes, which use those same horizontal networks to spread and harm.<sup>7</sup>

In *breaking poems* (2008), Hammad openly borrows from, experiments with, and innovates Arab vernacular tradition as well as the aesthetics and rhythms of hip hop music; she indeed draws part of her musical patterns from the Arab oral popular tradition and intermixes clearly recognizable black musical rhythms with Arabic vernacular words. Her poetry, more specifically, is built on a particular rhythmic pattern drawn from hip hop music called the *break*. As Mark Katz explains in his work on groove music, the *break* is “a short stretch of unadulterated rhythm as the singer and other

instrumentalists abruptly drop out, and the effect, whether heard for the first or the fiftieth time, is electrifying” (14-15). Throughout her collection, Hammad employs the *break* as a germinal element of her compositions. Her minimalist style, constituted of short, rhythmic, and beating words, highlights asymmetry, discontinuity, and brokenness and has a clear galvanizing effect. The broken form of her poems, moreover, reflects and refracts the main topic she addresses in her collection, namely global violence and the experience of being physically, mentally, and emotionally broken. The opening verses of the poem “break (bas)” (20-21) are particularly telling in this sense:

bas  
bastana  
ana bastana  
bas  
daily papers photo babies  
charred bread no life  
venus chaired motionless shaking  
bleed currents  
astonished stars cry  
bas (20)

In *breaking poems*, Hammad adapts the Arab classical practice of publicly reciting incandescent verses (Allen, 2000) to the needs of the present time and binds this specific tradition with that of African-American and African-Caribbean spoken word/dub poetry.<sup>8</sup> Writing about African-Caribbean dub poetry, Christian Habelkost insists on the effects produced by minimal expression and a rhythmic language, by arguing that,

minimal expression and the short line, in this case, combined with repetition and multiple rhyming, not only emphasize the riddim (in performance) and visualize it (in print); they are themselves a thematic reflection. Minimal expression is the best way to channel rage into a poetry structure. (96)

In “break (bas)” then, Hammad expresses her exhaustion and grief through repetition and asks in a very powerful way that the violence and massacres that hit today’s world stop; her broken words communicate her sense of rage and indignation, particularly against the media, which contribute to



transforming human tragedies into spectacular catastrophes to be easily consumed and forgotten soon thereafter.

Following the example of African-American spoken word and African-Caribbean dub poets, such as Gloria Sanchez, June Jordan, and Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, Hammad carefully selects her words according to their distinctive beat and their capacity to “affect” her audience; in doing so, she builds alliances with other women of color across national, racial, and ethnic boundaries, re-actualizing the heritage they left behind and adapting it to the urgencies of the present time. Hammad’s interest in the musical aspect of language and her strong affiliation to African-American, African-Caribbean, and Arab vernacular traditions emerge clearly in this poem, where the poet-speaker rages against the pervasiveness and omnipresence of human violence, peremptorily asking that the deaths of innocent Others immediately stop. Hammad’s poem clearly functions here as an interpellation, in Derrida’s sense, a final call, whose essential sense is engraved and crystallized in the word “bas,” Arabic for “stop” or “enough.” Interestingly, however, the poem’s final claim or what Derrida would call its *verdictum* or “the truth of the *Dichtung*” (Derrida, 2003: 50) is placed here at the beginning of the poem and not at the end, as it is more often the case. Perhaps everything has already been said, Hammad suggests, and there is no other word to add except “bas.”

In line with American poets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hammad employs “interruption, parataxis, narrative discontinuity, and alinearity to produce fragmentation and disjunction” (Keniston and Grey 3). This inner fragmentation, I argue, contributes to keep the audience alert as the middle caesura in the verses “daily papers photo babies / charred bread no life” and the variation of the fragment “bas” in the opening lines (“bas / bastana / ana bastana”) suggest.<sup>9</sup> The poem reveals a clear tension between individual poetic voice and collective demands, Arabic vernacular and English written language, local and global dimensions. Through a strong self-affirmative voice and specific linguistic and rhetorical strategies, such as the reiteration of the beating sounds “b,” “t,” “p,” Hammad turns the reader’s attention to the turbulent reality of the contemporary world, performing a kind of brief percussion solo to awaken a collective consciousness in danger of atrophy. The opening lines in crescendo (“bas / bastana / ana bastana”) produce a growing effect and express the speaker’s increasing anger and indignation in the face of the terrible escalation of violence she witnesses globally; they further convey her growing desire to put an end to the persistence and planetary amplitude of human and state violence.

