

# UNRULY WOMANLINESS, GENDER DYSPHORIA, AND ANITA FALELI'S ICONOGRAPHY

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If a sexuality is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy? (Judith Butler [1991] 1993, p. 310)

## Introduction

Roseanne, Miss Piggy (in *The Muppet Show*), Murphy (in *Murphy Brown*), Fran (in *The Nanny*), Ellen, Sabrina (in *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch*), Sally Solomon (a female alien in *3rd Rock from the Sun*) and Linda La Hughes (in the anarchistic British sitcom *Gimme Gimme Gimme*) are all powerful women in popular TV sitcoms, who often transgress (hetero)normative formulations of womanliness and effeminacy. As such, they are frequently perceived as *unruly female characters*. According to Kathleen Rowe's *Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter* (1995), the unruly woman is one who does not conform to her "proper place" and questions the primal social dichotomy between male and female through excess and outrageousness. In some cases, the unruly woman is characterized not only by assertiveness, a loud and raw manner of speaking, ordering others about and controlling the dialogue, but also by her large size, her masculine or androgynous appearance, and her domination (or attempted domination) of men. Rowe adds that the "unruly woman" is a prototype of woman as subject, rather than the objectified; one who expresses her own desires, makes a spectacle of herself, claims the power that comes from visibility in the public realm, and is often despised because of her independent personality (see Rowe 1995, pp. 1–21).

The manipulative character of sexual regimes and constituted gender identifications is primarily reflected in the formulation, reproduction, representation, and consumption of femininity and womanliness. The complex interrelations between patriarchal dominance, misogyny, sexist attitudes, and unruly women in film and television in particular, have been theorized by several scholars (e.g., Juno Andrea & V. Vale 1991; Rebecca Bell-Metereau 1985; Christine Gledhill 1987; Molly Haskell 1974; Sherrie Inness 2004; Henry Jenkins 1991; Julia Lesage 1988; Patricia Mellencamp 1992; Lisa Merrill 1988; Tania Modleski 1988; Laura Mulvey 1989; Pamela Robertson 1993; Kathleen Rowe 1995; Mary Russo 1986; Gaylyn Studlar 1990).

This article focuses on Anita Faleli, an Israeli fashion model, actress, singer, and sought after guest on TV talk shows of Jewish Oriental origins (in a society which is highly dominated by Jewish Western culture), considered by the Israeli mainstream *and* queer popular (counter)culture since the 1980s as a controversial media icon, slandered and

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admired at the same time. Her impressive performance integrates a significant physique (tall, shapely, hourglass figure), with expressive facial features and high and sweetish tone of speech. Her extravagant performance (flamboyant costumes, eccentric gestures, and explicit sexual expressions) frequently make her perceived by Israeli straights and non-straights alike as a transgender performer, although she is a (genetic) straight woman.

### Queer Womanliness and the Diva Worship

Joan Riviere ([1929] 1966) contends that *womanliness* can be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she is found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he does not have the stolen goods. “The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the masquerade,” Riviere notes. “My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing” (Riviere [1929] 1966, p. 213).

Moreover, if gender *is* drag, according to Judith Butler ([1991] 1993), and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth. “And yet, it is always a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body that produces this illusion of an inner depth, necessity, or essence that is somehow magically, causally expressed” (Butler [1991] 1993, p. 317).

In contemporary (trans)gender politics, the term *gender dysphoria* particularly exemplifies a condition of unease or discomfort wherein individuals find some or all elements of their gender statuses “hard to bear.” Although this usage can include persons who might be diagnosable as having “gender identity disorder” (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* 1994), it may also be used to describe the feelings of persons who have no discomfort whatsoever with their sex statuses but who do find the requirements for the enactment of their gender statuses to be onerous. Thus, in this context, “the term *gender dysphoria* may effectively describe persons who find their gender statuses hard to bear for substantially social or political reasons, as well as for psychological ones” (H. Devor 1996, p. 48).

One of the categories of females who exhibit gender role dysphoria is those whose gender role presentations are sufficiently ambiguous to inconsistently communicate their gender identities to casual observers. Devor (1987, 1989) has termed these individuals “gender blending females,” and notes that such women are themselves usually unequivocal in their sex and gender identities as females and as women, and may be heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual in orientation. Gender blending females, however, may be dysphoric about their gender roles alone or about their gender roles *and* their gender identities in combination (Devor 1996, p. 65). Importantly, Devor’s formulation of female gender dysphoria is focused more on deficiencies in social expectations placed upon persons than upon defects in individuals (1996, p. 80).

Steven P. Schacht (2002) points out that the dominant culture most typically views the *feminine*, especially its extreme manifestations, as the stigmatized “Other,” a burden, a handicap, harmful, and providing the basis for discrimination and a subordinate status. In direct contrast, he contends, gay men within drag communities commandeer many of these same cultural notions of feminine embodiment and use them as the basis of personal

prestige and power (Schacht 2002, p. 156). In gay drag shows, posture, gesture, costume, and speech acts become the elements that constitute both the identity and the identity performance (Moe Meyer 1994). Accordingly, Meyer (1994) theorizes the excessive and extravagant *camp subculture* as a primarily queer practice that celebrates polymorphous perversity.

*Camp* is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “affected, theatrically exaggerated; effeminate; homosexual” (1996, p. 206). Camp was defined by Susan Sontag in “Notes on Camp” ([1964] 1999) as a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. “It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not . . . The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility . . . What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine” (Sontag [1964] 1999, p. 56).

Transgressing the heterocentric hierarchical gender and sexual structure, however, often provokes fears, anxieties, stigmatization *and* erotic stimulation. Marjorie Garber (1996) suggests that, from Boy George to Prince, it is the unsettling nature of gender uncertainty that is itself an erotic borderline. She wonders whether “androgyny,” in show business in particular, has more power if the androgynous performer comes out as straight, or as bi—or if she or he artfully conceals or resists disclosing a sexual preference? “Is fantasy more powerful in the absence of too much collaborating ‘fact’ (whether the fact takes the form of ‘rumor’ or substantive evidence)?” (Garber 1996, p. 229). Notably, Garber clarifies that the *look* may be androgynous, but that hardly suggests that its performer is an androgyne—or a bisexual (Garber 1996, p. 230).

