In the fall of 2012 Palestinian hip-hop group DAM released a provocative music video titled, “If I Could Go Back in Time,” focusing on so-called “honor crimes.” Despite widespread support for their previous work, “If I Could Go Back in Time” drew considerable criticism for de-contextualizing, romanticizing, and by extension disempowering Palestinian women. Through a critical analysis of this music video as well as the ensuing debate surrounding its interpretation and reception, this article argues that the critical interventions made by politically engaged hip-hop artists, such as DAM, offer a unique vantage point with which to better understand the contested terrain of Palestinian activism. By tracing DAM’s long history of political engagement this article examines the discourses that determine “acceptable” forms of activism among competing publics, and further demonstrates how the field of popular culture serves to shape (both positively and negatively) the potential impact of, and audience for, any activist intervention. Drawing from the recent release of the bi-national feature film, Junction 48, this article further explores how DAM front man, Tamer Nafar, has attempted to displace the compassionate gaze of international audiences, respond to colonial logics of elimination, and carve out autonomous spaces for self-reflection and radical vulnerability.

**KEYWORDS** popular music, critical theory, film and television

“TRADITION AND THE ANTI-POLITICS MACHINE”

Since their meteoric rise during the Al-Aqsa Intifada (1998-2006) Palestinian-Israeli hip-hop group DAM has established itself as the foremost hip-hop collective in the Arab Middle East. Their initial success came as a result of several independently released singles, a successful studio album, *Dedication* (2006), and two highly acclaimed documentaries, *Channels of Rage* (dir. Anat Halachmi; 2003) and *Slingshot Hip-Hop* (dir. Jackie Salloum; 2005). Each of these projects drew international praise for its explicit activism, documenting Palestinian experiences of racial oppression and foreign occupation. As the immediacy of the Intifada faded from public view, however, DAM began to take on new issues and new techniques of narration. Their second studio album, *Dabke on the Moon* (2012), demonstrates this transformation. In a departure from their signature diatribes against Israeli oppression, DAM in this album takes on issues interior to Palestinian life: religious patriarchy, domestic violence, inter-sectarian relationships, drug abuse, and mass incarceration. Commenting on this change in approach, DAM member Mahmoud Jrere wrote, “*Dedication* was an album where we told the facts, *Dabke on the Moon* is . . . where we tell stories. Musically and lyrically each album reflects a different age” (Anderson 2012).
While *Dabke on the Moon* certainly reflects a different age, one in which the group no longer needed to establish itself as credible rappers, the album was nevertheless strongly criticized by international critics for not being political enough and by local audiences for being too “pop” (i.e. cosmopolitan), missing key Palestinian musical markers and aesthetics (Nesheiwant 2012). Esteemed scholars Lila Abu-Lughod and Maya Mikdashi went so far as to accuse the group of abandoning its politics and succumbing, i.e. selling out, to international influence. At issue was the group’s 2012 music video “If I Could Go Back in Time,” co-directed by Jackie Salloum and her husband, former DAM member Suhell Nafar. The video presents the tragic story of a young woman killed by her brother and father for attempting to escape an arranged marriage. Told in reverse chronological order, the video graphically depicts the intra-family femicide, while the artists move through the scenes, angrily lashing out at an intractable religious patriarchy. The video was produced with the support and funding of the UN women’s rights organization United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, and its release coincided with their international media campaign. While this wasn’t the first time DAM had taken on violence against women in their work (*see al-hurīyya unta*), it was the first time they approached the subject in partnership with an international aid agency.1

Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi’s strong critique of the video, published in the online magazine *al-Jadaliyya*, censured the rappers for myriad offenses, most notably for de-contextualizing, romanticizing, and by extension disempowering women. At the heart of this critique was the claim that by taking on so-called “honor crimes” DAM fell into an orientalist trap, reproducing a political logic that situates Palestinian women as “victims of their culture, to be championed by young men with enlightened views, and by foreign intervention in international aid” (Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi 2012a).2 The video, they claimed, failed to provide adequate cultural, political, and historical context, leaving the impression that “honor crimes” are symptomatic of a “barbaric culture and enduring [Palestinian] tradition.” Without providing adequate “thickness” of Palestinian lives, they argued, DAM inadvertently reinforced, and perhaps justified, “the conviction that it is Palestinians’ backwardness and lack of civilization that should be blamed for violence against women in the community.” Rather, the group would have been better served to remind audiences of “the structural violence that is usually front and center in their songs,” i.e. the occupation. “Honor crimes,” they claimed, require a more nuanced discussion, one that acknowledges how the practice is too often co-opted by international organizations as a tool to justify racial hatred and military occupation. Rapping about “honor crimes” to an international audience only invites orientalist thinking, increasing the precarity of Palestinians while unraveling sincere efforts to make gendered violence visible globally.

