

## Related Somehow to Africa

*black Palestinians and the search for shared identity*

### jewel bush

IN THE SUMMER of 2009, I crash a wedding party in Deir el-Balah, a city along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean Sea situated in the middle of the Gaza Strip. The celebration is in honor of the son of Mama Ayda, a dark-eyed, sober-faced matriarch. It is his groom's party.

The men drip sweat from dancing *dabke* outdoors in the Middle Eastern summer heat. They heap affection onto the groom-to-be, often embracing him and hoisting his chair high in the air as the women in his family and female guests form a semicircle around the fast-paced movement. They sit watching the scene, quietly chatting among themselves. Scores of children chase each other in the open field giggling into the night. At this age, prepuberty, it is acceptable for the sexes to play together.

I stand to snap pictures of this traditional Palestinian line dance—the stomping, the spinning, the kicking, and the jumping. The ground pulsates under the intensity of the *dabke* chain. My host and translator, twenty-four-year-old Samra, grabs my elbow and shakes her finger for me not to approach. With hand gestures, reprimanding looks, and tongue-lashings in Arabic, other women admonish me from going near the testosterone-only action. Under different circumstances, at a wedding reception back home, I would have joined on the dance floor.

Someone would have moved over a bit to make room for me in line to do the Bus Stop or perhaps the Cupid Shuffle and my presence would have been welcomed.

If I am to dance tonight, it will be in a separate area for women only. It is in this space that the



Samra and Suad at Suad's home, June 2009.  
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women, clad in their *thobes*—flowing garments rippling with intricate embroidery and appliqué designs—are allowed to trip the light fantastic. With outstretched arms, the women in various stages of womanhood dance with one another, moving slightly off-kilter from right to left, calling out in loud, piercing tones, clicking their tongues, sometimes removing their hijabs as they enjoy the camaraderie of female company. I take my snapshots from an acceptable distance as the children scurry around me, leaping in and out of frames, touching me, smiling at me, standing close to me.

When Mama Ayda arrives, I am escorted to meet her. Word at the event has spread that there is an American present, a black American. Based on my own Southern rearing, I don't have to fully understand this culture or their customs to know that it would be offensive not to greet the pillars of the community. Paying deference to elders is just as meaningful in Palestine as it is in Louisiana.

Mama Ayda is draped in a glowing white scarf; only a sliver of her smooth, ebony face is exposed. She is prominently seated as the most important person at the gathering. From this post, she receives gifts of heavy burlap sacks filled with rice and flour, bestowed upon her from the bride-to-be's family. Samra leads me over. A large crowd of women and children hover to hear my New Orleans drawl being translated into Arabic. With my point-and-shoot, notebook, and ignorance in tow, our conversation begins.

Mama Ayda was forced from her birthplace, a village named Nabi Rubin—believed to be the resting place of the Prophet Reuben—near Jerusalem in 1948: The year of the Nakba. The Nakba, translated from Arabic as “The Catastrophe,” refers to the year that more than 800,000 Palestinians were expelled from their villages in what is known as the Arab/Israeli War or the Israeli War of Independence. Israeli laws, established subsequently, prevented them from ever returning. These peoples and their descendants, close to five million, are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). They live as the largest group of refugees in the world. UNRWA is a United Nations agency that was specifically established in the 1950s to deal with “the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem.” There are fifty-eight recognized Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

Mama Ayda doesn't know her exact age. Ninety is her best guess. She has never met an American. I am her first. She calls me “nice.”

**I have voluntarily entered a war zone and am now plunged into a reality I had previously known very little about, only to realize that the very little that I think I know is all wrong.**

“I long for the day where I can eat, sleep, and be happy,” she tells me through Samra’s translation, expressing her longing for the siege to be over.

Before this, I had no concept of black Palestinians; yet here I am, deep in a community of black Palestinians, black people—a gumbo of complexions—who look like they could be from Haiti or Harlem or Ghana or out the Tremé. These black people were born in Palestine and live there, too: the African Diaspora in the flesh, the Gulf Coast meets the Middle East. And somehow, I manage to hook up with a clique of sisters. Maybe I could have fit in, gone unnoticed, except for my inability to speak or understand the language—and my American-ness, impossible to conceal, not even in my oversized backpack.

