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Notes on Craft: Writing in the Hour of Genocide

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What does Palestine require of us, as writers writing in English from within the imperial core, in this moment of genocide? I want to offer here some notes and some directions towards beginning to answer this question.

I.

Craft is a machine built to produce and reproduce ethical failures; it is a counterrevolutionary machine.

I use “Craft” here to describe the network of sanitizing influences exerted on writing in the English language: the influences of neoliberalism, of complicit institutions, and of the linguistic priorities of the state and of empire. Anticolonial writers in the U.S. and across the globe have long modeled alternative crafts which reject these priorities, and continue to do so in this present moment. Yet Craft still haunts our writing; these notes aim to clarify it, so we can rid ourselves of its influence.

Above all, Craft is the result of market forces; it is therefore the result of imperial forces, as the two are so inextricably bound up together as to be one and the same. The Craft which is taught in Western institutions, taken up and reproduced by Western publishers, literary institutions, and awards bodies, is a set of regulatory ideas which curtail forms of speech that might enact real danger to the constellation of economic and social values which are, as I write this, facilitating genocide in Palestine and elsewhere across the globe. If, as Audre Lorde taught us, the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house, then Craft is the process by which our own real liberatory tools are dulled, confiscated, and replaced. We believe our words sharper than they turn out to be. We play with toy hammers and think we can break down concrete. We think a spoon is a saw.

In the title poem of Solmaz Sharif’s collection *Look*, she writes:

Whereas

Well, if I were from your culture, living in this country,
said the man outside the 2004 Republican National
Convention, *I would put up with that for this country;*
Whereas I felt the need to clarify: You would put up with
TORTURE, you mean and he proclaimed: *Yes;*

In a lecture, Sharif describes the erasure and reduction the poem demanded of this moment, which we might also understand to be the demands of Craft. What the poem simplified into that brief section existed in real life as a prolonged encounter of violent rhetoric, and what the demands of the poem erased was the violence of a liberal protestor who stood by, ignored this encounter, and said to the Republican that while he didn’t agree with what he said, he knew he was a good person. Sharif calls this “the most violent betrayal and politically destructive decision this poem made me make, making me question whether a good poem is forever in fact irreconcilable with the nuanced reckoning our lives actually depend on.” All the qualities of Craft, the qualities which make a “good” poem, pressured this violence—the violence of the liberal American unwilling to put their body and their peace of mind on the line, a violence which might exist fundamentally outside the boundaries the lyric can address—into disappearing. Craft success is contingent upon ethical and political failure.

This is what Craft does to our writing: pressures and pressures until what matters, what we need to say, gets pushed to the margins or disappeared entirely. It is a Craft decision to describe Palestinians as human animals. It is a Craft decision to pressure U.S. officials not to use the word “ceasefire” or “de-escalation.” It is a Craft decision to describe Israelis as “children of light” and Palestinians as “children of darkness.” It is a Craft decision to begin interviews demanding Palestinians condemn violent resistance, a Craft decision to erase the perpetrators of bombings from headlines describing the bombings, a Craft decision to question the reliability of Palestinian death counts. These are Craft decisions because they are decisions which occur in language, and that language feeds and is in turn fed by policy. Somebody, with a name and an address, wrote, vetted, revised, and spoke aloud these words. The tools they used to do it, the ideologies which filled their vocabulary—these are Craft.

Craft is a machine for regulation, estrangement, sanitization. Palestine and all the struggles with which it is bound up require of us, in any and all forms of speech going forward, a commitment to constant and escalating betrayals of this machine. It requires that we poison and betray Craft at all turns.

II.

To write in solidarity with Palestine is to write amidst the long middle of revolution.

Between 1936 and 1939, Palestinian fellahin revolted against the economic deprivations imposed by the British Mandate and a growing Zionist movement in Palestine. Their revolt involved coordinated general strikes and violent resistance to the beginnings of ethnic cleansing and forced displacement. In response, the British instituted a set of policies which would become the 1945 “**Defence (Emergency) Regulations**”, which allowed British officers to bring about the full repressive strength of empire to bear on Palestinian peasantry to brutally destroy the revolt. After the Nakba, these regulations served as the basis for much of the state of Israel’s legal governmental structure.

For seventy-five years, then, Palestinians have existed—violent or not, political or not, active or not—in a state of revolt. We are legally defined as such; the law and its human enforcers

across the globe act accordingly. This means that as long as Palestinians have lived under the colonization of the Zionist state, and until Palestinians are no longer subject to a state whose definitional contours are premised on their existence as essentially threatening others, the revolt has been, and is, *in progress*. It is a daily lived thing, and Palestinians have always labored to define its shape for themselves: the Great Revolt, the First Intifada, the Second Intifada, the March of Return, the Unity Intifada, the myriad forms of resistance both minute and maximal, spontaneous and organized, armed and unarmed—these are part of the long and ongoing essential Intifada, a long and ongoing revolution that has taken many forms and will continue to evolve, and whose endpoint is liberation.

