

Imaginaries of Exile and Emergence in Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Hip Hop

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Figure 1. *Invincible* (Ilana Weaver) talking with her mother in her 2010 *People Not Places* video. (Screenshot by David McDonald)

Channels of Rage

Anat Halachmi's acclaimed 2003 documentary, *Channels of Rage*, begins with a furious argument between two prominent Israeli hip hop groups: DAM, a Palestinian-Israeli crew from Lyd comprised of Tamer Nafar, Suheil Nafar, and Mahmoud Jrere; and TACT, a collection of Jewish-Israeli rappers led by Subliminal (Kobi Shimoni) and Shadow (Yoav Eliasi). Meeting in a dark alley in Tel Aviv, the groups nearly come to blows over recent comments made by the two leaders, Tamer Nafar and Shimoni. Once collaborative and nurturing, the relationship between the two young rappers quickly dissolved as each began to embody contrasting political ideologies within the ongoing al-Aqsa intifada. Coming to terms with the violence on the streets of Tel Aviv and Jenin, both artists retreated from their once supportive relationship, based in a mutual love of hip hop, into the rigid, uncompromising nationalisms of Israel and Palestine.

Yet if we look beyond the belligerence and hyper-masculinized posturing, we witness an insightful commentary on contemporary Israeli society at the outset of the al-Aqsa intifada. Refracted through the lives and experiences of these young hip hop artists, Halachmi's film reveals the internal struggles young Israelis, Jewish and non-Jewish, faced during a profound

moment of collective violence, trauma, and mourning. Through his immensely popular CDs, *The Light of Zion* (2001) and *The Light and the Shadow* (2002), Subliminal energized the political right, advocating for a swift and powerful response to Palestinian terrorism through military strength. His songs articulated the widespread fears of Palestinian insurrection, existential paranoia, and the illusory desire for national security. National grief became an instrument of war, a powerful means of engendering solidarity and legitimizing an occupation in the name of self-defense. Tamer Nafar, as one of Israel's over one million non-Jewish citizens of Palestinian ancestry, advocated for a reimagining of Israeli society in order to include all of its citizens and a reconceptualization of the discourse of terror to include all acts of violence committed against noncombatants, "whether they are wearing a uniform or not" (Nafar 2005). His voice sought to destabilize Israeli-Jewish hegemony by asserting a Palestinian perspective in the public sphere, disrupting dominant regimes of knowledge, representation, and power. For him, national grief was not an instrument of war but an opportunity for understanding, a means for coming to terms with shared fears and anxieties that exist between Israelis and Palestinians. And although these young artists were never able to fully reconcile their differences, what becomes apparent throughout this documentary are the myriad ways in which both men utilized hip hop as a fundamental means for understanding violence, politics, and the Israeli nation-state.

Situating the work of these two artists within the broader history of Israeli and Palestinian hip hop (2000–2010), I focus specifically on the performative interplay of two discursive paradigms: *exile* and *emergence*. A recent collaboration by several Israeli artists (both Jewish and Palestinian) attempts to transcend the rigid binaries of the nation-state through hip hop performance and media. In film screenings, panel discussions, and collaborative music performances, these artists articulate what might be termed a postcolonial and post-national discourse of emergence that resists exilic notions of boundaries, and explores the shared cultural and historical connections between and within Jewish and Palestinian communities in Israel. The discursive shift from exile to emergence embodied in the work of these artists presents a unique reimagining of the nation-state, and offers new opportunities for interrogating the dynamics of power, hegemony, and popular culture in the Middle East.

In forming this argument I draw upon recent scholarship in postcolonial theory as well as gender and performance studies. In particular, I am inspired by recent attempts to employ the ideas of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) in the service of critical ethnography (Madison 2005:96–99). Levinas has long been an influential voice in postmodern ethical theory, and offers incredible insight into conceptualizing otherness in the ethnographic encounter. In relation to these hip hop artists, however, I would like to consider the utility of Levinas's "ethics of responsibility" for charting out possible nonviolent alternatives to the entrenched discourses of exile and the nation-state. Rooted in the foundational engagement of self and other, or what he calls "first philosophy," Levinas encourages us to question normative moral imperatives. He argues for a reimagining of the self in its pure relationality, as the consequence of engagement. And from this engagement emerges a provocative framework for thinking through potential nonviolent alternatives to trauma, mourning, and loss.

I focus primarily on a group of Israeli hip hop artists whom I had the pleasure of working and touring with intermittently over the last 10 years while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank. During that time I became closely involved with the Palestinian-Israeli rap group DAM at a moment in their careers when they were still struggling

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to develop a local Palestinian hip hop scene both in the posh discotheques of Tel Aviv as well as in the coffee houses and theatres of Ramallah and Bethlehem. Over the course of this research I traveled with the group on several occasions in Israel, the West Bank, and most recently in the American Midwest. While working with DAM, I was introduced to several other Israeli rappers: Sabreena da Witch (Abeer al-Zinaty), Invincible (Illana Weaver), Mohammad al-Farrah, Jay-mal (Krucial), Kotej, and Kwami. In surveying the soundscape of Israeli hip hop, I draw collectively on the voices and experiences of these artists. Unfortunately, despite my many efforts Subliminal, Shadow, and their TACT colleagues declined participation in this research, objecting to my close association with their rival, Tamer Nafar.

