Agency, Authenticity, and Parody in Palestinian Hip Hop

ABSTRACT Throughout the discourse surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict many methods have emerged to examine the ways in which artists engage with the issues through popular culture. As hip hop spread globally, its universal themes and ability to constitute community led to the use of rap as a vehicle for political commentary. This paper explores how the Palestinian hip hop group DAM provides a commentary on the experiences of Palestinian-Israelis through carnivalesque methods to create shocking juxtapositions. Using an inter-textual method, we can see that humor allows DAM to freely speak “their truth,” defusing tensions and providing a new perspective on the conflict, opening dialogue, and regaining control over a painful history. This case study raises questions of authenticity, agency, and parody in hip hop. The genre blurs the threshold of true and false and allows artists to present a conventional hip hop persona, giving them the freedom to safely comment on social issues. Humor allows for further political commentary under the façade of a joke. By parodying painful racial, gender, and class stereotypes, artists reclaim their identity and further subvert prejudices against them. This case study challenges the notion of what protest music looks like, and how it functions to promote change.

KEYWORDS popular music, transnational/global, hip hop culture, music videos, politics

“Watch this,” I say as I adjust the sound on the video to a barely audible level, preventing the potentially offensive sounds I’m about to play from echoing through the quiet café. It is winter in Canada, and snow falls quietly outside. My colleague watches the music video intently, straining to listen before her eyes widen with shock. We sit in momentary silence before laughing about the absurdity of the song, but I can tell that she is scandalized.

Her discomfort is justified. The music video for Da Arabian MCs’ (DAM) 2012 song “Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew” is provocative, riddled with sexual innuendo and heavy-handed political messages delivered with a joking irreverence. The lyrics create a narrative in which a self-proclaimed “brown” Arab man falls in love with a “white” Jewish woman he meets in a dilapidated—and stuck—elevator. Cultural differences between the two are revealed as the speaker describes the couple’s conversations; the male speaker recalls that he said, “My dream is not to be searched every time I fly,” while “all she heard was ‘boom’ and ‘heaven.’” His responses notably reference Arab stereotypes and parody systemic mistreatment by the Jewish government. The video’s visual narrative offers more dramatic counterpoint to this parody as two narratives emerge. The first follows the development of...
the couple’s romantic relationship, as they date and then eventually marry. The second, more violent narrative details the woman’s arrest of the man and his subsequent beating and deportation through a checkpoint in the West Bank Barrier.

Comprising of three Israeli-Palestinian musicians—Suhell Nafar, Tamer Nafar, and Mahmoud Jreri—DAM was inspired to begin their career in the early 1990s after noticing striking similarities between their hometown of Lyd and the street scenes of many of Tupac Shakur’s music videos.1 One of the first Palestinian hip hop groups, DAM also broke ground by being one of the first groups to rap in Arabic, which, when combined with Arabic percussion rhythms, Middle Eastern melodies, and elements of urban U.S. hip hop, helps them effectively tell their stories to a global audience, performing all over the world and still retaining popularity with youth throughout the Middle East. Despite their international reputation, though, the group has committed to remain in their hometown of Lyd, where they provide programs and opportunities to the local Palestinian citizens of Israel that would otherwise have been denied to them.2 Rallying on behalf of the oppressed appears as a common theme amongst the majority of their politically charged songs, including “Who’s the Terrorist” (“يأرعبساز”), “If I’d Go Back in Time” (“ميين إرهابي”), and “Stranger in My Own Country” (“غريب في بلادي”).

This case study may seem of narrow scope in the field of hip hop studies, offering a brief insight into a very specific song, but it raises meaningful questions of authenticity, agency, and parody in the genre. As a mask, hip hop blurs the threshold of what is true and false and enables artists to present to the audience a persona that meets style convention and expectations. This unique facet gives members extended freedom of speech and continues to make the genre an effective medium for social protest around the world. Adding the element of humor allows the political envelope to be pushed even further under the façade of a joke. By parodying painful racial, gender, and class stereotypes, artists reclaim their identity and further subvert prejudices against them. This case study challenges the notion of what protest music looks like and explores how one genre of music can be transposed globally and across cultural contexts to promote change through social protest.