In this article I explore several of the underlying issues alluded to above: Palestinian activism, gendered violence, popular culture, and vulnerability. In particular, I use the

1. *al-hurīyya unta* [Freedom for My Sister] was one of DAM’s first songs to explicitly engage with the theme of violence against women.
2. The term “honor crime” is quoted directly from Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi’s essay. The more accepted term “intra-family femicide” or simply “femicide” is used throughout this article following Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif (2012).
controversy surrounding DAM’s “If I Could Go Back in Time” as an entry point into a larger discussion on the contested terrain of Palestinian “resistance.” From this, I explore the recent release of the bi-national (Israeli/Palestinian) feature film, Junction 48, as a harbinger of a new, and potentially more effective, form of Palestinian activism. This episode of public engagement between internationally known hip-hop artists and the academics who study them presents several fascinating lines of inquiry for thinking about the relational dynamics of popular culture, activism, and vulnerability in Israel and in Palestine (Stein and Swedenburg 2005: 11). For example, in times of crisis how does popular culture serve to influence, both positively and negatively, the potential impact of, and audience for, activist intervention? Are engaged artists, and in particular Palestinian artists, obligated to remain obedient to the political demands of their international allies or their local communities? What effect might radical self-critique and vulnerability have on the larger project of Palestinian self-determination? And finally, how might DAM’s recent work redirect the “compassionate gaze” of international audiences toward meaningful activist goals?

As internationally recognized artists, DAM has been subjected to intense scrutiny and critique by both allies and adversaries. While adversaries often seek to discredit their emancipatory (Anti-Zionist) political message, allies are equally anxious: troubled that a hip-hop collective carries such an inordinate (and unprecedented) amount of influence in the representation of Palestinians across the world. Without a developed state apparatus, media infrastructure, or independent cultural economy, DAM (and especially its front man, Tamer Nafar) has assumed a political status well beyond that of any of their contemporaries. Since their debut in 2002, DAM has emerged as the most influential and widely recognized Palestinian artists in the world. And with international visibility comes immense expectation. As pseudo-state representatives, conscripted activists, and at times unwilling advocates, DAM faces immense pressure to advance the nationalist causes of diverse constituencies. Balancing the needs and expectations of local, national, and international audiences has proven increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Rooted in local experience, evolving as creative artists, and yet dependent of international patronage, DAM often struggles to negotiate the contested terrain of Palestinian activism, leaving audiences wanting and expecting more. These expectations are the result of the uncomfortable realization that DAM inordinately represents Palestinians around the world. In this article I argue that while shouldering this incredible responsibility, DAM has nevertheless persisted in developing a new, and potentially more effective, form of activism rooted in creative self-expression, local experience, self-critique, and collective vulnerability.

“Culturalizing” Violence
Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi drew much of their critique from the ongoing movement among international policy brokers to reframe gendered violence using simplistic and essentialized understandings of “tradition” and “culture.” In her work on transnational advocacy networks, Celeste Montoya notes that since 2004 international policy has dramatically shifted from global action against gendered violence toward more narrow terms focused on “cultural” forms of violence, such as femicide and female genital mutilation. According to
Montoya, this reframing is, “rooted in and reinforces xenophobic and racist discourses” (Montoya 2017). The “culturalization of violence,” she argues, serves only to justify the marginalization of vulnerable groups by situating Third World women as perennial victims of “barbaric others.”

Montoya’s 2013 book further demonstrates that policy makers’ efforts to culturalize violence have dangerous consequences for the communities they claim to protect. According to her research, international efforts to address femicide do not result in increased safety of women. Rather, such efforts serve only to reinforce colonialist assumptions that gendered violence is a kind of Third World cultural pathology. When the violence of the other is pathologized, Montoya writes, we justify their othering while excusing and normalizing gendered violence in the West. If international aid agencies are sincerely interested in addressing gendered violence in a meaningful way, then their efforts should focus on the myriad ways in which gendered violence is experienced globally in concert with other forms of oppression. To focus on a single axis of gender oppression leaves the movement vulnerable to co-optation and further undermines the potential solidarity work necessary to establish and sustain a strong international movement to end gendered violence (Montoya 2013).

In the Palestinian context this culturalization can be particularly damaging. Femicide is too often reported by police and news media as based on “family honor,” framing murder as somehow culturally legitimate and bestowing honor on the murderer. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif eloquently write, “[This kind of] culturalization not only lifts the responsibility from the criminal justice system to protect abused women, but also allows the Israeli system to position itself as superior, as belonging to a more ’modern’ and ’advanced’ culture” (2012). Culturalization thus works in concert with the colonial project, justifying otherness and pitting Palestinians against themselves.

**DAM Responds**

Approximately one month after Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi published their critique, DAM responded with their own essay in al-Jadaliyya. Pushing back against the insinuation that they were politically naïve, the rappers explained, “This song is one chapter of many in a compilation. Each piece offers a portion of what DAM addresses. We should not have to mention the occupation in every song to prove our political legitimacy” (Nafar 2012). This issue is key. Since its formation DAM has skillfully negotiated a political terrain that demands Palestinian artists only speak in relation to Israeli state violence. As such, their early work focused on documenting the experiences of Palestinians living under occupation and as a targeted minority population in Israel. Speaking out against other forces of oppression seemingly betrayed the demands of international audiences singularly focused on ending the occupation. Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi’s expectation that the group focus its efforts on “structural violence” (i.e. Israeli oppression) is problematic in at least three ways. First, it presumes that gendered violence is not structural. Second, it reveals the conflicted and paradoxical terrain Palestinian artists must navigate as they seek international patronage (Kanaaneh 2013: 4–8). And third, it essentializes Palestinians as objects of Israeli oppression (Faulkner 2014).
For DAM this song was about more than career advancement. It was about matters of local concern. Their infamous hometown, Lyd/Ramleh, claims one of the highest rates of murdered women in the Middle East. DAM continues:

“If I Could Go Back in Time” is a testimony to the women whose families murdered them over the last few years in Lyd, where we live. These deaths do not include the countless women who are subject to abuse and depression in their homes. This issue is not confined to Israeli occupation. We see Arab women being killed over the so-called “honor of the family” in Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, and many other places. There are no Israeli tanks over there. Domestic violence against women happens in all societies and we, as Arab men and women, are fighting against it in our own way . . .

