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# Indigeneity, Transgression and the Body: Orientalism and Biblification in the Popular Imaging of Palestinians

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers how the representation of Palestinians in popular imaging has shifted from the nineteenth century to the current day. It will utilise a mixture of popular media, including photography, portraiture, film, political posters and television. This longitudinal study charts the relationship of Orientalism and biblification as imaging systems – and their respective connotations of familiarity and otherness – in delineating questions of indigeneity and transgression as they pertain to the Palestinian body. It will analyse how biblification and Orientalism have operated to effect transformations in the projection and reception of the Palestinian body, both in western and Palestinian authored imagery. This analysis is underscored with questions of class, urban-rural divides and modernity in Palestine. Analysing the continuities, contestation and transformation shaping the imaging of the Palestinian body, this article focuses on the figures of the fellah, the fedayee and the infiltrator. It argues the Palestinian body was transformed from an indigenous, biblified vestige to an orientalised outsider status, with continuing impacts on contemporary representations. It considers how the historical contestation of Palestinian bodies has continued to impact contemporary popular narratives.

## KEYWORDS

Palestinian; *fellah*; *fedayee*; infiltrator; photography; film and television

Landmark studies such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1997) and Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) have established the long and deleterious effects of Western popular imaging on the perception and reception of Arabs and the Arab body. In the highly politicised arena of Palestine-Israel, questions of representation are particularly acute with claims and counterclaims of indigeneity at the root of one of the most significant and ongoing conflicts produced during the twentieth-century. This paper approaches the subject of Palestinian representation from a longitudinal perspective, to consider the genealogy of shifting representations. In doing so, it considers the interaction between Palestinian authored representations and those produced by the west to consider moments of confluence and contestation through different modes of representation.

Given the first daguerreotype of Palestine was taken in 1839 (Nassar 2003: 322), the same year that the new photographic process was invented, the duration of the

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popular imaging of Palestine is as old as the photo-mechanical technologies of representation that gave rise to technologies of popular media such as photography, film and television. In tracing the shifting representations of the Palestinian body through such popular media, this paper links cultural production to its political and social context. It also considers the role and effects of popular imaging, both local and global, on the multiple productions of the Palestinian body. Such a study necessitates investigation of a multidirectional approach to popular imaging. That is to say, the implications of Palestinian projections of identity are as implicated in the production of the Palestinian body as the ascriptions by Western tropes of representation. Indeed, there are a number of confluences that will be explored, which underscores the often-contradictory nature of Palestinian representations.

This article raises several questions. How did representations of the Palestinian body change through popular media from the nineteenth century to the present? How did the effects of various imaging systems that colour Western understandings of the Palestinian body – as well as political and technological developments – inform the shifts in how Palestinian bodies are imaged? How did imaging of and by Palestinians intersect with or contradict and counter Western imaging? What are the impacts of these disjunctures in representation?

## Bodies and Biblical Narrative

Within the throes of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographic practices, many visiting photographers, as well as studios, run by both local communities and foreigners alike, opened throughout the Levant. These local studios produced photographs for a variety of markets, but two significant photographic genres were Biblical images for Western consumption and studio photographs produced on commission for the local market.

The confluence of religious influence, modern technological development and the renewed colonial interest in the region (Nassar 1997: 25) created much popular western interest in the Biblical, leading to a significant market for the ‘Holy Land’ by the late nineteenth century. In addition to visiting photographers,<sup>1</sup> many local photographic studios<sup>2</sup> opened to address the market for tourists and pilgrims, as well as photographs for local consumption, such as portraits and *carte de visites* (Sheehi, 2016: 53–74). Given the saturation of photography in Palestine, there is much material upon which to draw.

In parallel to the commercial world of photography was the development of a significant Western academic infrastructure, primarily focused on archaeology, anthropology and Biblical histories in Palestine. A number of institutions were established, starting with the London-based Palestine Exploration Fund (1865), which later established the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (1919), shortly followed by the Russian Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (1882), the *École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem* (1890), the American School of Oriental Study and Research in Palestine (1900) and the German *Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Lands* (1902), among others. Collectively, these institutions comprise an extensive photographic archive for scientific purposes that sat as another genre alongside commercial photographic production. These images circulated primarily within scholarly

networks, if at all, making them of less relevance to the study of popular imaging, however they still coloured the emerging perceptions of Palestinian bodies.

The commercial roots of nineteenth-century imaging tropes in Palestine were rooted in the lucrative market for the Biblical (Zananiri 2016: 69). Both visiting photographers and local studios alike took photos of Biblical sites such as churches, landscape panoramas and putative Biblical sites of religious interest for a western audience that either addressed a souvenir industry locally or, for those who could not travel, audiences in the western world in the form of postcards and travel books. *Biblication*, a term coined by Issam Nassar, selectively highlighted the ancient Biblical past, effectively erasing the modern social life of the region (Nassar 2006b). Images of 'Holy Land' landscapes constructed a vision of an empty and ancient land, filled with ghosts of a Biblical past. This genre of imaging, as part of a touristic marketing apparatus for the region's Biblical narrative, came at the cost of obscuring, if not outrightly erasing, modern urban life of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Technological development of the medium was necessary before people could be recorded photomechanically. This technological lag was of course global, but had specific implications on the way Palestine was remediated to colonial centres. For instance, images of landscapes largely absent of people were annotated with putative Biblical histories, filling the figural absence with a textual one. When figures were able to be recorded in photography, they too functioned with biblified tropes by depicting Biblical trades or archetypes. Indeed, even in scholarly imaging, where figures did populate photographic frame, they were typically to indicate the scale of ancient monuments or archaeological sites (Barromi-Perlmann 2017). These early photographs, be they commercially produced for the western market or made for scholarly purposes, generally subordinated the body to the primacy of the 'Holy Land' that was the focus of the image.

