My Voice Is My Weapon

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“Carrying Words Like Weapons”

_DAM Brings Hip-Hop to the West Bank_

_Touring the West Bank_

During the summer of 2005 DAM embarked on a small tour in the West Bank with promotions at various radio stations and two large formal concerts in Ramallah and Bethlehem. The performances were a rare occurrence for DAM at this time given the potential risks involved in traveling across the Green Line into the West Bank. Israelis, especially Palestinian Israelis, were prohibited from traveling into the West Bank or Gaza without special permits. Carrying blue identity cards, DAM risked long detention or arrest if they were stopped at any of the Israeli checkpoints. Entering the West Bank is a simple process of walking through unattended turnstiles or finding back roads without checkpoints. It is when trying to leave the West Bank that credentials must be presented, bags searched, and questions asked. The fear of being arrested convinced the group to take back roads through the Jordan valley to get from Ramallah to Bethlehem. The circuitous route extended the drive to well over two hours, whereas the actual distance between the two cities is only about twenty kilometers (about twelve miles). Even on these back roads, however, DAM risked driving into an occasional “floating” or mobile checkpoint.

I was extremely interested in documenting these concerts as they represented a compelling opportunity to observe how youth in the West Bank might receive a group of Palestinian Israelis performing an African American popular music in support of the intifada. Previous fieldwork in Ramallah and Bethlehem had shown that American popular culture
was widely viewed as destructive to Palestinian society and its nationalist aspirations during the initial years of the second intifada. American popular music, while freely available on the Internet, rarely made an appearance in the mainstream public sphere. Street-side kiosks in these two cities carried little American popular music, and of these, few if any rap titles. Even in the widely cosmopolitan city of Ramallah, American media (music, books, and movies) were far less visible than in other Arab cities like Amman or Beirut.

In speaking to young people on the street it was difficult to find anyone who was familiar with rap. Those who knew something were of the general impression that it was low-class “black” music, without aesthetic value or meaning. Professional musicians in Ramallah active in the uprising had an even stronger reaction. Many of these musicians were disturbed and even angered by the idea of Palestinians singing an American popular music. “Those musicians are simply bitāmrāk (Americanized) and bityūhid (Judaized).” Some went so far as to deny the rap artists’ Palestinian identity all together. A prominent folklorist and performer of indigenous wedding song stated, “These are not real Palestinians. Where is their identity? Where is their loyalty to their own people?” Another musician stated, “I understand that they want to help us, but why can’t they do it in their own kind of music?” A director of an established music ensemble and self-proclaimed expert in Palestinian culture, history, and folklore went so far as to deny that there were any Palestinians in Lyd at all. “All of the Palestinians from Lyd were driven out in ’48; if there are any Arabs in Lyd they are just Bedouin who moved into the empty houses. These young guys are most likely just Bedouin trying to pose as Palestinians.”

The most outlandish and incendiary comments were made by a prominent Palestinian folklorist who believed that “Lyd was only populated with collaborators from the West Bank who had asked to be given Israeli citizenship.” The overt message implied here was that these musicians were descendants of traitors to their own people. But the unstated message was one of intense anxiety that these young Palestinian musicians were performing a style of music associated with the United States. I was amazed at how strongly people reacted to my explanations of DAM’s music. Even when couched in terms of resistance to the occupation and an end to Israeli racism against Palestinians, many musicians by and large were unable to see any similarities between “our music,” from the estab-
lished tradition of Palestinian folklore, and “their music” blindly imitating the Western (that is, American/Israeli) world. If these initial reactions were any indication, the performances promised to be significant points of engagement between contrasting aesthetic and ideational frames.

On several occasions I confronted Tamer, Suheil, and Mahmoud about these comments and was dismissed each time. I asked, “What will you do differently in performing before a Palestinian audience that has never been exposed to rap and that additionally may not look favorably on Palestinians of ’48?” Their answers were simple. “We are all Palestinians suffering from the same enemy, but in different ways. If there are people there who have a problem with us, it is their problem, not ours” (see figure 9.1).

On another level this tour offered a significant opportunity to document the different ways DAM approached various Palestinian audiences in performance. I had ample data concerning DAM’s performances for largely Jewish audiences in Israel and was especially fascinated to see what types of code switching would be employed between the two discursive fields.

