

OPEN LETTER TO SYLVIA WYNTER: UNLEARNING THE DISAPPEAR- ANCE OF JEWS FROM AFRICA

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In this moving account, Ariella Azoulay writes a letter to Sylvia Wynter discussing the Black scholar's essay "1492." She passes her reading through the filter of her experience as an Arab-Jew scholar relocated in the U.S. and reckons with the skewed concept of "Judeo-Christianity."

Dear Sylvia Wynter,

I love teaching your texts. They inspire me and stir the mind of my students. Your essay "1492: A New World View" (1995) helped me understand that the entire world as manufactured out of the events of 1492 is in a dire need of repair, a project that cannot be confined to calls for reparations.

Thinking with you about the world wrought by 1492, I am troubled by the use of the term "Judeo-Christian," and this is why I am sending you this note. Unlike other terms, whose origins you carefully question and whose meanings you transform, "Judeo-Christian" stands untroubled in your writing, as if there is a confirmed reality behind it. Judeo-Christian — where? When? In whose interest? Against whom? In service of what kind of world? Often, I wish the texts of authors I like to be flawless. But simply changing, excising, or explaining away the vexed term is not enough. A work is required to show how it was manufactured. I finally found the courage to do this in a letter addressed to you. The term "Judeo-Christian," as I hope you will understand, is in itself a distortion of the work of repair.

Why a letter? Your 1492 text sent me off on a journey, and I feel I owe you a postcard from my travels. I struggled with the writing of this letter, maybe because at the same time I began writing to you, I was also writing a letter to my father who passed away seven years ago. In my letter to my father, I try to reconstruct my failure to grasp the meaning of one brief sentence he told me during a longer interview I conducted for his 65th birthday. He mentioned, in passing, that he was in a concentration camp in Algeria. I had no memory of having heard this, though a few years later, I read it in the booklet that I prepared from the interview. It is as if what he was telling me didn't register in my conscious mind.

Years later, when my friend, the anthropologist Susan Slymoyics, asked to interview my father — knowing his age and guessing he might have been in a camp — that I truly *heard* for the first time that my father was in a concentration camp.

We never talked about it, though he told me and I heard, he told me and I wrote it down. I know that my failure to hear him the first time he told me is not really mine alone. I could not conceive of concentration camps in Algeria, since as you write, "Man's memories" of World War II were mainly European. Thus, many of the diverse groups that were targeted by the Nazis, the Fascists, and all other imperial powers were omitted from history and their suffering disavowed, to make room for the exceptional suffering and extermination of Europeans of Jewish origin.

In the Zionist state where I grew up — Israel — there was no room for my father's memories of persecution during World War II as an Arab-Jew whose French citizenship was revoked, nor for the vulnerability of Jews in Algeria after the creation of the State of Israel, which was constructed as a Europeanized stronghold against the Arab world. In Israel, where my father migrated in 1949, he was able to take advantage of the World War II imperial bargain, as his French citizenship — given to Algerian Jews in 1870 — meant he could pass for a European Jew (that is, a white Jew), and assimilate, at the cost of forgetting his Arabness. In my letter to him, I'm still reconstructing all he had to omit to sustain the self-deception of being French, despite being continually betrayed by the dark color of his skin, his French accent in Hebrew which Arab-Jews readily recognized as a North African one, and his Arab accent when speaking French.

Your discussion, dear Sylvia, of the substance of memories "we" share, those memories of a white bourgeois mode of being as *the* way of being human, hovers above both my letter to you and to him. After I started to write to you, I soon realized that a postcard was too small for what I wanted to say. But I still want to share the image I had in mind for your postcard. It is a photochrome image of twelve Algerian girls around the age of six or seven, posing for a photograph in a Delacroix-inflected harem-like setting — some idly standing, others at work — at what is an embroidery school for Arab girls, founded by a French woman a decade after the French conquered Algeria.



Any of these Arab-looking girls, whose picture was taken in 1905, could have been my ancestor. The photographs I have of my grandmother in Algeria, taken a few decades later, show her already as a French-looking woman, a Jewish Arab who has learned the lesson of Frenchness this school was established to impart. Where did my great-great grandmother, who was a native Algerian and could have been one of these girls, disappear to?