The Israel-Palestine conflict has prompted a widespread response from scholars and artists on all sides of the debate and garners regular media attention. The musical response to the issue has been heavily politicized with artists engaging through the purposeful creation of both explicit and implicitly political lyrical content, such as the music of highly popular Jewish right-wing rappers Kobi “Subliminal” Shimoni and

2. DAM, “ABOUT.” For more information on how DAM uses hip hop to advance Palestinian rights consult
   David A. McDonald’s “Carrying Words Like Weapons: Hip hop and the Poetics of Palestinian Identities in
Yoav Eliasi, more commonly known as “The Shadow.” Parents of youth who listen to these artists often condemn both rappers because they call for violence against conquered people, and although the lyrics rarely name the subject towards which the violence is directed, it is clear from songs like “We Came to Expel the Darkness” and “My Land” that it is the Palestinians. At other times, music created in the region carries a political message and is appropriated to support a specific agenda because of an artist’s engagement and advocacy outside of the context of their songs. Musicologist Nili Belkind makes it clear that popular genres effectively represent issues of national collectives and project concepts of Israeliness or Palestinianess as they prominently exist in society. Uri Dorchin’s view as a behavioral scientist coincides with and extends it, using the work of anthropologists Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg to suggest that the entire cultural-geographical popular culture is fundamentally one centered on politics and power.

Due to popular music genres’ ability to transmit cultural concepts, as well as their rootedness in the local politics of power, it is unsurprising that rap music has become a favored vehicle for the transmission of political agendas and ideologies. Mikhail Bakhtin explores humor’s linguistic capabilities and notes the common crossing of social and cultural taboo through the acts of mockery and parody of the sublime as well as sexual obscenity in his analysis of medieval carnival humor. This use of dark humor is not limited to one culture and has been theorized that it reinvigorates civic discourse, particularly in culturally diversified public spheres, and “reflexively imbue[s] ordinary language with socio-historical significance and depth of meaning lacking in the discourse of everyday life, thereby heightening social consciousness” by providing an equalizing space where social issues can be expressed.

This subversive use of humor is a common mode of empowerment for hip hop artists, with female artists such as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, who use the technique to “talk back” against...
the objectification of women in “booty videos” by claiming the genre and parroting it in their own music.10,11 In addition to leveling the social playing field, comedy also acts as therapy, providing a necessary means to dispel negative emotions surrounding difficult and painful topics.12,13,14 This strategic employment of dark humor is not contained within Palestinian hip hop but is noted across creative mediums as a lens to assess daily life under occupation. It is also considered to lend nuance to the representation of experience and “salvage selves long lost to given representations and tired meanings” and to mark death “both from the violence that delivers it and from the deadening daily routines of oppression.”15 The strategic humor and mockery in “Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew” allows the artists to reclaim their identities as Palestinians in Israel and to draw attention to their cultural mistreatment from a minority position in an aggressive anti-Palestinian political climate.

Since its global dissemination, rap and hip hop have provided a framework in which artists can create a community in which they operate.16 Rap exists in various states of “indigenization,” as it has been adapted to fit local geo-cultural contexts, creating “universal themes” within the genre that share a stylistic language that artists from vastly different cultural backgrounds can use as a communal channel of communication.17 Black popular


culture scholar Halifu Osumare argues, however, that it is not these similarities—the shared “root aesthetic”—but the connection of to the global use of hip hop to “collective marginalities,” including class, culture, and historical oppression, that draw hip hop artists to this genre.18 Hip hop, as a genre, is rooted strongly in minority communities that existed in resistance to the surrounding white culture. As such, hip hop is often used to subvert the status quo. Hip hop allows both Israelis and Palestinians to connect with one another outside of daily politics. Many rappers subscribe to this belief, claiming that their music is “not political” but is instead an act of “being true” or “speaking one’s truth.” Such attitudes illuminate a shared perception of hip hop as a template that can be molded to express one’s reality, allowing artists to establish the difference between themselves and the state, and emphasizing personal identity as superseding any governing ideologies.19 But sociologist Amir Ben-Porat asserts that even in non-political gatherings, underlying tensions stimulate national sentiments that divide participants into opposing factions.20