There is nothing politically problematic with a 3 ½ minute track that focuses on violence against women in our community. In fact, we believe this focus to be a crucial part of our broader political project. Fighting the occupation and fighting sexism and patriarchy is, for DAM, one fight . . .

We have a strategy that we are implementing. We see the risks in singing about Arab social and political issues. DAM is addressing an Arab audience in Arabic. We can speak to our own communities without being worried about how others will abuse it [emphasis added]. (Nafar 2012)

These comments pose several important questions: To whom are DAM responsible in their activist work? And in times of crisis what are the aesthetic, political, and cultural lines which delineate “acceptable” forms of activism among various stakeholders? This issue is also key. For while Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi were rightfully concerned with the optics of this song among international audiences, they nevertheless failed to take into account its potential impact within and among the local communities for whom it was intended. Rapping about “honor crimes,” DAM attempts to make a critical intervention into the politicized landscape of Palestinian life. Bringing such a profoundly sensitive topic to light inevitably risks international co-optation and stigma, but, and perhaps more importantly, for its intended audiences, it creates essential spaces for intimate dialogue. Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi’s critique seemingly emerges from their (privileged) position as international scholars working for Palestinian self-determination. And in this instance, it appears they wrongly assumed that DAM was performing in the service of their interests alone.

DAM’s response further reinforces the local dynamics of the song. While the video was funded and promoted by international agencies, the song itself was born of local experience and local concern. DAM remains rooted in their hometown. As such, Lyd and nearby Ramleh feature prominently in their work. Tamer Nafar is passionate about his neighborhood, currently living only blocks away from his childhood home. His activism has always been directed at these streets, informed by the experiences of his friends and neighbors. And like

many of DAM’s songs, “If I Could Go Back in Time” was written in a moment of crisis. Nafar explains:

In 2010 more than 10 girls were murdered [in Lyd/Ramleh]. Without going into personal matters too much, let’s say that this is not something we just read about in the paper. We knew at least two girls who were murdered. Either we shopped with them at the grocery store, or we went to school with them, or they came to our show. We also know some of the murderers. (Shalev 2012)

Lyd is more than a setting for “If I Could Go Back in Time.” It provides important context for interpreting DAM’s larger activist agenda. Nearly all of Lyd’s original 50,000 inhabitants were expelled by order of Jewish forces in 1948, forced to walk en masse across Jordanian lines (Morris 2008: 408, Spangler 2015: 156). The approximately 1,000 Palestinians who remained were subsequently relocated from their homes to accommodate an influx of Jewish refugees from neighboring Arabic-speaking countries (Monterescu and Rabinowitz 2012: 16). Once the city had been fully resettled, it quickly transformed into one of Israel’s “mixed towns,” the frontlines for ethnic engagement between Israel’s disadvantaged Palestinian, Mizrahi, and Ashkenazi communities (Yacobi 2012). Inter-communal violence, crime, and high unemployment left Lyd’s Palestinian residents vulnerable to state violence and a self-protecting Islamic conservatism such that religious sanctions and traditional kinship structures remain prominent forms of local governance (Karkabi 2013: 315). Lyd’s geographic location further isolated its residents from Israel’s more affluent/cosmopolitan Arab cities (Haifa, Jaffa). Amidst state marginalization and a self-protecting traditionalism, Palestinian political organizing has been difficult to sustain (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif 2012). As a result, Lyd has come to be defined by its marginalization from the state, its rampant drug trafficking, and its religious conservatism.

With the rise of DAM in 2002, Lyd’s Palestinian youth community had seemingly found its voice. Tamer Nafar carried his experiences around the world, rapping about life in Lyd especially, but also of Palestinians in Israel and under occupation. As a result of his international acclaim, Tamer Nafar now holds an incredibly influential voice in Palestinian society. He takes this role very seriously, investing considerable time and energy into developing an activist platform for Lyd’s Palestinian residents. As the group began writing its second album Palestinian women were being killed by intra-family femicide in record numbers. In Lyd and neighboring Ramleh, ten women had been murdered between 2006 and 2012, and in Ramleh’s Al-Jawareesh neighborhood alone, ten women were killed between 2000 and 2008 (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif 2012). Reflecting on the moment, Tamer Nafar explained the impact these murders had on the group and their motivation for writing “If I Could Go Back in Time”:

It keeps happening to girls we know. If we don’t know the girl, we know the man who did it. It’s a small city. It needs to be talked about. Now everyone is talking about the song, whether they like it or not and it is becoming a conversation. I’m glad it’s out there. For DAM, we want to talk about injustice without giving a damn who is responsible for it. (Nesheiwat 2012).
While Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi clearly interpreted the video through an international gaze, local Palestinian activists, and in particular feminist activists, celebrated its release. For those working in the trenches to provide shelter and support for Palestinian women, “If I Could Go Back in Time” was a welcome intervention. It brought the issue out into the open for public debate. More importantly, it directly engaged the concept of “honor” by attacking and discrediting murder as a form of Palestinian tradition. The fact that this message was delivered by Lyd’s most famous celebrities, men who carried the mantle of representing Palestine in popular music around the world, dramatically increased its impact and immediacy. Knowing that the song would draw critique, DAM took on this local crisis. And as a result, the group earned a great deal of respect among local Palestinian activists.

