

I Stood at the Border

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In order for me to write poetry that isn't political,
I must listen to the birds
and in order to hear the birds
the warplanes must be silent
— Marwan Makhoul

I begin with this poem because we live in a world that is plagued by bombings, mass killings, threats of nuclear wreckage, and other forms of violence that continue to annihilate, decimate, and silence both humans and nonhumans. One day after another, we are witness to a moment in history where our children and students, harrowed by the catastrophes that confront them, hear bombs and the sound of a gun instead of the school bell ringing, and who bury themselves under furniture that turn into makeshift shelters for fear of being buried in a coffin instead.

Indeed, as the poem insists, the warplanes must be silent if we want to write poetry that is not political, and I believe this is the case for everything else, including academic work. Some of us, more than others, know all too well that the arc between academia and violence is quite short. We observe this violence in the pushback against the Black Lives Matter movement, Idle No More, and, most of all, when the following two words are uttered: *Free Palestine*. In academia, this is considered political suicide.

I evoke Free Palestine not to only rouse emotion, though we should definitely feel moved by the struggle for a free and liberated Palestine, but to also demonstrate how academic work, often siloed from taking a stance on the grave injustices of our world, stifles the utterance of a movement that seeks to end apartheid. I have been warned, as have others, that we cannot even whisper Palestine for it is too political to take up. What is political, I ask, about speaking truth to power when Palestinian children, some barely out of the womb, know the word apartheid and genocide before they know anything else?

We must take this question seriously, for we cannot “do” academic work without acknowledging and recognizing that our children and students are asked to voice “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” or “Protect Kids Not Guns” as soon as they are born into this world. I speak this into existence because I am teacher above all else, and my unease with academic work cannot be separated from the classroom, for what happens in the space of academia and society more broadly inevitably seeps into my teaching life.

As Pat Palulis (2009) reminds me, we also do onto our students what has been done to us. I am a culprit of this myself, marred by rubrics and standards that demarcate my students into so-called academic gaps and grade levels. Moreover, English becomes a language that I use to measure my students, where the poetry and prose of the (m)othered tongue is buried under the weight of history. As we read books and write stories in the classroom, I become aware as to how I insist on the following: a finger space must distance one word from another, can't must be written as cannot, and there is no room for even one spelling mistake to exist on the page. So, forget the words Free Palestine, I barely allow my students to take another breath before they can pronounce and make sense of the world before them.

All of this takes form outside of the classroom, first and foremost. In dimmed rooms, where bright windows are darkened by colonialism and racism, teachers are measured and weighed down by what our students do and do not know, what our students have mastered, and what we can and cannot teach them. Palestine

is one of those things we are not allowed to teach them. If we do, I think here about how we are often subject to harsh and unwarranted criticism, sometimes even threats, that we must disengage from political conversations and thought in our classrooms and in the work we engage, especially when it comes to the question of the other. We are told, as I have confronted over and over again, that race has nothing to do with academic work. In other words, it must remain unnamed and unprovoked.

For those of us who refuse to remain unheard, we are framed as the problem, as Sara Ahmed (2017) suggests. As the author contextualizes, “When you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away” (p. 37). It is to say, in other words, that the academic work can continue if the one who raises the problem keeps quiet or is removed from the space altogether.

I have both experienced and witnessed this removal on several occasions and it is often quiet, precisely executed, and so swift that it is difficult to overcome. Sometimes, however, it is slow and painful, where we are driven to the brinks of despair and made to leave on our own volition. Therefore, the question of “Where is academic work?” is immensely charged and loaded for those of us who contemplate the inhumane and unjust histories that have marked the facet of our lives, and who, more than anything else, seek to reimagine a different future for the generations to come.

We must listen here to the provocation that Saidiya Hartman (2019) puts forth: there is immense potential in meeting in the hallway. My words here cannot be as poignant and sharp so let me draw on hers, which are written in relation to Black life in the twentieth century:

“In the hallway, you wonder will the world always be as narrow as this, two walls threatening to squeeze and crush you into nothingness. So you imagine other worlds, sometimes not even better, but at least different from this. You and your friends hatch plots of escape and dereliction. This black interior is a space for thought and action, for study and vandalism, for love and trouble. The hallway is the parlor for those who manage to live in cramped dark rooms with not enough air and who see the sunlight only when they step out onto the front stoop.” (p. 23)

I imagine that such spaces, necessitated and undergird by the conditions that make them inevitable, have taken form elsewhere as well—in the shops of Damascus to the streets of Palestine to the whispers that are exchanged between the border of India and Pakistan.