Such divisions make for an interesting area of study, and it is not uncommon to find multi-ethnic hip hop recreational gatherings and performances in clubs and concerts in Israel. As such, much has been written about the intersections of Jewish and Arab rap artists and their music. Ben-Ari and Dorchin focus primarily on the many guises and styles of Jewish rap and question how and why artists use rap as mode of constructing identity and disseminating personal beliefs. Humor, briefly mentioned by Dorchin, is given a great deal of attention in Ben-Ari’s work as he breaks down the ways humor manifests in the lyrics and modes of delivery, subverting power through inversion and mockery.21 Within this context, Ben-Ari notes the common use of sexual innuendo by rappers to shock the audience and continually integrate humor into their works and performances. He also theorizes that by using non-serious elements, artists can express explicit and potentially offensive messages to a wider audience under the assumed persona of “the rapper,” rather than tarnishing their personal identity. To reinforce this idea, Ben-Ari draws a cultural parallel to the Jewish festival of Purim, a festival defined by “masquerading carnival and inversion, in which for the duration of the holiday, the taking on of a different persona is momentary and hence permissible,” allowing for actions that would not be permissible under normal circumstances.22 Scholarship focusing on the study of the role that Palestinian rap plays in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis explores the “serious” methods of political subversion and resistance, giving passing or no mention to the use of humor.23 Songs that use parody and satire as a subversive tool are indeed scarce and easily

22. Ben-Ari, “From the South Bronx to Israel,” 130.
overlooked in Palestinian hip hop. A close reading of DAM’s “Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew” offers an opportunity to consider how humor might be effectively used as a tool to engage meaningfully with the daily struggles that emerge while living in the middle of a conflict zone.

To methodically complete a thorough intertextual analysis of the images and lyrics of the music video, I have adopted the analytical framework commonly referred to as “multimodal intertextuality,” that is, the understanding that all creative elements within an artistic work relate to one another and reference the outside world.24 The analysis of the video is sectioned into lyrics and images with smaller cross-sections of people and places, sexual innuendo, and the wedding as parody. DAM sets their video in locations with cultural and historical significance to further underpin the seriousness of their message in contrast with the humorous foreground subjects. They also make references to historical Jewish and Arab figures who have played a significant role in defining or fighting against Israel-Palestine relations. Historical events are parodied and satirized throughout the song, often through sexual innuendo, allowing DAM to protest the treatment and stigmatization of Palestinians within Israel. Finally, DAM challenges these stigmas by leaning into and exaggerating cultural stereotypes or flipping them on their heads. The first step in this methodological framework consists of extrapolating the cultural references from the lyrics and images before organizing them within the cross-sections.25 The second aspect of the analysis lies in determining the way that each element is satirized according to carnivalesque theory and to interpret how DAM uses these elements to communicate a form of musical protest to the audience.

The narrative of the music video opens with a man standing in an elevator, reminiscent of Aerosmith’s 1989 song “Love in an Elevator;” a male voiceover is heard, presumably in a serious conversation with his mother, saying, “Mama, I have bad news. I was stuck in the elevator, with this hot chick. Sit down, mama. Sit down, because your son fell in love with a Jew.”26 Throughout the voiceover the elevator doors open and a lighter-skinned woman enters wearing an Israeli military uniform and carrying a gun. The man looks perturbed at the woman’s presence, rolling his eyes and shifting his weight back and forth. This non-verbal language appears to be at odds with the voiceover claiming to be in love with the woman. The statement itself serves to throw the audience off balance, as the serious tone of the conversation with the mother is disrupted by the reference to the woman as a “hot chick,” thus crossing Bakhtin’s cultural taboo by using a sexual denotation in close conversation with a parent. The elevator then breaks down, leaving the man and woman stranded, and they begin to converse, inquiring if the other person can speak Arabic and Hebrew. Again, the narrative of the love story is disrupted as both parties can barely speak the other

26. Thank you to Brydone Charlton for this insight.
person’s language and only in a darkly utilitarian fashion, which highlights their cultural difference and creates humor while jarring the audience back into the reality of socio-political relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel:

“Do I speak Hebrew?” “A bit hard for me.”
“YESH AVODA?” means “U gotta job for me?”
Does she speak Arabic? She said a word or two.
“WAKEF YA BATUKHAK” means “Freeze or I shoots.”

