On Arab Masquerades and Necropolitics: Invisibilization and Hypervisibilization in Israeli Popular Culture

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Performance scholar Katrin Sieg coined the term ethnic drag in her book on racial, ethnic, and gender mimicry in Germany, where she extends the category of drag to include cross-ethnic performances. For Sieg, ethnic drag stands for a practice that

> excludes the material bodies of cultural Others and appropriates or ventriloquises their voices. The displacement, which reiterates the symbolic of colonial histories and attendant subject formations, instructs spectators how not to see the power and property relations that underwrite constructions of nationality even after race was elided from official discourse. It offers a critical vantage point from which the internal logic of nationality, race, and gender can be understood, as well as marking the locus of its most acute internal instability. (Sieg 2009, 86)

Not unlike the early 1990s discourse of gender performativity (Butler 1990), Sieg identifies the operations of drag as an interruption of regimes of perception and as a marker of their instability. However, several difficulties emerge from her concept of ethnic drag. Firstly, although taking care not to "postulate gender, sexuality, and race as analogues" (Sieg 2009, 22), the very grouping of her different case studies reflects an understanding of drag as reliant on performances of crossing between binary categories. Sieg also ignores the genealogies of practice and etymology of the term, which she refers to as "classic drag" (Sieg 2009, 28); this is imbricated with particular traditions of queer performance and, when attended to form within the idiosyncratic logic of its practitioners, is not necessarily synonymous with crossing, bending, or even with mimicry. Secondly, Sieg's careful and convincing attempts to create an epistemology through which to comprehend a wide range of heterogeneous

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representational performance practices hinges on the study of nation, national subject formation, and "the intricate ways in which race ... and sexuality" are predicated on [the nation] and vice versa" (Sieg 2009, 23). While this conceptual orientation may be adequate for the German or even broader Western European context, with its particular traditions of nationalism, colonialism, fascism, and performance, it falls short in the context of Israel-Palestine, where the cultural tropes I explore are located. In fact, the prevalent assumption of the sameness of national formations problematizes Sieg's alignment of heterogeneous materials such as Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (*Nathan der Weise* 1779) to those studied by historian Eric Lott on the nineteenth and twentieth-century American minstrel show, for example (1995), even if in both cases white people masked as non- or other-than white people. While Sieg's archive is rooted in and resulting from a European national project generating its constitutive Others in the form of (racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, etc.) minorities, Lott's subject material is constituted by settler-colonial power relations. As such, the mimicry and impersonation of Blacks in the US cannot be isolated from the function of exogenous groups (whether as enslaved or as immigrant laborers) who are meant to replace indigenous labor (Mamdani 2015). The absence of this perspective from the well-established study field of American blackface and minstrelsy—an influential scholarship hinging on the American discourse of race, which informs the study of tropes of racial mimicry worldwide—represents an acute gap in research.

This gap becomes clear with regard to other geopolitical contexts. In his study of the history of blackface in Hebrew-speaking Israeli theater, cultural anthropologist Eitan Bar-Yosef cites performance scholar Catherine Cole, who notes that what made the US-American minstrel show so racist "was that blackness and African American culture became the unequivocal signifier for ignorance, disorder and the grotesque" (Cole in Bar-Yosef 2013, 128). However, Bar-Yosef contends, "outside the United States, blackface could attain different meanings, divorced from the ideological weight associated with the specific race hierarchies germane to a particular culture" (ibid.). This is an important qualification in relation to studies such as Cole's on blackface in postcolonial Ghana (Cole 2001), Nadia Davids and Chinua Thelwell's on blackface in South Africa (Davids 2013; Thelwell 2013), Tracy Davis on minstrels in Britain (Davis 2013), or Halifu Osumare on mimicry of Blacks in Japanese Hip-Hop (Osumare 2001). However, the relevance of the US-American minstrel show as a product of settler culture, when compared to racial mimicry of Blacks in the 1950s and 1990s Habima, i.e., Israeli national theater productions of the racially charged

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musical *Cry the Beloved Country*, is entirely missing from Bar-Yosef's analysis.[1] Such research is oriented to a perspective of hegemonic experiences of empire and nation, risking the enhancement of settler-colonial processes rather than advancing their exposure and critique.

