
MAKING MEN THROUGH HIP HOP IN JERUSALEM'S SHU'AFAT REFUGEE CAMP

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On 17 February 2007, after several weeks during which Palestinian youth burned tires and threw stones at Israeli soldiers in protest of Israeli archaeological excavations at the Mughrabi gate, close to the Temple Mount/*al-Haram al-Sharif*, a hip hop crew called G-Town - from Jerusalem's Shu'afat Refugee Camp - staged a very different protest. They drove a borrowed Hummer car into a busy and crowded street in East Jerusalem, stopped the car, climbed on its roof and began to rap until the police broke up the impromptu concert 40 minutes later. For the members of G-Town, rap was more powerful and more provocative than throwing stones or burning tires as it enabled their voices to be heard.

Rap music is 'a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack'.^[1] Although rap music first originated among African-Americans in the 1970s as a voice of protest and resistance to their ghettoized, powerless status, by the 1990s, African-American rap music had lost much of its oppositional appeal in the United States, as it became increasingly mainstream and lucrative.^[2] Outside of the United States, however, marginalised, minority youth have adapted rap to their own local socio-political contexts, using it to express their opposition or rage.^[3]

Palestinian youth began experimenting with rap music in the late 1990s, with the creation of the successful group DAM (Da Arabian MCs) from Lod, who rap about their experiences of discrimination and racism as Palestinians living in the state of Israel. Since the release of DAM's immensely popular song 'Meen irhabi' ('Who's a terrorist') in 2001, rap has gained popularity among Palestinian youth in the West Bank,



G-Town performing on top of the Hummer, East Jerusalem, February 2007.

Gaza, Lebanon, Egypt and North America, fuelled in part by internet sites and chat forums devoted to Palestinian and Arabic rap. Almost all of the media coverage of Palestinian hip hop, however, has focused on DAM with little attention given to the burgeoning Palestinian hip hop scenes elsewhere.

The members of G-Town are inspired by African-American rappers, and *Dardake (It's Fucked Up)*, their first and only album to date, incorporates borrowed rap beats from well known US hip hop songs (their popular song *al-Sharq al-awsat al-jadid [The New Middle East]* is taken from Ice Cube's *Why We Thugs*). Despite their American influence, G-Town raps in Arabic to mostly local and almost entirely Palestinian audiences, unlike DAM, for example, who has a very large international following. While G-Town admittedly uses rap music as a vehicle to express political opposition to the Israeli occupation and anger at the apathy of the Arab states vis-à-vis the Palestinian refugees, they have also adopted rap music for survival purposes. Through rap music, the members of G-Town assert their masculinity, by (re)constructing it through their music, and thus empowering themselves as men, particularly at a time when Palestinian masculinity is being challenged and significantly weakened.

G-Town's Hood: Shu'afat Refugee Camp

The members of G-Town grew up in Shu'afat Refugee Camp, a densely populated slum housing around 22,000 people. Under Israeli occupation since 1967 and considered to be within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries, most of the camp's population have a special status as residents of Jerusalem, entitling them to the same rights and benefits as Israeli citizens, with the exception of the right to vote for the Knesset. Despite this status, since 2002 the camp has been severed from the rest of Jerusalem by the construction of the Separation Wall and checkpoints encircling the camp.[4] This disconnectedness and the subsequent absence of any municipal services, especially police, has led to an increase in family violence, robbery, use of firearms, public drug dealing and drug abuse.

B-Boy, the leader of the group, formed G-Town during the Second Intifada in response to feelings of hopelessness and of 'being lost'. The position of Palestinians in Jerusalem is particularly complex, as their experiences under Israeli occupation are different from those of Palestinians in the West Bank. Their contact with Israelis, mainly through employment and now increasingly in higher education, differentiates them from West Bank Palestinians; at the same time, the ongoing discriminatory and unjust policies of the Israeli authorities who seek to strengthen Israeli control over East Jerusalem has weakened the Palestinian leadership in this area, while igniting a new sense of resistance. For the members of G-Town, rapping is a chance to address some of these issues. It also gives the members a sense of purpose, instead of idling on the streets as many of the young men from the camp do.[5]



G-Town Signing, 2008.