The story continues with love scenes in which the woman no longer wears a military uniform and has let her hair down. Two separate narratives emerge as these love scenes are interrupted when shots cut back to a different narrative where the woman, still in uniform, has detained the man and blindfolded him in the elevator. Both narratives continue to unfold at odds with each other, one culminating in a wedding scene and the other ending with the detainee being roughly escorted to the West Bank Barrier, where he is beaten by two men. Throughout the music video, DAM subverts audience expectations using dark humor and striking contrasts between “high” and “low” cultural elements, combining two conflicting narratives.

The settings in which the music video is staged also contribute to the nuancing of socio-political history as each location featured in the background holds significant cultural and historical meaning to the Palestinian people and speaks to their past and present mistreatment by Jewish Israelis. Jaffa Harbor appears briefly as the setting for the love scene, providing a romantic spot with stunning architecture and natural elements. The port city, however, has been the site of many politically charged events. In 1948, Jaffa became a “mixed town” following the mass evacuation of the Palestinian population and the large influx of Jewish residents emigrating from Europe and the Middle East. Since then, the city has struggled to affirm its identity, with both Jews and Palestinians attempting to gain cultural control over the city.27 Similarly, the detainee narrative is set at the Israeli West Bank Barrier, where the Israeli government began constructing the wall in 2002 under the claim that it would protect Israeli citizens from Palestinian would-be suicide bombers, based on the events of the Palestinian intifada. The barrier was built on confiscated Palestinian land, cutting off farmers from their livelihoods and solidifying the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The wall stands as a symbol of the unilateral peace solutions provided by the Israeli government and the mistreatment of the local Palestinian population.28 Even the elevator where the couple meets holds significance, serving as a tool to bridge the gap between the class divisions of Jews and Arabs, literally bringing the man and the woman together in the same space. When paired with the lyrics “She was going up, I was going down,” DAM communicates the lack of opportunities and decline of social status for Palestinian Israelis, compared with those available to Jewish Israelis.

In addition to incorporating meaningful settings into the music video, DAM further nuances the history of the occupation by making explicit lyrical reference to historical figures directly involved in the Israel-Palestine conflict, invoking the politics and philosophies of those mentioned. For audience members who are familiar with the culture and history of the region, these associations give the lyrics a deeper level of meaning and a greater political charge. The first and most overt of these instances is a mention of Theodor Herzl, considered the father of Zionism, who famously stood on a balcony and said, “If you will it, it is no dream.” DAM satirizes this Jewish figure with the lyrics:

"Be ambitious she said 'If you want it's not a legend'
Herzlan said while standing on the balcony,
'For shizzel.' I said, ama use that saying
Soon as they allow me to build a balcony."

Using hip hop slang like “shizzel” in contrast with a quote from a lofty philosopher, DAM mocks Herzl’s philosophy and again highlights the societal inequality by commenting on the zoning restrictions and discrimination that Palestinian Israelis face when attempting to obtain building permits to expand their homes. The lyrics also make reference to Zehava Ben and Umm Kulthum, both singers, who are mentioned in the context of a proposed sexual encounter where the man will invite the woman to his room and offer to play the love song “Inta Oumri.” The sexual nature of the lyrics acts as a humorous mask for the activist work of both vocalists. Zehava Ben is an Israeli Mizrahi Jewish singer, who has been known for her work in bringing the music of singer Umm Kulthum, one of the most famous voices in the Arab world, to the Jewish population and adding new meaning to the prospect of peace between Israelis and Palestinians.29 Lyrics of Kulthum’s song “Inta Oumri” are loving, with lines such as “Give me my freedom, set my hands free so that I might give you everything, I will hold back nothing,” which Arab listeners eventually began to use as a symbol of resistance to their oppression.30