Jack Babuscio identifies camp with queer subculture based on *gay sensibility* as a “creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness” ([1978] 1999, pp. 117–118). Camp uses its “deviancy” in contesting the oppressive social order ruled by hetero-dominance, as a momentum of innovation and inspiration. Its “deviant” visibility, since its earliest expressions, has been a *political* one as an essential component of queer counter-praxis. This deviation from the social and sexual consensus is also political because camp reflects an aesthetic and ethical refusal to be visually “normalized” or silenced by dominance (Gilad Padva 2000).

In mainstream popular culture, American and European female icons are the subjects of diva worship because of their *over-emphasized* femininity: for example, Marlene Dietrich, the German-American movie star, who aroused many male *and* female viewers with her shapely long legs, sparkling evening gowns, and impressive fingernails; the Hollywood megastar Joan Crawford, with her powerful cinematic persona, significant eyebrows, wicked smile, and glitzy jewels; the film star, singer, and provocative blond beauty Marilyn Monroe, with the wind-blown skirt, who was the reigning sex goddess of the 1950s—arguably, her exuberance and sensual manner, allied to a fragile vulnerability and apparent innocence that shielded her own sexuality, made her non-threatening to a gay audience and irresistible to her lesbian following (Eric Braun 2002, p. 85); the British pop star Dusty Springfield, with her towering steel-blonde beehive, panda-eyed makeup, and slightly grannyish gowns (Norton & Reid 1999, p. 30); the black, supermodel, Disco diva, B-movie goddess Grace Jones (Norton & Reid 1999, p. 32) with her theatrical costumes, red gloves, dark lipstick, and prominent alto voice; the Tennessee country singer Dolly Parton, with her

massive blond wigs and buxom physique; the TV soap opera of the 1980s, *Dynasty's* star Joan Collins, “who played the powerful antagonist Alexis with her magnificent evening dresses, red lipstick, and sophisticated manipulations, a fabulously nasty character at last made Joan a global megastar” (Norton & Reid 1999, p. 44).

The academic debate about Madonna’s image, that of the ultimate blond *femme fatale* and her apparent (dis)empowerment of young and older female audiences has been intensified in the 1990s, and young female pop stars like Britney Spears sophisticatedly integrate youth and adulthood, innocence and attractiveness, neo-conservatism and eroticism in the 2000s.

Many divas—from Barbara Streisand to Kylie Minogue, from Cher to Jennifer Lopez—are characterized by highly carnivalesque, “ultra-feminine” outfits, accessories and gestures, such as Carmen Miranda’s flamboyant hats decorated by colorful plastic fruits and feathers. Daniel Harris (1997, p. 10) suggests that at the very heart of gay diva worship, however, is not the diva herself but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity, which ultimately led to what might be called the aestheticism of maladjustment, gay men’s exploitation of cinematic visions of Hollywood grandeur, in particular, to elevate himself above his antagonistic surroundings and simultaneously express membership in a secret society of upper-class aesthetes. Notably, all these celebrities have sophisticatedly produced and reproduced their womanhood on their skin, hair, fingernails, gestures, their gait, moves, tone of speech, glamorous outfits, and sassy accessories. These women are considered by their many gay male fans as *camp* icons—fabulous, extravagant, and festive mega-stars—who consciously *play the part* of the “ultimate” femmes, the admired super-women that reveal the powerful theatricality of gender representations, manifestations, and manipulations in contemporary popular media.

### Transgressing the Homogenous Society

In analyzing Anita Faleli’s politics of excessive womanliness, it is important to contextualize her campy performance and transgressive body politics in the specific socio-ethnic structure of the Israeli society. During the cultural development of the Israeli society in the 1940s and 1950s, immigrants from all countries, including Holocaust survivors, were initially expected to submerge themselves in the melting pot of the new society, changing their diaspora-sounding family names into Hebrew names, expunging traditional languages, class systems, occupations, and social relationships. This sweeping project was carried out by an Ashkenazi (mainly East-European Jewish) establishment. The captivating dream of a new and homogeneous Israel was therefore also reproducing and reinforcing the already-existing ethnic hierarchy of the pre-state community (Haim Hazan 2001, pp. 1–2).

The social hierarchy that formed quite rapidly from the 1950s presented the Jews of European descent, who constituted majority and hegemony prior to Israel’s independence in 1948 and controlled both the economic and political resources, at the top; the Palestinian-Arab population at the bottom; and the oriental Sephardi Jews from the Middle East and North Africa in between (Moshe Semyonov & Noah Lewin-Epstein 2004, p. 4). The Sephardi resistance to the socio-economic injustice (including the growing poverty and deficiency in many unprivileged neighborhoods, slums, and peripheral towns) and Western socio-cultural paternalism was led by the Israeli Black Panthers in the early 1970s.

Traditional masculinist approaches were challenged by the first Israeli feminist activists during the 1970s, including the politicians Shulamit Aloni and Marsha Friedman. In the 1990s, Sephardi feminist activists, including the late activist Vicki Shiran from Beit Berl College, became organized, challenging the apparent Western hegemony in the Israeli feminist movement. At that time, young oriental Jewish women were still stereotyped by many male journalists, writers, and film-makers as *Frekha* (means in Hebrew: “a bimbo,” “a light-minded woman”). Controversially, Oz Almog (1999, p. 886) suggests that the young Oriental women’s relationships with young men and restrained sexuality stimulated the separation of young oriental women from their subordinating traditional domestic roles, and, indirectly, encouraged the secularization and modernization of Israeli women and the Israeli society in general.

