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How Can Digital Tools Develop Poetic Analysis? Vocal Analysis of a Sample of Suheir Hammad's Performance Poetry

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This study is an attempt to highlight the significance of digital tools in poetic analysis. While critical tradition places the written text at the center of literary analysis, it marginalizes the unwritten aspects that play a crucial role in poetic aesthetics. A detailed sound analysis of a sample of Suheir Hammad's performance poetry, specifically her poem titled *Sawwah*, will establish the importance of non-text-based analysis. I use software applications, Gentle¹ and Drift,² to study rhyme and pitch. Vocal analysis uncovers layers of emotion and meaning that are not found in the written text. This research is primarily practical; therefore, I will not discuss further theoretical perspectives that justify the necessity of the oral aspect of contemporary poetry. Instead, I will point to basic oral techniques that represent constant themes in the later poetic analysis.

Today, authors are not restricted to publishing their work only in print. They find a higher level of flexibility on digital platforms that enable writers to reach and communicate with a wider audience,³ and allow them to develop an aesthetic that includes vocal and visual aspects. I will focus here on the oral aspect which leads to the conversational style in which the literary work may respond or refer to other texts.⁴ Readers will find this in the following poetic analysis.

The poem "*Sawah*," was performed in the Arab Music Concert Series in Philadelphia, on December 9, 2011. In the performance, the poet presented four of her poems in dialogues with Arabic and Black music. Here, Hammad's creativity is not limited to poetry or performance but also includes inventing a dialogue between her work and the selected pieces of music. Hence, the recorded event has several conversational levels, since each piece of the performance interacts with the one that follows it. Additionally, the poet selected Arabic and Black songs, engaging two experiences in a process of exchange. The performance emerges as a concatenation of distinctive cultural and historical pieces replacing the single effect of a poem with a more integral model in which different voices, cultures, and languages—considering music as a language—are joined together.

The conversational aesthetic that connects Hammad's work with other musical and poetic performances greatly depends on temporality. The music plays an important role in the temporal conversations recalling popular lyrics and building upon them. Obviously, the popularity of a certain musical work is subject to change through time, and her selection of musical pieces reflects the time of the production. Additionally, a musical instrument remains connected to a certain genre, cultural voice, and local

performance. Musical voices are also related to historical moments and settings in which they earn their popularity. Thus, the temporality of the conversational aesthetics gains its uniqueness from its locality. In the following discussion, I will clarify how Hammad uses temporality and musical instrumentation to further develop the dialogue in her performance.

The concept of temporality in the dialogue between Hammad's poetry and musical pieces has a permanent aspect because a video remains, well beyond the end of her performance. Similarly, digital platforms enable the poet to juxtapose different cultures and historical moments in her performance. Hammad presents her poem "*Sawah*" in the Al-Bustan Music Program starting with a musical piece of a popular Arabic song, "*Ahwāk*" or "I adore you," performed in the late 1950s by a celebrated Egyptian actor and singer, Abdel Halim Hafez. The melody has a dominant, soft tone in which the violin plays a basic role. Hammad also uses violin to represent the voice of the Egyptian song's melody, and this vocal aspect helps the piece approach a higher level of emotional influence. The dialogue between her poem and the singer's works requires recalling the actual voice of Hafiz's performance. Recent technologies offer the possibility of reaching old performances and, consequently, enabling the contemporary poet to use the same musical instrument played in Hafez's original song. Although Hafez and Hammad are not contemporaries, Hafez's videos and recorded songs allow Hammad access to detailed information about his performances. Thus, recordings of oral works enable today's poets to go beyond the limitations of time and place. This expansion has been inherited from written rhetoric where authors construct their works upon the works of others, produced in different times, cultural settings, and sometimes languages.

The dialogue that occurs in Hammad's performance of her poem "*Sawah*" engages with more than a single text. On one hand, she uses "*Ahwāk*" as a musical introduction. The song is well-known so that audiences, who have limited knowledge of Arabic songs, still can recognize the passage and understand the reference. Additionally, the verbal aspect of the song expresses a wistful love. The speaker and the beloved are apart, and there is no possibility of returning to the old days or forgetting them. Such meanings appear in Hammad's poem. Not only words but also deep emotions play important roles in her work. On the other hand, Hammad's poem responds to another song by the same singer, *Sawwah*,⁵ "Wanderer." The second musical piece is faster with a louder tone in which two instruments, the ney and the drum, have a remarkable presence. The narrative speaks about a wanderer who travels looking for his beloved, who is, in turn, an immigrant. The passage offers a

detailed image of diaspora. The journey lasts for years, during which the singer asks others about his beloved and sends oral messages through them to remind his immigrant love of the past. Notably, these types of songs became popular after the colonial forces dominated the Arabic world. In the case of Egypt, the contemporary republic started in 1953 and the British military left in 1954. The song mentioned above was performed during the late 1950s or early 1960s. Therefore, the use of Hafez's songs does not only create a dialogue between two poetic performances that belong to different generations but also indicates the diasporic continuity within comparable political realities.