It is important to note that the bodies visualised in such images are typically *fellahin*, that is, villagers or peasants, who, in the context of processes of urbanisation in the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods, were forming the basis of a modern working class (Sheehi 2021: 355). The focus on *fellahin* rather than the middle classes, often hailing from urban centres, produced a class bias in such images (Zananiri 2021: 8).

The class relations that are embedded in the employment of *fellahin* labourers in images such as Figure 1 underscore a number of important points. Firstly, these images buttress the narrative of an empty, underpopulated and underdeveloped land through the authority of scholarly imaging. This narrative of underdevelopment has significant resonances in western narratives of modernisation of the region (Abusaada 2021: 380). Secondly, and building on the authority of the scholarly, they depict a particular



**Figure 1.** General view of the city from the North. Charles Wilson, *Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem* 1865. Image Courtesy of Palestine Exploration Fund.

and highly classed encounter between the scholarly colonial lens and *fellah* body, rather than the plurality of Palestine which might be viewed from perspectives of ethno-confessional, class or urban-rural diversity. While the depiction of such broad diversity is a lot to ask of a single image, the significant repetition of this colonial dynamic in tropes of archaeological and survey imaging certainly had a representational impact on the far-off consumers of such images in colonial centres. The third point is the primacy of landscape. *Fellah* bodies as scale markers belie a relationship to the primary photographic subject: the Biblical land which they populate. When such photos are read within a broader context that includes popular biblified portrait photography, the vestigial status of ancient unchanged bodies in an ancient and unchanged land, creates a subtext of indigeneity or aboriginality of those bodies, but also implicitly reinforces a colonial hierarchy with the ‘modern’ viewer.

Portrait photography began to develop in the 1860s. When people appeared in Western cultural production, they too sat within modes of biblification. Images of shepherds, fishermen and mothers cradling babies proliferated (Nassar 2006b: 323). Such Biblical archetypes came to be commonplace, as exemplified by a populist ethnographic approach of Biblical types for the Western market, a notable example being Felix Bonfils’ studio photography, though many photographers, both local and foreign, courted the lucrative market for the Biblical, including Palestinian photographers like Khalil Raad. (Figure 2).

Biblification made the landscapes and people of the ‘Holy Land’ legible by reading them through Biblical interpretations (Zananiri 2016: 64–81), effectively assimilating a perceived Biblical past and appropriating it into a Western canon. Orientalism, however, operated through an inverse procedure that ascribed and delineated otherness. As Edward Said notes in the opening to his seminal work of the same name, ‘Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”’ (Said 1979: 2).

While biblification accessioned the Palestinian body in the western Biblical imaginary through a process of making familiar the foreign other, Orientalism actively marked the delimitation of otherness. The net result of these twin processes is the demarcation of a space of ‘civility’. This civility implicitly attempts to assume the neutral positioning of a western Biblical imaginary. That is to say, a recouping of the ancient spiritual roots of Western Christianity set against the wild and untameable otherness of an implicitly Islamic ‘Orient’ (Zananiri 2021: 10–11). The establishment of these imaging conventions had significant and ongoing effects, particularly in the consolidation of coding that which is putatively ‘authentic’. (Figure 3).

### Coding Authenticity: Identity Markers and the Emergent Bodies

The impacts of a visual language that codified a notional authenticity in imaging can be seen in the deployment of costuming in both photography and cinema, particularly by the interwar period. The representation of the *fellah* became an iconographic image, albeit one that had several meanings. The class-driven subtext to biblified and Orientalist representations, which were rooted in the *fellah* body of the nineteenth century, had broad transnational effects positioning, sometimes uneasily, the authenticity of the *fellah* body.



**Figure 2.** Galilee fishermen Between 1925 and 1946 transparency: safety film, with hand-colouring; 4 × 5 in. American Colony Photographic Department, LC-M343- 47013-x. Image courtesy of the Matson Collection, Library of Congress.

Images of *cultural crossdressing*, that is to say Western tourists having their photo taken in Palestinian or more broadly Arab costume has been explored from the perspective of Orientalist relations (Nassar 2006a; Bair 2010). Less explored, however, is the phenomenon within Palestinian communities.

The culture of *carte de visites*, of which images of ‘cultural crossdressing’ are but a sub-category, saw the spread of studio photographs through social networks as a mode of exchange, particularly among the upper and middle classes (Sheehi 2016: 55). Photography, including cultural crossdressing, was fashionable, representing a performance of class (Nassar 2021: 169–170), but more broadly a participation in the practices of modern life (Watenpaugh 2014: 2–4).

Typically, these images of cultural crossdressing employed the use of traditional Palestinian costume (either putative or authentic), often with props such as amphorae, guns, baskets or stools. The participation of Palestinians in the practice hints at a transnational confluence of class and modernity, given that the everyday wear of such people was similar to that of middle-class western counterparts, though suits might be augmented with a *tarboush* (fez) or other local accoutrements.





**Figure 3.** Portrait of Palestinian physician and anthropologist Tawfiq Canaan (1882–1964) between 1905 and 1920. Garabed Krikorian, Königl. Preuss, Hof, Photograph, Jerusalem. Image courtesy of Wikimedia. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tawfiq\\_Canaan.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tawfiq_Canaan.jpg).

In the case of Palestinian adoption of the practice, it indicates a transgression of class and urban-rural boundaries in choosing to be photographed wearing ‘traditional’ costume, rather than a cross-cultural transgression. The intent of such Palestinian photographic subjects may be difficult to address from a historical perspective. Was such an action a demonstration of ‘Palestinian-ness’, a performance of nationalism, or was it simply meant as a mode of humour, relying on class transgression? Humour may well have been a significant factor, evident in [Figure 4](#), which shows both the transgression of class and the transgression of gender. The implications of western visitors participating in the practice may also support a thesis that class rather than cultural transgression was at the core of such middle-class Palestinian performances.

