

Genet's Palestinian Folklore

JOANNE BRUETON

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON IN PARIS

Abstract. Jean Genet's political and personal allegiance to the Palestinians has often been interpreted as a putative exoticism, born out of a homoerotic fetishization of Arab alterity. This essay probes such criticisms to suggest instead that Genet's Palestinian poetics deconstruct orientalist tropes by subversively over-exaggerating them. In bearing witness to the Palestinian revolution, or in trying to pay homage to the massacres at Sabra and Chatila in 1982, Genet can never adopt an authorial position of confederation. His voice is mired in the privileges of resource, readership, and mobility facilitated by Western hegemony, which stands anathema to the democracy of his political project. In order to gesture to the reality of the Palestinians, without reification or evangelization, I argue that Genet subversively borrows the language of fairy-tale, folklore, epic, and mythology long associated with nineteenth-century French exoticism, to draw attention to the ultimate artifice of his portrayal. He invites us to glean the authenticity of an Arab world beyond the clutches of the European author, repurposing exoticist legends and formerly lurid colonial representations to transform them into revolutionary fable. In his overly aestheticized portrayals, I argue that Genet does not immobilize the fedayeen in the flat planes of a one-sided image, but disguises them in the layers of such folkloric make-believe that he makes a spectacle of the orientalist fantasy itself.

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Exotisme en littérature française. Très fécond. Nécessaire, car les Français n'inventent pas. — VICTOR SEGALEN¹

On 20 October 1970, a Parisian delegate from the Palestinian Liberation Organization invited French dissident Jean Genet (1910–86) to visit the refugee camps in Jordan, where he stayed intermittently until his death. That this notoriously nomadic writer made his home with those without one, bears a poetic coherence that is marred by the political context of the gesture. During an interview in 1974 with Moroccan novelist and acolyte, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Genet concedes that it was his dogged, anti-imperialist vendetta against the

¹ Victor Segalen, 'Notes sur l'exotisme', *Mercur de France*, 323 (March 1955), p. 594. 'Exoticism in French literature. Very rich. Necessary because the French do not invent', *Essay on exoticism: An aesthetics of diversity*, trans. by Yaël Rachel Schlick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 38.

West that initially steered him towards the Palestinians as ‘non seulement les plus défavorisés, mais [...] ceux qui cristallisent au plus haut point la haine de l’Occident’.² He runs the risk of fetishizing the Palestinians as subaltern wanderers, reducing them to props in a diatribe against Western values of colonial, capitalist dominance. Meanwhile, he also benefits from the privilege and scope granted by the hegemony of Western discursive modes.

As the self-questioning leitmotif of ‘que suis-je venu faire ici?’³ pulses throughout his memoir on Palestine, *Un captif amoureux*, Genet finds himself caught in a hypocritical bind: born in the metropole of an empire ‘si vaste qu’il ceinturerait le globe’ while attempting to pay homage to Palestinians divested of ‘leurs terres, leurs maisons, leurs lits’.⁴ The physical appropriation of territory is imagined here like a Russian doll, with each layer of national, domestic, and personal space consecutively removed. To extend the metaphor, the figure nested inside the bed would be the Palestinians themselves, and so if Genet is to conserve rather than conquer the identities he describes, he must reverse the symbolic appropriation of exoticist attitudes that co-opt the Arab world ‘according to colonial knowledge and lore’.⁵

Speaking as a Palestinian, Edward Said has vouched for Genet’s anti-orientalist inclinations by reading his entry into the Arab space ‘not as an investigator of exoticism’,⁶ but as ‘a vital act of [...] solidarity, his willing enraptured identification with other identities whose existence involves a strenuously contested struggle’.⁷ Identification never becomes assimilative in Genet’s imagination, and when writing about Palestine, he barricades himself behind ‘une lisière [...] épargné [par ...] ma non-appartenance à une nation, une action où je ne me confondis jamais’.⁸ He seeks a liminality that keeps him estranged from a patriotic kinship he staunchly rejects, such that his personal feeling of non-belonging only intensifies the alterity of the Palestinians he tries to evoke without commodification, superiority, or exoticizing invention.

