Modalities of Space, Time and Voice in Palestinian Hip-Hop Narratives

The Palestinian rap group DAM enjoys critical acclaim as a public voice of the anti-occupation struggle. Armed with in-depth understanding of both Palestinian and Israeli culture on account of their Palestinian ethnicity and Israeli citizenship, DAM has emitted caustic critiques of Israeli military actions while serving as ambassadors of non-violent resistance through workshops, interviews and documentaries. As a result, DAM has risen to prominence abroad, even as its three members (Tamer Nafar, Suhell Nafar and Mahmoud Jreri) participate in some aspects of the cultural boycott of the State of Israel. In November 2012, the group produced a music video in tandem with the organization UN Women for the song, 'If I Could Go Back in Time', which queries gender violence in Palestinian culture through an emotionally-charged representation of an 'honour killing'. Within weeks of the song's release, the Internet erupted with criticism from activists and anthropologists who charge that the song is anti-political and that it paints a sensationalist picture of Palestinian violence and misogyny. Critics point to UN patronage, absent female agency, failure to mention the occupation, and alignment with western categories of violence as the song's ideological shortcomings. Yet the song's musical, lyrical and visual material invokes the tropes and themes of time, space and voice that organize Palestinians' daily lives. In the process, DAM effects a nuanced examination of the complexity of the gendered dynamics of family life in the context of a broader political struggle, and the online discussion reveals how easy it is to misunderstand DAM's work. This paper engages a close reading to explore the affective modalities evoked in this challenging song, arguing that DAM's turn away from overt resistance material and towards a reflexive subjectivity has exposed them to occasional critique from the resistance movement even as the song encapsulates the elements of the resistance struggle. I argue that the domestic politics of 'home' is especially loaded in an occupation context, and that the song caused an uproar because it engages a set of alternative narratives that contrast citizenship, violence and home-making through the fraught medium of female bodies.

Introduction

Among the Arab world's musical genres, Palestinian hip-hop enjoys an especially prominent and favourable media platform. Among Palestinian rappers, one group dominates scholarly study and media fascination. For those reasons, DAM's long-awaited second album, *Dabke on the Moon*, was released to a flurry of scrutiny and debate in November 2012. Perhaps to the musicians' surprise, though, the album attracted attention not only for its ground-breaking material nor its record-breaking sales, but for a political firestorm over its lead single, accused initially by critics online of overlooking the key element of Palestinian lives, the occupation. The debate calmed down within a few months, but that moment of eruption was fascinating for scholars invested in the mobilizing power of hip-hop, because it enacted a negotiation of boundaries and taboos for politically active musicians, raising substantial questions about the convergence of gender relations and political violence in an intractable conflict.

The song, 'If I Could Go Back in Time',[1] tells a provocative story of an 'honour killing', a term queried by some feminist and legal scholars of the Middle East. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2011), for one, argues that this constructed category of gender violence evokes disgust from western audiences, and justification on the part of western leaders for taking control of populations (see also Abu-Lughod 2002). The song explores subjectivities of violence and agency, and after its release, a debate ensued online in *Al-Jadaliyya* between DAM and anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod with activist Maya Mikdashi, who criticize DAM for presenting gender

[1] "DAM featuring AMAL MURKUS - If I Could Go Back In Time," YouTube, accessed 19 December 2017, www.youtube.com.

violence through a skewed, Israeli lens, decontextualizing family life from the wider problem of occupation.[2] Some audiences found 'If I Could Go Back in Time' provocative because it paints a negative portrait of the status of young women within the Arab family and decouples it from the wider political reality of power relations.[3]

At the same time, the rather extraordinary song presents musical, lyrical and gestural cues that undercut the accusations of de-politicization, and indeed, I will demonstrate that what audiences were reacting to is a political reality that connects the domestic to the national directly. I will argue that the song presents a picture of 'home' life, both in the domestic and the national sense, which destabilizes the common narrative of 'resistance' (queried by Mahmood 2005: 9) because it tells a story about the nation through the everyday politics of home-making. Therefore, I will present musical evidence that DAM's accomplishment in this provocative song is the self-conscious construction of a reflexive subjectivity that challenges the mainstream representation of strictly vertical power relations prevalent across Palestine scholarship (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). I will present the case study of the most internationally recognized rap group, often lauded for its resistance stance and support of the Palestinian cause (McDonald 2009b and 2013, Swedenburg 2013) as a way of understanding the delicate political position that 'home' occupies for the '48 Palestinians – citizens of the State of Israel who descend from the Palestinians who were not expelled in the events of 1947-1949 (alternative labels: Israeli-Palestinians, Palestinian-Israelis or Israeli Arabs) – and the gender dynamics that support or subvert a resistance framework. The song's critiques reveal uneasiness with the '48 Palestinian positionality in terms of home, belonging, and narratives of exclusion.[4] Ultimately, the song's audience objected to the portrayal of a Palestinian woman as a citizen and a victim, when victimhood is chiefly experienced through the lens of, and at the hands of the brutality and inconveniences of occupation.

In this chapter, I conduct a close reading of 'If I Could Go Back in Time' to establish why audiences reacted with such passion to the song's release. I will argue that Palestinian artists face such pressure to present their material within an exclusively resistant framework that even material that fits the framework draws negative attention if it isn't overtly critical of the occupation. I will further argue that the resistance framework is so ingrained in DAM's work that the song's main subtexts constitute the core themes in Palestinian scholarship of space, time and voice, to which the song's musical, lyrical and gestural characteristics are symbolically allusive references. First, from the gestural/visual imagery in the video, I examine the setting of the young woman's murder in an olive grove. Second, from the lyrical perspective, I discuss the concept of looking back in time, the main theme of the song's chorus, and argue that DAM engages the nostalgic views of the past in the

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[2] For Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi's article, see: "DAM featuring AMAL MURKUS - If I Could Go Back In Time," YouTube, accessed 19 December 2017, www.youtube.com. For DAM's response, see: Nafar, Tamer, Suhell Nafar and Mahmoud Jrery (DAM). "DAM Responds: On Tradition and the Anti-Politics of the Machine," *Jadaliyya*, accessed 19 December 2017, www jadaliyya.com.