It is unclear how many Palestinians of African descent are in Palestine, but what is certain is that I had stumbled upon a strong enclave of them in Deir el-Balah. Their existence is swallowed whole in the dilemma that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where religious and political oppression and restriction of movement in a sixty-plus year fight hardly leaves any room for an identity separate from the national one.

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I first meet Samra, an English teacher, at Al-Maghazi Cultural Center, a social service nonprofit organization dedicated to the needs of women and children in the central Gaza Strip. Her silver bangle bracelets clank as the woman, who knows sign language too, uses her hands to help convert Executive Director Talal Abu Shawish’s address back into Arabic while he speaks to our group in English.

I am part of a New Orleans subgroup that has spent the last week with other do-gooders, activists, and journalists from around the world—including noted activist, political scientist, and author Norman Finkelstein—traveling on charter buses throughout the rubble and ruins that are unfortunately much of Gaza. The delegation is organized by CODEPINK, an anti-war group run largely by privileged white women. We arrive in the Egyptian North Sinai border town of Arish with a special letter from international diplomats recommending we be allowed to pass through the Rafah crossing into Gaza right away. My head is swimming with other people’s analyses of the Israeli occupation, whether the 1948 or 1967 borders should be honored, one or two state solutions, and Hamas vs. Fatah debates. This disaster awareness-raising tour weighs on me emotionally, as do the sounds of shelling in the Mediterranean Sea by the Israeli Navy, rolling blackouts throughout the region, bombed out edifices scattered across the landscape, chunks

of concrete sprouting from the ground, and bullet holes everywhere. I have voluntarily entered a war zone and am now plunged into a reality I had previously known very little about, only to realize that the very little that I think I know is all wrong. Wrong information fed to me from sources dead-set on criminalizing and vilifying a people as terrorists.

When I walk into the Al-Maghazi Cultural Center, I am weary from a daylong itinerary of visits to numerous social service agencies and stuffed from eating at every stop. It would be rude to turn down meals offered by a nation of people who live daily with food insecurity. I say *shukran* and consume respectable, yet minimal, amounts of the Mirinda orange soda and *makloubah*, a popular chicken and rice dish. By this time, my stomach is bubbling. I need water, Pepto-Bismol, and a nap.

Immediately prior, my group interviewed Dr. Mariam Abu Daqqa, a well-known resistance leader from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who spent many years in Israeli prisons for her role in armed resistance in the 1960s and 1970s and in the First Intifada in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Now, her efforts are focused on medical treatment and education for women, like providing eyeglasses and first aid classes, as well as tackling the psychological needs of women and kids living under siege. A cluster of us huddle to hear tales of a life dedicated to revolution, and marvel at photographs of her in younger days—among them, a photograph with Ernesto “Che” Guevara in Bulgaria. The non-smokers don’t mind her chain-smoking as we cling to her words in much the same way the thick smoke from her Marlboros grabs the air in her tiny, dank office.

Just like I notice Samra at the women’s center—the black Palestinian woman cloaked in a white, sequined scarf that covers her long, slender face, a silver necklace dangling down the front of her blouse—she notices me, too: the only black face among a sea of white ones. The three other black Americans traveling with the delegation weren’t in my unit that day. This fact hasn’t necessarily dawned on me until this point.

Once the presentation is complete, I make my way to Samra. There are several other black Palestinian women milling about the center, too. Samra and I become fast friends, an instant kinship undoubtedly based on our black skin. Within minutes, she and a few of the other women from the center surround me. We flip through a small picture album that I have brought with me, sharing glimpses of my life in the States as a mother, sister, and friend. We ask each other intrusive questions

**We ask each other intrusive questions that under any other situation would seem flat-out weird. But here, it is okay. Why? Because none of this is supposed to be normal.**

that under any other situation would seem flat-out weird. But here, it is okay. Why? Because none of this is supposed to be normal. Suad, a thirty-five-year-old secretary at the center, is in the cipher. As my group's time winds down, she blurts out an awkward invitation for me to attend a party with them that night.

