

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

"Rowing for Palestine," Performing the Other: Suheir Hammad, Mark Gerban and Multiple Consciousness

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3s02q5xf>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 5(1)

Author

Bauridl, Birgit M.

Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/T851019736

Copyright Information

Copyright 2013 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Birgit M. Bauridl, “‘Rowing for Palestine,’ Performing the Other: Suheir Hammad, Mark Gerban and Multiple Consciousness,” in *Arab American Literature and Culture*, ed. Alfred Hornung and Martina Kohl (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), 221–42.

BIRGIT M. BAURIDL

“Rowing for Palestine,” Performing the Other: Suheir Hammad, Mark Gerban and Multiple Con- sciousness

Introduction

When people who don't know me well . . . discover my background, . . . [t]hey no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose—the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds. . . . [T]he tragedy is not mine, or at least not mine alone, it is yours, sons and daughters of Plymouth Rock, and Ellis Island, it is yours, children of Africa, it is the tragedy of both my wife's six-year-old cousin and his white first grade classmates I learned long ago to distrust my childhood and the stories that shaped it. (Obama 1995, xv)

And then, on September 11, 2001, the world fractured . . . because the bombs of Al Qaeda have marked, with an eerie precision, some of the landscapes of my life; . . . my name is an irresistible target . . . (Obama 2004, x).

The intention of starting with a quote from President Barack Obama's 2004 introduction to his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* is neither to dive into a discussion of current U.S. politics nor to revisit Obama's personal story. This article begins with Obama's reflections on his identity because Obama's position—at the forefront of today's (global) media landscape—and the decision of U.S. voters in the 2008 elections emphasize the obvious: transcultural and transnational identi-

ties shape our notions of America and the world.¹ Moreover, since and although globalization inevitably means hybridization, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues, these transnational identities are not void of particularities. The questions and struggles surrounding terms like race and ethnicity, identity and double consciousness, perceiving, perception, and Othering that Obama describes are shared by many. In their attempts of identification, they are constantly faced with the “double sense” that Werner Sollors considers a characteristic of ethnicity: “the double sense of general peoplehood (shared by all Americans) and of otherness (different from the ‘mainstream’ culture)” (xi). Oftentimes, however, we see a complication or multiplication of this “double sense.”

“Otherness”—be it in terms of culture, ethnicity, or nation—becomes an accumulation of more than one aspect that “deviates” from the norm. Consequently, identities are characterized not only through a resulting double but multiple consciousness, or the processes and questions emanating from the clashing of and / or struggle with and / or merging of these facets. According to Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton “[t]ransnational migra[nts]” and, I would add, transnational, transcultural, or transethnic identities, “forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement [They] construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one [or two] societ[ies]” (48). Various sources of social (and cultural) identification, especially if they are seemingly conflicting ones, can turn the quest for identity into a complex struggle.

Since multiple consciousness is characterized by negotiation, oscillation, and fluidity rather than by fixed and clearly defined sub-elements

¹ When using the prefixing terms with “trans” in this essay, I intend to point to identities and “cultural forms” that emerge from the “endless process of comings and goings that create familiar [and] cultural . . . ties across national [and / or cultural] borders,” as Shelly Fisher Fishkin famously observes in her presidential address to the ASA (Fishkin 24, 30, 32; cf. Doyle 6). “Trans” furthermore needs to be understood as a qualifier that implies flexible and dynamic processes rather than stable and fixed products and results. In addition, “trans” does not execute a nullification of ideas of nation(s) and culture(s), but it functions as a spotlight cast on their permeability, constructedness and “imagined” nature.

of identity that can be added in a mathematical manner, “the question of difference,” to quote Heinz Ickstadt, “cannot be discussed any longer in terms of biological, geographical, or cultural essentialisms, . . . [but in terms of] the complex ways in which human beings are wrapped up in multiple, often conflicting discourses, practices, and institutions” (550-51). “General peoplehood,” receives a double connotation itself: it is, as Sollors illuminates, “shared by all Americans,” i.e., by minorities and majorities, but also by other nations and cultures.

Suheir Hammad and Mark Gerban are two individuals who are faced with and deal with the gap, however blurry it may be, that is oftentimes constructed between “general peoplehood” and “otherness” or their “universal identity as human beings” and their “particular” or “ethnic identity” as members of specific cultural / ethnic groups (Rockefeller 88). Suheir Hammad and Mark Gerban’s work furthermore shows that their heritage and / or identity comprises more than two cultures or nations and thus results in multiple consciousness. Since Hammad, one of the most successful contemporary (performance)² poets, and Gerban, a former professional lightweight rower,³ both find points of extensive comparison in the African American experience but also add complexity to the Du Boisian argument, I will read their work against his foil of the concept of double consciousness—as both triggered by personal quests and as imposed by others (cf. also Alcoff 335-36)—in order to demonstrate that they not only deconstruct any essentialisms and prove that a notion of bipolar identities cannot work, but furthermore that they engage in a transnational discussion of “general peoplehood.” Hammad’s performance poetry and Gerban’s autobiography are, firstly, defined by

² Hammad stresses the importance of the written word and her self-characterization as a “writing” poet. Nevertheless the tremendous presence of audio(-visual) performances on the Internet and her Def Poetry performances, broadcasted on HBO and turned into a DVD series, as well as her own publication of CDs demonstrate that she is a poet who (also) performs.