While it is clear that DAM wrote “If I Could Go Back in Time” for local audiences, for the victims, perpetrators, and witnesses in their community, it is not surprising that Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi would take another approach. Since the beginning, DAM has balanced the demands and expectations of diverse groups. They struggle against Israeli marginalization and occupation by committing themselves to a national Palestinian agenda, while at the same time rebelling against the social and religious conventions of their own community. It is their engagement with a multiplicity of audiences that broadens their impact and influence. It is also the reason why they have endured such critique. DAM concluded their published response to Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi with the following charge:

This is precisely the moment when we should dispense with concerns over how we may be read (particularly by the West). Propaganda will exploit any issue it deems fit, this does not mean we should turn a blind eye. Arabs are standing up and demanding a change from within. We see, “If I Could Go Back in Time,” as one effort of many in these momentous times. . .

We are part of a new artistic movement in Palestine that is secure enough to take on the occupation and domestic violence, racism and sexism. We will not shy away from engaging our society’s taboos. We believe we can, and we must, tackle these issues with openness, bravery, and honesty. (Nafar 2012)

With “If I Could Go Back in Time” DAM seeks to join a post-2011 artistic movement founded upon a new kind of anti-oppression politics: one in which the violence of the occupation is but one of many sites of potential intervention. This is an artistic movement secure enough in its message to look inward, to confront social taboos, regardless of potential consequence. On another level, this episode has inadvertently revealed the contested and highly problematic terrain of Palestinian activism and the international gaze. Inasmuch as Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi criticized DAM for not adhering to the implicit demands of anti-occupation rhetoric, first, by “forget[ting] the greedy and complex realities of life on the ground,” and second, by subjecting Palestinians to further stigma and de-humanization, with “If I Could Go Back in time” DAM may have stumbled upon a new (and perhaps more effective) form of political intervention based in self-critique and collective vulnerability. DAM’s refusal to conform to conventional models of anti-occupation protest song has hence created spaces for radical subjectivity
and self-representation beyond the international gaze. This move reimagines popular culture as an infrastructural means to develop new solidarities and new pathways for connection within and beyond the nation state (Karkabi 2017).

**JUNCTION 48**

With the recent release of the award-winning feature film, *Junction 48* (dir. Udi Aloni; 2016), DAM frontman, Tamer Nafar, has revived the discussion of gendered violence, popular culture, and vulnerability in Palestine. Working with Israeli-Jewish Director Udi Aloni, Nafar co-wrote (with Oren Moverman) and starred in this semi-biographical film, telling the story of Kareem (Tamer Nafar), an aspiring Palestinian rap artist trying desperately to break into the Tel Aviv hip-hop scene. Through a coming-of-age romance between Kareem and Manar (Samar Qupti), the film depicts the struggles of a new generation caught in multiple worlds: Palestinian citizens of Israel negotiating the colonial state politics of erasure as well as the demands of Arab nationalism and Islamic patriarchy. As Kareem attempts to navigate the political obstacles of the Israeli music scene, he is confronted with a series of crises. His friends are targeted by street violence and police harassment. His girlfriend’s cousins have forbidden her to date. His friend’s family home is targeted for demolition. And after a family tragedy his mother begins working as an indigenous healer. Each of these moments presents Kareem with an existential crisis, wherein he must redefine himself in relation to his surroundings. In the process Kareem undergoes a profound transformation.

As the title of the film suggests, Kareem and his cohort live at the junction of competing social, political, and cultural discourses. Kareem’s struggles to balance his career ambitions with his loyalty to his Palestinian community and to reconcile his secular cosmopolitan lifestyle with indigenous customs and beliefs reflect many of the themes Nafar has been rapping about for years. But, inasmuch as the film focuses on the structural violence of the state, it also addresses forces of oppression within Palestinian society as well. Much like “If I Could Go Back in Time,” *Junction 48* explores intersectional experiences of oppression endemic to Palestinian life.

While the primary conflict pivots on the protagonists’ efforts to challenge the impending demolition of a friend’s family home, the majority of character development occurs in the story of Kareem and Manar’s budding relationship. Coming from two different cultural and economic backgrounds, Kareem and Manar find common ground in music. As their relationship develops, it becomes increasingly difficult to hide their love from Manar’s family. When news of an upcoming hip-hop concert leaks, Manar’s male relatives threaten violence if she performs publicly on stage. Fearing femicide, Kareem forbids Manar from performing with him. In the aftermath Kareem realizes that his response, while well-intentioned, exhibits a similar form of patriarchy, denying Manar the agency to decide for herself how to proceed. Ultimately, Kareem yields, welcoming Manar to perform with him on stage. The choice is hers. The film then ends without resolution: Manar, dressed for the performance, staring out her bedroom window deciding whether to risk going out, while her cousins remain staked out in front of her family home.
The Feminine Nakba

