Israeli Leisure, 'Palestinian Terror,' and The Question of Palestine (Again)

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1.   Long after the arguments in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) have acquired both academic and popular currency, what's remarkable is the degree to which Said's *The Question of Palestine* (1979) remains a bold intervention into dominant U.S. discourse on the Middle East. At the most rudimentary level, Said's text aimed to establish the very existence of Palestine and the Palestinian people, and to trace the genealogy of their displacement -- both materially from their land, and figuratively from the landscape of both Israeli and U.S. history and collective memory. No less pressing, at the time of the text's publication, was the relatively uncharted work of systematically inserting Zionism into the history of European imperialism. In 1979, at a time when the signifier "Palestine" still resounded with insurgence for many U.S. audiences, *The Question of Palestine* was both a courageous project and, as Said noted in the text's introduction, a rather lonely one -- the loneliness of one who articulates the heretofore unsaid.[1] While the existence of the Palestinian people is no longer in question in the present, an aura of insurgence still haunts Said's colonial claim. Indeed, it is only very recently that academics, journalists, and activists in the U.S. have been authorized to speak openly about the coloniality of the Zionist project without the threat of sanction, without the need to defend against the charge of anti-Semitism -- and, for Jewish critics, that highly problematic label of "self-hater," which has long done the work of disciplining Jewish dissent and delimiting the terms of intelligible Jewish identity.

2.   Yet the parameters of permissible discourse about Zionism and the Jewish State have indeed shifted in the last few decades -- and quite markedly in the last year alone. The genesis of this shift is multiple. Certainly, it has been enabled by the success with which the Palestinian national movement and resistance struggle of the 1980s and early 1990s was able to export its historical claims, demands, and images of defiance into the US arena. The Oslo Accords of 1993, for all its flaws, bestowed international legitimacy on the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, in relatively unprecedented ways. So, too, must one credit the World Conference Against Racism of 2001, with its popularization of an anti-colonial critique of the Zionist project. But it is certainly the magnitude of Israeli violence and repression over the course of the last few years that has enabled -- indeed, required -- this vocabulary to emerge in new ways and with new force. In the spring of 2002, amidst the largest and most brutal Israeli incursion into the Occupied Palestinian Territories since the 1967 war, U.S. audiences bore witness to a significant change in the texture of popular discourse. What exploded onto the screens of televisions, and in the pages of newspapers, was not merely the language of "military occupation" and (to a lesser degree) "colonialism," but also of "war crimes," "ethnic cleansing," and even "genocide" -- language that was deployed, particularly in the aftermath of the Israeli incursion into Jenin, as a way to name and make sense of Israel's military presence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.[2] Certainly, some of these terms were much more accurate than others. Nonetheless, what merits attention is the fact of their collective emergence within a discursive landscape that had long been fiercely policed for anything that smacked of anti-Israeli sentiment.

3.   All of this is not to suggest the wholesale radicalization of US discourse and politics on Palestine. In the spring of 2002, as Israeli fatalities mounted from a campaign of Palestinian militarism, U.S. audiences also witnessed a frightening return to classic Zionist rhetorics, and racist defenses of the Jewish State, particularly from within the mainstream Jewish American community. Of course, Israel's official discourse on the need for self-defense in the face of Arab terror was a newly persuasive one for a U.S. public still stinging from the pain and affront of September 11. What we witnessed and generated in the spring of last year, was a complicated and polyphonic discursive sphere in which the language of Zionist coloniality and Palestinian terror competed for space and audibility within the mainstream media in relatively unprecedented ways. These complications -- and, at times, contradictions -- were exemplified in the language of our president, who lent his support to the Israeli administration in their battle against "terror," even as he experimentally deployed the term "Palestine," thereby implicitly bearing homage to the Palestinian struggle for self-determination -- both its history and its claims in the present.

4.   Taking my cue from this moment of discursive ambivalence and possibility in the U.S. media, and building on the tradition of (post)colonial criticism we've inherited from Said and others, this paper investigates the ways in which popular Israeli discourse represented and managed this same historic moment -- the period of Palestinian militarism and Israeli repression, in the spring of 2002, that we witnessed so graphically and pervasively on our televisions. Popular Israeli discourse was also in flux during this period, although in radically different ways. As Israel's occupation grew in intensity, violence, and scope, and as Israelis were faced with a virtually unprecedented wave of Palestinian (so-called) 'suicide bombings' [3] against civilian targets inside the state's 1967 borders, dominant Jewish Israeli discourse began to tell a story about leisure. In order to dramatize and render intelligible the Israeli experience of Palestinian militarism, and the radical ways in which it had transformed daily life, the Israeli Hebrew and English-language media collaborated in an account of Jewish leisure practices, and consumptive patterns more generally, under attack. At the center of this discourse, was the café or the