In the 1970s, the Israeli gay and lesbian movement was also established. It was strengthened during the 1990s after the law against all-male sexual intercourse was revoked in 1988. The local LGBT scene gradually developed its own political organizations, alternative media, telephone help-lines, bars, clubs, gym, cafes, saunas, annual pride march (since the early 2000s), and regular drag shows, starred by transgressive icons or gender-bending trash icons—alternative role models that celebrated extravagance and flamboyancy and challenged the bourgeois notions of “good taste” and proper feminine and masculine visibility and behavior—adored by the local LGBT community. Several female and male rock musicians and television and media icons, including Corinne Allal and Ivry Lidder, were coming-out since the early 2000s (see Padva 2003).

Anita Faleli’s popularity is highly influenced by these significant socio-cultural and ethnic developments. She was the subject of an extended profile story titled “Anita, Is It You?” published in Israel’s most popular magazine *7 Days* (a weekly supplement of *Yediot Aharonot*) in 2003. The story deploys Faleli’s colorful biography, which frequently reads like a soap opera, peppered with passion, romance, secrets, and tears: she gave birth to a child whose father is her former Nigerian lover; then she handed her daughter over to a Christian missionary institution in Jerusalem; they met again only when the daughter was 18 years old.

During the 1980s, Anita performed erotic supporting roles in popular film comedies like *Super Masseur* (in Hebrew: *Massagist Tzameret*), and entertained her audience in shows like *Couples-Couples (Wet Evening)*. She has also been invited to participate in live talk shows on stage together with a controversial Israeli transvestite, and she and her beloved real, stuffed bitch Glory (Figure 1.) joined a demonstration against the mass destruction of abandoned animals. Later, Faleli became sympathetic to a marginal group of Messianic Jews for Jesus, sometimes wearing a cross around her neck (Tzahi Cohen 2003, p. 96). These sensational details reinforce her eccentric image in the Israeli public sphere, communicating a sort of a flamboyant freak show.

### Eclectic Chic and Commercialized Escapism

After several quiet years, Faleli made her flaming comeback to the Israeli popular communication in a campaign for the local cellular phone project *Escape* at the end of 2003, targeting at young, cool consumers. This colorful and stylized campaign was characterized by a sophisticated camp strategy that combined visual innovativeness, drag, and homoerotic subtext. “Nothing else excites you?” asks a magazine ad for the *Escape* campaign, featuring Faleli displaying her shapely body in an erotic position. All the



**Figure 1**  
Anita Faleli (Courtesy of the photographer Moshe Shai)

consumer needs to do in order to find his/her way to this “weird” Alice in Wonderland, according to this ad, is to push a button on his/her cell phone. The eccentric model in this ad wears splotched tight clothing, a light blue belt, and a pink gown; her long hair is half blond/half red, her face is heavily made-up in green shades with shocking-pink lipstick; and her right leg is stretched forward as she signals the viewers to join her. In contrast to her flamboyant image, however, her expression here is seemingly cool, remote, despite being surrounded by a grotesque spectacle of stuffed tigers lit in a dramatic, expressionist style. Her *coolness* is represented here as the *extraordinary*. The message is that even if terrifying stuffed animals and monsters fail to capture your emotions, Anita might do so successfully in her sensual way. “You might be surprised,” this ad emphasizes in capital letters, “there is such a place called The Portal, where you can find yourself surrounded by many games, ring tones, animations,” etc.

The borrowing, eclecticism, and mixing of different categories all have their purpose and meaning, although these meanings are submerged somewhat beneath the surface glamour (Edith Gorogh 2000, p. 6). In this eclectic ad, characterized by a mixing of different styles, subcultures, and genres (e.g. horror films, expressionist cinema, music videos, drag aesthetics, diva worship, and erotic imagery), Anita is represented as an exciting gatekeeper, or, rather, as a doorwoman who invites/seduces the young consumer to visit the even more exciting, cellular hi-tech kingdom of delights. Further, Faleli is displayed and exploited as a “communications icon” (Paul Rutherford 1994), embodying a channel of meanings, an instrument of cultural power, which cuts across boundaries of social and cultural categories such as language or class. This is a co-optation of gimmicks, attractions, freaks, and extraordinariness into the dominant, sophisticated marketing systems that attempt to maximize profits by appealing to mass audiences. According to this logic, advertisements are highly stylized communication packages that address everyone,

regardless of social or economic status (Gorogh 2000, p. 3) *and* regardless of gender or sexuality.

Faleli's TV commercial shows her in tight splotched clothing, wearing heavy makeup, her hair half blond-half red, surrounded by extravagant set and accessories (including her beloved stuffed bitch Glory), stretching her long legs, and demonstrating how a cell-phone user who is fed up with conventional phone ring tones and musical ring tones, can record her/himself. Thus, Faleli repeats her own recorded voice: *Anita, ta'ani, zot ani* (meaning in Hebrew: "Anita, Answer me, it's me"). This flamboyant commercial did not earn her a great deal of money (Cohen 2003, p. 97), but it did earn her the fiftieth place in the List of the Most Influential 50 People in Israeli Fashion 2004 of *Layla* magazine (April 2004). The magazine's reasoning:

It's because she's this year's phenomenon. Because she became must accessory at every P.R. event. Because of the crazy campaign for *Escape* and its slogan *Anita, Ta'ani, Zot Ani*. And because she's responsible for the comeback of the splotched trend and eclectic chic. Because of her unique voice. And also because she was titled The Country's Ass (in the 1980s), and nowadays she is raising her bitch Glory and her other stuffed animals with much love. (*Layla's* 2004)

Integrating Faleli into the campaign for *Escape* can be explained in the media world's cannibalization of subcultures, considered by Chuck Kleinhans (1994) as a structural feature of the culture industry. He contends that it is populated by people who are predominantly petty bourgeois professionals whose very occupation implies a distance from and an irony toward the personalities, programs, and products they produce—a true dissociation of sensibility. "Unable to believe in what they make, to have a naïve acceptance of it, mass-culture makers are often drawn to subcultures precisely for the difference, their newness, their not-as-yet-commercialized qualities," Kleinhans notes. "All of which, not so incidentally, can be turned back into one's work; a weekend in the subculture inspires Monday morning's new ad campaign" (Kleinhans 1994, pp. 187–188). Faleli is often perceived by TV critics as a naïve and apparently immature individuality, allegedly exploited by local culture industrialists (e.g., advertisers and TV hosts) and entrepreneurs (e.g. producers and agents) who treat her as a profitable but relatively low-paid gimmick. As one male TV critic writes, "The combination of a person who knows his price and an audience who agrees to pay this price, empties the very concept of human dignity" (Shay Golden 2003).

