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# Part 2

## *Identity*

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## Identity, Diaspora, and Resistance in Palestinian Hip-Hop

*Randa Safieh*

### The Inception of Palestinian Hip-Hop

Since the late 1990s Palestinian hip-hop has developed as a national and cultural phenomenon. Politically charged hip-hop, with its spirit of resistance, has become the soundtrack for pro-democracy movements around the Arab world, from the streets of Palestine and Tunisia to Cairo. Palestinian hip-hop artists today are recounting the Palestinian cause and struggle via their art, telling the story of a people whose existence and history has long been denied and neglected. Many Palestinian artists today are creating politically charged music as a significant factor in the construction, preservation, and assertion of their identity and as a tool for resistance against Israeli oppression, while also paying respect to, and drawing upon, traditional Palestinian musical influences. This essay investigates the role of hip-hop in the assertion of a Palestinian cultural identity among artists within Palestine and the diaspora, through a study of their themes and messages emerging in their music.<sup>1</sup>

### The Development of Palestinian Hip-Hop: From the Bronx to the West Bank and Back Again

The hip-hop scene in Palestine is primarily divided into three locations: Gaza; the West Bank, including Jerusalem; and the area that became Israel after 1948. DAM, a three-piece collective from al-Lid (Lydda) in pre-1948 Palestine, are pioneers of the Palestinian hip-hop movement, beginning in 1998. The movement

did not emerge without struggle: economic limitation, travel restrictions, and even opposition from Islamic groups have all posed obstacles for hip-hop artists. Palestinian sound artist and hip-hop producer Basel Abbas describes the Arab hip-hop scene as being as “diversified (or fragmented) as Arabs themselves are. It expresses as much frustration, polarization and diversity as Arabs themselves enjoy and suffer” (2005, 42).

The Palestinian American hip-hop artists discussed in this essay are Will Youmans, who performed as a hip-hop artist between 2000 and 2006 under the stage name the Iron Sheik; Excentrik, a hip-hop producer/composer; the Philistines, a three-piece collective consisting of two Palestinian American brothers, Ragtop and B-Dub, along with Cookie Jar, who is of Filipino origin; Fredwreck, who has obtained huge commercial success as a hip-hop producer, having worked with artists such as Xzibit, Snoop Doggy Dog, and Mack 10; and one non-Palestinian outfit, the NOMADS. The NOMADS started their hip-hop career as a Syrian-Sudanese duo (Omar Offendum and Mr. Tibbz) and have collaborated with Palestinian hip-hop artists expressing a trend within Arab American society to identify with the Palestinian cause as the root of America’s collision course with the Arab world.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948, approximately eight hundred thousand Palestinians were expelled from their homes and have formed a global diaspora. Part of those relocated to America, which is now home to a large Palestinian community of more than three hundred thousand spread across the nation.<sup>3</sup> Approximately half of the Palestinian population in the United States arrived in the late 1960s after the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.

Ideologically, Palestinian hip-hop, both in Palestine and in diaspora discuss many of the same subjects. Arab Americans (Arabs who were born or raised in America and usually have obtained American citizenship) convey their identity as Arab Americans and also as minorities through their artistic names, music, symbols, and political activism (Youmans 2007, 1). What distinguishes Arab American hip-hop from other genres of hip-hop is that it blends hip-hop culture with Arab American identity. There is, however, an important distinction between Arab American hip-hop and Palestinian Americans in hip-hop. Arab American hip-hop refers to hip-hop created by Arab Americans who express their identity as Arab Americans through the use of the Arabic language, symbols, images, and Arabic musical influences (4). Palestinian American hip-hop emerged as a conscious way of establishing an alternative identity formation. Young Palestinians living in America are also “faced with two Americas, white and black, many young Palestinians now identify more with the latter” (Weir 2004).

