In a 1998 opinion piece for Egyptian weekly *Al Ahram*, Edward Said memorably skewered Yasser Arafat’s intention to issue his second declaration of Palestinian statehood within a year. Said wrote, “I say [statehood] with some irony because, at first glance, the notion of declaring a state for a second time (Algiers, November 1998 was the first) must strike the untutored spectator as inherently funny, since in both instances, except for about 60 per cent of Gaza, there is very little land for this state.”¹ Indeed, Arafat’s poorly thought out decrees for statehood never succeeded, resulting instead in the expected Israeli backlash against Palestinians living under occupation and within the Israeli state. But as Said went on to criticise the most obvious flaws of the illusive ‘statehood’ Arafat strove for, he made quite a profound assertion: “If by declaring that what, in effect, is a theoretical abridgement of true statehood is the first step towards the realization of actual statehood, then one might as well hope to extract sunlight from a cucumber on the basis of the sun having entered the cucumber in the first place. This is an example not of serious, but of magical thought, something we have no need of now.”² Lover of poetry and music though he was, Edward Said seriously devalues the radical potential of imagination in his article. Specifically, he slights the role that imagination plays in creating and sustaining a truly autonomous Palestinian nation. A nation with no land but also no borders; a nation with no military but also no war, and a nation with no recognition based on the destructive logics of empire. This is all to say, a nation that is lived without restrictions through the innovative and agile practice of imagining otherwise. This brief essay’s exploration of imagining an ‘other’ way to recognize Palestine pays its respects to Edward Said’s dogged pursuit of liberation, but remembers that Edward Said, like millions of other Palestinians, lived, and died, elsewhere.

“I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian,” African American poet June Jordan asserted after the 1982 massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, positioning herself

² Ibid.
within a proclamation of the existence of her fellow Palestinians. If June Jordan is Palestinian, if she, in fact, becomes Palestine, then does Palestine exist outside of the nation-state? Might Palestine exist within the very bodies that exceed the confines of statehood, of discernible cartographic recognition? Statelessness as a result of imperialism, exploitation, and forced displacement is unbearable and often unknowable, in any of its historic manifestations. But is the nation-state that the PLO twice declared, Mahmoud Abbas’s Palestinian Authority won relative approval of from the United Nations, and several European states have voted to ‘recognize’ in 2014 a solution? The dilemma of statelessness is real, but the “solution” — a state — risks cementing the outcome of Palestinian liberation within the very structures that first orchestrated its subjugation. When has the nation-state functioned as a tool of liberation? When has the nation-state escaped the confines of its origins in enslavement, imperialism, exile, and settler colonialism? The nation-state of borders and laws, that entity which classifies and determines what citizenship and belonging to the nation means… that nation-state is conquest and the root of occupation itself. We must not seek Palestine The State — we must instead continue to envision Palestine The Nation, the cultural nation, the people nation, the borderless, limitless imaginary of a nation. We are stateless, but we are certainly not uprooted or unlimbed. A fantasy? Wholeheartedly. A ‘magical thought’ that our intellectual forefather Edward Said might find frustratingly idealistic, or even absurd. But in absurdity we may trouble the normative expectations of state-based liberation (aping the West’s epistemological and political structures, which have structured our own oppression and our own complicity in the oppression of others — there are always others), and with our very bodies we remain Palestinian. The Palestinians of a Palestine that was never recognized as Palestine but remains, always, a practice of Palestine. The whole globe may hold Palestine, may be peoples coming together in June Jordan’s living room to build their homes as real and sustaining as the flesh that allows us to move, touch, and feel.

