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Legitimizing Narratives in Rhyme: Hip-Hop and National Identity in Israel and Palestine

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**Legitimizing Narratives in Rhyme
Hip-Hop and National Identity in Israel and Palestine**

Yuval Orr

2010–2011 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

Legitimizing Narratives in Rhyme:

Hip-Hop and National Identity in Israel and Palestine

by Yuval Orr

A Thesis Submitted to the Modern Middle East Studies Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Thesis Advisors: Dr. Ian Lustick, Department of Political Science
Dr. Heather Sharkey, Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations

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Introduction: Hip-Hop's Nationalist Moment in Israel and Palestine

In 2002, at the height of the Second Intifada and in the midst of a resurgence of Israeli nationalism and Zionist pride, Yakov “Kobi” Shimoni, aka Subliminal, released his groundbreaking second album *Haor ve Hatzel* (The Light and the Shadow). The album struck a chord with an Israeli public reeling in the wake of some of the most deadly civilian attacks the country had ever experienced. Subliminal's album opens with a “Hakdama” (Introduction) in the form of a monologue. As rain and thunder pour down in the background the narrator echoes the ominous tone of the elements with a voiceover that begins:

The year is 2002, and Israel is surrounded. Tears and laughter. Birth and death. Ending and beginning. They are all part of the daily routine for the Zionist believers. The entire world is against us. Terror controls the streets and Israel once more fights for her right to exist.¹

Subliminal's album, which went double platinum in Israel, represented a turning point in Israeli hip-hop and, more broadly, the Israeli popular music scene. From the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Israeli rock-and-roll had dominated the airwaves of Israel's most popular radio station, Galgalatz, as well as the country's pop charts and stadiums. The most popular Israeli hip-hop act at the time, Shabak Samech, a seven-member band that combined rock motifs with rap lyrics about partying and girls, had succeeded largely due to their ability to ride the popularity of Israeli rock-and-roll. The release of *Haor ve Hatzel* stands as the definitive moment in which Israeli rap captured the national consciousness and provided Israeli youth – disillusioned, frightened, and surrounded – with a rallying call heard through the streets of Tel Aviv and beyond: “The son of a bitch who can stop Israel has yet to be born.”²

¹ Subliminal, *Haor ve Hatzel* (The Light & The Shadow), Helicon Records: HL8204, 2002.

² Nirit Ben Ari, “*Asur l'Intifida Hashniah: Muzika Harap Hayisraelit Lo Hivkhinah B'Mah Sheh Koreh*” (A Decade After the Second Intifada: Israeli Rap Hasn't Noticed What's Happening), *Haaretz*, 1 October, 2010. This line is rapped by Hatzel in “Tikvah” (Hope) on Subliminal's 2002 album, *Haor ve Hatzel*.

Eight years later, weaving through a sea of bodies and merchants hawking street clothes and knock-off sneakers in the Central Bus Station in southern Tel Aviv, I seek out Aryeh Avatan, aka Chulu, the so-called “Godfather of Israeli Hip-Hop,”³ whose Mad Man Studios housed many of Israel’s hip-hop stars well before they became household names. It was Chulu who helped jumpstart Subliminal’s career, along with many other Israeli rappers, with the mixtape *Yisraelim Atzbanim* (Pissed Off Israelis) in the mid-1990s. In the intervening years Subliminal has largely faded from the public view, though not entirely from the public’s memory. His name is unavoidable in any conversation regarding Israeli hip-hop – indeed, the very name “Subliminal” seems to be synonymous with the genre within Israel – and yet Subliminal’s most recent work has strayed more towards the style of international pop than the gruff machismo, sparse beats, and Zionist ideology that flavored much of his earlier work.

Many Israeli rappers and producers harken back to the early 2000s as the heyday of Israeli hip-hop, when Subliminal was on top and the Israeli public respected both the medium and the message. To Chulu, Subliminal’s moment at the top seemed almost overdetermined. “In the period before and after the assassination of [Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin [in 1995] everything that was right wing was being trampled, everything that was Zionist was being stepped on, everything about ourselves, as Israelis, we were attacking ourselves... There was this feeling that it was too much, Aviv Geffen⁴ and ‘what a fucked up generation. It seemed like everything, everyone, was losing their values, especially Zionism... And then the terrorist attacks came and we were ready with songs about the situation, and at the height of the attacks we knew

³ Nirit Ben Ari, “A Decade After the Second Intifada: Israeli Rap Hasn’t Noticed What’s Happening.”

⁴ Israeli rock-and-roll musician Aviv Geffen, who rose to prominence in the mid-90s, continues to serve as a symbol of the far left in Israeli popular culture, much as Subliminal has transformed into a symbol of the right. Geffen also gave direct support to the members of Palestinian-Israeli rap group DAM, a key component of the Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop scene, early in their careers aiding in the production of their first major release in Hebrew, “Peshaim Khafim M’Pesha” (Innocent Criminals).

that we could make songs that would really influence people.”⁵ Suddenly, the songs that Subliminal had been recording with Chulu in his small Tel Aviv studio – songs about taking pride in the state of Israel, about Zionism, about national unity – perfectly captured the pulse of the changing political climate and found a waiting listening audience in Israeli youth.

The influence of Subliminal’s message was not limited to the young Jewish Israelis who flocked to his concerts in droves and helped his albums go double platinum, a rare feat in Israel where the buying public is relatively small. Indeed, Subliminal’s influence also helped to bolster that of Palestinian-Israeli⁶ Tamer Nafar, aka TN, who often performed on stage with Subliminal in the late ’90s and early 2000s. Hailing from the mixed city⁷ of Lod, a mere 15 minutes outside of Tel Aviv, Tamer began his career rapping predominantly in a mixture of English and Hebrew. As the Second Intifada reached its pinnacle the political, or national, sympathies of the two rappers – Subliminal with the Israelis and Tamer with the Palestinians – eventually led to enmity between them. Tamer began rapping only in Arabic and pursuing a career with his newly formed rap group, DAM, with his younger brother Suheil and their friend Mahmoud Jreri.

The dichotomies of anger and unity, despair and hope, which characterizes much of Subliminal’s message is reflected in the opening track, “Mukadime” (Introduction), from DAM’s first album, *Dedication*, released in 2006. DAM, which means “blood” in both Hebrew and Arabic, and also means “eternity” in the latter, combined a historical perspective on the

⁵ Aryeh Avatan, aka Chulu, interview with the author, 22 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁶ The term ‘Palestinian-Israeli’ refers to Palestinians who reside within the western bounds of the Green Line and have been granted Israeli citizenship. Many Palestinian-Israelis, including the members of DAM, do not self-identify as Israeli in any measure. My decision to use this term is predicated on the belief that it more fully represents the complexity of identity politics in Israel and Palestine and makes a necessary distinction between those Palestinians who reside on the western border of the Green Line within Israel (so-called ’48 Palestinians) and those who reside in Gaza and the West Bank. This distinction is further developed in the ‘Methodology and Summary of the Work’ section.

⁷ The term “mixed city” refers to cities within Israel where both Arab-Israeli (Christian and Muslim) and Jewish-Israeli residents live side-by-side. Often the neighborhoods housing the former are considerably poorer, and more poorly looked after by the state, than the neighborhoods of their Jewish counterparts.

Palestinian struggle with a connection to the frustration embodied by the Second Intifada.

Dedication begins with the unmistakable voice of Egyptian President Gamal Abd Al-Nasser, his oratory cut and scratched by Israeli producer DJ Alarm, intoning:

In the name of the Arab people [...] to those who believed in a principle [...] we will not bargain over our freedom [...] these promised generations live in a great moment [...] they witness a moment of great victory that they did not produce alone, a moment continued through the darkness and dreariness of the night, they worked and stayed up late and continued to raise up second after second until the great movement at the hour of dawn [...] the path which we have accepted is long and arduous.⁸

The opening lines from Nasser are charged with layers of meaning that display DAM's unique nationalist rhetoric. As Palestinians living within Israel, the members of DAM are channeling Nasser's words not only for the historical memory of their power to unite, but also for the memory of their power to confound and frighten the Israeli public.

In much the same way that Subliminal's Israeli public is "surrounded" by its Arab enemies, so too is DAM encircled by an Israeli force that oppresses and persecutes the Palestinians. Here both artists have constructed their national identity, and predicated their national struggle, as an oppositional force to that which would destroy them. The construction of nationalist identity facilitated by the words of both Subliminal and DAM is not a rigid one. Rather it is this fluid interaction with, and encircling by, the "Other" that provides the foundation for the (strikingly similar) nationalist narratives embedded in each of these artist's music. However, though both Subliminal and DAM represent the *etatist* facet of Israeli and Palestinian rap, respectively, there is a key distinction to be made in their perspectives: Subliminal's lyrical references to the state of Israel, even as they voice a sense of existentialist uncertainty, reaffirm the state's existence; in contrast, DAM's lyrics evoke an image of the possibilities for Palestinian statehood and reaffirm the antecedents of this struggle's present form. As Palestinian-Israeli

⁸ DAM, "Mukadime" (Introduction), on *Dedication*, Red Circle Music: 2006.

rapper Saz explains in his ode to Palestine, “We’re the only people in the world whose nation [homeland] lives within us / unlike the rest of the world living in their nations [homelands].”⁹

This essential difference between Subliminal and DAM – one dedicated to the maintenance of state, the other to the popular struggle for statehood – runs thematically through the themes of Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop. Ultimately, this dialectic shift, between maintenance of and aspiration for, can be seen as a fundamental divide between Israeli and Palestinian society, not merely their respective cultural productions.

Methodology and Summary of the Work

The present work seeks to engage the youth culture of Israelis and Palestinians, and more specifically the music and hip-hop culture articulated within both of these groups, as a means of understanding national identity more broadly. This study examines Israeli and Palestinian identity as two pieces of a whole, focusing not only on artists living within the internationally recognized boundaries of the state of Israel, but also on Palestinians living in the Palestinian Territories of Gaza and the West Bank.¹⁰ The work of numerous Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists and musicians is presented herein as a lens through which to read larger issues of nationalism, and popular support for nationalist narratives, present within both Israeli and Palestinian society. As Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg note in the preface to their volume *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, the study of popular culture as it relates to themes of political power and nationalism in Israel and Palestine has been significantly marginalized.¹¹ This process of marginalization emerged out of a general academic consensus

⁹ Saz, “Falestini” (Palestinian), on *Min Yom* (One Day), [unreleased].

¹⁰ Interviews with Palestinian artists were conducted both within Israel and the West Bank, but due to the present closure of Gaza by Israeli authorities it was not possible to conduct in-person interviews with artists in Gaza.

¹¹ Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

framing our understanding of nationalism and nation-states, that is, that they are “politically determinative and largely enclosed and discrete.”¹² An active engagement with Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop in this sense represents a small step towards bringing greater attention to the efficacy of popular culture as a tool for analyzing Israeli and Palestinian nationalism and follows Joseph Massad’s assertion, offered in his summation of the history of nationalist songs written in support of the Palestinian liberation struggle, that “the popular nationalist song is [not] epiphenomenal or subservient to the political, but is generative of political sentiment in many domains.”¹³ Thus, Subliminal and DAM, alongside other Israeli and Palestinian artists, do not merely react to the political environment around them, they simultaneously offer support or else undermine the political sentiments produced within this environment while using their art to create new sentiments or ways of understanding their environment. At the same time, this study deviates from the theory of discrete and isolated nationalism and attempts to show the manner in which Israeli and Palestinian national identity and nationalist rhetoric are defined and redefined, shaped and reshaped, through the cultural practices of Israeli and Palestinian musicians and hip-hop artists.

An additional note is necessary here on hip-hop’s utility in understanding national identity formation in Israel and Palestine. Hip-hop is a powerful medium through which to analyze and understand national identity precisely because, as an art form, it is deeply rooted both in the time and place of its practitioners and in its origins as a movement emanating from the urban African-American experience. In particular, hip-hop came about as an outgrowth of the increasing alienation and disenfranchisement of the African-American community within the

¹² Stein and Swedenburg, 5.

¹³ Joseph Massad, “Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music,” in *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 177.

social fabric of the urban setting – a facet of the art form and movement that will be expanded upon in the first section of the paper.

Hip-hop, as defined by the legendary hip-hop pioneer, Afrika Bambaataa, consists of four elements – breaking (breakdancing or b-boying), graffiti writing, rapping, and DJing. As an art form hip-hop is an amalgamation of styles and identities, borrowing heavily from the musical traditions of funk, rock-and-roll, and jazz among others. This process of borrowing and blending styles within hip-hop mirrors the larger trend of national identity formation in Israel and Palestine, whereby both are created and reconstructed in relation to, on top of and around, one another. Thus, in choosing hip-hop as a platform to express their national identity, Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists have broken several prevailing notions surrounding nationalist constructs well before the ink has dried on a page full of lyrics in a mixture of English, Hebrew, and Arabic and long before they have recorded their first verse in the studio. For the purposes of this study, the multi-faceted nature of hip-hop as an art form has been narrowed down to a primary focus upon rap and the lyrical element of hip-hop. This choice reflects not only the fact that rap is both the most prevalent and visible element of hip-hop in its globalized permutations, but also the simple fact that rap is the most potent meeting ground, within the framework of hip-hop, of the social and political influences at work in a given society.