The Freedom Theater in Jenin refugee camp was founded by Juliano Mer Khamis and Zakaria Zubeidi in 2006, out of the rubble of the Stone Theater, which had been founded by Juliano's mother Arna and was destroyed by Israel. The Freedom Theater's work is premised in part on the notion that "the third Intifada will be a cultural one." Yet crucially, Juliano stressed: "What we are doing in the theatre is not trying to be a replacement or an alternative to the resistance of the Palestinians in the struggle for liberation, just the opposite. This must be clear." Palestine demands that all of us, as writers and artists, consider ourselves in principled solidarity with the long cultural Intifada that is built alongside and in collaboration with the

material Intifada. We are writing amidst its long middle; the page is a weapon.

III.

The long middle is the state of the dailiness, oppression so pervasive as to form an atmosphere we move through.

The long middle is not a condition of time; we might be nearer to the end of revolution than the beginning, we might be nearer liberation than defeat, but our experience and our actions exist within the frame we can see, the frame of the long middle. Liberation is the end, but it is a geographical end rather than a temporal one, a soil and not an hour. We move *towards* it—sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but always. It is the location by which we orient our movement. We know it because it gets closer, not necessarily because it comes sooner.

(And liberation moves too, it has its own sort of agency, it can dance a little, as you stare through the hole in the fence you've just cut you might feel a hand on your shoulder, someone standing by your side like a friend, liberation letting you know what it feels like, that you're going the right way.)

The long middle, then, is the affective experience of moving inside the dailiness, inside the structural and therefore constant violence that forms the machinery of genocide and greases its wheels. Yet this affective experience also is, or might be, one of a counter and opposing dailiness: the dailiness of resistance and unrelenting struggle. This counter-dailiness is modeled by Palestinians, whose struggle within the long middle takes an astonishing diversity of forms—forms of care, of tenderness, of violence, of ingenuity, resource, and survival.

This constant Intifada is the path through the long middle. Intifada is a shaking off of oppression, shaking it off like a layer of dust. This is a bodily action, to shake, to convulse oneself in a constant motion of refusal, to be clean in the face of the world. We will get tired. Our muscles will tear, and then get stronger. Someone falls, we pick them up. We fall, we are lifted by others. We must continue.

IV.

We must ask: what does this require of us, then—to write amidst the long middle of Intifada? What might it mean for how we approach the page as a front of the long war?

The Brazilian antifascist theatermaker Augusto Boal wrote, in *Theater of the Oppressed*, that traditional Aristotelian narrative structures are coercive tools of the bourgeoisie, serving to purge an audience's revolutionary emotion and with it the obligation to intervene in an unfolding narrative as an active participant. This coercion is intended to make us feel as though world-historical events are beyond our grasp, that we have no agency within them and should remain within the status quo, which is only the dailiness. As Boal argues:

“The poetics of Aristotle is the poetics of oppression: the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected, and all its values are imposed on the spectators, who passively delegate power to the characters to act and think in their

place. In so doing the spectators purge themselves of their tragic flaw—that is, of something capable of changing society. A catharsis of the revolutionary impetus is produced!”

This catharsis makes witnesses of us, and nothing else.

(We should be suspicious of “witness,” too. In the West, in English, a witness is only ever in service of the law, their testimony only meant to convince a judge. The words and the positions they require of us are already tainted; the law won’t save us, the law is the one that kills us.)

Palestine requires that we abandon this catharsis. Nobody should get out of our work feeling purged, clean. Nobody should live happily during the war. Our readers can feel that way when liberation is the precondition for our work, and not the dream. When it is the place we stand, and not the place we shake ourselves towards.

In this way, what the long middle of revolution requires, what Palestine requires, is an approach to writing whose primary purpose is to *gather others up with us*, to generate within them an energy which their bodies cannot translate into anything but revolutionary movement. This is what Boal modeled for us in his theatrical experiments, which were dedicated to

empowering audiences to *act*, to participate in a creative struggle to envision and embody alternatives. For Boal, theater was not revolution, but it was a rehearsal for the revolution, meant to gather communities together in that rehearsal. Creative work readies us for material work, by offering a space to try out strategies, think through contradictions, remind us of our own agency.

We must be engaged in this kind of writing, which calls others into mobilization, generating feelings within our audiences that cannot be dispersed through the act of reading, but must be carried out into collective action. You sit, you read something, you feel grief or anger or joy, you get it all out, you put it down, you go about business as usual—this is the coercive affective system that Craft insists upon. We must write in such a way that there is no business, there is no usual. We must write so that, as Boal says, “the action ceases to be presented in a deterministic manner, as something inevitable, as Fate... Everything is subject to criticism, to rectification. All can be changed, and at a moment’s notice.”