Macro and micro level, mythical gods and quotidian dimension, are tightly related in this poem, as the consonance binding “charred bread” and “venus chaired” clearly suggests; the overall feeling, however, is not of unity but rather of incongruity, dissonance, and rupture. Hammad indeed stages in her poem an almost post-apocalyptic world where mythical gods—as personified by Venus, the Greek Goddess of Beauty and Love—have lost their supernatural powers and have become themselves frozen by horror and immobilized by fear. Violence is equated here to an unstoppable force that drives the world mad; still, Hammad believes that poetry can make a change and contribute for instance to documenting, remembering, and mourning the numerous broken Others that are too easily forgotten:

gather armless  
gather heart break  
gather just broke  
gather harvest  
gather blood  
gather thirst (20)

Through the repetition of the verb “gather,” Hammad hastens readers to pay attention to and recollect the numerous Others left behind by History in the advancement of its presumed forward march. Her words evoke a multitude of people —“armless,” injured or “just broke” — who pile up day-after-day, while unaffected spectators just watch.

Examining the representation of violence in Micheal Ondaatje’s *Amil’s Ghost*, Mrinalini Chakravorty reflects on the reader’s exposure to the deaths of anonymous others and writes: “The usual way of memorializing individual deaths that denote a singular, subjective life — through details such as place of belonging, linguistic and familial ties, ethnicity, name, age, and occupation — become insufficient for explaining the losses that are incurred” (542). Drawing from Chakravorty’s interpretation, I suggest that by representing violence as a phenomenon that replicates itself in a myriad ways, Hammad powerfully deconstructs the stereotype of the post-colony, and the non-Western world more in general, as “a place of danger and deficit” (Chakravorty 555) that is constructed in opposition to a secure and non-violent West. Her broken bodies are indeed dispersed in different areas of the world and brokenness becomes a global and shared human condition. In “break (bas),” I contend, Hammad presents violence as a confused and worldwide assemblage of corpses, mutilated bodies, and emotionally broken beings, raising crucial questions about urgent topics of socio-political,

historical but also ethical relevance relating to personal loss, public mourning, and collective agency. In doing so, she promotes awareness on universal precariousness, structural and affective inequalities, and the ways in which dominant geo-political powers direct an affective apparatus of moral and political obligation.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, in her collection, Hammad depicts violence in a rather impressionistic way, employing non-linear, disjointed, and rapid bombardments of images to communicate a reality that eschews representation and yet can be effectively captured in fragments and broken pictures. The assonance “image mirage,” in particular, in the verses “image mirage libnan woman khadra / khalas last call rouged up bought / down maze mezze liquor” (20), reinforces Hammad’s skepticism regarding the possibility of realistically, faithfully, and objectively representing violence. The scene of the “libnan woman khadra” (trans. Lebanese woman red), hiding herself behind a veil of make-up—as expressed through the verb “rouged up”—conveys an idea of artificiality, while at the same time evoking images of war, murder, and bloodshed. More in general, through a condensed and disordered assemblage of impressions, fragments, and breaks, Hammad movingly and powerfully translates to the reader the traumatic and confusing experience of living under siege and the puzzlement of a subject who is constantly confronted with her absolute precariousness and must find strategies to work through her brokenness.

The inner fragmentation of the Self, however, is not the only feature that Hammad foregrounds in her poems; as Feldman aptly notes, the structural and thematic brokenness of the poems is counterbalanced by a strong emphasis on relation and translation, two crucial elements that reflect “the text’s particular mode of relational poetics” (167). As precarious subjects in Beirut and elsewhere constantly break down and stubbornly piece together the broken pieces of their selves, cities, and histories, so Hammad chronicles in her poems the ongoing conflicts, quotidian traumas, cultural and religious clashes but also the networks of intercultural and interracial solidarities that survive the general breakdown.