Adopting hip-hop as a medium of expression thus requires of its practitioners a commitment to both hip-hop culture as a global language and to the unique language and cultural markers of the locality where the art has been appropriated. In the case of Israeli hip-hop artists their chosen medium represents a break with the folkloric past of Israeli popular music and the present popularity of *muzika mizrakhit* (eastern, or oriental music), which connects Israelis to their eastern, rather than western, roots. The themes present in Israeli hip-hop speak not only to

the Zionist moment of Subliminal's pinnacle, but also to the growing disillusionment of Israeli youth and the generational ennui characterized by today's post-Zionist era in Israel. For Palestinian hip-hop artists, their embrace of hip-hop also represents a break with the folkloric ballads popular in Palestinian music and the traditional sounds of Palestinian *dabka*, a folk music popular in the Levant. To be sure, the problematic of musical hybridity and adaptation did not arrive with the emergence of hip-hop as a global phenomenon in the 1990s. As early as the 1930s the International Conference on Arab Music in Cairo concerned itself with whether or not Arab ensembles should adopt Western instruments.¹⁴ Rather than creating new issues of hybridity and cultural convergence, hip-hop has merely made these issues more readily apparent and presented deeper contrasts between traditional and modern forms. The manner in which Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists address, and resolve, these contrasts also speaks to how the youth in each respective society perceive their place vis-à-vis their national history and how they imagine their national future.

Ultimately, it is the pursuit of a greater understanding of how Israeli and Palestinian identities intertwine and overlap that has inspired the present study. The historian Perry Anderson has labeled such studies "relational histories," or an attempt at the "reconstruction of [national histories'] dynamic interrelationships over time."¹⁵ In short, Israeli nationalism exists in part because of the existence of the Palestinians, and Palestinian nationalism has emerged in part because of the existence of their Israeli counterparts, and one should not be studied without acknowledgement of the other. Tracking the relationship of Israeli and Palestinian nationalist narratives and music through time, from the period of Israeli state formation and the Palestinian

¹⁴ Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 77.

¹⁵ Perry Anderson, "Agendas for Radical History," (presented at the New School for Social Research symposium, New York, New York, October 20, 1985).

*Nakba*¹⁶ in 1948, to the Six Day War of 1967, to the Oslo Accords of 1993, and on to the present day, this study attempts to demonstrate the interrelatedness of Israeli and Palestinian national identity across the generations through the lens of music, and particularly through the emergence of Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop.

The present study is the product of two months of fieldwork conducted back-and-forth between Israel and the West Bank in August 2010 and January 2011. Over the course of my fieldwork I interviewed both Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists along with those involved in the music business, music pedagogy, and professors studying popular culture in both societies. Interviews and observations were conducted throughout Israel in Tel Aviv, Ramle, Lod, Nazareth, and Jerusalem and in the West Bank around Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Dheisheh. Through my interviews I attempted to understand the way in which each individual artist viewed their own identity and gave this identity expression through their music. Beyond questions of identity, my interviews also explored the limits of expression in Israeli and Palestinian society and the extent to which rappers felt they had the agency to explore, or even question, their respective narratives. In addition to my fieldwork and interviews I have relied upon song lyrics as the source for my analysis of both Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop and the manner in which their respective content either diverges or overlaps.

Without a doubt, my personal background as the American-born son of Israeli immigrants has affected my approach to my fieldwork as well as my reception amongst my interviewees and the extent to which I was able to immerse myself in the Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop scenes, respectively. My family background was often a sensitive subject when speaking

¹⁶ Arabic for “catastrophe,” Palestinians refer to the founding of the State of Israel as *al-Nakba*. In recent years the Israeli Knesset has attempted to tamper down Palestinian commemoration of the Nakba within Israel by attempting to pass legislation banning public demonstrations and protests around Israeli Independence Day.

with Palestinian interviewees and, in rare instances, meant that certain individuals were unwilling to speak with me. At the very least, my strong background in Hebrew had a direct impact upon my ability to conduct interviews in Hebrew without a translator present, which was not always the case during interviews with Palestinian artists whom I interviewed in Arabic whenever possible. Beyond the question of my Israeli identity, my status as an American researching hip-hop also had a tangible affect on the way my interviewees related to me, as they alternately sought to vet my knowledge of hip-hop culture or request my assistance in distributing their music abroad. To the extent that it is possible to remove oneself from one's ethnographic work and analysis I have consistently attempted to do so. As to the efficacy of this effort, I leave final judgment to the reader alone.

An important semantic note is further in order. When discussing issues of identity and nationalism in relation to Israeli and Palestinian society it becomes exceedingly difficult to maintain a consistent definition of terms that will not in some way indicate prejudice or else altogether complicate the matter at hand. For the purposes of classification the members of DAM along with other Palestinian artists residing within Israel are referred to as Palestinian-Israelis throughout this study; however, their work as musicians is discussed under the umbrella of *Palestinian* hip-hop without any qualifiers. Likewise, the qualifier Jewish-Israeli is used throughout in reference to those Israelis who can be identified as part of the Ashkenazi (of Western European origin) majority, while terms such as Russian-Israeli and Ethiopian-Israeli refer to more specific ethnic subsets within Israel. All of these are similarly categorized as *Israeli* without qualification. In sum, it is often difficult to set the limits of what can fairly be classified as "Israeli" or "Palestinian," whether the term is being applied to a cultural production or an individual. Thus nearly every signifier of identity in Israel-Palestine becomes charged in its

application and may be contested by one party or another. From an artist's nationality, whether Israeli, Palestinian, or some amalgamation thereof, to an artist's city, referred to as "Lod" in Hebrew and "Lyd" in Arabic, everything shifts depending upon the speaker and the cultural context in which they situate themselves. To the best of my ability, I have established the parameters for all such terms based on an analysis of my formal and informal conversations with artists and through their song lyrics.

This study is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the nationalist narratives of Israel and Palestine as they have intersected with, and been constructed through, the development of musical culture and traditions in the modern era. The second section examines the history of hip-hop in the United States as understood by Israeli and Palestinian practitioners. Moving through a discussion of two pivotal eras in American hip-hop and the manner in which the personages and messages of these epochs resonated in the context of the Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop scenes establishes how Israeli and Palestinian rappers situate themselves in the continuum of the global hip-hop scene. The third section then combines elements of the previous two sections and presents the current trend of nationalist narratives and rhetoric as embodied by the voices of Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists who have begun producing music over the course of the last two decades. This section concerns itself with understanding who represents the sound of the nation in the modern era and why, contrasting the popularity (or relative obscurity) of hip-hop in Israel and Palestine with other current musical trends within both societies. This section also examines the way Israeli and Palestinian artists have utilized hip-hop as a medium through which to construct and shape their identities. The fourth section examines the manner in which Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop artists, by embracing a globalized and globally accessible art form, have offered their nationalist identities up for consumption by a

global market. In other words, how has the global appeal of hip-hop extended the reach, scope, and fluidity of these supposedly bounded identities – Israeli and Palestinian?

The Sound of Identity in Israel and Palestine Across the Generations

The construction of Israeli and Palestinian national identity was aided, in both instances, by the development of popular and folk music that gave voice to the emerging narratives of Israelis and Palestinians as such. Major shifts in musical styles and content often occurred in tandem with, or in response to, political events. At other times, styles emerged as a political phenomenon in their own right, much as Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop would emerge decades later.

Israel: The Early Ashkenazi Yishuv and the Mizrakhi Influx

In Israel, the expression of Israeli identity, as unique and distinct from Jewish or diasporic identity, emerged in the early years of the Israeli *yishuv* (settlement)¹⁷ through the popularization and eventual canonization of *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* (Songs of the Land of Israel). This repertory of songs, which emerged as early as the 1880s and continued to grow over the course of a century well into the late 20th century,¹⁸ represented a celebration of a reinvigorated Jewish identity embodied in the Zionist settlement in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel). The *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* repertory represented a key popular culture component of the nation-building project inherent to the Zionist enterprise, harnessing the semantic power of song lyrics that emphasized the major themes of Hebrewism: the pioneering ideal of Zionism, collective identification, and a strong connection to the land.¹⁹ In the early *yishuv* period, these songs spread throughout Israel by means of *shirei b'tzibur* (communal singing) and the publication of *shironim* (printed songbooks), distributed to youth movements, *kibbutzim* (socialist communes), and throughout

¹⁷ The word *yishuv* is used to refer to the early settlement of Palestine prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

¹⁸ Indeed, *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* continue to be a relevant, if somewhat less prominent, musical classification. According to Regev and Seroussi, new popular songs in Israel continue to be classified in this manner depending upon their “musical style, contents, and/or the identity of their authors and performers” (Regev and Seroussi, 2004).

¹⁹ Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 18, 57.

the educational system. The publication of these shironim often fell to the *Histadrut* (the Labor Union of the early Israeli yishuv) and the Jewish National Fund, lending the support of early state structures to the creation of a national Israeli ethos. The creation of the Hebrew folk song, along with the act of singing these songs together with other recent immigrants to Israel in forums organized by the apparatuses of a fledgling state, had the affect of solidifying a popular nationalist sound and imagery born of the Shirei Eretz Yisrael canon. The so-called “Golden Age” of Shirei Eretz Yisrael lasted from 1920-1960, during which time members of the various *kibbutzim* composed the greatest number of new songs, celebrating their return to the Land of Israel, and particularly, the “new paradigm of Hebrew culture.”²⁰

By the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the canon of Shirei Eretz Yisrael began to fade into the realm of nostalgia. Though the national trauma of the Yom Kippur War, which had caught the Israelis completely by surprise and was considered by many to be the first significant military loss of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), caused many to search for the national strength and unity of the early settlement period of the yishuv, for others the war served as a catalyst for deviating with the old Israeli musical norms. Indeed, the strength and unity of the Israeli state seemed to be succumbing not only to the external pressures of war, but to the internal pressures of new Israeli cultural forms as well with the rise of Israeli rock and the popularity of a new genre, *muzika mizrakhit* (literally, Eastern music). In the space left by Shirei Eretz Yisrael two musical styles came to dominate the Israeli scene – Israeli rock-and-roll and *muzika mizrakhit* – both of which borrowed and deviated from the narratives of Shirei Eretz Yisrael according to their own rationales. Though both of these musical styles undermined, in some sense, the ideological nature of Shirei Eretz Yisrael, they differed greatly in their origins. Israeli rock emerged primarily as the musical output of a generation of artists that had served in

²⁰ Regev and Seroussi, 71.

lehaqot tzvayiot (army ensembles), artists who combined their status as members of the Israeli establishment (evinced by their army service) with their interest in the 1960s rock culture of the West to create a new Israeli genre.²¹ By the early 1980s, Israeli rock fairly dominated the popular music scene in Israel, a fact attributed to the relative prominence of Western culture in Israel and the coming-of-age of a generation that had grown up on Israeli rock and began to enter the field of popular music themselves.²² The rock of this period differentiated itself entirely from the folk past of Israeli music in content, if not sound as well, as the lyrics of Israeli rock addressed issues of Israeliness that had never been relevant to the first generations of Israelis. Now, songs such as Shlomo Artzi's 1986 single "Layla lo Shaqet" (Unquiet Night), dealt with themes of Israeli masculinity and the losses of war:

Again at night I dream of you
Wake up because I dreamt how they
Shot at you and hit you
And you cry
Maybe you found rest
Among soldiers, you are allowed
Yes, I take comfort and sleep with her, yes
As though instead of you.

Unquiet night
And you are dead.²³

Other songs, such as Mashina's 1985 "Az Lama Li Politiqah Akhshav?" (So Why Do I Need Politics Now?) addressed the political concerns of the time and offered implicit critiques of Israeliness:

Thousands of mercenaries concentrate in a mosque
They talk about me but not with me
[...]
I lied when I said everything is so wonderful
Thousands of mercenaries concentrate in the dark
And in New York they invented a new kind of disease
I feel so wonderful

²¹ Regev and Seroussi, 144-145.

²² Ibid., 161.

²³ Ibid., 171.