Whatever the intent behind Palestinian motivations toward the practice, it underscores a particular coding of the *fellah* body through costume. Whether a form of classist humour or a performance of nationalism, it demonstrates middle-class Palestinian imaging was certainly not isolated from bibliified and Orientalist tropes. However, the production of such images by middle-class Palestinians and their western counterparts





**Figure 4.** Unknown (left) and Salim Zananiri (right) c. 1925–29. Photographer unknown [possibly Krikorian or Toumayan]. Carte de visite. Image courtesy of the author.

would appear to have very different motivations and symbolic values, though more research on the topic is necessary.

The introduction of new moving image technology and popular consumption of film in the interwar period saw a spate of popular Biblical epics as exemplified by Cecil B. de Mille's Biblical trilogy *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *King of Kings* (1927) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932). Much like the photographic industry that preceded and was contemporaneous to them, these films were a popular and commercially lucrative genre.

The format of the earlier silent films, in particular, have a significant confluence with biblified photographic production, reading as moving image tableaux spliced with textual intertitles. While the use of intertitles was a common feature of silent films, within the Biblical epic, they are reminiscent of the captioning in photographic material which interpreted Palestine and its people through Biblical text.

The use of biblified imaging conventions established in photography also continues in the moving images themselves. Costuming in Arab headwear such as *keffiyehs* and *hijab* abounds, as do *abayas* (robes), reflecting *fellahin* Palestinian dress codes of the day. The deployment of costuming as a manifestation of authenticity has particular resonances with middle-class Palestinian performances in portraiture.

Despite the increasingly politicised, and sometimes violent, context of Palestine in the 1920s (starting with the Nabi Musa riots in 1921, finishing with the Buraq riots of 1929), the question of indigeneity was unaddressed in film, with categories of Arab and Jew often collapsed, as the opening surtitle of *King of Kings* attests:

The events portrayed in this film occurred in Palestine nineteen centuries ago, when the Jews were under the complete subjection of Rome – even their own high priest being appointed by the Roman procurator. (Surtitle *King of Kings* 1927)

The collapsing of Jewish and Arab identity in post-Ottoman Palestine marks a particular seed that would germinate with the second period of Hollywood Biblical epics in the period after 1948. Notwithstanding the complexities of the ethno-confessionally diverse, multi-communal nature of Palestine – and the Zionist cultural erasure of the small indigenous Jewish Palestinian population by the significant growth of Zionist migrations (Evri and Kotef 2020: 5–8) – the collapsing of the two categories, and indeed ignorance about their nationalist differentiation, can be seen in much popular western cultural production.

Even in magazines such as *National Geographic*, which carefully trod a line between popular and scholarly publishing, we can see such examples of the conflation and flattening of the categories of Arab and Jew. The March 1914 issue, for instance, featured an article by John D. Whiting, from the American Colony Photographic Department, titled ‘Village Life in the Holy Land: A description of the life of the present-day inhabitants of Palestine, showing how, in many cases, their customs are the same as in Bible times’ (Whiting 1914 in Koptý 2021: 314).

Whiting, an American who had grown up in Palestine, spoke fluent Arabic and, in many ways, demonstrated a particular knowledge and sensitivity towards Arab Palestinians in his work as guide, US Vice Consul, antiquities dealer and photographer (Lev 2021: 233–236), argued in one of his articles that:

One cannot become even tolerably acquainted with Palestine without perceiving that it is the *land* that has preserved the ancient customs. Its present-day-inhabitants, who have nothing in common with the modern Jews who crowd Jerusalem, are still perpetuating the life of Abraham and the customs and ways of the people who lived here at the time of Christ. (Whiting 1914: 251–253)

As Yazan Koptý points out, Palestinians ‘are brought to the forefront of Whiting’s storytelling, but with the intention of using them as Biblical reenactors rather than protagonists in their own right’ (Koptý 2021: 314), providing a very particular insight into how Whiting understood the Western market for the Biblical. Despite some of the sensitivities to the various populations he displays elsewhere (Lev 2021: 258), Whiting’s conflation of early twentieth century *fellahin* with ancient Biblical populations points towards a popular understanding of indigeneity that is rooted in marketing the holiness of the landscape and pitted against a matrix of class and modernity in urban populations.

Aesthetically many of the Biblical and Orientalist tropes that pervaded photography and interwar cinema would continue in the epics of the 1950s and 60s. The *Nakba* – the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 (Pappe 2006; Masalha 2012) – meant a significant shift in the filmic treatment of indigeneity. This shift in tropes of indigeneity became increasingly politicised in the postwar context.

### Mid Twentieth Century: Contesting Representations of Indigeneity

The spectre of biblicisation and Orientalism came to have new prominence in their deployment of identity markers in highly politicised representations in the decades after World War II. Characters like Abidor in *The Robe* (1953) and Sheikh Ilderim in *Ben-Hur* (1959) are both played by white actors in brown face. Both are minor characters,

but also integral to their respective plots, which hinge on the crucifixion narrative. Sheikh Ilderim is the affable, but bumbling, means by which Ben-Hur is able to exact revenge on the film's antagonist, the Roman Messala, during the famous chariot scene. Ultimately this enables Ben-Hur to reclaim his place in society with his conversion to Christianity. Abidor is a much more malevolent character, duplicitous and motivated by greed. His betrayal of *The Robes'* protagonist Marcellus Gallio puts the villagers of Cana in great peril and causes a fight between Gallio and another character, Paulus.

In addition to their brown face, both characters wear outlandish Orientalist costumes replete with Ottoman style turbans and Saudi style *keffiyehs* and '*agals*. These costuming conventions are contrasted against Levantine Arab style *fellah* costumes, reserved for the characters of Jewish proto-Christian villagers, generally played by white actors. In the case of Ilderim, there is also a subtext of sexual deviancy in the form of a joke hinting at polygamy and bestiality during the scene in his tent where Ben-Hur initially thinks Ilderim is discussing his love of his four wives, though it turns out the sheikh is referring to the four horses that would pull the chariot in the race at the climax of the film. Between Ilderim and Abidor, many Orientalist tropes are performed, including deviancy, greed, duplicity and backwardness, to name just a few.