I decline the offer. I am insultingly underdressed, wearing ratty brown canvas sneakers, a long, cobalt button-down top, and puke-green yoga pants—a dusty, mismatched traveler whose luggage never arrived in Cairo. I am living in two outfits, emergency late night purchases from Khan el-Khalili, a major souk in Cairo.

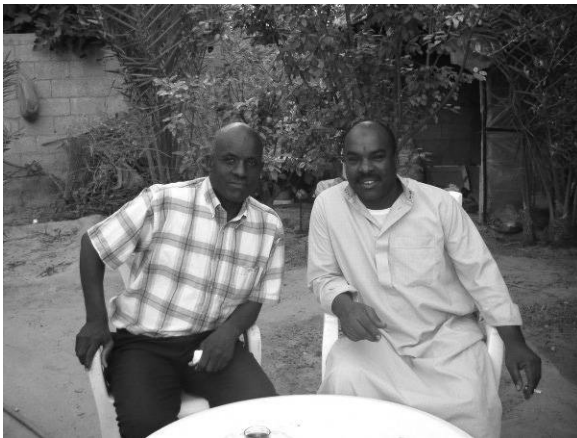
Suad, who speaks a fair amount of English, says “no problem,” and before I can object again, I break from the rest of the group armed with a list of cell phone numbers and the address of the hotel written on a slip of paper. We leave in a beat-up cab with Samra and Suad, off to Suad's house to choose an outfit from her closet to wear to what I discovered during the ride isn't just a get-together, but a marriage celebration.

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When we arrive at Suad's two-bedroom home in Deir el-Balah, her two sons—Wesam, five, and Islam, six, dressed alike in yellow and khaki short sets—greet us. Here, Suad's second shift starts. She has to prepare dinner for her family before she can head out for the evening. She whips up something quick on a stove of two propane burners.

Her husband, Khaleed, about ten years her senior, is in the family's backyard garden of olives, plums, apricots, figs, and grapes with his brother, Soad Ali. A mud oven rests in the corner of the yard for

use during the many times electricity is cut by Israel. The two men sit at a round white table drinking chai with maramia, a sweet sage, Khaleed in his green thobe, and Soad Ali in a blue-and-white checkered shirt and dark slacks. They read the newspaper and discuss matters of state.



**Brothers  
Soad Ali and  
Khaleed in  
Khaleed's  
backyard,  
June 2009.**  
© jewel bush.

Suad was born in Libya and is part Egyptian. It is not made clear to me why she emigrated from Libya to Palestine. “She came to Palestine because it is our country,” Samra jumps in to help Suad explain it to me. I still don’t understand, but I don’t press the issue. The importance of that detail shrinks as I talk to her husband and brother-in-law. They grill me as to why I am visiting “their country.” The men are flabbergasted to learn that I am traveling with people of Jewish heritage and faith who stand in solidarity with Palestine.

“But the Jews are our enemies,” Khaleed says with certainty. “They care?”

Both men have spent seven years in Israeli jail camps for what I understand to be the equivalent of American racial profiling, under “administrative detention,” an Israeli form of incarceration that requires no formal sentencing and effectively eradicates due process for non-Jews. As of April 2013, there were approximately 4,700 security prisoners in Israeli jails, 169 of them held under administrative detention without having been charged with any crime. Most of the prisoners are Palestinian men from the West Bank and Gaza areas, accused of participating in terrorist attacks.

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From life-sustaining medicine to common household supplies that we take for granted, everything that moves through Gaza is heavily regulated, even what is snuck in through the tunnels, dangerous, underground routes of commerce. The region doesn’t have a commercial airport. It used to, but the area where folks could fly in and out is now bombed out. Border crossings can take hours, days, weeks. Or never. The region has been likened to the largest, open-air prison in the world, with Israel as its warden. The people live under an apartheid system, which some argue is more severe than the one South Africa toppled in the 90s, if you believe in a hierarchy of oppression. “We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians,” said Nelson Mandela during a 1997 speech for International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People in Pretoria, South Africa.

