

الإمبراطورية والمنفى والاضمحلال: القوى السياسية والكونية في ديوان فادي جودة مشدود إلى النجوم

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## Empire, Exile, and Entropy: Political and Cosmic Forces in Fady Joudah's Tethered to Stars

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how Fady Joudah's Tethered to Stars (2021) enacts a poetic dialogue between empire, exile, and entropy—forces both political and cosmic that define the poet's moral and aesthetic universe. As a Palestinian-American poet and physician, Joudah situates his lyric voice between the trauma of displacement and the vastness of cosmological decay. Through close readings of six central poems—"Black Hole," "Event Horizon," "Oxygen," "Mausoleum for a Scorpio," "Listening Suture," and "Gemini"—the essay argues that Joudah fuses postcolonial critique with astrophysical imagery to propose a theology of impermanence and interconnection. Drawing on theoretical insights from Theodor Adorno, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire, the analysis shows how Joudah's poetics transforms exile into a moral and epistemological stance: estrangement as resistance and as clarity. The paper further demonstrates how his treatment of entropy parallels the political unraveling of empire, re-casting cosmic dissolution as both metaphor and method for reimagining justice and belonging. By situating Tethered to Stars within the framework of anti-colonial thought and contemporary cosmology, this study positions Joudah's work as a pioneering contribution to twenty-first-century transnational poetics—one that entwines the fall of empires with the slow dispersal of stars, and turns loss itself into a form of illumination.

**المستخلص:** تتناول هذه الدراسة الكيفية التي يجسّد بها فادي جودة في مجموعته الشعرية «مشدود إلى النجوم» (2021) حواراً شعرياً بين الإمبراطورية والمنفى والاضمحلال الحراري، وهي قوى سياسية وكونية في آن واحد تشكّل المنظومة الأخلاقية والجمالية للشاعر. وبصفته شاعراً



### Article history

Received: 25 / 7 / 2026

Accepted: 11 / 8 / 2026

Published: 30 / 9 / 2026

### تواريخ البحث

تاريخ الاستلام: 25 / 7 / 2026

تاريخ القبول: 11 / 8 / 2026

تاريخ النشر: 30 / 9 / 2026

الكلمات المفتاحية العربية: فادي جودة، الشعرية العابرة للحدود الوطنية، النقد ما بعد الكولونيالي، الصور الكونية، المنفى والتهجير

**Keywords:** : Fady Joudah, Transnational poetics, Postcolonial critique, Cosmological imagery, Exile and displacement

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DOI: [10.61710/v10/i3/s28](https://doi.org/10.61710/v10/i3/s28)

وطبيياً فلسطينياً أميركياً، يضع جودة صوته الغنائي في مساحةٍ بين صدمة النزوح واتساع التفسخ الكوني. ومن خلال قراءات تحليلية لست قصائد محورية — الثقب الأسود، أفق الحدث، الأوكسجين، ضريح لعقرب، غرزة الإصغاء، والجوزاء — تسعى الدراسة الى اثبات ان جودة يمزج بين النقد ما بعد الكولونيالي والصور الفلكية ليقتراح لاهوتاً للزوال والترابط. واستناداً إلى رؤى نظرية مستمدة من ثيودور أدورنو، وفرانز فانون، وإيمي سيزير، تُبين القراءة كيف يحوّل جودة تجربة المنفى إلى موقفٍ أخلاقي ومعرفي في آن واحد: الاغتراب بوصفه مقاومة ووضوحاً. ويكشف البحث ايضا عن ان معالجة جودة لمفهوم الاضمحلال تعكس تفكّك الإمبراطورية سياسياً، إذ يعيد صياغة التحلّل الكوني بوصفه مجازاً ومنهجاً لإعادة تخيل العدالة والانتماء. ومن خلال وضع مجموعة مشدود إلى النجوم ضمن إطار الفكر المناهض للاستعمار وعلم الكونيات المعاصر، تُقدّم الدراسة قراءةً ترى في عمل جودة إسهاماً ريادياً في شعرية ما بعد العولمة في القرن الحادي والعشرين، إذ يُضخّر انهيار الإمبراطوريات بتبدّد النجوم البطيء، ويحوّل الخسارة ذاتها إلى شكلٍ من أشكال التتوير.