Hammad’s emphasis on relation and transnational affiliations is particularly evident in the poem “break” (11-15), which opens the collection. In this specific case, the poet draws a horizontal cartography of global metropolises, linking together distant and discrepant geographical locations such as New York City, Bombay, New Orleans, Gaza, Tel Aviv, Baghdad, Houston, and the Palestinian refugee camps of Deheisha and Khana Younis in Lebanon. The poem opens with the speaker wandering slowly and in total solitude in New York City, a humid metropolis immersed in a “gray

thick” air (11). The speaker admits “looking for [her] body / for [her] form in the foreign / in translation” (11), as if finding the reflection of her own body onto the bodies of others and translating her own disorientation and sense of estrangement to others may function as a cure to heal her sense of brokenness and loss: “i left a long time ago / remember stubble remember unwanted remember touch / i can’t remember where I left my body” (11). As these opening lines make clear right from the outset, Hammad’s speaker is a profoundly broken soul yet also a deeply relational subject; translation thus represents for her a basic need and a crucial means of survival, as the following lines suggest: “poem needs form lungs need / air memory needs loss i need / to translate my body because it is profane” (11).

In “break,” the speaker carries on her body and in her soul the traces of a traumatic past but is also eager to engage in new relations; translation, in her case, becomes a useful tool to come to terms with the heterogeneity of her “profane” body. In “Praise of Profanation,” Giorgio Agamben develops a provocative reading of profanation as a practice that dismantles the old and artificial oppositions: sacred vs. human, religious vs. profane; by similarly celebrating human life in all its heterogeneity and hybridity, Hammad’s “break,” deconstructs the binaries Self/Other, local/global, minor/dominant, USA/Arab world, security/violence, manifesting them as interrelated and complementary entities rather than as antithetical categories.

Mirroring the inner fragmentation but also the relational, hybrid nature of the self, the cities that Hammad mentions in her poem are torn apart by very specific and apparently irreconcilable tensions but also united by similar experiences of violence. Beirut, in particular, is outlined as a city maddened “by all male religion,” a place where violence reigns undisturbed and creepily makes its way across “olive oil sweat camps resorts” (13). A culturally, linguistically, and religiously mixed place, Beirut has been the theater of a fifteen-year-long civil war and is still regarded today as a sensitive “contact zone” traversed by internal conflicts and tensions. In the Lebanese capital, as Hammad suggests, Palestinian refugee camps flank luxurious resorts, where Western tourists enjoy their holidays partly or completely ignoring the tragedy that is taking place on their doorstep:

(beirut)

a green body obsessed white possessed by all male religion sword  
sniper garnishes silicone radishes video radiology vexens eastern European  
prostitution manic depression olive oil sweat camps resorts

hair gel all that is life all that is death  
....  
we lived there once my parents sisters and me  
i left my skin there still boiling (13)

Hammad effectively translates here and illuminates the paradoxes that haunt Beirut specifically, while at the same time hinting at the imbalances that traverse our contemporary world more generally. She further links her painful experience of growing up in Lebanon as a Palestinian refugee with other similarly traumatic histories; her “skin...still boiling” in Beirut evokes and refracts the condition of other human beings in Bombay, New Orleans, and Baghdad, whose “bare” bodies (Agamben, 1998) bear bruises and wounds provoked by past and present catastrophes. In “break,” Hammad refuses to consider her condition as a Palestinian refugee as an isolated case of violence, loss, and dispossession, preferring instead to draw a set of networked links to actively articulate bonds of solidarity on a global scale. As a consequence, the distress of a Palestinian woman lamenting the loss of her family—as expressed in the lines “bloodied sand bits scalp ooze” (13)—is related to the fear experienced by people living in Bombay under permanent threat—as suggested by the sound explosions “bomb bay bomb bay bomb bay bomb bay” (14)—and to the sense of abandonment that overpowered the Katrina refugees (in large part African-Americans) in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane that hit New Orleans. Their hopeless condition, conveyed through the words “there is no wading in this water / a body can be polluted inside and out” (14), echoes the distress of Palestinians in the Deheisha camp as well as the sense of abandonment of Iraqi children in Baghdad “fall[ing] in love with the soldiers killing them / ... wish[ing] for something to follow / a star an idea called hope sick it sounds” (15).