Hammad offers a complicated poetic experience bridging disconnected cultures, eras, and languages. Such a complicated work is directed toward specific kinds of audiences. However, individuals who are unfamiliar with the linguistic or cultural context are still able to sense the ambiguity and complexity of the poem. Such intentional layering, in turn, motivates listeners to develop their consideration of this unfamiliar history, language, and music.

Hammad employs the music as a revival of Arabic memory. Therefore, the immigrant poet uses two levels of memory: artistic and social. Whereas the artistic aspect appears in the voice of the traditional melody and song, the social side emerges in the words of her poem that emphasize the experience of diaspora after colonialism.

Hammad writes,

I.

if you by chance

come across my beloved

remind him of me

of these eyes and these hands

he will remember me as

a poet and as

a pair of eyes a set

of hands

II.

this is what poets do

fall in love over and out

they break hearts poets

do and then wail when

their own are bruised

words carry no weight

meaning is in silence

in the space

between history and hope.

they divine watermelon

seeds touch everything

counter philosophies count

on deities poets

live cuspings fear

for years, they travel

exile a constant

static state

where they live

life is unreal until a kiss

This is the present

they offer

III.

when you find my beloved

the dark haired

smiling eyed one

remind him of me of

my laugh and my dance

do not tell him i

have cried nightly for

him waited for him

these words carry no weight

simply remind him

we are poets each

of us travelers between

history and hope (Hammad, *Zaatar Diva*. 30-31)

The poet employs a dialogic rhetoric⁶ that considers her use of themes found in traditional songs. As mentioned in Kuhn's "The Rhetoric of Remix," the digital age offers tools that help writers enrich their creativity with a new kind of oral tradition. In this example, the use of a musical introduction associated with the title of the poem, that is, in turn, borrowed from Hafez's song, enables Hammad to engage in a dialogue with three levels of creativity: the text of the poem, the interaction with another text, and the musical influence on the whole conversational work. The two songs, *Ahwak* and *Sawwah*, reveal Hammad's process in building her poem. The Arab-American poet

breaks down the songs into themes, questions, emotions, and ambitions to reproduce such elements in her own work. She does not only invent a new poem based on them but also proposes a reading of these songs from her position as an immigrant.

Not only the conversational aspect but also Hammad's performance depends on oral rhetoric as she performs her poem with a developing rhythm and intonation. I will analyze her performance inspired by Marit MacArthur's digital methodology, specifically in her article "Monotony, the Churches of Poetry Reading, and Sound Studies," in which she pays particular attention to the pitch as a crucial way in examining emotional expressions. For her, performance differs from reading because the former shows emotions while the second lacks them. The author highlights the significant rule of intonation, as she defines it, "the rise and fall of the voice; its changes in pitch" (42). MacArthur studies the intonation of academic reading and finds that such reading has a monotonous style that depends on repeating a certain manner of intonation and narrow range of pitch, limiting the level of excitement. In her attempt to offer a close reading to the voice, the author observes the range of pitch measured by hertz.⁷ While the average of a man's voice is 125Hz and the average of a woman's is 225Hz,⁸ the emotional expression of voice ought to occur in a wider range, higher or lower than the average. In her work, the study of vocal range considers the poetic topic, line length, rhythm, and repetition. The range of pitch has an interpretational quality such as emphasizing parts of the poem with a higher pitch. Additionally, the long duration increases the influence of specific passages. Moreover, the vocal rise and fall expresses emotions that add meaning to the poem; while flat intonation suggests that the poet offers a single dominant feeling, expressive intonation creates a developing experience (43-45).