³ Gerban terminated his career as a professional lightweight rower in 2008. Until then, however, he was the only member of the Palestinian national team. During his career, Gerban continuously participated in ‘topnotch’ competitions such as, for example, the World Championships in Gifu, Japan (2005) or Munich, Germany (2007).

biographical immediacy, in terms of text type as well as intention,⁴ although they arrive at a concluding transcultural message. Secondly, they assume a position in between the private and the public, between the personal biographical and performed biography. Consequently, they perform their selves as representatives of and as points of reference for “average,” “non-public” multiple-conscious individuals. Thirdly, despite their shared Palestinian and American cultural identity, Hammad and Gerban together span a wide range of the complexities multiple consciousness can imply.

Suheir Hammad: Performing the Other

Suheir Hammad was born in Amman, Jordan, to Palestinian refugee parents and migrated to Brooklyn, NY, with her family when she was a young child. In Brooklyn, Hammad grew up in a community that comprised different ethnicities and cultures, in a community of “color,” which she strongly identifies with. After “First Writing Since,” a poem written seven days after 9/11, gained enormous popularity on the Internet, Hammad was recruited for Russell Simmon’s Def Poetry show. At a first glance, she fits into the Du Boisian concept of double consciousness: she “feels [this] twoness,” the “two warring ideals in one dark body” (11).

Although she clearly characterizes herself as American, Hammad also contests the idea of America as a nation. The title of the poem “I Write America,” performed in Def Poetry Jam, unmistakably portrays her as an active participant in American democracy and society in the Du Boisian sense. In the same poem, however, Hammad depicts a vision that questions her American identity—“I dream America for the day I won’t have to hyphenate my identity.” The picture of the hyphen not only expresses her “two-ness,” but also the struggle this double consciousness imposes upon her within an American national context. The

⁴ An essential and defining characteristic of contemporary performance poetry is its employment of the biographical as a starting point and the transmission of personal opinion and political viewpoints. In the performance not only poetry but the poet himself are literally staged. Consequently, the traditional distinction between author and lyrical I becomes blurry if not even obsolete.

idea of America as a national community becomes even more porous when she states in her post-9/11 poem “First Writing Since”: “i have never felt less american and more new yorker, particularly / brooklyn, than these past days. The stars and stripes on all these / cars and apartment windows represent the dead as citizens first, not / family members, not lovers.” Apparently, when negotiating her own identity, Hammad distinguishes between the U.S. as a political entity and an emotional source for identification. While she decidedly criticizes U.S. politics—“Vietnam nightmares,” “blankets of small pox,” or “bondage in chains,” to name just a few examples (“Valentine”) -, Anti-American voices after 9/11, who call for a consideration of “U.S. transgressions” when discussing the terrorist attacks, make her, at least for “half a second,” feel “resentful.” “I live here,” she cries in “First Writing Since,” “these are my friends and fam . . . and we’re not bad people, do not support america’s bullying.” Yet this distinction becomes almost impossible when looking at her brother, “Arab,” “Muslim,” and in the U.S. “navy” (“First Writing Since”). While America as one entity ceases to exist in Hammad’s consciousness and thus constantly needs to be debated in her quest for identity, cultural, religious, and national affiliations are despite their antagonistic character not only entangled but partially fused and thus prevent personal identification by a simple distinction among the two.

Consequently, a turn to a self-perception as merely “Palestinian,” an adjective Hammad nevertheless uses to describe herself in interviews as well as in her poetry, does not seem to provide a solution to the struggle that is inherent in multiple-consciousness identities, either (cf. Knopf-Newman; “First Writing Since”). Although large parts of Hammad’s writing display Pro-Palestinian tendencies—from a depiction of the story of Rachel Corrie to Palestinian “children” being “shot” “in the head” and “homes / demolished” (“on the BRINK of”; “we spent the 4th of july in bed”)—, Hammad, nonetheless, takes a strong stance against violence on the Arab side: “[N]othing’s going to justify a suicide bomber,” she alludes to 9/11 in an interview (Knopf-Newman 80) and rants in “First Writing Since”: “I don’t give a fuck about / bin laden. His vision of the world does not include me or those I / love.” Here, the deliberate employment of explicit language not only hints at a state of enormous shock and emotional outrage, but emphatically stresses the clear distinction between fundamentalist and terrorist action, its equation

with specific cultures and religions as well as, vice versa, the equation of those who personally and socially identify with these cultures and religions with terrorists, on the one hand, and the importance of emotional belonging and “significant others”⁵ in the process of identification, on the other.

Hammad’s argument is even more complex than this. She is interested in cause and effect, questions the ideologies and reasons behind violence and discrimination, and addresses these questions to all national and cultural facets of her identity. She wonders “how bad a life has to break in order to kill” (“First Writing Since”) and complains that “people don’t want to hear why a fifteen-year-old kid straps dynamite onto himself” and that “we don’t ask these questions about Columbine . . . [or] about our own American youth” (Knopf-Newman 80). The dynamics that lead to Othering and “marginaliz[ation]” can be observed beyond national or cultural borders (Hammad in Knopf-Newman 86).