[3] A great deal of research about the now-secure genre of global hip-hop transpires in online media, and so while DAM does not seem to have suffered a loss of concert audiences (I most recently saw them perform in London in November 2014), the controversy and negative publicity online reveals a trend by which reputation and concert ticket sales offer contradictory evidence of what constitutes critical and commercial success.

[4] Compelling expressions abound that describe adeptly the general state of being for '48 Palestinians, of residing in one nation and identifying with another, such as: "I'm from here, but I'm not from here" (Kassem 2010: 97), and "Living and not living in the State of Israel" (Nusair 2010: 76).

subjunctive mode. And third, from the musical perspective, I mention the interplay of DAM, rapping the song's verses, with female singer Amal Murkus singing the chorus. Finally, I will demonstrate that while the song's national-allegorical connotations are consistent with Palestinian resistance iconography, the song failed to meet an imagined solidarity benchmark because it portrays the private home space as equally violent despite the absence of state actors.

DAM and the Burden of Over-representation

DAM's critical and commercial achievements are so well documented in the popular press[5] and in scholarship (Massad 2005, McDonald 2009b and 2013, Swedenburg 2013) that they risk overexposure on both fronts. For over a decade, the group has dominated international media depictions of Palestinian performing arts, partly since they are considered a powerful voice of resistance, and partly because they are easier to access than performers who live in the Occupied Territories who might not be as media-savvy. DAM's international prominence was further bolstered by the 'Arab Spring',[6] since they have long mediated the Israeli-Palestinian conflict informally. The medium contributes to the ease of circulating DAM's work, since the genre known sometimes as 'global hip-hop' is enjoying scholarly attention as the transnational community-building style of urban youth (Fernandes 2011, Nooshin 2011). In recent years, hip-hop's undercurrent of collective activism has prompted DAM to connect with Palestinians everywhere, rather than exclusively with their local population. In short, DAM has served for some time as a symbolic, if unexpected figurehead for a resistance movement, the group being especially effective since its members understand Israeli society from the inside.

All three members of DAM are '48 Palestinians, or Palestinians citizens of Israel.[7] There are approximately 1.7 million '48 Palestinians in Israel, where they speak Arabic as a first language and are fluent in Hebrew; they operate a separate school system;[8] and they vote in national elections.[9] This state of affairs, whereby '48 Palestinians participate in the Israeli public sphere but publicly feel ambivalent to the State of Israel's exclusive apparatus, leads to tension with other Palestinians and with the Israeli establishment (Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010: 5).

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5 The first page of an Internet search reveals the following reference in the popular press from the UAE and the USA: Ritman, Alex. "Palestinian rap group DAM reach for the Moon," The National, accessed 19 December 2017, www. thenational.ae; "Pioneering Palestinian Rappers DAM Drop Second Album," *XXL Mag*, accessed 19 December 2017, www.xxl.mag.com.

6 When the song came out, scholarship about the "Arab Spring" was still developing, so for lack of extensive analysis, Palestine was often considered the paradigm in the popular media: Swedenburg, Ted. "Hip-Hop of the Revolution (the Sharif Don't Like It)", *Middle East Research and Information Project*, accessed 19 December 2017, www.merip.org.

7 The majority of this population resides in the Galilee or in Greater Tel Aviv, with residents of East Jerusalem counting as permanent residents but not citizens. Three small, disparate parties (that sometimes unite on a joint list) represent the population in parliament, although Druze and Bedouin maintain their own separate voting patterns.

8 This is a characteristic of Israel's fractious population: there are four separate school systems in Israel, broken down along ethno-religious lines. Ultra-Orthodox, religious Zionist, secular, and Arab children all study (and socialize) separately.

9 Since some '48 Palestinians boycott general elections, their collective political power remains low relative to their demographic power.

DAM's three members – brothers Tamer and Suhell Nafar and friend Mahmoud Jreri – thus belong to a population often characterized, in terms of diaspora, as living on their land but in a foreign state (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005: 5).[10] That unusual positionality, whereby a minority population lives on the territory of its collective memory and imagination, but under a government that is insufficiently representative, presents a unique counter-example to many of the examples of migrants, pilgrims and diasporas that we find across diaspora literature. Technically, the people that I describe in this chapter live 'at home', although they often identify with the nationalist struggle of their kin in the West Bank, Gaza, and abroad (Shulz 2003: 74). '48 Palestinians are sometimes conceptualized as a sort of stepping-stone between Israelis and Palestinians, since they live within internationally-recognized boundaries, but paradoxically, the State to which they might openly express loyalty is primarily characterized by its lack of infrastructure and recognition as a political entity. Therefore, the in-between status of '48 Palestinians is the crucial identifying characteristic that renders them liminal figures in both Israeli and Palestinians narratives of home and belonging (Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010, Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005, Shulz 2003).

Whether the in-between status is expressed as a benefit or a challenge most commonly depends on the descriptor's perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Plenty of literature has been devoted to the infrastructural prejudices that exclude '48 Palestinians from the Israeli power structure because they are Arab ((Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010, Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005, Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007, Shultz 2003), and yet, '48 Palestinians occasionally find themselves being labeled collaborators by Palestinian authorities as well (Lang 2005: 79).[11] Meanwhile, in my own fieldwork among ethnic minorities in Tel Aviv-Jaffa since 2008, I have encountered an impulse among certain progressive Israelis and researchers to frame '48 Palestinians not as potential enemy combatants like occupied or exiled Palestinians, but as Israeli ethnic minorities like Ethiopians or Russian-speaking immigrants who inhabit alternative religious spheres and voting blocs in Israeli society.