Venture about three miles from the shore into the Mediterranean Sea—even a mile more—and the Israeli Navy will fire. Fishermen are

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forced to overfish the waters, trampling their livelihoods and causing an environmental calamity. Farmers along the borders face a similar scenario.

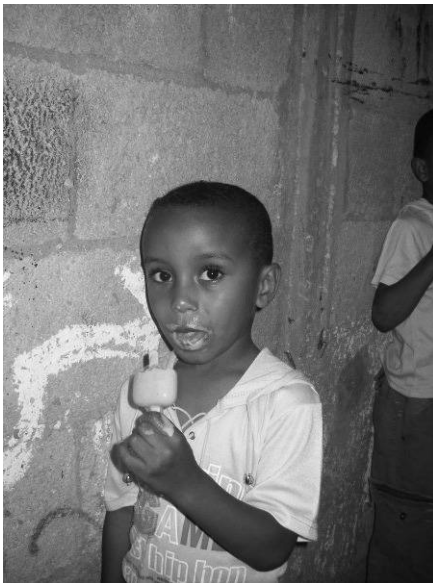
Many homes have been destroyed by Israeli air strikes, bombings, and heavy artillery fire, the scars of Occupation. The bombings are evident in Suad's neighborhood, the equivalent of a lifetime of post-Katrina blight that never gets rebuilt. You may have a lived-in house next to one so ravaged that it's hard to imagine it was ever called "home." Cement, wood, steel, glass, and other building materials are banned from entering Gaza or are never allowed to pass through the border crossings. Whatever is smuggled in is expensive, which makes reconstruction for those of a certain privilege and those willing to take the risk.

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I thank the men and exit the garden with Suad. She pulls several garments from the closet in her bedroom. We are about the same size. After showing me a couple of pantsuits that don't quite fit my tastes, she lays out a black one with a gold-embroidered neckline. "That one," I say, choosing it from the lineup of possible selections. I go into the bathroom to change. Right before I shut the door, Suad hands me a fistful of white napkins and smiles.

Dinner isn't quite finished when it is time for us to leave. The surreal normality of the song of the ice cream truck meandering its

way through the neighborhood is as magnificent as the call for prayer heard throughout Gaza. Suad fishes coins from her bag and hands them to her boys. Her husband comes to see us off. As we pile into our second cab of the adventure, he stands on the sidewalk, steadying himself with a stick. While we drive off, I watch the chocolate ice cream trickling down Wesam's and Islam's hands as they stand in the alleyway enjoying their sweets.



**Suad's son,  
Wesam, June  
2009.**

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I left Gaza with Samra's email address. I wrote to her when I returned to New Orleans, only to discover that it was invalid. Anxious I had lost contact with her forever, I did what everyone does these days when searching for someone: I looked her up on Facebook.

**jewel bush**

**6/12/09**

Hi . . . Not sure if I have the right person since you don't have a picture of yourself up . . . I was wondering if this was Samra, whom I met last week in Palestine. If so, please add me as a friend.

Moments later, from the other side of the world, Samra added me and sent this message:

**Samra**

**6/12/09**

hi dear. it is me who met in Palestine. and I added u. this photo is noumy cambel the model. all love

A second message from her followed within a few minutes, but it was in Arabic. Then,

**Samra**

**6/12/09**

iam sorry. so u have to learn some Arabic

While in Palestine, I asked black Palestinian women if the color of their skin negatively impacted their lives as Palestinians. Over and over again, the answer was "no." They said they experienced no discrimination and were quite confused by the question. They found it difficult to fathom being mistreated by fellow Palestinians. "*Israel* is our enemy," I was told. However, eventually, some admitted that, when it comes down to marriage, families seek lighter-skinned brides or Arab brides. Even Samra confessed in writing, "Once I loved white one but we broken down cus we will not marry cus of tradition. My family who refuse to let my marry with white basicly/ in the same time his family refused too."

One non-black Palestinian woman in Gaza told me that black women are not as good-looking, which is why they oftentimes don't get marriage proposals. She meant no insult, but stated it as a matter of



record: Black people—referred to as *sumr*, Arabic for brown, or by the racial epithet *'abd*, which means slave—are inferior, the truth of being black and Palestinian. To be Palestinian in the Occupied Territory means you suffer from a profound isolation and persecution. But to be black in Palestine means you suffer from an even deeper sense of isolation. Yes, it is possible.