While it is certainly not difficult to recognize the “two warring ideals” in Suheir Hammad, whereas both “ideals” lose their characteristics as “ideals” and become contested, Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness moreover involves the “second sight,” or, seeing oneself “through the revelation of the other world” (11).⁶ As much as Hammad had to defend Americans, she is also forced to fight negative perceptions of Arabs / Palestinians:

one more person ask me if I knew the hijackers. / one more mother-fucker ask me what navy my brother is in. / one more person assume no arabs or mulisms were killed. one more person / assume they know me, or that I represent a people. / or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page. (“First Writing Since”)

Hammad’s emotional outbreak against imposed identification mirrors Carla Kaplan’s definition of identity as “actuated either by the individual’s chosen identifications or by others who label individuals or groups based on characteristics and behaviors that seem shared” (124)—and deviant from a perceived norm.

⁵ Cf. Taylor’s explanation of George Herbert Mead’s employment of the term (32).

⁶ Cf. also Siemerling, esp. page 325.

When it comes to her body, Hammad is not only confronted with an ascribed negative but also in a corrupted sense positive identity. Her physical appearance causes repulsion when read as a symbol for Islam or terrorism, but it also represents the attractive “exotic.” Realizing that this interest in her body “is founded upon racial and cultural stereotypes that have turned the conceptual world of ordinary racism inside out” (Sernhede 315) and that it reduces her to selected elements of her identity, Hammad refuses to be abused as a twenty-first century Hottentot Venus: “don’t wanna be your exotic / some delicate fragile colorful bird / imprisoned caged / . . . don’t seduce yourself with / my otherness” (“exotic”).

Identity no longer is a concept that depends upon processes within the individual but, more so, on classification by the outside world. That this outside world is by no means homogenous and consequently forces different perceptions upon the individual depending on who judges and which aspect of the looked-upon subject is emphasized—and usually it is the seemingly “deviant” aspect, which of course turns the individual into the Other—contributes to the inner struggle of the multiple-conscious subject. Hammad, who in her youth identified with the children in her neighborhood, children of different ethnicities, is fully aware of these outer forces and explains in an interview:

And my father’s like you’re not Hispanic, you’re not black, you’re not this, you’re not that. And then I’d meet other Palestinians and he’d be like, yeah, but you’re not like them either. You know, because it was a very specific immigrant experience at a very specific time . . . I didn’t have a half-white parent or a white parent. I didn’t have the sense of cultural clash in my body. I had it outside of my body. (Knopf-Newman 85)

Nevertheless she continues: “In my body I felt like, I look like everyone else I grew up with—whether they were Puerto Rican or Italian or light-skinned black people” (Knopf-Newman 85). Hammad not only detects similarities in her problems and her identity and those of the neighborhood kids, she even goes so far as to partially assume—and to consciously perform—an African American identity and sees herself as “a Palestinian of African descent” (Simmons 189-91). In the print version of Def Poetry Jam, she is introduced as a woman who fuses both black and Palestinian identity in her self: “Organically, the two lives she

lived simultaneously as both Palestinian *and* Black melded, producing a unique political awareness that included both the culture she had been born to *and* the one she had so willingly immersed herself in" (190). A reference to June Jordan's poem "Moving towards Home," Jordan's answer to Sabra and Shatila, in one of Hammad's Def Poetry performances ("First Taste") further explains her willingness to adopt a multiple consciousness. Jordan writes: "I was born a / black woman and have / now become a Palestinian / against the relentless laughter of evil" (cf. also Knopf-Newman 77). Hammad was, as she states, deeply influenced by this poem; it "changed [her] life" (Knopf-Newman 77). She follows Jordan's example and reverses the process: in the title of her autobiography she identifies herself as *Born Palestinian, Born Black*.

As a consequence, Hammad extensively writes about past and present discrimination of African Americans. Moreover, she intends for her poetry "to give voice to the voiceless" (Hammad in Brown). Her poetry brims with an avalanche of references and discussions of the situation of other Others. "[B]etween indians, afghanis, syrians, muslims, sikhs, hindus. / more than ever, there is no difference," she observes, for example, in "First Writing Since." Whether "her profound desires to transcend cultural and religious barriers have given birth to a poet who *unifies* diversity" (my emphasis), as Nathalie Handal claims, and thus have transformed her into a being that also transcends any cultural or national definitions remains subject of discussion. Yet Hammad explains: "The gap that I'm trying to fill isn't whether or not we are connected . . . but the sense that the differences are okay . . . , differences don't matter when it comes to putting food on your child's plate." Her ability to understand that "one dominant narrative [is] being projected onto a multi-ethnic, religious, gendered group of people" (Hamad in Knopf-Newman 74) also lets her extrapolate that the key elements of processes that lead to victimization and Othering exceed cultural and national boundaries and thus transnationally link "others." Othering does not exclude the "most privileged nation," especially in the face of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: "if there are any people on earth who understand how new york is feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip," Hammad concludes in "First Writing Since," and thus annihilates any clear boundaries between perpetrator and victim. Accordingly then, perceived from the opposite viewpoint, active Othering, discrimination, and disempowerment are processes that can be

enacted by any culture or individual depending on hegemonic position(s) or personal empowerment, e.g., through assumed superiority or, more practically, access to destructive and oppressive means such as, for example, weapons. Thus, while pleading for humanity, Hammad nevertheless accusingly rants in “no cover up”: “what we have done / to this face humanity / people ribbed into boats millions / die water crossing gassed / . . . slave burned married to death . . . bulldozers spread virgin land mines . . . we shot ourselves / in the mouth and here we are . . . I have no more / fingers to point and victim / is a coat no longer warm.” Although the particularities of the local and of course of culture, religion, and ethnicity certainly prevail, the general pattern of hegemonic judgment and “misrecognition” (Taylor esp. 25, 26) provides for a common, not to say transnational, experience (cf. Pieterse).