Sexual innuendo is an important facet of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and has been commonly used by rap artists in Israel, both Jewish and not, to shock audiences and grab attention. Throughout “Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew,” DAM uses innuendo to humorously cushion the reality of historical events and stereotypes facing Palestinians. Again, the elevator metaphor appears with the lyrics “I was going down” providing a double entendre, referring to the common English slang “going down,” meaning to perform oral sex.31 The use of sexual puns lightens the meaning of the elevator as a representation of disparaging class divisions between Jews and Palestinians, as in the following passage:

Build a house; invite you to my room,
Play "Inta Oumri" mish Zahave Ben Oum Kulthum

And Boom, ama take you to heaven  
All she heard was boom and heaven  
I said 69 she heard 67  
All I wanna make is sweet love,  
But if you wanna make tough love too,  
(For a change can I be the one to) handcuff you.”

The passage idealizes the man’s fantastical sexual encounter with the woman in which he proposes that he will bring her back to his home and put on romantic music before engaging in pleasurable sexual activities, which he refers to as “taking her to heaven.” The love narrative is juxtaposed with the next lines which show that the woman has misinterpreted the man’s intentions, instead conceiving of his meaning within the common stereotype that Palestinians are terrorists and suicide bombers. The lyrics “All she heard was boom and heaven” refer to the belief, commonly held by religious terrorists, that their actions will guarantee them a spot in a heavenly afterlife. The mention of handcuffs acts as a symbol of restraint and submission referring to the common unwarranted arrest and detainment of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers. The lyrics also suggest a longing for a shift of power, parodied in a sexual nature in which the handcuffs, a common form of bondage in BDSM practices, symbolize power, leaning back in to the narrative of the sexual encounter. Again the humor is created by the juxtaposition of normal human experience with the daily realities of oppression and detainment faced by Palestinians.

Even as DAM highlights culturally significant figures and settings to dramatize the social and political struggles between Palestinians and Israelis, the video’s wedding scene seems to offer some insights into the ways that these two communities can coexist, as well as the limits of that coexistence. Traditionally, weddings symbolize the coming together of two families, and, as such, they also embody the coming together of two different sets of values, ideas, and cultural practices, even in the most culturally similar couples. They are, as a consequence, often the result of extensive negotiation between individuals and their families and emerge as a sort of compromise between all the parties involved. That DAM chose a wedding as the video’s climax, then, appears to indicate a desire for the existence of the two cultures within a singular country and governing entity. But, as carnivalesque theory posits, weddings constitute the sacred, inviting mockery and highlighting stereotypes. A marriage between a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish man crosses a deep cultural taboo, the forbiddenness of intermarriage in the Jewish faith. To enhance the mockery, the cultural distinctions between the bride’s Jewish family and the man’s Palestinian family are exaggerated using traditional cultural dress and dance. Furthermore, the culture-specific clothing is later used as battle uniform to further distinguish between the two sides as a food fight breaks out. The tradition of cutting the first slice of cake as a newly married couple is also co-opted

to nuance the political realities of the occupation. During the wedding scene a layered cake decorated in the colors of the Palestinian flag is brought out and presented to the newlyweds. The man tries to cut a large portion of cake, but the woman moves his hand so that he cuts a very small piece of the cake before unceremoniously dumping it onto his plate, much to his obvious annoyance. The bride then walks off with the cake and gives it to her Jewish family while the man tries to grab it from her but is held back by his groomsmen, prompting a food fight. By mocking the traditional wedding practices with acts of selfishness and violence DAM uses dark humor to illustrate the history of the occupation of Palestinian lands and unequal land division and social standings, represented by the irreverent and unequal cutting of cake.