Figure 9.1. DAM (from left: Suheil Nafar, Tamer Nafar, Mahmoud Jrere). Photograph by DAM (2011).
In language, dress, behavior, lyrics, and gesture, would D A M perform any differently for Palestinians than for Jews? More than simply a matter of performance, how would D A M navigate a different aesthetic field in Ramallah? Could they convince a Palestinian audience in the heart of the West Bank that they really were “brothers suffering from the same enemy, but in different ways?” Would the style of music impede the message? Hip-hop culture had taken root in the more cosmopolitan Israeli popular music scene in the late 1990s. And in fact, there had been a small number of Palestinian attempts at hip-hop by groups like Sabreen. However, in Ramallah, hip-hop culture, its styles of dress, dance, posture, declamation, and performative interaction, remained relatively unknown. Could the crowd see beyond the xxxl clothing and basketball high-tops to even hear the message of the music?

On the night of D A M’s first performance I approached the Kasaba Theatre in Ramallah one hour prior to the concert. My heart leapt as I saw perhaps one hundred teenagers standing outside trying unsuccessfully to get tickets. The concert had been sold out (see figure 9.2), and there were crowds waiting around the block trying to get tickets any way they could.

**Figure 9.2.** DAM concert flyer in Ramallah. Photograph by the author (2005).
could. More and more people kept showing up. I paused in amazement only to realize that I had yet to buy a ticket. I never would have guessed so many people would show up. I stood outside the theater amongst the crowd planning my next move. In desperation I quickly made a phone call backstage. Tamer answered, in his customary urban American accent, “Wassup?”

“Tamer, the concert is sold out, and I can’t get tickets,” I explained.

“Sold out? How many people are out there?” he asked.

“There are at least a couple hundred waiting to get in, and another hundred or so still looking for tickets.” Based on previous concerts I knew the theater’s capacity to be between two and three hundred. Flyers placed on the doors of the building warned that the concert had sold out earlier in the morning but said that there would be another show the following night in Bethlehem. For these young fans, however, the following night’s concert might as well have been in South Africa, given the severe hardships for Ramallah residents to travel outside the city at night.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be onstage with us,” Tamer said reassuringly.

Standing outside the theater I asked several bystanders what their impressions were of the group and of rap music in general. Most weren’t familiar with either but had seen advertisements for the group and wanted to check them out. Others knew of the political nature of the music and were expecting an intifada concert or rally. One teenager told me that he expected to hear the group sing famous intifada songs. Others thought that it was going to be a dance concert. Concert attendees were mixed equally between young men and women, wearing the typical Palestinian fashions of kufiya, flags, and t-shirts with political or nationalist pictures and messages. Whether it was the politics or the spectacle of seeing Palestinians from Israel rap, in talking with groups of attendees it was clear that there was a general feeling of curiosity in the crowd.

True to his word, within twenty minutes Tamer had me escorted backstage, where DAM was giving an interview with a local newspaper and posing for photographs with a young twelve-year-old Palestinian American girl and her father. The mood was light, but I could tell that the group was a bit nervous to be performing in Ramallah. Once the doors were opened I found a seat in the third row and waited for the concert to begin.

As the music started most in the crowd sat silently, not quite knowing how to react. In the back of the theater a large group of shabāb (youth) began to chant the usual Palestinian political slogan ubiquitous to any po-
A political rally or concert. *Birūḥ, bidam, nafdīk yā ‘Arafāt!* (By spirit, by blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for Arafat!). For any Palestinian political concert or rally this would be a perfectly acceptable and even expected form of interaction. For Tamer, Suheil, and Mahmoud, however, this style of chanting was more of an annoyance. It suggested that this was a political rally or a formal protest instead of a rap concert. Knowing DAM’s overall distaste for politicians and their empty rhetoric of struggle and resistance, I was interested to see how they would react. Using the microphone as a makeshift baton, Tamer mockingly conducted the chanting until it ceased after no more than three or four repetitions. Then he took the microphone and calmly asked, *Khalast? Kaffī? Ṭayyab Yahalla!* (Is that it? Are you all finished? Great, let’s go!).

Tamer’s response to the chanting was a perfect way of setting the stage for the performance that was to follow. It made allowances for the ubiquitous rhetoric that accompanies any formal political gathering, but also showed the audience that this was something different. The objective was not to champion or denigrate a political figure or ideology. This was a concert. More importantly this was a rap concert with its own sets of phrases, slogans, practices, and poetics. Tamer was able to take control of the concert without confronting the shabāb outright. Had he tried to sing over them, or to stop them altogether, he would have opened himself up to criticism for being against Arafat. This would have been considered distasteful in Ramallah, so closely following the leader’s death. If he had encouraged the shabāb, he would have lost control of the concert and been competing with these chants for the rest of the evening. Because Tamer allowed for the chanting, but then quickly moved forward with his own program, the shabāb did not attempt another interruption the rest of the night.