In this article, I analyse how Genet’s precarious authorial posture towards Palestine uses the orientalist inclination towards fantasy, imagination and folklore against itself. In his often overly aestheticized portrayals, he nods to an exotic legacy in which a mythical Arabia served Europe as its figurative muse, only to stress the intrinsic artifice of this representation. His political

² Jean Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 370. ‘[T]oward those who crystallized to the highest degree the hatred of the West’, *The Declared Enemy*, trans. by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 331.

³ Jean Genet, *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 278. ‘[W]hat am I doing here?’, *Prisoner of love*, trans. by Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 235.

⁴ Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 19. ‘[T]hat circled the globe’, ‘their houses, their lands, and even their beds’, *Prisoner of love*, p. 12.

⁵ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁸ Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 125. ‘[A] boundary [...] safe [because] I didn’t belong to, never really identified with, their nation or movement’, *Prisoner of love*, p. 105.

responsibility is not to rewrite the myths of 'un monde arabe conventionnel: *Les Mille et Une nuits!*',⁹ not to impose a putative truth, but to stress the fallacy of his Palestinian images to safeguard their reality beyond the page.

In a scene in *Un captif amoureux* that dramatizes the politics of his poetics, Genet recounts his first encounter with Yasser Arafat, the erstwhile chairman of the PLO:

Abou Omar m'avait renseigné sur mon rôle ici: 'votre fonction sera très difficile: vous ne ferez rien'. J'avais compris; être là, écouter, me taire, regarder, approuver ou sembler n'avoir pas compris; avec les feddayin être le vieux, avec les Palestiniens celui qui vient du nord.¹⁰

Arafat entreats Genet to muzzle the autonomy of his voice and role-play a caricature of the impotent outsider to manipulate the false hegemony of a North-South dialectic in which his narrative might be read. The verbs insist on Genet's performed inaction: he is to be seen and not heard; to acknowledge his role as compliant bystander, rather than agent. Twice repeating the term 'compris', Genet toys with its homonymy to insist he understands that his discourse must neither comprise, nor totalize. Arafat casts Genet as the powerless old man who serves as foil to the virile fedayeen; his elderly presence metonymically mapped onto an aged Global North that no longer has a place in Palestine. Indeed, in a gleeful reversal of orientalist norms, Genet recounts in a 1983 interview that it was Arafat's signature that granted him permission to move around the camps, the authority of the Arabic word trumping and ratifying the European's.¹¹

Genet designates his brooding guard, Moubarak, as his unlikely source of editorial advice:

[t]u as une petite chance d'être lu, mais trouve-la dans l'urgence et la rapidité de tes phrases. Je te propose une image. Un enfant débile doit prendre de l'huile de foie de morue. Il vide le flacon en souriant car la voix de sa mère le charme. Pour elle, il avale cuillerée sur cuillerée de l'huile abominable. Les lecteurs te suivront si tu deviens leur mère. Parle d'une voix douce et inexorable.¹²

He tinges the scene with a droll irony: Genet the orphan brought up by the French social services is recast in Palestine as a mother helping her puerile French readership swallow the bitter chronicles of the East. Yet, underneath,

⁹ Jean Genet, 'Les Palestiniens', in *Genet à Chatila* (Arles: Solin, 1992), pp. 87–151 (p. 121). '[A] conventional Arabic world [found in] *A Thousand and One Nights*', my translation.

¹⁰ Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 208. 'Abu Omar had told me what my role was to be here. "Your job will be a difficult one: don't do anything". I'd understood this to mean I was to be there, listen but say nothing, look on, agree or seem not to understand. With the fedayeen I was to play the old codger; with the Palestinians someone from the north', *Prisoner of love*, p. 174.