In turning to Sara Ahmed's phenomenological approach (Ahmed 2006), I instead pose the question of whose identity and agency were relegated to the background and made "invisible" with regard to contemporary Israeli popular culture. This analysis points to the understanding of performances of racist mimicry of Arabs within this context in order to pose a more general claim: that there is a continuum between ethnic mimicry and necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). I compare two audiovisual examples, each with distinct aesthetics, that together emblematize a near-dichotomy of strategies of defacement by means of representation. I read them as the two ends of the same technology of visuality. While one presents a general caricature of an Arab singer, the other capitalizes on the hyperrealistic impersonation of Palestinians. In both of them, the face of the Palestinian Other is out of focus for the Israeli and international viewer, impossible to discern and therefore dehumanized. These seemingly benign forms of popular culture are consumed, celebrated, normalized and identified with uncritically, not by a fundamentalist minority of messianic settlers, but by the mainstream of Israeli society and a significant share of global viewership. Contrary to the prevalent appeal to exceptionality in the Israeli case, I contend that a degree of the necropolitical is endemic to any case of ethnic drag practice embedded in colonial relations. Shefita and Fauda are but a suffocating reminder that the stakes of ethnic mimicry, appropriation, and the theatrical (ab)use of an/other's face are not the insult or the political incorrectness but the facilitation of real destruction of real bodies, homes, and lives.

Shefita, Fauda, and The Necropolitical Hypercontemporary

Shefita is a peculiar though resilient phenomenon in Israeli popular culture, often regarded as a multicultural innovation. A persona created by the Jewish-Israeli performer Rotem Shefi, Shefita specializes in covering English songs with a unique twist: using a fake grotesque Arabic accent. The television series *Fauda* (in Arabic فوضى; "chaos" or "disorder") fictionalizes the activity of a specialized

1 Habima (Hebrew: The Stage) is Israel's national theatre. Founded in 1918 in Moscow as an avant-garde Hebrew-speaking theatre group, their immigration to Palestine in 1931 (officially endorsed as a national theater in 1958) was a well-publicized symbolic milestone of Zionist settlement and naturalization of the settlement project by means of erecting national institutions (see Tartakovsky 2013).

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security force unit of "Mista'arvim" whose members disguise themselves as Palestinians and infiltrate Palestinian society to collect intelligence and execute "sensitive" operations. Created by Israeli-Jewish makers, both Shefita and *Fauda* rely on the representation of an Arab Other, articulating its meanings and symbolic economies. The emergence of two such distinct cases of popular representation of "Arabness," in the case of Shefita and of Palestinians in that of *Fauda*, is intriguing when considered against the backdrop of Jewish-Israeli public discourse. In the last two and a half decades, public opinion in Israel has sweepingly gravitated towards nationalistic, separatist, and xenophobic sentiments. Since the Second Intifada in 2000, Palestinian citizens of Israel have gradually been marked as external to the state's body-politic de facto, a trend visible in openly ethnocentric legislation and culminating in the parliamentary discourse leading up to the 2022 elections and their aftermath (Arablouei 2024; Alterman 2022). The legitimacy accorded by the Israeli mainstream to, and its compliance with, the state-sanctioned violence and military oppression of Palestinians in the West Bank and especially Gaza have reached unprecedented heights. Within this political and social climate, the appearance and popularity of the two performance tropes is at least conspicuous. It encourages us to rethink popularity as an indicator of social trends and a decipherer of cultural currents as biopolitical. What does the impersonation of an "Arab" or of "Palestinians" signify within contemporary Israeli culture? I propose that—in a manner which exposes inherent contradiction with nationalism—the more violence is directed towards Palestinians, the more visibly they cohere as political subjects. The related but essentially different examples of Shefita and *Fauda* outline two strategies of disavowal emanating from this (apparent) paradox. While *Fauda*'s ethnic drag capitalizes on extreme mimetic adjacency and is more impervious to criticism (claiming to "give a face to the other side"), Shefita's Othering masquerade dialectically opens itself to decolonizing trajectories.