DAM’s first song was a recently composed track used to introduce the rappers and to invigorate the crowd through responisorial singing. In the choruses DAM introduced the type of music they were singing as well as themselves through posturing and self-praise. Then in the refrains DAM encouraged the audience to shout out “Ramallah!” between lines. This technique successfully introduced the crowd to the group and achieved a sense of communal interaction between performers and audience. It allowed the audience to powerfully shout out their pride in their city while also giving the impression that this song had been specially written for them.
I said where you at? [Response:] Ramallah!
Where we going? Ramallah!
Who you with? Ramallah!

With each question the crowd shouted back instinctively “Ramallah!” In much the same way that rock musicians reconfigure the lyrics of some of their songs to recognize the city in which they are performing, DAM brought these Ramallah teenagers, their local identity, and their sense of community into the show. The crowd loved it. The end of the first track brought with it thunderous applause. On a different level, however, “Ramallah” called to mind the well-known *dabke* song “Wayn? al-Ramallah” (Where are you going? To Ramallah). Palestinian wedding ensembles and folkloric dance troupes throughout the region very frequently include this particular folk song in their repertory. What is more, virtually every Palestinian wedding celebration includes this song as part of its *dabke*. When asked about this reference Tamer Nafar stated, “We know that song, I mean everyone knows that song, so while we weren’t trying to reference it directly, we did want to do something that got everyone singing with us.” For the teens in attendance, however, hearing DAM create a rap song with a chorus similar to that of a well-known folk song was indeed striking. Musically the songs have little in common. Yet the similar beat patterns and repeated phrases caused a group of shabāb to try to form a small *dabke* line in the back of the theater. They were quickly rebuffed, however, by theater ushers who did not want the crowd to leave their seats.

The second track was also participatory, but with a different theme. Here DAM got the crowd involved by having them shout out the word “Rāb!” (Rap!) between each line.³ At each chorus DAM would call out, “Arabi!” to which the crowd would reply, “Rāb!” This exchange, “Arabi . . . Rāb!” (Arab . . . Rap!) continued for several choruses. The collective singing served to conflate the two terms and the clusters of ideas that informed them. One of the main goals of this concert was to bring rap to a wider audience: to sell a new style of Arab music influenced by foreign sources. DAM’s refashioning of African American rap within a Palestinian nationalist frame was largely unknown to this West Bank audience. For these teens Arabic rap was a refashioned style of Palestinian protest song in text, metaphor, and imagery, yet drawn from foreign sources. By uniting these two terms in participatory responsorial singing, DAM prompted the crowd to repeat over and over again the name for the style
of music they were hearing. Through reiteration they naturalized the idea of rap as an Arab style, and Arabic as a rap style. The song served as a basic primer of terms and phrases, teaching the crowd what rap is and how it might be thought of as something Arab.

Hawīya, Hegemony, and Performative Rituals of Subordination

If the first song pulled the crowd into the performance by signifying their local Ramallah identities, and the second song was an attempt to sell a new style of Arabic rap to an uninitiated and unfamiliar crowd, the third song was DAM’s attempt to sell themselves. Speaking between numbers, Tamer opened his wallet and drew out his blue Israeli identity card, holding it above his head. “Does anyone know what this is?” he questioned. In a collective sigh of disgust and acknowledgment the crowd replied loudly with screams and hollers. Some even drew out their own green Israeli identity cards in response. The card, or biṭāqa al-hawīya (identity card), is one of the most hated and vilified manifestations of the occupation for Palestinians in the West Bank. It is both a manifestation of the subordinate position of Palestinians to occupying soldiers, who at any moment may demand to see their “identity card,” and additionally it marks the single strongest measure of the Israeli state to divide Palestinians into different political and geographic entities.

Based on the color of their hawīya, and the information contained therein, Palestinians may or may not pass through various checkpoints or gates in the “security/apartheid” barrier. For example, at the time of this performance Jerusalemite Palestinians could pass through the Qalansiyah checkpoint freely (both ways but not into Israel), while Ramallah Palestinians could not; Nablusi Palestinians could enter Ramallah but not exit into Jerusalem; Palestinian Israelis could enter Jerusalem but not the West Bank; Palestinian refugees in the camps were rarely, if ever, permitted to leave their neighborhoods; and very few Palestinians were ever allowed into the camps unless they were registered residents. These boundaries and borders were never fixed and routinely shifted according to local politics, times of the year (or day), and the ad hoc decisions by the Israeli army administration (or guards currently on duty). Thus at each instance when the hawīya is demanded, the holder rarely knows if he or she is in accordance with or in violation of the “law.” Moreover, just as Palestinians crossing checkpoints may not know the current laws, so, too, the Israeli
soldiers policing the checkpoints themselves often do not know the current restrictions and must spend long periods of time calling company commanders for instructions.