We are a chosen people
So why do I need politics now?²⁴

At the same time that Israeli rock musicians rooted in the traditional culture of Hebrewism began to explore issues of Israeliness from their insider perspective, the *Mizrakhim* (Israelis from the Arab and predominantly Muslim countries of North Africa and the Near East) began to assert their own identity as Israelis through their own musical stylings. The distinctly Middle Eastern flavor of muzika mizrakhit placed it in a position of cultural inferiority relative to the more Western sounds of Israeli rock and Mizrakhi artists used their art to both link themselves back to their own unique cultural heritage and to their own form of Israeliness.²⁵ Combining elements of Arabic, Yemenite, Moroccan, Kurdish, Turkish, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and Persian influence, the category of muzika mizrakhit covers a rather diverse musical style, which originally came to the yishuv with Yemeni Jewish laborers.²⁶ Still, the muzika mizrakhit of the early yishuv period was produced entirely outside of Israel and it was only in the 1970s that a local scene emerged.²⁷ Spurred on by the creation of the first Oriental Song Festival in 1971, and the spread of their music through the emerging technology of cassette tapes, Mizrakhi artists entered the Israeli public consciousness and, by turns, the Israeli mainstream. In its early stages, the content of muzika mizrakhit “took the stigmas and stereotypes imposed by outsiders and [used] them prominently in songs, transforming them into positive in-group symbols...[which] carried a loaded hostile message to the dominant group.”²⁸ However, over time, the tone of muzika mizrakhit softened as Mizrakhi artists attempted to fit themselves into the greater fabric of Israeliness that had long kept them at the margins of Israeli society. This meant that Mizrakhi

²⁴ Regev and Seroussi, 179-180.

²⁵ Ibid., 193.

²⁶ Ibid., 203.

²⁷ Jeff Halper, Edwin Seroussi, and Pamela Squires-Kidron, “Musica Mizrahit: Ethnicity and Class Culture in Israel,” *Popular Music* 8 (1989), 133.

²⁸ Regev and Seroussi, 217.

artists often turned to the catalog of Shirei Eretz Yisrael for inspiration and material and increasingly distanced themselves from their Arab roots, asserting that their style was more ‘Eastern Israeli’ than Arab in order to remove the Arab stigma from around them.²⁹

The slow movement of muzika mizrakhit towards a balance of Eastern and Western musical influences allowed for mizrakhit to make its way onto the Israeli radio, a significant development. Indeed, the very development of Israeli music, and a sound that could be called distinctly Israeli, occurred not only in public spaces of consumption, but through the airwaves of the radio, which traditionally favored more European sounds. Beginning with the launching of a Jewish national radio program in 1936, which eventually became known as *Kol Yisrael* (the Voice of Israel) following the founding of the state in 1948, radio played a central role in shaping Israel’s Jewish national culture. In contrast to the dominance of television over radio in most Western countries, the delayed development of Israeli television into the 1960s allowed radio to play “a more dominant part in shaping the national culture and collective memory [of Israel] based on the hegemonic ideals of the Zionist pioneers of Ashkenazi (European Jewry) background.”³⁰ This hegemonic ideal was particularly solidified through the founding of the first army radio station, *Galai Tzahal*, shortly after 1948.³¹ Addressing the phenomenon of state radio emerging as the representative of pop culture, and even musical subcultures, Menahem Mautner argues that Galai Tzahal managed to blend the categories of “youth,” “army service,” and “rock,” so that the “category of rock was considered capable of including, or containing, the category of army service.”³² In other words, it fell to Galai Tzahal, as both arbiter of popular

²⁹ Halper, et al., 134.

³⁰ Danny Kaplan, “The Songs of the Siren: Engineering National Time on Israeli Radio,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2009), 316.

³¹ *Tzahal* stands for *Tzava Hagana L’Yisrael*, or Israeli Defense Forces.

³² Menahem Mautner, “Galai Tzahal o Ha’ahadah Shel Harok ve Hamavet” (Galai Tzahal or the Unification of Rock and Death), *Plilim*, vol. 9 (2001), 16.

culture and representative of the Israeli state and its army, to find a way to reconcile its seemingly contradictory existence. As an institution of the state that called up thousands of youth into service annually, the army desired to appeal to youth culture without compromising its own conservative stance. Thus it was determined that the broadcasts of Galai Tzahal should “transfer to those soldiers who listened the message that completing army service could be consistent with a deep interest in rock and even a deep involvement in the culture of rock.”³³ Of course this meant that as early as the 1960s Galai Tzahal began to play a significant role in “sterilizing anti-establishment messages in Israeli rock,” primarily through a system in which army news and heavier news items were “sandwiched” in between songs.³⁴ Thus, through the airwaves of Galai Tzahal, the natural tendency of rock towards conflict or rebellion was gradually “softened” and the seeming contradiction that existed between the rebellious nature of youth culture and the ordered hierarchy of the army as state apparatus was made gradually invisible. The development of Kol Yisrael, and later Galai Tzahal, also effectively made the invisible populations of Israel – particularly Mizrakhi Jews – even more so, as the national sound of folk and rock popularized via the radio institutionalized the marginalization of neighborhood traditions.³⁵

The same tension, or relative lack thereof, can be seen in the approach of Israeli hip-hop artists to the second army radio station, *Galgalatz*, created several decades later in 1993. Galgalatz quickly succeeded in capturing a large percentage of the Israeli listening audience, creating a playlist of primarily mainstream rock songs that set the tone of popular music in Israel. However, the station did not merely set the contemporary tone of Israeli radio, but rather it solidified the process that had begun with Kol Yisrael whereby the Israeli state exerted control

³³ Mautner, 19.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Amy Horowitz, *Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic* (Detroit: Wayne University State Press, 2010), 42.

over the sounds of the state with Israeli soldiers serving as disc jockeys and helping to select the contents of the station's much sought after Playlist. Though few hip-hop artists would readily admit that they tailor their sound to the Playlist restrictions of Galgalatz, all Israeli hip-hop artists readily recall the warm reception Subliminal's pro-Zionist message found at the station and on its airwaves in the early 2000s as a powerful moment for Israeli hip-hop. Thus, as Or Tregger, aka DJ Alarm, explained, Israeli hip-hop artists wishing to receive national airplay would have to consciously adjust their message to fit the acknowledged biases of Galgalatz:

A lot of musicians will make music that supports the state because they also want to be connected to the industry, because the industry [is Galgalatz] – and what is Galgalatz? Galgalatz is the radio station of Tzahal! Now, I'm not trying to change that. That's the situation. They built it, they're stronger than everybody else, and that's how it is ... Tzahal is controlling the most important radio station in the country, so are they going to play a song against what's happening? No. Are they going to play a song by an Arab rapper? I don't imagine so. They probably won't even play a song by an Israeli rapper that speaks about the conflict. [By their standard] music shouldn't be about politics, and if it's going to be political then it might as well give support to the state.³⁶

If the prominent sounds of Israeli music conformed to – or at the least, did not actively question – the state narrative, due to the influence of state apparatuses then how might the absence of a state, in the instance of the Palestinians, affect musical production?

Palestine: A Pan-Arab Struggle Writ Local

In contrast to the Israeli musical canon, which attempted to unite disparate groups of formerly diasporic Jews under the newly formed rubric of Jewish-Israeli, the popular nationalist expression that found its voice in Palestinian music connected the Palestinians to their Arab roots and thus naturally to their Arab neighbors. As David McDonald has noted there existed a “vibrant tradition of resistance song throughout the British mandate period [1920-1948],” however, “[due to] the improvisational character of this repertory, coupled with the absence of

³⁶ Or Tregger, aka DJ Alarm, interview with the author, 21 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

reliable recording technology, pre-1948 resistance song has been difficult to document.”³⁷ Thus, the historical record regarding Palestinian music relating to the nationalist struggle of the Palestinians is primarily one which begins in 1948 and moves forward. In the wake of the 1948 war Gamal Abd Al-Nasser’s Pan-Arab socialism “emerged as the dominant socio-political discourse”³⁸ amongst the Arab states and, furthermore, Egypt became the locus of cultural productions intended to unify the Arab peoples.

It is not coincidental that the introduction to DAM’s album pays tribute to Nasser, but rather this harkening back to the Nasserist revolution of the late 1950s and early 1960s reflects two interesting facets of early Palestinian nationalist music – that its production largely came from Palestinian diasporic communities and other Arab singers, and that these pro-Palestinian productions were in large part fueled by the success of Nasser’s Free Officers Revolution in 1952 and the emergence of Pan-Arabism.³⁹ At the turn of the twentieth century, Cairo emerged as the undisputed cultural center of the Arab world and as such, many of the most famous songs of the early Palestinian liberation movement emanated from Egypt’s capital. Much as in Israel, where state-owned media established common narratives across all broadcast mediums, the Egyptian state-run entertainment industry advanced a singular revolutionary agenda, particularly regarding Palestine.⁴⁰ Among those artists whose songs were broadcast frequently on Egyptian television, Muhammad Abd Al-Wahhab stands out as a particularly outspoken supporter of the Palestinian struggle in the period prior to the 1967 war between Israel and the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria along with their Jordanian allies, which would come to be known in Israel as the Six-Day War and in the Arab world as the June War. In a 1963 composition entitled

³⁷ David A. McDonald, “My Voice Is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance,” PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2006, ProQuest (AAT 3242934), 69-70.

³⁸ McDonald, “My Voice Is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance,” 79.

³⁹ Joseph Massad, “Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32 (2003), 21-22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

“Sawt al-Jamahir” (The Voice of the Masses) al-Wahhab sang of his Palestinian brethren and called upon the *jamahir*, the masses, to aid them in their struggle:

In the name of our union,
Rise O struggle,
And tell the aggressor Zionists,
That the banner of Arabism
Found its stars
Ever since the year 1948
The masses say that the hour
Of revolutionary action has struck
In Palestine, in the name of the masses⁴¹

The unifying message of “Sawt al-Jamahir” is reflected in the words to another popular work by al-Wahhab from the mid-1950s entitled “Nasser” (literally, Victory, and a reverential song of the new Egyptian President), in which al-Wahhab expresses the optimism of the nascent Palestinian liberation movement with Nasser as its clear figurehead:

Your people, your people, O Palestine,
Will never let go of their revenge
For the liberation army is at the gates
Waiting to return home,
Your sun shall rise,
And the rights of the refugees shall be restored,
All the Arab people are your weapon
And their weapons are unity and nationalism⁴²

With the Arab defeat in the 1967 war and the collapse of the union between Egypt and Syria following on its heels in 1969, the resilience of these weapons – unity and nationalism – began to falter. As Egypt recouped in the war’s aftermath, the tone, tenor, and place of production of Palestinian nationalist music shifted away from its Egyptian center. Indeed, the post-war period witnessed the emergence of the Lebanese artist Fayruz and the Rahbani brothers who composed the majority of her songs. In odes to Palestinian cities, such as the popular “Jerusalem,” “Jaffa,” and “Shawari’ al-Quds al-‘Atiqah” (The Streets of Old Jerusalem), Fayruz lamented the losses of

⁴¹ Massad, “Liberating Songs,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

1967 and addressed the new reality of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.⁴³ At the same time, Fayruz and other artists also offered lyrical praises to the resistance efforts of the emerging Palestinian guerrilla movement. This movement spawned its own musical canon and artists in the 1970s and 1980s, the most prominent of which, Marcel Khalife, emerged as the latest incarnation of the Palestinian liberation movement's voice. In a reflection of the future spread of hip-hop, Khalife became one of the first Arab singers of political songs to become popular primarily through the distribution of cassette tapes and guerrilla radio stations.⁴⁴ Borrowing many of his lyrics from the poems of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, Khalife energized popular support for the Palestinian resistance movement both in southern Lebanon and within Israel. Meanwhile, the voices of Palestinian artists from the diaspora added to the fray as groups such as *Al-Firqah al-Markaziyyah* (The Central Band), associated with the Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), produced songs such as "Ya Jamahir al-Ard al-Muhtallah" (O Masses of the Occupied Land), "Ana Samid" (I Am Steadfast), and "Kalashnikov" that praised the armed struggle of the PLO.⁴⁵ Broadcast by guerilla radio stations in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, such songs became popular across the region and throughout Palestinian refugee camps, and their lyrics relied on a greater inclusion of Palestinian dialect than the music of previous generations.

In a similar manner, DAM's music and message is one which connects the Palestinian struggle, through a distinctly Palestinian sound and presentation, to a larger Arab nationalist discourse. As DAM recasts the Palestinian narrative, applying it to their struggle as Palestinian-Israelis, they are also weaving themselves into the greater thread of Arab nationalism. Speaking to this very trend, Suheil Nafar speaks of the need to unify Palestinians around a common

⁴³ Massad, "Liberating Songs," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 26-28.

⁴⁴ Massad, "Liberating Songs," *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 190.