It is notable that both characters are cast as being from elsewhere, Abidor as Syrian and Sheikh Ilderim as a nomad passing through. Where figures in the photography of the nineteenth and early twentieth century marked scale as some sort of indigenous vestige of the landscape, in the post war Biblical epic their orientalist representation depicts an insertion that disrupts the natural order of the landscape.

In both these films, it is unavoidable to portray Jewish characters. However, unlike *King of Kings*, where Caiaphas and the Pharisees are treated within the antisemitic trope of responsibility for the crucifixion (Zananiri 2016: 74), there is no major conflict between Judaism and Christianity within these later films. Instead, Judaism is treated as a precursor to the inevitable spread of Christianity. Bruce Babington and Peter Evans (2009: 33–34) describe this as 'de-judaicizing Judaism' – Hollywood cinema making Judaism more acceptable to western-Christian audiences.

The significant growth of Biblical epics in the 1950s and 60s almost universally narrates a world in which Christians or Jewish proto-Christians struggle against the oppression of empire, constructing an alternative nationalist vision with an emphasis on the individual (McAlister 2001: 61). Fundamental to this leap into the Biblical imaginary is a demarcation of ethnicities amongst its filmic populations and their twentieth-century referents.

Where the filmic denizens of *King of Kings* are nineteenth-century Palestinians conflated with first-century Jews, post war cinema depicts a Jewish population conflated with Christian/democratic narrative. This cinematic assimilation of Judaism into Christianity is important in several respects. First, it assumes the Jewish characters depicted in cinematic representations are soon-to-be Christians coded through biblified costuming. Second, the Jewish population is indigenised into the filmic landscape and defined in opposition to other groupings who are coded through Orientalist tropes, a marked difference from the amorphous populations of *King of Kings*. Third, this assimilation is predicated upon the historical assumption of Christianity's expansion and, given the politicised version of Christianity posited by the film, the implicit spread of liberal democratic values (Zananiri 2016: 76).

Perhaps the most politicised remediation of Biblical narrative in film is George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), released amid the growing tensions that led to Six Day War in 1967, in which Israel would capture the remainder of historical Palestine including East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Stevens' extensive process of research and script development included consultations with a host of religious and political actors, most notably Pope John XXIII and then – prime minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion (Medved and Medved 1984: 135), underlining a very conscious process of politicising New Testament narrative.

The opening scene of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* sets up a narrative in which Christianity is a force for liberation. The film's ethnic demarcations are established firmly from the outset. The three wise men's garb, though entrenched within a mode of Orientalist costuming, is clearly not Arab; Arab costuming is reserved for the Jewish population of the film. In a twist on the antisemitic tropes of *King of Kings*, Herod quickly tells the wise men: 'I am an Idumean, not a Judean. The priests here in Judea mock me in their Temple. Their temple, which I built'. This positions Herod as the antagonist while effectively stripping him and his dynasty of their Judaism by highlighting their roots in Edom, an ancient state initially in current day southern Jordan, slowly displaced westward into southern Palestine by the first century CE (Zananiri 2016: 75), thus referencing the Jordanian rule of Jerusalem and the West Bank. This effectively inverts the antisemitic tropes employed in *King of Kings* and applies it to the Edomite proto-Arabs, while upholding the filmic narrative of Oriental threat to Biblical order.

The careful and intentional conflation of Biblical narrative with contemporary politics in *The Greatest Story* effectively inverts the assumptions of Palestinian indigeneity in the earlier generations of photography outlined above. Indeed, analysing the filmic developments within the longer duration of imaging-systems, the Palestinian body undergoes a metamorphosis in which it is cast out of the Biblical imaginary.

The legitimisation of indigeneity that biblification, and implicitly representational markers such as costuming, bestow shifts from Palestinians in early photography, to an amorphous status in interwar film and finally to the legitimisation of Israeli indigeneity by the mid-1960s. Likewise, the shifts in Orientalist representation by the post war period are deployed in a process that was used to delegitimise the Arab body. The outlandish costuming and Orientalist tropes of characters like Ilderim and Abidor reconstruct Arab bodies as a *foreign to* or *invaders of* the filmic landscape, further supporting the filmic exile of the Palestinian body.

The representational shift in the delineation of the Oriental – a process of othering – rewrites narratives of indigeneity by carefully conflating the indigenous within the Biblical. The consequences of this shift proffers a rejection of Palestinian indigeneity and the politicised re-ascription of indigeneity to Jewish bodies, constructing Arabness as an infiltration of the 'natural' – and perhaps divine – order of the Biblical landscape.

### Building Binaries of the Transgressive Body

The results of shifts in representational ascriptions of indigeneity through imaging systems like biblification and Orientalism from the nineteenth to the mid twentieth century would have significant effects from the period around the 1967 Six Day War onwards. It is within this geo-political context that Palestine became a significant

global flash point. The beginnings of the anti-colonialist Palestinian national liberation movement, exemplified by the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, asserted Palestinian indigeneity, but was also largely deemed a terrorist organisation in the west.

The relationship between the Palestinian body and the landscape from which it was displaced in 1948 created particularities in its global imaging that hinged and pivoted on biblification and Orientalism in popular cultural production. The developing split in the imaging and imagining of the Palestinian body on the one hand affirmed it as an indigenous, anti-colonial liberator and on the other delegitimised it as an infiltrator (Azoulay 2015: 6–22) and source of terror.