Israeli Hip Hop, Popular Culture, and the Public Sphere

In the years leading up to and immediately following the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, popular culture throughout the Middle East was profoundly affected by new social and political realities, even as it was simultaneously influencing those realities. Within Israeli and Palestinian communities, the inception of the peace process drastically reconfigured the public sphere, opening spaces for radical dialogue and debate (Hass 1999; Stein and Swedenburg 2004; Brinner 2009). This process of radicalization resulted in new forms of representation and regimes of knowledge that advocated support for, or resistance to, emerging political realities. And while this was by no means the first moment of collaborative possibility in Israel-Palestine, it was perhaps the first to initiate such a profound momentum for change within Israeli Jewish and Palestinian communities. Within Ashkenazi public spaces a new quasi-fascination with Arab culture—such as food, music, and fashion—was made possible by renewed efforts in Israeli diplomacy, which itself was buttressed by the consumption of those very products and practices. The Israeli public sphere critically examined the founding myths of Zionism in cinema, literature, and music, inspiring debate and a renewed interest in revisionist history (Pappe 2006; Shohat 2010). Within Palestinian communities, the “post-Oslo honeymoon,” as it was colloquially known, ended the pervasive intifada culture of the 1980s, allowing for the reemergence of previously suppressed forms of everyday sociality between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis (soccer games, weddings, walks along the beach, falafel stands). Palestinian musicians, artists, and dancers were no longer expected to be mere agents of cultural preservation and propaganda. Rather, it became permissible to develop new forms of music and dance in collaboration with the transnational (i.e., non-Arab) world (McDonald 2009b; Rowe 2010). Palestinian dancers trained in Europe and North America began returning to Palestine to teach and develop new styles of hybridized dance-drama (Rowe 2010). Musicians previously burdened with the obligation of preserving traditional folklore as a tool of cultural resistance began experimenting with new styles, instruments, and compositional processes. The popularity of this emerging Palestinian cosmopolitanism served to reify, legitimize, and justify further engagement with the “outside” world. In each case the development of new forms of popular culture served both to *reflect* as well as to *generate* popular sentiment and new imaginings of national identity (see Blacking 1995:223). Aesthetic experimentation, collaboration, and the expansion of public modes of consumption reflected an awakening of sorts, a radical reconceptualization of national subjectivity away from the intractable past towards an imagined future. At the same time, by citing a more general discourse of peace and reconciliation, popular culture generated new ways of thinking and being. In various modes of public performance, engagement with the national Other served to sustain and accelerate new forms of identity and intelligibility.

It was within this prolonged moment of possibility that hip hop first developed in Israel. Anat Halachmi brilliantly captures the collaborative origins of Israeli hip hop in her documentary (2003). Making their way to Eilat in 2000 for one of the first hip hop festivals in Israel, Tamer Nafar, Kobi Shimoni, and their many companions spent the nearly six-hour bus ride sharing lines, free-styling beats, joking around, and otherwise talking of Jewish-Arab coexistence. Reflecting on the experience in one of our conversations in 2005, Tamer Nafar explained:

In the early phases, especially at that show, it was all about the music, the beats, the groove, getting to know other people [in the scene]. We didn't care about anything, but making the music. It [hip hop] wasn't about that [the political situation]. We were all just trying to start something new. To be somebody. (Nafar 2005)¹

That something new, hip hop, provided a neutral space within which Israeli identity might be radically reimaged. Unfettered by the indexical associations and meanings of traditional Israeli and Palestinian nationalist song, the articulation of an African American popular expressive form transcended normative lines of difference between national self and other. It was neutral space in that both Jewish and Palestinian rappers looked to the same African American performers for inspiration, drew similar meanings, and found a space for identification outside of the nationalist binary. In this instance musical style functioned as more than merely a frame. Rather, hip hop formed a discursive space in which participants were compelled to make behavioral choices that determined and defined communal relationships. Through fashion, language, body comportment, posture, and gesture hip hop became a tool for identification that allowed for, and perhaps demanded, more collaborative representations of self to emerge. In this way, musical style became an important vehicle of embodiment through which these artists could radically reconceptualize themselves and their relations to one another.

Passing the time and the microphone, and composing interlaced verses of poetry, Shimoni and Nafar revealed hip hop's potential to engender a desired mutual recognition. But this was not a recognition of and within the history and politics of the past. Rather, as Judith Butler reminds us, the fundamental human need and desire to be recognized by the Other elicits a transformation in its very asking. "When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are [...]. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address" (2004:44). To seek recognition, to engage, begets a transformation, a *new future relation*, a becoming of something new. This something new can then become a model for agency and intelligibility, a means of articulating new forms of community.

Speaking directly into the camera Shadow (Yoav Eliasi) gives voice to this transformation. Riffing on the well-known sentiment of Rodney King—victim of racial intolerance—Shadow laments, "Why can't we all just get along?" Then, revealing the subtext of his parody, he makes an obscene gesture. "Only in Israel, guys," Shadow continues, highlighting his own racial identification as a Mizrahi Jew, "Russian, Ethiopian, Arab, and Persian rappers can stand on one stage, and a fine looking black man like me!" This passing comment engages with an African American discourse of racial intolerance often associated with hip hop culture and practice. However, in his mockery of that discourse, Shadow calls forth a space for imagining a new Israeli hip hop bereft of and detached from that history of ethnic strife, and based upon a desired mutual recognition of racial cooperation and diversity within the discourse of the Israeli nation-state.

Building on this statement Tamer Nafar then throws his arm around Kobi Shimoni, and demands, "Film the coexistence! Film it!"

Subliminal jokingly responds to his new Palestinian friend by further expunging the racial hostilities of the American and Israeli past, saying, "Aren't you a second class citizen? Get off our backs!" The camera then freezes, fixated on the faces of the young rappers rapt in the exuberance of the moment, a palpable sense of community revealed in their frozen expressions.

It is perhaps worth thinking through this brief interaction as a diagnostic of transformational power relations (Abu-Lughod 1990). The joking banter, wordplay, and roughhousing reveal a profound moment of recognition. Through music these young artists are getting to know each

1. For a history of DAM and its impact on the larger field of Palestinian nationalist song see McDonald (2013).

other, playfully beginning a new relationship based on a mutual struggle for recognition and acceptance (as rappers, as artists, as Israelis, as Arabs, as progressive youth, etc.). This recognition, however, is accomplished by specifically reframing normative history, power, and subjectivity. Traditional lines of racial and religious difference are subjected to radical redress, play, and experimentation. The young men pass the microphone and posture for the camera. They put their arms around each other, blurring racialized understandings of taboo and consequence. This is a community and relationship of a different sort. In soliciting this new recognition, these artists are in effect committing an act of transgressive Israeli intelligibility, fashioning new ways of conceptualizing self and other through the constitutive power of discourse and performance.



Figure 2. *Subliminal* (Kobi Shimoni) and Tamer Nafar trading rhymes in Anat Halachmi's 2003 documentary *Channels of Rage*. (Screenshot by David McDonald)

Discourses of Exile

As foretold in the introductory scene, however, this collaborative and nurturing relationship did not endure. With the onset of the al-Aqsa intifada several months later in October 2000, and the escalation of violence in 2002, these artists, and their constituent Israeli and Palestinian audiences, quickly reverted back to “conflict mode.” Extreme restrictions of mobility, violence, and the constant threat of military incursions transformed everyday life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, effectively incarcerating Palestinian society. At the same time, a new culture of religiously framed martyrdom arose, directly challenging the secular cosmopolitanism of the 1990s. In Israel the escalation of the uprising in 2002 created an environment of pervasive fear, anti-Arab racism, and social instability. Everyday rituals and public sociality were severely disrupted as both Israeli and Palestinian communities retreated in fear of random acts of terror: the “awakening,” or “honeymoon,” of the 1990s was replaced by an even more powerful malaise of xenophobia, fundamentalism, and intolerance. In print media, graffiti, popular music, poetry, and dance, the divisive poetics of fear and nationalism spread across the public sphere (Oliver and Steinberg 2005; McDonald 2009b).