Mark Gerban: Rowing for Palestine

While Suheir Hammad’s double consciousness is characterized by the experience and affiliation with Palestinian / Arab culture, the United States, and a chosen identification as African American, Mark Gerban’s biographical background is even more complex: Born in the U.S. to a Jewish / American mother and a Muslim / Palestinian father, his career as a professional lightweight rower for the Palestinian Rowing Federation puts his identity and heritage into the spotlight. Now living in Germany, Gerban is working on the manuscript of his autobiography, “Rowing for Palestine.”⁷ Similar to Hammad, the indeed “warring ideals” are almost more than obvious in both his performance of his identity and his writing. While in the interview he hints at “general peoplehood” as well as his personal identity when he claims “I’m ummm me,” he at the same time hesitates and adds the social identities: “American. With Palestinian, Muslim, Jewish, well then also Israeli roots” (interview). Michael Kammen observes that “[t]he creation of compound

⁷ I would like to thank Mark Gerban for his time, for the interview, and above all for trusting me with his story and the manuscript of his autobiography. Note that the title of the first draft of Gerban’s manuscript was “The Cross of Two Fates.” For sample newsletters written by Gerban, cf. “Mark Gerban to Represent Palestine.”

identities has been a highly significant aspect of Americanization as a social process” (Kammen 195).⁸ One can certainly speak of both a “compound identity” and “Americanization” when looking at Gerban and his self-characterization. However, the idea of a mere compound and the notion of complete Americanization, which includes the development of a multiple consciousness, cannot hold completely true in Gerban’s case. Palestinian as well as Jewish culture for a long time were indeed “warring ideals;” full identification as American was impossible; and “Palestinian” and “American” as characteristics were perceived as antagonistic rather than inclusive. What Gerban reaches in the end is more than a compound; it is a negotiation between and embracing of these different cultures within his personal identity.

Gerban not only depicts himself as “American” in the interview, but, moreover, in his autobiography he describes a process of Americanization his family experienced. His mother’s Jewish family, who arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth century, developed from an “Orthodox-Jewish lifestyle to a more traditional American way of life” (“Rowing”). His mother cooks a Thanksgiving dinner in the American tradition, and the family watches the inevitable college football games. Jewish holidays are celebrated not only with “Chanukah gelt and spinning dreidels” but also with all-American “toy cars and Barbie dolls” (“Rowing”). As a U.S. citizen and member of a Philadelphia rowing club, Gerban’s initial goal was to make it into the U.S. national rowing team. When first confronted with the idea of rowing for Palestine, Gerban clearly identified himself as predominantly American: “I don’t think I could row for another country [meaning another country than the U.S.], that’s a pretty big change” (“Rowing”). Gerban makes a point in mentioning his American passport in a chapter in his autobiography that deals with the family’s first trip to Palestine / Israel to reconnect with his Palestinian relatives when he was a young boy. Nevertheless, the fact that he almost loses his American passport when waiting to board the plane to Tel Aviv at Philadelphia International Airport already alludes to the “warring ideals” within him.

When looking at Gerban’s American identity, Ickstadt’s call for the “national” to be analyzed as a “category” “between the local and the

⁸ Also cf. Ickstadt’s discussion of Kammen’s statement (551).

global” (551) seems adequate. Yet the view of “[m]any proponents of the new American studies [Ickstadt mentions, who] see human beings, on the one hand, as locally or metaphorically defined in terms of borderline (i.e., as formed by overlapping or conflicting cultures or discourses) and, on the other, as being part of transnational areas . . . where cultures have clashed and interacted in a shared if antagonistic history” (551) also seems to almost perfectly account for Gerban’s Palestinian and Jewish⁹ heritage. While at times strongly drawn to one or the other, Gerban’s autobiography shows that almost up to his 2005 decision to row for Palestine, he was constantly oscillating between the two. Since his father tried to hide his Palestinian identity during Gerban’s childhood, Gerban did not only grow up in a Jewish community, but in the strong belief that he was Jewish and nothing else. The moment of recognition came at the age of eight, when fellow little players revealed his father’s true heritage during soccer practice:

One of the guys on the team . . . began to make fun of my father “There’s no way he’s Jewish, he’s too dark to be Jewish.” . . . “He’s your dad? Yeah right, you’re not even the same color . . . , he’s an Arab He was probably kicked out like all the others because he doesn’t belong there. . . . And if he’s your father, you’re not a real Jew.” (“Rowing”)

The family realizes that the process of identity formation (or conscious construction) is both linked to the past and the future; or, as James Clifford phrases it, “to imagine a coherent future,” to enable Mark to eventually come to terms with the competing social and cultural identities that are merged in his personal identity, they need to “selectively mobilize past resources. Articulations of tradition, never simply backward-looking, are thus generative components of peoplehood, ways of belonging to some discrete social time and place in an interconnected world” (97). What results is a short geographical and cultural encounter with Gerban’s Palestinian heritage, a journey in time, space, and culture—to an Arab area in Philadelphia and to Palestine, to the family’s past that determines Gerban’s coming-of-age, which is inextricably linked to multiple processes of identification. After this experience,

⁹ A binary opposition Gerban himself uses.

