



**Born Palestinian, Born Black:**  
*Antiblackness and the Womb of  
Zionist Settler Colonialism*

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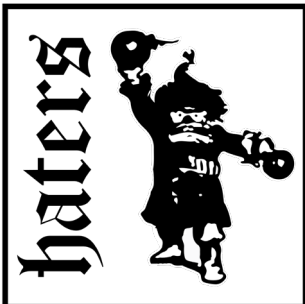
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I was born a Black woman  
and now

I am become a Palestinian

**JUNE JORDAN**, *Moving towards Home*

They killed her on a Wednesday. Maram Saleh Abu Ismael, 23, and her unborn child, as she tried to cross the checkpoint to reach a doctor's appointment in Jerusalem. It didn't matter that she had gone through the extensive process they demanded to obtain a permit to cross the border. It didn't matter that the soldier who shot her was standing behind a concrete blockade (un 2016).

The soldier guarding the checkpoint was afraid. Afraid of her pregnant belly as she walked in the wrong direction. So afraid, he shot her 15 times; kept shooting to "confirm the kill" even after she lay lifeless on the ground.

Why do they fear us? Why do they fear our unborn children? As Palestinian feminists, we have asked this question and sought the answers countless times. Across space and time, the gendered Palestinian body and the Palestinian womb have been intimate sites of surveillance and state violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014). Historically, Israel has discouraged growth among Palestinians with policies aimed at "containing Palestinians and their fertility" (Kanaaneh 2002, 253). Limited access to medical care and facilities during pregnancy and childbirth hinder the possibility for Palestinian women to have a healthy and safe pregnancy (Giacaman et al. 2006), as they are shaped by the necessity of navigating militarized geographies (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 1191). Indeed, "between 2000 and 2002 alone, 52 women gave birth and 19 women and 29 newborns died in military checkpoints in the occupied Palestinian Territories" (Erturk 2005, cited in Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 1191). As twenty-nine-year-old Rula recounted her story of being forced to give birth at the *Beit Furik* checkpoint,

At the checkpoint there were several soldiers; they were drinking coffee or tea and ignored us . . . I was in pain and felt I was going to give birth there and then; I told Daoud [her husband] who translated what I said to the soldiers but they did not let us pass. I was lying on the ground in the dust and I crawled behind a concrete block by the checkpoint to have some privacy and gave birth there, in the dust, like an animal. I held the baby in my arms and she moved a little but after a few minutes she died in my arms. (Amnesty International 2015)

Crossing checkpoints often exposes pregnant Palestinian women to political violence. As Aseel, a woman interviewed in another study, explained,

A soldier was going to hit me once while I was pregnant because I [verbally] challenged him at a checkpoint. I had just come back from visiting my mom in Jerusalem and the checkpoint was closed. Everyone was pushing and there was tear gas. I said I was pregnant and my son was waiting for me at home but he wouldn't let me through. The others [Palestinians waiting to cross] warned me to stay away and said that he has hit women before. . . . The moment he turned his head, I passed and he started shouting and pulled my clothes. (Hamayel et al. 2017, s91)

The severe stress of crossing the checkpoint and militarized spaces during the time of pregnancy can result in not only adverse psychological but also bodily effects, as some women have reported having miscarriages immediately after crossing the checkpoint and other aspects of navigating the carceral geography of occupied territory (Hamayel et al. 2017, s91).

In this chapter, I place Black and Indigenous feminist scholarship in conversation to consider the racialized politics of the womb, a project grounded in a political moment that has given birth to a resurgence of movement building and intellectual production centered on an analysis that highlights similarities (and dissonances) between structures of racial violence that devalue Black and Palestinian life across white settler states.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the (much deserved) attention to the hypervisible forms of violence that form the basis for contemporary practices of solidarity— from blatant legal discrimination, police killings in the street, and mass incarceration to the walls (both literal and figurative) that ghettoize communities into territories of dispossession— has left fundamental questions concerning the nature of the relationship between antiblackness and Indigenous erasure in the Israeli settler colony as structures of violence largely unattended. In fact, the tendency of such politics has been an implicit erasure of antiblackness as a foundational logic animating Zionist settler colonialism, a collapsing of racialized positionalities in liberatory projects, and an elision of the gendered character of structures of violence.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter offers a more intimate scale from which to examine the relationality between structures of antiblackness and Palestinian erasure. Drawing on Black and