As a means of theorizing this nationalist turn in Israeli hip hop I propose a hermeneutic based in the concept of exile as discursive practice. This discourse of exile, intelligible only within a territorially framed understanding of human society, rests upon an ethics of belonging. Or, to be more precise, subjectivity arises from a punitive dislocation, and a compulsory frustration of the desire to fully actualize the self in relation to place. In this instance belonging is framed in terms of communal and territorial contiguity, a national homeland. The ultimate realization of this desire, however, can only be achieved asymptotically, never truly fulfilling its compulsory desires. For even when a homeland has been established, exile remains powerfully operative in shaping and sustaining national intimacy and directing state policy. In this sense, subjectivity is formed relative to an absence, an instability, a foreclosed desire for belonging, and

a constant fear of dispossession from place. Determinations of self and other emerge within the insatiable desire to alleviate this instability through territorial recognition, sovereignty, and a coterminous relation between self and place, nation and state.

Within contexts of heightened violence, trauma, and mourning, in which our mutual vulnerability to the Other is most exposed in often terrifying ways, collective grief and fear often give rise to the impulse to restore order, safety, and control through an exertion of state power or, where state power is nonexistent, through anticolonial militancy. These impulses become legitimized, self-evident, even commonsensical, when articulated within a discourse of exile and the nation-state. Contemporary forms of national sovereignty are founded in notions of protection and efforts to master our fundamental vulnerability to the outside world. Violence reminds us of this vulnerability. Yet in the process, collective experiences of violence engender a profound sense of community and nation by bringing to the fore these very relational ties of dependency. It is essentially a “we” that is at risk, that is dependent, that is vulnerable, and a “you” who is a threat, a danger. Herein lies violence’s productive capacity to shape regimes of knowledge and relations between self and other (Wade 2009:18).

Discursive efforts to articulate the anxieties of national vulnerability take various forms. Typically, they involve expressions of profound instability, loss, and the precariousness of life. Subliminal’s single, “I’m Living Day to Day” offers an excellent example of this phenomenon.

I’m living day to day
I don’t go anywhere
A day passes another comes
And nothing has changed
The clock does not stop
Tomorrow will be here soon
And just the tune resides
I have no other country

I’m living day to day
Ask me where we got to go, we got nowhere
I live in a country without peace
Everyone is drowning in a dream
Falling and not seeing the end of the abyss (Subliminal 2001)²

This excerpt from the third verse and chorus is a powerful commentary on the precariousness of life under constant threat of violence and terror. Without choices, without hope, without options, the discourse of exile may be effectively employed to define the nation, and to further absolve or legitimize virtually any actions deemed necessary to banish fear of and vulnerability to the Other. The final line of the third verse offers an intertextual reference to a larger discourse of exile in Israeli popular song (see Regev and Seroussi 2004). The recurring line “I have no other country” (*Ein li eretz acheret*) is a direct citation of Gali Atari’s well-known 1998 pop song of the same name. The framing of exile and its retaliatory stance of power pervade much of the Israeli hip hop in the early 2000s.

Onstage during a concert in Tel Aviv in the fall of 2002 Subliminal embodied both cause and cure for the nation’s inherent vulnerability. Striding calmly across the stage, Subliminal maintained a sense of cool, strength, and determination. He gestured carefully into the crowd, pointing to his chest and the sky, never out of control. Though the nation is at risk, “dangling like a cigarette in Arafat’s mouth,” his body remained self-assured, confident, resolute. He began most shows with the same introduction. “Who here is proud to be a Zionist in the State of Israel? If so, put your hands in the air!”

2. Unless otherwise noted, translation of all lyrics are my own.

His sidekick, Shadow, offered a more aggressive approach, pacing angrily up and down the stage. While Subliminal remained controlled, Shadow's vocal exclamations became growls, yells, and screams. He hyped the crowd between sets, got everyone on their feet, introduced each song, and played counterpoint to Subliminal's well-crafted verses of poetry. If Subliminal is the mind, Shadow is the body. His overly developed musculature becomes a powerful sign of strength as he displays his immense biceps, chest, neck, and back for the crowd. There is a sense of rage in the way Shadow throws his arms, pounds his chest, and shadowboxes onstage. Playing off of his well-publicized experience serving in the Israeli elite forces, Shadow's embodiment of military strength is apparent. If Subliminal gave voice to the precariousness of life under constant threat of violence, Shadow embodied the solution: strength of the body and body politic. From Subliminal's "Divide and Conquer":



Figure 3. Subliminal (Kobi Shimoni) onstage in Tel Aviv in 2002, from Channels of Rage (2003). (Screenshot by David McDonald)

Dear God, I wish you could come down,
 Because I'm being persecuted
 My enemies are united,
 They want to destroy me
 We're nurturing and arming our haters, enough!
 Divide and conquer
 Hey, united we stand divided we fall (Subliminal 2002)

And from "Biladi":

Once again the pavement is painted red
 The heart of man is silenced
 And the blood flows to the sea
 A shitty world, constipated reality,
 Dying to live but living to die (Subliminal 2002)

We find a very similar strategy in one of DAM's most popular singles off their 2006 album *Dedication*. In "Stranger in My Own Country," Mahmoud Jrere speaks of a pervasive loss of hope and despair living as an unrecognized minority in Israel, alienated from his nation:

All the ships are sailing, leaving behind them sadness
 That's drowning our hearts
 Again we are unwanted guests in our home
 But our destiny is to stay physically close to our lands
 While being spiritually far away from our nation
 Who cares about us? We are dying slowly
 Controlled by a Zionist democratic government!
 Because it's denying my existence
 Still blind to my colors, my history and my people

Brain-washing my children
So that they grow up in a reality
That doesn't represent them (DAM 2006)

Jrere's criticism of the Israeli state builds upon similar themes and employs similar rhetorical strategies as his Jewish counterparts. However his personal style of performance is unique. Jrere has developed a reputation for subtlety and cleverness. His voice rarely elevates in performance. His body moves slyly onstage. And in comparison to his DAM companions, his approach emphasizes nuance. Our interviews were always provocative as I never could predict his response. Backstage before a 2009 performance in Richmond, Indiana, for example, Jrere discussed his approach to this song: "It's about not being heard, being brainwashed [...] No one hears us [Palestinian Israelis] even though this is our land. Now we're guests [in our own house]. They say this is a democracy, but it's only a democracy for Jews" (Jrere 2009).