## Hip-Hop and “Glocalization”

Hip-hop has been appropriated in different contexts to represent the causes adopted by ethnic minorities. It has also been employed as a tool for youth protest and to

make statements about sociopolitical concerns. Sociologist Roland Robertson uses the term “glocal,” a combination of “global” and “local,” to describe the ways these two entities interconnect (Mitchell 2001, 11). The terms “glocal” and “glocalization” are eminently applicable to the Palestinian hip-hop movement, in which its artists have created their own local versions of hip-hop, drawing on influences from urban American hip-hop as a result of globalization. It may seem a little ironic that Palestinian youths resort to a transatlantic cultural phenomenon for this purpose, and the accusation of Americanization has sometimes been leveled against them from more traditional schools of thought. In fact, globalization and the global distribution of hip-hop are part of the reason why Arab youth have chosen hip-hop as an outlet for their self-expression. “Black culture” has now become a “global culture” by different communities appropriating and responding to its style, music, and image (Bennett 2000, 137). Palestinian youth have modified and adapted African American hip-hop to express their own disillusion with the social and political climate in which they live. Hip-hop, as a culturally mobile genre of music, is constantly being redefined and reinterpreted as it is appropriated by various different ethnicities and nationalities around the world. It has become evident that while hip-hop is a form of cultural expression for youth of African descent, it is also applicable and transferable to various marginalized and oppressed cultures and ethnicities who relate to the issues of African American hip-hop. Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop artists have not only made use of African American hip-hop imagery but have also adapted it to express their own concerns, frustrations, and specific localities. Tamer Nafar of DAM asserts: “We are political, social and anti-commercial—it basically boils down to ‘protest rap.’ But our songs also have philosophical, poetic and even ironic overtones. In addition to being influenced by hip-hop, we’ve learned from Arab poets how to use metaphors. Instead of stealing them from books, we develop our own images using our street slang” (Franzen 2007).

## Hybridized Identity in Palestinian American Hip-Hop

The desire of a minority community to redefine itself can lead to the construction of hyphenated identities. The term “hyphenated identities” was developed as a way to describe “the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity” (Bhabha 1997, 58). Palestinians of the diaspora have a constant reminder that they are separated from their homeland and that they are a minority in their host country. Perhaps this explains why many minority youths use their status as ethnic minorities in a positive manner by celebrating their culture. Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes addresses it thus:

The emergence of “hyphenated identities” has been hailed as a force undermining the oppressive identity-producing apparatus of the nation-state, and putting into play new, inclusive, and open-ended notions of belonging. No

longer can one safely assume that globalization produces cultural homogenization or acquiescence to the political status quo, as proponents of the cultural imperialism hypothesis once argued. (2003, 303)

Hyphenated identities are a form of hybridity, a subject much researched by post-colonial studies, that deals with cultural exchanges between race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Beard and Gloag 2005, 84). Through the formulation of hyphenated identities, minority communities are resisting being defined by others. Hybrid cultural forms can strengthen the sentiment of national belonging and can signal “empowerment and cosmopolitanism” (Stokes 2003, 306). Hybridized identities are often the consequence of cross-cultural exchanges and cultural appropriations between different groups resulting in a third culture. This creates a third idea or space that bears “something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha, quoted in Beard and Gloag 2005, 84–85). Ragtop relates this philosophy to his own condition: “I can’t separate the two. I’m Arab American, influenced by ‘both’ cultures. A line [in the Philistines and NOMADS song “Hala”] like ‘See us in bars and sheesha parlors *mūsiqá al-Intifāda*’ is actually about how the two are intertwined, how we flow easily between so-called Western and Middle Eastern cultures” (Ragtop interview with author, 2007). Sociomusicologist Simon Frith’s hypothesis on the link between music and identity is very much aligned with Ragtop’s view: “What makes music special—what makes it special for identity—is that it defines a space without boundaries. Music is thus the cultural form best able both to cross borders . . . and to define spaces” (Frith 1997, 125).

For Palestinian Americans, the appropriation of “American” as part of their identity is a way to reconcile their attachment to their homeland with integration into their host countries. However, since the events of 9/11 they often find it difficult to live their Palestinian American identity amid the surveillance of the American war on terror.