Although significantly routed within the local contexts of their formation, both Shefita and *Fauda* have proliferated and are being viewed globally through online streaming platforms. Shefita was titled "the Arab diva who broke the internet" after viewings of her music-video exceeded a million views on YouTube in August 2015 (*Orly & Guy Morning Show*). *Fauda* is the first Israeli television production not only to be bought by the global streaming giant Netflix for distribution but also production, rebranded as a Netflix Original in November 2016 (Shechnik 2016). This made the show's second season an international coproduction rather than a singly Israeli cultural product. Both Shefita and *Fauda* are also reported to have been watched with fascination in the Arab world (Noriel 2017), traditionally regarded in Israel as hostile or oblivious to Israeli content. The exceptional attention directed towards these two performances of ethnic

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drag and their commercial success highlights their relevance for the study of contemporary cultural representations and the public they assemble globally. Furthermore, they bring to the fore the role of new viewing cultures in commodifying and circulating local discourses of performance and their demurral of the local-global binary. As such, they expose how networks of racist violence and occupation exceed the local and—again, the national—through commodification, which in turn normalizes and whitewashes violence. We should think of them and theorize them as produced and perpetuated by global networks of power, dovetailing, or as it appears in this case, foreshadowing, disaster capitalism, arms trade (Klein 2008), and even genocide.

Shefita's FreeFrom Arab

Rotem Shefi is a trained singer-songwriter who has attempted to break into the Tel Aviv music scene for several years. While this did not happen to Shefi, it did happen to her made-up persona, Shefita, whose cover version of Radiohead's 1990s hit song *Karma Police* went viral on YouTube in 2013 (Shalev 2003). Shefi features in the video dressed in an oriental garment and riding an old horse cart in the streets of Jaffa's gentrified flea market. Two distinctly Arab markers of the cover version are the use of instruments typical of Arabic classical music and Shefi's accent. The latter functions as the main signifier of Arab Otherness, as did the burnt cork marked Blackness in the US minstrel. This element is the most revealing of Shefi's practice as pejorative mimicry, exercised from an uncritical, privileged position and one that exceeds the innocent bad taste of mimicking another's speech. In the reality of segregation, surveillance, and population control in Israel, accents play a crucial role in official and unofficial systems of racial profiling and discrimination. Numerous documentaries and news reports in Israeli media have exposed how speaking Hebrew with a discernible Arabic accent results in fewer opportunities to attain a job, rent a flat, or enter a nightclub, even when "Arabness" is not signified through physical appearance, religious affiliation, or place of residence (Barbiro and Koperman 2010; Dahan and Rivlin 2015; Tzion 2021). The focus on the voice as the locus of racist mimicry is an elusive and often overlooked formal element in different traditions of ethnic drag. Lott remarks that "every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of Black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return" (Lott 1993, 5). Indeed, visual devices like blacking-up (or adorning prostatic long noses; Sieg 2009) are more readily policed and banned by liberal regimes of political correctness than the use of voice and accent. The anxiety around the tone of voice tends to take center stage in situations where the tone of the skin is inadequate to signify racial difference.

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As Sieg shows in her work, such was the case in the performance tradition of Jewface in nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century Germany, capitalizing on what was known as the "Jewish voice" (Sieg 2009, 35).

But Shefi does not intend to parody or ridicule. She insists in her early interviews that her performance of Shefita is motivated by love and respect for Arabic culture. She offers the example of hearing the sound of the call for prayer coming from the mosque of the Arab village neighboring her native town as an example of personal relation and identification (Shalev 2013). The isolation of the accent component as a leading aesthetic device of mimicry is further enhanced by Shefita's refrain from actually speaking Arabic. This is perhaps more than anything due to Shefi's complete lack of knowledge of the Arabic language. Since *Karma Police*, Shefi has released at least five more music videos in which she covers English songs of Nirvana, Alanis Morrissett, and Aerosmith as Shefita. Although none of them has gained the outstanding online popularity of the first Karma Police video in 2013, Shefi has not continued to perform her own music. Her first interview as Rotem Shefi and not Shefita since 2013 was in 2023 (Mako 2023), and another in 2024, where in light of the October 7 attack, she renounced her Shefita. During this decade, she has only been interviewed as Shefita, insisting on speaking her Arabic-accented English.

As a cultural fiction, Shefita offers an abstract, updated quotation of Arabness with no source; a simulacrum. More than anything, Shefi's "Arab diva" lacks any marker of Palestinian identity or agency. In her early shows, Shefi made it a point to inform her audiences that Shefita was "born in a rich village between Dubai and Iran and accidentally arrived in Israel with which she fell in love immediately" (Brener 2015). As such, this fiction aligns the public she creates with the West-facing prosperity of the Gulf States, in which indigenous Palestinians are implicitly deducted from the sum group of "Arabs." In this way, Shefi provides Israeli audiences with a kosher oriental fantasy of a generalized Arab whose language and jokes they understand. This is a character that, by coming from the outside, orientates them as locals, indeed natives. In the world of this fantastic ethnic drag, the Palestinians whose mosque prayer calls have inspired Shefi and on whose lands of destroyed villages Shefi's native town was erected have never existed, nor has their language. Due to this characteristic of the Shefita act, I call this mode of ethnic drag "FreeFrom," following the logic of unhealthy food produce engineered to contain no sugar, gluten, caffeine, or fat, thus allowing consumers to eat it without risking their health. Shefita fictionalizes and trades an Arabness devoid of "Palestinianness" as signifying political claims and rights, and it is in this quality that her popularity inheres.