⁴⁵ Massad, "Liberating Songs," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 31.

identity that can eliminate the divisions between Christian and Muslim Palestinians, Palestinian-Israelis living within the 1948 borders and Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, and the multiple other divisions that had fissured Palestinian society.⁴⁶ In a remarkable way then, as today's Palestinian hip-hop artists attempt to reclaim the unifying narrative of an earlier nationalist musical discourse through their own art they are also attempting to create a more fluid model of the apparatus present in the Israeli state. However, rather than relying on institutions to present a unifying narrative that elides differences in creating a specific Palestinian sound, Palestinian rappers have used hip-hop as a more adaptable medium through which to voice their narratives.

Before delving into the specific narratives found in the lyrics of both Palestinian and Israeli rap, however, the following section first addresses the Palestinian and Israeli readings of hip-hop history and the implications that these different historical understandings have for the actual practice of rap.

⁴⁶ Suheil Nafar, "Hip-Hop Araby: Political Expression and Popular Culture" (panel discussion, New York University, New York, NY, May 1, 2010). Suheil also implicated Israeli policy in exacerbating these divisions, particularly between Christian and Muslim Palestinians living within the 1948 borders of Israel. In the instance of these Palestinian-Israelis, Suheil argued, Israel provided Christians with greater rights and freedom from harassment that prevented them from identifying with the greater Palestinian struggle.

Bronx-Born to Worldwide: Lessons from the Pages of Hip-Hop History

The lessons to be drawn from hip-hop are many and multi-faceted, as the history of the art form speaks to issues of class stratification, racial segregation, sexism, urban poverty and crime, among many other salient points. However, the present overview of hip-hop as it arose and rose to prominence in the United States is rooted specifically in the understanding which Israelis and Palestinians bring to their surveying of hip-hop history. Rather than surveying the whole of hip-hop from its emergence in the Bronx, New York City in the 1970s to its current commercial presence on the Billboard Charts the present section focuses on two particular eras of hip-hop in the United States that Israeli and Palestinian rappers have turned to in understanding their own place in the culture of hip-hop. The first of these two eras can be characterized as the period of rap's commercial ascent in the United States at the end of the 1970s with the release of the first commercial rap single, "Rapper's Delight," in 1979 by the Sugar Hill Gang. It is to this historical track, and the sentiment of this era, that many Israeli hip-hop artists point as an inspiration and the defining moment of hip-hop as an art form. The second era, which saw the rise to prominence of gangster rap as a commercially viable and popular subset of hip-hop and, in particular, the quick ascent of West Coast rapper Tupac Shakur lasted from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. It is here that many Palestinian hip-hop artists find their own artistic inspiration and it is particularly in the lyrics and personage of Tupac Shakur that Palestinians find a rallying call and a reason to pick up the mic.

Anthropologist Ian Condry has argued that the "double bind" of appropriating hip-hop as an art form in foreign places causes foreign artists to feel that they must simultaneously "respect the African American roots of the music while also producing something uniquely authentic and

original.”⁴⁷ This imperative to stay true to the origins of hip-hop while also bringing something new and culturally relevant to the art form is not uniform, however. For the manner in which an artist understands and interprets the very origins of the art form will have a clear impact on what respecting these origins will involve. Thus, as Israelis and Palestinians read into, and appropriate from, the history of hip-hop in the United States their historical readings speak volumes as to their own worldview and the pressures of Israeli and Palestinian society upon them as they attempt to meld a foreign art form to their own locality.

For Palestinians, the history of American hip-hop as an art form reached its apex in the rapper Tupac Shakur. In large part this is because they see themselves in Tupac Shakur as a brother, a representative of their own struggle for freedom from oppression, and a martyr taken before his time. Tupac rose to national and international prominence in the early 1990s although the brand of “gangsta rap” that Tupac’s music fell under had begun a few years beforehand with the release of California-based crew N.W.A.’s (Niggaz With Attitude) *Straight Outta Compton* in 1988, an album that emphasized the “strength of street knowledge” above all else.⁴⁸ Tupac’s music also emphasized the importance of street knowledge and remaining true to the experience of the inner city African-American experience. Yet even as his image hewed closely to gangsta rap of N.W.A. with releases such as his 1993 album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, Tupac’s music and persona transcended his immediate surroundings and resonated with listeners the world over.

Speaking of the music video for Tupac’s 1993 single “Holla If Ya Hear Me” rapper Tamer Nafar remarks, “There was something in the video that even if I couldn’t understand the

⁴⁷ Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 27.

⁴⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 318.

lyrics, I could understand the message.”⁴⁹ Adi Krayem, a member of the three-member hip-hop crew We7 (pronounced “Weh” and short for *Waled al-Hara*, or Children of the Neighborhood) of Nazareth, remarks on the role Tupac plays in Palestinian ghettos: “If I take you up here to Roum, a poor neighborhood [in Nazareth], you’ll find Tupac’s lyrics written on the walls and you’ll find that these people don’t even understand English! As a kid, I could identify with Tupac’s videos – seeing the cops lining up black guys on the street – even without knowing the words.” Krayem contrasts this natural Palestinian connection with hip-hop to what he sees as a forced Israeli connection to the art form: “Israeli artists don’t have anger and they can understand [hip-hop] intellectually, but they don’t feel it. It won’t develop as an artistic form [without the anger].”⁵⁰ The hip-hop dichotomy that Krayem outlines – essentially, feeling it versus understanding it – suggests that there might somehow be a more natural affinity between Palestinian hip-hop and its American counterpart, which Krayem connects to a common desire to fight against a system of oppression.

The universality of Tupac Shakur’s message and image reflects sociologist Michael Eric Dyson’s assertion that “Tupac was a transcendent force of creative fury who relentlessly articulated a generations’ defining moods – its confusion and pain, its nobility and courage, its loves and hates, its hopelessness and self-destruction. He was the zeitgeist in sagging jeans.”⁵¹ In a 1995 interview, one year before his death, Tupac explained his worldview, elucidating his understanding of the “thug life” as he led it:

It’s not thugging like I’m robbing people, ‘cause that’s not what I’m doing. I mean like I’m not scared to say how I feel. Part of being [a thug] is to stand up for your responsibilities and say this is what I do even though I know people are going to hate me and say, ‘It’s so politically incorrect,’ and ‘How could you make black people look like that?’ ... That’s what I want

⁴⁹ *Slingshot Hip Hop*, directed by Jackie Reem Salloum (New York, NY: Fresh Booza Productions, 2008), DVD.

⁵⁰ Adi Krayem, interview with the author, 10 January 2011, Nazareth, Israel.

⁵¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001), 106-107.

to do. I want to be real with myself ... Most of my music [tells the truth], I'm just trying to speak about things that affect me and about things that affect our community.⁵²

On the one hand, Tupac spoke to and for the African-American community, and yet at the same time he represented a sort of radical individualism, whereby he seemed concerned only with himself and his own status and opinions. This binary has informed much debate on Tupac's lasting influence on not only the development of American hip-hop, but the very development of consciousness within the youth population of the African-American community. This binary approach to Tupac's legacy finds an interesting parallel in Palestine where the older generation of Palestinians perceives hip-hop as a Western cultural medium that removes its young Palestinian practitioners from their cultural rootedness, one by one. Meanwhile, Palestinian hip-hop artists themselves see their chosen medium as a continuation of the popular Palestinian struggle, a way of reasserting the longevity of the Palestinian community both within Palestine and abroad. In essence, Palestinians have cast their approach to hip-hop in the mold of Tupac who, in the words of American hip-hop artist Mos Def, "[took] something that was negative and associated it with [young blacks] and tried to flip it."⁵³ This exact tactic can be seen in songs such as "Min Irhabi?" (Who's A Terrorist?) by DAM, discussed in the following section, where the Palestinian-Israeli rappers attempt to flip negative portrayals of Palestinians as simply "terrorists."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Israeli hip-hop is not shot through with the legacy of Tupac Shakur. Israelis sought for themselves a different historical foothold in attempting to find their place in hip-hop culture. This foothold was not to be found in the gangsta rap of N.W.A. and Tupac, but rather in the lessons gleaned from the dawn of the first hip-hop generation in the late 1970s. The

⁵² Dyson, 113, 119.

⁵³ Dyson, 171.

Israeli read on this particular era of hip-hop history is that the medium did not always have an overt message – in other words, hip-hop was not always political. Khen Rotem, aka Sagol 59, a rapper from Jerusalem who began his career in the early days of Israeli hip-hop in the 1990s, argues for this approach to hip-hop, stating that it is not inherently a political medium, rather he sees it as simply an instrument for expression: “I disagree with the idea that hip-hop began as a political medium. It started as music for fun that was played at parties ... True, there are artists such as Public Enemy or The Brand Nubians that are more ‘conscious,’ but hip-hop is an instrument, you can do with it whatever you want. It’s as if you were to ask me what a guitar is. Well, with a guitar you can play Blues or Flamenco or Classic.”⁵⁴

In emphasizing the possibility for apolitical hip-hop, Israeli rappers will often point to the 1979 single “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang. Indeed, the single capitalized on the party vibes of early hip-hop culture and as the first rap song to make it onto vinyl, “Rapper’s Delight” transformed rap from what had been one element of a culture experienced in live performances at nightclubs and block parties to a recorded product. In so doing, the song became the first standard by which future recording artists might measure their own work – and certainly their own success. “Rapper’s Delight” quickly moved from the insular world of the New York hip-hop scene to the rest of the United States and shortly thereafter to the rest of the world. The great irony of the Sugar Hill Gang is that a group of three unknown rappers who were quite literally pulled off the street to record the song ended up internationalizing the art form.⁵⁵ According to hip-hop cultural critic Jeff Chang “Rapper’s Delight” succeeded precisely because it channeled “the funny stories, the hookish slang, the same kind of stuff that would strike listeners around the world as both universal and new, not local and insular.” In other words,

⁵⁴ Khen Rotem, aka Sagol 59, interview with the author, 17 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁵⁵ Chang, 130-132.

“‘Rapper’s Delight’ was tailor-made to travel, to be perfectly accessible to folks who had never heard of rap or hip-hop or The Bronx.”⁵⁶ Moreover, for people who had never heard of hip-hop or the Bronx – or as in the Israeli case, for those who could not relate to what was happening in the Bronx – “Rapper’s Delight” provided a sound and style easily emulated that did not require a rootedness in the urban experience of African-Americans that birthed hip-hop culture. Thus Israelis have largely adopted the sound of hip-hop even as they consciously abandon elements of the message. As Eyal Rob, a member of the four-man DJ crew Soulico, explained to me: “Our political message is that it doesn’t have to be political ... what we’re trying to do is to maintain some sense of normalcy, which is difficult because the day-to-day reality here is that everything is abnormal.”⁵⁷

Indeed, the daily reality of abnormality manifests itself in many ways through the sounds of both Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop. However, if Israel is, as both Rob and Sagol 59 claimed in separate interviews, a place that “forces one to be political because politics is in the air,” then how is it possible to make apolitical music and what does it mean to attempt to make apolitical rap specifically?

⁵⁶ Chang, 131-132.

⁵⁷ Eyal Rob, interview with the author, 26 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Hip-Hop's Creative Energy: New Narratives Born, Old Narratives Recast

Israel: From Zionist to Post-Zionist and Back

We can sit all day
And hash and rehash it
Sit all night
And chew it over until we swallow it
But why should I dive into it
And get depressed by it?
I'd rather not
Since there's no solution to it
So what do we do?
We take comfort
[...]
We sing that it will be good
We sing so we won't fight
We sing so we can't see
There's nothing
We sing another song of comfort.