With the conquest, the traditional craft of embroidery, which had been transmitted intergenerationally, was standardized into a European curriculum emphasizing mechanized movements, "orientalist" patterns, and the French language. The young girls in this photochrome were in training to become a labor force producing for European markets. Look at the synchronized movement of their right hands. No doubt, they were asked by the photographer (or their teacher-patron) to act as if they were in the midst of embroidering. This semi-mechanized gesture is not how their ancestors used the needle, outside of the market logic of French educational institutions. Note how everything is standardized: were there no left-handed girls among them? Was this "flaw" also eradicated, along with previous modes of embroidering? Does the standardization of their work connect to the disappearance of my great-great grandmother?

This lesson of Frenchness, standardization, eradication has a name in French: *laïcité*. The term "secularism" doesn't quite capture the stripping bare the worldliness, or being-in-the-world, of a person, which *laïcité* requires. Part of solving the "Jewish question" in Europe required the refashioning

of Jews as secular Europeans (who could still be "Jews" at home) before they could go in public. With the French conquest of Algeria, the Jews were singled out from the Arabs and were made into a "problem," forced to get rid of what identified them as indigenous, so that a few decades later the colonial regime could reward them for their efforts with the 'gift' of French citizenship. Thinking of this "Judeo-Christian" bargain in relation to the state process of *laïcité* helped me. As my interlocutor, you helped me to identify the "Christian" component in the secular Jew.

Your uninterrogated use of the term — Judeo-Christian — assumes a readership that recognizes itself in it. If you could have anticipated a reaction like mine while you wrote, I am inclined to think that you would have asked more questions about it. It's true, some of your Jewish readers, and maybe also some Christians, may find this category reassuring, a confirmation that the post-World War II bargain, the one which promised Jews whiteness and welcomed them into the Christian-secular world, and offered Christians a way out of their guilt, is respected. I'm Jewish, but I am not one of these readers, and I'm not alone.

As I worked to retrieve memories of my family's Arabness, I joined you in your endeavor to expose Man's memories as simply one mode of being human, a white, middle-class commitment to perpetuate, as you call it, "unimaginable evil." The Judeo-Christian, I begin to understand as I write to you, is one of the latest iterations of the imperial practice of assimilation, one that was materialized on a state-scale with the Christian-European interest in the State of Israel. I was

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Postcard, School of embroidery, Algiers (1905). / Look at the synchronized movement of their right hands. No doubt, they were asked by the photographer (or their teacher-patron) to act as if they were in the midst of embroidering. This semi-mechanized gesture is not how their ancestors used the needle, outside of the market logic of French educational institutions. Note how everything is standardized: were there no left-handed girls among them? Was this "flaw" also eradicated, along with previous modes of embroidering?

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born in this State, Israel, and I grew up to refuse to be ruled by the multiple bargains of its creation. I refused to become a memory-less Jew, whose life was mutated and reformatted to begin only with the creation of the nation-state.

I first read your work around 2012, immediately after I moved to the United States. I was still trying to figure out the shape that my book *Potential History* would take in response to my own migration and my encounter with the afterlives of slavery in the U.S.. I was inspired by your commitment to continually care for a world made through violence.

This care manifests itself quite early in your 1492 text, when you account for the "subjective understanding" of both Columbus ("celebrant") and the Aztecs ("dissidents"), and study the meaning of their respective "glorious achievements." You know that from the point of view of dissidents, it's almost impossible to think about Columbus's "glorious achievements"; but being a dissident yourself, you insist on doing so. It is as if you were saying that without saving some of the world that Columbus's project unleashed, destruction would continue. In other words, the project is not to surrender to Man's memories, but rather to rewrite their meanings in conversation with the memories of others — a "conceptual move" into a "realm beyond reason," beyond Man's realm. The paradox, you tell your audience,

"is that all of these technological revolutions have increasingly served to more totally submit mankind to the single Western and, in Clifford Geertz's term 'local culture' memory, that has made it all possible; that in effect has made our gathering here today, with all of us in this room, being able to understand each other, conceivable. Unimaginable evil, therefore, side by side, with the dazzling scientific, technological and other triumphs." ("Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture – The Cinematic Text after Man," 2000).

