English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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Suheir Hammad, “What I Will” and “(break) clustered”

https://www.ted.com/talks/suheir_hammad_poems_of_war_peace_women_power?language=en

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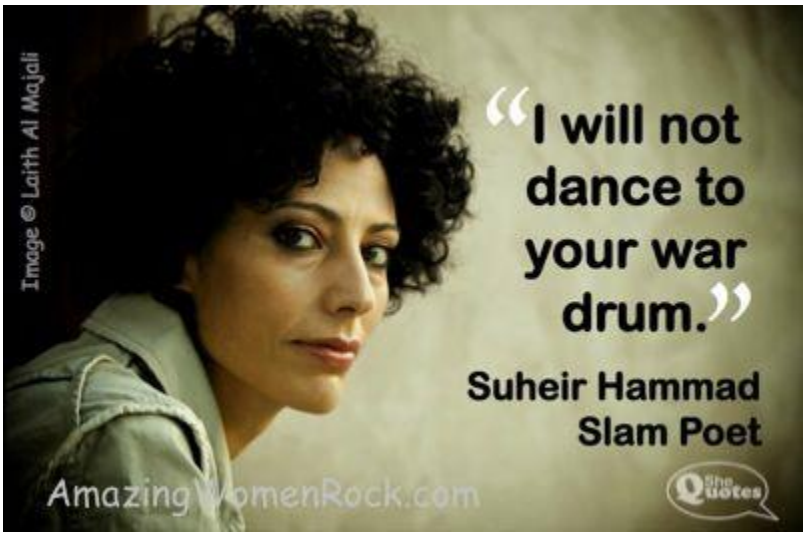
The title of our first poem, “What I Will,” offers you some assistance, keying you to an important problem and question at the heart of the poem: Hammad sees herself engaged in a contest of *wills*, her will against the almost overwhelming will of those who not only prosecute wars but also seduce a nation into the celebratory affirmation of war.

Note how Hammad doesn’t point to a specific war even if, in the end, it proves impossible not to treat the American response to the 9/11 attacks as the most important context for her text. She does sometimes perform spoken-word poems that single out particular armed conflicts (and inevitably, when she does, it creates controversy—an intelligent and articulate woman speaking against war in the most militarized nation on the planet is going to create controversy)--but in this poem, as in “(break) clustered,” she is more troubled by the murderous and impoverishing conditions of all the wars unfolding around her. These include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which her parents were swept up when the state of Israel was created in 1948, as well as the War on Terror led by the country—America--to which her family finally immigrated as refugees. Specific wars can be Hammad’s focus, as I say, but in these two poems the focus is instead on a more pervasive warring condition. They inhabit and explore the origins and effects of an ambient culture of violence. War is her subject rather than individual wars, a focus she ensures by being careful not to name a specific war.



In “What I Will,” Hammad invites us to consider not the war on the ground as it were, not the drone attacks on enemy combatants and civilians in Afghanistan, for example, nor the use of I.E.D. explosives to kill American soldiers in places like Iraq. Her poem does not dwell on Israeli Defence Force tank attacks on the West Bank; nor does it speak of rockets fired by Hamas into Israeli cities. Instead, the poem zeroes in on a political atmosphere that calls for war and that makes war seem like the only path to the future. In the post-9/11 world, i.e., in the understandably angry and sorrowful aftermath of the terror attacks, Americans like Hammad worry that amid all the sadness, bewilderment, and rage, a thirst for revenge has overtaken the country at the precise moment when what is called for most is a sharpened critical imagination, a visionary’s insight into what is actually happening. Note that Hammad realizes that bloodthirstiness, i.e., the belief that violence can only be met by a greater violence and that vengeance is better than justice, is not a feeling that spontaneously erupts in her fellow citizens. It is instead something into which citizens are schooled or trained or seduced. The music of war is broadcasted on all channels all the time, so it can seem almost impossible to resist its beat. How does she capture that insight?