MacArthur does not study the voice independently from the text. In her analysis, she divides the poem into intonational units starting from the beginning of the first line to the peak of the pitch down to the lowest range pitch. She considers the short pauses and ends on a long pause. She writes the words of each unit on the intonation chart, underlining the relative peaks in pitch. Thus, the connection between performance and words is emphasized. Furthermore, she considers the written form of the poem. A disregard of line breaks and a different order of pauses appear to be key in controlling the performance over the written passage. Therefore, MacArthur pays particular attention to the structure of the poem and the way this structure is transformed by readers. She finds that some readers mistranslate the poems while others support the semantic aspect. For her, the intonational units might corrupt the structural aesthetics of the poem, such as when it is read in the traditional intonation used for poetry in the

modern era. She suggests that effective performance ought to add a developing emotive experience to the structure of the passage. In her study, she analyzes readings by readers who did not write the poem. However, in my study, I will use Hammad's reading of her own poetry. Thus, on many occasions, the performance occurs as a translation of the structure in the written version. I will offer more details in the poetic analysis.

MacArthur argues that poetry reading and performance are responsible for audience interaction with the work. For her, the multiplicity of voices in poetry presentation encourages audience participation. Some techniques, such as interruption of the poem and variation of intonation, play a key role in creating a conversational style, or, according to her expression, a "call-and-response." She underlines the use of external phrases, which do not exist in the original poem, and the interruption of an existing rhythm as two popular patterns of conversational performance. The author links such a style to African American religious practices,⁹ where the participation of other voices plays a significant role in the performance. Such behavior reveals the impact of West African oral traditions on African American creativity (56). Notably, Arabic oral arts also value such interruption. For example, the poetic genre of *muwaššah* depends highly on interrupting the initial meter and rhyme. The alternation between two melodies creates a conversational model that has a refreshing effect on listeners. Influenced by both African American practices and Arabic heritage, Hammad interrupts her performance with foreign phrases. This will be explained in the performance analysis.

Analyzing Hammad's poem "*Sawah*," I will focus on two important vocal aspects: rhythm and intonation, or pitch. To look at rhythm, I used Gentle,¹⁰ which is a software that works on audio files to produce a script of the spoken words, that often needs to be revised. Each word in the script is associated with its duration in the performance (see Figure 1). The beginning and the end of a word during the time of performance as recorded in the uploaded file are reported, using measures by the microsecond, 0.000001. Thus, the software offers accurate information in demonstrating the speed of the performance. Although such data considers very short breaks between words that are less likely to be recognized by listeners, such breaks play a crucial role in creating a musical effect that does not exist in a continuous narrative. In addition to such breaks, the analysis highlights two kinds of pause: *short pauses*, more than 0.25 of a second but less than a second, and *long pauses*, more than a second, categorized in the software as "noise." Moreover, I will distinguish among three speeds: *fast narrative* where there is no time break between words, *fast rhythm* where words are

disconnected with small breaks, not pauses, and *slow rhythm* where pauses appear. Nevertheless, pauses alone, including breaks, do not offer a clear image of the rhythm. Therefore, the study also emphasizes the duration of the utterance of a single word such that it is capable of making the rhythm, or the narrative, faster or slower.

if	if	7.28	7.6
you	you	7.6	7.79
by	by	7.79	8.02
chance	chance	8.03	8.52
come	come	8.52	8.75
across	across	8.75	9.2
my	my	9.2	9.38
been	been	9.38	9.55
love	love	9.55	9.78

Figure 1: Screenshot of Gentle's Results

To measure the range of pitch in the performance, I used Drift,¹¹ which is a software that offers the level of pitch measured by hertz per centisecond, or 0.01 of one second. The poem has a wide range of pitch between 60 to 400 Hz (see Figure 2). If the average rate of a woman's voice is around 225, the poet, in general, uses a higher pitch more frequently in the first 55 seconds and gradually moves to a lower pitch. In terms of performing stanzas, or short passages, she employs a dominant style of starting with a higher pitch and falling to a lower range. This style considers the content where the piece starts with an energetic introduction only to go deeper to more complicated ideas emphasized by a lower pitch that allows listeners to relax and focus. Hammad interrupts this repetitive intonation with sharp increasing or falling pitches. The chart in Figure 2 shows more declines than rises for two rhetorical reasons: to support the musical introduction that indicates traditional songs, in which the falling of pitch often plays a significant role in romantic songs, and to shorten the distance between her and her listeners as she whispers in a more intimate manner. In the detailed analysis of the range of pitch, I must, at times, disregard the structure of the poem because of two reasons. First, a stanza sometimes has intense data, therefore, the division helps simplify the results. Second, a significant purpose of studying the pitch is to identify intonational units, and I will consider the rising-falling pattern as an intonational unit whereas the unexpected changes, occurring in the dominant style, represent a precise emotive expression.