## The Question of Identity: Redefinition and Representation of the Self

Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop artists have resisted the existing constructions of an imposed identity and challenged the negative profiling of their identity by reformulating it as positive, still bearing the original aspects of their identities. Through performance, participants can construct notions of “self” that challenge and refashion hegemonic organization, and through performance and music participants can offer an alternative notion of power and resistance in Palestine and across the Atlantic (McDonald 2005, 5).

Youmans’s artistic name, for example, the Iron Sheik, is an attempt to reverse, redefine, and challenge Arab misrepresentation. The original Iron Sheik is an Iranian wrestler who epitomizes, for some, negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern

people.<sup>4</sup> Ragtop (which is also a derogatory term for an Arab), like Youmans, reclaimed disparaging Arabic terms in a way to reverse stereotypes and transform negative terms into positive ones. When asked about the connotations and meaning of the name “The Philistines,” Ragtop answered, “The definition of a ‘philistine’ is taken directly from the Webster’s dictionary . . . a philistine is ‘an enemy of Israel’ [*sic*]. We chose the name to reclaim it, as we believe the dictionary definition [coincidentally?] fits stereotypes of modern-day Palestinians. Our first album is called *Self Defined*, because we reject that definition” (Ragtop, interview with author, 2007). Ragtop refuses to be defined only in terms of Israel without an independent identity.

Self-definition is a recurrent theme in Palestinian hip-hop and expresses the refusal of an imposed Arab identity. The Philistines, in their song “Self Defined,” narrate their frustration of confinement to such an imposed identity:

Since the very first time, I find my rhymes  
 To be labeled as malignant, never once benign  
 Inspirations divine, intelligent in design  
 But I find myself confined, in between these lines  
 Self Defined means I’m unchained / From your  
 Name brand narrow way of thinking / Your wack ship is sinking  
 Your practice is bringing mad stresses to your life  
 But you can / Open your eyes son the P have arrived

Hip-hop communities in Palestine and the diaspora are actively employing hip-hop simultaneously as a vehicle for asserting their “otherness” as Palestinians and also as a common form of cultural expression of identity: “otherness” to distinguish themselves from the Israeli population of Palestine and from American society. One inherent similarity between Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop is their efforts to make a distinction between “self” and “other.” Again, Frith’s theoretical framework can be very closely aligned with the issue of a Palestinian American cultural identity. What Frith suggests is not that “social groups agree on values, which are then expressed in their cultural activities[,] but that they only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity” (1997, 111).

## Hip-Hop in Palestine and the Diaspora: The West Bank to the West Side

Popular culture is engaged in a constant interplay with political, economic, and social factors. This reasoning explains the differences in the output of Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop. One of the most distinctive differences between both musical groups is the issue of diaspora, which plays a central role in Palestinian American hip-hop artists’ creative production. On being a Palestinian

of the diaspora, Excentrik says, “Palestine is like a phantom for me; I know who I am, I know where I am from, and I know where I am going, but the future is always so random and seemingly bleak at times, I’m sure every diaspora cat can feel me” (interview with author, 2007).

Ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin’s diaspora theory advocates, “through songs, each locale and each generation . . . finds ways to connect to actual or imagined *pasts*, not *presents*” (2003, 289). This is generally true of American hip-hop artists in the Palestinian diaspora. It appears that many Palestinian American hip-hop artists are fulfilling Slobin’s proposition that “many people themselves think they are living away from a homeland, and respond nostalgically or angrily, actively or apathetically to the fact of separation or to the outsider’s view that they are potential terrorists” (285).

There have been many studies conducted on the Palestinian population living within Palestine and in the refugee camps. Academic literature shows that although it is common for second-generation immigrants to have a reduced sense of “political consciousness and ethnic pride,” this is not the case for Palestinians of the diaspora (Christison 1989, 19). Palestinians of the diaspora have at times adopted dual national identities and have succeeded in merging both cultures and to formulate dual perspectives and attitudes.