Throughout the difficult discourse surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict, many methods have emerged to examine the ways in which artists protest and comment on the issues through popular culture. As hip hop spread globally, its universal themes and ability to constitute community, as well as the resonance that many artists felt in relation to their own lives led to the use of rap as a vehicle for political commentary and subversion. One of the most effective forms of human communication, humor, often appears in the genre as a tool to defuse tensions that often prevent the discussion of serious topics, allowing artists to challenge societal incongruities and diffusing it with new perceptions and attitudes.35 Freud explains humorous behavior as a means of dealing with difficult or taboo subjects, and modern therapists regard it as a tool to help clients defuse personal, social, and emotional issues.36 DAM’s "Mama I Fell in Love with a Jew" successfully communicates the same serious messages, albeit in a radically different way. The song offers a unique perspective from which to analyze Palestinian hip hop and opens a discourse about the intersections of global hip hop, politics, protest, and humor. In "Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew," DAM addresses social and racial prejudices against the minority Palestinian Israeli citizen, by poking fun at both Jewish and Arab stereotypes. They also combine shared cultural history and past atrocities with sexual innuendos and irreverent hip hop phrases in such a way that on the surface the song seems a lighthearted and non-threatening jab at Israeli-Palestinian relations. By doing so, DAM acknowledges each party's perceptions of the other and defuses the biases, creating room for a profoundly meaningful critique of the larger socio-political issues.

Such an approach has been well documented in other musical settings, so it should come as no surprise that DAM has found it to be a useful strategy in their own work. Esti Sheinberg, for instance, has used Bakhtinian theory to examine the ways in which Shostakovich’s use of irony, parody, and satire comment on social incongruities, noting how he uses exaggerations of the social and musical standards to satirically transgress the conventional. Sheinberg highlights the covertness of these exaggerations when applied to background material, which is often dismissed as less significant.37 These observations hold true in relation to the

background settings of images in the video for “Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew,” as many of the scenes are set in real locations with political significance. Another activist group that uses humor as a method of communication, The Raging Grannies, break through age stereotypes in a colorful rag tag approach. The Grannies comment on serious topics, such as environmental crises, using wit and humor rather than anger, something they believe to be a winning combination when it comes to persuading people. In her study of The Grannies, Carole Roy notes that humor does not diminish the gravity of the situation, but instead provides a new perspective and makes it easier for the audience to engage with topics that are difficult to discuss.38 English literature scholar Regina Barereca agrees that the presence of humor opens a topic for discussion and allows artists to make feelings and responses available to their listeners without terrifying or overwhelming them.39

Bakhtinian carnivalesque theory lends itself quite smoothly to the analysis of the satirical elements in DAM’s music video for “Mama I Fell in Love with a Jew.” Mikhail Bakhtin began creating the theory of carnivalesque in his investigation into medieval carnival folk humor. The festivals comprised acts of sexual and bodily obscenity, hyperbole, abuse, mockery, and profanity; all of which Bakhtin viewed as transgressing against social taboos through exaggeration.40 During carnival, the normal rules of society were temporarily dissolved, removing the hierarchical boundaries that governed interactions, particularly those between the upper and lower classes, the young and old, or the sacred and the profane.41 In both the festivities and literature that apply this technique, parody, mockery, and debasement are the means of expression used to create a misalliance of things normally at odds. The story of “Mama, I Fell in Love with a Jew” details the romantic relationship between a Palestinian Israeli man and a Jewish Israeli woman, breaking class and racial distinctions. The song also uses sexual innuendo, hyperbole, and abuse throughout the lyrics and images portraying the couple’s relationship in relation to the socio-historical contexts.

In the modern era, activism has been credited with the revival of carnivalesque traditions, with campaigners nonviolently protesting with parody, general nudity, or costuming and masks.42 Marcyrose Chvasta argues that “performance is emotive, ambiguous, and confrontational” and keeps the activists’ morale high, acting as a display of communal strength, but fails to dictate a clear course for activism.43 Using the carnivalesque as a method of protest also acts as a means to garner support, in contrast to negative or violent protests which can intimidate onlookers. Although the revival of the carnivalesque tradition as an imaginative form of protest provides an effective tool for opening dialogue, educating the public, and

42. Weaver, “Carnivalesque Activism as a Public Relations Genre,” 4.
working through real world issues, no legislative policies or procedures will change unless the government feels threatened.