The members of G-Town use their upbringing in the camp to assert their 'realness' and 'street cred' as



Palestinian rappers within the growing and increasingly competitive Palestinian hip hop scene. Having listened to African-American hip hop, they perceive the camp as analogous to the African-American urban ghetto with its poverty, lack of infrastructure, drugs and guns; even their name G-Town stands for 'Ghetto Town'. The camp features prominently in their overall image, their music and their performances, reflecting the centrality of 'place', the physical setting of a social activity, in making and performing music.[6]

Rapping and Masculinity

Masculinity is an important construction among the young men of Shu'afat camp, as throughout Palestinian society. In particular, the Israeli occupation has shaped and usurped Palestinian masculinity. During the First Intifada, beatings or interrogations by the Israelis became a kind of 'rite of passage' that was crucial to the construction of Palestinian masculinity.[7] During the Second Intifada, however, young men began facing a 'crisis in masculinity', as they found it increasingly difficult to be providers and breadwinners; and as the rates of injury and death rose, so did their reluctance to confront Israeli soldiers.[8] In recent years, this crisis in masculinity has been interpreted more severely as 'emasculatation' or the total loss of male power. Whereas during the First Intifada, confrontations with soldiers and the beatings endured were construed as empowering, today, it is just the opposite. In particular, the humiliation of Palestinian men as they cross the checkpoints between Israel and the West Bank (and parts of Jerusalem), during which they are questioned, searched and ordered around, is seen as a lack of power, and tantamount to feminization.[9] This weakening of masculinity parallels reports of increased domestic violence among Palestinians in Jerusalem, as well as in the West Bank, and my own observations of aggressive behaviour (owning attack dogs and guns; driving recklessly) corroborate similar claims of a crisis in masculinity among Palestinian Israelis.[10]

In this emasculating context, rap becomes the primary means for the members of G-Town to openly criticise and confront Israel's hegemonic practices, whilst it also provides them with a tough, resistant, masculine image. African-American rappers, especially the late Tupac Shakur, who came to codify the 'gangsta' rap genre, have influenced G-Town's understanding of rap and the ways they use it to reclaim and (re)construct their masculinity. The members of G-Town identify with Tupac because he also originated from the 'ghetto' and wrote about the institutionalised discrimination against African Americans in the US, which they in turn further relate to as Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Tupac, as well as other African-American rappers, offers an alternate construction of masculinity: Tupac's lyrics, his 'thug life' image, and 'cool pose' - his physical postures, clothing styles, social roles, behaviours, styles of walk, speech, hand shaking and so forth - all emit a hyper, almost threatening masculinity that serves as a coping mechanism against oppression and racism.[11] Mimicking this hyper masculinity through hand signals and the 'gangsta' style of dress (baggy pants, ostentatious gold jewelry - 'bling' - and hooded sweatshirts, with the Palestinian *keffiyeh* added as representative of the local context), the members of G-Town have constructed a new resistant, tougher and positive masculinity that is intrinsically linked to the refugee camp or the 'ghetto'.

Although the majority of G-Town's lyrics are solidly nationalist, masculinity is inherently related. Their lyrics call for the necessity of and adherence to *sumud* (steadfastness), the mechanisms of coping and resistance that the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation have developed for remaining in their homes and on their land. Being critical of Palestinian men who remain passive to the Israeli occupation, and whose masculinity thus becomes questionable, is a common theme in G-Town's rap. In their song *al-Hilm al-Ramadi* (*The Grey*

Dream), a song about losing hope, B-Boy sings: 'we are not going to forget the daily killing and destroying of homes/they are increasing and growing when we are dying/they take up arms against us and think they are whales/without a weapon I can hide in a coffin/and our leaders are useless as a stand/and your mate has become a spy/I sing, I sing, I sing/no one hears what I keep saying.' The song suggests that Palestinians are 'digging their own graves' by not resisting (or not being able to resist) Israeli policies, or by becoming a 'spy'; that is, a collaborator with the occupation.[12] The criticism of the 'spy' is directed particularly at those in the camps where, despite being reputable sites of resistance, the socioeconomic organisation of the camps has made collaboration easier, with Israel creating networks of collaborators through threats, drugs, bribery and blackmail.[13]



Members of G-Town climbing the Separation Wall at Shu'afat Camp, 2008.

Since their debut album, G-Town continues to construct their masculinity by increasingly rapping about the social problems in Palestinian society, created and exacerbated by the Israeli occupation. In late 2007, they produced the title track for the film, *Roads*, critical of the drug dealing and drug abuse that thrives among young Palestinian men. In this song, G-Town calls on their listeners to forget the drugs and to turn to rap: 'we had enough of them, we have had enough of blood/they also brought us drugs, our youth are seeking them/and nobody cares, and you, go shut up/the rap is our way we will express our problems.' In September 2010, G-Town was awarded a prize by MTV Latin America for their song *Enough is Enough* calling specifically on young men to put an end to violence against women. In both songs, G-Town challenges the behaviours characterising the emasculated state of Palestinian men. In their song *Bab al-hara (The Gate of the Neighbourhood)*, released in late 2010, G-Town warns its listeners that they are losing Jerusalem, as it is gradually being destroyed by the Israeli occupation and its policies designed to divide and weaken the Palestinian population.[14] By reclaiming and (re)constructing Palestinian masculinity through rap, and by defending Jerusalem while other young men are sitting around idle, G-Town has acquired a certain status within Shu'afat Camp. Their recent song and video of *Halina naduk (Let's Play Music)* is, for example, an ode to rap music and the very standing that they have achieved as rappers.