The late Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said regarded authorities as having frequently implemented the invention of tradition as a means to rule mass societies when small communities and social units were disbanding and disintegrating. Authorities used the invention of tradition as a means of linking large groups of people to one another (Said 2000, 259). Although Palestinian hip-hop artists are not seen as authority figures, in Palestine and in the diaspora they follow a similar path to forge a sense of unity, especially among the artists themselves, in the form of musical collaborations. This has been conveyed with musical collaborations such as the Lyrical Alliance collective, explained later in this essay. Said further argues that people prefer to rewrite memory to provide themselves with an identity, a national narrative, and a status. Mahmoud Jreri of DAM describes his role in this common endeavor: “As young people in schools we wasn’t [*sic*] aware to our culture. We knew that we are Palestinian, but in schools they teach us about Zionist ‘heroes,’ the same heroes who killed and transferred most of our people. We don’t learn about Mahmoud Darwish. You have to figure it out along, and we did figure it out” (interview with author, 2007).

Speaking from another angle, Palestinian American hip-hop artist Excentrik elucidates on the idea that artists can create, and to a certain extent control, a status for themselves, through their musical output.

[Music] humanizes who we are. When people see us on stage they are like, “What? They ain’t terrorists.” If all I rapped about were political stuff, no one would hear it. People use Fox News and the Bible for analysis these days,

and to that majority we are merely blood-sucking anti-Christ. That is obviously the furthest from the truth, so doing what I'm doing—I should say what *we* [Palestinian hip-hop artists] are doing—makes a huge difference in the pictures of us the majority of Americans have painted in their minds. We are no longer boxed in, we can be human, artistically important humans; they cannot demonize an artist like they can demonize falsified imagery. (interview with author, 2007)

Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl describes how the music of immigrant groups is affected, including the size and selection of the group, reasons for immigration, and the contact upheld with their home country; the “degree of physical, cultural, linguistic isolation and cohesion of immigrants in the host country, the cultural and musical differences and compatibilities of an immigrant culture in its relationship to the host culture, the attitudes of such a group toward diversity and change—all these obviously play a part” (1983, 227). While each of these issues plays a part, the reasons for immigration dominate all others in Palestinian American society, many members of which come from families who were forced to leave Palestine.

Nettl poses certain questions about immigrant musical culture within their host countries: whether maintaining immigrant musical tradition supports the preservation of the cultural tradition as a whole, whether musical change conveys the acceptance of their host culture, and whether music acts as a reminder of the group's heritage while other behaviors of the group assimilate. Some immigrant groups integrate into the conventional behavior of their host country while remaining faithful to their traditional music, performing it at special occasions as a reminder of their home country. Parallels can be drawn between the musical behavior of indigenous minority groups and immigrant minority groups, and it is their minority status that allows for comparisons and similarities within their musical behaviors (227–28).

A common theme that exists in Palestinian American hip-hop is politically charged lyrics recounting the Palestinian struggle fused with traditional Palestinian musical influences and hip-hop culture. Youmans upholds this idea: “I use American instruments more, but some Arabic samples. The beats are hip-hop beats. The politics, though, are purely Palestinian. The content is very Palestinian—more so than it is Western hip-hop. My words are political translations” (interview with author, 2007). While Western influences are prevalent in Palestinian American hip-hop, Ragtop, of the Philistines, explains that much of the essence of Palestinian tradition is still drawn upon in their music: “There's a long poetic tradition in the Arab world that is similar in many respects to hip-hop: we have ‘battle’ rhymes and love poems, we have poems about our homes and traditions, and we have poems that basically serve as boasts on behalf of the poet or his sponsors. All of this is reflected in Palestinian American hip-hop” (interview with author,

2007). Jjeri describes DAM's music as "60 percent hip-hop and 40 percent Arabic/Palestinian music" and interprets a correlation between Palestinian culture and hip-hop culture: "breakdance: *dabke* [Palestinian folk dance]; graffiti: *shī'ārāt* [political slogans]; freestyle: *zajal* [Arabic oral tradition of poetry]" (interview with author, 2007).