In each case these artists articulate their position from within a discourse of national detachment, precariousness, unfulfilled national subjectivity, and an intense desire for recognition. Building from feelings of fear, loss, and grief, Subliminal and DAM often assert their identities specifically in terms of territory or place. In Subliminal's "Biladi" the chorus answers fundamental questions of subjectivity from within the discourse of exile and the nation-state:

[Hebrew]: Who am I? What am I? Where did I come from?
I am here and I came here,
Hadi Ardi vima Biladi [Arabic: This is my land and this is my country]. (Subliminal 2002)

Subliminal's assertion of identity rests upon an ethics of redeemed exile. "I am here and I came here." However, the redemption of exile can never be fully realized: to do so would transcend the primary axis of Israeli intelligibility and its imperatives for gathering the exiles. The final tag line of the chorus offers important insight into the ways in which engagements of self and other are conceptualized from within this discourse. Shifting to Arabic, Subliminal makes a direct challenge to the national Other: "This is my land and this is my country." In a similar fashion Tamer Nafar makes an identical claim in his song, "Born Here." Rapping in Hebrew, Nafar speaks out against Israeli efforts to marginalize Palestinian history and culture:

Enough, enough gentlemen.
I was born here, my grandfather was born here.
You will not sever me from my roots. (DAM 2006)

In interpreting each of these artists' attempts to confront the violence of the al-Aqsa intifada, we find very similar rhetorical strategies and tactics for asserting the self in relation to the Other. Although Hebrew is not a foreign language to Nafar (while Arabic certainly is a foreign language for Subliminal), it is not coincidental that each artist strategically employs a degree of code switching in making these claims. Asked why he chose to compose the final line of "Biladi" in Arabic Subliminal explained, "Because the people who are supposed to understand it, understand Arabic... *Biladi va Ardi* are words that are understood in any dialect of Arabic... If it's up to me making music is fine, but... I use music as a means. My goal is to relay a message" (Halachmi 2003). Likewise, Nafar composed his Hebrew-language hit "Born Here" in counterpoint with the widely popular Israeli Jewish anthem of the same name "Kan Noladeti" (Born Here) popularized by Orna and Moshe Datz in the 1991 Eurovision song contest (McDonald 2009a:123). For Nafar, rapping in Hebrew is a means of compelling recognition in the Israeli popular soundscape. As he once explained it to me,

If I look out into the audience and see one Jew, I will rap in Hebrew. I do this because Jews are not my audience; they are my *target*. And if I rap to them in Hebrew they have to listen. *They can't dismiss me*; even if they don't like what I am saying, they have to listen to my message. They need to know that I'm here, that *I'm not going anywhere*. That I'm going to be heard. (Nafar 2005; emphasis added)

It is fascinating how each of these artists is most concerned with being heard, being recognized, in the eyes of the national Other. Their attempts at crossing linguistic lines are not to transcend difference, but rather as a means of assault, of forcing their thoughts and ideas onto foreign audiences. This assault is by no means limited to language alone. Onstage, the desire to be recognized is manifest in the aesthetics of the performance itself. Nationalist signs are strategically deployed in the precomposed beats of the music, which utilize vocal and instrumental sampling from the long established history of folk, protest, and political song. The flags and banners that adorn the stage issue a call for national recognition. And in the various ways in which the bodies of participants interact within the spaces of the performance, signs of national identity serve to reinforce the meanings of the lyrics. Subliminal often lifts his golden Star of David necklace up to his temple for dramatic effect and wears Israeli sports paraphernalia. Nafar wraps a Palestinian black-and-white checkered *kuffiya* around his neck and shoulders. His T-shirt depicts a stone-throwing child with the caption underneath, “Terrorist?” In each case the aesthetics of the environment fashions spaces and the bodies that pass through them, regulating what it means to be Palestinian and/or Israeli as a performative national identity. The compulsion to be heard by the Other is a fundamental desire of exilic imaginings of the self in which national recognition, even national existence itself, becomes a political statement subjected to intense scrutiny and doubt.

Despite these similarities, it is nevertheless important to point out that there are key differences in the ways that each of these artists conceptualized national identity. While Subliminal seemed to demarcate the boundaries of the Israeli nation-state in terms of religion and the redemption of a Zionist narrative, Nafar sought to articulate his subversive poetics from within the state, as an Israeli citizen. His project was not specifically the establishment of a Palestinian state or the disestablishment of the Israeli state, but rather the acknowledgement of his full status as an Israeli (of Palestinian ancestry) and the reconceptualization of the Israeli national narrative to include all of its citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish. For Nafar, the redemption of his Palestinian identity need not come at the expense of the Israeli state. Nevertheless, symmetries in sentiment do not necessarily translate into symmetries in consequence. Each of these artists made his claims from within differentially understood and experienced fields of power. Subliminal, for example, was never arrested for articulating his position, while Nafar has been routinely subjected to arrest and police surveillance for political dissent.

In the years since this “nationalist turn” in Israeli hip hop both Subliminal and DAM have gone their separate ways. The release of DAM’s first studio album in 2006 along with a series of successful documentaries about the group generated performance opportunities on college campuses and among solidarity groups throughout Europe and North America: by 2008 the group had begun performing almost exclusively for international audiences. Leaving the dialectics of racial politics behind, DAM does little to acknowledge the problematics of their Israeli citizenship. Instead, they tout themselves simply as dispossessed Palestinians. However, insofar as their affiliation with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict has afforded the group sustained media attention, including multiple spreads in *Rolling Stone*, in many ways it has also overdetermined their public persona as artists. Today, DAM struggles to break free of the expectations of resistance, and has stated many times their desire to branch out into the mainstream as commercial artists. Their newest album, titled *Dabke on the Moon*, moves in that direction by sidestepping hardline politics and focusing more on diffuse social issues. Tamer Nafar describes the project as, “Still a fuck you thing. That attitude. But it’s more to do with social affairs. [...] I’m not ashamed to admit that we are not doing underground music anymore [...] We are so influenced by pop music... commercial stuff. When it comes to the music, to the beats, we are not claiming to be hardcore” (in Collard 2011).