As if responding to Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi’s initial charge of superficial engagement with intra-family femicide, in co-writing the screenplay Nafar delves more deeply into the dynamics of religious patriarchy and gendered violence. The storyline is more nuanced, presenting multiple subject positions and experiences. While certainly manipulated for dramatic effect, perhaps to the point of cliché, the threat of femicide presents opportunities for character development, dialogue, and engagement. Once the initial threats are made, we witness the responses of various characters: male and female, religious and secular, old and young. These responses are complex, eschewing simplistic interpretations of good and bad, right and wrong. And in its final resolution, the viewer is left with a more textured understanding of how, and under what circumstances, femicide might occur, as well as the various means through which individuals might collaborate in response. Reflecting on his motivations for writing the script, Tamer Nafar stated:

The film was an abstract way of showing that there is also a feminine nakba [catas
trophe]. Because other than us being oppressed, me, as a man. I am an oppressor as well. . . . It was me trying to show, to take responsibility for the things that I do wrong as a man. (Barrows-Freidman 2017)

During one of our interviews I asked Tamer to clarify this point:

So, in a way it is criticizing my own self. My own living. It is about feminism in a way. But because somehow, we think that chauvinism lies only in religious people, like it is an Arabic [sic] thing. And it is not. I really wanted to make it clear that it is a male thing. It’s not an Arab thing. Don’t tell me that it is an Arab thing. It is a man thing. Like yes, we kill on the ‘honor’ of the family, and in Egypt they almost raped women in the square [Tahrir]. In India they rape women. In the US they have pornography. In Eastern Europe they have women trafficking. So, don’t lay it on me. It’s not bad Arabs. It is bad men [emphasis added]. (Nafar 2017a)

Kareem’s relationship with Manar presents several opportunities to confront the toxic masculinity alluded to in these comments. As the threat of femicide compels each of the main characters to confront their positionality to gendered violence, in its resolution, the film, eschews culturalizing such violence as merely the result of Palestinian tradition. Palestinians are represented on all sides of the discussion, each with their own motivations, biases, and worldviews. And while no solution is offered, the audience nevertheless bears witness to an intimate encounter of immediate and local concern: families, friends, and loved ones trying to understand one another under threat of violence.

“If Only” [Ya Reit]

Kareem’s ongoing transformation occurs most poignantly in the performance of the film’s signature track, “If Only” [ya rait]. Reflecting upon the violence of his upbringing, the pressures and obligations of Palestinian resistance, as well as the conventional masculine
imperatives of hip-hop, Kareem pens a love song to Manar, documenting his ultimate desire for a new way of being in the world.

If only I could write you a song full of clichés, but it’s the one thing I can’t do. I want to imagine us kissing in the rain, but I hate the rain. It reminds me of our leaking roof.

I hide my love songs in the drawer, I’ll return to them after my problems are solved. Now I’m soaking wet at your doorstep, pull me out of these streets. Cover me with your clothes, I’m afraid to be weak in front of you.

Exorcise the demon of poverty out of me; the demon of oppression; the feeling that there is no tomorrow. Exorcise my demon of drugs; the loans to the banks. And hug me like there is no tomorrow.

I write against the siege on Gaza, against those who brought us darkness. I write for the camps, and meanwhile the love song is a refugee in my drawer. I am a refugee on your doorstep. Remind me that oppression is a border, not a need. Take off my clothes, I am ready to stand naked and weak in front of you.

Create the demon of wisdom in me; the demon of trust. So I won’t fear you, nor for you. Create the demon of passion in me; the demon of revolution. I will fight for both freedom and love.

“If Only” stands in stark departure from the hyper-masculine songs previously presented in the film. Melodic, slow, deliberate, tender, Kareem’s transformation occurs musically. Rather than spitting rhymes for angry effect, Kareem sings his desire to be free from Palestinian resistance. He seeks to be free from politics, from poverty, from drugs, from conventional masculine imperatives. He seeks the privilege of being nonpolitical, to sing a love song full of clichés. But ultimately, Kareem seeks the privilege of vulnerability, to stand naked, without fear of, nor for, his beloved.

In one of our interviews, Tamer Nafar explained his approach to co-writing this song:

I am in love with this melody. Because the character in the movie is all about rap, sound, effects, but this last song [is] because of the emotion, because the character breaks a lot of inside borders in his spirit. He transforms. He breaks borders and becomes something else. Even musically he is different. Musically he is something more.

That’s what the song is basically saying. I wish I could write you love songs full of clichés... I want to demolish one wall [the Israeli ‘Separation Wall’], but at the same time I have built a wall between us. This is the whole point of the song. In my generation. Because sometimes we can do demonstrations against the ‘Separation Wall,’ and we can live separated. Man alone and women alone. I wish I could write you a love song full of clichés, but somehow, I can’t write anything but politics. Somehow, I am very good at describing the political situation, but when it comes to a love song I find my own borders. I create my own borders. (Nafar 2017a)

It was at this point in the conversation that Nafar pivoted toward reimagining masculinity, hip-hop, and the obligations he feels as a Palestinian activist:

That is why I am writing against honor that was written by men. Because men, we define honor. I am writing against the siege over Gaza, and against those who are...
stealing the lights and electricity. I’m writing for refugees, and I’m writing against the dictators living in their big castles. Remind me that politics is something that we need to fight, but it is not something that we need to write. I need to fight it, I don’t need to write it.