While holding a recognized travel document provides a degree of security for '48 Palestinians, theirs is a ruptured citizenship. Nafar, Nafar and Jreri grew up in the city of Lydd (Lod in Hebrew), a 'mixed' (Arab/Jewish) city that is fragmented and economically stratified along ethnic lines. As the members of DAM recall (McDonald 2009b, Salloum 2008, Swedenburg 2013), their neighbourhood growing up was infested with drugs, crime, police harassment and a discriminatory urban planning policy. And yet, DAM's members can travel abroad without the hassle and exclusion that refugees experience, and they have access to decent schools and hospitals, resources that set them apart from refugees living across the Levant (Abu-Lughod 2010: ix, Khalili 2007). The much-documented second-class status in Israel of '48 Palestinians (see above), on the one hand, and the ambivalence of living under an

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[10] This will be a common thread throughout this chapter, and scholarly literature about being a '48 Palestinian deals with it directly. Individual chapters as well as complete volumes (Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010) examine being "displaced at home," "refugees at home," or "excluded at home."

[11] In contrast to the positive connotation of the term "collaboration projects" in Israeli music (see Brinner 2009), the term "collaborator" is undesirable as a label in the Occupied Territories; authorities in the West Bank and Gaza often execute people accused of co-operating with the Israeli government .

often-hostile government,[12] on the other, yields a state of being in which daily life is embroiled in the nuance of living in Israel and holding loyalty to the Palestinian cause.

The result of this ambiguous status, a condition of 'necessary politics' (Tawil-Souri 2010: 139) whereby basic aspects of daily life are politicized, manifests itself in the complex web of names applied to '48 Palestinians, and through which one expresses political allegiances. The term '48 Palestinian explicitly frames the events of 1948, the establishment of the State of Israel and the mass expulsion of Palestinians as the central node of group identity (see Khalidi 1997). On the other hand, the term often used by Israelis, 'Israeli Arab', implies an othering of ethnic minorities.[13] A third term sometimes used by academics and progressive Israelis, 'Palestinian-Israeli', implies a fractured collective self through the construction of a binary opposition. The 'necessary politics' that accompanies naming (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005: 111) reveals the daily experiences of living peacefully under a government in conflict with one's kin group. This necessary politics undercuts the widespread idea that '48 Palestinians are privileged in their ability to participate in the democratic process, providing a vivid contradiction to David McDonald's assessment of the mimetic (affective) versus kinetic (embodied) experience of occupation (2009a).

One reason that scholars and journalists focus so heavily on DAM might be that many aspects of DAM's existence carry this necessary politics that requires political engagement and interpretation. As mentioned frequently in the literature, the name DAM carries multiple meanings, each corresponding to an audience (McDonald 2009b, Swedenburg 2013). The first, in Arabic, means 'eternal', implying a primordial Palestinian connection to the land. The second, in Hebrew, means 'blood', which likewise carries connotations of kinship affiliation, but also an implication of violence. The third, a hip-hop acronym, situates DAM in a global underclass; it stands for 'Da Arabic MC', which draws on the sociolinguistic particularities of hip-hop vernaculars (Terkourafi 2010: 3). Even the name of the town of their origins, Lydd, engages the conflicted dynamic of DAM's status. Referred to in Hebrew as Lod, Lydd is a site of close scrutiny from Israeli historians because of the forced emptying of the town and nearby Ramle in 1948 (Morris 2008: 287), and even the term 'mixed' town exemplifies the institutional neglect of '48 Palestinians in Greater Tel Aviv (see Kassem 2010: 105). In this sense, the basic information that classifies DAM's work and origins requires judgment of '48 Palestinian civic subjectivity and engages life narratives and interpretations of history.

I will not dwell on DAM's past work, which been covered in detail by David McDonald (2009b and 2013). However, I mention their best-known songs to highlight what I perceive in 'If I Could Go Back in Time' to be a shift towards reflexivity. DAM earned critical attention for the first time in 2002 with the song, 'Min Irhabi' ('Who's the terrorist?').[14] The song focuses on resistance and opposition, with DAM denouncing the methods of the Israeli military by turning the classic western tropes of Arab terrorism against the Israeli military apparatus. They do this through the imagery of violence and checkpoints, and through their table-turning discourse of 'you're the

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[12] '48 Palestinians do not serve in the military; the erstwhile foreign minister ran on a platform of forcing them to sign loyalty oaths to the state in 2009; and the Israeli political right often discusses "land swaps," or trading Arab villages for Jewish settlements in a final status agreement.

[13] However, many Israelis would argue that this is a common type of ethnicity marker for Jewish migrants as well, who are described by their "Edah" or national origins.

[14] "Min Irhabi-DAM," YouTube, accessed 19 December 2017, www.youtube.com.

terrorist.' In their early work, DAM examined problems within Palestinian society as well, and have been vocal advocates for women's rights.[15]

Equally, DAM's songs often engage the contact zone between Palestinian and Israeli society, and some of their most exciting songs challenge nationalist narratives, such as the 2004 song 'Born here'. In 'Kan Noladeti',[16] the song's Hebrew iteration (there is an Arabic version as well, which Eqeiq 2010 and McDonald 2009b examine in depth), DAM raps in Hebrew and subverts classic Zionist clichés as a way of expressing a subversive bi-focal subjectivity that looks both to Israeli and Palestinian society for audiences and critiques. The Hebrew version, commissioned by Shatil, a progressive organization in Jerusalem, makes claims to contested land on the basis of primordial connections. In the Arabic version, DAM employs salty language and imagery of molestation at the hands of the repressive state apparatus (Althusser 1970), whereas the Hebrew version subverts a classic neo-Zionist Eurovision anthem also known colloquially as 'Born here'. While the revised song certainly 'resists', perhaps more importantly, it negotiates the liminal space DAM's core audience inhabits – Palestinians who understand the nuances of Israeli cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997, Stokes 2010). DAM's imagination and audacity to perform a song like 'If I Could Go Back in Time' emanates from the understanding of what it means to live 'at home' yet not to feel 'at home'. They are, therefore, able to transition seamlessly between the domestic space (where they speak Arabic) and the national space (where they often speak Hebrew) as complementary sites of agency.