## **Say What? The Language Barrier**

Palestinian hip-hop in the United States is a direct blend of urban American hip-hop and Palestinian musical influences. Palestinian hip-hop bands often rap in English as well as Arabic. According to Stormtrap of Ramallah Underground, "Through English I can make the same message understandable to wider audiences around the world" (interview with author, 2007). Mr. Tibbz, one half of Sudanese/Syrian, US-based rapping duo the NOMADS, agrees that "part of the effect of rapping in English is putting the Arab experience in English terms, making it pertinent to an audience that would most probably never have understood what Arabs live through and deal with" (interview with author, 2007). The Hebrew lyrics appear to have a similar purpose: to reach a society that is increasingly uncomfortable with the "Palestine under Israel issue," the continued presence within Israel of the indigenous population of Palestinians. Palestinian hip-hop in Hebrew is an eye-opener to remind the Israelis that the ostrich policy of hiding their heads in the sand—in this case behind walls—is not a solution, and that the issues of occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the rights of those Palestinians with Israeli passports need to be addressed. Jjeri explains his usage of Hebrew in his music as being a message specifically directed at the Israeli occupation: "We also did it [rap] in Hebrew. It's the second language that we learn in schools, and we had a lot of anger. They [Israelis] don't live the life that we are living, but they know about it. It's important for me to say that I know that you know about it and you choose not to do anything" (interview with author, 2007).

Palestinian American hip-hop artists have made a deliberate choice to rap in English so as to remain accessible to non-Arabs as well as Palestinian Americans of the diaspora, for whom Arabic may not be spoken. Ragtop explains this in his experience: "I actually try to avoid excessive use of Arabic or references to Middle Eastern history or culture that may be obscure even to an Arab American who hasn't extensively studied the region, because it makes the music inaccessible to the majority of listeners. I do not think my purpose is solely to create music that Arabs or Arab Americans can relate to—in fact quite the opposite, hence this creative choice" (interview with author, 2007). Ragtop's choice is also upheld by Youmans: "I see it [rapping in English] as a way to communicate with the American public. Also, my use of English tells Arab Americans that while Arabic is the language of their ancestors, we can command the tools here to speak for us" (interview with author, 2007).

Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop artists, through their music, are communicating to several demographic audiences: native Palestinians within the homeland, Palestinians of the diaspora, as well as non-Palestinian audiences globally. The choice of language in Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop is a very conscious and intentional decision in the targeting of specific audiences to hear their message and has performed a vital function in positioning artists and their audiences within a larger communities of practice.

## Comparison of Themes

Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop artists cover many of the same themes and topics, such as identity, Middle Eastern politics, U.S. foreign policy, racism, discrimination, gender issues, and pride of their heritage. Palestinian hip-hop artists, both those based in Palestine and those within the diaspora, endeavor to preserve traditional values to narrate their own history and resist oppression. Jleri insists that they are advocating a “message of change also, and to change you have to get up and do it in your hands, because no one will do it for you” (interview with author, 2006). This is most movingly expressed in the lyrics of the chorus of DAM’s “Ng’ayer Bukra,” meaning “change tomorrow”: “We want education, we want improvement / To have the ability to change tomorrow.” Youmans speaks in similar terms: “Change comes from collective movement, not individual aspiration” (interview with author, 2006). Mr. Tibbz also draws attention to the wider ramifications of the unresolved Palestinian issue:

I want to convey that the Palestinian situation is a major problem for the world and must be dealt with immediately. I want the audience to realize that Palestinians are victimized human beings living in one of the most deplorable humanitarian and political situations. Until we see the Palestinians as what they are—innocent, honest people forced into one of the shitiest [*sic*] situations on the planet—we can never truly understand the mentality of the Palestinians let alone address their needs.” (interview with author, 2006)