¹¹ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 277.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 209. 'You've only got a faint chance of being read — if your style is urgent and swift. I'll give you a simile. A puny child is supposed to take cod-liver oil. The sound of his mother's voice can make him smile and swallow spoonful after spoonful of the horrible stuff — empty the whole bottle. If you become their mother your readers will go along with you. Speak in a voice that's sweet but inexorable', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 175.

there is a subtle political recalibration at play. Within this *mise en scène*, Genet has Moubarak draw on an allegorical image in which a resistant party must be distracted and mollified to absorb content that is hard to digest. Europe is imagined as the petulant child who must imbibe a dose of Middle Eastern politics. They can have none of the sugar-coating of the nineteenth-century French romanticists, who invent an Orient just to offer succour to a Europe they find putrid and parched.¹³ Rather, Moubarak advises that Genet find another way of persuading a Western audience to listen to his tales of the Palestinian rebels: narrating the stories about the fedayeen through a soothing, yet pointed lullaby; or recounting a revolutionary bed-time story.

Shifting from an intra to extra-diegetic narrative, Genet steps back from Moubarak's counsel; evangelizing to a French readership in the interest of doing them good is anathema to his crusade against the West. Even Éric Marty's controversial analysis of the late Genet warns against ascribing a moralizing content to his pro-Palestinian texts, his trenchant rejection of Genet as 'celui qui purge le lecteur, et le monde par la même occasion, de ses mauvaises pensées',¹⁴ offering a just reading of Genet's purposefully non-prescriptive ethical position. In Palestine, Genet is more disciple than teacher, more son than patriarch.¹⁵

Critics who take umbrage at Genet's Palestinian relations, vilifying his 'racial fetishism', 'sexual tourism', and 'colonial erotics' as the 'foundation of his contestatory political engagement',¹⁶ presuppose a stable position of white, narrative dominance that this article challenges. I argue instead that Genet grafts his signature aesthetic of *trucage*, of narrative dissimulation and artistic sham, onto a Palestinian context precisely to reject the tyranny of such objectification. In narrating the Palestinian revolution, Genet seeks a poetics that testifies to a reality that he can only articulate obliquely, in the interstices between his words. The opening pages invite us to read through and around his diaphanous prose to get to 'la translucidité et le blanc [qui] ont une réalité plus

¹³ See Victor Hugo's 'Preface' to *Les Orientales*, in *Œuvres Complètes V: Odes et Ballades. Les Orientales* (Paris: Alexander Houssiaux, 1857), p. 211, when he perceives 'le statu quo européen' as 'déjà vermoulu et lézardé'. '[T]he European status quo [...] already worm-eaten and cracked'.

¹⁴ Éric Marty, *Jean Genet post-scriptum* (Paris: Editions Verdier, 2006), p. 11. Marty polemically disavows readers' volition to read *Un captif amoureux* as an emancipatory text, stating that it 'betrays emancipation itself because of an ontology of domination'.

¹⁵ Genet experiences an ethical awakening in the Palestinian camps, stating that 'je changeai en ce sens que mes relations changèrent, parce que chaque relation était différente', *Genet à Chatila* (Paris: Solin, 1992), p. 98. 'I changed in the sense that my relations changed, because each relation was different', my translation. Said also claims that 'there is no indication that he aspired to a special position, like some benevolent White Father', *On Late Style*, p. 137.