Far from getting caught in sterile oppositions such as East/West, Middle East/America, violence/security, misery/good life, Hammad successfully links experiences and histories across racial, cultural, and national boundaries, thereby refusing to consider her experience as unique and therefore “exceptional.” Warning us against the danger of a self-centered approach and highlighting the power of “contrastive correlation and comparative differentiation” (648) to pursue mutual recognition, Kadir writes: “Absent the comparative, all recognition, then, devolves into self-recognition in the purified rhetoric of the tribe and in the pellucid mirror of the self, in which the tribal acquires universality” (650). Hammad, I contend, successfully eludes this danger by turning her attention to the different

manifestations of global violence, which involves us all, albeit in different degrees, and by relating her grief to the one of distant Others.

Far from abandoning herself to feelings of hopelessness, resignation, and passivity, Hammad uses her poetry to inaugurate “a new trajectory of affects” (Butler, 2009) based on mutual concern, human empathy, and solidarity. In doing so, she brings alternative, intimate affects into the public domain and endows them with a political significance. The poem closes with the speaker waiting for a “storm,” a clear metaphor for change and rebirth; in addition to that, at the center of the poem, Hammad places the delicate image of her baby niece sleeping in her mother’s arms and being fed by her, thereby contributing to constructing an atmosphere of regained harmony, solidarity, and unity:

(exactly brooklyn)

my niece sleeps light

my sister feeds her her body

my clan holds one breath (14)

Through the image of her baby niece sleeping gracefully and calmly in her mother’s arms, Hammad mobilizes feelings of mutual trust, affection, and hope; the term “clan,” normally a synonym standing for violent faction or tribe, is here rewritten in more positive terms to indicate a group of women linked together by mutual care and by a shared understanding of human life as “one breath.” By reserving a central position to this powerful image within her poem, Hammad rewrites the affective and the intimate as the radiating point from which every other dimension—including the public and political sphere—should be rethought. If, as Moustafa Bayoumi has recently argued (2014), the circulating politics of terror and fear “create a public that is not mobilized but atomized,” Hammad responds to the spreading disconnection and disaffection with the insurrectionary power of her poetry, which offers opportunities of connection and affective as well as political mobilization in the name of a shared brokenness. In her praise of Hammad’s collection, Afaa Micheal Weaver celebrates its gendered perspective and optimistic nuances, pointing out that “*breaking poems*...inform[s] the dreams of a world that honors woman and honors woman speaking her own voice, breaking the bonds of old worlds with bright moments, bright moments, bright moments.”<sup>11</sup> Extending Weaver’s praise, I believe that Hammad’s poetry not only provides us with moments of hope and clarity but also demands that

we take responsibility for past and present histories of oppression, suffering, and loss that have been silenced, covered up, and ignored.

**Joan Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda or She Who Will Lose her Name*  
The Caribbean as a Site of “Rupture and Connection”**

Weaver’s praise of the bright moments that Hammad’s poems realize is particularly useful, I believe, to introduce the third and last text I explore in this article, namely Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda or She Who Will Lose Her Name* (2008). An African-Caribbean writer and scholar based in Britain, Anim-Addo rewrites Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko* (1688) in the form of an opera libretto, thereby situating herself “within the context of a recent tradition of anglophone African-Caribbean writing and re-writing” (Anim-Addo 81-82). *Imoinda* is a creolized text, in Glissant’s terms, a “non-uniform whole” traversed by “sudden changes of tone” and “continuous breaks in the narrative” (85). In her heterogeneous and transnational text, Anim-Addo rewrites the traumatic history of transatlantic slavery from the perspective of her female protagonist, the princess Imoinda. Writing back to a whole tradition that has historically represented African women as silent Others, Anim-Addo depicts Imoinda as a heroic yet also profoundly broken character; a fearless and self-assertive woman, who goes against local conventions and traditional patriarchal rules by refusing to marry the man her father has chosen for her, Imoinda is sold into slavery and forcibly transplanted to the Caribbean. Reflecting on her own reconfiguration of Imoinda’s figure, Anim-Addo underlines her innovative perspective and explains: “While Behn’s Imoinda is without agency, functioning mainly as a device in the narrative, Imoinda, as I recognize her, is used to making choices and having her will. Her actions, in this perspective, are implicated in the breaking of family and community taboos which lead to her banishment alongside Oko” (83).