'If I Could Go Back in Time'

Overall, DAM's early work fits into the popular, though ultimately conventional framework that Swedenburg criticizes (2013) of resistance material that presents a monolithic anti-occupation agenda. Swedenburg's criticism makes the important point that Palestinian society's problems might run deeper than the occupation, but a resistance agenda remains the top priority for the Palestinian solidarity movement today. The agenda aligns DAM with the interests of global hip-hop, a movement frequently characterized as a subversive, 'oppositional practice' (Rose 1994) that emerged from urban poverty and technological innovation in opposition to state institutions (Baker 2011, Durand 2002, Nooshin 2011). Just as African-American rappers in the 1970s and 1980s opposed the American institutions that discriminate against young black men such as the police (Chang 2007), Palestinian rappers criticize the chief agents of their daily troubles, the Israeli military. The main themes of global hip-hop, and specifically a conscious message of political activism and enfranchisement, all appear in DAM's early work, as do the main indices of global underclass status: resentment of second-class citizenship, feeling of persecution at the hands of the repressive state apparatus, pressure to demonstrate machismo or protect female kin, and a sense of advocating for a better society rather than dropping out of it or joining a gang (see DAM's earliest work, *Stop selling drugs*). In interview, the widely-cited Iranian-British rapper Reveal (Mehryar Golestani - see Nooshin 2011 for a profile of this politically engaged rapper who is heavily involved in the Iranian hip-hop scene) explains that DAM bear this

[15] '48 Palestinian rap is well-represented by female rappers, such as Abir Zinati and Safa Hathoot.
[16] "DAM, 'Born Here', Hebrew/Arabic with English Subtitles," YouTube, accessed 19 December 2017.

burden of representation whereby audiences expect that they will adhere to a fixed set of political ideologies and communicative strategies:

> When you have extreme conditions of human rights abuse or geographical restrictions, and you have people who seem to be champion of the cause, people, they don't see them as people...People will elevate them to an extreme level...They see people - DAM - as sort of heroes...The false expectation is built on belief and stereotyping. (Interview, London, 12/7/2013)

Reveal makes the point that rappers represent a constituency for whom they are considered spokespeople, and the responsibility of narrating peoples' lives and problems can leave them vulnerable to controversy.

Dabke on the moon's lead single, 'If I Could Go Back in Time', is framed, as its title implies, as a narrative in reverse of a young woman's life and death. The story is told in three verses, each of which is rapped by a different member of DAM while the musician/activist Amal Murkus (also '48 Palestinian) sings the chorus between each verse. The verses narrate, in the third-person, the experience of a young woman who is murdered by her father and brother for trying to flee an arranged marriage to her cousin (see Abdo 2004). The discussion in the popular press defines this as an 'honour killing'. In the chorus, Murkus sings, presumably in the voice of the woman, her last thoughts or, based on the video's framing, perhaps from the afterlife, and what she would do if she could live her life over on her own terms. These dual mechanisms in the chorus of time and voice constitute a compelling statement on who has the right to speak for women in general, or to tell the Palestinian story in particular (Nusair 2010).

I was especially taken with the accompanying video's visual imagery, which has upset disparate audiences, as inseparable from the song's sonic characteristics. In the video, we find a paradox: that Amal Murkus sings a first-person reflection in the chorus of the protagonist's life, but in the video, a young actress plays the story's central character. There is a schism here that, in the video even more than as an audio track, might seem to speak on behalf of an ostensibly voiceless young woman, robbing her of agency and the ability to position herself in the story (Sayigh 2007: 149-150). Whereas in the song's audio renditions, she is relegated to the chorus, in the video she is taken out altogether as a participant, left as an observer of her fate, which is especially difficult for some audiences to accept because her fate is death at the hands of her family rather than soldiers (see Humphries and Khalili 2007: 211). Following her death at the song/video's beginning, we watch her life unfold in reverse: the first verse describes the conditions of her murder, the second the circumstances of her unsuccessful escape plan, and the third the context of her upbringing in which she was robbed of personal agency, and punished when she tried to assert herself in decisions. As the video ends, the expression 'Freedom for my sisters', the name of another DAM song, flashes across the screen, while the credits state that the video was funded by the organization UN Women.

This brief description contains most of the song's controversial elements. The three main issues that have come out on message boards and in scholarly and activist discussions are the characterization of the framing crime; the voice and agency of the protagonist; and the ironically paternalistic outside funding for the video. These debates can be found easily online, and they briefly overshadowed the release of *Dabke on the Moon* in November and December of 2012. The overarching critique was that the trio failed to position itself as sufficiently committed to resistance, and DAM's liminal, reflexive positionality left some audiences confused. As I examine

the song's visual, melodic and gestural imagery, I will argue that the video is especially disruptive, because it engages a seemingly less politicized reading of the lives of '48 Palestinian women than an obvious resistance discourse provides.