¹⁶ Kadji Amin, *Disturbing attachments* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 82–84. Said exonerates Genet's love of Arabs as his reason for entering into political coalition, while Ivan Jablonka argues that because 'il a loué la charge érotique de la révolte et la beauté des combattants [...] on ne sait plus si le soutien de Genet est d'ordre politique ou sexuel', *Les vérités inavouables de Jean Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 18. '[H]e praised the erotic charge of the revolt and the beauty of the fighters [...] we no longer know if Genet's support is political or sexual', my translation.

forte que les signes qui les défigurent'.¹⁷ It seems that only the anti-figurative, only the erasure of representational realism, will grant us access to an elsewhere Genet strives not to reify. His strategy is not to stay mute as Arafat suggests, but to document his experience with the Palestinians by steeping his representation in a poetics of artifice. If he perceives his words as staining reality, then they must exaggerate their illusory theatricality to show that they are anything but real.

Yet, the border between Arabic reality and legend plagues Genet. In an interview in 1983, he insists on the materiality of the Palestinians whose 'poids' and 'vérité des gestes' defy the fantastic clichés and imaginative geography of the Arab world.

Quand je suis parti de Paris, j'étais encore sous l'influence d'un Orient littéraire. Même si on en parlait dans les journaux, on en parlait encore littérairement [...] j'ai vu un peuple dont chaque membre accomplissait des gestes d'une pesanteur, d'un poids réel. Il y avait un poids de réalité de réel. Tous les pays arabes donnaient des paquets de cigarettes. Aucune cigarette n'était allumée et n'était fumée négligemment. Une cigarette avait son sens. Un seau d'eau pris par une femme arabe à la fontaine avait son sens.¹⁸

Genet's double polyptoton — *pesanteur*, *poids* and *réalité*, *réel* — emphasizes the poetic construction of his vision of Palestine. He lends the Palestinians solidity, form, movement; eager to actualize what has been fossilized in the flat-planes of an anti-empirical, exotic imaginary. The seemingly arbitrary cigarette is an important detail. Like Victor Segalen's volition to strip the term exotic 'de tous ses oripeaux: le palmier et le chameau; casque de colonial; peaux noires et soleil jaune',¹⁹ so Genet's fascination with the Arabic world comes from removing the magic carpets to confront a familiar modernity. The cigarette is a well-known Genetian motif, its smoke made iconic in *Un chant d'amour* as the sign of an illicit desire that transgresses the borders imposed by a dominant power. When transposed onto Palestine, perhaps Genet theatricalizes the poise and purpose of each cigarette in an imagined act of resistance against the imprisonment of stock images 'qui montrent une Palestine en armes et décharnée'.²⁰

Genet's Palestine is not the image sold to the West of an atrophied assailant, but a vital body that inhales, imbibes, elicits thirst and, hence, survives. Clearly, Genet fetishizes this domestic reality: partly because its

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11. '[T]he translucency and the whiteness contain more reality than the signs that mar them', p. 5.

¹⁸ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 275. 'When I had left Paris I was still under the influence of a literary Orient. Even if it was spoken of in the newspapers, it was in a literary way [...] I saw a people who performed gestures with a real weightiness, a real weight. There was a weight of reality, of the real. All the Arab countries gave out packs of cigarettes. No cigarette was lit or smoked negligently. A cigarette had its sense. A water bucket taken to a fountain by an Arab woman had its sense', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 238.

¹⁹ Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978), p. 22. '[O]f all its cheap finery: palm tree and camel; tropical helmet; black skins and yellow sun', *Essay on Exoticism*, p. 18.

²⁰ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 89. '[S]howing a Palestine armed and fierce', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 71.

ordinariness transgresses exoticism; partly because the most prosaic of objects — a cigarette packet, a water fountain, a bucket — are so stylized in his vision that he can describe reality without ever claiming to have any real access to it. As Clare Finburgh argues, this is a *réel* forged in ‘the dissemination of appearance, the perpetuation of iconography with which [...] Genet creates a poetic representation of the Palestinians, and concurrently highlights this representation as illusion.’²¹ Genet may try to expose the codes that disrupt the orientalist fantasy, but like the cigarette which ‘avait son sens’, he never attempts to codify an ontological meaning beyond the visible.