Subliminal has also moved away from the nationalist songs of his early career, pursuing collaborative projects with international DJs outside of Israel. His studio albums, *Just When You Thought It Was Over* (2006) and *Jew-Niversal* (2011) are more influenced by techno and

electronica than hip hop and R&B. As a hip hop impresario, Subliminal has pursued several commercial ventures, developing a fashion line and media production company. In each case it appears as if the “nationalist turn” in Israeli hip hop has run its course. DAM and Subliminal were able to successfully ride the wave of nationalism during the intifada years into successful recording careers. But both have come to the realization that hardline politics, while a powerful means of making one’s career, may not be the best way to sustain it.

Although there are many other examples that could be discussed, for the purpose of this study it seems appropriate to identify a common discursive position from which both Tamer Nafar and Subliminal asserted fundamental claims of self and other through their music. Each employed hip hop as a forum for narrating their experiences of grief, trauma, and collective fear. However, each began their story with the experience of violence inflicted upon the “we.” These are narrations of the national self in the *first person*. The experience of violence was proffered in such a way as to reify the differences between self and other, and the nationalist framework of which it is a citation. The discourse of the nation, as the primary means of subjectivity, then goes unmarked, an irreducible prerequisite of the subject, taken for granted, rather than interrogated as a performative construct.

Discourses of Emergence

As a corrective to the discourse of exile I offer a speculative discussion and exploration of a new, nonviolent hermeneutic based in the concept of *emergence*. I borrow this concept from binational Israeli/American hip hop artist Invincible (Ilana Weaver) and her recent project for social change, the Emergence Travel Agency (ETA). In contrast to the discourse of exile, emergence, as I envision it, involves a conceptual transposition of belonging beyond the territorially defined nation-state, nested within an ethics of a shared human vulnerability. In this sense, vulnerability and fear are not to be vanquished through state power, but are rather the starting points for mutual recognition, reciprocal exchange, and an intimate engagement.

Theorizing this struggle for recognition and the engagement of self and other, Levinas proposes the notion of the “face”: “Not in front of me, but above me; it is the Other before death, looking through and exposing death [...] the face is the Other who asks me not to let him die alone” (in Levinas and Kearney 1986:23–24). It is as if to do so would implicate the self as an accomplice in such a death. Here the Other, imagined in the face, is not defined simply in relation to the self, but rather lies outside of the self demanding a response:

The human face is the epiphany of the nakedness of the Other, a visitation, meeting, a saying, which comes in the passivity of the face, not threatening, but obligating. My world is ruptured, my contentment interrupted. I am already obligated. Here is an appeal from which there is no escape, a responsibility, and a state of being hostage. It is looking into the face of the Other that reveals the call to a responsibility that is before any beginning, decision or initiative on my part. (in Moran 2000:139)

In realizing the face of the Other we are ruptured, interrupted, held hostage to the obligation to respond. This obligation is the foundation of what Levinas termed an “ethics of responsibility.” To fully respond to the Other is to recognize the Other, to seek justice, to be responsible for the Other’s life above and beyond one’s own. In order to fully meet this obligation, one must be cognizant of the vulnerability of the Other and the fragility of life itself:

My ethical relation of love for the Other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being in the world [...] to expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the Other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the Other. (in Levinas and Kearney 1986:23–24)

This fundamental demand of the face begets an ethics of the precariousness of life whereby the needs of the Other are paramount to the needs of the self. Levinas's fundamental claim is not simply an ethics of responsibility for the Other, but that the very existence of the self is contingent upon and developed through this engagement. It is only through a primary relation with and response to the Other, what Levinas refers to as metaphysics or "first philosophy," that the self becomes knowable (Morgan 2011:4). It is the most fundamental reality, that which enables and grounds everything else. For in the moment we address the face we do more than simply acknowledge the existence of the Other; "in some way we come to exist in the very moment of being addressed," being recognized (Butler 2004:130). Levinas recognizes the epistemological problem of efforts to establish the self without first attending to the presence, the call, the obligation of the Other. Here recognition becomes the seminal act of awareness and the actualization of the self upon which all else is built.

In the work of Invincible's Emergence Travel Agency project, we may in fact find traces of Levinas's "ethics of responsibility" in practice. An Israeli who emigrated to the US in her adolescence, by the age of 15 Invincible had become a mainstay of the Detroit hip hop scene, developing a reputation for social activism on myriad issues: gentrification, minority disenfranchisement, and GLBTQ rights. Riding a wave of interest in Detroit-based rappers in the late 1990s, she turned down several lucrative recording contracts from labels hoping to make her into a female counterpart to Eminem. Instead she decided to found her own fair-trade hip hop label, Emergence Media, through which she records, produces, and distributes her work independently. She has since released one major album, *Shapeshifters* (2008), and a host of underground mixtapes and collaborations. She was recently recognized along with Lauryn Hill, Jean Grae, and Queen Latifah as one of the top five female rappers of all time.³ Along with the release of *Shapeshifters*, Invincible created a multimedia performance/activism web portal called the Emergence Travel Agency, where she presents music videos, links, and commentary surrounding her work. In describing the project Invincible writes:

[ETA] reveals the connections between people and places by creating media that resists displacement, gentrification, colonization, occupation, obstruction of movement, denial of the right to leave, and denial of the right to return. ETA is beyond borders, checkpoints, deportations, passports and dehumanizing immigration application processes. (Emergence Travel Agency 2010)

"ETA is a journey that begins online," she states, and it will continue until "we can all travel or stay where our hearts desire." The centerpiece of this project is her independently released single, "People Not Places." One of two songs she recorded to protest the Israeli occupation, it begins with a recording of a phone conversation the artist had with her mother about nostalgia for their Israeli home. Invincible asks, "Hey Ima, do you ever miss people back home?" After a long pause her mother replies, "I miss people...not places."