The act of pulling out one’s identity card is a moment of severe distress and fear in daily Palestinian life under occupation, for there is a very real possibility of arrest, detainment, questioning, and/or routine harassment each and every time it is demanded. It marks the most fundamental engagement between Palestinians and the occupying forces (that is, the Israeli state) and is both hated for its presence, yet envied by those who seek greater freedom of movement equal to some “other” Palestinians. In all cases it marks one of the most powerful and effectual means instituted by the Israeli state to coerce Palestinians into thinking of themselves as a fractured subordinate community with differing rights and privileges.4

In this performance Tamer Nafar used his hawīya as a way of bridging perceived differences between Palestinians of ’48 and Palestinians in the territories. He explained it to the audience: “Does everyone see this identity card? We are Palestinians from Lyd. There are over a million ’48s [Palestinians living in Israel]. Together we suffer as one nation, one people, and one land, Palestine.” In pulling out his identity card Tamer was making a powerful statement. He was revealing himself to the audience as a Palestinian who must navigate the same restrictive structures of racism and difference as those affecting his audience. The measures of separation and forced exile were revealed to extend beyond the Green Line (West Bank) and into the heart of ’48 (Israel). Though Tamer Nafar travels with an Israeli passport, speaks fluent Hebrew, has the right to participate in national elections, and was raised attending Israeli schools, he is bound to his hawīya in the same ways as his audience. He must present his hawīya at any moment, any time, to any soldier or policeman who demands it.5 His hawīya is at times a curse. But at this moment it was his link to the collective experiences of his audience. For those in attendance, seeing Tamer’s hawīya brought forth powerful indices of their own experiences dealing with the occupation. Such experiences served to link the audience together within a shared construct of state subordination. It seems that symbolic discourse simply could not convey the necessary meanings to connect these two groups in quite the same way. The performative gesture of pulling out the identity card, as well as the signification of the identity card itself, was a powerful performative of Palestinian experiences of subordination to the Israeli state.

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Immediately upon seeing the card the crowd seemed to come alive. *Kānū Zaynā* (They’re like us) was the response I heard from the crowd of teenaged girls sitting in the row in front of me. At this point, DAM launched into their next song with the crowd cheering enthusiastically, many waving their hawīya high over their heads.

This was a powerful moment in the performance where the ice was broken between performers and audience. If there were questions as to the national loyalties of the performers and their experiences as “real” Palestinians, they were quickly answered. In terms of the many ways music and musical performance have been used to express feelings of nation and community, this gesture is worthy of further reflection, for it has been shown that in various contexts, times, and places, the struggle for Palestinian self-determination has been the principal discursive field through which the nation has been imagined and articulated. To be Palestinian, whether living in Jordan, Israel, or the Occupied Territories, of differing social formations, is to be engaged in this struggle. Collective suffering at the hands of Israeli authorities accorded DAM entrée into the West Bank national imaginary and bonded the two national constructs together.

On another level this gesture reflects many of the processes by which power may structure the subjectivities of subordinate groups. As individuals are confronted with infinite signs that substantiate or enforce the dominant order, subordinate groups become both the subjects of power as well as subjected by power. In other words, subordinates learn to self-identify by their inferior position within the dominant social order. Michel Foucault, for example, wrote very convincingly about the processes by which the subject is constituted from within power/knowledge structures. Especially in his later works detailing what he calls the “technologies of the self,” Foucault was interested in mapping out how subjects fashion themselves in relation to received structures of knowledge and power. For Foucault power is analogous to a “web” of relations within which individuals circulate. Power is never localized in any one place or idea. Rather it is employed through various discourses or “regimes of knowledge.” Indeed “there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operate through and on the basis of this association.” Each society creates for itself a specific regime of knowledge that structures the relations between dominant and subordinate as well as its myriad mechanisms for subjugation. Caught up
in these webs, individuals “are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.”

Foucault believed that the individual then becomes both constituted by these regimes of knowledge and is the primary means or vehicle for its transmission.