Genet thus mines, rather than maligns, the influence of a literary Orient. It actually provides the ideal setting for him to reveal the fragile artifice behind its myths. In the camps at Ajloun, Jordan between 1970 and 1971, he muses on how the fedayeen might reclaim the legends behind their identity:

[c]orps et visages sont offerts à qui sait lire. On croit comprendre qu'ils ont voulu cette dureté afin de créer ce nuage qui flotte sur le monde arabe, de déchirer les mythologiques qu'on y a peintes. C'est la révolte. [...] Parlant de ce nuage, je n'évoque rien d'autre que ce qui demeure en chacun après l'étude ou la lecture simple du Coran où, pour mieux se dissimuler, tous les feddayin sont allés prendre leurs noms de guerre.²²

In a subversive play of orientalist tropes, Genet turns the bodies of the fedayeen into texts that become legible only to those who can recognize the illusion of the characters they are playing. The fedayeen tear down the mythologies of the West by constructing a new smokescreen: an impenetrable mask behind which their real self remains untouched. Such a conscious play of illusions is at the heart of their revolt as Genet imagines a form of self-protection afforded by the characterizations of pseudonyms found in a different fiction: the Quran. New layers of textual lore replace the stories invented and imposed by a European imaginary; the cloud of orientalist mystery is reappropriated as a hermetic site of Palestinian meaning that rejects a Western reading.

Obscurity is ensured by the legend that inspires these *noms de guerre*, whose weight of tradition ‘fait douter de l'homme qui en fut peut-être l'origine’.²³ As the real is lost to the imagination, identities are dispersed in a complex web of untotizable imitation and play-acting. Genet turns legend into theatre and offers up this mimicry of identity as a perverse way for the Palestinians to protect themselves against further colonization. In the wake of ‘la blessure

²¹ Clare Finburgh, ‘Jean Genet and the Poetics of Palestinian Politics’, *French Studies*, 56.4 (October 2002), pp. 495–509 (p. 498).

²² Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 177. ‘Bodies and faces are given to those who can read. One might think that they willed this hardness so as to create the cloud that surrounds the Arab world, and to tear apart the mythologies that have been depicted on it. It's a form of revolt [...] In speaking of this cloud, I am evoking nothing other than what remains within everyone after studying or simply reading the Qur'an, in which all the fedayeen looked for a *nom de guerre*, the better to conceal themselves’, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 152.

²³ *Ibid.*

coloniale',²⁴ Genet figures the Palestinians caught in the iterative performance of bloated theatricality: '[a]fin de combler le vide les boursoufflures ne sont pas seulement dans l'imprécation ou le geste, mais dans l'extravagance des héroïsmes racontés.'²⁵ Just as Judith Butler reads gender as 'an imitation without an origin', a parody of the very notion of an original,²⁶ so Genet safeguards the fedayeen by locating their identity in the iterative performance of an epic heroism that has no solid foundation. Through mythology, the fedayeen escape reification.

Here, Genet calls Orientalism's bluff. He subtly bends what Said believes an orientalist attitude shares with magic and mythology as 'the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are *because* they are what they are, for once, for all time',²⁷ to imagine the Palestinians exploiting such hermeticism and using legend as a political strategy against a brutal appropriation of their reality. Curiously, Genet floods his Palestinian texts with reference to Eurocentric epics. He compares the patriotic death of the fedayeen in *Quatre heures à Chatila* with 'le choix [...] d'Achille dans l'*Illiade*'.²⁸ He draws on the medieval Spanish tale of El Cid and the Greek myth of Antigone as allegories for the details that are erased or passed on across generations.²⁹ He transposes the Homeric dilemma of whether to 'mourir en un temps bref, ou chanter pour l'éternité?'³⁰ onto the choice of Palestinian youths deciding whether to go to war. Moreover, he states that since classical antiquity, it is never the event, but its poetic memorialization that lasts:

la gloire des héros doit peu à l'immensité des conquêtes, tout à la réussite des hommages; l'*Illiade* plus que la guerre d'Agamemnon; les stèles chaldéennes que les armées de Ninive; la colonne Trajane; *La chanson de Roland*; les peintures murales de l'Armada; la colonne Vendôme, toutes les images de guerres furent exécutées après les batailles grâce aux butins à la vigueur des artistes.³¹

In part, such comparisons allow Genet to put the Palestinian revolution on the literary map, making space for its actors by creating a transnational kinship with mythological giants. Mainly, however, they serve to legitimize the intrinsic artifice of all commemoration.