This is just an example of the process he [Kareem] is going through. And for me [Tamer] . . . as a rapper to say that I’m willing to stand and be weak in front of you, I think there is an emotional process that I [Tamer] have been through. And that is why I am in love with this song. Because above politics, above society, [for men] it is still a weakness to show weakness.

And [this] is something that hip-hop has been pushing against for a long time. How do we maintain this masculinity without all of the bad things that come along with it? In this song I am trying to step outside of that [hyper-masculine] tradition, and develop a new kind of hip-hop. (Nafar 2017a)

It is this profound transformation of conventional understandings of hip-hop, masculinity, and Palestinian activism that I seek to amplify. Tamer Nafar’s desire for freedom is not only directed against a pervasive colonial enterprise, but also against a discourse that envisions resistance as inherently masculine (Butler 2016). So, under what conditions might we imagine Tamer Nafar’s call for radical self-critique and vulnerability, his “willingness to stand and be weak in front of you,” as an effective mobilizing force in the drive for Palestinian self-determination? In what ways might vulnerability advance emancipatory goals? And how might such a move compel a new, and much-needed, decoupling of masculinity and resistance in Palestine?

VISIBILITY, PRECARITY, AND THE LOGIC OF ELIMINATION
Tamer Nafar’s attempts to humanize Palestinian experiences, to inhabit new (non) political spaces, and to rewrite the codes of normative masculinity each occur within an environment wherein Palestinian lifeways are strategically erased from public view. To wit, Patrick Wolfe has effectively argued that, the Israeli state (as a settler-colony) is founded upon a “logic of elimination,” whereby indigenous bodies/histories/presence must be eliminated in the act of constructing a new colonial society (Wolfe 2006: 389). The fundamental premise of the settler-colony rests upon an empty landscape. So goes the Zionist trope, “a land without a people, for a people without land” (Said 1979: 9, Khalidi 1997: 101). The “logic of elimination” thus relies upon and produces differential visibilities through which the settler-colony can be instantiated and normalized (seen) while the natives’ presence erased (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2010: 10). Anti-colonial politics, therefore, always entails some kind of intervention into the field of visibility (Arendt 1958, Ranciere 1999). In Junction 48’s climactic scene where a friend’s family home is demolished so as to build a National Museum of Co-Existence, we witness Wolfe’s “logic of elimination” in practice. The Israeli narrative of progressive “co-existence” is ironically premised upon the erasure of the indigenous bodies with whom it claims to coexist. Homes are demolished because, according to state discourse (maps, laws, permits), they were never really there in the first place. Their inhabitants’ resulting displacement similarly goes unseen in that their erasure only confirms and sustains the “logic of elimination” of which the demolition is
an example. In a field where “Palestinian personhood is unintelligible, Palestinian suffering is invisible, and regular demands for rights and recognition are therefore always and already foreclosed,” (Hamami 2016: 174) the struggle becomes one of appearance (Arendt 1958: 199; Ranciere 1999:74). In particular, how, and under what conditions might Palestinians begin to appear, to be seen and heard as grievable subjects worthy of empathy and recognition (Butler 2009: 2–5)? What rhetorical, discursive, gestural, or performative moves might then be necessary to bridge this ontological divide? And how might acts of counter-visibility and counter-narrative advance this process?

As an act of counter-visibility, Junction 48 facilitates seeing and hearing Palestinians beyond the “logic of elimination.” Insofar as Kareem and his cohort hold a very public music performance on top of his friend’s demolished home to raise awareness of Israeli state-violence, the film itself seeks to mobilize Palestinians as visible, legible, knowable subjects. In each of these acts of intervention the artists seek to bridge the visible and the invisible, the familiar and the unfamiliar. Not unlike the long history of Palestinian national cinema, Junction 48 deploys counter-narrative and counter-visibility in the service of emancipatory goals (Dabashi 2006, Gertz and Khleifi 2008).

And yet, it is equally important to consider how forms of popular culture do much more than merely facilitate appearance. Feature films and popular music create essential spaces of transgressive interaction and engagement (Karkabi 2013: 310–11). If politics involves an intervention into the field of the visible, then any act of political intervention presumes/requires a “stage,” or space, within which its assertions are made possible, its politics performed. These are spaces that allow for the interaction of bodies that would not normally interact; spaces that redefine “what can be seen and what should be thought, talked about, and taken into account;” spaces that compel a “reimagining of another world within the one that currently exists” (Faulkner 2014: 149).

Feature films like Junction 48 create openings for alternative worlds, spaces for counter-visibility, connection, and creation. Through narrative, performance, and gesture, audiences are imaginatively embedded within, and situated alongside, precarious communities in an act of transgressive visibility. In the story of Kareem, Manar, and their cohort, audiences bear witness to the precarity of Israel’s unseen Others. And in the act of witnessing, audiences are held captive, locked within a posture (and demand) of response. While audiences may choose indifference, empathy, or antipathy, they must nevertheless choose, and hence confront the ethical consequences of that response.

Junction 48 Director Udi Aloni is adamant on this point. “As the only bi-national (Israeli/Palestinian) feature film with an entirely Palestinian cast, we created a movie where

5. In a cruel irony, Israeli police placed an actual demolition order on the home used for filming these scenes in Junction 48. Director Udi Aloni was thus forced to rush filming these scenes so as to avoid actual Israeli demolition crews.