Nevertheless, not all the critics agree that her performance in the TV commercial is demeaning. "One can argue about the morality of bringing weird people to talk shows, but the creators of TV programs would claim they only provide visibility to a wide range of people," argues one female critic:

One who is less dissembled, may realize that "weird" or "different" person is a great item, as the viewers can feel so "normal" in comparison to her/him . . . This campaign suggests that it's o.k. to be imperfect, which is quite a refreshing message in a world of commercials, constructed upon images of male and female models whose physique is almost impossible. (Avital Yogev 2003, original quotation marks; emphasis added).

The critic notes that, first, the advertisers exploited a motive of grotesque monsters; and then they sought something new:

Anita is integrated successfully in this campaign. Despite her *weirdness*, and may be *because* of it, she does well . . . The message of this commercial is “Don’t give a damn! Even if your voice does not enable you to be proud of who you are, it is still yours”. Comic talk shows had made us laugh at her. Vastly different, here we laugh together *with* her. (Yogev 2003)

This corresponds to Edith Gorogh’s (2000) distinction that the media, particularly television advertising, offer ideals toward which people attempt to approach. The popularity and persuasiveness of advertising images may lie in the fact that besides offering the ideal, advertisements also provide the viewer with methods to attain it (Gorogh 2000, p. 4). Significantly, advertisements are continually advocating the cult of individualism. They try to create a cultural storehouse of meanings, feelings, and desires wherein consumers can select those products that suit their perceptions of self-image (Gorogh 2000, p. 5). The method by which to attain the teenager’s individuality and self-fulfillment, as represented/mediated by Faleli’s TV commercial, is one that does not conform to the commercialized youth culture standardization of the adolescent’s body and soul; instead, it promotes being proud of who you are, no matter if your physique, voice or performance, in this critical stage of pubescence, are imperfect.

Faleli defends this provocative commercial, however, not by claiming any such idealistic mission but, primarily, by emphasizing her financial difficulties: “I deserve to make a profit. I’m very good. I’m alone. I’m in need. You know I’m not greedy, but life requires money, so give me what I deserve” (Cohen 2003, p. 94). She admits, however, that she enjoys publicity and popularity:

I was so happy to hear the message from the advertising agency on my answering machine. I thought, I’m not the only one who was waiting, the public was also waiting for me. I was often asked why I’m not on TV commercials. I replied that I’m not looking for such an opportunity, not chasing it, just waiting patiently for a call. (Cohen 2000, p. 117)

Moreover, in her performance with the stand-up comedian Shabbi Zra’aya in the popular TV program *Sunday Entertainment with Dudu Topaz*, Faleli informed the viewers about the fabulous feedback she gets from people on the street. “Some very intelligent women are calling me from their cars, ‘Anita, you’re great, we love you, keep doing commercials, you have lit up the whole country,’” she said, and released an unexpected, shocking, and unruly burst of laughter. When Zra’aya asked her what payment had she received from the advertising agency, she replied with a seemingly serious expression: “It expanded my ego, not my bank account,” and Topaz, the TV host remarked: “This is a meeting of two people with shocking IQ!”

In financial difficulties *and* aspiring to gain increased attention, publicity and visibility on television, however, Faleli has developed a complex relationship with those culture industrialists who represent, modify, and manipulate her as a kind of highly profitable “weirdness.”

### **Transgressive Make-up and the Politics of Making Up**

V.N. Volosinov ([1929] 2000, p. 45) contends that the economic conditions that inaugurate a new element of reality into the social purview, and which make it socially meaningful and “interesting,” are exactly the same conditions that create the forms of

ideological communication (the cognitive, the artistic, the religious, and so on), which in turn shape the forms of semiotic expression. Notably, these socio-cultural conditions *are* the commercial imperatives of most of contemporary popular culture and its spectacular freak shows. Faleli's "weirdness" is considered by journalists, advertisers, TV hosts *and* their audiences as *unusual*; thus attractive and money-spinning. In another profile story in *7 Days* magazine, featuring one of Faleli's less famous sisters, Dassy Daniel (née Haleli), the journalist assumes that "the power of this family's daughters lies in their extrovert personalities, rather than in their education" (Cohen 2004, p. 66), and goes even further to suggest, in his pseudo-psychoanalytical semiotics, that "the combination of their silly costumes and unusual facial features provoked suspicion and ridicule" (Cohen 2004, p. 66). Faleli's deviation from the physical and cultural conventions, and gender formulation in particular, is perceived by the mass media as a corporeal transgression reinforcing dominant codes of visibility and behavior.

Faleli, like any physical body, can be perceived as an *image*. As a performer, an artistic-symbolic image to which a particular physical object gives rise, she is already an *ideological* product, as the physical object is converted into a *sign*. Volosinov concludes that "without ceasing to be a part of material reality, such an object, to some degree, reflects and refracts another reality" (2004, p. 39). In exploiting a dialectic semiotics of sign and *design* of the transgressive body, Faleli is often (mis)placed by culture industrialists and their mainstream communications as the *abnormal* that signifies *and* empowers the normal; the *extraordinary* that approves the ordinary; the *unusual* that highlights the usual; the *irregular* that constitutes the regular; the carnivalesque that reaffirms the mundane; the exceptional that underlies the accepted.