²⁴ Ibid. '[T]he "colonial wound"', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 153.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 178. 'As a way to fill the emptiness, the bombast is found not only in curses and gestures but in the extravagance of the heroism that is recounted', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 153.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 138. Also see Elizabeth Stephens, *Queer Writing: Homoeroticism in Jean Genet's Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 121.

²⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 70.

²⁸ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 264. 'Achille's choice in the *Iliad*', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 228.

²⁹ Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, p. 320.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 174. 'Which is better, a quick death or to sing forever?', *Prisoner of Love*, p. 146.

³¹ Ibid., p. 14. 'The *Iliad* counts for more than Agamemnon's war; the steles of the Chaldes far more than the armies of Nineveh. Trajan's Column, *La Chanson de Roland*, the murals depicting the Armada, the Vendome column — all the images of wars have been created after the battles themselves thanks to the looting or energy of the artists', *Prisoner of Love*, p. 8.

Instead of idolizing the fedayeen as immortal heroes in a European narrative, he summons his Western readers' canonical knowledge of *The Iliad*, *La Chanson de Roland*, *El Cid*, *Antigone* to drive home the fabrication of his account. Because these epics are accepted as fictions, they help Genet neutralize any hint of orientalism by accentuating the fallacy of his testimony. What Genet admires in the *Iliad* is precisely its poetic license, not its referent: he ascribes beauty to its status as poetry, rather than as sacrament or historic truth.³² Imagining the fedayeen as Homer does Achilles, Genet assumes an ambitious, yet humble task. He exposes what François Regnault reads as 'le dilemme homérique [...] qu'écrire n'a aucun rapport avec agir',³³ to craft an ersatz reality that is visibly no more than words. Genet's Palestinian sagas pay homage to a literary legacy that is lucid about the demarcation between the symbolic and the real. In a chiasmus that shifts what territory belongs to him, Genet notes about *Quatre heures à Chatila* that 'l'espèce de petit récit que j'ai fait [...] je l'ai fait avec des mots qui sont les miens pour parler d'une réalité qui n'était pas la mienne'.³⁴ In a tale made only of signs, Genet breaks the illusion that any reality could ever lurk behind a blind orientalist fantasia.

Thus, while Genet may claim that 'aucune technique du récit ne dira ce que furent les six mois passés par les feddayin dans les montagnes de Jerash et d'Ajloun en Jordanie',³⁵ arguably the only genre appropriate for such ineffability, such disbelief, is the language of make-believe. Genet riffs on the grammar of fable at the end of *Quatre heures à Chatila*, claiming 'je dois avoir vécu la période jordanienne comme une féerie', 'cette féerie à contenu révolutionnaire', 'des Européens et des Arabes d'Afrique du Nord m'ont parlé du sortilège', 'toute cette équipée aurait dû porter en sous-titre "Songe d'une nuit d'été"'.³⁶ The anaphora of fairy-tale helps remove Genet from any lazy cultural identification with the Palestinians, denying a myopic inclination to cast them in his own image. Instead, he apes the mystery, romance and chimerical landscapes of the French exotic tradition to travel to an elsewhere that has all the cues of Said's invented Orient:³⁷ witchcraft, hearsay, dream, even the modal verbs defy fact.

In a political twist, perhaps Genet is harnessing what Segalen critiques in the epigraph — the tendency of French literature to pastiche fable and rewrite

³² Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 145 ; p. 161.