As always with poems, the answers lie in the language Hammad taps into and sounds out. Note the particular metaphor to which she repeatedly turns in the poem, the metaphor that helps knit the poem together: “everyone” around her “dances” to the beat and the rhythms of “your drummed up war.” That metaphor of a war dance and the war rhythm is in play in almost every verse of the poem, which is Hammad’s way of nudging you towards these questions: Why would a poet craft that comparison or analogy? What work does that metaphor accomplish? Metaphors are always challenges to thinking, one of the most important resources of language available to a poet and a primary way to encourage you to think differently and to think otherwise. Since the ancient Greeks, we’ve known about the strangely compelling power of music and rhythm. The great Greek philosopher, Plato (some of you may have considered some of his work while in high school), points out that certain kinds of music have the power of kidnapping you, and of carrying you outside of yourself or even, as he says, leading you to “betray your truest self.” It’s one thing to make a fool of yourself at a concert. That’s a joyfully affirming way in which to abandon yourself to someone else’s music. But what if the music is *martial*? What if vengeance is made to feel irresistible, necessary and even, in some odd way, *pleasurable*? How does an otherwise rational, decent people come to the point in which they find joy in the thought of killing others? Who taps into that joy and uses it to make excuses for more war? How impoverished or distracted or perverted does the imagination need to be such that we dance on the graves of others? One kind of beat in the world calls for dumbly happy obedience. But another kind of beat, called “poetry” or more broadly, “literature,” is designed to bring you to your senses. Hammad looks around her, listening to a nation’s leaders and a nation’s media call for revenge and compares these calls to a kind of mesmerizing music. Fellow citizens who might otherwise know better are taking a kind of perverse delight in the sounds of the war drum. “Everyone” around her, it sometimes seems, has fallen into a kind of swaying

trance. But look at how Hammad characterizes this dancing: it is, as she says, "lifeless." Go back and listen attentively to how she performs that verse: "It is life less." Hammad pronounces each syllable with a certain deliberation, slowing the pace of her poem down, as if to register in her own language the deadening beat of the war drums. The lifelessness of that music, its deadly weight, drags her poem almost to a stop. Why then does she break up the word "lifeless" into what sounds like two words, "life" and "less"? In her performance she says "life," then pauses for a millisecond, and then says "less." The war drums encourage others to dance about, so that on the surface they seem alive, quickened by the beat and by the prospect of inflicting a beating on others. Those who dance the dance of death do look like they are alive, that they have a kind of life. But what looks lively and spritely, what is quickening the hearts of a now bloodthirsty nation, only *seems* like life, like liveliness. In truth, the war dance is all about death, not life. It is without life. "It is life-less." The rhythms of the call for war drown out other kinds of music, for example, the music of those who call instead for thoughtful reflection, critical thinking, i.e., for acts of imagination. "What I Will" is *itself* an expression of that dissenting imagination, an example of what it means to use the imagination to think differently. Like all poems, Hammad's work combines pleasure, a pleasure in sounding the depths of language, with difficult thinking. The phrase "I will" is used many times in the poem, repeated so as to bring home that Hammad still possesses a "will," and that her "I" has not been swept away like the crowds around her, who dance and sway to the rhythms of the call for violence and the call to take pleasure in that violence.

Crowds celebrating the killing of Osama bin Laden.

This poem is a spoken-word poem so it is a *performance*. Because it is a performance, it is important to watch and listen to exactly how Hammad stages the poem, how she puts the resources of her voice, hands, breath and body to work in making the poem work and thus how she is present to her own poetry and in fact a vital part of that poetry. As I said in class, in spoken-word poetry, the poem and the poet work together and together create something more than the sum of its parts. And in a poem that relies so heavily on the metaphor of rhythms and beats, it stands to reason to pay close attention to its *own* rhythms and beats. As I've said before in class, poetry calls upon repetition and rhyme, among other things, to pace itself; poems have their own clock or timing, so to speak, and this is one of the ways in which they carve out a space in the world that is so often at odds with the clocks and timing of that world. Listen to the poem, looking out for those moments where Hammad alters the poem's timing. For example, consider the verse "I will not be played." What happens to the sound of the poem, its beat, at that moment? Why does Hammad change the poem slightly at that moment? "Every one can be wrong" is another verse in which the poem's pacing or timing changes. Listen for it. What change do you hear? Why there?

The poem is woven together by a series of "I will nots" and "I wills." There are many more "will nots" than "wills." Why? How does that manipulation of sound and sense capture the spirit of the poem? Each time Hammad says "I will not" she points us towards something in particular that others are doing but that she refuses to do. So a big part of grappling with this poem is understanding what it is precisely that Hammad is speaking forcefully against. Draw up a list of those things as you consider the poem. One of these disavowals, these acts of saying "*no!*," for example, is:

I will not mourn the dead with murder nor suicide.