In the course of the narration, Imoinda’s initial “day-dreaming” suddenly metamorphoses on board of *The Greenwich* (the slaveship that will forcibly transfer her from Africa to the Caribbean) into a dark and hopeless nightmare. On this “nightmare canoe,” Imoinda is overwhelmed by feelings of fear, despair, and nostalgia; her beating heart, which reminds her of the African drum, painfully brings her back to the African continent, from which she has been uprooted:

IMOINDA:

Heart drum. Heart drum. Hush.

Hush or explode. Can one body bear more?

Heart drum, heart drum hush.

Sound mocks me. Silence is a new friend now.  
Heart drum hush, lie still, hush up  
unless, unless you are the talking drum,  
silent messenger from a world known once  
now struck dumb, dumbstruck by cold misfortune (90)

Through incantatory repetitions and a clear rhythmical pattern, cadenced by the beat of Imoinda’s heart coupled with that of the African drums, Anim-Addo conveys feelings of exhaustion, terror, and suffocated despair. On the slaveship, Imoinda and the other slaves are “stripped and whipped” (90), “raped,” “tossed and dashed and tossed again” (96); the violence and vexations they suffer during the crossing, however, are just a mere anticipation of the hardships and alienation they will endure in the plantation. The following scene, focusing on Prince Oko being sarcastically ridiculed by the Overseer, deprived of his humanity, and reduced to a number and merchandise, is particularly telling in this sense:

OVERSEER:

Your wife? You have papers to prove this?  
That mark upon your shoulder  
says you are slave number one o one,  
the property of this plantation.  
Even the fingers on your hands  
you cannot claim.

All were purchased by another. (118)

Anim-Addo documents here the dispossession, loss, and alienation that African slaves—among others—endured in the Caribbean plantation system; her libretto, as Giovanna Covi argues, is “an ethical-political choice first of all” (12), as Anim-Addo succeeds in giving back through her rewriting the humanity that enslaved Africans had been deprived of. In line with Glissant’s interpretation of the plantation as a harsh reality where nonetheless “forms of humanity stubbornly resisted” (65), in her creolized text, Anim-Addo celebrates life, the stubborn survival of African heritage, and the crucial role of women in preserving and transmitting the collective memory. The following lines exemplify my statement:



IMOINDA:

What we remember, the whip can't undo.

.....

ESTEIZME:

Yes. Always, there is something we can do.

Remember and this will see us through. (96, 98)

Anim-Addo rereads here the history of transatlantic slavery from a gendered perspective and rewrites the plantation as a crucial nodal point, that is “a site of memory that cannot be thought in non networked form” (Cooppan 617). Praising Anim-Addo’s feminist and resistant rewriting, Covi insists on the innovative perspective she proposes in her *libretto* and argues: “To the triumph of virility and the extolling of the virtues of male warriors, the opera libretto opposes the triumph of birth and the celebration of memory” (101). Accordingly, in the closing scene, Imoinda gives birth to a baby-girl and proudly declares:

IMOINDA:

Though this be only life of sorts

They shall not have the final victory.

I have chosen life. (154)

In *Imoinda*, Anim-Addo engages in cultural, linguistic, and intersemiotic translations and narrates the tragic but also resistant history of the Caribbean archipelago and its people. Reflecting on the forces that pushed her to rewrite Imoinda’s story, she explains: “More important than the individual, however, was the writing of ‘our’ story, that of the Caribbean. In this narrative, the woman is central” (86). In her libretto, Anim-Addo interestingly chronicles the brutality of transatlantic slavery together with the vitality of African peoples and of their creolized heritage; in doing so, she rewrites the Caribbean as a “contact zone” (Pratt) or, in Glissant’s terms, a place of “rupture and connection” (151). Anim-Addo’s opera brings to the fore both these complementary dimensions; the result is a creolized text which provides readers with the opportunity to listen/read/watch the history of transatlantic slavery from a completely new perspective, that of an anglophone African-Caribbean woman writing within the borders of the British nation and tirelessly attempting to extend those same national

boundaries, by weaving an intricate transnational tale/history of cultural contact, violent clashes, and irremediable loss. Writing on the *The Thousand and One Nights* (2013), as an exemplary case of how cultural forms travel across national, cultural, and racial borders, Marina Warner explains: “Contact or translation zones may be flashpoints for conflict and indeed fields of protracted oppression, but they are also areas of mingling and interfusion, of a process of Creolisation” (26).