The questions of agency that the song raises are especially provocative in the Palestinian context in the wake of the 'Arab spring', a set of socio-political processes in which hip-hop was credited as a mobilizing agent. Hip-hop around the Arab world today often focuses on the protection of women, reframed in rap terms as disrespect by boyfriends. The group Arabian Knightz's 2011 song 'Sisters'[17] sympathizes with Arab women who are verbally abused by western men. The song features Shadia Mansour, a London-based Palestinian Christian known as the 'first lady of Arab rap' who, like Amal Murkus, sings beneath the melody in the song rather than rapping. The trope that young Arab women are defiled by outside influences and need the protection of their brothers is widespread in contemporary Arab hip-hop, and it is the principle of *sharaf* politics that DAM reject in 'If I Could Go Back in Time'. In both 'Sisters' and DAM's own song 'Freedom for my Sisters' (2006), female protection and emancipation (two seemingly opposing concepts) are equated with ethnic/national protection/emancipation. We recognize in 'Sisters' an impulse to promote ethnic self-confidence rather than female emancipation, while DAM's point out in 'Freedom for my Sisters', that women carry the burden of occupation because they experience the physical pain of labour (a resistance activity), linking resistance to women's rights.

Yet whereas 'Freedom for my sisters' implies the equation of female emancipation with collective political power, political realities collude in the othering of women in subtle ways even by agents who intend the opposite. For example, considering DAM's work from the same period, one notices a dynamic playing out that sidelines women's issues when self-determination returns to the foreground. The DAM song 'Mah li huriye', ('I don't have freedom') uses a simple pronoun switch to demonstrate that political issues are more often kept separate from women's issues. Contrasting 'I don't have freedom' with 'Freedom for my sisters', - the narrative 'I' being operatively male – makes the case implicitly that women's voices are frequently abrogated to the resistance struggle. The titles and content of these songs encapsulates a dynamic of gender relations and civil rights in the Palestinian resistance effort (Sayigh 2007: 150),[18] whereby Palestinian men are granted freedom by Israel and women are granted freedom by Palestinian men (Nusair 2010: 81-82). DAM's juxtaposition of civil rights and women's rights as equal concerns in the resistance movement highlights the crucial role women have played in the Palestinian resistance movement (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005: 127). So in addition to being chiefly responsible for expanding national borders through procreation (Yuval-Davis 1997: 46) and quantitative nation-building (see Shafir and Peled 2002), women participate in resistance activity frequently (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005: 112). It is, therefore, possible that 'If I Could Go Back in Time' upset audiences precisely because the song pointed out to audience a disparity between political contribution and domestic autonomy. Yet the song connects the political 'I' to the domestic 'she' through a converging of women's bodies and voices, and portrayal of national space.

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[17] "Arabian Knightz – Sisters ft Isam Bachiri and Shadia Mansour," Youtube, accessed 19 December 2017, www.youtube.com.

[18] The gender parity mentioned previously is exclusive to '48 Palestinian rappers. Across the Green Line in the West Bank or Gaza, everyone's civil rights, and thus perhaps, all the more so women's rights, are far more curtailed.

Palestinian Women's Voices

In the scholarly literature, Palestinian women are imagined to inhabit multiple sites of occupation (see Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010 especially), and DAM's song can be alternately read as sharing the female perspective or co-opting female agency. How one interprets the song depends on how one interprets this set of dynamics in Palestinian life. DAM's promotion of women's causes is well-documented, yet a critique of agency and voice is undeniable. In 'If I Could Go Back in Time', the protagonist's story is mediated through the male, third-person voices of Tamer Nafar, Suhell Nafar and Mahmoud Jreri. In an ironic twist, the process of ascribing agency to young women is curtailed, with DAM making the protagonist the object, rather than the subject of the story. Moreover, since the narrative content airs the domestic problems of a vulnerable population – domestic problems that have historically manifested themselves politically (Humphrey and Khalili 2007: 223) – activists and feminist critics advise that DAM's members are in no position to impose judgement on women's rights and experiences while depriving them of voice.[19] While this argument's merit seems self-evident in the song's vocals, the protagonist's voice is far from silent in 'If I Can Go Back in Time', and through examining the song's melody, sung by Amal Murkus, I consider the explosive 'necessary politics' of touching on *sharaf* (see Abdo 2004 and Lang 2005), the basis of the song's central event.

When the song was first released, I was surprised by the selectivity of the online critiques by respected luminaries. As already mentioned, activists and bloggers charged DAM with ignoring political realities, and depriving women of a voice in the song. This charge emanates from the verses' third-person narration, and the ambiguous status of the singer Amal Murkus in the video (the protagonist's role is outsourced to a younger woman whose voice we never hear). But for the moment, it might be useful to focus on the song itself rather than the video, and should we listen to the song without watching the video, we would hear Amal Murkus through the entire song.

To remove the song's lyrics from discussion, we can hear several melodic voices through the song. First, Murkus sings the chorus in the first person. Second, the members of DAM rap the verses. Third, beneath DAM's rapping, Amal Murkus sings the main motive (melody) of the song through the verses in an ornamented and melismatic style, sometimes accompanied by an oud and/or a violin. At the risk of reading too much into DAM's intentions, when I listen to Amal Murkus singing the skeletal melody, I interpret the wordless singing as a voice trying to make itself heard (see Humphries and Khalili 2007, Kassem 2010 or Sayigh 2007), which is itself the dynamic DAM's members intend to replicate in their storyline. It requires only a minor effort to consider what the female voice is doing within the song and why, and Murkus's voice collapses the seemingly stark divide between the male/rapped/past tense verses and the female/sung/present tense chorus, and I am surprised that the song's critics failed to mention it.