There's a great deal compressed into this verse. That means that the poem is inviting you to respond, using your own imagination! And in using your own imagination, you demonstrate that you aren't one of those "lifeless" zombies dancing to the war drum. What does it mean to mourn through killing others or killing oneself? How does grief, the painful response to loss, result in violence against others or against oneself? Hammad looks around her and sees grief, sees mourning. War violence leaves nothing but devastation . . . and those who survive it and must endure all that loss. Hammad does not say that she does not mourn. She says that she will not mourn in a very particular way, namely express grief by inflicting harm on others or herself. All around her, she feels the pressure to mourn in this particularly depleting way. In characterizing the war-mongers and those seduced into war violence as suffering a form of grief, Hammad acknowledges that behind those beating the drums of war, behind those who are drumming up war and drummed up by war, real human beings endure the anguish of enormous loss. Hammad is sickened by those who take pleasure in war and who are swept up by war-fever . . . but that doesn't prevent her from seeing that behind the violence there is a very human frailty operating in the background, namely the struggle to live with loss, to make the pain of a terrible hurt go away. A country suffers catastrophic attacks, and chooses to respond to that injury by inflicting injury on others. In a sense, it doesn't matter who gets injured. What matters is that someone gets injured. That's the war "psychology" against which Hammad struggles. Perhaps if the war dancers saw that grief lay at the heart of their vengefulness, they might come again to see themselves as human again, i.e., as vulnerable and fragile as those they seek to kill. Perhaps if they realized that they were striking out at others out of

a poorly understood grief they would jettison the desire to become "lifeless" automatons, puppets swaying to someone else's music. Perhaps. What then to do with loss *other* than kill, kill oneself, kill oneself in order to kill others (as in the case of suicide-attacks), or be killed? Perhaps by murdering others in a war hysteria, a vengeful nation effectively kills *itself*, snuffs out its spirit of hope and life. A nation that is intoxicated with killing and vengeance murders itself. Cherishing corpses means living in a culture of death. One thing is clear: there are completely other ways to mourn, including crafting and performing a spoken-word poem like "What I will" or "(break) clustered." Truth-telling overcomes flag-waving: that is Hammad's wager.

The poem ends with the verse, "Your war drum ain't louder than this breath." But the poem does not conclude there. Hammad pauses for one beat . . . and then takes a deep breath. Why? How is breath and breathing put to work in the poem?

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"(break) clustered" is another poem by Hammad performed against war and against a pervasive culture of war. If you read the poem closely, you'll see that war and war culture are evoked by the poem in at least four ways:

1) There is war on the ground, the wars in which soldiers, mostly boys, die. Notice that Hammad insists upon the fact that war consumes *youth*s in particular, an insight that William Blake had about the wars being fought by Britons in the 1790s. Wars then, as now, are disproportionately fought by young people, often in places whose populations are made up mostly of young people. It is mostly youth who kill and are killed. Sons, children, boys: those are the words that Hammad uses in some of the poem's opening lines. Why?

2) War implicates women in particular ways. Hammad's poem refuses to characterize women as "collateral" damage, as the horrible expression goes, a war-word that Hammad rejects in "What I Will." They are real individuals who collectively and individually suffer war violence. At the dark heart of this poem, Hammad lists some of the specific ways women endure that violence, repeating the phrase "One woman," as if trying to add up the destruction and pain. But there is no way to add it all up, for the losses are incalculable. The "best" that Hammad can do at this point in the poem is enumerate those losses ("One women," and another "woman," and another "woman"), not unlike the names of the dead inscribed into the black granite of the Vietnam War Memorial in Komunyakaa's poem, "Facing It." In that poem, the poet gets to the unreal number of 58,022 but knows that counting the dead doesn't come close to accounting for the losses on the battlefield, in the homeland, and in the hearts of those who, by some miracle or trick of fate, have survived. Hammad keeps us focussed on the specific ways women suffer war, often all but forgotten when your focus is instead on what soldiers are doing and enduring. But in this poem women also stand metaphorically for the horrors endured by all non-combatants, men, women, and children, in wars that know no boundaries. After all, civilian casualties out-number military casualties in most armed conflicts and have since the days of William Blake. The boundary between combatants and non-combatants is itself a casualty of

modern war, in which everyone and everything is a treated as a target. But as Hammad notes, in the homeland and abroad, wars inflict terrible damage on women, "one woman" at a time.