6. On this point Karkabi has effectively used Foucault’s concept of the “heterotopia” to describe these real and unreal counter-sites that transcend or invert dichotomous divisions in society. These are enabling spaces that empower and facilitate the interaction of bodies in transgressive ways.
Palestinians could represent themselves in new ways.”7 “But more important, in the theatre audiences are forced to engage with the Other, to witness what life is like for Palestinians [in Israel], they can’t hide. They can’t not see.” (Aloni 2018). Junction 48, tells the story of contemporary Israeli life from the perspective of its unintelligible Others. The story of Israeli power is told from the experiences of its victims. As a corrective to the “logics of elimination,” Junction 48 thus presents significant opportunities for intervention into the regimes of power that foreclose appearance. Narrative from within, telling the story of the dominant from the perspective of the precarious, compels a reassessment of normative codes of difference and the resulting experience of precarity. Tamer Nafar hints at this approach when discussing Junction 48’s bi-national cast and crew. “Collaboration in Junction 48 can be a vehicle for reconciliation. Our movie is a solution. The solution is when the strong side, the privileged side, will be part of the storytelling of the oppressed side. When Jews and Palestinians work together to tell the story of the oppressed, that’s where hope begins” (Mitnick 2017). These interventions create a possible world where the privileged are solicited to see the colonized in a new light, and through that interaction, become what Wendy Hesford describes as “ethical witnesses” (2011: 192).

DISPLACING THE COMPASSIONATE GAZE

DAM’s meteoric rise to international acclaim can be attributed to several factors, most notably, their unique ability to document Palestinian hardship in a format (hip-hop) familiar to, and compatible with, cosmopolitan aesthetics (McDonald 2013a). Drawing from an established musical lexicon of racial dispossession and urban empowerment, hip-hop proved to be a powerful means to engage international audiences and gain acknowledgement of their human rights. Not only was their music compatible with cosmopolitan tastes, but their documentarian approach conformed to standard representational logics that position Palestinian suffering as an object for international consumption. For Palestinians, documentary media remains the easiest pathway for international visibility and recognition. These forms, however, bear significant consequence for recognition and political agency. Documentary media make the crimes of the occupation visible to international audiences, but too often rely on the image of the Palestinian as eternal victim. The pervasive image of the Palestinian victim in documentary media is partly the result of efforts to solicit international support. But the effect of this solicitation is not necessarily emancipatory. Rather, it delimits Palestinians as objects of the international gaze. Even for those who are empathetic toward Palestinian self-determination, the perception of Palestinians as essential victims does not permit seeing them as equals. Rather, they come to be defined by an absence, not only of basic human rights, but also of political agency.

The representational logic of documentary media is premised upon presenting a suffering victim before the “compassionate gaze” of outside audiences. Suffering is required, demanded, not only to legitimize the effort, but also to reinforce and sustain the privilege of the audience. Not unlike the culturalization of violence discussed above, the “compassionate

7. The cast of Junction 48 was also diverse in religious affiliation, featuring Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and atheist actors.
“gaze” works alongside the colonial project by essentializing Palestinians as victims, disempowering their political agency, and absolving the First World of its responsibility to address structural violence in the colonial encounter. Playing to the “compassionate gaze” of international audiences proved incredibly lucrative for DAM in its early years, supporting the group with tour dates abroad when local performance opportunities had disappeared. But, at the same time, DAM’s documentarian approach created an expectation, a demand that they conform to standard perceptions of Palestinian identity: as angry victims, as the effects of Israeli state violence, and as the objects of humanitarian intervention.

DAM’s shift to storytelling in their second studio album proved controversial for international audiences in that it actively disrupted this documentarian imperative. No longer was the group reporting on Israeli state violence. Rather, DAM began to create new scenarios, new characters, and new worlds of interaction and engagement drawn from local Palestinian experience. For those expecting DAM’s familiar diatribes against the occupation, Dabke on the Moon, was a betrayal of sorts, a kind of “selling out” for pop star acclaim. But, for the group it was a strategic tactic to evolve, to develop, and to reclaim the agency to define themselves. Junction 48 further expands upon this approach. For while international audiences criticized Tamer Nafar’s move to acting as an attempt to monetize DAM’s past political notoriety, he sees this move as part of a larger activist agenda, a “politics by other means” (Nafar 2017b). For Nafar, acting in feature films, writing screenplays, and singing love songs are a means of political engagement in that these projects not only expand visibility, but more importantly, diversify representational logics. As fiction, Junction 48 adds an additional element of creativity and playfulness, such that Palestinians are not mere objects of Israeli violence, but authors of their own experience. Each of these works are acts of counter-visibility, to be sure, but more important, they serve to redefine the logics of Palestinian representation by reclaiming the agency to narrate the self. In this way Junction 48 does not simply make the plight of the indigenous visible. Rather, as Simon Faulkner points out, such interventions also function to “bring into visibility a situation in which the villagers are not just those who suffer . . . but also those who create (2014, 160).

Author: It seems like you are being boxed in, like you have to [sing] every song about the occupation. And you are not allowed to tell stories, to develop yourself as an artist.