That simple response had a profound impact on the artist, both as a testament to the importance of life's personal relationships and to Israel's ongoing displacement of the indigenous Palestinian population. Thinking of that history, Invincible explains that she began to feel, "what a privilege it was to *not* miss that place, and to *not* prioritize that connection between people and places" (Emergence Travel Agency 2010). In many ways, this brief conversation elicited a sense of liberation, an emergence from the dominant Israeli nationalist discourse of exile and its compelled redemption rooted in the territorially defined nation-state. Nostalgia for "back home" and its linkages to imaginings of Jewish and Israeli identity were here fashioned in the image of the communal self, relationships, people, forged within essential practices of human dependency, vulnerability, and sociality.

3. See, for example, Gaines (2010) and The Top 13 (2010).

Building upon this conversation *Invincible* set to work on a 12-minute documentary/music video project entitled *People Not Places* (2010), as part of an international art exhibit commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian *al-Nakba* (catastrophe). The song depicts a fictional Birthright Israel tour, where the artist portrays two lead characters: the Birthright tour recruiter, and a questioning young American Jew seeking to uncover the recruiter's agenda.⁴ At each stop on the tour she exposes nationalist propaganda, literally peeling back state-sponsored posters to reveal and recognize a latent Palestinian presence and perspective.

Prepare for take off
Touch down — Ben-Gurion
Strict search make sure nobody enters with bombs
Blue white flags
For the Birthright Tour I'm on
Never mention three villages that the airport is on
Recent history buried, but it speaks through the sand
All Jews, Law of Return, I don't seem to understand
A land without a people for people without a land?
But I see a man standing with a key and a deed in his hand
(*Invincible* 2008)

Invincible's harsh critique strikes at the very heart of the Israeli nationalist narrative. As young participants in the 10-day educational program are greeted with the trappings of Israeli state power (flags, borders, customs, identification papers, body searches), they fail to see the indigenous Palestinian villages upon which the airport is built. State security ensures that “nobody enters with bombs,” yet in so doing the state indexically defines and affirms self and other in the elusive and illusory desire for national security. State mechanisms of representation and exclusion constitute the body politic through a disavowal of Palestinian presence and a dislocation (relocation) of Jewish subjectivity within the territorially defined and defended nation-state. For *Invincible* the Law of Return—the right of all Jews to gain Israeli citizenship—and the denial of Palestinian repatriation, the cornerstone of Israeli national identity, sustain a discourse that limits the intelligibility of non-Jewish lives and voices in Israel. It is not that Palestinians are poorly recognized, but that within the discourse of the Israeli nation-state they are unrecognizable, nonentities. Such a maneuver allows for and even sustains the fallacious trope of “a land without a people, for a people without a land” by disavowing the very existence of the Other. In recognizing Palestinian claims to legal property ownership in pre-1948 Palestine, *Invincible* questions the tactics through which such claims go unnoticed, unrecognized, or unheard.

First stop, Museum of the Holocaust
Walking outside, in the distance, saw a ghost throwing a Molotov
Houses burnt with kerosene, mass graves, couldn't bear the scene
It wasn't a pogrom, it was the ruins of Deir Yassin (*Invincible* 2008)

Following this, *Invincible* moves beyond mere recognition of non-Jewish presence and instead asserts a common vulnerability in Jewish and Palestinian lives. The combination of public spectacle and grief creates a powerful site for the fashioning of political communities

4. According to its website, Birthright Israel provides 10-day educational trips to Israel for Jewish young adults aged 18–26 as a means to diminish the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities around the world; to strengthen the sense of solidarity among world Jewry; and to strengthen participants' personal Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people. But perhaps the program's greatest goal, and strength, lies in its capacity to inspire a sense of Israeli identity and belonging among young American Jews in the hopes of encouraging them to move to Israel permanently (Birthright Israel 1999).

(Patraka 1999). This particular verse, inspired by the April 2009 firing of Itamar Shapira from his job as a tour guide at Yad Vashem for comparing the traumas of the Holocaust with the traumas experienced by Palestinians during 1948, extends this perspective by asserting a quasi-symmetry of suffering between victims of the Holocaust and victims of al-nakba (see Stern 2009). Here, Yad Vashem, as a powerful site of Holocaust remembrance and nation-building, offers a transgressive mapping of place given its proximity to the site of the depopulated Palestinian village of Deir Yassin.⁵ Although no markers, plaques, or memorials pay tribute to this ethnically cleansed village, upon exiting the Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem visitors are directly confronted with a panoramic view of its ruins, its absence. For those who recognize this absence, who know what they *aren't* seeing, Yad Vashem becomes an instrument of strategic intelligibility, a means to shape perceptions of self and other, and a citation of the larger discourse of exile and the nation-state.

In making this claim *Invincible* seems less concerned with diminishing the foundational position of the Holocaust in imaginings of Jewish identity and the Israeli state, than with forging a rhetorical space within which shared experiences of suffering and trauma may be recognized among all victims of nationalist projects motivated by the desire for ethno-national purity. Throughout Yad Vashem, visitors are confronted with a timeless edict—"never to forget man's inhumanity to man"—and yet the voices of those who perished at Deir Yassin a mere several hundred meters away go unheard. It is not merely that these two events need (or even should) be compared. The mechanics of quantifying suffering have been ceaselessly debated in both Palestinian and Israeli nationalist literatures. But rather, given their geographic proximity and the larger structural framing of man's unbounded inhumanity, the conventional practice of not "seeing" Deir Yassin needs to be understood as a particularly strategic citation of a larger discourse of not "seeing," a discourse of national intelligibility whereby Palestinians are unrecognizable nonentities.

Upon visiting Deir Yassin with her aged grandmother, one of the few surviving residents of the depopulated village, Dina Elmuti reflects quite beautifully on the poetics of not seeing in Israel/Palestine:

I can't help but feel as though the overwhelming irony is shamelessly mocking me as I stand there on the other side of Yad Vashem in Deir Yassin, where a massacre took place 62 years ago. I stood there honoring those whose names don't appear in a museum, whose voices are rarely, if ever, heard in the media, and whose legacies are insolently ignored and omitted from textbooks and classrooms, rendering them invisible to so many in the world. Standing there, I wonder if those who visit the museum look over to the other side and even know what occurred there some 60 years ago, whether or not they question what happened, and whether or not they feel any sympathy like they do for their own. Deir Yassin carries with it such magnitude, for it is not just the story of a massacre, but the story of two peoples—the victims and the victims of those victims—whose fates allowed them to be conjoined on stolen land. (Elmuti 2010)

The "hook," or chorus of *Invincible's* song, offers an opportunity to redress the unintelligibility of Palestinians in the Israeli national imaginary. Here *Invincible* stands before a poster advertisement for the Birthright tour. In it, a single airplane is pitted against a pale blue sky with the words "Take Off to Ben-Gurion: Discover Israel, Discover Yourself" stretched across the upper margins. Standing in front of the poster *Invincible* peels it back to reveal the image of a young Palestinian woman, fellow rapper Sabreena da Witch (Abeer al-Zinaty) wearing a traditional Palestinian *thawb* and *kuffiya*. As Sabreena emerges from beneath the poster, *Invincible* sings:

5. The Palestinian village of Deir Yassin was depopulated on 9 April 1948 by Jewish paramilitary groups. For further reading on the historical events leading up to its destruction see Pappé (2006) and Morris (2004).

