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SEEING DOUBLE:  
PALESTINIAN/AMERICAN HISTORIES OF  
THE *KUFIYA*

In March 1988, about three months into the Palestinian *intifada*, those responsible for packaging the news at CBS and *Time* magazine rubbed their eyes in disbelief, thinking they were seeing double. They had only just come to appreciate the significance of the *kufiya* or “Palestinian scarf” from the scenes on nightly television news showing young Palestinian men and women confronting Israeli soldiers. All of a sudden, the *kufiya* had popped up in an unexpected place. So many people in New York and other U.S. cities were wearing black-and-white checkered *kufiyas* that it briefly became a “news” item (for CBS on March 18, for *Time* on March 21). What looked so natural in the West Bank seemed a transgression on the urban U.S. streets. Why, the media wondered, had this sign of Palestinian struggle suddenly appeared in the ensembles of “downtown” U.S.A., together with black turtlenecks, ripped Levis, hightopped sneakers, and eight-zippered black leather jackets? Could it mean political solidarity with the Palestinians? *Time* briefly considered this possibility, only to dismiss it and normalize the *kufiya*’s unexpected appearance under the category of fashion, citing statements from its wearers: “It’s just an accessory,” “The ethnic type of look is in right now,” “The idea that it’s political is ridiculous,” and “What did you say it was called again?” (Cocks 1988).

I was aware that the *kufiya* had infiltrated the urban North American style scene in late 1983, but made no serious effort to understand its appearance. In October 1984 I left for the West Bank to do fieldwork. When I returned home in late 1985, I was pleased but puzzled to find that the *kufiya* I had purchased was still trendy.