Gerban's initial "discomfort with a simple word" ("Rowing"), namely Palestine, disappears. Interestingly, just as much as the little soccer players use phenotypical characteristics to classify Gerban and his father, his outside appearance changes with his trip to Palestine: "I stood in front of the mirror in my room. While I stared at myself, I carefully looked at how I had physically changed over the summer. My skin was much darker, while the curls in my hair turned from a dark brown to a light blond, and my ears and nose were bigger" ("Rowing"). Mark himself begins to equate cultural characteristics with his body. While his "darker" skin seems to—speaking in stereotypes—hint at his newly-found Palestinian identity, the "light blond" hair alludes to a conflicting aspect in his identity.

The further Palestine gets removed after Gerban's return to the United States—again in terms of space, time, and, above all, cultural immediacy (after all, he lives in a Jewish environment)—the stronger his confusion and, in consequence, emotional distance to Palestine grows. This can easily be seen in two more mirror scenes that occur during his elementary and high school years—and the employment of mirror scenes of course reflects the question of self-identification and outside perception: "I was all alone, with just me and my simple reflection in the mirror. . . . I didn't resist. This time, I directly headed downstairs. . . . The truth was, I didn't know what to believe in anymore" ("Rowing"). While 'upstairs' is characterized as Arab space, the place for Muslim prayer, 'downstairs' symbolizes Jewish family life. Shortly after his return from Palestine, Gerban easily moved between the two floors and thus between the two cultures, using the staircase as a bridge between the two and dedicating a similar amount of time to both. The spatial, temporal, and cultural removal of his Palestinian experience and the immediate influence of the Jewish community he lives in, however, turns the staircase first into an obstacle that seems to call for an either-or decision and then into a barrier between these two now competing social identities. Consequently, Gerban's attempt of identification develops from confusion into the refusal of the Palestinian side: "I approached the mirror and stared into my reflection. I hated what I saw, because it was ugly and distorted, and I had no one but my father to blame" ("Rowing").

For many years, Gerban more or less consciously selects and excludes sources of identification and thus constructs and begins to, in a

Butlerian sense, perform an identity that only partially reflects his heritage, but is in coherence with his present surroundings: he focuses on his Jewish heritage. In college, Drexel University in Philadelphia, he joins a Jewish fraternity. After 9/11, he “[feels] disgust from within” when he sees “video clips of Palestinians who cheer . . .” and “[can’t] acknowledge that this foreign culture [i]s a part of [him]. . . . Perhaps the greatest personal threat [i]s that [his] sisters decide . . . to wear their hijabs” (“Rowing”). He angrily urges his mother: “Look at your daughters, your little terrorist daughters” (“Rowing”). His quest for identity that is complicated by the seemingly mutually exclusive ‘options’ his cultural heritage implies, has, as a consequence, led to the exclusion of that source of identification, namely Palestine, that seems antagonistic not only to Judaism but also, and even more so after 9/11, to the larger society he lives in.

Yet 9/11 nevertheless proves as the “turning point” (interview) in his life. When his Jewish fraternity brothers embark upon a tirade of hate against Arabs / Palestinians, Gerban experiences what he calls “the moment of my revelation—the epiphany” (“Rowing”). This time, however, the “revelation” does not result in an exclusive embracing of only one facet of his heritage. Gerban accepts the multi-perspectivity that shapes his existence. In order to (re)establish balance and fluidity between his Jewish and Palestinian origins, he publishes an article that tells his father’s story, but Gerban stresses: “Towards the end, I put a lot of emphasis on the conclusion, where the idea was to show my family as a peaceful example of co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians” (“Rowing”). “I didn’t accept myself at some point in my life,” he says in the interview, apparently referring to the “warring ideals,” the seeming bipolarity of Palestinian and Jewish identification, within him, “I had to learn to do that again. That was a really difficult process” (interview).

Similarly to Hammad, the facets that constitute Gerban’s identity do not remain flawless. It could be discussed whether Gerban’s depiction of Palestine as the proverbial land of plenty with an “abundance of splendid fruits” (“Rowing”) consciously compares American and Native American history to that of Palestine.¹⁰ Although there seems to be a slight imbalance between his criticism of Palestinians and that of Israelis

¹⁰ Also note that the source of this allusion is Biblical (Israel).

and American Jews, his employment of children's perspectives in his autobiography is more striking. Neither eight-year-old Gerban nor his young Palestinian cousins can understand the conflict. The little boy explains innocently: "But you know, the Israelis and the Palestinians are fighting each other all the time, and I don't know why" ("Rowing"), and thus implies not only a criticism of both but also his wish for a peaceful co-existence.