One of the more obvious methods for policing the Israeli social order, and the subordinate position of Palestinians within that order, is the issuing of state identity cards. Here the definition of the individual is itself a performative act of power in its most capillary form. Palestinians are defined in relation to the state based on the information recorded on their hawīya. This is but one technique of subjugation within which Palestinians circulate and in the process become constituted by these relationships and interactions. As Palestinians have come to identify themselves based on these relationships and interactions they police the dominant social order themselves in daily performances and rituals. The constant act of pulling out one’s hawīya, in its performative reiteration, gives materiality to the dominant order and serves as a primary identification process through which the codes of Palestinian subordination are transmitted and reified.

The power of hawīya, both in the literal and figurative sense, was not lost on the crowds attending this particular DAM concert. In this performance environment the dominant social order, as represented by these cards, was thrown into relief against the imposed conceptions of the Palestinian nation as fragmented and disjointed. Tamer Nafar and his companions found a particularly ironic way through the dominant power structure. They took one of its most potent indexical triggers, their hawīya, and turned the order on its head by using the identity cards as a tool for inclusion rather than exclusion. For them the performative submission of identifying oneself based on hawīya became the staging point for shared experience and collective identity formation. The effect of hawīya in this moment was to bring these Palestinians together, rather than drive them apart.

This exchange between DAM and their audience also illustrates an important point concerning the nature of power and resistance. From Foucault we see that power often reveals itself to be constitutive both of social relations between groups and of subjectivity itself. “The individual [and the relations between individuals] is the prime effect of power and at the same time . . . the element of its articulation.”

But in creating subject positions antithetical to the dominant order, regimes of knowledge create
their own resistance. Power structures at all times are engaged and negotiated through modes of resistance. Such resistance often takes shape in the form of subjects constituted within its web. Palestinians navigating networks of social control and occupation are at all times positioned outside the dominant social order. Their subordinate status guarantees resistance to that social order in the very act of submission.

In a famous poem by Mahmoud Darwish titled “Bitaqah Hawiya” (Identity card), also known colloquially as “Isajjal Ana ‘Arab” (Record that I am an Arab), the author writes forcefully of this same process of being constructed and subjected as inferior through identification papers, as well as of the Palestinian resistance to this construction. The poem is especially poignant in showing how structures of domination inherently construct subordinate, resistive identities in opposition. Here, as in the concert above, the shared experiences of those who must carry the Israeli identity card offer common ground for collective identity formation.

Record! I am an Arab
And my identity card is number fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth is coming after a summer
Will you be angry?

Record on the top of the first page:
I do not hate people Nor do I encroach
But if I become hungry
The usurper’s flesh will be my food
Beware, beware, of my hunger and my anger!!

In this poem Darwish writes of the engagement between himself and the occupying Israeli soldier. The poem takes place within the pensive moments of exchange between the occupier and the occupied. However in this instance Darwish takes the opportunity to supplement the inadequate information on his identity card with aspects of his life and history. His Israeli-fashioned identity insufficiently captures his personal conceptions of self and nation. He demands that the soldier record his family, his history, his children, his hunger and anger. He demands to be made known, to be understood, even to exist as more than a number ascribed by a faceless state bureaucracy.

Darwish’s 1964 classic poem has been the source of several different
intifada songs, most notably by Ahmad Qa’bour in the early 1980s. However, within the repertory of shared Palestinian resistance literature, this poem ranks as perhaps one of the best known of all time. Based on the history of this literature, as well as the continued discourse of hawīya, it is little wonder that Tamer Nafar’s hawīya had such a powerful effect on his audience.

_Break Dancing in Basements, Rapping in Ramallah_

Later in the program a group of young boys came up to the stage and motioned over to Tamer Nafar. They spoke briefly into his ear, and a moment later Nafar took the microphone from his brother and addressed the audience. “It seems there is a break-dancing group here in the audience tonight, and they would like to come up onstage and dance for you while we sing the next song.” The crowd clapped excitedly for the teens to take the stage. Tamer looked inquisitively down at the youngsters, no more than fourteen years old, and asked, “So what is the name of your group?”

“We have never danced outside of our basement so we don’t really have a name,” was the response offered by the most courageous of the three boys.

“Well, you must have a name,” Tamer commanded.

“We’re the ‘Break-Dancing Club’” (_Nādī al-Braykdān_) It was the only name the young boy could think of on such short notice standing in front of 250 people.