– Hadag Nahash, “Shir Nechama” (Song of Comfort), on 6, 2010

In a basement studio in southern Tel Aviv, I meet Hemi Kfir Artsy, aka Fuck A, one of the original members of Israeli hip-hop group Shabak Samech. One of the most crime-ridden and eclectic parts of the city, southern Tel Aviv presents a milieu of Israeli culture where undocumented migrant workers from East Asia and Africa mingle with bohemian Israelis, Russian immigrants, and people milling in and out of Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station. Gesturing to the bustling streets just outside of the studio Hemi explains to me the simultaneous appeal, and inherent difficulty, of creating Israeli hip-hop: “There is such a wide range of culture and backgrounds in Israel – how can you possibly make music that unites everyone? In this way, it's only natural that we should look to America for an example.” Still, Israeli hip-hop has faced staunch opposition from critics who cite this exact reason – the foreignness of the medium – for

their dismissal of the genre. “People are searching for something ‘Israeli’ and in many ways this is why hip-hop has not succeeded here.”⁵⁸

Peering out onto the street outside, it is difficult to ascertain what it is exactly that Hemi is referring to when he speaks of “something Israeli.” Hemi recognizes as much when he adds that, “our engagement here [in Israel] with identity is a very deep one because the question of who’s a Jew and who’s an Israeli is one that is constantly coming up.”⁵⁹ Still, to what genre of music might this “something Israeli” belong? If the current musical trends in Israel are any indication, Israelis are finding themselves primarily in the sounds of *muzika mizrakhit* and *muzika dati’it* (religious music). To be sure, the musical landscape has altered dramatically since Shabak Samech first entered the fray in 1992 with their feel-good message of parties, drugs, and girls – one which Hemi attributes to the young age, between 17-18, of the members upon the group’s founding. Despite their young age, or perhaps because of it, Shabak’s early work captured a uniquely “Tel Avivnik” (a resident of Tel Aviv) vibe, which appealed to Israeli youth who wished to escape the conflict surrounding them in the wake of the First Intifada. Indeed, this very tendency of escapism had been critiqued some years earlier by Israeli singer Norit Galron in her song, “The Flood That Follows Us,” which directly addressed Israeli indifference towards events in the West Bank embodied by the culture of Tel Aviv. In this song, banned from Israeli radio⁶⁰, Galron sang, “There is a State of stones and petrol bombs / and there is Tel Aviv, burning from its clubs and its lewd acts / There is a State of protestors where they wear the wounds / and there is Tel Aviv, celebrating, living, eating and drinking / No, do not tell me about

⁵⁸ Hemi Kfir Artsy, aka Fuck A, interview with the author, 30 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Harel Segev, interview with the author, 15 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

a girl who lost her eye / It only makes me sick / I haven't the strength for depressing and agonizing types / and I don't care what's been done in the settlements.”⁶¹

The First Intifada created a fissure in Israeli identity, a fault-line that would be reopened in 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada. It awakened many Israelis to the realities of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the plight of Palestinians both within and without the boundaries of the Israeli state as others cloaked themselves in indifference retreating further into the cover granted by Tel Aviv's forgiving embrace. Thus while Tel Aviv emerged as an indisputable center of Israeli arts and culture (both before and after the Intifada) it also became a cultural “bubble” where Israelis could escape the harsh realities of the unceasing conflict around them. The First Intifada also sparked intense debate within Israel about the meaning of Israeli collective identity, a debate that Hemi alluded to in his discussion of what it means to be Israeli. As for Shabak's engagement with the topic, however, Hemi indicated that it was one which “people like to push away because it hurts too much and it brings up more and more questions that hurt even more,”⁶² the implication being that Shabak was not prepared to raise such questions.

Beyond engaging with the essential question of what it means to be Israeli, there was also the crucial engagement with what it means to be hip-hop in Israel, which had not been addressed by Shabak either. According to Eyal Rob, this latter question is still at issue in Israel today: “Hip-hop in Israeli is problematic because it's still trying to find itself. It's very concerned with what's happening in the United States, which is only natural given the influence the States holds, but [hip-hop artists] still haven't quite found a way of how to make it work here [in Israel] ... slowly there's been a presence of artists who are looking around their immediate surroundings

⁶¹ Norit Galron, “Akhareinu Hamabul” (The Flood That Follows Us), on *Akhareinu Hamabul*, 1989.

⁶² Hemi Kfir Artsy, interview with the author.

and not to America, 14 hours by plane from here.”⁶³ As Israelis attempt to distance themselves from the appearance of wholesale adaptation of Americana to the Israeli scene they are also attempting to move beyond a problem that has plagued hip-hop production in the United States, what Michael Eric Dyson has labeled “the question of black authenticity [which] haunts the culture . . . with artists adopting a stance as a thug or gangsta to prove their bona fides and their ability to represent the street.”⁶⁴ However, it can be argued that Subliminal’s success set a precedent in Israeli hip-hop whereby rather than the standard of authenticity being related to notions of “thug” or “gangsta,” as in the United States, it became linked to a concept of “Israeliness” as in previous iterations of Israeli music. DJ Alarm remarks on this very fact as he reflects on Subliminal’s success in bringing hip-hop into the Israeli mainstream: “On Subliminal’s second album [*Haor ve Hatzel*], the songs that were successful were very much about *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), the beautiful and strong together. The truly hip-hop songs weren’t really successful at all, but the songs that managed to get onto Galgalatz and to spread throughout the country were the songs such as the renewal of ‘The Flowers in the Canon,’ which was a song from the days of the *lahaqat tzvayit* (army band), and the songs that most Israelis want to hear are the ones that unite them, that give them strength and security.”⁶⁵ Yet the notion of hip-hop – an art form that began as a means of negotiating “the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression”⁶⁶ – serving as a tool of the state seems especially paradoxical. Sagol 59 comments on the irony of such an establishmentarian attitude becoming synonymous with hip-hop: “Subliminal was [never] representing a particularly peripheral or extremist perspective, quite the opposite. I think he represents the views of eighty

⁶³ Eyal Rob, interview with the author.

⁶⁴ Dyson, 15.

⁶⁵ DJ Alarm, interview with the author.

⁶⁶ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21.

to ninety percent of Israelis. Although people in the United States can't seem to understand how it is that a rapper sings patriotic songs that are supportive of the army, and the state, because it seems to go against what [hip-hop] is."⁶⁷ The Subliminal standard, which exerted a rather overt influence on hip-hop artists in the early 2000s, began to fade in prominence as the urgency of Israeli unity in the face of terror attacks faded. With the construction of the barrier between Israel and the West Bank in 2003, and the subsequent downturn in attacks within Israel, hip-hop artists willing to level critiques at the Israeli state began to emerge in more force.

These artists, led most prominently by the six-member hip-hop collective Hadag Nahash, tapped into a new ethos that had first emerged in the wake of the First Intifada through the efforts of a group of Israeli intellectuals who became known as "post-Zionists." This group sought to make public the alienation felt by Israel's minorities, with Palestinian-Israelis representing arguably the most prominent (and most overlooked) minority, and to create "a more inclusive definition of Israeli collective identity."⁶⁸ The post-Zionists, many of whom occupied positions of influence in Israeli academia and media establishments, were especially critical of the core tenet of Zionism, namely Israel's conception as a Jewish state, and acknowledged the inherent contradiction between this conception and the state's standards of liberal democracy.⁶⁹ It is in light of the post-Zionist movement that the lyrics and message of Hadag Nahash should be understood. Combining the sounds of rock, funk, and hip-hop, much as Shabak Samech had done prior to them, Hadag Nahash took their sound and message in an entirely new direction. Introducing a new nationalist narrative into the mainstream, one which reflected post-Zionist thought by subverting the predominant Zionist, exclusively Jewish narrative of Israel's founding,

⁶⁷ Sagol 59, interview with the author.

⁶⁸ Dov Waxman, *The Pursuit of Peace and the Crisis of Israeli Identity: Defending/Defining the Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 140.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

Hadag Nahash offered up insightful critiques of Israeli culture and national identity. Though Tel Aviv is often identified as the stronghold of the Israeli left and peace movement it is notable that the Jerusalemites of Hadag Nahash, rather than their Tel Aviv counterparts, introduced leftist critiques into the Israeli music mainstream. In some ways, the music of Hadag Nahash speaks more to the realities of southern Tel Aviv than the very artists living and producing music there.

Though the band formed in 1996, Hadag Nahash only truly entered the Israeli music mainstream in 2003 with the release of their popular single “Shirat Hasticker” (The Bumper Sticker Song). Penned by Israeli writer David Grossman, the song presented a subtle yet biting criticism of the Israeli state through an extraordinarily clever composition of popular Israeli bumper stickers, which juxtaposed the mixed messages prevalent in Israeli society and the underlying obstinacy of Israelis to shift away from the Zionist motif. The song opens with the dueling messages of the left and right Israeli establishment: “A generation of peace demands peace / Give Tzahal the chance to win / A strong nation makes peace / Let Tzahal cut [them] down.” The contradictions of the first verse continue in the second with lines such as “We don’t have children for unnecessary wars / The left helps the Arabs / [Menachem] Begin is good for the Jews / Take the Oslo criminals to court.”⁷⁰ It is only through the chorus that Hadag Nahash’s perspective emerges, cutting through the violence of the verses with the words “How much evil / Can one swallow / Father have mercy.” In an interview in the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, David Grossman explained that the song was intended to “express the noise, the vulgarity, the evil that we have in our lives,”⁷¹ yet the popularity of the song in Israel was predicated largely on Israelis’ ability to identify with certain bumper stickers and the message embedded in the lyrics – of tolerance above hatred and violence – was lost on many Israelis. As Harel Segev, a radio DJ for

⁷⁰ Hadag Nahash, “Shirat Hasticker” (The Sticker Song), on *Chomer Mekomi* (Local Material), Anana: 2004.

⁷¹ Sagi Ben Nun, “David Grossman Katav L’Hadag Nahash Shir M’Milim Stickerim” (David Grossman Wrote a Song for Hadag Nahash from the Words of Bumper Stickers), *Haaretz*, 11 May 2004.

Israeli station 90FM explains it, “Hadag Nahash is the only band that consistently criticizes the State that has managed to succeed [in Israel], but they do it with such style that you almost forget they’re being critical.”⁷²

Hadag Nahash’s Zionist critique takes a more overt form in the song “Gabi ve Debby” (Gabi and Debby), whose title references a 1950s television program that featured two Israelis traveling in time to witness the great moments of Israel’s birth. Here Hadag Nahash subverts the prominent symbols of Zionism and asserts that the founding myths of Israel are entirely disconnected from the daily realities of Israelis living in the 21st century. This disconnect between Israel’s past and present is best illustrated by an exchange in the song where rapper Shaanan Street meets Theodor Herzl. Shaanan first remarks on Herzl’s calm demeanor while “all of Israel is going up in flames” and then goes on to suggest that Herzl, the great Zionist thinker of the 19th century, is stoned. Shaanan’s lampooning of the Zionist figurehead continues as he tells Herzl of all the problems in Israel – the traffic accidents, the strikes, the quarter million unemployed, and the corrupt politicians – to which Herzl replies by offering Shaanan a pill that will allow him to inhabit the mythical Land of Israel which Herzl, in his writings, sought to reclaim for the Jewish people. The chorus of the song, “Hadag Nahash makes Zionist hip-hop!” affirms the subversive purpose of the verses.⁷³ The implication of “Gabi and Debby” is clear – the current generation cannot rely on founding myths and their figureheads in order to understand where Zionism is today.

In essence, the development of Israeli hip-hop fell along similar lines as previous art forms in Israel’s short history. As Ella Shohat notes in her book *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, “The ‘Palmach generation’ (or 1948 generation) view of literature as

⁷² Harel Segev, interview with the author.

⁷³ Hadag Nahash, “Gabi ve Debby” (Gabi and Debby), on *Lazuz*, Hed Arzi 64399, 2003.

educating for Zionist values and dealing with national concerns such as Aliya [immigration to Israel], the struggle against the enemy, and the pioneering settlements, was followed by the ‘state generation’ downplaying of such ideals.”⁷⁴ This new literary wave of the 1960s “bypassed Zionist collective ideals ... the role of art according to the ‘state generation,’ was to give the reader aesthetic pleasure rather than social insight.” Indeed, Israeli hip-hop followed closely the trend which Shohat points out in which the so-called “state generation” of authors and filmmakers maintained their apolitical stance “even when the fiction revolves around characters whose sociological being necessarily implies the problematics of the political scene.”⁷⁵ That is, even as Israeli hip-hop artists bought into an art form which they recognized as being one element of a political movement, they insisted on maintaining their ability to use it for apolitical purposes. Israeli hip-hop, in the post-Subliminal era, would not, by necessity, address the political realm of Israeli life.

What has caused the shift in Israeli hip-hop away from the political, the nationalistic, the Zionist? The Israeli historian and critic, Ilan Pappé, has argued that, “in the domain of mainstream music, few of Israel’s pop singers who imitate Western models would risk their relationship with the wider public by being ‘political.’”⁷⁶ Confirming Pappé’s thesis, Subliminal’s success stands out as an exception, rather than a rule, of Israeli popular music. Indeed, Israeli rappers who have attempted to capitalize on Subliminal’s particular brand of rap have come and gone with little fanfare. As Harel Segev explains it, “In Israel, music and politics do not mix. The Israeli listener will not accept political messages in mainstream music. Israelis like their music to be calm and relaxing and by entering into the political [artists] risk losing

⁷⁴ Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 203.

⁷⁵ Ella Shohat, 205.