Gerban's oscillating between Judaism, Palestine, America, and what appears as indecisiveness, results not only from multiple consciousness *per se*, but, even more so, from the stark contrast between his Jewish and Palestinian heritage, on the one hand, and between his Palestinian origins and American society, especially after 9/11, on the other. "It's an embarrassment . . . these are my people doing this to my people on the other side" (interview), Gerban attacks the conflict between Israel and Palestine but at the same time makes the problem his own; the outer fight is transported into his innermost self that struggles not only with coming to terms with this inner juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous cultures but also with the "second sight" that different groups impose upon him either due to one or the other culture that defines him. It is no surprise then that his harshest accusation, however, is directed towards Othering that does not reflect the full scope of one's real identity and is solely based on stereotypes. While, in his autobiography, he only mentions the Othering of Jews briefly—"society [i.e., 'mainstream' America] saw us [Jewish students] as a minority" ("Rowing")—he dwells more extensively upon the Othering of Palestinians through 'mainstream' America and Jewish America.

Although Gerban tries hard to maintain that he is "half and half" during his childhood, his environment attempts to force him into one category, Jewish or Palestinian. Shortly after his little Jewish American soccer mates have identified him as "not a real Jew," he declares to the boys in Palestine "I'm half Jewish and half-Muslim." But they correct him: "You're not Muslim, you're Jewish" ("Rowing"). His fellow American students and his American teacher offer him another "second sight" and come to the same conclusion:

Then I told [my teacher] my mother was Jewish and father was Muslim. 'Oh, then you're Jewish,' she said. . . . And, since the majority of the class was Jewish, the rest of the children nodded their heads in total agreement. I was really confused. . . . I was lost. . . . 'Well how can

[your family] be happy when their families are killing each other in Israel?" ("Rowing")

Doubtlessly, after 9/11 classification and categorization turn into negative stereotyping. "Those terrorist Arabs, . . . they could be walking with bombs around their chests," warns one of Gerban's Jewish fraternity brothers; and the publication of his article which depicts his father's story, triggers, despite its peaceful ending, accusations of him being a "terrorist," "Nazi," and "Hitler" and culminates in the publication of a counter-article in a local Philadelphia Jewish paper which, according to Gerban, calls him "the literary equivalent of suicide bombers" ("Rowing"). In his autobiography, one of Gerban's sisters identifies this viewpoint as an "American perspective," and thus brings in a third group that attempts to determine his identity. The fact that his American rowing club compared him to terrorists once they learned he would be rowing for Palestine demonstrates that both individuals and institutions try to classify him as the Other, and in this case evoke the picture of the heathen, savage, and dangerous enemy.

Scholars agree on the fact that (negative) stereotyping and imposed and selective mis-identification can have a disastrous effect on the double-conscious subject. "The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized," observes Taylor (36) and thus also gives reason for the previously discussed distorted and hated picture of his Palestinian self Gerban sees reflected in the mirror as a child. Taylor furthermore not only detects similar patterns in the black experience, the American history of colonization and settlement and that of "indigenous and colonized people in general," but also notes that "misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (26). Taylor vividly explains Gerban's initial "disgust" he feels with his Palestinian heritage after 9/11 and his equation of his sisters with terrorists; he enables us to guess the inner conflict of a subject who can try to deny but not to erase parts of his heritage and thus, in order to reach a peaceful inner negotiation between the "warring ideals," is forced to go through what Gerban calls a "difficult process" (Interview).

While Gerban today calls himself a “white guy” (Interview), referring to his (insistence on) self-identification as non-deviant rather than as Other, he reports three past incidents or phases when, in his life, he “felt like a minority” (Interview): when, during his career as a swimmer, he competed for the PDR in an exclusively African American race; when, at high school, he “was shut out from the white kids” and became a member of the African American community at his school; and after he published his father’s story (interview). Every time Gerban “felt like a minority,” he belonged to a different minority, depending on who judged in which “cultural context” (Alcoff 336).

Yet this multiple Othering in different contexts obviously allows Gerban to see connections between different “outsider” groups in their experience of Othering. Although there is no evidence that Gerban’s autobiography deliberately shares characteristics with the African American slave narrative, the manuscript currently displays common elements such as an introductory chapter discussing the family’s history, the story of dislocation, the experience of double consciousness or the importance of naming—in the autobiography Gerban’s immigrant father changes “his last name from something much too difficult for Americans to pronounce to something much simpler, Gerban” (“Rowing”). On the content level, however, the autobiography depicts a conscious comparison. In order to teach the so-far all-Jewish-American boy more about the Palestinian experience African American history is used as a paradigmatic example:

“African-Americans were being treated poorly in America. They had to drink out of separate water fountains, walk on opposite sides of the street, and always had to sit in the back of the bus.”

“Wow, did they really?”

“Yes, Mark. Many people in this country were racist.”

“Racist? What’s racist?” (“Rowing”)

The point of comparison—the shared experience of being Othered—becomes more obvious when in high school Gerban and the African American kids are united in their position as outsiders. “You’re in a class full of niggers,” Gerban is told, “they found out Mark’s father is a sand nigger” (“Rowing”). What Gerban and the African American kids share is clearly their deviance from what others consider to be the norm.