Laughing at the situation Tamer brought all three boys up onstage to thunderous applause. “Please welcome . . . the Break-Dancing Club!” As the music started the three boys gathered into a semi-circle and began throwing themselves into extremely difficult combinations of b-boy moves they had never before attempted in public (see figure 9.3). Their private fascination with hip-hop and its associated dance forms had yet to be seen outside of their parents’ homes. And here in front of a live rap crew, these boys saw their opportunity to actualize an aspect of their own musical identities in public. This was a rare opportunity in which their love of hip-hop could be articulated as natural to their surroundings. Sharing the stage with three Palestinian rappers, in front of a supportive Palestinian crowd, their love of break dancing, baggy clothes, and spiked hair was momentarily normal, acceptable, and even supported.

To say that the crowd was enthusiastic would be an understatement. With each twisting flip or spin, drawing shouts of praise and amaze-
ment, the crowd realized that hip-hop was not as foreign an art form as they had once imagined. To the contrary, they were watching a group of young kids from their own community dancing onstage to the music in a style-appropriate way. These teens were a part of the rap scene from inside Ramallah’s walls, wearing its clothes, and learning its style. The last song, “Min Irhabi?” (Who’s the terrorist?), brought much of the crowd to its feet. Twenty to thirty young teens rushed up to the stage and danced alongside the three performers as DAM sang their most famous hit. By the last chorus the entire crowd was singing along:

Who’s the terrorist? I’m the terrorist?
How can I be the terrorist when I am living in my own homeland?
Who’s the terrorist? You’re the terrorist.
You’ve taken everything I own while I am living in my own homeland.

After the concert had ended throngs of young teens flooded the stage to get autographs and pictures with DAM. Many were still singing the

Figure 9.3. Nadi al-Braykdanz (Break-Dancing Club). Photograph by the author (2005).
lyrics to each other as they circulated around the theater. An hour later, after the crowd had finally dissipated, DAM began to make its way out of the theater. By and large they were happy with the performance. There were the usual problems with the monitors and the mix, but on the whole they felt that the concert went as well as could be expected. However for DAM it was the “Break-Dancing Club” who stole the show. “Can you believe those guys have been listening to our music and learning to dance in their houses?” Suheil exclaimed in disbelief. “There are six hundred million Arabs, we’re going to reach every one of them.” The whole situation only bolstered Tamer Nafar’s long-held view that rap was the next “big thing” to happen to the Arab world and that DAM was going to be a pioneer of the movement. Listening to Suheil’s optimism I was reminded of what his older brother had told me weeks earlier during an interview in Israel.

DM: You want to reach the whole Arab world, but hip-hop isn’t all that big yet in Syria and Jordan. What will the future of rap be in the Arab world?

TN: After our album is released, it will happen. I am sure. I know. You can check the charts. . . . I can predict the revolution of hip-hop. Check out the beat. [Tamer plays a track from the newest dance CD to come out of Egypt.] It is black music. It is R and B. . . . It is coming, man. It is coming. We just have to give the right name for it. The kid is here [the baby is born]; we just have to name it.

Later that week after DAM had finished its last performance on this small West Bank tour, I noticed Tamer removing a large four-square-meter promotional poster from the foyer of the Peace Center in Bethlehem. The large poster pictured the three young rappers together in a prototypical posture of power idiomatic of much of hip-hop culture. Carefully placing the poster on the floor, rolling it up as a final souvenir, I asked Tamer quite pointedly if he was going to hang it next to the large poster of Tupac Shakur already hanging on his bedroom wall.

“Maybe I’ll take ’Pac down and hang this one in its place,” Tamer answered.

Given their early successes, their determination, drive, and commitment to spreading hip-hop among a new generation of Palestinian youth, who knows? Maybe they just might “take ’Pac down” and hang in his place.
Moving Forward, Moving On

Over the last twelve years DAM has found its way into the Israeli, Palestinian, and international mediascapes via new forms of technology and informal channels of consumption and distribution. Their ability to enter into different musical markets is directly attributable to new media, Internet sites, bootleg recordings, concerts, and videos. However, their access to these various arenas has been predicated on their facility to navigate several different sociopolitical discourses. First among these is DAM’s ability to express their message in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, drawing on common vernacular phrases, slang, obscenities, and references indigenous to each cultural frame. In three languages they index the interstices of at least three aesthetic communities in highly idiomatic ways. Traversing between and across these modalities DAM has attracted a diverse following of Israeli Jews, Palestinians, and transnational solidarity hip-hop fans throughout the world. Language is the primary means through which this has been accomplished and hence represents the most fundamental way DAM has sought to communicate its message.