## Introduction

Fady Joudah's *Tethered to Stars* (2021) takes up a long-term dialogue between the forces of empire, exile, and entropy. Joudah, a Palestinian-American doctor and poet, entangles the political disturbances of colonialism and displacement with cosmic imagery of black holes, stars, and cycles of elements. The result is a poetics that bridges the terrestrial tragedy of empire (with its histories of exilic and oppressive ones) and the cosmic reach of entropy (the gradual diffusion and transformation of matter throughout the cosmos). The argument of this essay is that Joudah's collection advances these themes in continuous conversation, through close reading of a selection of poems and theoretical notions from anti-colonialism and critical theory. By engaging the likes of Theodor Adorno, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire, the reading exposes how much Joudah's own poetry responds to greater wisdoms: that exile can be a moral stance, that colonialism is a violent disorder that leaves "germs of rot" in its wake, and that even the stars will echo political defeat and hope. Due to the relative dearth of precedent academic criticism of Joudah's work (his fifth book, published in 2021, has yet to receive more reviews and interviews than scholarly articles), this work also positions itself as a pioneering effort.

Critics have picked up on Joudah's unique intersection of "the ever-enlarging cosmos" and "the unspeakably intimate bits of our lives" (Shehabi, 2021), but more thoughtful scholarly analysis is needed to parse the collection's exchange between cosmic and political forces.

Discussion of the following three central poems—"Black Hole," "Event Horizon," and "Oxygen"—will be detailed in the following sections to demonstrate how they illustrate entropy, theology, and cosmic process. Thereafter, attention is directed toward less-discussed work like "Mausoleum for a Scorpio," "Listening Suture," and "Gemini," applying quote-to-page directly in order to support readings of exile and empire. Theoretical citations along the way are cited directly whenever available (Adorno, Fanon, Césaire), bringing insight into Joudah's works in the light of critical theory on exile and colonialism. The essay concludes with refining our vision for *Tethered to Stars* as a book that unifies political and celestial vision, composed with an academic tone and lucidity fitting for a general literary studies reader.

### **Empire and Exile in *Tethered to Stars***

Joudah's investigation of empire and exile appears in poems that directly address the politics of displacement, cultural hegemony, and the long shadow of colonialism.

In "Mausoleum for a Scorpio," the narrator-poet recounts an encounter at a literary festival where he is compelled to discuss "poetry and politics" and even to "say something about exile" (Joudah, 2021, p. 69). This direct appeal in the poem demonstrates how inseparable the political situation is from Joudah's work—a point underlined by the poem's explanation of another poet's response. With performative ostentation, the poet proclaims, "There is no language like ours. We have Shakespeare...abolished consanguinity, erected a sky to bark up the cellulose of time" (Joudah, 2021, p. 69), claiming culture superiority for his own heritage. This tawdry boast about Shakespeare, and an immortal "sky" of literature, satirically lays bare the mind-set of cultural empire, that one's "language" and literary canon are taken as universality and superiority. Joudah's ironic presentation of this moment invokes Aimé Césaire's famous denunciation of colonial ideology: "That no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes...is already a sick civilization" (Césaire, 1972, p. 14). The performing poet in "Mausoleum

for a Scorpio” is, resonantly, this belligerent pride (even when he lets us know he doesn’t “say this to be bellicose”): a cultural condescension that Césaire accused as “morally diseased.” Having set the scene, Joudah condemns a colonial mind-set that defines its own art as a soft power instrument. The poem’s title – mausoleum for a scorpio – is also to imply that this poisonous ego is entombed, that this imperial arrogance is dead and buried where it should be.