In fabulating Shefita's biography, Shefi foreshadowed the political reality which materialized with the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, consolidating diplomatic relations and mainly trade (Maoz 2020) between Israel, the

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UAE, and Bahrain. Unlike the peace treaties between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan and the Oslo Accords with the PLO, the Abraham Accords ignore Palestinian claims completely. In this, the long-standing position of unrecognition and non-normalization of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians by the Arab states was broken. What served to recover Trump's and Netanyahu's waning support due to their failed coping with the COVID-19 crises (ibid.) now allowed Israelis to fly from Tel Aviv to Dubai and back without ever noticing the West Bank underneath—bypassing it as if it never existed. It's a fantasy of a Middle East free from Palestinians.

Considering Shefita solely as a cultural phenomenon within a nation risks mistaking it for cultural appropriation. This interpretation would assume some underlying societal-ideological and legislative systems that account for these minorities, defining and protecting them and their culture or failing to do so—a situation where the hegemonic group is reproduced by a dialectic relation to them. As cited earlier, in theorizing practices of impersonation of Native Americans in postwar Germany as a reaction to the Nazi genocide (by means of embodying a surrogate victim of genocide according to Sieg), Sieg finds that this ethnic drag "instructs spectators how not to see the power and property relations that underwrite constructions of nationality even after race was elided from official discourse" (Sieg 2009, 86). Here, however, the national—that is the Israeli-Jewish public gathering to face Shefita as their Arab Other—makes possible the unseeing of Palestinian Arabs and the reality of occupation. If they embrace her as an Arab, it is only as fiction, as a cartoon, and endorsing her seemingly expresses inclusivity, tolerance, openness, and mostly good humor. Though appropriation may alter an object, it inevitably preserves its existence and often enhances it. Whatever established signifiers of Arabness are at Shefi's disposal, which are very few, the context within which she operates necessarily frames her signification as erasure and elimination rather than appropriation, at least as far as Arabness pertains to Palestinians in Israel-Palestine. When we ask who Shefia is "free from," the violence of this act becomes far more apparent.

In a workshop I conducted with a mixed working group of Jewish and Palestinian youth in Jaffa in January 2017, I screened several of Shefita's music videos and asked the participants to comment. Most Palestinian participants had not seen Shefita before, and the first one to respond said, "I don't understand the words she is singing; is she from India?" When I explained that this performance was meant to signify an Arabic accent, most Palestinian participants burst out laughing. As many of the Jewish participants already knew Shefita before, their reactions oscillated between embarrassment and disbelief at the Palestinians' failure to decode Shefita's "Arabness," and they launched an avid defense of the talent and playful inventiveness of the singer. As part

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of the ongoing activity of an established political youth partnership (Sadaka-Reut NGO, https://reutsadaka.org/en/), the setting for the workshop was part of the organization's pedagogy of decolonizing education. Both Jewish and Palestinian youth group members, who, at the time of the workshop, had already worked together for several months, were familiar with each other and with a critical political discourse. Yet, the Jewish members of the group were unable to recognize the repercussions of the symbolic elimination of Palestinians generated by Shefita's act, and the Palestinian members struggled to articulate their resistance to it (indeed, how can one prosecute Shefita for appropriating Arab culture when a moment before one decoded her as Indian?). The Jewish participants highlighted Shefita's talent and comedic qualities by refuting any suggestion that the imitation might be problematic. A mere few took a critical stand towards it, deeming it racist or offensive. Only at this part of the discussion, where the gap between the two groups was exposed as phenomenological—what does one *see* or *not see*—did the Palestinian participants express their anger at both the performer and their fellow groupmates for endorsing her. It is not so much what Shefita *does* as much as what she *means* in the context of Israeli contemporary politics—or rather, what she does phenomenologically.