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*By now, it seems to have become a requirement of the global community that all societies determine the measure of beauty and charm by the lightness of the skin, and ours is no exception. Black Palestinians are the subject of extreme prejudice and social profiling as children. As adults, they find it difficult to integrate into society and be treated with respect and equality by fellow Palestinians. Suffering the brunt of it are our Black Palestinian women who, under this racist framework, find it impossible to live up to such standards of beauty. They are often shunned and declared unfit for love or marriage because blackness has become akin to ugliness.*

—BUDOUR YOUSSEF HASSAN

I have many follow-up questions about race in Gaza. I sent Samra a link to a website with an article by anthropologist Susan Beckerleg (<http://yajaffar.tripod.com/african.html>) that discusses the history of black people in Palestine, focusing especially on the history of black Africans being brought to Palestine as slaves and laborers. The following exchange ensued.

**Samra**

**7/13/09**

it is nice article and interesting

it has valuable information about palestine

but frankly I wondered that the writer describe black people in palestine as slaves in fact they do not call slaves . . .

another thing writer see that black people in palestine related somehow to africa but I think we are not we are just Palestinian born here

I attempted to clarify, explaining to Samra that the author simply meant that, at some point in the past, black Palestinians had a genealogical connection to Africa. For example,

**jewel bush**

**7/13/09**

. . . i was born in the united states. my parents were too. and so were my grandparents, but as a black woman and taking into consideration the history of the united states and slavery, my ancestors do come from africa; even though i may be unsure of where they came from in africa. i know it is the past, but knowing and acknowledging the past is also part of the present and future.

**Samra**

**7/13/09**

ok thanks for making its clear  
but I still have question are all black people related to africa??  
about past I really appreciate the past and who has no past  
has no future . . .

The instinct of knowing a sister when you see one, that very sameness that drew Samra to me, was also the very thing that separated us, this diasporic identity I had that she could not comprehend, regardless of her proximity to the continent. We both carry it in our DNA: Africa. However, Africa is also what separates us, both in terms of consciousness and identity.

For me, blackness is the crux of my political identity; for Samra, that is being Palestinian. The very act of being black in America is political—from how our ancestors arrived, to where they could use the bathroom and drink water and live and work and shop and walk, drive, ride and go to school, wages, healthcare—all political. In all of my Pan-African idealism that I carried with me to Gaza, I made assumptions about racial identification based on phenotype. For Samra, being black doesn't cultivate feelings of racial pride as it does for me. Blackness for Samra is not an identity marker. Palestinian, Muslim, woman, daughter all trumped—superseded—a notion of blackness as critically important.

However, the fact that blackness—and a sense of connection to Africa—is not of great importance to Samra's sense of identity does not mean that this is true for all black Palestinians—or that it was always true for the black Palestinian community. In an email exchange

with Susan Beckerleg, she clarified some of the history behind this distancing.

Palestinian history is all geared towards promoting the idea that they are the original inhabitants of the region. This is a reaction to the Israeli claims that the land is theirs and the snatching of Palestinian land. People are not interested much in history for its sake, and many people do not want to delve into slave pasts. Being called 'abed' is bad enough. People of African descent told me what they knew of their parents and grandparents and their lives in Palestine. Some older people I spoke to in Jerusalem had been born in Africa, while others in the Negev and Gaza told me what they knew of how their ancestors came to Palestine. For many other people the link with Africa had been lost and all but forgotten.

Beckerleg conducted interviews with black Palestinians in Gaza, the Negev, and Jerusalem between September 1995 and January 1998. It was this research that formed the basis for her article, "Hidden History, Secret Present: The Origins and Status of African Palestinians," to which I had linked Samra. In it, she goes on to clarify that the failure of the Oslo Accords proved a turning point in the identity politics of many black Palestinians. In her words, "as the political situation worsened it became more difficult to talk to people about the highly sensitive and political issues of ethnic origin, the legacy of slavery and their current status as Palestinian or Israeli citizens."