Tamer Nafar explains, “If I look out into the audience and see one Jew, I will rap in Hebrew. I do this because Jews are not my audience; they are my target. And if I rap to them in Hebrew they have to listen. They can’t dismiss me; even if they don’t like what I am saying, they have to listen to my message.” It would seem that the same holds for their work in Arabic and English as well. Shifting dialect and accent, DAM repositions itself into specifically Palestinian frames, often urban but also rural. Likewise, before a transnational audience of solidarity activists and journalists, English provides a gateway for telling their story and for drawing economic opportunity and international attention to their cause. At a 2009 concert in Richmond, Indiana, DAM opened with a recently composed song, “Letters,” where the Arabic alphabet is introduced in rap to a non-native speaking audience. Opening the song Tamer explained, “I learned English through hip-hop, and now you are all going to learn some Arabic through hip-hop.” In each case, their idiomatic usage operates to more fully express their message as well as to shape its potential reception. As Nafar often says, one must “carry words like weapons.”

The message being conveyed changes considerably depending on the context of its performance. In the early years, when Israeli shows for a Jewish audience were the norm, the message was one of ethnic engage-
ment within the Israeli state, an end to discrimination against Israel’s Palestinian citizens. These performances, largely in Hebrew, featured a much more cosmopolitan aesthetic, exploiting references to urban African American ghetto life and minority empowerment. For an audience already familiar with rap and African American cultural forms and identities, DAM’s approach was to align preconceptions of urban America with the Palestinian condition in Israel. In form and content, DAM identified itself as the “Gangstas of Israel”—soldiers for the same noble causes as famous African American rappers. By enacting a well-known discourse of ethnic empowerment, DAM sought to exploit the similarities between the American civil rights movement and the current struggles of Palestinians in Israel. For Nafar there was no difference between the American slums of New York and his own neighborhood in Lyd.

As the second intifada intensified, the political context changed such that performances for Jewish-only crowds became rare. As a result of changing politics as well as the need to find new markets for their work, DAM’s message shifted to the larger struggle for self-determination and an end to the occupation. The Ramallah concert outlined above was illustrative of how DAM attempted to develop a new hip-hop community by drawing on the canonical signs of Palestinian nationalism. Most important of these were shared experiences of domination and forced subjectivity through the use of identity cards and other restrictions of movement. Lyrically these songs employed the formulaic repertory of intifada song made famous in the early 1970s and 1980s, couched in a transnational hip-hop aesthetic. Onstage DAM strived to link their current explorations in rap with the long-established tradition of Palestinian protest song. Samples of famous intifada poetry and folk song, along with strategic inflections of accent, served as the sonic foundation from which DAM constructed its rhymes. Nizar Qabani, Ahmad Qa’bour, and Mahmoud Darwish (famous intifada poets and singers) were all cited in the performance through lyric or musical quotation. DAM and its modality of performance were packaged as a new direction in Palestinian nationalist music worthy of the same respect as the folk singers of the past, albeit in fundamentally different ways. More importantly DAM hoped to sell themselves as Palestinians struggling alongside those under occupation, to sell that they were all “suffering from the same enemy, only in different ways.”

In these early performances DAM matured and developed by strategically aligning itself within the nationalist trajectories of both Israeli Jewish
and Palestinian communities. Yet at the same time, in refashioning popular conceptions of Palestinian suffering and seeking dialogue with the Israeli mainstream, D.A.M. confounded nationalistic dogma. Their use of highly stylized Hebrew slang made a play for the incorporation of Palestinians into the Israeli state imaginary. Their music, interviews, and activism revealed to Israeli Jews how their native language (Hebrew) might be appropriated and refashioned into an ideological weapon against Jewish ethnocracy. Such a move serves to betray the Jewish national discourse of homogeneity and difference from the “outside” Arab world. Rather D.A.M., in their early career, reiterated through performance that Palestinians are in fact an internal constitutive element of the Israeli state.

During these initial formative years, D.A.M. presented challenges to the established Palestinian nationalist discourse as well. In language, culture, and politics, Palestinian Israelis typically run counter to the long-held view that Palestinians are united in their struggle against the “Zionist enemy.” Their appropriation of an American musical style of performance further frustrated the timeless, primordial aesthetics of Palestinian folklore. Rather their music is a product of the here and now, thrown into relief by the employment of new media in the production and distribution of their work. Strategically essentialized notions of national identity have largely dominated the history of Palestinian protest song. In style and aesthetics D.A.M. opened up new spaces for seeing and hearing Palestinian music in concert with the transnational (that is, Western cosmopolitan) world. Along with this, D.A.M. has proven that their fluency in Israeli society has not diminished their capacity to speak, think, and feel as part of the Palestinian nation. Perhaps the single greatest fear of Palestinian musicians working in Jordan and the West Bank is that the eventual normalization of relations with the Israeli state will precipitate the loss of their national aspirations for self-determination. D.A.M. has shown that despite their “normalized” interactions with Israel, they are indeed still very much a part of the movement to end the occupation.