As Hartman goes on, this space “is ugly and brutalizing and it is where you stay” (p. 23). For those of us who have found ourselves in a corner of a room, in a dimly lit corridor, in a narrow hallway, or wherever else one finds themselves, we know these meeting places with great intimacy and there is nowhere else for us to go. In these spaces, we cry, we embrace, we gather, we laugh, we reflect, and we vent. In other words, it is where we make room to breathe. But, most of all, we can strategize.

We think about what we can do to destroy the forces that attempt to restrain us, to find a way out of this hell, and to never again repeat the histories that have left us violated. For sure, this responsibility is difficult as we must confront bigotry and hatred at almost every turn, wrought by both some of the most belligerent and unread men, as well as those who believe the words that those men utter. As their violence affects us all, trickling into the academic work we do and sometimes blurred as the project of equity, diversity, and inclusion, the hallway becomes a site where we can imagine a world beyond the oppression that constricts and shrouds us. It is a meeting place for us to think otherwise.

Accordingly, the hallway can also be thought of in the way bell hooks (1989) considers marginality as a site of resistance. As she suggests, the margin is a “space of radical openness...a profound edge” (p. 19). Our hunger for a different way—one that seeks to upend the forces that wreck the world—sharpens that edge.

Such a provocation comes from our suspicion of the centre—a space where we our bodies cannot be contained or held. I am more and more convinced, as George Yancy (2010) insists, the centre must not hold, and I believe it is our meeting in the hallway that will make this possible. I think of us as the scribbles or notes on the margins of a [white] page, where we annotate a text with our own interpolations, contaminating and tainting words with other words. It is the hallway, in the same way, that sits between one room and another, and as easily as it holds everything together, we can bring it all down.

When we are afraid of the hallway as a place where we might be met with our potential death, I want us to remember that there are spectral voices in the hallway that speak to us and keep us from dying. The voices that I refer to here are the ones of our ancestors who once occupied the same hallways where we congregate and strategize now. When we hear a sound that cannot be explained, I believe it is their voices that we hear, ascertained in the subtle thump that disrupts both the noise and the silence that exists in the room. Forget *Interstellar*, our ancestors have been transcending space and time well beyond the introduction of the film.

In that same way, we owe it to the generations who will come after us to puncture the walls of the classroom, both in academia and elsewhere, with our own voices for them to hear. We cannot allow ourselves to be burdened by academic work at the centre, or, even worse, believe it can do the work of reckoning, repairing, and reworlding. Though the hallway is a regulated zone, as Hartman reminds me, anchored and situated in buildings that are inherently colonialist and racist, it is also a liminal space. Some might argue that liminality sits at the edge of the academic work that it critiques, and so, it too is a part of the academic machinery, and it is merely its underling. I suggest, absolutely not. Let us not forget here that liminality is a space of transition, and we hold in tension the double gesture of the word (im)possibility, dreaming of what it means to do this work differently and perhaps even to destroy it altogether so that we can start anew.

Again, we have to remember, as Hartman writes, of not “failing to see what can be created in [a] cramped space, *if not an overture, a desecration, or to regard our beautiful flaws and terrible ornaments*” (p. 23). Heeding these words, if we truly want to hear the birds and if we want the warplanes to be silent, we must be willing to depart from the academic work that limits our speaking truth to power, in the question of Palestine, for instance, and we must meet in the hallways to make that happen. We owe it to our children and our students. We owe it each other. And we owe it to ourselves.

To that end, I want to finish with the words that inspired this engagement. As I read and speak these words offered by Toni Morrison even now, something is roused within me, stirred by the contents held in one sentence, and it gives me sustenance and I hope it does for everyone else as well. Here are those words: “I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was.”

References

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