V.

The facilitation of this genocide is contingent upon the great discursive and material weapon of the West: the ontological categories of “terrorist” and “terrorism.”

We must remember that terrorism does not describe an objective reality; it is, like other pieces of language weaponized to murder, an ideological word used by ideological powers, with specific legislative and carceral bodies attached to its use.

C. Heike Schotten, in *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler-Colony*, offers us the only definition of terrorism that matters. She writes that the figure of the terrorist:

“...can be understood as the contemporary settler state’s moralized imperial name for the unthinkable indigenous remainder that, in the insistence on remaining, challenges the settler state’s claim to sovereignty, security, and civilizational value. Indeed, indigenous peoples’ continued existence not only challenges settler sovereignty’s claim to legitimacy and ‘first’-ness, but is the harbinger of that sovereignty’s death insofar as they become legible to it as existing.”

Terrorism is the great weapon of the West. It is used only against those who can fit inside its scope, and that is not everyone. It is the indigenous remainder, and those in solidarity with them, in the scope; no one else appears. Land defenders blocking Cop City appear in the scope, protestors fighting police brutality appear in the scope. Terrorism does only what it was designed to do only to those it was designed to target. Terrorism cannot be recuperated. We cannot use or weaponize it for our own purposes. It means nothing to call Israeli or American violence terrorist violence, because terrorism is a one-sided weapon and its bullets belong to the state. The state cannot appear in the scope. In trying to prove that we are *not* terrorists, or prove that someone else *is* a terrorist, we reify that the weapon of terrorism ought to exist at all, and that the problem is simply giving it the right target. We reload the weapon ourselves when we do this. Instead, as Schotten argues:

“If the only options are... to side with a futurist, settler, and imperial ‘us’ (whether as avowed advocates of empire or its collaborationist liberal compromisers) or with a queered, ‘savage,’ and ‘terrorist’ other, the choice, I think, is clear: we must choose to stand with the ‘terrorists.’”

This choice must shape our writing. No more conversation between the sword and the neck. No more attempting to prove that the oppressed are the neck and not the sword, to point the

sword in a direction that will satisfy its blade. It doesn't matter. This applies to a multitude of other words whose meanings are situated outside of our control. The language is poisoned already. There is no cure.

What does that choice make possible? In her short film "In the Future We Ate From the Finest Porcelain," Larissa Sansour has a character use the phrase "narrative terrorism." This can be our approach: to engage in a guerilla war on the page, to consider it an additional front in our solidarity with those who will always and forever be the targets of the state's weapons. One way to think of this is to consider what narrative means when it is firmly on the side of those rendered terrorists, on the side of the colonized and the oppressed, on the side of those in the scope. What tactics, shapes, strategies and necessities do their struggles demand of our narratives? How might our narratives serve the haunting of the indigenous remainder, eating away at the foundations of empire like termites? How might our writing, in the words of Palestinian intellectual and martyr Bassel Al-Araj, "live like a porcupine, fight like a flea"? And, perhaps most importantly, how can we refuse the integration of these choices and this language into a new neoliberal set of constraints that pay lip service to the struggle but work to neutralize it nonetheless? That is, how can we continue to globalize the Intifada without allowing it to be merely subsumed into the project of globalization?

We might escalate this narrative terrorism towards a constant aesthetic terrorism; we might pursue infrastructural damage to the arts and to the structures of publishing. This might mean, among other things, clogging submission portals, hijacking the space of the bio, as Rasha Abdulhadi has **modeled**, hijacking the interview and the podcast and the craft talk and the classroom and the call for submissions and the \$75 payment via Venmo for the poem. It might mean writing things that are unpublishable and forcing publishers into doing it anyway; it might mean circumventing or ignoring the structures of publishing in favor of means of circulation outside the bounds of capital and therefore free from the grasp of the invisible hand. It might mean boycott, pressure, and refusing to allow the return of the oppressive dailiness in any space we inhabit. It might mean being loud, annoying, and resolutely steadfast in our refusals and our insinuations. It might mean joining with writers who are extending solidarity beyond the page and into direct actions against the complicity of our institutions, literary or otherwise. It might mean, too, building alternative and sustained networks of support for our fellow writers who lose jobs, opportunities, or face harassment. Like a net, we tie ourselves to one another to stop the dailiness from getting through; we tie ourselves tight enough so none of us get lost along the way. Maximal commitment, minimal loneliness, to paraphrase a comrade.

VI.

We should betray Craft by replacing it with political thought.