The culture of liberationist imaging, particularly in poster production, created a new Palestinian iconography that can be seen as a rehabilitation of the *fellah* body. The vestigial status of the biblified *fellah* body in nineteenth century imaging was remade as strong, virile and masculine in the form of the *fedayee* (freedom fighter). He, for the *fedayee* was almost always gendered male, was made more masculine through the pervasive phallic symbol of the AK47 with which he was armed and the military khakis he donned. These marked him as part of a global anti-colonial movement, though his depiction wearing a *keffiyeh*, associated with the rural *fellah*, located him specifically as Palestinian. The *fedayee* body is also subject to similar class distinction, borrowing from the visual vocabulary of *fellah* imaging, reinforcing the relationship of the village or peasant body to the land, albeit reframed and celebrated within a new Marxist idiom. These aesthetic codes are most notably embodied by late Chairman of the PLO, Yasser Arafat.

Military fatigues coupled with the anonymity that reflected the tactics of guerrilla warfare became standards in representation, whether as photographs, propaganda posters or filmic depictions. Nameless, and often faceless, a confluence is drawn between the shadowy military figure hidden and sheltered by the landscape and his similarly anonymous *fellah* forebears that helped to mark the landscape's scale. (Figure 5).

The imaging of the *fedayee* is not dissimilar to the counter-image of the infiltrator, which is unsurprising given that both are rooted in the imaging of the same Palestinian body. These split perceptions of the Palestinian body reflected a much broader global fragmentation of politics during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, but were often informed by similar visual symbolism.

This binary of *fedayee* and infiltrator raises several questions. How do we conceptualise the binary perceptions of the *fedayee*/infiltrator body that developed? What can these split perceptions and representations tell us of the imaging systems upon which they are built? What role do biblification and Orientalism play in the affirmation or delegitimation of Palestinian indigeneity?

Part of the answer to these questions might be found in the developing figure of the *infiltrator*. In the aftermath of the 1948 war, and the consequent establishment of the Israeli state, the *Prevention of Infiltration (Offences and Jurisdiction) Law* (1954) was introduced. Section 1 of the law stipulates:

1. In this Law –

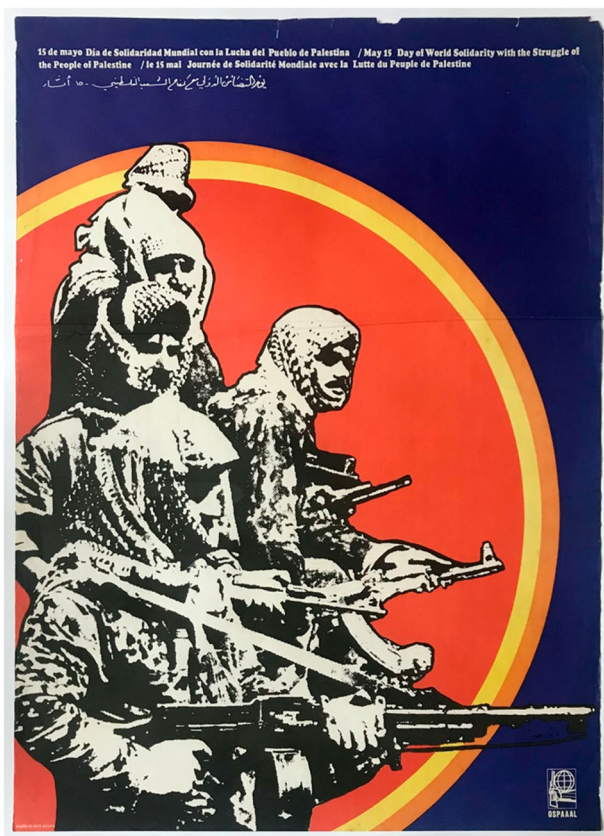
- “infiltrator” means a person who has entered Israel knowingly and unlawfully and who at any time between the 16th Kislev, 3708 (29th November, 1947) and his entry was -



- (1) a national or citizen of the Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi-Arabia, Trans-Jordan, Iraq or the Yemen; or
- (2) a resident or visitor in one of those countries or in any part of Palestine outside Israel; or
- (3) a Palestinian citizen or a Palestinian resident without nationality or citizenship or whose nationality or citizenship was doubtful and who, during the said period, left his ordinary place of residence in an area which has become a part of Israel for a place outside Israel.

Such a redefinition of the displaced Palestinian body, previously imaged as an indigenous vestige of the 'Holy Land' in landscape photography, but now recast as an infiltrator has multiple implications.

From a political perspective, the porosity of the young Israeli state's borders, and its ethno-nationalist agenda, necessitated a formalisation and policing of which bodies should populate the land and the relationship of the land to both Jewish and Palestinian bodies. In addition to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine during the *Nakba*, the production



**Figure 5.** 15th May Day of World Solidarity with the Struggle of the Palestinian People 1980. Designed by Gladys Acosta for OSPAAAL. Collection of the author.



of a new Israeli sovereignty that actively encouraged Jewish migration, minoritised remaining Palestinians (Bosch 2017: 256–259) and limited non-Jewish migration (Bosch 2017: 268–270), while the criminalisation of Palestinian return was established with the legal definition of infiltration.

This legal constellation effectively cemented the rupture between the Palestinian body and landscape, recasting the Palestinian body in the form of the *fedayee*/infiltrator as a threat to the construction of a Jewish demographic majority. This did not stop Palestinians in the years between 1948 and 1956 returning. Indeed, crossing borders into the new state was a daily phenomenon, though fraught with the risk of being killed or arrested and deported to refugee camps outside of Israel's new borders (Azoulay 2015: 18). The construction of the *fedayee*/infiltrator can be seen – in both literal and figurative terms – as the attempt to reunite body with landscape. The highly specific masculine gendering of the infiltrator implies the act of infiltration is an act of penetration, paralleling some of the Orientalist narratives of sexual deviance found in Hollywood cinema.