Conclusion

When G-Town climbed on top of the Hummer and began to rap in protest of the Mughrabi gate excavations, their rap voiced not only their anger at having come of age under Israeli occupation, but it also empowered them as Palestinian men in the very emasculating context of the ongoing Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem. G-Town's appropriation of rap has given them a kind of elevated stature within Shu'afat Refugee Camp. With the intensifying of Israeli control in Jerusalem, Palestinian youth find themselves in a very precarious and volatile predicament. In Shu'afat Refugee Camp, the connection to Jerusalem has become even more tenuous, and in this context G-Town's message of *sumud* mixed with masculinity plays an



important empowering role for young Palestinian men both inside and outside the camp, who remain desperate for means of hyper masculine expression so that they can survive the realities of Jerusalem's Palestinian ghettos under occupation.

[1] Keyes, Cheryl L, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press (2002).

[2] Chang, Jeff, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, New York: St Martin's Press (2005).

[3] Mitchell, Tony, "Another Root - Hip-Hop outside the USA", in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, edited by Tony Mitchell, Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press (2002).

[4] Amim, Ir, "Jerusalem Neighborhood Profile: Shu'afat Refugee Camp" (2006), < [http://www.ir-amim.org.il/Eng/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/ShuafatRefugeeCampEng\(1\).doc](http://www.ir-amim.org.il/Eng/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/ShuafatRefugeeCampEng(1).doc)> 28 Feb 2011; UNRWA, "Shufat [sic] Refuge Camp Profile", <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=121> > 28 Feb 2011; International Peace and Cooperation Center, *The Wall: Fragmenting the Palestinian Fabric in Jerusalem*, Jerusalem (2007).

[5] At the end of 2010, G-Town began its own 'reality' show, called 'G-Town's Security Cam' (in reference to the ongoing surveillance of Palestinians in East Jerusalem), uploaded to YouTube. In the first episode, in addition to rapping and discussing their music, they talk to their viewers about the notion of 'purpose'. See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T78d8sqjJC4&NR=1>>.

[6] Stokes, Martin, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music", in *Ethnicity Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, edited by Martin Stokes, Oxford and Providence: Berg Publishers (1997); Murray Forman, "'Represent': race, space and place in rap music", *Popular Music*, 19.1 (2000): pp. 65-90.

[7] Peteet, Julie, "Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian *Intifada*: A Cultural Politics of Violence", *American Ethnologist*, 21.1 (1994): pp. 31-49.

[8] Johnson, Penny and Eileen Kuttub, "Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada", *Feminist Review*, 69 (2001): pp. 21-43.

[9] Naaman, Dorit, "The Silenced Outcry: A Feminist Perspective from the Israeli Checkpoints in Palestine", *NWSA Journal*, 18.3 (2006): pp. 168-180.

[10] Sa'ar, Amalia and Taghreed Yahia-Younis, "Masculinity in Crisis: The Case of Palestinians in Israel", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35.3 (2008): pp. 305-323.

[11] Iwamoto, Derek, "Tupac Shakur: Understanding the Identify Formation of Hyper-Masculinity of a Popular Hip-Hop Artist", *The Black Scholar*, 33.2 (2003): pp. 44-49.



[12] Rhoda Kanaaneh, "Boys or men? Duped or 'made'? Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military", *American Ethnologist*, 32.2 (2005): 260-275.

[13] Yahya, Adil, "The Role of the Refugee Camps", in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, edited by Jamal R Nassar and Roger Heacock, Bir Zeit: Bir Zeit University and New York: Praeger (1991): pp. 91-106.

[14] The song itself is a play upon the popular Syrian television series broadcast during Ramadan, which tells the story of a utopian neighborhood in Damascus of the 1930s, fighting against outsiders.

About the author

Ela Greenberg is an independent scholar residing in Jerusalem. She holds an MA in Middle East Studies from the University of Chicago and a PhD in Islam and Middle East Studies from Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her book *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow: Education and Islam in Mandate Palestine* was published by the University of Texas Press in 2010. Her current research interests include Palestinian youth culture in East Jerusalem, Palestinian hip hop, and Palestinian and Israeli non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation. Her article "The King of the Streets": Hip Hop and the Reclaiming of Masculinity in Jerusalem's Shu'afat Refugee Camp', appeared in the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* in 2009, and is being republished in the 2nd edition of *That's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* by Routledge Press in 2011.