The PFLP's 1969 document, "[Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine](#)" (developed, in part, by the [Palestinian writer, revolutionary, and martyr Ghassan Kanafani](#)) notes:

One of the basic conditions of success is a clear perspective of things: a clear perspective of the enemy and a clear perspective of the revolutionary forces. It is in this light that the strategy of the struggle is determined, and without this perspective, national action becomes an impetuous gamble which soon ends in failure. Revolutionary political thought is not an abstract idea hanging in a vacuum, or a mental luxury, or an intellectual hobby for the educated, which we can, if we wish, lay aside as an unnecessary luxury. Scientific revolutionary thought is clear thought whereby the masses are able to understand their enemy,

his points of weakness or strength and the forces which support and ally themselves to the enemy.

If we are to consider our writing a space in which to fight, we'd better know who we're fighting, who we're fighting *with*, and why. Political thought and political education are the vital building blocks of that knowledge. Craft asks us to consider the language first and the politics second, tells us that a political education is not central but peripheral to being a writer. We must reject this. As Amiri Baraka argued [in a 2004 lecture](#) on art and politics:

"You must raise the level of our understanding of the world... so that we understand the causal connections in the world, why it acts the way it does. So that we don't believe everybody who smiles at us and gives us a broom is our friend. So that we know who are our friends and who are our enemies, and right now so that we can build that united front. What is the artist's job? To make war. The artist's job is unrelenting war on evil."

Baraka tells us we are making war, and war requires strategy. Political thought is what provides the strategy for an artistic war. Political thought is the enemy of Craft; Craft is a machine to elide and foreclose political thought. This must be our constant betrayal, to know now that the lyric is not as valuable

as the polemic. That the sonnet must give way to the photocopied and wheatpasted list of companies and individuals with financial ties to the genocide. That political thought is not only an option for artists but a duty, an obligation and a fundamental necessity. That it supersedes the line break, the marginalia, the invocation of the muse. Better to know what we're saying and why, and to say it with force, like a stone hurled from the river that reaches the sea.

VII.

The craft for the long Intifada is made and remade each day by resistance.

I wrote all this because I needed it, or something like it. I have felt unable to write and needed a way back in. I was suspicious of writing, of what its powers really are in a moment of crisis, and I was equally suspicious of the more common ways we have to answer that question. I needed more

than healing, witness, catharsis, community, imagining otherwise. I needed something that Craft does not contain, is in fact devoted to purging from “writing” in its professionalization and enforced respectability.

In September 2021, six Palestinian prisoners escaped from Gilboa prison by tunneling out with a spoon. Among them was Zakaria Zubeidi of the Freedom Theater, further reminding us that the cultural revolt is inseparable from the material one. One of the other escapees, Mohammed al-Ardah, said they did it to show “the occupation is a mere illusion made of dust.” This illusion of dust coating our bodies, drowning us in cruelty. We move with Intifada to shatter the illusion.

This is what I need. Not Craft, but the immeasurable creative force that breaks a prison using only the artifacts of bare survival which have been allotted to us, and the clarity of knowing why we did it. This is what life looks like. This is something we can do with spoons.

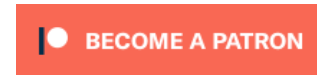
Above all, Craft is what keeps us polite while the boot is on our neck or on somebody else's. And we cannot afford that, not now and not going forward. As June Jordan wrote, in *Civil Wars*:

“If you make and keep my life horrible then, when I can tell the truth, it will be a horrible truth; it will not sound good or look good or, God willing, feel good to you, either. There is nothing good about the evils of a life forced into useless and impotent drift and privation. There is very little that is attractive or soothing about being strangled to death, whether it is the literal death of the body or the actual death of the soul that lying, that the humiliation and the evil of self-denial, guarantees. Extremity demands, and justifies, extreme response. Violation invites, and teaches, violence. Less than that, less than a scream or a fist, less than the absolute cessation of normal events in the lock of abnormal duress is a lie and, worse than that, it is blasphemous ridicule of the self.”

Craft is that lie. This Craft of the state, the Craft of the weapons manufacturing board members, the silent, silencing universities, the financially imbricated publishers, and the complicit awards bodies. We have to abandon it and write with sharper teeth, without politeness, without compromise. We have to learn, or build, or steal, or steal back, the craft we need for the long Intifada, which we carry with us to liberation and beyond. ♦

Fargo Nissim Tbakhi is calling on you to join with the revolutionary masses across the globe in fighting for the survival and liberation of Palestinians and all oppressed people. We are bound up with one another. Anywhere and everywhere you are, you can get in the way of the death machine; hold somebody's hand tight and get in the way together. Revolution until victory for all of us.

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Letters From Gaza,
Part 7



Tip of the Spear
[Excerpt]