It is clear, however, that you are not implying symmetry between "celebrants" and "dissidents," but rather asking "can there be, besides these two, a third perspective?" thus offering a way to engage with the central question that "remains unresolved:" "which meaning, for what group, and from which perspective — celebrant or dissident?"

How can dissident's' words oppose violence that has become the norm, and still care for the world which made this normalization possible? You start by refusing to go

past Columbus, rejecting the teleological assumption that anything that has happened was unavoidable. You halt, and transform 1492 into a pivotal moment from which to reconstruct the cognitive and material conditions under which Columbus's enterprise happened but also, *could not have happened*. You reconstruct the challenges he faced while persuading others of his vision: "putting forward the intellectual rationale, in spite of the mockery and derision of the learned scholars of his time." Thus, what Columbus initiated is accompanied in your text by another eventuality: that it could not have happened, that it could not have been imagined. And indeed, you tell us, this work of un-imagining Columbus has already begun, with the anti-colonial and civil rights movements of the 20th century. Let me remind you of this beautiful reversed temporality from your text:

"I propose that such a 'move beyond reason' has already began, even if still marginally so. It began in the context of a 'general upheaval' whose dimensions were, and will be, as far-reaching as that of the intellectual revolution of Christian humanism and humanism out of which Columbus and Copernicus's challenge to the representation systems and categorial models of geography and astronomy was to be affected."

To make it happen, you imply, in a quite W.E.B. Du Bois way, that actions are not enough. Man's fictional memories should be unmoored from shared reality so that the memories of Man's others could be set down. This is what Du Bois did when he wove the un-orchestrated mass flight of slaves into the fabric of a general strike in his account of emancipation.

In your text on the Cinematic text and Africa, you relate to cinema as the vehicle through which memories of Man, etched on celluloid, become etched in people's mind as *their* memories, even if these people are in fact Man's "others." This happens because, as you tell us, these others, even if they radically oppose to Man, were "educated in the Western episteme or order of knowledge which is based on the *a priori* of this conception of the human, *Man*, must normally know the world [...] from this perspective."

Being equally educated in the "Western episteme," I know that we have to unlearn more of Man's memories than we can know when we begin. Since I didn't have to pro-actively unlearn the memories affiliated with a "Judeo-Christian" tradition, I thought that they had not become mine. My first

assumption was that they were not included in the memories infused in the veins of Jews born in Israel. My second assumption was that these memories may not have been transmitted to non-white Jews, meaning non-Ashkenazi Jews, meaning Arab-Jews.

I no longer think so. Wrestling with the normalization of "Judeo-Christian" in your writing, I now understand that the state of Israel is actually the materialization of a Judeo-Christian vision, though it would have been superfluous, and probably also antagonistic, to naturalize this term in a "Jewish state." It is so obvious now. Not only was the state of Israel created with imperial tools (colonization, partition, deportation, nation-state form); it also replicated the domination of white Europeans of Jewish origin, who turned their way of being Jewish into the only way of being Jewish — a Judeo-Christian Jewishness. In so doing, they imposed the Christian-secular state apparatus (which, in Israel's case is Judeo-Christian) as a universal form. Like other "universal" forms, it is one based on differential and unequal governance. For this project, Europeans of Jewish origins had to be whitened, to refute the proof provided by World War II of their non-whiteness. To be whitened, European Jews needed other Jews to be *their* non-white Jews. This lies at the core of the imperial state.