The story in *7 Days* magazine, titled "Anita, Is It You?" is illustrated by a huge image: a close-up of Anita Faleli (photographed by Moshe Shay). It presents her in profile, her eyes shut. In performing her womanliness, her cheeks are heavily rouged, her nose well powdered. Her eyelids are covered with violet mascara; her dyed brown eyebrows are partly covered by the red part of her hair. Any trace of moustache has been carefully removed and covered with powder. Her lips reveal a flamboyant red lipstick and her tongue protrudes slightly, as she blows a bubble-gum balloon (Figure 2.) A jewel worn around her neck is partly covered by the blond part of her two-toned dyed hair. Terry Goldie (2002), a gender scholar and drag artist, notes that an element that crosses between the body and the dress for both women *and* drag queens is makeup, which is something foregrounded in heterosexual pornography, for example. "Makeup is a way of writing on the body, particularly for the drag queen, who stays within the limitations of what has been called 'glamour makeup,'" he notes:

This is the makeup that is always recognized as makeup by even the most myopic, straight male but is described as "highlighting" or "enhancing," rather than crossing that barrier to categories such as "theatrical," which is regarded as transformative . . . Makeup is of the body, of the mind, of the performative. (Goldie 2002, pp. 131–132)

Faleli's portrait appears to be no more manipulated, cultivated, and invested than that of any other woman. Nevertheless, this media icon's womanliness is repeatedly questioned, inquired, scrutinized, and is often even mocked and parodied by advertisers, TV hosts, journalists, and her many male and female, straight and gay fans. For more than twenty years she has been frequently (mis)represented as a closeted M2F (male to female) transgender, who is unsuccessfully trying to masquerade her womanhood, or, rather, as an



**Figure 2**  
Anita Faleli (Courtesy of the photographer Moshe Shai)

intimidating androgyne or a queer freak show, often articulated by gossip columnists as “The country’s prick” or “The country’s ass.” The profile story in the above-mentioned popular magazine aims to remove the mask from her face and to reveal her true identity as a *genetic* woman.

The story’s subtitle problematizes and sensationalizes Faleli’s gender identity:

For years, Anita Faleli has been portrayed as a moonstruck character, surrounded by animals and undressing herself in bizarre performances. Her participation in a TV commercial with stuffed animals then made her a household name. Tzahi Cohen tried to elicit some details about her ambiguous past and her mysterious daughter. He found out that if there is such a name, Anita Faleli, it only exists in the imagination of the great woman from the dreams. (Cohen 2003, p. 94)

The question “Anita, is it *you*?” is never naïve, referring to Anita’s flamboyant performance and sort of identity ambivalence that simultaneously attracts and intimidates many of her viewers. Stigmatized in Israeli popular culture as a “dazed, marginal character” (Cohen 2003, p. 96), she is perceived as *more* than a woman and *less* than a woman at the same time. The politics of stigmatization, however, is more diverse and multi-faceted than one may realize at first glance.

### Sexual Authenticity and Eroticized Liminality

When Anita is asked whether she can explain the rumor that she used to be a man, she tells the journalist about a man who had told her that he was sure that she had been born “as a boy.” Faleli had offered to make a bet, and clear up this issue once and for all at a gynecologist’s clinic. The man had not agreed. The journalist suggests that people might think she is a man because she often mingles and associates with transvestites and transsexuals. “You have a point,” she responds.

The straights were very angry when they saw me performing in cabarets with trannies. They said to me, “Anita, what do you have to do with them? Are you mad? People might think that you’re just like them.” And I answered, let them think. I know I’m a woman according to my own perspective. (Cohen 2004, p. 117)

She adds manifestly: “Anita is for freedom for all human beings, including one’s free sex-lives” (Cohen 2004, p. 117). Anita is identified here as a genetic woman who does not deny her close relationships with transgender people. Rather, she is a stigmaphile, who celebrates her liminality, which she interprets as an erotic borderline, a free zone of sexual, gender and counter-cultural expressions in a world that often considers her as a corporeal parody of womanliness and effeminacy.

“Sooner or later, happily or unhappily, almost everyone fails to control his or her sex life,” notes Michael Warner in his book *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999). “Perhaps as compensation, almost everyone sooner or later also succumbs to the temptation to control *someone else’s* sex life. Most people cannot quite rid themselves of the sense that controlling the sex of others, far from being unethical, is where morality begins,” he adds and asks: “Shouldn’t it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy, in a way consistent with everyone else’s sexual autonomy?” (Warner 1999, p. 1) As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) points out, no one person can take control over all the multiple, often contradictory, codes by which information about sexual identity and activity can seem to be conveyed. Hence, in many, if not most, relationships, coming-out is a matter of crystallizing intuitions or convictions that had already been in the air for a while and established their own power-circuits of silent contempt, silent blackmail, silent glamorization, silent complicity (Kosofsky 1990, p. 4).

Although the discussed profile story is not the first journalist endeavor to expose Faleli’s “real” gender *and* sexual identity, it is the most extensive research of this media icon’s origins and “authenticity.” This is not the usual, linear route of coming-out *and* outing strategies that attempt to expose hidden homosexualities. Rather, this is a manipulative, circular maneuver (straight-queer-straight) that reaffirms the dominant socio-sexual matrix. The liminal reflects a threat, or, rather, a challenge, to the classifiers’ sexual codification. Faleli’s liminality is “solved” by representing *and* “outing” her as a straight genetic straight woman who was only *misperceived* as a male-to-female transsexual by certain audiences. This resolution is required because ambivalence is not tolerated by the rigid sexual order.