The political importance of our bodies (cultural, social, corporeal, and ephemeral) to colonized peoples, especially for those whose bodies function in exile, is fundamental to our understanding of how Palestine is practiced outside of the limitations of the nation-state and the politics of utterable recognition it demands. Though Palestinians under occupation, in refugee camps, and in the diaspora are absented from Western epistemologies (“a land without a people for a people without a land” being the common refrain), their own way of being and knowing poses a radical threat to the tenuous logics of Zionism. This is particularly intriguing in the case of the refugee — a figure


theorised as constituting a great threat to the power of the state by Giorgio Agamben, who argues that the refugee’s very existence contests the state’s role of sovereign over life: they manage to live without the state, in essence. In Achille Mbembe’s parallel estimation, the refugee is a political body within war, thus an act of absolute state power. In the case of Palestinians, both assertions might be considered equally full of imaginative utility: Palestinian refugees continue to exercise their existence by being without a (Palestinian) state, even while being subject to the (Israeli) state. Palestinians resist the finality of the loss of a homeland by practicing their existence through the very human material coloured by this loss. In essence, the bodies of Palestinians and their relations in exile act as an exercise of existence — bodies unrecognizable and unacknowledged as life forms by their oppressors but unable to be detached from themselves or their own self-knowing.

Hailing from the destroyed village of Al-Birwa, the poet Mahmoud Darwish is firm on the tangibility of Palestine from within and elsewhere:

My homeland is neither a bundle of tales,  
Nor is it only a memory.  
This land is the skin veiling my bones,  
And my heart  
Vibrates over its grass like a bee.

Darwish anthropomorphizes the land from which he has been exiled from, molding from it a human form — “the skin veiling my bones” — and thus inhabiting its significance in spite of Israeli occupation and Palestinian dispossession. Darwish can no more hope to peel the skin off his bones and live than any other human — he is Palestine. Palestine shapes, creates, and forms him. This is a manifesto of Palestinian existence. If we wear the homeland as our skin, do we need a nation-state to live?

In another instance, spoken word poet and Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad embodies Palestine through the language offered by June Jordan decades past. In the pages of Born Palestinian, Born Black, she maintains, “Home is within me. I carry everyone and everything I am with me wherever I go. Use my history as the road in front

7 Mbembe identifies a potentially autonomous “spirit” within the reductive ‘othering’ of African life by non-Africans in On The Postcolony, noting it’s potential in the following line: “This ‘life world’ is not the only field where individuals’ existence unfolds in practice; it is where they exercise existence — that is, live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death.” Achille Mbembe, On the Postcolony, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 15.
of me, the land beneath me.”\textsuperscript{9} The land she walks upon is not static or tethered to an unyielding map; neither is it a nostalgic, timeless place. The Palestine Hammad calls home within her is \textit{phalasteen}:

\begin{quote}
We call back to the \textit{phalasteen}  
Of folks songs and village dances  
The \textit{phalasteen} of martyrs and their mothers  
The \textit{phalasteen} bulldozed over in beirut  
Whose mouth was jammed silent  
With food stamps in brooklyn.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

\textit{Phalasteen} in “Blood Stitched Time” is in Beirut, in Brooklyn, and in the physical violence, beauty, and pain inherent in oppression and resistance. If \textit{phalasteen} is martyrs, folk songs, poverty, bulldozers, and silenced mouths, then where is it not? This the Palestine that is the whole world — Hammad speaks to a global condition of colonial violence that exists in \textit{phalasteen}, the place she calls back to and the place within her, and in the United States, the place where her words are formed and delivered.

To understand statehood as it exists in the Western imaginary is merely a structuralised form of violence, an entity that mediates life and death, is to understand that conceptualising freedom from the state must engage a radical departure from the state-based logics that govern our terms for liberation. Palestinians yearn for their historic place — the borders long imagined and inhabited and restructured from within and without — and call it a “homeland.” The yearning is real, and is valid, but a homeland exists anywhere the people do — and Palestinian people are everywhere, in all bodies. Perhaps the defining feature of occupation and dispossession for Palestinians and their kin is having been denied the ability to occupy space in land, in place, and in memory. The practice of memory is so often (as Said’s terse response to Arafat’s poorly planned statehood proclamation demonstrates) to reflect on what was, what should have been, and what might still be. Thus creating an alternate futurity, for Palestinians, is to remember imaginatively. Displaced from the land, from recognition, and from their own memories, Palestinians are also displaced from linear modes of history and existence. We have, therefore, exactly the ingredients required to imagine a non-linear, placeless freedom — one well beyond the confines of a nation-state. It is a freedom we imagine, every day, by existing for and within ourselves, in these bodies born of Palestine.

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