The category of the infiltrator has been analysed at length by Ariella Azoulay, particularly in relationship to the archive. She refutes in no uncertain terms the construction of the infiltrator:

The category of “infiltrator,” [is] a constitutive element of differential sovereign regimes, i.e. regimes whose governed population is differentially ruled ... Infiltrators, the archive lures us to comply, should be looked for *in* photographs and documents ... Hence, my study of the infiltrator is based on the assumption that the infiltrator who is allegedly captured in the photos *does not exist*. As spectators, we attend the event during which state agents try to force a Palestinian – who resists the authority of the state to expel him from his homeland – to become an infiltrator ... My assumption – the infiltrator doesn't exist – is a politico-historical assertion that the archive cannot confirm or refute since the archive is one of the sites where infiltrators are fabricated. (Azoulay 2015: 6–7)

In this reading of the production of the infiltrator through the archive, we begin to understand the conflicted perceptions of the Palestinian body. Indeed, we might understand the transgressive body of the infiltrator as a delegitimizing interpretation of the *fellah* which was also reified as liberator in the image of the *fedayee*.

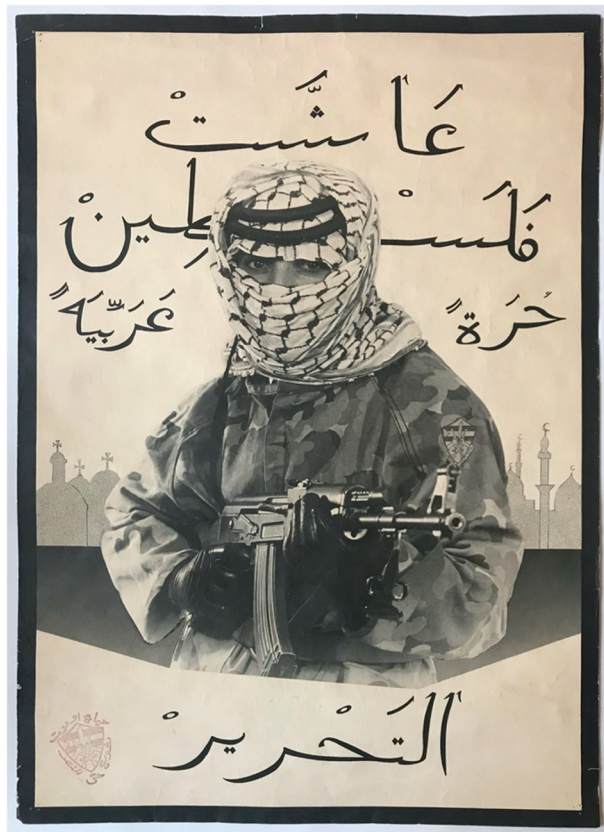
This transgressive matrix of imaging is something that Palestinians were both aware of and carefully navigated in projecting the image of the *fedayeen* and the Palestinian liberation movement more generally (Lionis 2015: 71). The Palestinian re-conception of the body from *fellah* to *fedayee* was also accompanied by the PLO's establishment of a photographic department within months of the Palestinian victory at the Battle of Karameh in 1968 and a visual vocabulary largely informed by Socialist Realism (Lionis 2015: 74). Palestinian employment of Socialist Realism again underlines the broader geo-political context of the Cold War, which featured so strongly in post-War Hollywood Biblical epics.

The poster in Figure 6, translates as ‘Long live a free Arab Palestine, liberation’, and is marked in the bottom left-hand corner with a stamp of Fatah, the major political party within the PLO. The image bears all the hallmarks of imaging of the *fedayeen*. Perhaps what is most interesting about this poster is not the figure itself, but the background upon which he is superimposed. The grey skyline to the left shows the profile of a series of churches and to the right a series of mosques. The careful positing of Christianity and Islam behind the secular figure of the *fedayee* makes a very particular statement about religion, projecting the secular nature of the Palestinian national liberation

movement against Zionism, with its focus solely on Judaism. Such images which highlight secular nationalism transcending religious sectarianism were not uncommon in PLO cultural production. Another notable example is a photograph of Palestinians guarding the Maghen Abraham synagogue in Beirut in 1975,<sup>3</sup> highlighting the Arab commonality between Palestinians and the Jewish Lebanese community over the assumption of confessional conflict.

This careful addressing of religion in the projection of Palestinian identity is very telling, particularly in the projection of revolutionary Palestinian cultural diplomacy that aimed to overcome the 'Holy Land' narratives of imaging and the politicisation of the western Biblical imaginary. At the same time however, the anonymity of the *keffiyeh* clad *fedayee* also implicitly toys with the figure of the infiltrator.

The hyper sexualised subtext of the infiltrator's attempt to reunite his body with land through the violent penetration of borders has a confluence with questions of demography and the reproduction of *fedayee* bodies on posters for dissemination. Posters of the *fedayeen* were distributed through solidarity networks into streets globally. Such distribution of *fedayee* images lurking on walls in cities propagandistically plays with Israeli



**Figure 6.** *Al shat Filastin hurriyah Arabiyeh al tahrir* [date unknown, probably 1970s]. Designer unknown, produced for Fatah. Collection of the author.

anxieties about the act of penetration/infiltration by multiplying and reproducing the Palestinian body in poster format.

This new, transgressive body can be read on the one hand as a response to and a remaking of orientalist figures of Arabs in Hollywood Biblical epics, but on the other as a mechanism for the remaking of the ancient and vestigial *fellah* body in pre-1948 imaging. This process, it is worth noting, parallels the earlier re-making of the Hebrew body in Zionist imaging (Zerubavel 2008: 315–352).