At the same time, I wasn't surprised that the female/first-person/singing voice might be ignored in a rap song, since gendered hierarchies dictate musical production and interpretations (McClary 1990). In a hip-hop song, rapping might be considered the primary (male) activity, and singing might be considered a backup (female) activity (Rose 1994). Indeed, DAM employ the technique of male verse rapping

[19] This position is dominant on the Internet, even among feminist activists.

alternated with female chorus singing to great acclaim in 'Born Here' with fellow '48 Palestinian musician Abir Zinati. Zinati sings in Arabic while DAM raps in Hebrew, a code-switching technique that lends itself to novel nuance in its political message (Terkourafi 2010: 3). This formula worked in 'Born Here', so DAM use it again in 'If I Could Go Back in Time', but in this case, their audience cannot accept the song structure because the structure highlights, rather than covers up, the multiple contexts of women's voices being silenced.

It seems that critics have two main problems with the song's gender dynamic, which equate to one common issue. First, they say that DAM have robbed the protagonist of her voice; and second, they argue that DAM present unfairly a set of domestic practices intended to infuriate those who abhor Arab culture (Abu-Lughod 2002, Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2011). In effect, they object to the conflation of the personal (domestic) with the national (political). In both of these criticisms, commentators ask who has the right to speak on behalf of Palestinian women, whose movement might be controlled by their male family members, who in turn are often denied freedom of movement by state authorities.

While an intensive debate over *sharaf* politics, that is, the politics of disparate domestic disputes that culminate in the planned murder of a female family member, or an activity sometimes translated as 'honour killing', is beyond the scope of this discussion, DAM's representation of this set of behaviours is very much at issue among critics (see Abu-Lughod 2002, on the one hand, for an explanation of 'salvation rhetoric', or Lang 2005 for an in-depth discussion of domestic violence that sets aside issues of power relations, on the other). Like the vocabulary ascribed to DAM's national origins and hometown, the naming of this set of domestic behaviours reveals a 'necessary politics' agenda. This embodied, symbolic set of domestic behaviours reveals a set of power hierarchies within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict beyond assumptions of occupiers and occupied, with domestic life revealing multiple layers of power and powerlessness.

The domestic behaviour coded as 'honour killing' transpires rarely – among some Palestinians and Druze – when a (usually) male member of a kin group kills a female member in order to preserve the family *sharaf* (honour) (Lang 2005: 57). Sharaf resides in the male members of the kin group, which they maintain through the purity of the female members. Sharaf can be lost, and a family disgraced, when a woman gives birth outside of wedlock; elopes with a member of her religious group or from outside; when she refuses to marry a person chosen by the family; or when she is defiled through premarital sex or rape (ibid).[20]

The imagery of defilement is applied to the land frequently in Palestinian literature and political speech (Humphries and Khalili 2007: 223), linking the domestic to the political in the case of family possessions. The use of feminine language for women and land, and the pressure on men to preserve the purity of both, makes public and private, or domestic and national, difficult to differentiate. This means that a discussion of sharaf politics on DAM's part subjects them, transitively, to criticism of their resistance bona fides. In this circle of domestic-national linkage, DAM is pressured not to veer far from an excoriating rejection of the occupation. In this light of the ubiquitous blurring of domestic and national language, the charge that

[20] Isabelle Humphries and Laleh Khalili explain that even threat of rape in 1948 was an effective tool that emptied Palestinian villages; the threat to male kin was strong enough to dictate mass flight (2007: 210).

'If I Could Go Back in Time' is apolitical seems to be an unnecessarily narrow interpretation.

DAM's previous work on resistance material focuses on uncovering subaltern voices (Eqeiq 2010: 67) and engaging the oppositional state of being for '48 Palestinians. As we see from the particular public debate over 'If I Could Go Back in Time', though, co-option of the female voice and body has made audiences uncomfortable, in part because the concerns of Palestinian women work in parallel, rather than in unison with the resistance effort (Nusair 2010: 91). The complexity and privacy of sharaf politics, the role of women in the resistance movement, the connection between civil rights and gender rights, the equation of the domestic and the political in nationalist art all make for a song in which discussion of domestic life takes on political connotations (Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010: 12-13), but in which public questioning of domestic norms reads as betrayal of the resistance cause. However, the gendered language that codes the defilement of land as domestic violence reveals a language of propriety that invokes the domestic and the national equally.

The Concept of Time and the Burden of History

To many activists, resistance is still so much the goal of popular art that developing a subjectivity detached from current affairs is impossible (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007: 7). And yet, the song's title, and its framing device, focused on the concept of time, implies consideration of perhaps the most intractable issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely how to interpret and narrate the past. The lyrical focus on time engages with the conflict implicitly, but beyond that, DAM proposes a reflexive engagement with the historical baggage of being '48 Palestinian.

Palestinian populations, separated by citizenship and borders, tend to self-identify by dates. '48 Palestinians remained within the State of Israel's boundaries after the Nakba (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005:3),[21] while '67 Palestinians came under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza following Arab military defeat (Shulz 2003: 39). Dates define groups in exile as well: 1982 was the defining moment for Palestinian refugees in Beirut (Sayigh 1996: 150),[22] while 1990 marked the dispersal of the refugee population in Kuwait (Shulz 2003: 66).[23] Numbers, particularly dates, and the concept of time most of all, mark a chief form of collective self-reflection for Palestinians because the dates become associated with myths and ethno-symbolic narratives of self-determination (Jayyusi 2007: 109). In DAM's song, the title expression, repeated in each chorus, demonstrates what the young female protagonist would do 'If I could go back in time'. The expressive affect here of nostalgia and regret, expressed in the subjunctive mode, makes a bold statement at the personal or the collective level (Jayyusi 2007: 118). The lyrics repeat across the three choruses:

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[21] I use the Palestinian terminology here for expedience and clarity, without engaging a personal political commentary on the contested interpretations of historic events.