TN: No. Somehow ‘the West’ is boxed in. If you look at my albums, my songs, my last song that reached 2 million views is about a car. It is about having fun in a car. Getting drunk and driving around in a car. That is the most popular song in Palestine. Would you cover that? No. You would go for ‘Who’s the Terrorist?’ Palestinians get drunk and enjoy it. But when you come from the outside, I mean, ‘the West,’ journalists [and academics]. Somehow, they want to romanticize us in a way. We are the beautiful ones, those handsome ones that fight the occupation. Like a Palestinian Chuck Norris . . . And excuse me, we get drunk, we get jiggy, some of us pray, some of us are extremists, some of us are not . . . That is what I am doing in my songs. I am playing my generation. So, it is you guys [international audiences] that come in search of protest songs. If protest songs don’t exist that means we don’t exist. If the occupation doesn’t exist, that means we don’t exist. That is romanticizing. And as an artist I don’t like that.

After the demonstrations we [Palestinians] go home, we pay bills. There is life. What the Israeli occupation is trying to do is dehumanize us and disconnect us from the world.
It is important for me to stand up and say, ‘fuck the occupation.’ ‘I want to be part of the world.’ That is why it is important for me to show that we also die from car accidents. We also die from cancer. We find love . . . I cannot run away from the spices of my culture, and the politics in my society. That is what I am trying to say [emphasis added]. (Nafar 2017a)

Here Tamer Nafar makes an excellent point. In their efforts to draw attention to state violence, international stakeholders too often romanticize victimization. As if suffering is the only meaningful argument for Palestinian rights. “If the occupation doesn’t exist, we don’t exist.” Nafar’s move toward narration, storytelling, reflects the desire to disrupt and displace the “compassionate gaze” of Israeli and international audiences. Instead, he aims to humanize Palestinians through self-critique, vulnerability, and the artful presentation of local experience (“the spices of culture”). With these new projects Tamer Nafar aligns himself with a new wave of Palestinian artists no longer content to provide counter-narratives to the “logic of elimination.” This is an arts scene that seeks to liberate itself from the Israeli and international gaze, carving out new spaces for Palestinian subjectivity to emerge (Karkabi 2017). It is through these efforts that Palestinians might free themselves from the compulsory demands and expectations of competing audiences, and create an autonomous space for radical creativity and self-expression.

**EPILOGUE**

In the end, Lila Abu-Lughod and Maya Mikdashi published a pseudo-apology/semi-retraction to their initial critique. Playing off the title of the video, the scholars stated, “If We Could Go Back in Time . . . we would have crafted our words more carefully” (Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi 2012b). While reiterating their initial points regarding international co-optation and the complications of “discussing violence reproduced and institutionalized within racialized states,” they nevertheless expressed regret that their comments were taken as a direct critique against DAM. When in fact, they “deeply admire and appreciate DAM’s political and social influence.” Looking toward the future the two scholars expressed a desire to continue these productive debates “with solidarity as our first stance.” It is important, they assert, for stakeholders to push each other “to think, write, and research more carefully” while preserving solidarity against opposing groups.

Honoring solidarity among political stakeholders is certainly an important, if not essential, task. As Abu-Lughod and Mikdashi reiterate, respect among “comrades in the struggle for justice for Palestinians,” is necessary to continue these productive debates. I get the feeling, however, that they have somehow missed the point. It’s not about preserving solidarity against opposing groups, but rather, facilitating and fostering Palestinian agency to liberate themselves from the Israeli and international gaze. Perhaps it is worth considering how radical forms of self-critique, the fracturing of conventional political blocs, and the assertion of collective intersectional vulnerability, may in fact accomplish these goals. Simply honoring solidarity does not bridge the ontological gap that forecloses Palestinians from appearance nor does it displace the “compassionate gaze” of international audiences.
I argue that “If I Could Go Back in Time” and Junction 48 pursue a different (and perhaps more effective) form of activism, fighting the occupation by humanizing Palestinian subjectivity, revealing the troublesome messy intimacies of Palestinian life, and laying bare a politics of vulnerability that exposes Palestinians as neither righteous victims nor savage zealots. And while such efforts may be susceptible to co-optation, it is worth considering how such diverse representational logics increase potential points of contact, counter-visibility, and empathy among and between disparate audiences. If, as Tamer Nafar suggests, the Israeli occupation depends upon dehumanizing and disconnecting Palestinians from the world, an effective response might be to humanize Palestinian lifeways through radical creativity. Pop songs and feature films that honestly and sincerely capture the intersectionality of Palestinian life would seemingly provide effective spaces for condemning the occupation by connecting Palestinians to the world through mutual vulnerability, as people who “go home from the demonstrations,” “who fall in love,” “who die of cancer,” “who get drunk.”

In both “If I Could Go Back in Time” and Junction 48, violence against women becomes a means of connecting Palestinians to the global experience of religious patriarchy and toxic masculinity through situated experience, providing counter-narrative and counter-visibility to Palestinian difference and “the spices of Palestinian culture.” Moreover, in re-imagining conventional masculine imperatives (of hip-hop and resistance), “If I Could Go Back in Time” and Junction 48 compel empathetic engagement across diverse ontological fields. These kinds of solicitations should not be dismissed as weakness, but rather, amplified as opportunities for self-narration and self-representation outside and beyond the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. For Palestinians to exist outside of this crisis requires that they first be seen and heard, as creative, intelligible, fallible, complex, creative subjects. Engaging in radical self-critique, tackling society’s taboos with “openness, bravery, and honesty” would seem to be an appropriate means of accomplishing this task.

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