3) A culture of militarism or the culture of war forms and deforms our understanding and experience of war. Hammad says that the "language" of war will not and cannot "math" her. But her poem acknowledges that that language forcefully shapes how others think of war. For example, the death of soldiers is "galvanized." Of course, the dead are not literally "galvanized," so this is another example of a metaphor that summons you to think. To galvanize is to sheath something in a protective layer, often metallic. What is it that Hammad is evoking for us here? The bodies of the Canadian and American war dead, assuming that their remains are recovered, are flown home in metal caskets. Not all nations are in a position to collect their war dead in this way. But Hammad is on to something else. What is it about our culture that transforms the dead in the way that the metaphor of galvanization suggests? Does galvanizing the dead protect the dead from being seen and understood in more complicated ways? In their metal caskets, are the metaphorically shielded from a more thoughtful reflection on the war that took their lives? Galvanize also means to shock someone into taking action. What actions do seeing the galvanized dead trigger? Hammad provides a richly suggestive answer to that question in the very next verse. "We cherish corpses." --A ghoulish idea, but also a challenge to you to think about the dead in new ways. Notice right away that Hammad does not say "We cherish the dead." You might expect the word "the dead," but instead we get the word "corpses." What is the difference here? And what can it mean that we live in a war culture that schools us into cherishing—adoring and nurturing--war-torn bodies. Are we passionately attached to war and to the deadly "harvest" of war? ("Harvesting" is the metaphor with which the poem brings itself to a conclusion, after all.) If we cherish corpses, what hope is there for loving the living?

4) The warring world is the world in which Hammad lives and in which she performs her poem. So when she says "<u>We</u> cherish corpses" she signals to us that she too is part of that strangeness, caught up in its strange but often compelling ways of thinking about war. She is part of that "we," not remotely distant from that "we." But "we" also do something else. The very next verse, in fact, points out that "<u>We</u> mourn women, complicated." "We" are thus not one single thing, but a mixture of things, a people who fall prey to falling in love with killing and making excuses for war, but also a people capable of experiencing and expressing grief for others, "women" in particular. "We mourn women, complicated" is a deliberately ambiguous verse and thus an invitation to thought: it can mean that the women "we mourn" are complicated, i.e., a challenge to understand or comprehend. There is no "one woman" but instead many different women, enduring wars in many different ways and places; but the phrase can also mean that mourning itself is complicated. Mourning is complicated and makes loss a complicated thing. In either case, Hammad's poem affirms a place for complication against the war narratives that insist on *simplifying* war, protecting it from questions and criticism, and so galvanizing it.

Hammad is herself a woman who is a kind of casualty. She too is caught up in the "contraction" and "malignancy" of what she calls "humanity." Biographically speaking, she came from a family

displaced into several countries by war; she writes and performs in a post-9/11 world engaged in a perpetual war; she grew up in the most militarized country on the planet. So war is bound to have permeated her. And it has. The poem's fragmented quality captures that fact. List some of the ways in which the poem unfolds in a fragmented manner. Hammad herself says several times and in several different ways that she is a strange mixture, at once broken and an assemblage or cluster of ill-fitted parts. Look for how she evokes those parts: light/darkness, sound/silence, sickness/health, tenderness/violence, form/storm, blindness/sight, exploded/unexploded, running to human beings/running from human beings, absence/presence. The poem also switches or "breaks" restlessly between intensely personal remarks ("Blind, ign'ant—still am" "Ign'ant:" notice here that she adopts the language or dialect of the Brooklyn neighborhood in which she grew up. Why? To what effect?), on the one hand, and searing images of the annihilating effects of global armed conflict. Trace these oppositions in the poem. Be prepared to be able to discuss the details of these "breaks." Trace the ways in which she frankly acknowledges the fact that she is speaking from a very complicated place. For an American like Hammad, the wars are fought elsewhere, but they have come home. No. They have *always* been home. They are a part of the homeland. And for millions of individuals, there is no homeland because the wars have forced them to flee. In any case, the wars sunder her and sunder the lives of other women, each time differently. How does the poem capture that experience in sound and in sense, form and content?

War has always been with her and she has always been with it. How does Hammad put that fact to us? Notice how often she returns to a curious notion: she has never been free from war, never been innocent of it, never "pure." Consider her use of the metaphor of being "spoiled." Using this metaphor, she compares herself metaphorically to a piece of fruit. But note how strange this fruit is. It was never ripe and then got spoiled; *it was spoiled from the start*. Here Hammad resists the temptation to think that once upon a time she lived an innocent life, free from the effects of war. That life is only a fiction, not unlike the illusory "perfect" world behind the walls in Justice's sonnet. As we saw in that poem, "the woman" is the first among the inhabitants of Eden to see that this perfection was never perfect, that it was in fact a spoiled place from the start . . . although the angels have tried to keep the inhabitants from seeing any of that spoiling. (What does Blake say about "spoiling" in "The Chimney Sweeper"?) And like that woman, Hammad doesn't for one moment regret not being able to fall back on the illusion of an uncomplicated life. She unfurls her wings amid the complication, as sorrowful and hurtful as it is.