This remaking of the Palestinian body can be seen in both Arab and Western imaging supportive of the Palestinian cause. Hashem al Madani, a photographer who ran *Studio Shehrazade* in Saida, Lebanon, described some of his clientele from the late 1960s and 70s who chose to be photographed with guns, military fatigues and *keffiyehs*:

I consider the act of posing with a gun as an act of showing off - a display of power ... It is part of my role as a photographer to photograph them the way they wish (Quoted in Venema 2014)

The statement gives a sense of popular identification with the figure of the revolutionary body of the *fedayee*. Likewise, the affirmation of the *fedayee* body can also be seen in Western publications. The photographs taken by British photojournalist Donald McCullin in Jonathan Dimbleby's book *The Palestinians* (1979) border on the erotic. Shirtless *fedayeen* with rippling muscles train, holding guns, looking with determination at the camera lens. This is particularly visible in a chapter that focuses on the Battle of Karameh (Dimbleby 1979: 135–140).<sup>4</sup>

Both Madani and McCullin's work, counter to the poster culture that anonymised the body, often shows these men's faces, who proudly identify with national liberation as a cause, actively performing *fedayee*. Indeed, particularly in the case of Madani's output, they are electing to have their portraits taken. This instatement of personal identity with nationalist cause inverts, at least in image, the anonymity of the infiltrator.

The performance of liberation and identification with the *fedayee* body might be read within the earlier historical context of Palestinian 'cultural cross-dressing'. Certainly, where pre-1948 images may have involved a mixture of humour, nationalism and class transgression in purveying a notional authenticity, by the 1960s and 70s the political urgency of the period may have inspired a desire to project both personal and collective agency through the figure of the *fedayee*. Indeed, the overt nationalism of being photographed as *fedayee* in the 1970s certainly makes an argument for a nationalist subtext of image of cultural cross dress in the early twentieth century.

The *fedayee*/infiltrator binary demonstrates a politicised compartmentalisation of Palestinian identity. The genre of *fedayee* imaging, particularly in relation to Madani, specifically inserts the Palestinian self into broader context of geo-political relations, an act that can be construed as a refutation of the imaging systems that had proceeded them. This period reflects the rapid growth of contestations around identity that led on from the 1950s and 60s where notions of Palestinian indigeneity were questioned and delegitimised.

## Contesting Representation

The trope of the Palestinian body as a source of terror continued through the 1980s and 90s. Jack Shaheen's study dealt with more than 900 films that represent Arabs. Of the

films featuring Palestinians, more than half were produced in the 1980s and 90s. Nineteen from 1983 to 1989 and another nine from 1990 to 1998 (Shaheen 2003: 186). With context of online streaming, these tropes have continued in long format tv shows like Netflix's *Fauda* (2015–) and Showtime's *Homeland* (2011–2020). Both series have attracted criticism for their representation of their Orientalist tropes of terrorism (Durkay 2014; Serhan 2018). Indeed, there has been open speculation that writers of *Homeland* had been directly in contact with US state agencies in regards to script development during the Obama administration (Massad 2012; Edwards 2017), suggesting the propagandistic potential of the genre in justifying US foreign policy.

One of the few recent series that has actively attempted to complicate such problematic imaging is *Transparent* (2014–2019). The series centres around a secular Jewish-American family, the Pfeffermans, in which three adult siblings Sarah, Ali and Josh navigate their transgendered parent Maura's transition to being a woman. In the fourth season of the series, Ali and her transgendered mother travel to Israel where Ali finds herself amongst a milieu of queer activists, including Palestinians, Israelis and internationals. The complex politics of Season four merit a study unto itself, raising important questions about Jewish American relationships to Zionism and Palestinian solidarity, pink washing, Biblical representation, and modes of masculinity and gender, to name but a few of the complex representational issues with which it deals.

While it must be said that the Palestinian characters roles' in the season are small, they are also pivotal to Ali's questioning of Zionist narrative. The careful interweaving of these characters strongly problematises the representational issues around authenticity and the Palestinian body in what can only be described as a landmark for popular western imaging.

Incidents such as the Pfefferman family travelling with Moshe, their estranged Israeli grandfather, who treats them to a tour directly problematises questions of indigeneity. On the bus Ali gets into a fight with Nitzan, her grandfather's security guard, who's demeanour and political beliefs are portrayed with the militaristic arrogance of hegemonic masculinity. In response to the mounting tensions on the bus, Sarah acts in a diplomatic role by playing the song *What's the Buzz* from Jesus Christ Superstar to get the family singing and dancing to avoid an escalating conflict (season 4, episode 6). This incident highlights and problematises how the liberal – and increasingly secular – popular Biblical imaginary is deployed to erase the conflicting political and representational viewpoints, much to Ali's discomfort.

In another incident, arriving at a Bedouin camp as part of the tour, Moshe says 'This was started by a friend of mine, Benyamin [a Hebrew name]. It's a Bedouin village'. In turn, Josh asks 'so these Bedouins are cool with us just like crashin' with them?' to which Nitzan with much machismo and disdain replies 'they're not real Bedouins, real Bedouin camp you don't wanna visit' (season 4, episode 7). The context of the conversation undermines the performative veneer of Orientalist authenticity that the 'village' embodies. The negation of 'real' Bedouins populating the village is on the one hand a negation of the threatening transgressive body of the *fedayee*/infiltrator, but also effectively debunks Israeli claims of indigeneity. It is also reminiscent of class driven Palestinian performances of *fellah* authenticity in earlier modes of 'cultural crossdressing' and the implicit cultural claims that practice entails. In this way, the primacy of the *fellah* body as a marker of authenticity – though in this case conflated with the Bedouin – is

still central to the layering of representational performances embodied in the scene. Indeed, the *fellah* body is not just central to debates of authenticity, but is couched as the *site* of contention. Given the core queer concerns of the series that circumnavigate trans politics, gender identity and bodies, a complex matrix of issues is extended to questions of performance around authenticity, ethno-confessional identity, nationalism and indigeneity.

One of the most significant series of encounters in the season is Ali's multiple trips to Beit Farashe, a farm in the West Bank, to visit her love interest the trans activist, Lyfe (Figure 7). The farm is a social hub filled with queer Palestinian and international activists. It shows an idealised vision of communal vegetable gardens, a context in which people are involved in growing food, discussing politics and engaging intellectually. In Beit Farashe, the Palestinian body is restored to the landscape, but is also humanised and embodied in an intellectual subject position. Here the Palestinian body is of the earth (like the *fellah*), politically and intellectually active (like the *fedayee*) and engaged with the accoutrements of modern middle-class lifestyle (like visits to hip cafes in Ramallah).