A creolized narrative that resists closure, Anim-Addo’s libretto describes the complex, heterogeneous, and slippery reality and history of the Caribbean, bringing together and contrapuntually reading the histories of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Far from providing us with easy solutions or the illusion that the wrongs of the past can be easily fixed, Anim-Addo shakes our consciousness with feelings of outrage, compassion, and indignation, knowing very well that—as Margaret Urban Walker makes clear—“we are never in positions to begin at the very beginning with utterly fresh pages or perfectly balanced scales. We need lively imagination but also realism and humility about the powers and limits of moral repair” (124-125). Through the act of recovering and rewriting a forgotten/imposed/silenced History, Anim-Addo translates in her work the frustration of a contemporary African-Caribbean writer, who still witnesses in today’s societies forms of discrimination and oppression of all sorts; and yet, she further instills in that same text the dreams of a poet, who has not yet given up her faith in humanity and stubbornly believes in the possibility of imagining and building more inclusive and less violent societies, cultures, and histories.

### **The Potential of Creolization in Recovering Forgotten Histories and Negotiating Shared Futures**

The three creolized texts at the center of this article foreground the intercultural contacts and exchanges but also the conflicts and ruptures traversing today’s metropolises and more in general our globalized world; they further shed light on examples of global violence as well as on planetary networks of solidarity, thus rewriting our present as a site traversed by potentially productive as well as destructive tensions. All three artists analysed in this essay dive into a dark and painful archive of violent and most of the time forgotten histories and narratives; they reemerge from that darkness with powerful and resistant stories that claim recognition and point to bright futures. Crisis, in their works, is reframed as a painful critical condition but also as an opportunity to rethink the present together with others and envision an alternative, hopefully less violent, and more inclusive future. If terrorism, as Sunaina Maira has recently argued (2014), has been converted into a “technology of nation making,” then the artists at the center of this study counter and subvert such technology directed at fostering divisions by deploying alternative narratives that promote recognition and mutual care

instead of terror, affective proximity and solidarity instead of separation. All three artists tirelessly look for and foreground convergences within a transnational structure of global violence and support forms of solidarity across historical, cultural, religious, and national borders. As a consequence, the radical Other in their texts emerges not as a marginal entity but rather as a fundamental actor of the public and political domains, a nodal point that connects distant geographical places, discrepant and so far unrelated histories. In light of the crucial position played by the radical Other in these texts, I wish to ask: How do the US and British nations look like from the liminal/central position of the radical Other that these texts embody and foreground? They certainly appear more messy and entangled than we might have imagined, wrapped up as they are within complex webs of relations extending across cultures and nations. From the position of the radical Other, the Arab world appears hardly separate from the US; the Caribbean archipelago is not much far from Britain. Of course, also the reverse is true. The three artists addressed in this article indeed show us that each specific location on the globe is part of a nexus of worldwide relations, a nodal point within a network of multiple connections; each one in her own distinctive way outlines in her text an alternative geography, in which continents, nations, cities and individuals are not separated but rather in contact. By representing Arab and Caribbean cultures as well as US and British nations as precariously situated on an unstable equilibrium, the artists at the center of this article further shift the very ground on which dominant cultures are located, by revealing to us their inner tensions and potential points of rupture. In “Changing Perceptions,” Zughuib challenges cultural divides and disrupts structures of inequality, providing viewers with creolized, and therefore complex, multichrome, and carnivalesque representations of Arab (-American) women, cultures, and societies. In *breaking poems*, Hammad links the painful history of Palestinian refugees to the dramatic experience of members belonging to other oppressed and unprivileged groups in the US, India, and Asia. Finally, in *Imoinda*, Anim-Addo brings together the histories of Africa, Europe, and the Americas, contributing to a rethinking of traditional binaries such as Self/Other, center/periphery, local/global, minor/dominant, and inviting us to reconsider these terms not as antithetical but rather as complementary entities.