In his discussion of the politics of marginalization, Irwin Goffman ([1963] 1986) refers to a “stigmaphile” space of *the stigmatized among themselves* (and those who are sympathetic and supportive) and the “stigmaphobe” world of the normals. He contends that the stigmaphile space is where we find a commonality with those who suffer from stigma, and in this alternative realm learn to value the very things the rest of the world marginalizes—not just because the world marginalizes them, but because the world’s

pseudo-morality is a phobic and inauthentic way of life. Goffman refers here to the intolerant and narrow-minded stigmaphobic world, which is characterized by its hypocrite and narrow-minded approach towards social, ethnic, gender and sexual minorities. In the dominant culture, conformity is ensured through fear of stigma (Warner 1999, p. 43).

Faleli is characterized by her stigmaphilic extravagance, theatricality, flamboyancy, and reflexivity, aware of her transgressive image and media personality, although she is *not* the “classic” diva associated with a society of upper-class aesthetes. Rather, she embodies the popular qualities of a “trash icon,” identified with alternative cult cinema and television from the 1970s to the 2000s: Divine in John Water’s films; Roseanne in her TV sitcom; Katy Sagal as Peggy Bundy in the sitcom *Married ... With Children*; Mollie Sugden as Mrs. Slocombe in the British TV sitcom *Are You Being Served?*, and the animated Marge from Matt Groening’s *The Simpsons*, etc.

Peggy Bundy, for example, is portrayed as the consumer-mad housewife, interested only in her nail polish and her husband’s paycheck, while her spouse, Al Bundy, is portrayed as the quintessential lazy good-for-nothing, a lousy provider who hates work, dislikes his family and prefers watching television to almost anything else (Liesbet van Zoonen 1995, p. 322). Sex is never on his mind, to the enormous frustration of his wife. Their teenage daughter is the proverbial, sexy dumb blond, their son, a foul-mouthed adolescent with no respect for his parents. Van Zoonen (1995) concludes that gender and family stereotypes are taken to extremes in *Married ... With Children* creating a source of laughter that exposes and undermines the dominant gender discourse rather than conforming to or strengthening it. Similarly, Anita Faleli, in performing “excessive” womanhood, embodies a sort of reverse snobbery: a working-class diva who ridicules heteronormativity. In her politics of transgression, Faleli is easily identified and admired by many Israeli gay men who challenge and confront the dominant gender and sexual discourse.

Another persona whose gender identity is often questioned in the mass media is the bearded female performer Jennifer Miller (Figure 3). Chris Straayer (1996) has analyzed the documentary *Juggling Gender* (1992), a portrait of Miller, a woman in her early thirties who began to develop a beard in late adolescence. Although beards do not uniformly occupy a sex-defining position across different races and cultures, they do in Miller’s family and culture. As her beard thickened, Miller became increasingly estranged from her family. Her grandmother urged her to undergo electrolysis, but she experienced the process as an extremely painful mutilation (Straayer 1996, p. 208). Miller would have liked the term *woman* to include her; however, after years of also being treated like a man, she thinks of herself as not just woman. Her experiences on the street have broadened her construction to incorporate sometimes being man. Putting aside her earlier plans for college and a professional life, Miller helped to create a feminist circus in which her “freak” status is acceptable.

In the circus, she juggles, bearded and bare-breasted, foregrounding her sexual discontinuity. She eats fire, lies on a bed of nails, and performs other circus acts to make explicit society’s ostracizing gaze at her. Performing as a Coney Island sideshow, she reminds the audience that many women have beards, that nonbearded femininity is constructed via shaving and electrolysis. (Straayer 1996, p. 209)

Faleli’s public image of an “excessive” and eccentric woman who is a powerful, dominant sex icon, contradicts her self-perception. “There are always people around me,”



**Figure 3**  
Jennifer Miller in Tami Gold's documentary film *Juggling Gender* (USA 1992). Courtesy of Women Make Movies

she notes, "but I still feel like a sheep surrounded by voracious wolves. I can only trust animals one hundred percent" (Cohen 2003, p. 96). She claims that she has disappointed many men. Some had wanted to pay her for her time, promising they would satisfy themselves without touching her. "Some of them are very intelligent," she notes. "They look so gentle, cute, sweet, so I can trust them. Going to their home doesn't seem problematic to me. That's why I always say that one's appearance doesn't mean anything" (Cohen 2003, p. 117).

Like Miller's representation in the North American media, Faleli too is often represented by the Israeli press as a sort of "androgynous" performance. In contrast to Miller, Faleli has not one male sign of puberty (e.g. beard, hairy legs, hands or "chest"). Rather, she is "suspected" by some of her audiences of being a transvestite because of her "extravagant" *femininity*, her high, nasal and over-refined voice, heavy makeup, glitzy, ostentatious wardrobe, and "overly" effeminate physique, all features often associated with transgenders, who frequently embody the most explicit—and extrovert—feminine performance. Miller and Faleli share, albeit in different ways, feminine gender identities *and* identifications, which are distrusted by the powerful heteronormative cultures.

### Enigmatic Ethnicity and Subaltern Autobiography

In his attempts to expose her authenticity, the writer of "Anita, Is It You?" claims that Faleli's birth name is not Anita Faleli but Hannah (or Annie) Haleli (Cohen 2003, p. 98). Her current name is represented as a suspicious masquerade. Her original first name, Hannah, is a Biblical and rather old-fashioned Hebrew name, certainly not as exotic as Anita.

Her original surname, Haleli, is a typical Jewish Oriental (Yemenite) name in Israeli society, a society characterized by conspicuous ethnic tensions.

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) claims that the construction of the colonial subject and the exercise of colonial power through discourse demand an articulation of the forms of difference, both sexual *and* racial. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, and power (Bhabha 1994, p. 67). Accordingly, Anita Faleli, often colonized by Western mainstream communications, is subject to the powerful discourse of her “subaltern” origins—in terms of gender, class, and sexuality. While “Faleli” sounds exotic, associated by many Israelis with carnival, Brazilian sensuality and tropical delights, “Haleli” is perceived as more mundane, trivial, and much less glamorous. The latter also reflects her present daily life, including her work as a saleswoman in a pet shop in south Tel Aviv, and her history as a daughter of grocers in a tough neighborhood in south Tel Aviv, growing up with five sisters and one brother (Cohen 2004, p. 66).