Gerban takes the leap from the particular to the transnational in a fashion that is similar to Emory Elliott's claim in his presidential address to the ASA. Elliott first quotes Martin Luther King, "I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted," and then argues: "Dr. King's words are still timely as we witness thousands of coalition soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people being killed" (2). Gerban explains: "If it's not the African Americans, it's the Turkish people in Germany" (interview).¹¹ While, similar to Hammad, Gerban does not insist on essentially shared characteristics of the Other, he observes a shared victimization and similar processes causing it. In his open letter "The Tolerance of Intolerance," which was published during his rowing career and therefore under a different name, he writes: "For humanity, our ignorance as a people inadvertently forms an endless number of walls and barriers. Stemming from the roots of hatred itself, these ideals grow into thoughts of racism and oppression"

Gerban nevertheless claims that his "intention is n[either] politics" nor accusation (interview). The rowing project he supports in Gaza, for example, "stays strictly away from politics" (interview). He stresses that his "intention" is to "tell [his] story" and that his "overall goal is not one side or the other, . . . it's humanitarian," it's "acceptance" (interview). Thus, Elliott's characterization of "diasporic literature" also describes Gerban's goal: ". . . autobiographies . . . enable us to understand deeper psychological and emotional experiences that we otherwise may never have . . ." (15). And clearly, Gerban's autobiography reflects the inner and outer struggle with his multiple consciousness. His oscillation between different facets, or even poles, of his identity, supports his idea of trying not to side. The fact that he has come to embrace all facets of his identity (despite rowing for Palestine, Gerban still considers himself Jewish) and that he has achieved the ability to negotiate between them, however, verifies his call for mutual understanding that results from his individual biography.

¹¹ For a scholarly employment of the same comparison, cf. Alfred Hornung's response to Shelley Fisher Fishkin's presidential address to the ASA.

Conclusion

In her introduction to Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism and the "Politics of Recognition"* Amy Gutmann asks: "What does it mean for citizens with different cultural identities, often based on ethnicity, race, gender or religion, to recognize ourselves as equals . . . ?" (3). Yet what does it mean when these different and sometimes competing cultural identities meet in one person and have to be recognized as equal not only by the seemingly hegemonic culture but also by each other? Hammad and Gerban embody this question. Although both share a Palestinian and American cultural and national affiliation, their experience is both the same and simultaneously not the same. In both cases, it is the multiplication of their consciousness and self-perception, i.e., the multiplication of the "warring ideals," that demonstrates the pluralization of contemporary quests for identity. What is crucial is the dependence of identification on the past, i.e., on heritage and family history, as well as on present influences, i.e., the cultural environment, national and transnational political issues, and personal goals, and thus consequently its relation to the future. However, while Hammad's heritage is Palestinian and becomes complicated by migration to the United States and a chosen black identity, Gerban's origins, Palestinian and Jewish American, are themselves competing and multiplied by the Jewish American migrant experience. They have in common a criticism of not only the hegemonic nation or culture that is contained in their identity, but of the Othered facets as well.

According to Taylor,

discovering [one's] identity doesn't mean that [it is] work[ed] out in isolation, but that [it is] negotiate[d] through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition. [Personal] identity crucially depends on [the] dialogical relations with others. (34)

And:

. . . [O]ur identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of

themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (25)

Similarly, Hammad's as well as Gerban's consciousness is—despite their different starting points—influenced by this dialogic, whether welcome or not, relation to others. The “second sight,” the imposed notions of who they are, includes misrecognition, which for them especially after 9/11 equals being “reduced” to the “terrorist Arab.” Hammad and Gerban are indeed—to return to Ickstadt's quote—“wrapped up in multiple” and, especially in Gerban's case “conflicting” inner and outer “discourses.” While these discourses are partially based on the concept of the nation and at the same time question and transcend it (especially the Israeli / Palestinian conflict on the one hand, and the Jewish, Palestinian and Black experience, on the other), Hammad and Gerban's multiple consciousness combines these very discourses. Consequently, their identity transcends geographical and cultural borders and thus needs to be viewed as constant negotiation and fluid identification rather than an accumulation of bipolarities or “cultural essentialisms.” The result is a definition of multiple consciousness or identity not as a static, irreversible concept, but as a selective, constructive, both active and passive, constant and ultimately performative process of negotiations within and without the self. Hammad and Gerban thus portray identity as a “performative act” (Butler), a process that is by no means independent from given, chosen, and imposed factors such as heritage or outside perceptions and (mis)recognitions.¹² While Hammad and Gerban may only partially share the “content,” i.e., what cultures they identify with, the general pattern of self- and imposed identification remains the same.

Consequently, the very personal experience of a pluralization of otherness ultimately leads Hammad and Gerban to a deep understanding of the patterns of Othering. A quote by Pieterse explains the transnationalization of these patterns without annihilating cultural and ethnic particularities:

¹² Hammad's and Gerban's performances of their identities can thus also be read as subversive acts of resistance against imposed identifications, reflecting Judith Butler's concept of identity as performative and based on reiteration.