Jews destroying Jewish worlds didn't start with the aftermath of World War II. Recall the "emancipated" French Jew Isaac-Jacob Adolphe Crémieux, who sought to re-educate Arab-Jews in North Africa and to eradicate their Arabness in an effort to make them French, i.e., secular. European Jews, who negotiated with European governments to aid the movement of Jews from Europe to Palestine, sometimes in collaboration with the Nazis, showed their commitment to the Judeo-Christian impulse to cleanse Europe of its Jews. The memories of the Jews as non-whites, as the white Man's other (alongside the Blacks and Natives), needed to be erased and replaced with something else: the exceptionalism of the extermination of European Jews. It is this trade that gave birth to "Judeo-Christian" as an adjective for a shared cultural heritage. Thus an Arab country, Palestine, was transformed into a piece of property that Europeans, who acted as if they had rights in it, gave as a gift to another group of Europeans (see Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, 1992). The gift of Palestine was given in reward for the whitening of the Jews. The crimes against humanity, which Europeans committed on the bodies of Jews for

the sake of racial purification, now became license to Jewish settlers in Palestine to commit crimes on the bodies of the Arab indigenous population. This was the price of their whiteness, and this is how Jews became Christian secularists. This was the triumph of imperial *laïcité*.

The creation of the State of Israel and the imposition of a system of differential citizenship made Arabness a threat. This Judeo-Christian blow to the worldly sovereignty previously shared by Arabs and Jews in Palestine is the latest reiteration of the 1492 Christian purification of the Iberian Peninsula from Jews and Muslims whose blood was not pure.

However, much like previous imperial efforts to rid a nation of racial "impurities," the Zionist purging project failed. Broken promises, histories of suffering, debts, duties, revenge, love, shared habits, mixed languages, images, and cultures escaped any attempt to "solve" their mixture. The question, as you show persuasively, is not if but how what you call "interaltruistic symbolic cospecificity" can be imagined anew.

What is "Judeo-Christian," then? It is the name of a post-World War II onto-epistemological bargain that incorporates the Jew into the Christian paradigm at the expense of a shared Judeo-Arab world. Thus, it is not only about "Man and its others," or maybe never was, since men could not become Man without destroying previous alliances, pacts, and shared worlds, and establishing their domination on and through this dyad. Some, like the Jews, had to be made "other" and then conscripted into Man's projects, before Man could define himself by relation to still-existing others. Hence, since 1492 — and even earlier, perhaps, if one think about the Crusades — targeting the Judeo-Arab world has been one of Man's *raison d'être*, one that in Palestine becomes not just a Christian but a Judeo-Christian enterprise. The temporal proximity between the invention of the Judeo-Christian (1945) and the creation of the Jewish State (1948) is not a coincidence.

Re-reading your text on 1492, I am struck by how you refrain from engaging the destruction of the Judeo-Arab world, not mentioning the purging Jews and Muslims from the body politic of Spain and Portugal from that also occurred in 1492. It is not that you are not familiar with this history: you use it as the background for your discussion of Bartolomé de Las Casas and how he "had been trapped by an 'error' of natural reason" ("New Seville and the

"THE CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND THE IMPOSITION OF A SYSTEM OF DIFFERENTIAL CITIZENSHIP MADE ARABNESS A THREAT."

"THE MEMORIES OF THE JEWS AS NON-WHITES, AS THE WHITE MAN'S OTHER, NEEDED TO BE ERASED AND REPLACED WITH SOMETHING ELSE: THE EXCEPTIONALISM OF THE EXTERMINATION OF EUROPEAN JEWS."

"THE SCHOOLS, WHICH PROVIDED A 'CIVILIZING' EUROPEAN EDUCATION, SOUGHT TO UPROOT JEWS FROM THEIR JUDEO-ARAB WORLDS AND REEDUCATE THEM INTO QUASI-EUROPEAN CITIZENS, SEPARATING THEM AND SETTING THEM AGAINST THEIR ARAB CO-CITIZENS."

Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de Las Casas," 1984). In that text, written a decade earlier, you use the term "Euro-Christianity." I cannot help but think that this omission of the other 1492, and the transformation of the term itself, is itself a manifestation of fabricated Judeo-Christian epistemology and dictated by its use.

The violence against non-Europeans and women worldwide, which was required to end World War II and establish a new world order on the ruins, was partially concealed through the spectacle of redress. While non-whites, like in many colonies in Africa or Roma people in Europe, were punished, European Jews were differentiated from others who were equally deserving, and granted redress. For the Jews, the price and the prize was becoming white, i.e., Judeo-Christian.