As Bhabha points out, racial or sexual epithets serve the colonial discourse to differentiate the colonized Other, realized as multiple, as polymorphous (1994, p. 67). Faleli’s ethnic biography, like her gender performance, is repeatedly represented as polymorphous, indefinite and, thus, *unreliable*. In different interviews she has told the local press that she was born to a half Yemenite family; she is a daughter of a mulatto mother and Ethiopian father; her mother is a traditional Yemenite woman; she was adopted by an English family (explaining her slight English accent); and that she never knew her parents because a short time after she was born she was transferred to a Kibbutz, then moved from one institution to another (Cohen 2003, pp. 97–98).

The authenticity of Faleli’s ethnic, sexual and cultural autobiography is doubted and questioned by her interviewers. Anthony Giddens contends, however, that autobiography, as the core of self-identity in modern social life, is a *corrective intervention into the past*, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events ([1994] 2000, p. 249; emphasis added). Self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative: the narrative of the self is made explicit. “Like any other formalized narrative, it is something that had to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course” (Giddens [1994] 2000, p. 253). Identities, according to Stuart Hall, are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions (1996, p. 4). Although Faleli’s (auto)biographies seem contradictory, frequently inconsistent, her apparent rewriting of her past could be interpreted as reflecting her personal and social difficulties, derived from her efforts to cope with her hardship as a teenager and as a young woman of an unprivileged class *and* ethnic group.

Thus, her autobiography is in the process of transformation and alteration. It could be interpreted as shaped and reshaped by her continuous efforts to overcome her daily hardship, detachment, and loneliness. Faleli constantly re-invents and re-produces herself, and her never-ending story, multi-layered, multi-faceted, and multi-versioned as it is, is an inseparable part of her art; an integral part of her performance; an essential part of this unconventional persona, whose *business* is to *show*.

In transforming herself from Hannah Haleli to Anita Faleli she connotes another female icon associated with marginal show business, who also reformulated her own identity—Annie Sprinkle, who transformed herself from dull, inhibited Ellen Steinberg to outrageous, exhibitionistic porn star Annie Sprinkle (Geraldine Harris 1999, p. 142).

Although Faleli is certainly not a part of the sex industry, both women have struggled to rebuild themselves as marginal, albeit influential female icons, exploiting patriarchal industries to (re)produce their identities and media personas—Sprinkle moved from porn movies and live shows to fringe theatre, while Faleli made her debut in lingerie fashion shows and sensual shows on stage, and later became a performer in television and popular film comedies.

Faleli, like Sprinkle (who is now recognized as a feminist performer and queer advocator), demonstrates a process of strengthening, a kind of self-made woman who re-created herself, challenging narrow mindedness, prejudice, and bigotry. For her queer admirers, Faleli does not signify a masquerade but a victorious self-fulfillment, and a powerful manifestation of changeability, being what she wants to be. In this sense, Faleli is a sort of alternative diva who empowers her gay fans' identity; she teaches them how to transform shame into glamour; how to celebrate their otherness; how to embrace their marginality.

Further, her apparently "polymorphous perversity" is associated with her modeling of women's lingerie in 1982, in which she identified herself as "The Country's Ass," celebrating the apparently chauvinistic symbolic segmentation/objectification of her own body. Catherine Waldby (1995) suggests that the ass is soft and sensitive, and associated with pollution and shame, like the vagina. Notably, it is non-specific with regard to genital difference, in that everybody has one. It allows access into the body, when, after all, only women are "supposed" to have a vulnerable interior space. All this, according to Waldby, makes anal eroticism a persuasive point for the displacement or erasure of purely phallic boundaries (1995, p. 272). In other words, Waldby intends to challenge the conventional association of phallus and exclusive male superiority, and to confront the association between (fe)male passivity and inferiority. Faleli's anal definition provokes anxieties and stimulates many gay *and* straight men who experience anal sex. In highlighting her bottom, Faleli represented herself as the ultimate "receiver," fantasized by her straight fans as if she is allowing herself to be pursued, penetrated, consumed, conquered, and done. Susan Bordo (1999) notes that Hollywood—still an overwhelmingly straight-male-dominated industry—is clearly not yet ready to show us a *man* "passively" giving himself over to another, at least not when the actors in question are our cultural icons. "Too feminine. Too suggestive, metaphorically speaking, of penetration by another" (Bordo 1999, p. 191). On the contrary, many gay men interpret the title "The Country's Ass" as a courageous transgression from the (hetero)sexual order that analogizes passivity and powerlessness.

Waldby contends that if the potential for passive anal pleasure is denied its denial can be acted out as violence against, or contempt for, those who are interpreted as wishing to either experience such pleasure themselves, or to "impose" it upon another. In this sense, "the repression or elision of anal eroticism in heterosexual men can be seen to work not only along the lines of the masculine/feminine division, but also along the homosexual/heterosexual divide" (Waldby 1995, pp. 272–273). In proudly defining herself as "The Country's Ass," Faleli "rehabilitated" and celebrated the bottom, anus, and rectum as adorable, rather than condemned sites of erotic pleasures.

### **Unruly Womanliness and Pansexual Euphoria**

Faleli, in her Sephardi, not Western, origins, and in her gender performance, plays a significant part in the democratization of contemporary "masculine" and "white" gay

culture in Israel. While affirming a distinctive group identity that legitimately differs from the larger society, notes Steven Epstein (1987), this form of political expression simultaneously imposes a “totalizing” sameness within the group: it says this is who we “really are.” A greater appreciation for internal diversity—on racial, gender, class, and even sexual dimensions—is a prerequisite if the gay movement is to move beyond “ethnic” insularity and join with other progressive causes (Epstein 1987, pp. 47–48). In her excessiveness and eccentricity, Faleli scorns aesthetic and physical hierarchies. “I’m not Anita/I’m not Lolita/I’m not Conita/I’m not Rita/Just Anita,” she claims in one of her songs. In her clothing, makeup, and tone of speech, she parodizes the heteronormative circus of absurdities, exposing womanhood as a masquerade and recommending her viewers to free their minds and follow their passions, feelings, and true colors.