When I asked Jleri about the ideological differences between Palestinian hip-hop artists based in Palestine and those of the diaspora, he answered, “In our daily life everyone faces different problems, so we sing about different subjects.” Stormtrap, however, reminds us that the life of a Palestinian today is not normal: “Being Palestinian you don’t really get a chance to live a normal life in your home. I will always be wishing for what have been and are denied, and those thoughts always seem to find their way into my music” (interview with author, 2006). Youmans also sees the differences between artists within Palestine and the diaspora as linked to their immediate life experiences: “The difference between me and Palestinian groups is they live the oppression. I live under a much softer system

than they do. Discrimination happens, but it is nowhere as bad as Israel's policies. I can only be a solidarity rapper. They have the authentic voices" (interview with author, 2006). Excentrik agrees: "The oppression we feel here is but a fraction of the shit they gotta go through—and that really makes a difference in how you approach your sound" (interview with author, 2007). However, Ahmed Jay, a Palestinian-Jordanian hip-hop artist, considers that all Palestinian hip-hop artists, whether based in Palestine or the diaspora, "hold the same message" (interview with author, 2006).

Peaceful resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine is evident in the lyrics of DAM, as in their song "Mali Huriye," meaning "I don't have freedom": "You won't limit my hope by a wall of separation / And if this barrier comes between me and my land / I'll still be connected to Palestine."<sup>5</sup> The "wall of separation" mentioned in the lyrics refers to the Israeli-built separation wall that cuts through the West Bank, surrounding villages and separating and dividing Palestinians from their land.

The two approaches to celebrating and conveying national identity among Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop artists are very different, given their cultural, social, and political contexts and subjectivities. Palestinian Americans have appropriated hip-hop as a channel for the recreation and reformulation of their migrant or refugee identity; in Palestine it is part of a struggle against the occupation.

## The Future of Palestinian Hip-Hop

For many people internationally, the Palestinian struggle for freedom has been shaped by popular uprisings—images of youth confronting tanks with stones on the streets of occupied Palestine etched into our consciousness—but seldom is the role of the arts or poetry in the Palestinian struggle highlighted in mainstream media headlines. Palestinian hip-hop artists contribute to promoting and advancing a distinct Palestinian identity, beyond the boundaries of the Palestinian communities themselves, by way of culture and music rather than political discourse, although the latter is part and parcel of Palestinian hip-hop. The emergence of Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop illustrates the fact that colonized, oppressed, and marginalized peoples will always find a means to express themselves and narrate their own history, and that music continues to be a tool in that struggle. Hip-hop has achieved a counter-hegemonic status with many Palestinian youths, with the intention of empowering a generation of youths who relate to the way in which Palestinian hip-hop artists help to change the stereotyped perceptions of Palestinians. Hip-hop is giving a voice to those who might otherwise not have been heard. It is doing so in a manner not significantly different from any other cultural revival, building upon the essence of Palestinian musical tradition.

As a movement with rising momentum it appeals to many young Palestinians, across national boundaries, bridging the distance between a segment of young

Palestinians living within Palestine, and those within the diaspora, whose paths might otherwise not have crossed. There have been multiple musical collaborations between Palestinian and Palestinian American hip-hop artists, as well as between Palestinian hip-hop artists and others from the Arab world, launching Palestinian hip-hop into the international arena. A glowing example of these musical collaborations is the Lyrical Alliance collective fronted by DAM's Tamer Nafar. Lyrical Alliance, which comprises some of the most prominent Arab hip-hop heavyweights, crossed many linguistic and cultural boundaries. Among the Arab hip-hop artists in the collective was Brooklyn emcee Talib Kweli, whose social and political awareness places him in a league of his own. The Arab artists came from an array of countries around the Arab world, from Algeria to Amman, from the West Bank to West London. Among them were London-based rapper/singer Shadia Mansour; Rabah Ourrad, the controversial Algerian rapper notorious for his courageous and witty political critique of the Algerian reality; Lebanese bilingual rapper Rayess Bek; Samm, ambassador of Jordanian hip-hop and winner of the Jordanian "Beit El Hip-Hop" talent show; and video jockey Jana Saleh from Lebanon. Despite the geographical dispersion of the Arabs, their music still has the ability to unite them in their continuous attempt to define their culture and identity. Nafar, who primarily rapped in Arabic, thought that the Lyrical Alliance experience would lead to "more collaborations in the Arab world and more hip-hop unity" and hopes this collaboration will have attracted more hip-hop fans outside of the Arab audience: "We know all about the African Americans through hip-hop; now we can exchange cultures and more work with the world's artists, such as Talib Kweli."