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1 This has included conversations between communities around overlapping systems of oppression and resistance to state violence; delegations of Black activists to occupied territory, and Palestinian activists to Ferguson, Missouri; and internal conversations within Arab diaspora communities around antiblack racism, all of which, it is important to note, build on long-standing histories of Black internationalism, anticolonial solidarity, trans-national political analyses, and movement building between communities (e.g., Alhassen 2017; Erakat and Hill 2019; Feldman 2015; Lubin 2014).

2 In this chapter I use the terms *Zionist settler colonialism* and *Israeli settler colonialism* interchangeably to refer to what Faye A. Sayegh called the “Zionist settler-state of Israel” (1965, 21), a formation characterized by “(1) its racial complexion and racist conduct pattern; (2) its addiction to violence; and (3) its expansionist stance.” This is grounded in an understanding of Zionism as an ideology and political movement that has subjected Palestinians to structural forms of violence and erasure across space and time in the pursuit of a new Jewish state and society (e.g., Salama et al. 2012).

Indigenous feminist scholarship on the spatial politics of the body, and building on Joy James's (2016) theorization of the womb and concept of the "captive maternal," it argues for an acknowledgment of the interplay between logics of antiblackness and Palestinian dispossession in the Israeli settler colony through an examination of the racialized politics of national reproduction, or the politics of the womb. Zionist settler colonial epistemologies and technologies of governance that fuel contemporary exercises of violence against Palestinians in occupied territory, it argues, are energized by an antiblack logic that seeks to purify and secure the Jewish body—and hence, the national body—from the imagined threat of racial contamination.

In order to do so, it examines Zionism's historical project of increasing Jewish demographic presence in Palestine through pronatalist policies that situate women's bodies as symbolic national peripheries. Beyond encouraging birth and expanding Jewish families to fight in what national leaders have referred to as a "demographic war," pronatalist policies continue to labor towards purifying the Jewish nation in the image of European (white) supremacy, and maintaining the racial exclusivity of the "chosen people." It proceeds by examining how these essentially eugenicist politics are instrumental in fomenting growing racial panics concerning a Palestinian demographic "threat" and Israel's internal racial others, fueling violent policies of antiblackness and Indigenous erasure within the colony.

I conclude by sharing some reflections on the question of transnational feminist struggles against racialized gendered violence within the context of white settler nation-states. Drawing on Tiffany King's (2016, 1026) theorization of Black fungibility as a "spatial methodology," I suggest that a centering of the gendered Palestinian body as territory or geography opens space for what Shanya Cordis (2019) calls a praxis of "relational difference" between the entangled logics of "gendered anti-blackness" (Vargas 2012) and "racial Palestinianization" (Goldberg 2008). Examining Israel as a white settler colony invested in the colonial body politics to which antiblackness is foundational forces consideration of critical theories and activist praxes invested in dismantling the settler-spatial order that fall outside of the liberal humanist frame.

### **Race, Space, and the Body: The Womb of Zionist Settler Colonialism**

The production of space and racialized positionalities in the Israeli settler colonial context is often overdetermined by a binary understanding of Palestinian native and Israeli settler bodies and lives. While other scholars have noted the traveling of racial logics between, for example, the United States and Israel through shared imperial relations of power (e.g., Abu-Laban and Bakan 2008), I am less interested in identifying causal relationships than in the ways in which antiblackness and Palestinian erasure map onto each other in the Israeli settler colony. The gendered racial politics of the production of settler space, which I call the womb of Zionist settler colonialism, is a promising lens through which a relationality between antiblackness and Palestinian erasure can be further explored. I deploy the term "womb" here in relation to Joy James's conceptualization of "Womb Theory" or Western theory, "the historical context that married democracy with slavery" (2016, 256).