My Ima [mother] misses people not places
 Has she seen the towns with names in Arabic the Hebrew replaces?
 The policies are evil and racist, deceitful and heinous
 You'll never be a peaceful state with legal displacement (Invincible 2008)

The second half of the chorus is then sung by Sabreena, situated behind the frame of the poster among various iconographic signs of Palestinian history, politics, and resistance (kuffīya, thawb, Kalishnakov rifle, microphone). Shifting register, the voice of the “unrecognized” sings in Arabic:

*Idbikr isma' al-biladnā
 Qabal ma yatījī wa badilbā
 Idbikr wa qūlī qūlī kayf
 mash taqla' waṭan 'aysh fīmā*

[Remember the names of our cities
 Before you came and replaced it
 Remember and tell me how
 Not to miss a nation
 living within us?] (Invincible 2008)

Invincible strategically operationalizes Palestinian difference in the service of her larger project of re-memoring, recognizing Palestinian presence, reorienting Israeli national history, and dismantling Zionist myth. This recognition of Palestinian presence has its limits, however. In the chorus, as Invincible peels back a Birthright poster imploring its audience to discover Israel, she reveals the young Palestinian woman, but her distance, her difference, her foreign-ness is maintained. Because Sabreena is singing in Arabic, the audience can only read her words in translation, and are prevented from connecting with her through language. This is particularly interesting given that the performer, Sabreena da Witch, is a very prominent hip hop artist herself, fully fluent in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. Given that the point of this song is to reveal and recognize the Palestinian presence in Israel, it is peculiar that her



Figure 4. *Invincible* (Ilana Weaver) with *Sabreena da Witch* (Abeer al-Zinaty) singing from behind the poster's frame in *People Not Places* (2010). (Screenshot by David McDonald)

voice is rendered foreign, other. Likewise, dressed in a traditional Palestinian gown, thawb, surrounded by iconographic signs of Palestinian history and resistance, Sabreena is portrayed not as the young, cosmopolitan, feminist that she is, but rather, as an artifact of history, an object of the gaze, and a relic of nationalist consequence. Finally, her presence in the video exists only in the enclosed spaces of the poster's frame. Once the poster is peeled back we see and hear her, but she remains captive in the frame, isolated, and distant. Never do the two artists come into contact with one another. It would seem that this attempt to humanize Palestinians, to situate Palestinians within a contemporary Israeli imaginary, concomitantly serves only to reinforce spatial, cultural, and temporal distances.

Responding to my criticism in one of our interviews, Sabreena disagreed.

The idea of the chorus was to remind people—especially Israelis and Americans—that there was a nation on the land before [19]48, there was a culture and language and costumes. That they are still there. Singing the chorus in Arabic provides the listener with the voice that Zionists are attempting so hard to erase and cancel. In her verses Ilana [Invincible] mentions names of cities and towns that were changed from Arabic names to Hebrew names, and the chorus says the same thing but in Arabic so that the listener will have a chance to hear the language that is being erased as a policy of colonialism.

Although I'm trilingual and can communicate in my music with all three languages I find it always most suitable to speak of Palestine in the Palestinian language and dialect. I believe it brings Palestine closer to the listener and it challenges their minds, as the mind is more active when a foreign language is being heard. The hope is that the listener will feel the meaning or will put an effort to understand what is being said. This way they will learn more than just a political statement. (Sabreena da Witch 2011)

In addition to using what might be considered essentialist iconography of Palestinian resistance, *Invincible* further plays with representations of Israeli Jewish identity. Stereotypes of both Israelis and Palestinians

are strategically performed, and by their contrast, call attention to the “real people” portrayed in the video—people who are questioning, seeking, and suffering. For example, the Birthright tour recruiter, performed by *Invincible*, appears in a periwinkle leisure suit, curly wig, thick glasses, and baseball cap. The recruiter smiles constantly, to the point of awkwardness, with arms wide in a welcoming embrace. This “used car salesman” characterization, as *Invincible* calls it, satirically



Figure 5. Invincible (Ilana Weaver) as a Birthright Israel tour recruiter, in People Not Places (2010). (Screenshot by David McDonald)

mocks both Zionism and Birthright for comedic effect, and is intended to contrast with her other persona in the video, a young progressive American Jew (*Invincible* 2011). Later, in the third verse and chorus, Sabreena's Palestinian folk-indigeniety contrasts with fellow rapper Suheil Nafar's contemporary urban street clothes and mannerisms. As Sabreena holds rigid postures of resistance, posing with microphone and turntable, Suheil moves naturally, his body assuming the typical fashion (oversized hoodie and jeans) and gestures of urban hip hop.

In each instance, conflicting depictions of Jewish and Palestinian identity are proffered as a means of historicizing and humanizing the so-called “real people” depicted. These depictions become a brilliant semiological tool of identification among her audiences, humanizing both Jews and Palestinians as progressive and urban, each struggling to negotiate competing discourses of modernity and the nation-state.