In this close reading, we can see how Joudah establishes a dialogue of empire: the speaker of the poem, taken implicitly to be Joudah himself, is placed in the role of exiled poet commandeered to declare politics, while a voice of privilege travesties empire’s metaphors of culture. The tension between them is the tension between exilic consciousness and imperial congratulation. Exile, in Joudah’s handling, is not merely nostalgia for lost homeland but also a vantage point from which to question about belonging and power. Critical theory here throws its light.

Theodor Adorno wrote, “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (Adorno, 2005, p. 39)—an aphorism written as Adorno himself remained in exile from Nazi Europe. Adorno’s contradictory thesis is that estrangement sharpens one’s moral and critical faculties; not to be completely “at home” is to battle complacency in a world of injustice. Joudah’s poem is highly sensitive to such exilic morality. A number of poems exist in a state of liminal sight, both here and there, often in America but with eyes turned toward other lands and pasts. “Listening Suture,” for instance, offers a description of a family picnic on the beach of the Gulf Coast and the looming presence of global and cosmic awareness. The observer sees a rain of subatomic particles (“a beam of photons, muons”) falling, 17.3% of which are the leftovers of the dead...71.3%—I do not know whose dead, if there are mine (Joudah, 2021, p. 48). Even playing with his kids, the forbidden mind is aware of unseen beings—the dead of previous wars or exiles—traveling from far away. The poem categorically states, “displacement is a body” (p. 48), anchoring the intangible condition of exile in the tangible sensation of flesh and flesh.

In a rich father–daughter conversation splashing in the Gulf shallows, Joudah has written: “‘There’s no center that isn’t made up of periphery,’ my daughter says... I say, ‘And within each periphery a center rises up’” (Joudah, 2021, p. 48). This call-and-response encapsulates a political philosophy: the

center (of power, of culture) which is considered normal consists exactly of peripheral peripheries that have been marginalized, and every periphery has the possibility of generating its own center. The lines evoke a picture of decentered multiplicity and new voices emerging—essentially a poetic articulation of anti-coloniality. Postcolonial theorists have similarly argued that empires depend on their peripheries and colonized worlds will "rise up" with emergent centers of culture. Joudah places this observation in internal dialogue, even inferring that second-generation exiles are attuned to the overturning of imperial hierarchies. This visualization of mixed waters in the Gulf (fresh "Mississippi silt" mingling with sea) confirms this idea of mixed-up, border-breaking identity.

Joudah's grievance with empire's legacy is continued in "Gemini," wherein the poem pairs a tableau of everyday American life with submerged undercurrents of displacement and erasure. The speaker reports driving his car into the shop and walking through his neighborhood before coming upon "another newly demolished house" and a familiar ancient live oak tree being bulldozed at a construction site. The destruction of the live oak – "dismembered... limb by limb until its trunk stood hanged" (Joudah, 2021, p. 67) – is described in visceral terms. The poem declares succinctly the power behind this change: "The machinery and its men: almost always men, poor or cheap labor, colored with American dreams. The permit to snuff the tree was legally obtained" (p. 67). Here, Joudah skillfully connects gentrification within the local context to the larger tendencies of empire and capital. While the tree dies before his eyes, the speaker imagines its own voice: "the waft of SOS the tree's been sending to other trees" (p. 67), its distressful cry in the scent of its "fresh sap." This personification of the tree sending an SOS evokes environmental entropy and loss, and metaphorically stands in for human communities forcibly torn from the earth.