With the construction of the Israeli “apartheid/security” wall and the further restrictions of movement placed on Palestinians under occupation, the “interiorization of social life” has had tangible effects on Palestinian cultural practices. Without access to indigenous community spheres, concerts, and festivals, families have been forced indoors—reliant on media for access to the outside world. In this way, the Internet, movies, popular music, and other culture have largely filled the void of in-
digeneous social practices (weddings, markets, cafes, public performances, political gatherings, and so on). The result has been an increase in the consumption of transnational popular media. The growing popularity of hip-hop is but one example of this process. New media and new technologies have served to relieve much of the spatial incarceration Palestinians have been forced to endure. Alternative transnational communities reflected in hip-hop, break-dancing clubs, chat rooms, blogs, and the like have surfaced as a direct result of the “interiorization” of social life. These new communities of style and practice have had a profound influence on the various ways that Palestinian nationalism has been performed and articulated in the public sphere. The penetration of Dâm’s music into different Israeli, Palestinian, and international musical arenas speaks to the artists’ capacity to navigate many of these national and transnational communities. Yet the modality through which they have gained entrance to these arenas illustrates the discursive fluidity of popular music and culture more generally. Manipulating lyrical content and musical device is not the only means by which Dâm engages different cultural audiences. Their use of a transnational popular music repositions them in a different theater of meaning less constrained by conventional Israeli/Palestinian conceptions of race, religion, and nation.

In the years since these early concerts, the Palestinian hip-hop scene has developed and expanded in fascinating ways. What was once a very strange, and at times threatening, form of protest song has now become the mainstream. Through sustained international media attention, tours, and a series of successful documentaries, Dâm has, for better or worse, come to define Palestinian music in the twenty-first century. Buttressed by a new wave of Palestinian hip-hop artists from across the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Israel, and the near and far diaspora, hip-hop has now become one of the dominant forms of political song among Palestinians and international audiences. If their first audiences were Israeli Jews, and later Palestinians in the West Bank and near diaspora, by 2008 the group had begun performing almost exclusively before international audiences of solidarity activists in Europe and North America. In front of these audiences Dâm does little to acknowledge the relationality of their Israeli citizenship. They present themselves, and are presented by international media, simply as dispossessed Palestinians, despite the fact that their many tours throughout Europe and North America are made possible only because of their Israeli passports and the support of organiza-
tions unwilling or unable to work with artists in the West Bank. In many ways such a strategic move allows for greater economic opportunity, as requests to perform and speak on college campuses across North America steadily increase. Yet at the same time, other lesser-known hip-hop artists from Gaza, Jenin, and Ramallah have struggled mightily to be seen (and heard) outside the literal and figurative walls of the occupation. In terms of logistics and funding it is far easier for international aid organizations, NGOs, and colleges and universities to work with ‘48s (Israeli citizens), rather than attempt to procure the necessary permissions for artists to leave the West Bank and Gaza Strip. What is more, new guidelines stipulate that any United States government–funded or –affiliated institution must require Palestinian artists (from Gaza and the West Bank) to sign a formal declaration “denouncing Palestinian terror” in order to receive funds. Given that Israelis are not required to do the same, many Palestinian artists find it politically problematic and refuse to accept funding from the United States government.

However, inasmuch as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has brought these young artists to the international stage and the pages of Rolling Stone, in many ways it has also overdetermined their public personae as artists. Hyped as the “soundtrack of Palestinian resistance” by international media looking for a “hook” with which to engage the conflict, DAM has struggled to break free of the expectations of “resistance.” As they move forward with their careers, DAM has stated publicly their desire “to move beyond the political hype, to be musicians known for their beats and verses, not their politics.” Pushing back against these expectations, DAM has asserted the need to branch out, to be able to sing about love, to be accepted as mainstream, commercial artists. Their newest album, provisionally titled Dabke on the Moon, takes dramatic steps in this direction. Released in December of 2012, this new album is described by Tamer Nafar as adopting a “more human angle” of “telling stories” and “playing characters.” It is an attempt to move “above ground,” to position the group within the larger marketplace of Arab popular music. Only time will tell if this new venture can transcend DAM’s political image, an image that they previously worked so diligently to create and manipulate on the international stage.