By contrast, my own ancestral connection to Africa has never been in doubt. Growing up in Louisiana, I developed a Pan-African viewpoint at a young age. In the 1990s, we repped RBG, wore "Free South Africa" medallions, learned about Marcus Garvey, and studied the principles of Kwanzaa. Even without knowing exactly where in Africa my ancestors were captured, all Transatlantic slave routes lead from Mama Africa. Unlike Samra, I have the privilege to be able to embrace this triple identity—black, American, African—without fundamentally having to give up one for the sake of the other.

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Oral testimony about ancestry can be hard to obtain directly from black Palestinians. Despite the tabooed connection between black skin and slavery, slavery and forced labor cannot account for nearly all of the black people in Palestine. Their origins are in fact quite diverse, including voluntary migration and religious pilgrimages to the Holy Land from African nations with sizable Muslim populations, such as Chad, Senegal, Sudan, and Nigeria. Kali Akuno, a member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, who has done Palestinian solidarity work in the United States since 1987, adds,

Slavery was much more complex within the Islamic world than it was in the West. Part of the complex legacy of slavery is it encompassed peoples of all races in the region despite that it still came to be associated specifically with people with 'black' African phenotypes in the Arabic speaking world even though the 'black' Palestinian population is as much a product of military operatives (soldiers and mercenaries) that served various caliphates over the years, as it is of those Africans who were enslaved and brought to Palestine before the 19th century.

I ask Samra where her parents were born? Her grandparents? She says her grandparents were born in Bir al-Saba' (Beersheba) in the Negev desert, on occupied Palestinian land, and expelled during the Nakba. Her mother, who is significantly older than her father, was also born in Bir al-Saba'. Her father, a teacher, in Gaza.

• • •

We tour classrooms and workshops while visiting the Afaq Jadeeda Association, a center that provides a creative outlet for children in the Nuseirat Refugee Camp through sports and the arts. There is a pair of pre-teen boys who are smitten with me. At one point, they are so close that I stop suddenly and they trip over desks so as not to touch me. Their faces are bruised and their clothes are tattered. They speak enough English for us to engage. They are silly and make jokes. I am the butt of some of these gags, I infer. They question many times, "You Sudan? You Somal?" They lead a young girl of about six over to clarify.

“See,” they say, pointing at her, “she Somal.” Again they ask, “You Somal?”

She is a foreigner to them. She is African. She is black like me.

“No. I’m not Somal. I’m from America,” I say.

They initiate their own tour to show me their drawings and the rest of the room. We get to a bookcase and they remove a glossy magazine from the shelf. The cover is of bloodied and bandaged babies and wreckage. Without flinching, they tell me in clear English, “America did this.” I don’t know if they recognize the gravitas of that statement. Some of the instructors shoo them away now, but it is too late. I am already indicted.

When we leave, one of the members of the delegation starts to give her possessions to the children, ranging in age from about five to fourteen. She empties her small tote, handing out apples, individually wrapped snack bags of cookies and crackers, miscellaneous trinkets she was carrying, and all of the shekels in her pockets. The boys who chided me for the U.S.’s role in the Occupation are among the youngsters.

As I ride off in one of the luxury buses CODEPINK uses to travel around Gaza, I am ashamed. I burrow my head in my purple notebook that I use for jotting down my thoughts. I don’t want anyone to witness my tears, tears of the privileged American, who can leave just as quickly as she arrived.

The boys tap on the window where I am seated. I look up and feign glee. The bus takes off as we head to another site to see more despair. They run behind the bus calling out, “I love you. You will come back?”

I take down the window and sit on my haunches.

“I’ll try.”

• • •

When I posted the images of my trip on Facebook, my cousin, Klasi, commented on a snapshot of me next to Suad, Samra, and Sally, another black Palestinian woman at the community center. My short curly locks were covered in a scarf similar to the Muslim women I am standing with. “You look just like one of them,” she remarked after liking most of the pictures in the album, “Frontline Gaza: Women and Children First.”