Most profoundly, the narrative of the poem is disrupted by a text message the speaker receives about "an American literary magazine calling for a special issue on Jerusalem, deadline approaching, art and the ashes of light" (p. 67). The disruption of Jerusalem – this city that stands for exile, war, and contested empire – into this suburban American world is not an accident. It shortens distances: the Texas or other dislocated oak resonates with dislocated olive trees and Palestinian existences. This muted critique resonates with Frantz Fanon's warning that "imperialism...leaves in its wake here and there tinctures of decay

which we must search out and mercilessly expel from our land and our spirits" (Fanon, 1963, p. 181). In *Tethered to Stars*, Joudah is performing exactly that diagnostic labor: feeling out the "germs of rot" in contemporary life that are rooted in an imperial past (either the colonization of Palestine or the colonization of nature and communities by profit). By naming these connections so obviously, the poem was positioned as an act of remembering and resistance. Joudah's act is both anti-imperial and hopeful.

### **Entropy, Theology, and Cosmic Process in "Black Hole," "Event Horizon," and "Oxygen"**

Besides its political statement, *Tethered to Stars* is replete with imagery of cosmology and astrophysics—black holes, galaxies, stars—imagery that Joudah uses to speak of entropy, theology, and cosmic process. Poems "Black Hole," "Event Horizon," and "Oxygen" are key to understanding how the collection binds the cosmic and the human and theological together. They are all instantiations of where scientific conception converges with existential query, where it is insinuated that the fate of empires and souls would be as simply legible in the stars as one legibly inscribes it in histories and in scripture. In the poem "Black Hole," Joudah uses the astronomical occurrence cleverly as a figurative landscape to tackle death, transience, and the decay of traditional religious teleologies.

The poem begins with a spectacular picture of epicureanism: "Of impermanence, on whose edges the last escape is infinite" (Joudah, 2021, p. 91). Here, the event horizon of the black hole—the "edge" beyond which escape is impossible—is called upon as a point where even an escape is infinite (a clever misapplication of the physics: the speed of light is the escape velocity from the edge of a black hole, essentially unreachable). Immediately, Joudah connects this cosmic limit with human destiny: "if it is death this destiny offers me, and in its tail end a conduit to another realm in which time spins differently than we've known it to pass" (p. 91). The black hole is envisioned as a passage into some kind of unknown "realm" that distorts time itself—an allusion to general relativity. But Joudah's is not a scientific curiosity; it is theological. He likens the black hole's function to the service of "heaven and hell for as long as they could / before they ran out of gas / with no wormhole out of God to show for" (p. 91).

These lines meld astrophysics and theology with satirical bite: religious certainties have all burnt off their fuel and there will no divine detour (wormhole). Joudah is suggesting that the classical afterlife has passed out of significance, that the black hole, cosmic, unnamed, errored of morality has taken its place. Both entropy here is understood in the physical, and spiritual: “extinguished imagination masquerades as exchangeable commodity” (p. 92). Heaven/hell are now exhausted symbols: equally, our imagination is meaningless in a capital and inertia-driven world. Nonetheless, in representing the black hole as a space of poetic possibility, Joudah strangely returns that suffocated imagination. The poem reflects on what cosmic event (star death) reveals about theological desire and the transience at creation’s outset. As part of a lineage of literature from modern writers grappling with the “death of God” in the scientific era, Joudah engages in this invocation of metaphor, returning to the limit- or threshold-point in “Event Horizon” to once again regard that “limit-point.”

The poet writes, “Stars telegram me: if I’m reproducible, I’m not necessarily an inheritance” (Joudah, 93). This line taps cosmological communication (“telegram”) with the philosophical conundrum that kills the imagination: reproduction versus legacy. In exile, inheritance, cultural and biological, is always in question. The event horizon here becomes not just the metaphorical end-stage of spacetime, but also the limit-point where memory becomes unknowable. The poetic nature of continuation is what Joudah questions: if we replicate, have we preserved, or have we repeated? In Event Horizon, Joudah reexamines the limit-point theory of cosmic physics—the surface sphere of a black hole from which no message will emerge—and reconceptualizes that theory as a metaphor for suspension in existence. The stars appear “pulsating shudders...a bioluminescence...This sentence blends cosmological communication (“telegram”) with the philosophical question of repetition versus legacy. During exile, inheritance – both cultural inheritance and biological inheritance – is an abiding doubt. The event horizon here is not just a metaphor for the edge of space-time, but a moment in which remembering ceases to be knowable. Joudah poetically questions what it means to continue: if we are copying, will we end in preservation or mere repetition? In Event Horizon, Joudah reconsiders the limit-point theory of cosmic physics – the surface sphere of a black hole from which no message will emerge – and

imagines it as the poetic figure of existential suspension. The stars appear as “pulsating shudders... a bioluminescence / of the departed” (Joudah, 2021, p. 93).