Since the initial draft of this article, this song has caused controversy in the United States following Tamer Nafar’s performance of it at the conference “Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics, and Possibilities,” held at the University North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in March 2019 and co-sponsored by Duke University. Hidden microphone interviews and edited clips of Nafar’s performance conducted and posted online by film maker Ami Horowitz began circulating under the title “Duke and the University of North Carolina sponsor anti-Semitic conference!” the month following the conference, prompting widespread reactions among American audiences. The clips show Nafar on stage saying,

“This is my anti-Semitic song. . . . I know it sounds R&B stuff, but don’t think of Rihanna when you sing it. Think of, don’t think of Beyoncé, think of Mel Gibson. Go that anti-Semitic . . . Let’s try it together. I need your help. I can’t be anti-Semitic alone. . . . Oh, I’m in love with a Jew. . . . You look beautifully anti-Semitic.”

Following the incident, UNC has released statements condemning anti-Semitism; however, UNC Global states that “while the video misconstrues the breadth of discourse that took place during the panels, UNC Global regrets any offense that the video and performance have had for members of the Jewish community.” Newly appointed interim chancellor, Kevin Guskiewicz, stated, “A performance during a recent conference held on our campus contained disturbing and hateful language. I am heartbroken and deeply offended that this performance happened. I stand steadfast against anti-Semitism and hate in all its forms.”

The controversy even managed to reach a higher level of American politics as reports of $5,000 of federal grant money sponsoring the conference, prompting Rep. George Holding to petition Education Secretary Betsy DeVos to ask her department to begin an investigation based on “reports of severe anti-Israel bias and anti-Semitic rhetoric at a taxpayer-funded conference.”

While the public response in the United States to this controversy has been largely outrage, some question whether it does constitute anti-Semitism at all, suggesting that Nafar’s statements are satirical in nature due to the polarizing nature of the conflict. UNC junior Fouad Abu-Hijleh told The Daily Tar Heel, “When he said, ‘This is my anti-Semitic song,’ I think he was alluding to that, like, if you criticize Israel, people are

44. Weaver, “Carnivalesque Activism as a Public Relations Genre,” 4.
going to call you an anti-Semite. That’s how I perceived it as a Palestinian.”

Lara Friedman, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace and a self-identifying liberal Zionist, stated that the performance remained within the bounds of appropriate academic discourse and pointed out that the conference included criticism of Israel, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, as well as of U.S. policy on Gaza. Elyse Crystall, a comparative literature associate professor at UNC who is the faculty adviser for the campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, said she felt that Nafar was ironically poking fun at American notions that Palestinians and Arabs are anti-Semitic. “The way I heard that was, ‘All of you here probably think that because I’m Palestinian, I’m anti-Semitic, and maybe you’ve been sitting here waiting for me to say something negative, so here’s the song you’ve been waiting for,’” she said. “I don’t think he was being anti-Semitic. I think he was satirizing our own stereotypes of Palestinians and maybe Arabs more generally as anti-Semitic.”

Perhaps more telling than the reactions to the performance itself were comments made about Nafar’s comedic approach. Ari Gauss, the executive director of UNC Hillel, explicitly condemned the satire, stating, “Whether he’s attempting be a comedic provocateur, I don’t know, but I didn’t find it funny. The idea of the university sponsoring a musician who would sing about anti-Semitism in an at-worst glorifying way and at best belittling and lighthearted way, they’re not happy about it,” he said. “You still have the option to bring speakers who don’t play fast and loose with this language, and if you want to push the envelope, you have to cover your bases.”

From the context of Nafar’s statements as an opening to “Mama I Fell in Love with a Jew,” it is probable that they were satirical, consistent with his darkly humorous public persona.

This incident, not well-known by students on the Duke or UNC campuses, will likely be the only experience that American audiences will have with this song; however, the incident and the surrounding publicity reveal the troubling ways that controversy and discourse surrounding a speech act can become politically conflated, overshadowing the act itself and the message it attempts to convey. Despite the possibility for such conflation, hip hop allows performers the space to blur the lines between reality and performance, with the performance often ascribing to perceived conventions, such as the gangster or the anti-Semitic Palestinian. As explored in Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, artists have the freedom to express shocking and taboo opinions by humorously leaning into the stereotypes of race, gender, politics and class, provoking conversation about identity, authenticity, and agency in the form of a joke.


52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.