I look like them? Or they look like me? Who am I, other than the descendant of Aliza “Mazie” Martin—the oldest person to whom my family can trace our lineage? In the early 1800s, French sugar planters packed her up, along with the rest of their property, and left southwest France (Department of Basses-Pyrénées), headed for Pointe Coupee

Parish in Louisiana. Mazie, who died in LeBeau, Louisiana in 1910, was born somewhere in Africa between 1820 and 1830 before being brought to France as a slave, then to Louisiana as a slave.

Me, Samra, Suad: We resemble each other, as we should, as daughters of the Diaspora. Suad from Libya. Samra from Palestine. My ancestor, Mazie. And me, related somehow to Africa.

. . .

Social media allows Samra and me to foster a relationship akin to that of old-fashioned pen pals. She asks about my son. I ask if she's found work since her contract at the nonprofit has ended. She keeps me abreast of her quest to study abroad to pursue a degree beyond her English degree from the Islamic University in Gaza. I ask how the translation process is going for an assignment she is working on, a book about children's artwork in Gaza. She follows me on Twitter. Adds me on Skype. Instagram, too.

As the upheaval in the region intensified over the years, seeing Samra again seemed like a fantasy. Keeping in touch via cyberspace would have to be enough. But then, I receive a Facebook message one day, three years after we met: Samra is coming to America. The Palestinian Authority has granted her special permission to participate in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), a program of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Her month-long residency, focusing on education and activism for young women, will include stops to Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans.

Samra's New Orleans schedule is packed with meetings, visits to various places such as the World Trade Center, some sightseeing, and a graduation ceremony with the seventeen other program participants—all in two days. I pick her up at the Intercontinental Hotel in downtown New Orleans the night she arrives in my city, a week before Christmas 2012. I am eager to repay her for the hospitality she showed me those years back. With the few resources she had, she gave generously, even the bracelets from her arm when we hugged goodbye in 2009.

I trade text messages with the coordinator of the group to arrange our meet-up. It is not lost on me that, this time, *I* am guaranteeing *Samra's* safety. I pull into the hotel driveway and spot her

**We get to a bookcase and they remove a glossy magazine from the shelf. The cover is of bloodied and bandaged babies and wreckage. Without flinching, they tell me in clear English, "America did this."**

right away sitting outside on a bench with the delegation leader. Samra cradles a sheer black scarf outlined with sequins. Her skinny braids flow down her back. She wears a white miniskirt with dark tights underneath.

After we embrace, she calls my attention to her ensemble. “Do you like it?”

“Samra!”

“I’m in the USA,” she beams.

We drive off into the chilly New Orleans night, accompanied by her new colleague, Laura from Romania. I ask about the things they’ve done so far. Samra loved Los Angeles and was able to go to a “disco” there. In Washington, D.C., they toured the White House. She hated Cincinnati because there was a shooting near the hotel, which made her afraid to go outside.

We pass the Superdome and ride down South Claiborne Avenue, heading Uptown to the holiday potluck a writer friend is hosting.

“I’m so sorry about Hurricane Katrina,” Laura says. “Is everything better?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Your leaders, what’s wrong with them?” Samra asks.

Samra mingles confidently at the party. When it is time to fix something to eat, Samra asks about the spread. She points to a mountain of confectionary nibbles. “What’s this?” she asks, when she sees me add a couple to my plate.

“Rum balls. They have alcohol in them.”

“Oh,” Samra passes over them, continuing to the next dish. Laura helps herself.

It is no different from a night out with old friends, who meet up often to go shopping or to the movies or for Sunday brunch. We pose for pictures in front of the Christmas tree in my friend’s living room. The glimmer of the red and green lights reflects brilliantly off the sequins on Samra’s black blouse.

“Wait,” she grabs her scarf before the picture is taken, this one with me, and then a few additional ones with others at the shindig.



**Woman dancing at the wedding, June 2009.**  
© jewel bush.

We don't stay out too late. I have work in the morning and Samra's day begins at 7:00 a.m. We make plans to hang out the following afternoon, once she is done with the program's closing activities. The next day is one of many goodbyes, as her delegation separates and its participants begin returning to their countries of origin.