⁷⁶ Ilan Pappé, “Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians Part III: Popular Culture,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 61.

listeners...if an artist is going to be political then it shouldn't hurt to listen to it – this is where Hadag Nahash has been especially successful.”⁷⁷ Eyal Friedman, aka Kwame, an Israeli rapper and former co-host of *Essek Shachor* (Black Business) Israel's first radio program dedicated to hip-hop, added that although he does rap about his *smallani* (liberal) politics, most artists won't do so out of sheer economic concerns: “Most artists don't make their political beliefs known because they are afraid. They are afraid to lose their audience because Israelis tend to be very extreme in their beliefs, they hang onto their beliefs and refuse to enter discussion...the moment you announce your beliefs, you've lost a huge part of audience that simply doesn't want to hear from you anymore and they've closed the door on you. Now, if this is how I support myself then who cares if I think this way or that, if I say so they'll ruin me, so why should I talk about politics?”⁷⁸ The trend of depoliticization of Israeli popular music is further reflected in the more popular musical trends of the moment. “In the last four or five years there has been a phenomenon of a resurgence of Jewish music. This trend of returning to the past of Israel and to our [Jewish] history.” Segev muses that Israelis appreciate being able to eat shrimp (a food typically banned by Jewish food laws, or *kashrut*) and still listen to Ehud Banai (a popular rock-and-roll artist who infuses his lyrics with religious references), so long as Banai does not attempt, “*Lakhzir otanu b'tshuvah*” (literally, to bring us back in repentance).⁷⁹ A second trend in Israeli popular music, that of muzika mizrakhit, speaks both to the depoliticization of Israeli music and its constant struggle with national identity as the genre borrows heavily from Israel's Arab neighbors and the history of Israel's Arab-Jewish citizens even as it avoids any mention of Israeli discrimination against both of these groups. According to Motti Regev, a professor at the

⁷⁷ Harel Segev, interview with the author.

⁷⁸ Eyal Friedman, aka Kwame, interview with the author, 2 September 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁷⁹ Harel Segev, interview with the author. The common Hebrew phrase, “*lakhzor b'tshuvah*” (to return in repentance), refers to one who answers the call of God, or becomes religious. Here Segev is suggesting that so long as religious singers are not attempting to convert their listening audience they can remain popular despite their largely secular Israeli listening audience.

Open University of Israel and co-author of *Popular Music & Culture in Israel*, muzika mizrakhit only became popular in Israel after being “diluted” – losing some of its more distinctly Arab musical qualities and adopting more of a pop sound.⁸⁰ In other words, it was only when muzika mizrakhit lost its edge of protest – the desire, on the part of Jewish-Arab émigrés to Israel, to become part of the social fabric by quite literally making noise – that the genre began to enter the mainstream. So too has Israeli hip-hop succeeded only to the extent that the genre, within Israel, is removed from its roots as a form of popular protest and instead focuses its energies on connecting to the world outside of Israel. For Regev, the importance of hip-hop in Israel is not as a form of protest, but it is rather as a medium through which to connect Israelis to the rest of the world, to assert one’s cosmopolitanism over and above one’s distinctly Israeli identity. Indeed, if Hadag Nahash’s music is any indication, it is this very cosmopolitanism that seems to be most prevalent in Israeli hip-hop today. The group’s sixth studio album, *6*, released in 2010 went gold in Israel with over 20,000 copies sold. Of the album’s twelve tracks, half of them are sung and rapped entirely in English. If Regev’s assertion that “only the use of Hebrew makes something authentically Israeli”⁸¹ holds true, then the growing trend of blending English and Hebrew in Israeli hip-hop (and Israeli rock as well) is indeed suggestive of an effort to create a hybrid sound that will not be immediately identifiable as Israeli. This new sound is motivated in part by economic considerations. When a gold album in the United States is awarded to a record that has sold 500,000 units, it’s difficult to disagree with the market appeal of opening up one’s English-speaking audience. However, there are other factors at work in the trend towards lyrical expression in English, the most prominent of which may be characterized as a harkening back to that tenet of Zionist ideology that Ella Shohat characterized as “the European ideal-ego which

⁸⁰ Motti Regev, interview with the author, 19 January 2011, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁸¹ Ibid.

fantasizes Israel as the prolongation of Europe ‘in’ the Middle East, but not ‘of’ it.”⁸² When rapper Shaanan Street sings “I’m just a little man / I come from the Middle East / I wanna be a free man / I ain’t no gangsta no”⁸³ in the chorus of the song “Little Man” on *6* he is giving voice to this tension, threaded throughout the verses of the song as well, between acceptance of his being in the Middle East, yet still wanting to be free of it as well.

Palestine: Music as Martial Art and New Forms of Resistance

As Israeli hip-hop moves away from its rootedness and Hadag Nahash makes “Zionist” hip-hop completely disconnected from Israel’s Zionist past, Palestinian hip-hop binds its practitioners and listeners closer to its nationalist past. With headlining shows across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and the United States, features in countless media outlets, from CNN to the BBC and Al-Jazeera, and several documentary films, among them *Slingshot Hip-Hop* (2008) and *Arutzim Shel Za’am* (Channels of Rage, 2003), the members of DAM have emerged as the natural voice of the Palestinian youth. Their success on both the local and international stage is predicated in part on their ability to connect the modern plight of the Palestinians not only to the antecedents of their historical struggle but also to the related struggles of minorities the world over. Yet the three members of DAM, all Israeli citizens and residents of Lod, do not conform to typical media representations of Palestinian youth from the West Bank and Gaza. While the prevalent nationalist narrative of the Palestinians – centered on issues of self-determination, citizenship and belonging, struggle against oppression, and a historical tie to the land – resonates with their experience as members of a Palestinian-Israeli minority within Israel, the trio has had to work to prove themselves as authentic representatives of the Palestinian struggle.

⁸² Shohat, 207.

⁸³ Hadag Nahash, “Little Man,” on *6*, Hatav Hashmini: 2010.

In “G’areeb Fi Bladi” (Stranger in My Own Land), on the group’s first studio album, *Dedication*, Tamer Nafar hints at this internal struggle when he raps, “The light of our great grandparents will never fade away / I’m a stranger in my own country but I thank God / That I’m still sticking to my culture, all of you can call us / ‘Renegades’ or the ‘Inner Arabs’ or the ‘Arabs of ’48’ / Whatever, we’ll keep the roots of Palestine till the end of time.” Nafar’s recognition of West Bank and Gazan Palestinians’ disparaging view of Palestinian-Israelis as “Arabs of ’48” – in essence, those who abandoned the Palestinian cause by becoming citizens of the Israeli state created in 1948 – evinces an understanding of his, and DAM’s, unique position vis-à-vis these Palestinians. Yet rather than yield to those Palestinians who claim their own struggle as somehow more authentic, DAM offers further rebuke by adding the voice and words of Palestinian poet, Tawfiq Ziyad, to the song breaks: “I did not betray my homeland / And my shoulders did not falter / I stood in the face of my oppressors / Orphaned, naked and barefoot / I carried my blood upon my palm / And did not let my flags lower / And sustained the green grass / On my ancestors’ graves.”⁸⁴ The sense of duality, being both Israeli and Palestinian and belonging to neither, is echoed by Suheil Nafar as he raps, “The occupation has written our destiny / which is, that the whole world till today is treating us as Israelis / and tomorrow Israel will continue to treat us as Palestinians.”⁸⁵

DAM draws out this connection to the history of the Palestinian presence in modern-day Israel further in their 2002 single “Hun Anwalidat” (Born Here). “Hun Anwalidat” plays upon several important nationalist themes, including “constructs of birthplace, roots, and ancestry...the most powerful indices of Israeli and Palestinian national discourse,”⁸⁶ even as the song’s

⁸⁴ DAM, “G’areeb Fi Bladi” (Stranger In My Own Land), on *Dedication*, Red Circle Music: 2006.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ David A. McDonald, “Carrying Words Like Weapons: Hip-Hop and the Poetics of Palestinian Identities in Israel,” *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology*, 123.

combination of lyrics in both Hebrew and Arabic speak to the ability of the group to transcend traditionally constructed in-groups. “Hun Anwalidat” is also instructive for its direct opposition to its musical antecedent – the Israeli entry to the 1991 Eurovision competition, “Kan Noladeti, Kan Bayti” (I Was Born Here, My Home Is Here).⁸⁷ The Israeli song, which became a national hit in the early 1990s and took its place among the canon of Shirei Eretz Yisrael demonstrates clear Zionist (“And after two thousands years, an end to my wandering”) and Israeli nationalist (“Here I drank water from the well, and I planted grass in the desert”) rhetoric. Where “Kan Noladeti, Kan Bayti” illustrates the forward-looking gaze of Israeli nationalism – “Here I was born, here my *children* were born” (emphasis added) – DAM’s “Hun Anwalidat” illustrates the importance of historical roots to the Palestinian narrative saying, “I was born here, my *grandparents* were also born here” (emphasis added).⁸⁸ Still, DAM’s two versions of the song, Hebrew and Arabic, are not identical and address very different facets of the Palestinian nationalist narrative, with much of their critique of this narrative delivered in the Arabic version. The complexities of Palestinian-Israeli identity are evident in DAM’s code switching⁸⁹ – even in the Hebrew version of the song the chorus is sung in Arabic – and their schizophrenic approach to song making, which has them alternatively adopting the voice of a Palestinian-Israeli addressing a Jewish-Israeli audience and the voice of a Palestinian addressing a strictly Palestinian audience. The video for “Hun Anwalidat,” which features residents of Lyd taking to the streets of the city in nonviolent protest, offers a clear indication of DAM’s desire to assert their presence and also pays homage to the video for the powerful “Straight Outta Compton” by N.W.A., which achieved much the same result for the African-American community of Compton

⁸⁷ McDonald, “Carrying Words Like Weapons,” 124.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸⁹ The term refers to the simultaneous use of more than one language in one’s speech. In the instance of DAM, the artists occasionally switch between Hebrew and Arabic in both their recorded and live performances.

in 1988. In other words, the song and video together carry a clear message – we’re here, and we’re not going anywhere.

Of course, not all of DAM’s work addresses the fault lines of Palestinian-Israeli identity and perhaps their most popular single, “Min Irhabi?” (Who’s A Terrorist?), is rather a reflection of Palestinian unity in the face of Israeli oppression. Though the song’s theme of resistance is perhaps vaguely reminiscent of early Palestinian resistance music, the lyrics address the dichotomy of “terrorist” and “victim” made particularly relevant in the wake of the Second Intifada. Though it is rapped entirely in Arabic, “Min Irhabi?” speaks directly to an Israeli audience and appropriates the epithet of “terrorist,” turning it against the Israeli state and the IDF. In the first verse, Tamer Nafar offers a searing critique of the persecution of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli state rapping, “You’re killing me, like you killed my ancestors / Go to the law, what for? / You play the role of the witness, the lawyer, and the judge / If you judge me, my sentence will be death / Your dream is to be above us, the definition of a minority / Your dream is that [we] the minority end up the majority in the cemetery / Democracy? In truth more like Nazism / You endlessly raped the Arab soul / Impregnated, she gave birth / And his name is suicide bomber / And then you call *him* the terrorist?”⁹⁰ The video for the song juxtaposes images of Palestinian children throwing stones with the terrorizing of Palestinians at the hands of armed Israeli soldiers, building upon the power imbalance highlighted by the songs’ lyrics.

DAM’s pointed lyrics and tone finds its counterpoint in another well-known Palestinian-Israeli artist, Sameh Zakut, aka Saz. Hailing from the Arab city of Ramle, also just outside of Tel Aviv, Saz believes that he and DAM share one goal – “to let people know how we feel.”⁹¹ The artists may differ slightly, however, in their approach to this goal. Saz regularly appears in

⁹⁰ DAM, “Min Irhabi?” (Who’s A Terrorist?), 2001.

⁹¹ Sameh Zakut, aka Saz, interview with the author, 29 August 2010, Ramle, Israel.

concerts with Israeli artists, both in Israel and the Palestinian Territories and abroad in the United States and Europe. Saz's more reserved message of mutual understanding through music comes from his belief that, "If you attack someone they're not going to sympathize with you. And that's the goal – not for people to feel sorry for you, but to sympathize with you. Being political is only one element of my identity...through hip-hop I can find commonality [with others] and remind people of our humanity, our hopes, our fears, our dreams."⁹² It is perhaps unsurprising that Saz should be labeled the "rapper for change" given that his hometown of Ramle has always been on the forefront of cultural and musical change. In the 1960s and 1970s Ramle had been the center of the alternative rock scene in Israel and had furthermore been a gateway between Israeli artists performing muzika mizrakhit and the Palestinian communities of Israel.⁹³

Saz's more cautious approach to overt Palestinian nationalist rhetoric combined with his overtures to his Israeli counterparts has mired him in what fellow Palestinian-Israeli artist Mira Awad calls "the plight of the 'good Arab.'"⁹⁴ According to Awad, a native of the Arab village Rameh in the northern Galilee, Israelis will often use the phrase, "You're one of us," to describe Palestinian-Israelis who denounce violence or otherwise deviate from Palestinian nationalist norms; in other words, those Palestinian-Israelis who are perceived by Israelis as outwardly privileging the Israeli part of their identities. As a representative of Israel, alongside the singer Achinoam Nini, in the 2009 Eurovision contest, Awad has been fairly accepted by the Israeli mainstream, however her background and politics occasionally place her at odds with this same group. "You're one of us' means that when we [Israelis] are speaking about Arabs it's not you that we're talking about, we're talking about 'those Arabs,'" explains Awad, "But I'm not always 'one of us' because there are moments when suddenly I'm 'one of them.' And it's

⁹² Saz, interview with the author.