While the pitch is falling, the rhythm is generally an alternation between slow and fast. The analysis will focus on the rhythm, not the tempo, because the former identifies the speed of the performance in a certain piece including pauses and the word duration while the latter offers a general idea about the structure of the performance. To distinguish between the tempo and the rhythm, I discussed Hammad's performance with Mikel LeDee, the Music Resources Supervisor at Louisiana States University. He comments:

The underlying pulse that is felt in music and speaking is the tempo. It is not always obvious, but it is there. In this poem the performer derives the tempo from the instrumental introduction. The rhythmic variations are important and she varies this in her delivery. However, tempo and rhythm (the movement of music through time) are related but not the same. One is the pulse and the other is what happens in between the pulses (LeDee).

LeDee finds that the poet uses the musical introduction as a tempo of her poem, creating a coherent piece out of the conversational voices. He confirms that her text is not independent of the music played, whereas the rhythm represents the space where the uniqueness of her verbal performance appears. The performance has a slow rhythm at the beginning and the end while the fast rhythm occurs in the middle, whereas the fast narrative emerges only in short passages. The space of slow rhythm makes Hammad's work an appropriate fit with the musical introduction. Thus, Hammad employs a precise plan of the movement among several levels within the speed of her reading.

Figure 2: Pitch Range during the Performance

The verbal performance is composed in an introduction and three parts: the first part is composed of two stanzas and the second of six stanzas, while the third in three stanzas is interrupted by an individual line. Hammad introduces her poem after the musical passage, saying "*Sawah* [a long pause] that was *Ahwak* for Abdulhaleem." She starts with the title of her poem, which is also the title of the Hafez's song, and then identifies the title of the musical introduction using the word "that" to point out the played piece. Her verbal introduction is one of the slowest moments in the performance with long words duration and two pauses: a long pause after "*Sawah*" and a short pause after "Abdulhaleem." The slow performance helps Hammad maintain the influence of the slow music of the song, "*Ahwak*," and give the audience some time to depart from the traditional song and prepare to receive the poem. The poet separates the introduction and the poem by a short pause. In the initial part of the poem, the poet writes:

if you by chance
come across my beloved
remind him of me

of these eyes and these hands

he will remember me as

a poet and as

a pair of eyes a set

of hands (*Zaatar Diva*. 30)

She starts the poem with a fast narrative in the first two lines “if you by chance / come across my beloved.” The absence of breaks between words is mitigated by the long word duration. Thus, the poet starts in the style of a storyteller to attract attention, and the long word duration is necessary to maintain the coherence of the rhythm that connects the introduction with the poem. In the following two lines, the poet shifts to a slow rhythm, with long duration in performing words, and a combination of breaks and pauses. Such a shift identifies the first highlighted passage in the poem: “remind him of me/ of these eyes and these hands.” This passage also represents the repeated lines in the song. Next, Hammad returns to the fast narrative in the second stanza, considering that the breaks between phrases with short pauses are not located in the line breaks but the end of a coherent phrase: after “poet” and “eyes.” The long word duration is gradually shortened. While the poet, relatively speaking, stretches her words in the line “and as a pair of eyes,” she applies a shorter duration in rest of the verse. Such changes of speed add musical rhythm, allowing Hammad’s voice to differ slightly from the musical piece. Finally, the poet separates her second stanza from Part II of the poem with a long pause.

Although Hammad disconnects the verbal introduction from Part I, moving from a slow to faster rhythm, the two parts appear more harmonized in terms of intonation. Figure 3 represents the pitch range of this introduction and the first stanza. While the underlined words show the relative pitch peaks, the bolded word signifies the relatively lowest tone. Notably, the first word of the introduction “*Sawah*” and the first word of the poem “if” have a similar rate, 254 Hz. In both parts, the intonation falls to a lower range. Additionally, two moments of flat intonation appear at the end of both the introduction and the first stanza. Such moments are necessary to identify the melodic units in the performance, especially that the rhythm also slows in both flat passages. The pitch in the first stanza is more wavering than in the introduction, for two reasons. She seeks more emotional expressions and prepares the intonation to fit

with the dynamic rhythm of the first stanza. Although the dominant intonational style here is to start with a higher and move to a lower pitch, this pattern is interrupted by a slight increase to energize a key word in the poem, “remind.” This rise also has a musical function because it prepares the listeners for a sharp drop in pitch. The poet wants her voice to reach a deep point to express such complex feelings as an immigrant who wants to reconnect with her people. Such dense emotions reveal the weight of memory. The poet whispers her struggle to the audience. Traditional singers also use such a drop in pitch in their performances, for similar reasons. Thus, Hammad does not only create an intimate space where her suffering transfers to the listeners through her voice but also recalls the traditional style of singing. She uses the voice of memory to underline the sense of belonging and emphasize the emotional and artistic experiences that she shares with Arabic audiences.