The embodiment of space has long been a concern of feminist scholars, who have drawn attention to the ways in which women's bodies have been constructed as a symbolic national periphery in a variety of contexts (e.g., Aretxaga 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997), as "biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities" and "reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups" (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Women are constructed as "symbolic border guards" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 23), embodying the nation's boundaries and becoming contested geographies. In settler colonial contexts, biopolitical surveillance and control over women's bodies and reproductive capacities are closely tied to eliminatory policies that seek to destroy Indigenous peoples in order to replace them with a settler entity (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015; Wolfe 2006).

Native feminist scholars have further argued that Indigenous women's bodies within settler regimes are saturated with meaning, signifying Indigenous political orders, land, and perhaps most dangerous of all, the possibility of reproducing native life itself—and with it, "other life forms, other sovereignties, other forms of political will" (Simpson 2016, 28)—a challenge to the very legitimacy of the settler state. As such, women's bodies have been subjected as inherently "rapeable" (Smith 2003), violable and disposable entities in the march toward settler accumulation by dispossession. Thus, while territoriality is widely understood as settler colonialism's "specific, irreducible element" (Wolfe 2006, 388), the native body must be centered as geographic space in theorizing territoriality. In the drive toward native "elimination" (388), the native body is a locus of racialized, gendered processes of colonial dispossession.

Concomitantly, Black feminist scholars have argued that antiblackness is embedded in the spatial projects of colonialism. Sylvia Wynter's (1994) work considers the foundational role of Blackness in shaping the epistemological terms of the Enlightenment, the figure of the human, and hence the very terms of conquest. In doing so, she opens space for thinking beyond the native/settler binary, urging a consideration of antiblackness in projects of Indigenous erasure. In discussing the territoriality of the racial-sexual body, critical geographer Katherine McKittrick (2006, 45) draws attention to the ways in which geographic conquest and expansion are "extended to the reproductive and sexually available body" of Black women. That is, through histories of enslavement, captivity, and racial rape, Black women's bodies—their "reproductive organs, capacities, and sexualities" (47)—became units of spatial production. Tiffany King extends these analyses to understand the Black female body as "a process that is constituted by and constitutes landscapes" (2013, 16). Thus, "anti-black racism's productive and repressive power are also in play when the settler is eliminating the native from the land" (16).

I want to think with both Indigenous and Black feminist analyses that identify the ways in which race and racism are necessary for the production of space (McKittrick 2006, 12), in considering how the Palestinian condition enters into conversation with Blackness. How might the power of antiblackness be at play in Israel's ongoing project of eliminating Palestinian presence from the land? I suggest that the figurative womb of Zionist settler colonialism—its position as a "fulcrum of U.S. imperial exploits in the Middle East" (Erakat and Hill 2019, 8), one shaped by global histories of

colonialism and white supremacy (and hence a gendered regime of antiblackness)—is centered in the politics of the womb, or the gendered politics of bodily reproduction. While womb politics, or the ways in which the womb has been a generative space in birthing national projects grounded in biological racism (James 2016), carry the particularities of racial histories and contexts, they can be fertile grounds for considering the intimate entanglements of antiblackness and Indigenous erasure. Antiblackness is embedded in the spatial project of Zionist settler colonialism through its presence/absence in the gendered body politics of white settler nationalism. In turn, Zionist settler colonialism enacts erasure against native Palestinians (seeking to disappear them from the landscape), while, at the same time, energizing antiblack racism in Israel.

In the following section, I investigate how intimate surveillance and the politics of birth, situated within a political context of racial elimination, coupled with Israel's pronatalist fertility regime, work to engineer Zionist settler colonialism as an aggregate of a particular kind of racialized Jewish bodies, creating Israel as a white settler nation in the image of Europe.

### **Antiblackness and the Politics of the Womb: Producing the White Settler Nation**

Black feminist scholars have been at the forefront of drawing attention to the ways in which the womb has been a primary site of racialized control, dispossession, and violence at the heart of national reproduction of white settler states such as the United States (e.g., Bridges 2008; Roberts 1997; Threadcraft 2016), where the terrorizing of Black reproductivity through racial rape, histories of racial slavery, and its afterlife became a primary means of political control (James 2013). In the legitimization of Black captivity during racial slavery, Black women's wombs were a site of commodification of value; in the post-Emancipation era, the Black female body has been used to naturalize Black criminality, leading to a disfiguring of Black maternity, a window on the afterlife of slavery as a gendered regime.