Samra wants to go shopping to buy souvenirs for her girlfriends and her big family back in Gaza. She also wants to purchase a laptop for her uncle who lives in Cairo. I take her to a few electronics stores so she can take advantage of the season's deals. She wants to buy clothes and cosmetics for herself. We don't go to touristy shops. I take her to a strip mall where merchandise is abundant and reasonably priced. This won't be the case once she is back in Gaza. We have until 11:00 p.m.—holiday extended hours. I use this time to get some of my Christmas shopping taken care of, too.

I am embarrassed I don't get to take Samra anywhere truly special or authentically New Orleans and for this I apologize. She says no need, at least we get to be with each other. We end our night eating mediocre American fare at a noisy sports bar. We keep the talk light, but there is a numbing silence on the drive back to the hotel. It is nearly 1:00 a.m. when I drop her off. I give her a book on New Orleans culture, a nondescript hardback about crawfish and Bourbon Street, Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest, Café Du Monde and the Mississippi River.

We rush our goodbyes. I tell her that we will see each other again despite there being no guarantee when or if she will ever be allowed to travel outside of Palestine again. Or I allowed in again. Tears run down my face when I open the gift she leaves for me, a copper Pashmina scarf and dangly earrings.

. . .

Long after she has returned home, Samra tells me of something that happened while she was in the process of securing her visa to travel to the United States.

**Samra**

**10/6/13**

when i went to westbank fot the first time for visa meeting in amircan conslate , i passed in front of the entrance to Bair saba' , i was so excited and really wish if i could go there , but i can not so i took pic with road sign indicate to my home . . .



My grandparents born in Bair saba'a too.. and really I do not know if we have origin roots in africa

U told me before that all black people come from africa

Samra and I continue to discuss heritage and politics, but mainly we talk about the things friends do. I tell her that I am still writing about my trip to Gaza all these years later. She asks me to read her concept paper for a grant proposal she is writing. A few months go by and she messages me that her proposal has been selected from a pool of 681 others to be funded. Her empowerment project, Girls Make Difference, modeled after the fellowship program she participated in in the States, will be implemented. I tell her how proud I am. She asks me to like the group's Facebook page.

**Samra**

**4/20/14**

I hope we can meet again

Insha'Allah or as we say in the South, "If the Lord says the same."

### **Coda**

Israel began an assault in Gaza on July 8, 2014. According to the Gaza Health Ministry, 1,915 Palestinians have been killed and at least 10,000 wounded, most of them civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. I reach out to Samra via Facebook.

**Samra**

**7/9/14**

*its sooo bad dear we smell death around like movies . . .  
airstrik never stopped since last three nights*

**jewel bush**

**7/9/14**

*How can you work like this?  
What are you doing to stay safe?*

**Samra** 7/9/14

*people go work and pretending its ok / and majourity stay home  
do nothing just hearing bombing around  
u know there is no shelters*

**Samra** 7/10/14

*till this moment 88 civil palestinian and more than 610 injurries*

**jewel bush** 7/10/14

*Have you been safe?*

**Samra** 7/10/14

*Yes I stay at home with family  
U know, many ppl now r forced to leave homes in north of gaza  
and go to unrwa schools*

**Samra** 7/12/14

*160 martyrs and 1070 injurries till this moment during 5 days  
Most of them children and women*

**Samra** 7/15/14

*Hey dear  
Um fine with my family*

**jewel bush** 7/18/14

*Any word about what's going on?*

**Samra** 7/18/14

*Since two days and um speechless  
I can't recognize or analyze what is going on  
Just innocent kidds killed  
And whole families murdered*

As I finish this writing about black Palestinians, Israel and Hamas have agreed to and broken at least three ceasefire agreements to give civilians a break from the violence, allowing them time to bury the

dead, tend to the wounded, and gather food. Samra hasn't responded to any of my messages in more than twelve days.

Immediate survival understandably usurps identity.

For Samra, to concern yourself with blackness is to zero in on a headache, when you have bullets lodged in your skull. It is to point to a rash when phosphorous acid is raining from regular air assaults. Yes, the headaches or the rashes irritate you, but they're not the biggest of the problems you face. You could be dead.

But Insha'Allah, or if the Lord says the same, you will live another day, occupied. 🌐