[22] See Morris and Black (1991) for an explanation of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, during which time the Israeli military turned a blind eye to the massacre of (official statistics unavailable) perhaps several thousand refugees by partisan fighters in the Lebanese civil war.

[23] After Yasser Arafat expressed support for Saddam Hussain in 1990 when he invaded Kuwait, the Palestinian population in Kuwait was expelled (Lang 2005: 223, fn 28).

‘Lu araja bez-zaman / Kuntu barsum, baktub / Kuntu barghani’

‘If I could go back/ In time/ I’d draw, write/ I’d sing’

Amal Murkus sings each subsection for two four-beat measures, and the line of lyrics is embellished (the chorus lasts sixteen measures and we hear it three times). This is not the only explicit reference to ‘going back in time’, though; in Suhell Nafar’s first rapped verse, he explains the mechanism of storytelling in reverse, and in the third verse, Tamer Nafar mentions the young woman looking back on a life in which she never defended herself. Here is a composite picture of a look back that is full not of nostalgia for a better life, but regret that the young woman’s life had been pre-determined against her own interests.

This line is sung and repeated in the subjunctive mode, which, as Lena Jayyusi explains, is a widely used apparatus in Palestinian memory to indicate regret (2007: 118) An apparent subtext, and perhaps an undesirably reflexive one for audiences who see Palestinian rap chiefly as a form of resistance, is a querying of historical entanglements. DAM editorializes that the young woman is not at fault in the circumstances leading up to her murder (she is killed for resisting), but she nevertheless considers what she might have done differently. This twist on looking backwards is standard in Palestinian fiction. In the classic stories of the 1970s (roughly what we might consider a Palestinian canon), the protagonist is often an imperfect figure, and a fatal flaw can often be ascribed to the events of 1948 (Abu-Lughod and Sa’di 2007: 13). The narrative tone of DAM’s song sounds far more like the remorseful tragedy of Palestinian fiction than the bravado and boasting that determines a rapper’s skill and status (Rose 1994).

We might probe further what DAM means by looking backwards. The story itself goes back to the young woman’s birth, which is a familiar literary device, since Palestinian stories commonly use 1948 as a protagonist’s year of birth, such as in the classic ‘Return to Haifa’ by Ghassan Kanafani (1970).[24] Since 1948 is an indelible date for Palestinians, that often serves as an end-point for a narrator going back in time. Amal Murkus sings that, if given another chance, the protagonist would ‘draw, write, sing’, with no word about blame or violence. The absence of explicitly political material here is somewhat stark, since it leaves listeners/viewers to draw their own conclusions. The song’s lyrical content is so suggestively affective and nostalgic, in contrast to earlier songs like ‘Min Irhabi’ (‘Who’s the terrorist’), that we might reasonably credit DAM with presenting an alternative perspective on an intractable conflict. In this case, it is rather understandable why DAM might come under fire to those for whom introspection seems contrary to the urgency of protest. Controversially, DAM engages reflexively in a contested history, and tracking the group’s own temporal trajectory engages the ‘necessary politics’ (Tawil-Souri 2011) of ’48 Palestinian life. Yet the mechanisms of going back in time, storytelling in reverse, and considering the full lifespan assert persuasively that DAM seek a framework for ascribing agency to Palestinian lives.

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[24] In the story, Said and his wife travel to Haifa to visit their old house after the border has been opened in 1967 to allow relative freedom of movement to Palestinians. Said cannot go through with the visit, and when his wife rings the bell, she recoils in horror as she realizes that the baby who was left behind in the chaos of 1948 is fully grown, standing in front of her wearing an Israeli military uniform.

The Olive Grove as Political and Liminal Space

When I saw the song's video for the first time, I was, like much of DAM's audience, struck by the poignancy of the violence against the young protagonist. I was equally moved by the location of the murder and the song's first verse. As the story is told backwards, we witness the young woman's murder in an olive grove, where her brother shoots her and her father digs a grave. As we move through the scene, her father and brother drag her from the car trunk, and then (as told in reverse) they snatch her from her bed. The complete visual imagery of the first verse, therefore, comprises the olive grove and the family home. This imagery might immediately resonate with Palestinian and Israeli viewers (see Eqeiq 2010 or Regev and Seroussi 2004 for discussions of imagery in Israeli and Palestinian music). I read this understated imagery of landscape and house to be an apparent expression of Palestinian nationalism (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007: 14).

To set aside the image of the olive grove for a moment, the dual image of land and house is a complementary set of images that pervades both Palestinian and Israeli music and literature. Palestinian poetry and folk music are replete with descriptions of the land and the nation's connection to it, whether in the form of a Zarif-at-tool dabke or a Mahmoud Darwish poem like 'al-Hathihi 'ard' ('On this land').[25] The primordial impulse of the land 'belonging' to the Palestinian people is supported by an artistic commitment to natural imagery (Humphries and Khalili 2007: 226). Likewise, in Israeli literature and popular songs (see Regev and Seroussi 2004), descriptions of the nation and the family gathered together under the commitment to building a house on the land is a classic nationalist trope. The land-house imagery thus inhabits an exalted symbolic position in the starkly similar nationalist tropes of Israeli and Palestinian self-determination.

Returning to the imagery of the olive grove, DAM presents as the opening to this video one of the classic images of both the resistance struggle and the peace process. The olive branch is a widely-recognized biblical metaphor for peace that is incorporated today into vernacular speech, but more importantly, the olive tree has come to symbolize the Palestinian resistance in DAM's previous work (see Eqeiq 2010: 58), especially as applied to military conflict. Over the decades of the occupation, the Israeli military has become increasingly bold in its expropriation of Palestinian farmland for ostensibly security-related purposes (Shultz 2003: 107), making agricultural access increasingly strained. As a result, Palestinians often refer to settler and military activity in gendered language of sexual violence, especially the explicit terminology of rape. In this respect, the national space of the olive grove is conflated discursively with the private space of the home, and the olive tree comes to stand in for a mother, daughter or wife. In the West Bank context especially, the olive tree is the home and the nation, in the senses of symbol, metonymy and livelihood.