These statements imply not destruction, but existence beyond comprehension – light bearing evidence even at the point of extinction. The “telegram” sent by the stars reads somewhat like a lament and a manifesto: “if I’m reproducible / I am not necessarily / an inheritance” (p. 93). It is a humorous subversion of archetypal myth, implying that reproduction (biological, cultural, or poetic), necessarily does not mean continuance or value. As such, Joudah takes on the relationship of entropy to the dislocation of exile – what remains behind, even if completely incapable of return. Referencing Adorno’s remark about the artist in exile becoming estranged from its present forms, Joudah shifts physics into scripture, entropic meaning as both destroyer and vehicle of poetry. “Event Horizon” stretches between the eschatological and the empirical – between what the stars die into and what we assign that dying meaning to.

Of the three poems, “Oxygen” is the most intimate, giving life to the element as usher and recipient. Oxygen’s voice hears the poem when it writes: “Several catastrophes preceded us before I was the one to linger your longest, while you shuddered under the weight of the nervous system, boot kicked my gasp” (Joudah, 2021, p. 46). This recalls birth, the moment a newborn pulls its first breath, beginning life. The catastrophes that precede predict supernovas, massive extinctions, and life’s long evolution that ends with this gasp. Joudah melds together scientific fact and poetic theology—breath of life is both element and spirit. Oxygen continues: “Between ignition and smothering we made a life of it, had each other opening to opening” (p. 46.) This image contains the variety of metabolics—fire, breath, death, sex. The reference “opening to opening” evokes bodily contact and flesh exposures to and transmission of spirit. It evokes the religious roots of breath as soul: the Hebrew word רִיחַ (ruach) and the Greek word πνεῦμα (pneuma) have both the meaning “spirit” and “breath.” Joudah puts this etymological legacy to work for his poetic theology. This is both scientifically beautiful and tenderly existential. Oxygen is not a mere chemical necessity, but is also a witness to birth, destruction, and transcendence. One critic remarked that Joudah’s tone

exile, and entropy are not separate subjects but are entangled forces and considerations that Joudah functions at the intersection of in *Tethered to Stars*.

## **Conclusion**

In our close readings of “Black Hole,” “Event Horizon,” and “Oxygen,” we have witnessed that Joudah employs celestial events and scientific vocabulary to explore the relationship between entropic symbols and theological commentary—the universe gradually unwinding reflects the fading of established religious certainties and the agency of meaning-making at the edges of existence. Our close readings of “Mausoleum for a Scorpio,” “Listening Suture,” and “Gemini” highlight how Joudah addresses exile and empire, how he conveys the violence of colonial conception and expulsion, while also expressing the exiled gaze that perceives nuance and connectivity where others impose center and margin. Throughout the series of political and cosmic powers of speech dialogue, star and atom imagery carry innuendo commentary with a physical and temporal spectacle between the brutality of the state and dispersal, such as human displacement, which gets stretched to size as it relates to galaxies or down to axis like oxygen.

The synthesis of such observations is Joudah’s unique accomplishment. He also aligns with Edward Saïd’s insistence on the role of exilic artists to be outside of the narrative of Empire and to provide alternative forms of seeing that disrupt the guarded center. The way Joudah’s vision shuttles—telescope to microscope, history to astrophysics—reminds that inhabiting our world requires both proximity and immensity, political awareness, and cosmic modesty.

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