Figure 3: Pitch Range of the Introduction and Part I, the First Stanza

The poet keeps the flatness within a narrow range of pitch in the second stanza (see Figure 4). The relatively higher pitch occurs in the first line whereas the rest of the stanza maintains a lower pitch, dividing the passage into two intonational phrases: “[he] will remember me as” and “a poet and as / a pair of eyes a set / of hands.” Unlike the introduction and the first stanza where Hammad starts with a higher pitch falling

to a lower tone, the poet here in the second stanza starts with a lower pitch. Such a flat pattern becomes more vital with the gradual increase in the speed of the rhythm. Similar to a musical band where an instrument only falls silent to open the floor to another, the poet fills the flat-steady intonation with a rising speed, keeping the audience's attention and combining both intimate and energetic feelings. Finally, the pitch range in the initial part of the poem, including the verbal introduction and the first and second stanzas (Figures 3 and 4), has two major functions: familiarizing audiences with the dominant intonational pattern and creating feelings within which the poem is understood.

Figure 4: Pitch Range of Part I, the Second Stanza

In the second part of the poem, the rhythm appears more dynamic with quick movement among different patterns. The increase in speed starts from the last two lines of the previous part, becoming more lively. However, this speed is interrupted by slow moments to emphasize specific lines or/and to recall the initial slowness of the poem. In the second part, Hammad starts:

this is what poets do

fall in love, over and out

they break hearts poets

do and then wail when

their own are bruised. (Hammad, *Zaatar Diva*. 30)

The first line occurs in a fast narrative associated with a short word duration and ends with a long pause. Notably, Hammad also uses the fast narrative in the first two lines of the poem. She offers a frequency of rhythm that is associated with the structural body of the poem. It is important to mention here that the last two lines of the first part of the poem “as/a pair of eyes a set/of hands” are also performed in a fast narrative with a short word duration. The speed of the performance bridges the two parts and prepares audiences for the transition of the rhythm to a faster pattern. The second line, “fall in love, over and out,” appears in a fast rhythm with small breaks between words slowed down by a long word duration. While a long pause divides the first and the second lines, the second and the following lines are separated with a smaller break, 0.01 of one second, merging the two stanzas in one performative unit. Despite this unification, the poet reads the second line in long duration and shortens the word performance of the third lines. The poet performs the last three lines as two rhythmic units “they break hearts poets/ do” and “and then wail when / their own are bruised.” The last unit is performed with a very long word duration, keeping the fast rhythm between phrases. Such diversity in the rhythm emphasizes each rhythmic piece. The second part of the poem represents a new discourse that is slightly separated from the initial part and the musical introduction. Part II moves from the immigrants’ memory and hopes to poets and their poetry. After building an emotional context in the first part, the poet employs a dynamic rhythm in an energetic style where her thought seems bold, powerful, confident, and likely convincing. The frequent changes in the rhythm also increase listeners’ interest.

In order to highlight the diversity of the rhythm of the passage above, the poet stabilizes her intonation. Thus, listeners receive a dominant flat intonation (Figure 5). Only the first line has a wide range of pitch. While the first word represents a relative peak in pitch, the last word of this line occupies the deepest position in the chart. The wide range of pitch is associated with fast narrative sped up further by short word duration. The line is empowered by the dynamic intonation and rhythm offering the highest level of excitement in the stanza. The long pause after the line also adds more emphasis. This speaking behavior highlights the passage as a key moment in the performance in general. Additionally, the drop from a high to a lower pitch, associated with the fast rhythm, appears frequently in the first part, and its continuity maintains

the initial feeling and connects the second part of the poem to the first part, despite different and disconnected content. After the first line of the passage above, the poet changes the intonation into a flat style in the next two lines. She slightly increases her pitch in “and then wail” emphasizing the word “wail” (see Figure 5). The first stanza ends in the second 32.49. This rise serves to refresh the excitement of the passage.