In addition to the symbolic power of the olive grove in Palestinian land disputes (Bardenstein 1999: 148-157), the location of the young woman's murder represents the imagery of the liminal stage known as the rite of passage. Indeed, not only does Victor Turner (following Arnold Van Gennep) invoke the forest as the liminal space where transformative change occurs (Turner 1967, Van Gennep 1907), but much of the understanding of how the forest works as liminal space comes from

[25] Trees, seeds, and other plants that grow from the earth dominate Palestinian and Israeli imagery (Humphries and Khalili 2007:226, fn 21).

ostensibly familiar landscapes. The Hebrew Bible, and particularly the early books of Genesis and Exodus, is filled with the narrative device of a protagonist in transition fleeing to the forest or desert to experience an epiphany and return to society prepared for leadership.[26] A viewer who has studied the Bible from a literary perspective (as much of DAM's Israeli audience has) would be familiar with this literary device, and would recognize it as a multi-valent image of transition and personal conflict. DAM no doubt chose the olive grove because of its political and literary meaning in Palestine, but moreover, the song's imagery draws on the liminal state of being a '48 Palestinian. The video connects with Palestinian narratives of longing for autonomy on the land (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007: 14) and Jewish narratives of the forest as site of personal growth.

All of these images, of the young woman being taken from her home to certain death; of the father digging her grave in an olive grove; and of the family being separated by violence, resonate with Palestinian populations all over the world as representative of recent Palestinian history (Shulz 2003: 2). Indeed, if these images were associated with resistance material, or if the young woman's assailant were an Israeli soldier, the images would carry immediately recognizable national-allegorical connotations (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007: 12-13). However, the category of violence, specifically of domestic violence between Palestinians, increases the affective power of audience objections to DAM's resistance positionality. We might note that the olive grove goes unnoticed in the many critiques online, which take issue with DAM's political positioning.

The dual setting of 'If I Could Go Back in Time' in an olive grove and in the family home indicates a primordialism/kinship theme to the song's narrative tension. The representation of space – an issue that matters above all in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – indicates that DAM is acutely aware of both the national-allegorical acuity of visual imagery and of the liminal-symbolic power of gestural cues. Suhell Nafar, Jacqueline Reem Salloum and UN Women, the video's producers and directors, have created a video that expresses the multiple layers of vulnerability for '48 Palestinian women so subtly that even well-informed audiences have failed to recognized the video's political agenda. Space – the home and, equally, the olive grove – is a crucial element in articulating the symbolic power of female fertility in Palestinian self-determination. The defiling of the olive grove by family, rather than military violence, is a powerful commentary on the linking of personal tragedy and political disempowerment through the gendered language of sexual violence.

Conclusion

At the moment of its release, 'If I Could Go Back in Time' provoked a reaction that was consensually deemed disproportionate, in part because of the disparate interpretations applied to it. In one, a young woman is murdered by her family without recourse to justice. Another reads the song as an apologia for western categories of Arab stereotypes whereby history and politics elude fictional accounts of peoples' lives. A third borders on the national-allegorical, and puts the song forward as source material for navigating the complex set of living conditions for '48 Palestinians. The central act's location in an olive grove; the nostalgic look at pre-

[26] See Genesis 22 for the liminal motif as applied to Abraham; Genesis 28 as applied to Jacob; or Exodus 3 for Moses.

history; and the denial of the young woman's ability to procreate and sing for herself present the moral problems facing Palestinian decision-makers about how a future state will deal with land, the complex history of violence leading up to establishment of the state, the expanding population, and relations with 'cousins' across the border (see Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005). Indeed, I interpret this song as an ingenious rendering of the national-domestic problems facing Palestinian self-determination.

The song's musical, lyrical, and gestural/visual characteristics index the ruptured, oppositional subjectivities that conflict with each other in the context of '48 Palestinian domestic life. Each element addresses the main issues that Palestinians face in their daily lives: negotiating their interpretation of history (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007: 21, Jayyusi 2007: 118), dealing with a troubled/occupied space (Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010), and claiming for themselves a voice that is often ignored (Abu-Lughod 2010, Humphries and Khalili 2007, Sayigh 2007). I argue that the critics of this song, iconoclasts who think that rap doesn't deserve scholarly attention, or committed supporters of the resistance movement who argue that it is impossible to decontextualize aspects of Palestinian life from occupation, have overlooked a narrative linking domestic life to nationalist narratives. In the context of a national struggle where land disputes converge with fertility statistics, the house and tree, the backwards narrative momentum, and the trapped female voice amount to a perhaps irreconcilable rupture between citizenship, resistance, and home-making.

Over the course of DAM's career, the group has varied the object of its critique, from the State of Israel's military machine, to specific Israeli policies and cultural tropes that deny Palestinian claims to the land, to Palestinian society itself. DAM has disturbed audiences by articulating social problems that decouple domestic life from the occupation. But in a sophisticated reflexivity that is clearly, if perhaps even reductively reliant on a resistance discourse, DAM sheds the identity of a purely oppositional entity, and has bound the domestic to the national effectively. DAM has highlighted domestic problems, and perhaps implied that those problems might be an additional obstacle to self-determination. In the process, DAM has added a layer of complexity to a context of warring essentialist nationalisms. For a population that is torn between supporting the self-determination of one government while living precariously under another (Kanaaneh and Nusair 2010), 'If I Could Go Back in Time' offers a rather spectacular portrait of the constant tug between land, house and nation for a female population doubly demoted in the vertical power relations of Israel-Palestine.

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