In 2019, Shefita participated in the reality TV song contest Hakokhav Haba (in Hebrew "rising star"), which nominates the Israeli representative for the 2019 Eurovision (mako.co.il). This show exposed her to millions of viewers and turned the discourse around her act and its questionable ethics into a heated debate in printed and social media. On the one hand, the acceptance and normalization of her act on such a magnified scale and the opportunity to voice objections to it, on the other, facilitate the "presencing" of power relations even when their articulation in discourse is still incoherent and vague. One such example was the initiative of Fakhri Sa'id, a Palestinian student of the Tel Aviv University College in Jaffa, to cancel her show on campus, leading to a televised debate between Shefi and Sa'id (Cohen and Loksh 2019). Through talking back to Shefita, Sa'id was able to perform a resistance to the broader mechanisms of oppression, greater and graver than the specific situation. In this, the made-up drag of ethic-crossing momentarily served to suspend the straightening devices of disavowal. The decoy that Rotem Shefi created and named Shefita was used inversely in this case as a concrete target for political dissent. It allowed denied power relations to become somewhat exposed.

Shefita's case frames drag as marking practices that produce phenomenological interference, an intervention that suspends or resists naturalized, normalized regimes of perception. As a practice of drag, Shefita's ethnic fiction challenges orientations: the ways concrete bodies and their significations are found in space (Ahmed 2006). The implication of masquerading as an Arab—even

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in the FreeFrom style exercised by Shefi—in a space devoted to the disavowal of Palestinian Arabs cannot but draw attention to how Arabness is constructed, to begin with, and, by that, reintroduce the disavowed Palestinian into view. This dynamic is further complicated in the following example of ethnic drag, where, in a completely opposite fashion to Shefita's, the mimicry of Palestinians claims the utmost detailed accuracy and authenticity.

Fauda's Superarab

The tactics of ethnic impersonation deployed in the action television fiction *Fauda* (2015) expose an opposite route of appropriation and erasure. The series portrays the activity of Mista'arvim—a specialized undercover military unit that undertakes sensitive operations within the Palestinian civilian areas of the West Bank. What "undercover" means in this context is that Jewish-Israeli soldiers are trained to mimic Palestinians to perfection, mastering typical styles of dress, walking, body language and dialect. In other words, the units of Mista'arvim use racial cross-dressing for military purposes. What the makers of *Fauda*, Lior Raz and Avi Issacharov, have done, in turn, is to use their military experience of Mista'arvim ethnic drag for entertainment purposes. As *Fauda* is now being broadcast in numerous countries, Raz and Issacharov can be said to have launched the entertainment equivalent of the Israeli security industry, which exports worldwide the technology and knowledge developed for the occupation, surveillance, and population control of Palestinians.[2] The abundance of Israeli manufactured weapons featuring in the series indeed suggest reciprocity which is more than a mere formal likeness of these two industries.

Fauda's allusion to performance traditions of racial mimicry is apparent already in its marketers' choice of visual language, presenting the main characters in a double picture, comparing them as they are dressed up as Palestinians and when they are dressed as "themselves," that is, as "Israeli," as "normal." Most likely unintended and uninformed, these images quote rather faithfully the aesthetic logic of nineteenth-century poster advertisements from US minstrel shows. Even the subtleties of typography are recruited to express the delicacy of mimicry when diacritic signs are replaced almost unnoticeably between the Arabic and the Hebrew logos. All of these are joined to the recurring theme to which considerable *Fauda* screen time is dedicated: the act of dressing up, applying makeup, dying hair and beards, perfecting accents, and mastering

2 The popular US series *Homeland* (2011) preceded *Fauda* (2015) but is itself an adaptation of the Israeli series *Hatoofim* (2010).

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mannerisms. Through these means, the Israeli protagonists flawlessly transform into Palestinians. The spectacle and challenge of passing authentically, pertinent to many mimetic practices, is a vital component in *Fauda*'s dramatic structure and its aesthetic appeal.