⁹³ Horowitz, 18.

⁹⁴ Mira Awad, interview with the author, 11 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

between the roles of ‘enemy of Israel’ and ‘one of us’ that I live.’⁹⁵ In essence, Awad or Saz’s willingness to engage, in a positive sense, directly with the Israeli “Other” calls up issues of national belonging. The question of national belonging, being both Palestinian and Israeli and accepted by neither, crops up as Saz explains, “I am a Palestinian living in Israel with Israeli ID, but I don’t feel safe. The problem is politics, always politics. So you can’t say, ‘We’re not going to deal with politics.’ We have to deal with politics. On a daily basis there are no checkpoints, but in the long-term we’re screwed. I’m afraid that we can be kicked out if the Palestinians recognize the Jewish State and that the Palestinian leadership will forget about us.”⁹⁶

Saz’s experience straddling the Palestinian-Israeli divide has extended to his musical endeavors as well. In the early 2000s Saz released an album in France with Israeli singer Eti Castro under the title *Master Peace*, featuring songs such as “Here Comes Peace,” sung in Arabic and Hebrew, which spoke of Israeli’s and Palestinian’s mutual desire for peace. In 2006, Saz left the project and returned to Israel to continue his solo career. The organizers of the *Master Peace* project replaced Saz with an Arab female vocalist and rebranded the project as *Bnot Hashalom* (Daughters of Peace). According to Saz, for the Israelis who organized the endeavor “it was peace as business, and peace isn’t business. When you talk about peace it’s different for Israelis and Palestinians. Ten years ago the Israelis would say, ‘Peace is [for the Palestinians] to stop bombing Israel.’ And now there are no bombs so they call this peace, but for Palestinians this is not peace because in the West Bank there are still checkpoints and problems with the occupation.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Mira Award, interview with the author.

⁹⁶ Saz, interview with the author.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Adi Krayem of We7 offers another perspective on peace building activities – “I don’t believe in them.”⁹⁸ He is speaking, in particular, to Mira Awad’s vision of peace building through music. For Krayem, there is no way, “to fight hatred with love, as Awad does... ultimately, you do not build love. In the end, everyone hates you. Israelis hate you because you’re seen as Palestinian. Palestinians hate you because you’re seen as Israel.”⁹⁹ Moving past the possibility of peace through music, Krayem explains the goals of his music as simply a matter of being heard, “I don’t see my music as a political message because it’s not – our album does not change the wall [separating Israel from the West Bank] or the racist messages [in Israeli society]. We’re just artists trying to express anger that people can understand and relate to. This is hip-hop in its essence.”¹⁰⁰ This same message informs the chorus of We7’s “Sawt al-Samit” (Voice of the Silence), where Abeer Zinati sings, “We were told to feel fear / but our lives are just / our voices will heal us / the voice of the silence.”¹⁰¹ This message is echoed by Mohammed Maghrebi, aka Big M, one of the founding members of the hip-hop crew G-Town of the Shuafat Refugee Camp, “Our goal, it came from struggle, that was the beginning. We say we are the voice of the voiceless and we should keep on that and never forget the streets and we will keep on fighting until we get the change.”¹⁰²

Though Adi and Mohammed agree that hip-hop should represent the “voice of the silence” or the “voice of the voiceless” their perceptions of hip-hop’s essence – the feeling of anger and the desire (even need) to express it against the need to fight for change – are divergent. Still, both artists trace their involvement in hip-hop directly to its roots in the United States and to the African-American struggle against modern permutations of racism. Big M takes the

⁹⁸ Adi Krayem, interview with the author.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ We7, “Sawt al-Samit” (Voice of the Silence), *We7 Demo* [unreleased].

¹⁰² Mohammed Maghrebi, aka Big M, interview with the author, 17 January 2011, East Jerusalem, Israel.

affinity between himself and African-Americans one step further when he refers to himself as a “Palestinian Negro.” When asked to clarify what he means by his use of such a racialized term he elaborates, “It’s the similarity that I see between the Palestinians and the [Black ghetto]. How the cops treat us and how the cops treat them [African-Americans]. In America, it’s Black and White. Here, it’s Palestinian and Israeli.” Big M ultimately connects the experience of racism back to his reasons for using hip-hop as a means of fighting back. “I call hip-hop the Palestinian martial art. It’s a tool to fight with, it’s a path of resistance. Someone facing all the racism, walls, checkpoints, the violence and the drugs, it’s a way out.”¹⁰³

Even as the common thread of popular struggle unites Palestinian hip-hop artists throughout Israel and the Palestinian Territories, their disparate locales have a clear impact on their understanding of themselves as Palestinians. Big M draws a distinction between himself as a resident of the Shuafat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem (annexed to Israel in 1967) and those Palestinians who live within the borders of the Israeli state established in 1948. “Once we had a concert in Copenhagen and the poster had us billed as an ‘Israeli’ group. We canceled the show. We’re not Israeli, we’re Palestinian. Maybe if I was a ’48 Arab living in the north [of Israel] or living in Lyd, but I live in the middle of nowhere. Our refugee camp is the only camp inside Jerusalem – we have no nationality.” For Mohammed, who helped found G-Town in 2002, the lack of representation for the Jerusalem perspective in the Palestinian hip-hop scene. “I was waiting and waiting to hear someone talk about [Jerusalem] and no one did. No one was talking about what’s happening here ... Nowadays, if you listen to Palestinian hip-hop, you’ll find that there is the ’48 hip-hop, and the West Bank an Gaza, and Jerusalem. And every place has the things that they talk about.” Indeed, G-Town has become so popular within the refugee camp

¹⁰³ Big M, interview with the author.

that the very words “hip-hop” have become synonymous with the group itself. As Mohammed explains, “Some kids in the street, they think that rap music is called G-Town. They don’t even know that there’s something called hip-hop.”¹⁰⁴

Indeed, among the greatest challenges facing Palestinian hip-hop artists is the ability to connect to audiences outside of their immediate environment. This challenge is nearly as acute for Palestinians living inside of Israel and East Jerusalem as it is for those living in the West Bank and Gaza where Israeli border control has made it difficult to get the necessary equipment to build recording studios.¹⁰⁵ The East Jerusalem studio operated by the Palestinian band Sabreen, where G-Town records, and the small basement studio operated by We7 in Nazareth are two of the only places that cater specifically to Palestinian artists within Israel and East Jerusalem. Thus many Palestinian artists find themselves traveling abroad in order to sign record deals or else record their music in European studios in the hopes that their music will then be marketable abroad and back home. Discussing the difficulties of trying to navigate the prospects of signing with an Arab label and the benefits of signing with a European label Adi explains, “We are considered Israelis by the Arab world so we cannot get deals [with Arab labels]. If we record in Israel then we can’t have a Jewish producer’s name on the album ... There is a growing alternative scene around the Arab world, but Europe is the most open window – lots of Arab communities and peace agreements with Israel.”¹⁰⁶

Though his understanding of the international recording industry makes explicit the Israeli identity that the outside world has placed upon him (much as in the case of DAM and Saz), Adi asserts that he cannot coexist with Israelis as an equal because, “In order to coexist I first have to

¹⁰⁴ Big M, interview with the author.

¹⁰⁵ Moaiad Al-Qeisy, interview with the author, 14 January 2011, Dheisheh Refugee Camp, West Bank.

¹⁰⁶ Adi Krayem, interview with the author.

exist. If I, as a Palestinian, do not exist according to the Israelis, then how can we have coexistence?”¹⁰⁷ Still, attempts to utilize hip-hop as a bridge between dueling Israeli and Palestinian national identities within Israel are not uncommon. In the mid-2000s former Galgalatz DJ and culture critic Liron Taani founded *Festival B’Shekel* (Festival for a Shekel) with the support of Hadag Nahash’s Shaanan Street. The Festival, which takes place every year in Bat Yam (yet another “mixed” Tel Aviv sister city), Lod, and Jerusalem, brings together Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli youth to record and perform together. Taani’s popular hip-hop radio program, *Essek Shachor*, had established him as a figurehead of the Israeli hip-hop scene and in creating Festival B’Shekel he sought to utilize hip-hop “in order to bring out the hatred and anger to begin the process of understanding the root of the problems.”¹⁰⁸ The difficulties inherent in this endeavor became clear in the summer of 2010 when the Israeli news channel, Channel 2, did a piece on the program in Lod. In one segment from Channel 2’s coverage we see one of the Israeli participants recording his verse in the studio in front of all his peers, and Liron, when suddenly he enters into a rapped tirade about the Palestinians full of racial slurs and stereotypes directed at “the Arabs.”¹⁰⁹ The piece cast doubts on the effectiveness of hip-hop in countering the deep-seated hatred and attendant stereotypes that have divided generations of Israelis and Palestinians.

¹⁰⁷ Adi Krayem, interview with the author.

¹⁰⁸ Liron Taani, interview with the author, 29 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

¹⁰⁹ Channel 2, “Liron Taani Oseh Hip-Hop B’Lod” (Liron Taani Makes Hip-Hop in Lod), 13 August 2010.

Conclusion: Crossing National Boundaries

As a medium for uniting disparate groups within Israel, or uniting Israelis and Palestinians, hip-hop has met with relatively little success. A shared cultural medium has not necessarily translated into a bridging of cultures. Ironically, the global appeal of hip-hop has allowed Israeli and Palestinian rappers alike to travel the world, taking their music and message with them, but the potentiality for collaborations between these artists are fraught with more than simply artistic differences. To be sure, collaborations between Israeli and Palestinian artists do occur, and artists such as Sagol 59 have attempted to use hip-hop as a platform for dialogue: “For me, it was always important to show people that there can be a dialogue [through hip-hop]. To perform together [with Palestinians] – even if we’re arguing before the concert, or on stage – to be part of a panel and to answer questions ... Just to show people that at the very least there can be dialogue, that we can talk.”¹¹⁰

Ultimately, however, the power of hip-hop in both Israel and Palestine derives from its ability to connect Israelis and Palestinians to their respective national identities. It is the ability of hip-hop artists to renegotiate, or affirm, their relationship to prevailing nationalist narratives that defines the genre in Israel and Palestine. Furthermore, the emergence of a global hip-hop network allows for a wide dissemination of these narratives, whether or not Galgalatz provides them with airtime. Hip-hop artists are at once capable of transcending traditionally conceived spatial boundaries – through international tours, record sales, and the Internet – and of disseminating new nationalist narratives that reach beyond their own immediate subordinate group (i.e., Palestinian nationalist narratives that resonate with American youth, and Israeli nationalist narratives that resonate with a portion of this same listening audience). This is

¹¹⁰ Sagol 59, interview with the author.

particularly true of Palestinian hip-hop, which has capitalized on its understanding of struggle as a unifying force. Mohammed Azmi of Palestine Streets, a growing crew from the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in the West Bank, tells me that, “When I talk about myself, I’m talking about thousands and millions of refugees around the world ... [and] I’m not rapping for other Palestinian refugees, they know how it is to live as a refugee. I’m rapping for those who do not know.”¹¹¹

From local conflict to regional struggle to internationalized phenomenon, what are the global implications of the narrative hybridity of Israeli and Palestinian hip-hop? With the unfettering of national boundaries enabled through the Internet, the new nationalist narratives (and critiques) of Israel and Palestine are reaching increasingly larger audiences, audiences whose opinions and outlook on Israeli nationalism, Palestinian nationalism, Zionism, terrorist-victim dichotomies, and the continuing struggle between these forces will be shaped by their exposure to these Israeli and Palestinian voices.

Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the manner in which these new voices and songs will impact the current generation of listeners, they undoubtedly make up the soundtrack of resistance. Indeed, in many ways it is the Palestinian narrative, over and above the Israeli narrative, that is finding a home outside of the homeland. In much the same way that the music of Marcel Khalife and the musicians of the PLO resistance – bootlegged and distributed via radio and cassette from Lebanon to Syria, Egypt, and beyond – connected people across geographical divides, the music of DAM and other Palestinian artists has resonated far beyond their immediate locale. Indeed, this new voice of Palestinian resistance, emerging from within the boundaries of Israel, has spread to the Palestinian diaspora across the Arab world and

¹¹¹ Mohammed Azmi, interview with the author, 14 January 2011, Dheisheh, West Bank.

beyond, entering the consciousness of hip-hop fans across the globe to a degree far greater than that of Israeli artists. The efforts of artists such as DAM and Saz are also reflected by music produced by the Palestinian and Arab diaspora, a phenomenon that is not present (or at least, not prominent) in the Israeli diaspora.¹¹² Palestinian-American rappers such as Iron Sheik and Excentrik (Oakland), the Philistines and N.O.M.A.D.S. (Los Angeles) and other Arab-American artists such as California-based producer Fredwreck and New York-based spoken word artist Suheir Hammad have all lent their lyrics to the cause of Palestinian resistance and awareness.¹¹³ Perhaps this should not come as a surprise as the experience of the Palestinian diaspora, or exile, historically lent itself to the formulation of an “ideology of ‘armed struggle’ and ‘revolution’ [that] was asserted as a strategy to overcome processes of victimization and to transcend the state of dispossession, denial and statelessness.” In other words, struggle became a core concept of Palestinian identity,¹¹⁴ a fact reflected in the lyrics of Palestinian hip-hop artists within and without Israel.