Most recently, hip-hop played a role in the Arab Spring. Many hip-hop artists reverted to hip-hop's origins and used it as a form of political commentary and as a way to unite communities from the streets of Tunisia to Cairo. Hip-hop also carved a space for itself within the academic sphere when on June 26, 2012, a group of well-known hip-hop artists, critics, and intellectuals came together at the Barbican in London to address the question, "Does rap enhance or degrade society?" Among the participants were rapper KRS-One; Victorian literature expert John Sutherland; David Cameron's youth advisor, Shaun Bailey; and African American civil rights activist Jesse Jackson. The questions that they addressed include themes such as whether hip-hop is the "authentic voice of the oppressed that turns anger into poetry and political action, or a glorification of all that holds back oppressed minorities and hinders them from mainstream assimilation" (Toppin 2012). Often a cultural movement precedes political change, maybe because artists often reflect what a society is thinking and feeling long before laws are changed. Artists often do more than merely reflect circumstances, sometimes assisting in the generation of cultural practices and ways of thinking about political circumstances. It was also at the height of the anti-Arab furor, in the aftermath of 9/11, that Arab American comedians such as Maysoun Zayed and Dean Obeidallah, first made a breakthrough and together co-founded the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival in 2003 and are often featured on mainstream American television channels.

Sales of Palestinian hip-hop music in the Arab world would be an indication of the success that the movement has achieved thus far. The applause that Palestinian hip-hop artists receive at pro-Palestinian demonstrations, which often dwarfs the applause of the speeches, is another indication of its popularity. As for Palestinians, hip-hop has helped to provide the younger generation with a new tool—an innovative approach to self-expression and identification—as much as a therapeutic and creative outlet for their frustration.

“Someday I hope for us to make more songs celebrating than politicizing” (Fredwreck, interview with author, 2006). This aspiration also represents that of the general Palestinian hip-hop movement. The late Yasser Arafat used to say, “The Palestinian National Movement is not only the gun of the freedom fighter but mainly the pen of the writer, the brush of the painter, the words of the poet.”<sup>6</sup> Now that the Palestinian side has abandoned the dialogue by arms and resorts to the arms of dialogue, the Palestinians’ cry for freedom will express itself more and more through the poets, the composers, and the musicians.” Until then, where many Palestinians are concerned, a song will never be only a song, but an act of resistance.

## Notes

1. Research was undertaken between September 2006 and July 2012. This essay is based on empirical data and research conducted by the author. Ethnographic research methods such as observational and participatory fieldwork were used, with regular contact with the artists in question. The primary research tool employed is qualitative interviews conducted via face-to-face meetings, telephone exchanges, as well as direct email correspondence with the hip-hop artists. The initial interviews were followed by exchanges of continuous correspondence with the artists. My recourse to ethnographic research methods through interviews allowed my informants to self-define and self-represent.

2. Omar Offendum and Mr. Tibbz have since embarked on solo performing careers.

3. No precise records exist of this figure because of the absence in American census forms of any Arab category.

4. Hossein Khosrow Ali Vaziri, aka the Iron Sheik.

5. Translation taken from DAM’s official website: [http://www.damrap.com/lyrics/english/ihda2/Mali\\_Huriye.html](http://www.damrap.com/lyrics/english/ihda2/Mali_Huriye.html).

6. Yasser Arafat quoted by Afif Safieh, February 15, 2006, Georgetown University’s Intercultural Center, Washington, DC.

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