While the United States “grew a womb” by consuming the “generative properties of the maternals it held captive” (James 2016, 256), the Zionist project has consumed the wombs of Palestinian women as intimate sites of surveillance, violence, and erasure (e.g., Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015), while simultaneously consuming the wombs of Jewish women for their capacities to regenerate the Jewish people as a nation.

In historical Palestine, numerous scholars have catalogued the ways in which the Zionist movement devised surveillance and population management strategies as early as the 1920s in order to deal with the inevitable problem arising from the formation of the settler nation: how to rid the territory of its Indigenous Palestinian population (e.g., Sa'di 2014; Sayegh 1965; Zureik et al. 2011). Within this context, Palestinian women's wombs have been constructed by the colonial state as the vessels of an imagined “Arab demographic threat” that should be controlled and eliminated, producing them as sites of surveillance and state violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). Histories of gender and sexual violence, including the historical restrictions of Palestinian women's fertility (Kanaaneh 2002), coupled with restrictions on bodily autonomy during the time of birth, legalized mechanisms of family separation (i.e., the Citizenship

law), and mobility and access to reproductive health care (Giacaman, Abu-Rmeileh, and Wick 2006), along with other factors (Hamayel, Hammoudeh, and Welchman 2017), as noted earlier, serve the interests of the Zionist project in eliminating Palestinian presence. Violence against the gendered native body and land are intertwined. As Maya Xinka feminist Lorena Cabnal articulates it, being an Indigenous woman in contexts of ongoing colonialism is complex because “your body becomes the first disputed territory for patriarchal power” (2019, 115).

At the same time that Israel has sought to decrease the Palestinian population, it has worked to increase Jewish demographic presence in historical Palestine. As Yuval-Davis and Anthias explain, the issue of national reproduction, “both in terms of its ideological boundaries and in terms of the reproduction of its membership” (1989, 92), has been at the center of Zionist discourse. Israeli demographic policies have historically sought to “increase Jewish domination in Israel” (94). The Zionist project conceptualized the survival of Israel as a “demographic race” (94) early on, as leadership believed that sovereignty could not be fomented without a Jewish demographic majority. While Jewish immigration (aliyah) and settlement was considered to be the quickest and most efficient method of increasing Jewish presence, the need for establishing a Jewish demographic advantage remained a preoccupation of Zionist leadership (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 92). Thus, Jewish family size became a matter of “security and a sacred national mission,” and natality “(having large families) was tantamount to patriotism” (Tal 2016, 80, 81).

Beyond encouraging birth and expanding Jewish families to fight in the demographic war, pronatalist policies worked to purify the Jewish race and maintain exclusivity of the chosen people. Indeed, as Ronit Lentin highlights in her discussion of Israel’s construction as a racial state, “the prominent Israeli genetics professor Rafael Falk reads the entire history of Zionism as a eugenicist project, aiming to save the Jewish genetic pool from the degeneration forced upon the Jews by diaspora existence (Falk 2006, cited in Lentin 2008); prominent Zionist thinkers perpetuated the idea that Jews were a separate “race,” adopting “the terminology of Volk—a racial nation shaped by “blood and soil” (Falk 2006, 18–19, cited in Lentin 2008, 8). Hence, within this context, where Jewish women’s bodies became the vessel for national reproduction, an emphasis was placed on the importance of Jewish motherhood in producing the new Jew, a process of “rehabilitating” the denigrated Jewish body that lay at the heart of regenerating the Jewish Nation. As Meira Weiss (2002) highlights, Zionism has a “unique bodily aspect” that, stemming from the denigration of the Jewish people throughout Europe for centuries, sought to rehabilitate a Jewish identity and especially Jewish masculinity (e.g., Boyarin 1997; Gilman 1991). Rather than challenging the orientalist image that excluded and subjugated Jews in Europe, Zionism “internalized and reproduced them”:

Zionism modeled the “new Jew” on white European values and culture in purposeful opposition to Eastern cultural markers carried by Middle Eastern Jews and certainly by Muslim and Christian Arabs. As a derivative of En-

lightenment Europe, Zionism reproduced the polarized binaries of the superior, enlightened West and the inferior, primitive East. It claimed that Jews as a national entity belonged to the superior, enlightened West despite their geographical origins in the East and sought to enlighten (read: colonize) its primitive peoples. (Erakat 2015, 78–80)

Thus, Israel's founders reified European supremacy in ascribing new value onto Jewish subjectivity and nationality in relation to the racialized Palestinian Other.<sup>3</sup>

Through an assertion of Zionism, “the non-white Jewish victims of anti-Semitism could assert a bridge from non-whiteness to whiteness, identifying with European global hegemony” (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2008, 646). In its alliance with global white supremacy, Zionism absorbed the antiblack logics foundational to Enlightenment Europe. The legal architecture of the colonial project, which sprang from the British mandate for Palestine, further evidences this fact. As Yael Berda (2017, 18) details, the legal framework of the occupation was based on British colonial emergency laws, which sought to manage the civilian population in accordance with the laws of war: “The colonial regulations carried with them the administrative memory of colonial rule, which involved not only laws but organizational practices and political dispositions, primarily the legitimacy to use separate legal systems for different populations based on race” (19). Demographic governance and management of the occupied native population grew out of a larger, global project of Western imperialism.

Over time, Israelis came to “occupy the structural positions of whiteness in the racial hierarchy of the Middle East. Arabs, accordingly—most notably in the person of Palestinians—are the antithesis. . . . Historically, politically, religiously and culturally, Arabs are neither Jew nor (as such) white” (Goldberg 2009, 117). The state's preoccupation with engineering the new Jewish body in the image of European supremacy has thus energized the policing of other nonwhite bodies within the settler nation, particularly Mizrahi (Jews of Middle Eastern descent) and African Jews (see Shohat 2003; Lavie 2014). In what has come to be known as the Yemenite Children Affair, for example, it is estimated that hundreds to thousands of children were kidnapped from their Jewish mothers and fathers who had fled Yemen in the 1950s, before being given or sold to Jewish Ashkenazi families, that is, Jewish families of European descent (Fezehai 2019). In 2013, Israel admitted giving Ethiopian Jewish immigrants forced contraceptives without their knowledge or consent (Dawber 2013). While the Israeli Ministry of Health previously denied the practice, suspicions were raised by an investigative journalist who interviewed more than thirty Ethiopian women in an attempt to understand why birth rates in the community had fallen dramatically. The theft of Yemeni children and the policing of Ethiopian women's reproductive autonomy are

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3 The “rehabilitation” of the Oriental Jew by making him European was a decidedly gendered endeavor. As Weiss's (2002) work explains, the construction of this new Jew as a sacralized, chosen body is the attempt of the diaspora Jew as Other to reinvent himself by embodying the hegemonic, European body, resting on the collective construction of a masculine, healthy body in service of the Jewish nation. The Hebrew man, whose reconstructed body symbolizes this national recovery, thus energizes a racialized hierarchy of bodies in Israel.

cases that point to continued attempts to purify the Jewish race, highlighting Israel's construction as a white settler state animated by logics of antiblackness and invested in the control and management of women's bodies and reproductive capacities. This is to say nothing of the mass detention and deportation of African asylum seekers, and other crude forms of racial violence and antiblackness openly endorsed by Israel's political leadership (see, for example, Pierre 2015).

Pronatal policies continue today through a variety of reproductive technologies and practices such as reproductive genetics (e.g., Hashiloni-Dolev 2006) that enable the production of the Jewish body and homeland in the image of European whiteness and the disappearance of the Palestinian body and body politic. Such practices go beyond pronatalism, bordering on a form of racial eugenics aimed at purifying the Jewish nation (e.g., Nahman 2013), highlighting the interlocking logics of antiblackness and Palestinian erasure that undergird the white nationalist character of the state.