The stakes of ethnic mimicry are demonstrated in the first minute of the first episode. The short scene opens with an aerial shot of the inside of a large mosque, where people are seen praying. In the next shot, loud banging on the mosque's doors is heard, joined by nervous cries for help, as an ill-looking person is rushed into the main praying hall by two men and supposedly a woman in a long black dress and hijab. They are asking the people in the mosque to bring him water while the man is clutching his chest, suggesting he might be having a heart attack. As the people who were praying gather around them to help, the ill person quickly turns to one of them, pulling out a gun while the group who brought him in follows suit, thus revealing themselves to both the viewers and the Palestinian characters in the mosque as Mista'arvim. They abduct one of the people in the mosque while threatening the others with guns to keep them from interfering. When a person standing behind the Mista'arvim pulls out a gun, he is quickly shot dead by the woman figure waiting by the mosque's entrance. The next shot follows a car that had waited for the Mista'arvim unit outside the mosque, into which they all climb and quickly drive off. The woman removes her headscarf inside the vehicle, revealing herself as a Mista'arev man. The narrative of the rest of the episode follows them, and we never get to see the people who were left behind in the mosque. In this snap performance of infiltration and abduction, ethnic impersonation and gender cross-dressing unite. This synecdochic establishment scene confirms a state of being in which, for Palestinians, no one and nowhere is safe, while for Israeli Mista'arvim, nowhere and nothing is out of reach.

While conspicuously absent from Shefita's fantasy, the hyperbolic presence of Palestinians in that of *Fauda* serves as a crucial point of comparison. The series' commitment to authentic representation dictates that all characters are depicted by actors of their respective national/ethnic group. Palestinians play Palestinian characters and Jewish-Israelis Jewish-Israeli ones, respectively. Furthermore, the makers have stated in an interview that special Palestinian advisers were employed on the set to supervise the meticulously accurate depiction of Palestinians in all scenes alongside military and secret service experts (Noriel 2017). A non-Israeli friend who follows the show shared with me that he often finds it difficult to distinguish the Israelis from the Palestinians as, in many situations, the only clear distinction is indicated through the use of either Hebrew or Arabic. This may bear on the very intelligibility of the show's narrative, as much of the tension that sustains the plot emanates from the ability to disguise and infiltrate. Within *Fauda*, the Palestinian characters inevitably

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serve as dupes whose failure to recognize the true Israeli identity of the soldiers serves as the ultimate indication of the mastery of the Mista'arvim's mimicry. The gender scholar Amy Robinson describes the act of passing as a "triangular theatre of identity," where "a member of the in-group witnesses the failure of a person outside the group to register the identity of another in-group member" (Robinson 1994, 716). Appropriating the model which originally describes the ways queers and people of color negotiate white and/or heteronormative environments, for the most part in *Fauda*, both the viewers and the Mista'arvim are set up as members of the same group and the Palestinians as the duped Other.[3] This relationship is turned around at one point when a young widowed Palestinian woman dresses as an Israeli to blow herself up in a Tel Aviv night club, avenging the death of her husband by the Mista'arvim. Rather than signaling a potential reciprocity of passing, this scene seems to alert the danger of the reversal of mimicry as a weapon when Palestinians use it against Israelis. The roles of infiltrator and duped might have reversed, but the spectator remains the detector.[4]

The symbolic and aesthetic implications of *Fauda*'s performance of crossing are severe. Unlike Shefita, the appropriation of culture, dress, speech, and body language, all framed through the performance of authenticity and accuracy, are turned necropolitical (Mbembe 2003). Due to structural segregation and discrimination, the clear majority of Jewish Israelis are Arabic illiterate. At the same time, most Palestinians have at least some knowledge of Hebrew, and many have a complete mastery of it. In this reality, the Arabic lingual sphere remains to some degree shielded from hegemonic penetration and appropriation, preserving a Palestinian discursive zone to which most Israelis would find it difficult to enter. Priding themselves on bringing Palestinian Arabic to Israeli television primetime (Noriel 2017), *Fauda*'s makers fabulate and dramatize the piercing of this somewhat protected sphere, subtitling and making accessible to non-Arab viewers what until now was out of an immediate reach and gaze. This fictional dynamic of undermining Palestinian closed private spheres is extended in *Fauda* to physical spaces such as mosques, homes, bedrooms, and showers, where the camera invades and exposes. *Fauda*'s cinematic syntax pays special attention to the bodies of Palestinian women, where plot and filmography occasionally collide in providing opportunities to peek under hijabs and bourkas. The role of the detector assigned to the viewer through

3 Sieg also borrows Robison's "triangular theatre of identity" in her study of antisemitic Jewish impersonation on the German stage (see Sieg 2009, 19).

4 The second season, which aired in 2018, features more mimicry of Palestinians as Israelis. This might be related to Netflix's greater involvement in the script and production.