[M]inorities . . . appeal to transnational human rights standards beyond state authorities Particularity . . . is a global value and what is taking place is a ‘universalization of particularism’ or ‘the global valorization of particular identities.’¹³ (49)

. . . [S]hared global experiences range from various intercivilizational encounters such as . . . migration to slavery, conquest, war, imperialism, colonialism [C]onflict, conquest and oppression . . . also unite humankind, even if in painful ways and producing an ambivalent kind of unity (52)

While not attempting to dissolve differences between minorities but celebrating them instead, Hammad and Gerban indeed recognize, in more structural terms, common causes, deviance being at the forefront, and processes of Othering and victimization that connect them across national or cultural borders. The “elevat[ion of] ethnic identity, which is secondary, to a position equal in significance to, or above, a person’s universal identity is to weaken the foundations of liberalism and to open the door to intolerance,” notes Rockefeller (88). “General peoplehood” then comes to comprise people beyond the single nation—in terms of experience as well in terms of a “global human condition” and humanitarian aspects (Pieterse 53).

Works Cited

- Alcoff, Linda Martín. “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?” *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Eds. Paula M.L. Moya and Hames-García. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. 312-44.
- Clifford, James. “Taking Identity Politics Seriously: ‘The Contradictory, Stony Ground’” *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*. Eds. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie. New York: Verso, 2000. 94-112.
- Doyle, Laura. “Toward a Philosophy of Transnationalism.” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1.1 (2009): n. pag. <<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9vr1k8hk>>. 30 Aug. 2010.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Norton, 1999.

¹³ Reference to R. Robertson.

- Elliott, Emory. "Diversity in the United States and Abroad: What Does It Mean When American Studies Is Transnational?" *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 1-22.
- Fishkin Fisher, Shelley. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies." *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 17-57.
- Gerban, Mark. "Rowing for Palestine." In ms.
 ---. Telephone interview. 22 Sept. 2008.
- Gerban, Mark, alias Christine S. "The Tolerance of Intolerance." E-Mail to the author 17 Jan 2008. Ms. of letter "Historical Suffering of the Jews Is Now Visited upon the Palestinians." *North County News* 14-20 February 2007.
- Glick Schiller, Nina, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc. "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration." *Anthropological Quarterly* 68.1 (1995): 48-63.
- Gutmann, Amy. Introduction. *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition."* Ed. Charles Taylor. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Hammad, Suheir. "Interview with Christopher Brown." *The Electronic Intifada*, 2006. <<http://electronicintifada.net>>. 14 Aug. 2008.
 ---. "exotic." *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and More*. Ed. Danny Simmons. New York: Atria, 2003. 17-18.
 ---. "first writing since." *ZaatarDiva*. New York: Rattapallax, 2005. 98-102.
 ---. "no cover up." *ZaatarDiva*. New York: Rattapallax, 2005. 85-6.
 ---. "on the BRINK of." *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and More*. Ed. Danny Simmons. New York: Atria, 2003. 192-7.
 ---. "valentine." *ZaatarDiva*. New York: Rattapallax, 2005. 48-50.
 ---. "we spent the 4th of july in bed." *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and More*. Ed. Danny Simmons. New York: Atria, 2003. 78-80.
 ---. *ZaatarDiva*. New York: Rattapallax, 2005.
- Handal, Nathalie. "Drops of Suheir Hammad: A Talk with a Palestinian Poet Born Black." *Aljadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts* 3.20 (1997). <www.aljadid.com>. 14 August 2008.
- Hornung, Alfred. "Transnational American Studies: Response to the Presidential Address." *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 67-73.
- Ickstadt, Heinz. "American Studies in an Age of Globalization." *American Quarterly* 54 (2002): 543-62.

- Kammen, Michael. "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration." *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture*. Ed. Michael Kammen. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 169-98.
- Kaplan, Carla. "Identity." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York UP, 2007. 123-127.
- Knopf-Newman, Marcy Jane. "Interview with Suheir Hammad." *MELUS* 31.4 (2006). <<http://www.evergreen.edu/diversity/series/docs/suheir-interview.pdf>>. 29 Sept. 2008.
- "Mark Gerban to Represent Palestine in the Men's Lightweight Single at Worlds." *Rowing 1.com*. 17 Aug. 2005. <http://www.rudern1.de/Rowing1/2005/08/Mark_Gerban.php>. 18 Aug. 2008.
- Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. 1995. New York: Three Rivers, 2004.
- Pieterse, Nederveen Jan. "Globalization as Hybridization." *Global Modernities*. Eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson. London: Sage, 1995. 45-68.
- Rockefeller, Steven C. "Comment." *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*. Ed. Charles Taylor. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. 87-98.
- Sernhede, Ove. "Exoticism and Death as a Modern Taboo: Gangsta Rap and the Search for Intensity." *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*. Ed. Charles Taylor. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. 302-17.
- Siemerling, Winfried. "W.E.B. Du Bois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity." *Callaloo* 42.1 (2001): 325-33.
- Simmons, Danny, ed. *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and More*. New York: Atria, 2003.
- Sollors, Werner. "Theories of American Ethnicity." *Theories of Ethnicity*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: New York UP, 1996. x-xliv.
- Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.
- The Company. "First Taste." *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and more*. Ed. Russell Simmons. New York: Atria Books, 2003. 28-31.
- The Company. "I Write America." *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway . . . and more*. Ed. Russell Simmons. New York: Atria Books, 2003. 103-5.