Empathy, Emergence, and the Post-Nation

At each phase of the Birthright tour, *Invincible* attempts to evacuate nationalist meaning to allow for a recognition of Palestinian history and presence. Sabreena adds that, “[this song] offers a different point of view, politically and socially. [...] It showcases a voice we do not usually hear [...] in the Israeli and American music scene” (Sabreena da Witch 2011). In my reading, this song is truly transgressive in its movement beyond the entrenched discourses of exile and the nation-state. More than merely a nuanced satire of Birthright and many of the founding

myths of Zionism, “People Not Places” is an exercise in rethinking, reframing, and reconceptualizing difference. Although situated in the dialectics of Jewish and Palestinian exile, *Invincible* implores her audience to awaken to the life of the Other, to see her face and respond to its call for justice: to privilege people over place. In a similar vein, Levinas writes:

[W]hat is essential in human spirituality does not lie in our relationship with the things which make up the world, but is determined by a relationship, effected in our very existence, with the pure fact that there is Being, the nakedness of this bare fact. ([1947] 2001:19)

Each of these writers privileges people over place, and takes radical steps to conceptualize the self within a primary process of engagement with and attending to the vulnerability of the Other. For Levinas peace arises in the “awakeness to the precariousness of the Other” (Peperzak et al. 1996:167). If the self cannot survive “by itself alone,” without the recognition, the address, of the Other, then it would follow that a lasting peace might only arrive through an empathic “awakeness to the precariousness of the Other.” What I have labeled here a discourse of emergence seeks to dislocate us from our entrenched subject positions, by situating self and other within that mutual struggle for recognition, to be truly seen as fragile, vulnerable beings. We all seek this recognition.

Nevertheless, the movement towards emergence requires several discursive transpositions, many of which are easily seen in this particular hip hop song. First, *Invincible* detaches subjectivity from the territoriality of place. Second, she resists the temptation to narrate the self from the first person. Rather, she explicitly recounts the Israeli nationalist narrative from the perspective of its Others, its victims, revealing in vivid detail the ways in which Israeli lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others. And perhaps most importantly, *Invincible* begins the story of the experience of violence not with actions committed against the communal “we,” but rather attends to the violence and vulnerability of the Other, in symmetrical dialogue with the vulnerability of the self: “You’ll never be a peaceful state with legal displacement.”

No doubt, these are all very difficult steps to take. And in taking them, *Invincible* has encountered a great deal of resistance from Zionist organizations in the US. One might wonder if she would be willing to perform this song in Israel, or in a Hebrew translation: a question that was asked but never answered in our interviews. Given that her primary audience is American youth, or perhaps more specifically, young American Jews who may be considering participating in the Birthright program, I wonder if there is space for this message in the Israeli public sphere. Preliminary research in album sales, radio playlists, and informal discussions with Israeli Jewish rappers has revealed that *Invincible* has had very little impact in the Israeli pop music scene even though songs calling for an end to the occupation are not uncommon.

Despite this, *Invincible* considers herself to be in political exile, avoiding compulsory military service in Israel. “Most of my family in Israel refuses to speak to me,” she admits in an interview with journalist Rachel Swan; “[they] pretty much cut me off for my views” (in Swan 2008:3). Performing exclusively in America, it seems *Invincible* is afforded a more malleable political environment in which to make these claims. Likewise, it would be perhaps more difficult for Palestinian hip hop artists to publically abandon the quest for an independent nation-state, given that it has historically been the cornerstone of Palestinian cultural practice and affiliation. Nevertheless, in touring North America with several other hip hop artists, including DAM, *Invincible* has begun a process wherein conceptions of Israel and Palestine are open to radical re-imagination. Sabreena da Witch, for example, released an album that displaces national anxieties by speaking out against the “internal occupations” felt by all women living under intolerant patriarchy (Sabreena da Witch 2010).

These newest compositions seem to transcend the tired dialectics of Israel/Palestine in favor of subaltern empowerment outside the discourses of exile and the nation-state. Likewise, in turning towards international music scenes and markets Tamer Nafar and his DAM cohort have

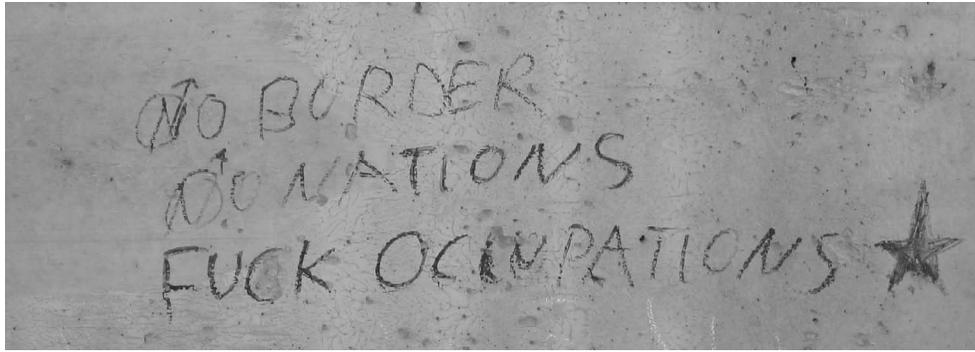


Figure 6. Graffiti on the Israeli “Security” Wall adjacent to Checkpoint 300 in 2005. (Photo by David McDonald)

begun shifting their political stance as well. Interviewed in the *Boston Globe* while on a 2011 North American tour, Nafar was quoted as saying, “we don’t believe in Palestine; we believe in freedom in general—when it comes to sex, to studies, to art, whatever you want. We believe in the idea of freedom of expression” (in Mitter 2011:C3).

This statement exemplifies a profound transformation in DAM’s performative politics, signaling a dynamic new approach. Over time DAM has strategically engineered its political message in relation to its desired audience. For the group to publically shift their approach towards “freedom” rather than “Palestine” is tremendously risky, given their financial dependence upon local and international solidarity networks and organizations. Although “freedom” maybe considered congruent with larger nationalist goals of self-determination, Nafar’s statement is surely transgressive in relation to the larger history of Palestinian nationalist song (McDonald 2013). Perhaps what we are witnessing are the seeds of a new postcolonial and post-nationalist discourse of emergence that resists traditional boundaries and the compulsions of exile and the nation-state, and explores the consequences of *seeing*—a kind of seeing in which mutual vulnerability and shared cultural and historical connections form the foundation for conceptualizing the self. A similar sentiment can be found among the *mélange* of graffiti adorning Israel’s “security” barriers. Simply scrawled in black marker just outside checkpoint 300, which separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem, is the poignant message, “No Border, No Nations, Fuck Occupations.”

The consequences of such an emergence are far-reaching. If the primary force shaping and sustaining the discourse of exile and the nation-state is the pervasive need to banish fear and vulnerability to the Other, if the nation-state is merely a machination of recognition, protection, and safety performatively articulated in quiet anxieties of the precariousness of life, then perhaps an awareness of collective vulnerability to and responsibility for the Other would render such machinations unnecessary. Perhaps, by attending to the primary process of address and the need for recognition and response, we may find our resulting collective vulnerability a powerful place from which to emerge, to know, and to understand ourselves through our others.

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