Reflecting on the transnational turn in literary studies and on the power relations that structure both the real world and the world of theory, Vijay Prashad provocatively asks: “Is transnationalism another way to bring American concepts abroad? Is it absorbed un-problematically [outside the US]?” I believe that the three artists addressed in this essay show us, through their translations and their being translated, that transnational cultural flows do not follow merely a one-way trajectory but rather

multiple and ramified directions that contribute to the dissemination but also to the radical disruption and re-conceptualization of histories, terms, and theorizations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Writing on the distinction between transnationalism and diaspora, Rainer Bauböck argues that diaspora differs from transnationalism for its “focus on the politics of passion” (319) and thus for its intrinsically affective dimension. See Rainer Bauböck, “Cold Constellations and Hot Identities: Political Theory Questions About Transnationalism and Diaspora.” *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Eds. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010. 295-321.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the artist, see Zughaib’s personal website [www.hzughuib.com](http://www.hzughuib.com) and her article “Stories My Father Told Me: The Personal Narrative in Visual Art,” in *Etching Our Own Image. Voices Within the Arab American Art Movement*. Eds. Anan Ameri and Holly Arida. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. See also Maja Majzoub interesting article “Homecoming Queen: Gouache Goddess Helen Zughaib returns Home After 35-years Hiatus.” *RAGMAG* (August 2010): 36-8.

<sup>3</sup> The powerful and subversive force of the carnivalesque, first theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin with reference to the medieval Feast of Fools and the works of Rabelais, has been recently reconsidered, among others, by Egyptian scholar Samia Mehrez with reference to the Tahrir Revolution. See Samia Mehrez, ed. *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*. Cairo: American University Cairo Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The dichotomy minor/dominant is highly ambivalent in the case of Zughaib as well as of the other artists discussed in this paper. She indeed belongs to a “signifying minority” within the American nation yet also enjoys a privileged and therefore dominant status by virtue of her American citizenship and location with respect to more marginal Others.

<sup>5</sup> In 2011, the city of London inaugurated the Shubbak Festival, a biennial event that functions as “a window on contemporary Arab culture” and celebrates the ways in which the Arab and the British cultures fruitfully and creatively interact with each other. For more information on the festival, see [www.shubbak.co.uk](http://www.shubbak.co.uk)

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Gualtieri, among others, has drafted a thorough and provocative study on the ways in which Early Syrian Americans have been racially constructed in the US. Their racial status, she contends, has shifted unevenly between the categories of “white” and “non-white,” causing them to become easy targets for forms of racial discrimination and episodes of lynching. See Sarah M. A. Gualtieri. *Between Arab and White. Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Salah D. Hassan refers, in particular, to the diatribe about the song “Arab Money” by African American rapper Busta Rhymes, which reinforces the cliché of the boasting Arab man showing off his oil money. After vehement criticism, a second version called “Arab Money, Remix 1” appeared. Montreal based Arab rapper The Narcicyst responded to the attacks with the song “The Real Arab Money.”

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<sup>8</sup> I want to underline here what I call the African-American group is in fact a highly heterogeneous and internally diversified group.

<sup>9</sup> Analyzing a poem by Paul Celan, Derrida has convincingly demonstrated the efficacy of a fragmentary poem, whose intrinsic indecision and interruptions keep the reader vigil, engage him/her with the poem, and give a sense of urgency to the entire composition. See Jacques Derrida, *Béliers. Le dialogue interrompu: entre deux infinis, le poème*. Paris: Galilée, 2003, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> In her provocative paper “Transnational 9/11 Memorials: Mapping the Geographies of American Affective and Political Cultures,” Erika Doss shows how the US have successfully managed to extend their geo-political hegemony to the domain of affects. Her argument originates from a careful analysis and critical interrogation of what she calls “9/11 memorial mania,” which has successfully spread around the globe.

<sup>11</sup> This quote is taken from the back cover of the 2008 edition.

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