"Childhood" is often thought to be an Edenic place, although Blake's poetry reminds us to be very careful not to idealize childhood and forget how vulnerable it is. In Hammad's poem, childhood is like a jar of "salted lemon." What do make of this metaphor? "Salted lemon" is a jarred preserve, a savoury treat in a pretty or "enamel" container. Why would Hammad characterize childhood in this way?

Hammad not only marshals the considerable resources of language to capture what it means to be complicated and to be living and performing in a war-torn place; she also suggests that it is *precisely* because she is complicated and living in a broken time that she has the ability and the motivation to speak and to speak up. She sees things, she can "experience exponentially" not in spite of the brokenness of her world but *because* of it. What is it that she sees?

"Don't want to be missed," she says, referring to the experience of refugees . . . and those refugees include her, after all. As we see in "What I Will," the capacity to mourn or grieve loss is for Hammad centrally important. "We mourn each one/Or we mean nothing at all." Without the affirming and nurturing the capacity to grieve loss, and not only our own loss, but—and this is really important—the losses of *others*, the losses, for example, of women in war, then we drown in nothingness and meaninglessness. But to mourn someone else's death, we must see them as worthy of being grieved. And so the question this part of the poem poses is this: when the lives and deaths of others no longer feel grievable, when others are treated as mere fodder for war, when others die and go unnamed and unremembered, what hope can there be? War perpetuates itself and intensifies when "we" are schooled into believing that "they" aren't worthy of being grieved. When we dance on the graves of others, "we" are saying publically that the dead are unworthy of being grieved. We are saying that their deaths, if they are acknowledged at all, are to be celebrated pleasurably. "What I will" teaches us that reacting to loss, for example, a terror attack, with killing, "we" kill ourselves. Without acknowledging our own losses or the losses of others, we sow the ground with explosives. Grief "smoulders," as Hammad says; it continues to burn beneath the surface, threatening at any moment suddenly to flare up and consume everyone, friend and enemy, "us" and "them." Hammad instead calls for grief to be expressed and losses, all losses, to be acknowledged. If not, we create an ever more dangerous world, a world filled with "cluster bombs left behind."

I use the metaphor of "sowing," i.e., planting and growing, because that's the strange metaphor with which the poem brings itself to a conclusion. Consider the dark "harvest" that Hammad evokes in the poem's last lines, a churned up world of body parts ("baby teeth"), weapons ("bombs"), and hopes ("salvation," "redemption") among other things, all of it burned to ash, leaving only "smoke." Even the "witness" is threatened; it can seem that there is no one left to testify to the atrocities and destruction that are taking place, so total are the wars. Imagine that nightmare, a war so consuming that no one, or hardly anyone, is left to tell the story of all those who suffered and died. Imagine a war so complete that all the witnesses are killed. At the start of the poem, Hammad had described the violence around her as "creative," meaning that the imagination had in some sense been conscripted to war, and that a dark spirit activated or quickened war, the result of which is a toxic "harvest."

All that Hammad can do at this point in the poem is to tell herself and her listeners to "breathe." And that is what she does. And then she adds a short suggestion as a way of effecting closure in the poem. The poem has earned the right to offer a lesson at its conclusion. "If you must fear" something, she counsels, adopting the voice of the teacher, "fear the unexploded." --A

wonderfully ambiguous last verse! It points in several directions at once. For example, it means fear the bombs that have yet to detonate. Fear the suffering and death and loss that has gone unacknowledged or unrecognized, for those things may suddenly return in the form of murderous violence. Fear what we have sown in the ground of other places and in the injured hearts of others. But "fear" may have another meaning here. Perhaps what "we" need to fear most is precisely the moment when "we" see that others, all others, friend and enemy, are grievable, worthy of mourning. To resist the temptation to dance on the graves of others, and instead to acknowledge that others feel grief and are worthy of grief, well, that would be to explode war, to wage war on war. The "unexploded" is the future that we still lack the courage and imagination to create. And until we find that courage and act on that imagination, it will only seem fearful to us.