Figure 5: Pitch Range of Part II the First and Second Stanzas, in Addition to Hammad's Comment

After the two stanzas of Part II, the poet interrupts her poem with external phrases. The move from poem to commentary occurs after a short pause, which does not corrupt the intonational unit of the poem. This interruption brings sudden changes to the rhythm and intonation, representing Hammad's shift from the position of poet. Her assumption of the role of the listener inverts her position to one from which she can criticize herself. She says, “oh yeah, really! a little compassion!” She leaves the narrow range of pitch to an unexpected rise (Figure 5). Additionally, she moves from long to short word duration, speeding up the already fast rhythm found in the previous two stanzas, and gradually abandons the breaks between words, replacing the fast rhythm with a fast narrative. The rhythm starts fast with “oh yeah” and speeds up further with a short word duration. In the following phrase, she continues in a fast narrative, slowed by long word duration. Additionally, two long pauses interrupt this comment:

the first after “really!” and the second after “compassion.” The pauses function as a space for the audience to participate. The long pause at the end of the interrupting words allows the participants’ laughter to reach the stage. Hence, the fast rhythm of the beginning of the phrase and the later fast narrative are slowed with long pauses in addition to the word duration.

Hammad’s commentary is highlighted by the word duration and offers dense emotions through high pitch and fast rhythm and narrative. The poet focuses on expressing feelings—her emotive reaction to her poem— and, therefore, eases the musical aspect by using a more casual manner of speaking. The performance of this piece supports the element of suddenness since the unexpected comment occurs also in an unforeseen style. Furthermore, the rise in pitch is familiar in interruptions in everyday conversation. Additionally, representing the voice of listeners, the poet encourages the audience to participate. In this phrase the poet applies a crucial shift of the rhythm, intonation, and point of view. A departure from a dominant voice and manner of expression shortens the distance between the poet and her listeners.

This multi-voiced technique is highly regarded by Mikhail Bakhtin as the dialogic aspect of modern literature. For him, dialogic discourse presents a theme from multiple points of view (263). In Hammad’s poem, two voices are represented; while the poet’s voice dominates the poem, the voice of an imaginary listener interrupts the text with a dissenting opinion. Additionally, Bakhtin pays particular attention to the role of laughter in demolishing classical writings. He writes: “[i]t is precisely laughter that destroys the epic [or classical literature], and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image, a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close” (23). Thus, Hammad’s long pause after the external phrase not only allows for audience laughter, but also further shortens the distance between the poet and her listeners. In addition to humor, she also uses a lower pitch to get closer to her audience. Therefore, she employs a relatively higher pitch in this comical phrase to add a level of excitement to such an intimate relationship.

The poet returns to her poem after a long pause. She performs the rest of the second part as a unit separating the stanzas with short pauses:

words carry no weight

meaning is in silence

in the space
between history and hope.
they divine watermelon
seeds touch everything
counter philosophies count
on deities poets
live cussing fear

for years, they travel
exile a constant
static state
where they live
life is unreal until a kiss
this is the present
they offer (*Zaatar Diva*. 30-31)

Hammad recovers her dominant style of intonation, starting with a higher pitch that falls, energizing the beginnings and emphasizing her ideas with a lower pitch as she continues in her performance. Figure 6 shows that the first word of the passage “Words” occurs at the highest point and the pitch gradually falls for the rest of the stanza. She ends the first stanza of the passage above with a short pause to start again with a slightly higher pitch, falling gradually to a lower range.

Figure 6: Pitch Range of Part II Stanzas 3, 4, and 5

Hammad underlines a phrase, “live cusp ing,” with a deeper pitch, while the following word “fear” is centralized at a higher pitch. This wide range of intonation emphasizes the line, and such an emphasis is supported with a relatively long word duration and two short pauses after “live” and “fear.” That is to say, the phrase, “poets live cusp ing fear,” represents a key statement in the poem. I will return to all emphasized lines at the end of this analysis to highlight the specific meaning delivered by the poet’s reading. Hammad continues her performance to the end of the second part of the poem using a flat pitch in a narrower range.

The rhythm supports the intonation, starting as a fast narrative, as often in her beginnings, and gradually slowing to a slow rhythm by dividing words or phrases with small breaks and sometimes short pauses. The duration of words is generally short and grows slightly longer in order to emphasize certain words or phrases. Observing the details of rhythm, one finds that the first stanza of the passage above occurs in a fast narrative. After the short pause between the stanzas, the poet employs a fast rhythm with a generally short word duration. She emphasizes the line “in the space between history and hope” with a slightly longer word duration. The rhythm slows, starting from the second line of the second stanza above, with the words “[...] touch everything” and achieves the slowest moment in the line, “poets live cusp ing fear” in a

slow rhythm associated with long word duration and short pauses. The rhythm gradually returns to a fast rhythm with a very short word duration in the following lines “for years they travel / exile a constant / static state / where they live / life is unreal until [...]” and expanding the duration again to emphasize the last word of the stanza “a kiss.” Thus, the dominant fast rhythm is generally supported with a short word duration but slowed down at three spots: “in the space between history and hope,” “poets live cusping fear,” and “a kiss.” Thus, we can imagine the performance of the passage above as a musical piece that starts loud and fast, gets slower, reaches its deepest and slowest point in the highlighted phrase, recovers the high speed gradually, and slows down to highlight another important expression.