As a person who regularly confronts transphobia, Faleli challenges paternal attitudes towards her as a gender-bender anecdote or, at worst, as a live freak show. She expressed her pain in a melancholic song, “Hello, My Name Is Pain” (in Hebrew: *Shalom, Shmi Ke’ev*), which she distributed to friends and admirers in Tel Aviv clubs a few years ago. “Shalom, my name is pain/everyone knows me, everyone hates me,” she notes and asks her male addressee (in Hebrew, a gender grammatical language, “pain” or *ke’ev* is a male noun) to wait for a minute, and let her speak, let her explain: “I’m not your enemy.” As the song continues, Faleli analogizes herself with a warning red light, and wishes that someone would save her, and in return, she would save him.

In her reflexive eccentricity, Anita often transforms gender dysphoria into pansexual euphoria, reproducing herself as a counter-cultural brand and queer icon in the community, who is gradually creating its own iconography, role models, symbols, identifications, and values. Faleli made a cover version of the Israeli diva Ilanit’s hit song “Somewhere” (in Hebrew: *Ey Sham*) from the 1970s, about a legendary and pastoral place, where dreams can come true, where the performer sees a rainbow in a cloud, where the dawn breaks in white, “There we’ll find the garden together/The garden of love.” In her performance of this nostalgic mainstream hit song, Faleli gives it new shades and nuances. In her saccharine voice, she is seemingly “queering” Ehud Manor’s straight lyrics, and the garden may be associated by gay listeners specifically with Independence Park, Tel Aviv’s most known gay cruising area, portrayed in this unofficial performance as a Utopian place where a rainbow appears with dawn, in all its colors, and not only corporeal pleasures, but love too is in the air.

Faleli, as an “exotic” diva or, rather, a “trash goddess” (Cohen 2003, p. 96) from south Tel Aviv, represents several minorities simultaneously and embodies several sorts of Otherness in an ethno-sexual complex of identities: a woman in a patriarchal society; a Sephardi in a Western society; a genetic woman involved with the transgender community; and an eccentric, marginal icon co-opted by the powerful culture industries. Her campy womanliness explores, questions and parodizes contemporary gender maxims and sexual axioms in the mainstream popular culture. Rather than providing an essentialist perspective of constant and fixed female identity, Faleli embodies the notion of identity as a dynamic process of changeability, alterability, transformability, and modifications. As Hall (1996) notes, identities are never unified and, in late modern times, have become increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation (Hall 1996, p. 4).

The notions of “multiplicity,” “change,” and “transformation” are inherent to the politics of masquerade. As Mary Anne Doan (1991) points out, the masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning lies in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely imagistic. The transvestite, in particular, adopts the sexuality of the other—the woman becomes a man in order to attain the necessary distance from the image. “Masquerade,” on the other hand, “involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image” (Doan 1991, pp. 25–26).

Faleli’s particular (mis)representation in popular communications as masquerading her erotic identity, a gender-bender icon whose ethnic origins are seemingly “disguised,” in the 2000s somehow echoes the intersection between sexual and ethnic hierarchies of the late nineteenth century, the rising of academic, scientific racism, which was linked to the invention of the homosexual body. The analogy between the sexual invert and the mixed racial body was mobilized in contradictory ways, however, within the sexological discourse: it would exhibit this body as evidence either of degeneration or of a legitimate place within the natural order (Siobhan Sommerville 2000). Notably, the transgressive performance of this “unruly diva” generates mainstream *and* counter-cultural queer identifications based on camp subculture and radical body politics. The gay fandom of Faleli in Tel Aviv reflects a major component of a gay culture and sensibility—the need to create codes and alternative realities. Michael Bronski notes that the image of the male homosexual as “creative”—a stereotype ranging from serious novelist to interior decorator, from film-maker to dress designer, from renowned stage performer to drag queen—is well established. Indeed, a great deal of gay male culture has been centered upon the creation, cultivation, and appreciation of the arts (1998, pp. 55–56).

Further, the idea of the mask that protects the wearer while allowing him to speak truthfully is resonant in much of gay culture. Bronski suggests that the most obvious contemporary incarnation of the trickster is the quick-witted, sharp-tongued, drag queen (1998, p. 56). Although Faleli is not a drag queen but a genetic woman, she often experiences homophobic and, mainly, transphobic alienation. Her womanliness, excessive and flamboyant as it is, is often perceived as a display of camouflage, insincerity, and fraud. Her authentic identity, identification, feelings, and emotions are constantly scrutinized and mocked by mainstream popular culture. Many queers often experience heteronormative attempts to question their queerness and to “cure” their transgression. Thus, gays who experience denial, rejection, and persecution, at least in certain phases of their lives, can identify with Faleli’s subaltern position and pain.

The gay cult of this female icon reflects a resistance to the paternalistic heterocentric regime and its powerful classifications, showing that womanliness is a mask that can be worn or removed. “By destabilizing the image,” notes Mary-Anne Doan ([1982] 1999, p. 139), “the masquerade confounds his masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography. Nevertheless, the preceding account simply specifies masquerade as a type of representation which carries a threat, disarticulating male systems of viewing.” Enjoying Faleli’s performance can thus be interpreted as a subversive pleasure of transgressing the patriarchal gaze, and identification with the unruly, the nonconformist, the dissident woman who represents gender euphoria (rather than dysphoria), celebrates her carnivalesque theatricality and eclectic chic, and embraces erotic pluralism and sexual diversity.

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