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witnessing Palestinians being duped is thus extended to constitute them as the Mista'arvim themselves. It fictionalizes them as the infiltrators whose privileged gaze is permitted into life's most intimate and closed-off areas. The real-life precarity of Palestinian bodies routinely under occupation in the West Bank, where the first two seasons are set, provides all the opportunities and contextual legitimacy for this fantasy of absolute control.

To articulate the specific defacing mechanization of *Fauda* as ethnic drag, I turn to a 1993 critique of the feminist performance scholar Peggy Phelan on the implications of gender drag for women. Phelan argues that:

> within the economy of patriarchal desire, which frames … male cross-dressing, the figure of the woman is appropriated as a sign to validate male authority. His authority is determined by how fully he can "wear" her; in wearing her, however, he renders her actual presence unnecessary. ([1993] 2005, 99)

Significantly, Phelan provided this observation in the context of the debate surrounding Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* on Harlem drag balls of the 1980s (Livingston 1990). Since then, not only the binary approach that discusses the symbolism of drag in terms of "man-dressed-as-woman" was challenged by queer theory and more forcefully by queer performers and their practice, the very use of the term and the development of queer performance since rendered it partial and insufficient. However, when adapted to the context of the kind of ethnic drag that is circulated, even celebrated, in *Fauda* and later in the posted images of IDF soldiers, Phelan's position is rather useful.

The form of symbolic displacement and erasure of the Palestinian agency that takes place in *Fauda* is doubled. First, in paraphrasing Phelan's insight, the mimicry of Palestinians is constructed so convincingly that it constitutes the Mista'arev as a potential surrogate. Its aesthetics imply that the "adorning" of Palestinians constitutes an exciting element of contemporary Israeliness. Similarly, Philip Deloria places the assimilative practice of "playing Indian" to white Americans (Deloria 1998, 7). Secondly, within *Fauda's* fiction, the Mista'arvim characters are very good at talking like them, walking like them, falling in love with other Palestinians like them, even resisting Zionist colonialism like them, to the extent that "real" Palestinians are deemed somewhat redundant. The excess of drag takes this logic further precisely because it is a performance, a costume. The Mista'arev represents a fantasy in which an Israeli is not only everything a Palestinian can ever be but more. Firstly, because he is protected and guided by the powerful apparatus of the Israeli intelligence and security forces. This is realized in *Fauda* through the recurring drone images of Palestinian cities and the role of the commander who is streaming intelligence

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and tipping off the soldiers in action through an unseen earphone, endowing them with a clear strategic advantage over the less technologically advanced Hamas warriors. Secondly, while Palestinian agency is static and predetermined, the Mista'arev is both Israeli and Palestinian, alternately and never together. It consumes and contains everything. If Shefita fashions a palatable Arabness, free-from Palestinian reference, *Fauda's* Mista'arev not only can substitute the Palestinian Arab; he represents an improved model: a "Superarab."

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Fauda's third season, which aired in 2020, became the only representation of Gaza and Gazans on Israeli TV screens outside the regular circulation of bombing footage on the news. Its fourth (2022; On Netflix 2023) focused on Hezbollah in Lebanon and, like the third season, followed a plotline of kidnapping of Israelis. My case studies and conclusions predate the unfathomable destruction of Gaza and the genocide of its people at the hands of the Israeli army since 2023 (see Mordechai 2024). However, in an interview with an American newspaper in March 2024, *Fauda's* makers announced that its fifth season, which is currently in the making, will deal with the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and its aftermath. Lior Raz explained:

> We try to give faces to the other side and feel compassion for the other side … Now I assume it's going to be very hard to do that … I don't think it will be possible to show Hamas as humans, but we have to bring a good story … (Cohen 2024)

Fauda's camera desecration of intimate Palestinian spaces is echoed in a social media trend which proliferated during 2024, after Israel's invasion of Gaza: IDF soldiers photograph themselves presenting and often modeling women's undergarments in houses they have destroyed. Outing these private, regularly hidden-away items asserts a similar testimony of complete and utter control over Palestinian lives and fate. Its often homoerotic stance and its deliberate act of humiliation notwithstanding, the dragging in these images participates in the reductive dissection of Palestinian people to materiality, to a garment and a makeup, to mannerism and a gait to be mimicked, to props on a set. The displaced dresses and lingerie items on the bodies of IDF soldiers become the negative space of its displaced or murdered owners.

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