The intonation and the rhythm of this part follow the general melody of the poem and support important phrases. Stabilizing the performance in a general style of flat intonation and relatively fast rhythm is important after the exciting moment created when Hammad interrupts her poem with external phrases. Additionally, the poet has built her emotional context, and shortened the distance between her and the listeners in an early stage of the performance. In this advanced piece, audiences are open to accepting the influence of her work. Spending more effort on the musical aspect here may consume audience's energy.

The last part of the poem refers to the initial section and the Egyptian song:

when you find my beloved
the dark haired
smiling eyed one
remind him of me of
my laugh and my dance.
do not tell him i
have cried nightly for
him waited for him

these words carry no weight

simply remind him

we are poets each

of us travelers between

history and hope (*Zaatar Diva* 31)

Preparing the audience for the final silence, the poet breaks her performance with short and long pauses. The rhythm starts fast and gets slower towards the end. The pitch range is narrow and flat overall with considerable wide-range breaks. The first three lines occur in a fast narrative, as usual, with short word duration. The first line is separated from the two following lines with a long pause. The poet often uses the long pauses to distinguish between stanzas or ideas. On this occasion, however, she gives the listeners a space to remember the song and recall the initial lines of the poem. The rhythm slows, shifting from a fast narrative to a fast rhythm with long word duration in the lines “remind him of me of / my laugh and my dance.” The rhythm is slowed even further with a short pause after “laugh.” The second stanza of the passage above follows a long pause performed in a fast narrative with short word duration, emphasizing the phrase “have cried” with short breaks. This emphasis has an intonational justification that will be clarified later. Starting from the line “these words carry no weight,” the word duration gets longer in a fast narrative of each line or thought. However, the thoughts are divided by long and short pauses to further slow the rhythm; a long pause takes place after “weight,” and the short pauses occur after “him,” “poets,” “travelers” and “history.” The last line is very slow with a long word duration and a short pause after “history.” In general, the music of the passage starts fast and gets slower and slower to close the performance.

Figure 7: Pitch Range of Part III Stanza 1 and part of Stanza 2

Figure 8: Pitch Range of Part III from Stanza 2 to the End of the Poem

The intonation of the passage above has a complicated range that does not strictly follow the repeated falling intonation in the poem (see Figures 7 and 8). Hammad starts the passage with a higher pitch, as she often does, then falls to a deep tone. The

pitch range appears wide in the first phrase, “when you find.” Whereas “when you” occurs at a higher pitch, “find” is performed at a deep pitch. This style, as mentioned, frequently appears in Arabic traditional songs and connects the poem with the musical introduction. Then, the pitch stabilizes in the second and third lines and rises slightly at the beginning of the fourth line, “remind.” After this increase, pitch gradually falls, a trend that continues in the following three lines. Here, the poet whispers again to her listeners, emphasizing the passage, showing more emotion, and shortening the distance between her and the audience. A slight increase, on the word “tell,” prepares listeners for a sharp deep intonation in “cried.” Thus, this section occurs in a stable range of pitch that is interrupted by a wider range to emphasize specific phrases and create a variety of emotional effects.

The phrase, “I have cried,” is highlighted with a fine sudden slowing of the rhythm, from a fast narrative to a fast rhythm with short breaks, representing a deep point in the poem with an unexpected shift in both rhythm and pitch. The poet whispers this part and expands its duration in the performance, delivering intense feelings. After this deep moment, the poet improvises a small change to the written passage. She adds the pronoun “I” before the “waited” to serve the slow rhythm and to create an improvised representation of the contents. The pronoun also has an intonational function. The poet wants to apply a wide range of pitch. Thus, “I” happens at a relatively higher pitch, making “waited” seem deeper.