³³ François Regnault, 'Le choix d'Homère', in *Genet à Chatila* (Arles: Solin, 1992), pp. 173–76 (p. 176).

³⁴ Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 278. 'This little story I told [...] I told it with words that are mine. But in order to speak of a reality that was not mine', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 240.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243. '[n]o narrative technique can ever say what they were like, the six months [...] that the fedayeen spent in the mountains of Jeraash and Ajloun, in Jordan', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 208.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 264. '[I] experienced the Jordanian period as if it were a charmed adventure'; 'this fairy tale with revolutionary content'; 'Europeans and North African Arabs have spoken to me of the spell that kept them there'; 'the whole venture should have had the subtitle "A Midsummer Night's Dream"', *The Declared Enemy*, p. 228.

³⁷ See Bernard Poirot-Delpech, 'Un captif amoureux de Jean Genet: le théâtre des opérations', *Le Monde*, 6 June 1986, p. 1; p. 19. Poirot-Delpech argues that Genet figures Palestine in same exoticist vein as Gide, Malraux, Loti, which Edward J. Hughes evaluates in *Writing marginality in Modern French literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p. 155.

old stories rather than imagine new modes of representation — to reframe that exoticism. By drawing attention to his authorial mythology, he tempts us to look harder at the topography of a Palestinian reality beyond his page and uses his lexis of *féerie* to make our ignorance all the more poignant. He reminds us that ‘si quelque lecteur a vu une carte géographique de la Palestine et de la Jordanie, il sait que le terrain n’est pas une feuille de papier’.³⁸ Genet’s folkloric ploy is to unveil the palimpsest onto which stories of the East are written, daring us to see the paper as the cover that homogenizes the contours of a real Middle East. His readers can no longer hide behind the veil of his literary imaginary, protected by what he fears for the Black Panthers as the palatable ‘forme d’un folklore très rassurant pour la nation dominatrice’.³⁹ We must look to another parchment, to the map itself, for a glimpse into reality; and therein lies Genet’s most fantastic invention yet:

[s]’il me fallait figurer le Palestinien [...] je ne pourrais pas le faire sauf à inventer sorte de figure toujours mobile, inquiète et certaine, volontaire, interrogative et sûre de soi, fragile mais passant entre les gouttes comme l’aiguille de la boussole indiquant toujours le Nord, afin qu’elle-même — l’aiguille — ou que lui-même — le Palestinien — ne soit jamais le Nord.⁴⁰

Stripped of all exoticist finery, Genet portrays the Palestinian as an ephemeral, defiant energy that resolutely refuses to be contained by any image. Their material reality is located in such figurative resistance: no form can pin down a figure who oscillates between contradictions; no language can essentialize or identify them through cliché. In Genet’s gossamer portrait, the Palestinians have weight precisely because they mutate, revolt, adapt, question, stand firm; features that render them invisible in an institutional context and dehumanized in a political one. However, being made un-real as a nation is recast in Genet’s fantasy as the source of the Palestinians’ greatest power: their way to disavow the hegemony of a Global North and follow the internal compass of irrepressible, revolutionary struggle.

³⁸ Genet, *L’Ennemi déclaré*, p. 264. ‘Any reader who has seen a map of Palestine and Jordan knows that the terrain is not a sheet of paper’, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 228.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75. ‘[F]olklore that is very reassuring to the dominant nation’, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ Notes from 1970, collated in Elisabeth Boyer and Jean-Pierre Boyer, *Genet* (Paris: Éditions Farrago, 2006), p. 300. ‘[I]f I had to figure the Palestinian [...] I would only be able to by inventing a figure that was always mobile, anxious yet certain, wilful, questioning and confident, fragile but weathering the storm like the needle on a compass that always points North, so that neither the needle nor the Palestinian could ever be North’, my translation.