In addition to the efforts of the Palestinian diaspora, the Arab world has continued to lend its voice to the Palestinian cause, although not always to the same effect as the songs of Abd Al-Wahhab. In a 1998 project funded by the Arab nationalist Saudi prince Walid bin Talal, over twenty Arab singers from around the Middle East participated in the recording of “Al-Hulm al-‘Arabi” (The Arab Dream). Made popular through its broadcast by satellite channels into homes across the region, the song represented a clear attempt to evoke the feeling of the Pan-Arab songs of past generations:

¹¹² In fact, one of the most outspoken supporters of the Palestinian cause in the U.S. hip-hop scene is the Israeli-American MC Invincible from Detroit. The absence of a pro-Israeli counterpart of equal prominence in the U.S. is telling.

¹¹³ Sunaina Maira, “‘We Ain’t Missing’ Palestinian Hip Hop – A Transnational Youth Movement,” *The New Centennial Review* 8 (Fall 2008), 165-166.

¹¹⁴ Helena Lindholm Schulz and Juliane Hammer, *The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2 and 121.

Generation after generation, will live on our dream
As what these generations say today will last our lifetime
[...]
That's our dream, for all our life
An embrace that gathers all of us together¹¹⁵

Despite, or perhaps due to, its popularity, the song was widely parodied across the Arab world.¹¹⁶

Indeed, Tamer Nafar noted the emptiness of pro-Palestinian song rhetoric around the Arab world in his remarks as part of a panel in New York City entitled “Hip-Hop Araby” where he noted, “Every time we have asked the Arabs for help they have given us songs. Always songs. We don't need any more songs, we need actions.”¹¹⁷ For Tamer and DAM action has meant leading protests against housing demolitions, spreading global awareness about the plight of the Palestinian minority within Israel, and lending their voices to support of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions of Israel) movement, which began in 2005, highlighting the movement in their concerts; many of the aforementioned Palestinian-American and Arab-American artists have also lent their support to this cause increasing awareness amongst hip-hop fans globally.

Ultimately, DAM's message is so persistent not only because its contents have found an echo in the musical productions of the Palestinian and Arab diaspora, but because the group has also managed to transcend linguistics boundaries. Rapping in Hebrew, Arabic, and English, code-switching according to their audience, the group has consciously extended their influence well beyond their immediate environment. As 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

¹¹⁵ Massad, “Liberating Songs,” 195-196 and Elliott Colla, “Sentimentality and Redemption: The Rhetoric of Egyptian Pop Culture Intifada Solidarity,” 338 in *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*.

¹¹⁶ Elliott Colla, “Sentimentality and Redemption: The Rhetoric of Egyptian Pop Culture Intifada Solidarity,” *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*, 339.

¹¹⁷ Tamer Nafar, “Hip-Hop Araby: Political Expression and Popular Culture” (panel discussion, New York University, New York, NY, May 1, 2010).

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."¹¹⁸ In contrast, Israeli rap, even at its most inclusive, tends to be aimed primarily at a Hebrew-speaking audience, with the exception of the latest trend towards rapping in English. Though numerous Israeli rappers have attempted to rap in Arabic, most notably Shaanan Street of Hadag Nahash, their efforts have generally seemed to be more of a novelty than an earnest attempt to connect with an Arabic-speaking audience. Indeed, even Eyal Rob had to admit that the Palestinian appropriation of hip-hop culture came off as more naturally authentic than the Israeli attempt at the same: "It's funny because if we go to the place where hip-hop emerged from – the ghetto – then the Palestinians are most significantly representing the definition of 'ghetto' in Israel. If in the United States it was about the color of one's skin, here it's one's nationality ... all the things that transform hip-hop into something 'real' is for the Palestinians a day-to-day reality."¹¹⁹ Sagol 59 echoes this sentiment: "You know, when a guy from a group like Ramallah Underground raps about how he wakes up in the morning and sees the barrel of a tank pointed at his window you can't argue with him. This isn't sloganeering, this is what he sees. So it's much more powerful than all this 'justice and peace' [talk]."¹²⁰

Perhaps then Palestinian hip-hop's transnational success can be attributed to the ability of these rappers to align their struggle with the struggle of others around the world through an "oppositional youth subculture,"¹²¹ a subculture that has yet to fully embrace Israeli hip-hop. For Sagol 59, who has performed with both DAM and Saz, the lack of critical voices in Israeli hip-hop is dire. Yet it is also a matter of necessity – the perceived need to silence critical voices in

¹¹⁸ David A. McDonald, "My Voice Is My Weapon," 372.

¹¹⁹ Eyal Rob, interview with the author.

¹²⁰ Sagol 59, interview with the author.

¹²¹ Maira, 170.

order to present a unified front. As Sagol explains, “For a young nation fighting for its very existence since its inception, there is an urgent and perpetual need for a cohesion of ideological lines in order to create a consensus of thought that embraces us all and helps ‘us’ to effectively fight enemies ‘out there.’ In Israel, even art, and within this broad category popular music specifically, is recruited on behalf of the ethos of Israeli society and unconditional support of state institutions while all criticism, doubts, and profound questions are locked away in the far corners of our consciousness.”¹²² In essence, Sagol is pointing to the creative limitations placed upon Israeli artists as a necessary component of being part of Israeli society. Sagol’s bleak assessment regarding the bounded nature of Israeli artists’ criticisms of the state and adherence to state-manufactured narratives suggests that ultimately, in an interesting inversion, Palestinians’ statelessness has enabled them more freedom of expression. Their narrative has also garnered them more sympathy throughout the world, as Sagol put it: “This is a war of narratives, it’s a war of stories, and theirs [the Palestinians’] is much forceful than ours [the Israelis]. [Their story] is easier to sell – just like it was easier to sell our story in the ‘40s and ‘50s.”¹²³

Does the medium matter? Why is the absence of protest in Israeli hip-hop so remarkable and can Israeli practitioners really call themselves “hip-hop” without remaining socially conscious? The answers depend on how one perceives the culture’s roots. It also depends on the extent to which Israeli artists, who have served at least three years in the armed forces and thereafter will serve thirty years in the reserves, can disentangle their identities from the Israeli state apparatuses

¹²² Khen Rotem, “B’Yisrael Adayin lo Ma’arichim et Hahip Hop” (In Israel, They Still Don’t Respect Hip-Hop), *Achbar Ha’ir*, November 6, 2009.

¹²³ Sagol 59, interview with the author.

through which they have been shaped.¹²⁴ For the state permeates their forms of expression too, as indicated in the relationship between Galgalatz and the IDF.

In part this phenomenon can be explained by what Regev calls “the lack of a protest culture within Israeli society.”¹²⁵ Obviously, this rule does not hold true for all of Israeli hip-hop – nor all Israelis – however the small coterie of Israeli rappers who are using the medium in order to communicate a transformative message or awaken Israelis to the discrimination within Israel against minorities do not have enough force behind them to start a real movement. At least not yet. Perhaps emerging hip-hop crews such as the Petah Tikva locals, Prodox, comprised of two Ethiopian-Israelis and one Ashkenazi Israeli, might begin to shift the genre by representing a more subaltern identity not often seen or heard in Israeli music today. As cultural critic Nirit Ben-Ari has noted the Ethiopian community within Israel has largely replaced the lower social rung that was formerly occupied by the Mizrahi community in Israel.¹²⁶ Ravid, aka Natchi Natch (which means “white” in Amharic), explained to me that Prodox’s latest album can best be characterized as “Brooklyn circa 1995 ... just straight hip-hop.” Ravid explained that this is the sound the group was going for because this was the hip-hop that spoke to them the most – perhaps an indication that Israelis of a new generation can indeed see themselves in some of the same American hip-hop figures that Palestinians do. Ravid also takes a different perspective on why Israeli rappers aren’t talking about the conflict anymore – not because it’s polarizing, but because it’s played out. “Around the time Subliminal released his second album there was a lot of talk about the conflict, so now MCs are afraid to talk about it because it’s been hashed out

¹²⁴ Shohat, 220.

¹²⁵ Motti Regev, interview with the author.

¹²⁶ Nirit Ben-Ari, “Muzika Etiopit B’Galgalatz?” (Ethiopian Music on Galgalatz?), *Yediot Negat*, 18 March 2011.

already ... it's reached this point where you're afraid to talk about it because people will say, 'Another song about the conflict, whatever.'"¹²⁷

Reflecting on the future of hip-hop in Israel, Eyal Rob also offered an optimistic note: "Things are starting to move here and I think people will stop talking about what was, and will start talking about what can be. As long as you're speaking about what was you'll always be right, from your perspective, but to speak about what can be you need courage and you have to go in directions that are less sure or known."¹²⁸ For Rob, a group like System Ali, comprised of Russian-Israelis, Jewish-Israelis, and Palestinian-Israelis who all live in the same neighborhood in Jaffa, is the future of Israeli hip-hop and, more poignant still, a sign of a shared future.

To the extent that both Israelis and Palestinians have adopted hip-hop as a useful means to given expression to their identities, within the confines and constructs of both societies, their end goals are markedly different and reveal a fundamental difference between the self-perception of Israelis and Palestinians. The Israelis adopted hip-hop as a Western art form – a Western means whose end is a greater closeness or linkage between the Western world and Israel via the medium of hip-hop. Israelis recognize the inherent connection between hip-hop and the African-American experience as rap music is known as *muzika schora* (literally, Black music) in Hebrew; however, they do not necessarily see this connection as an imperative to engage with all facets of this historical bond. For Israelis, the appropriation of hip-hop represented an entirely new direction for Israeli music – the borrowing of a sound that was not rooted in the lived experience of Israelis either as diasporic Jews prior to the founding of the state of Israel or as Israelis as such. That is, unlike the construction of Israeli rock, or even *muzika mizrakhit*, the cultural trappings of hip-hop had no precedent in the fabric of Israeli society.

¹²⁷ Ravid Plotnik, aka Natchi Natch, interview with the author, 24 August 2010, Tel Aviv, Israel.

¹²⁸ Eyal Rob, interview with the author.

For the Palestinians, hip-hop is uniquely linked to its origins as “Black Noise,” as Tricia Rose titled her seminal work on the art form. For Palestinians, hip-hop is an art form that speaks for an oppressed minority to the rest of the world and links its practitioners and audience via its message over and above the medium. Palestinians see themselves as the rightful inheritors of a predominantly African-American art form. This is apparent not only from the manner in which Palestinians naturally link their struggle for statehood and against Israeli occupation and oppression to that of the African-Americans in the United States, but also from specific linguistic cues embedded in their speech and music. Of these cues the most remarkable is the tendency, on the part of Palestinian rappers in particular, to refer to themselves as the “niggers of the Middle East,”¹²⁹ a reference that viscerally connects the experience of discrimination in the United States to that experienced by Palestinians. As Moaiad Al-Qeisy, a young rapper from the Dheisheh Refugee Camp, explains, connecting hip-hop to the African-American struggle in the United States and on to the Palestinian struggle not only justifies the use of the art form for young Palestinians, it also leads to buy-in from the older generation: “People in the camp are very traditional and rap comes from outside so they [the older generation] would give me problems. They don’t like the clothes, they don’t think it’s Palestinian. I tell them that in the U.S. there were problems between the Whites and Blacks, and the Blacks used this medium to explain their position and to reduce tension and violence.”¹³⁰

The different interpretations of hip-hop on the part of Israelis and Palestinians speaks to a clear difference between their end goals in adopting the medium as a means of expression. For Israeli hip-hop artists, their intention often centers around the desire to create a sense of normalcy in the midst of chaos. For Palestinian hip-hop artists, the intention appears to be an

¹²⁹ Big M, interview with the author.

¹³⁰ Moaiad Al-Qeisy, interview with the author.

attempt to create a sense of themselves. Ultimately, both Israeli and Palestinian find a shared purpose in hip-hop that maintains the divisions between them – legitimating narratives in rhyme.

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