The line “these words carry no weight” appears in the performance, exactly as in the written passage, as an independent unit between two long pauses; rhythm shifts into a different word duration, and the pitch registers at a higher point. The line first appears in the second part of the poem. Because this line is repeated, the change of rhythm and pitch becomes necessary to avoid the dullness of repetition. Therefore, the poet performs the word “these” at a high pitch, breaking the flat and falling pattern with a moment of excitement that influences the end of the poem. The following passage rises at several distinct points, in contrast to the dominant falling pattern. As evidenced in Figure 8, the pitch is high in “we are poets,” slightly decreases in “each of us” and “travelers,” increases again in “between history,” and declines upon the last word, “hope,” recovering the deep dominant feeling. Musical compositions sometimes follow a similar style with an intermittent rising of pitch before ending the piece with a higher level of excitement.

According to the voice analysis, intonation alternates between whispers and excitements in a wide range to create a developing poetic experience by integrating

emotions while the rhythm emphasizes the structure of the poem and ensures its musical coherence. Pauses do not strictly follow the line breaks that are written with uncompleted thoughts. The poet connects lines with short breaks and occasionally inserts a pause in the middle of a line. That is not to say that the poet completely disregards the line breaks, but she occasionally wants the performance to move faster between lines and places her pauses around centralized thoughts, specifically in the second part of the poem.

Both intonation and rhythm maintain the audience's attention throughout the performance. They serve to emphasize specific lines, phrases, and words as key turns in the poetic expression: "remind," "this is what poets do," "poets live cusp[ing] fear," "a kiss," "the space between history and hope," "I have cried," and "these words carry no weight." According to these highlighted phrases, the poem focuses on the role of poets in refreshing memory, countering fears, and creating a space between history and hope. Poetry and songs do not only function as verbal or musical aesthetic expressions but also as feelings and memory. The vocal analysis shows how the poet conveys her heavy emotions to the listeners through a low pitch.

The analysis of Hammad's performance reveals poetic aspects that are not found in the written text, such as emotional whispers, energetic excitements, and the emphasis created by word duration. The poet builds her performance using a consideration of time; the introductory and final sections appear slower and more emotional than the middle of the poem, which is more exciting. Apparently, the poet has regard for the listener's attitude toward her work. She gives time to remember, if necessary, and intensifies the rhythm when it is needed. This dialogic aspect serves the intentional influence of the poem.

The vocal analysis in this study aims to highlight the function of contemporary digital tools in analyzing performance poetry. This study also proves that discussion of the oral aspects of poetry is an integral part of the poetic analysis. Poetry is not only about words, structure, music, rhythms, or rhymes but all these elements and beyond them. This orality becomes unavoidable in critical studies, especially in the contemporary digital culture. Digital texts in general have vocal and visual aspects that must be considered in academic discussions. As researchers who experience the digital age, we carry the responsibility of developing critical perspectives to advance its tools, such as oral and performance studies.

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Footnotes

1. Created by Robert Ochshorn and Max Hawkins. <https://lowerquality.com/gentle/> ↵
2. Created by Max Hawkins and Robert Ochshorn. <http://drift-demo.lowerquality.com/upload> ↵
3. Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle offer more details on the communicational nature of online space in their article "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software." ↵
4. In her article, "The Rhetoric of Remix," Virginia Kuhn offers more details about the increasing popularity of the use of oral characteristics in more recent works as a response to the communicational development offered by digital platforms. ↵
5. For more details on the Arabic song "Sawwah" written by Mohammed Hamza see Amina Goodyear's translation on *All About BellyDancing!* <http://www.shira.net/music/lyrics/sawwah.htm>. Accessed 1 March 2019. ↵
6. The term is inspired by Kuhn's "The Rhetoric of Remix." ↵

7. Defined as “the standard unit of measurement used for measuring frequency. Since frequency is measured in cycles per second, one hertz equals one cycle per second. [...] Hertz is commonly used to measure wave frequencies, such as sound waves, light waves, and radio waves” (Christensson).

<https://techterms.com/definition/hertz> . ↵

8. According to Carlos Gussenhoven's *The Phonology of Tone and Intonation*, this is the universal average of human voice. ↵

9. Although the influence of African/ African American cultures represents a key factor in Hammad's work, my thesis requires me to maintain the focus on the influence of Arabic tradition and oral techniques in general. For additional information regarding African/ African American oral inflections on written and spoken poetry and folklore, see the studies of experts such as William Bascom, Henry Lewis Gates, Jr., Roger Abrahams, Abiola Irele, and John Roberts ↵

10. <https://lowerquality.com/gentle/> ↵

11. <http://drift-demo.lowerquality.com/upload> ↵