Despite the secular overtones of Beit Farashe and its milieu, one of the most interesting scenes, is Ali's first visit to the farm. A lunch is held, with much fresh food and Palestinian dishes such as *maqloubah*. People are gathered around the long table, which is set outside amongst the idealised, leafy setting of the farm engaged in discussions of liberation, both queer and Palestinian (season 4, episode 6). The image of the long table in this setting subtly conjures the image of both the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane. This reference to the Biblical, and in particular the Christian New Testament, rather than the shared Judeo-Christian Old Testament is interesting on several levels. Firstly, for a series that is predicated on a Jewish American lens, it references highly Christian symbolism. This is arguably demonstrative of a secularist progression of Babington and Evans' *de-judaicizing Judaism* described above. Secondly, it actively restores the Palestinian body to the landscape through the use of biblified identity markers, that have been stripped of openly religious overtones. Thirdly, the transgressions of the orientalisised *fedayee*/infiltrator body are actively and openly queered in a positive representation – with much appeal to the show's progressive audiences – replacing Orientalist notions of terrorist deviance with liberal displays of sexual diversity.



Figure 7. *Pinkwashing Machine*, 2017. *Transparent* Season 4, episode 3. Video still.



Fourthly, it implicitly asserts the indigeneity of the Palestinian body by combining the previous elements and repositioning the Palestinian body within the landscape.

While contemporary imaging of the Palestinian body is clearly still as contentious as it was in the twentieth century, it also clear that there is significantly more complexity around its portrayal. The shifts in the production and reception of the Palestinian body may also partially be explained by changing Jewish-American generational attitudes to support for Israel<sup>5</sup> (Pew Research Center 2013) and the global impacts of growing domestic political polarisation in the US most recently embodied in resistance to former US President Donald Trump's support for Israel (Flynn 2019; Seddiq 2020; Sriram 2020).

## Conclusion

The imaging of Palestinians has undergone significant changes since the establishment of photo reproductive technologies. These representational shifts have had significant impacts on the ways in which Palestinian bodies have been perceived and, with the escalation of political tensions in the twentieth century, the image of the Palestinian became ever more contested. Despite this deep representational contestation, the figure of the *fedayee*/infiltrator must be seen as fundamentally rooted in the establishment of biblified body of the *fellah*. However, the context of shifting representations also needs to take into account representation as a multidirectional process that also involves Palestinians, albeit through a different lens.

While Palestinian participation in 'cultural crossdressing' might be seen as a quotidian bourgeois practice or projections of the *fedayee* body a surrogate for liberation in times of acute political crisis, they both embody a deeper meaning. Taken at face value, they may appear to support or even perform biblified or Orientalist representations. Certainly, cultural crossdressing had antecedents in western Orientalist practice and there is a significant confluence between the imaging of the *fedayee* and the infiltrator. However, given a more nuanced understanding of their representational contexts, they must also be seen as part of a cultural process that questioned and attempted to define ideas of identity, authenticity and indigeneity.

The ambiguities of Palestinian authored representations could easily be misconstrued without an understanding of their historical context, but they also demonstrate a strong relationship to popular western practices of imaging Palestinians. Indeed, the photo reproductive technologies, modern modes of representation and an understanding of western perceptions hints towards the globally encompassing nature of modernity as a culture, ideology and lived experience, and one that continues to be a site of contestation.

In attempting to sketch just some of the representational phenomena across a diverse array of media, it is clear that there are fundamentally distinct social, cultural and political agendas between western and Palestinian authored imaging. Much of the contestation relies on different interpretations of similar subject matter, which raises questions of misrepresentation as much as representation itself.

The production of categories like *fellah*, *fedayee* and infiltrator were facilitated by a broader context in which imaging systems like Orientalism and biblification acted as markers that delimited the acceptability of those same bodies within the popular western imaginary.



The pervasiveness of these imaging systems also underscores a question of *who* the imaging of the Palestinian body is produced *for*. The restoration of the Palestinian body in the scene at Beit Farashe, for instance, although very secular, still relies ultimately on the biblified imagery. Such an image, though intended as a secular representation that undermines religious narrative, still fundamentally points to a Western, culturally Christian, consumption of the Palestinian body. This underscores an inescapability of religious narrative, even in a positive assertion of Palestinian indigeneity, making such a representation both a continuation *and* a subversion of such imaging systems at one and the same time, ultimately marking the complexities of the images discussed.

## Notes

1. For instance, Auguste Salzmann, Mendel John Diness, Francis Frith, Frank Mason Good, Francis Bedford and Frank Scholten.
2. For instance, Garabed Krikorian, Khalil Raad, Daoud Sabounji, Issa Sawabini, The American Colony, Karimeh Abbud, Zakaria Abu Fheleh and Gustave Dalman.
3. Interestingly, this image was used by Michael Rakowitz, an artist of Jewish Iraqi descent, in a similar gesture that upholds Arab over confessional identity in the exhibition *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)* 1–7 May 2013, Traffic, Dubai, in collaboration with Regine Basha and Dr. Ella Habiba Shohat <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/dar-al-sulh-gallery/pcrdj4fd3xhhy325g7e0l3wcm0hfo9>.
4. One of these images, *Palestinian Fighter Training in Beirut* (1976) can be found in the collection of the Tate Collection, along with others from the period. See <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mccullin-palestinian-fighter-training-in-beirut-ar01217>.
5. 53 per cent of Jewish-Americans over the age of 65 say that caring about Israel is an essential part of their Jewish identity, but this number drops significantly to only 38 per cent for those in the 30s and 40s. See “A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of US Jews”.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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