### **Born Palestinian, Born Black: Palestine's Captive Maternal**

The centrality of bodily reproduction and its entanglement with the continuous uprooting and erasure of Indigenous Palestinians situates the womb of Zionist settler colonialism as a space that has absorbed the antiblack logics foundational to the terms of conquest and global white supremacy. These politics form the core of a racist social structure that aims to create Israel in the image of a European nation and, in doing so, eliminate not only the Indigenous Palestinian, but also non-Ashkenazi (European descent) presence within the boundaries of that nation. Attempts to purify the Jewish national body bring to the fore the extent to which Israel's epistemologies and technologies of governance are energized by a fundamentally antiblack animus.

Tiffany King argues that "the symbol of the Black body plays a paradigmatic role in spatial expansion, and geographic humanity" (2016, 1024). Thus, the ways in which Blackness is imagined "in relation to space, residency, Indigenous and conquistador/settler communities is of critical importance" (1024) in undoing the settler order. While situated from within a U.S. settler context, I find resonance between her analysis of the spatial logics of Black fungibility and the spatial logics of Zionist settler colonialism. While the structural positionalities of Black women and Palestinian women in white settler states differ, I want to suggest that the terrain of the gendered body, read through the spatial logics of Black fungibility, and of Palestinian elimination in the settler colony, opens up space for thinking through a politics of what Shanya Cordis calls "relational difference."<sup>4</sup> According to Cordis, "Rather than a discomfiting collapse of racialized difference that perpetuates the so-called ruse of analogy, relational difference centers particularity even as it articulates horizontal connections across ongoing colonial violence" (2019, 30).

The embodied, gendered politics of Zionist settler colonialism provide a ground for thinking through a politics of relationality between eliminatory logics of anti-

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4 While I refer to them here as structural positionalities, it is important to note that this bifurcation of Palestinian and Black is, in the context of historical Palestine, necessarily a false one, as even in Jerusalem there is a historical community of Afro-Palestinians who identify as both Black and Palestinian.

blackness and Indigenous erasure as they traffic in the bodies and lives of women between and across white settler states. The reproductive and productive labor of the Black “captive maternal” (James 2016) may not be visible at first glance; her figure nonetheless energizes the womb of Zionist settler colonialism and the spatial project of Indigenous erasure in historical Palestine.

The title of this piece is a reference to Palestinian poet Suheir Hammad’s collection of the same title (2010), which itself is a play on June Jordan’s 1985 poem, “Moving towards Home,” written in the aftermath of the 1982 Philangist-Israeli massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon’s Sabra and Shatila camps.

*I was born a Black woman  
and now  
I am become a Palestinian*

The passage, as Jodi Melamed analyzes it, “exemplifies the conjoined epistemological-political project of women of color feminism: it works as politics in the first place by innovating ways of knowing that abrogate normal politics” (2011, 79).

In this chapter, I want to challenge us to think further with this feminist “poetics of relation” (Glissant 1997) as analytics, by exploring the intimate geographies of the body as sites where racial and gendered histories of dispossession push up against each other, and further, ground possibilities for renewed political imaginaries of solidarity based on shared vulnerabilities to violence and a desire for “living room” (Jordan [1985] 2011). Still, to think with the insights of Black feminisms in considering the Palestinian condition in the settler colony is not to elide or erase difference between racialized positionalities, but to consider how antiblackness as a global structure shapes the contours of possibility for Palestinian life and survival. I have ventured to explore here merely one aspect of this womb work, the ways in which the racialized politics of birth at the center of the Zionist project’s ongoing colonization of Palestine is imbricated with the foundational gendered logics of antiblackness. In other words, examining Israel as a white settler colony invested in the carceral logics and gendered body politics to which antiblackness is foundational forces consideration of critical theories and activist praxes invested in dismantling the settler spatial order that falls outside of the liberal humanist frame. The current political moment calls for feminist analytics and political projects that attend to the specificities of gendered violence and dispossession, while also contesting the elision of antiblack logics that give rise to the eliminatory politics of Zionist settler colonialism.