In the U.S., given that the majority of American Jews came from Europe, the whitening of the Jews was relatively seamless, and took place alongside the whitening of other American immigrant subcultures that had been despised: the Irish, the Italians, the Poles. As I was born an Arab-Jew in a white Judeo-Christian state, treated as such by others earlier than I could claim it as an identity with any self-awareness, my life experience is of a non-white Jew. To my surprise, since I arrived in the U.S. in 2012, I have been read as a white woman. When I understood that this unintended and undesired "passing" actually has a name — "Judeo-Christian" — it annoyed me in two ways. First, the fictional fusion of Jews with their persecutors and the erasure of Jews' history of being "others"; second, the homogenization of all Jews into a single category, which is a reiteration of the consistent denial of the existence of the Arab-Jew. "Judeo-Christian" denies whole realities: Jews were part of Arab worlds, Jews were part of Judeo-Arab modalities of being and caring. From the 1492 purge of Jews and Arabs from the Christian body politic in Spain and Portugal, Christian European empires reached out to Judeo-Arab worlds in North Africa, South-East Europe, and West Asia and were troubled by them. An emblematic example of this was the establishment of Alliance Israélite Universelle schools in North Africa. The schools, which provided a "civilizing" European education, sought to uproot Jews from their Judeo-Arab worlds and reeducate them into quasi-European citizens, separating them and setting them against their Arab co-citizens.

Whether in Israel, which I left eight years ago, or in the U.S., where I am a legal resident, I am not ready to trade

my life experience as a non-white Jew — a Mizrahi Jew, Sephardic Jew, Arab Jew — for that of a whitened Jew. I refuse to inhabit this position because I do not recognize its legitimacy. In Palestine, it has so often been used to persecute inhabitants, Palestinians but also in different ways Jews, in the name of the modern Jewish nation-state. Here in the US, the recruitment of whitened subjects has assisted in the project of enslavement and the continuing persecution of non-white people.

I have long tried to discuss this with colleagues and friends since emigrating to the U.S., but I sensed that my American friends had no context for what I was trying to say, and the conversation could not go beyond an exoticization of me as an "Arab Jew," an identity unfamiliar to most of my interlocutors, despite the existing work of scholars such as Ella Shoat or Gil Anidjar. When it comes to official forms where my "race" should be indicated, "Jewish" no longer existed as an option. Every time I have to fill such a form, the census, or when applying for changing my legal status, I find myself pressed to select "white." In the local context, choosing "white" seems to me to be less of a lie in the eyes of those who check my forms and raise their eyes to look at me to verify my race, than saying that I am Black, Asian, or Native American.

Since I left destroyed Palestine and migrated to the U.S., my engagement with 1948 in Palestine has intertwined with a growing personal and intellectual interest in 1492, in the Iberian Peninsula and beyond. I came to understand what bothered me about the category of the "Mizrahi Jew," used in Israel to describe Jews from Arab countries. When seen from my chosen research unit of a half-millennia, we see how the idea of the "Mizrahi Jew" caught Jews from Arab countries in a manufactured history that started in 1948 and rendered everything before into a kind of museumified "past." The category of "Mizrahi Jew" normalizes the dissociation of my family from Algeria, and in a broader way from Africa. You may say, as some have already done with a certain historical and scientific authority, that North Africa is not "Africa." No doubt, relating to North Africa as a separate region makes sense, but not at the risk of erasing it from the African continent, nor from broader Jewish life in Africa and the Mediterranean world. That is, North Africa was part of a Euro-African world long before the inventions of Europe and its other, Africa.

As you can likely guess at this point of my letter, I'm troubled by the disappearance of the Jews from Africa, and more so, by the disappearance of this disappearance from our political and worldly imagination, and see in it the effects of the invented Judeo-Christian bargain that is now at the core of white supremacy. The wholesale differentiation of North Africa from Africa and Europe, like the partitioning of so many other areas in the world, facilitated creation of separate histories for each region, as if each were caught in its own temporality. And this partitioning serves imperial ends by making it impossible to see one global regime that needs to be abolished.

When the life of Jews who migrated (mostly against their will) from North Africa to Israel is reduced to "Mizrahi Jew" and the story of Mizrahi Jews' oppression in Israel, this narrative becomes an internal discourse among Jews in Israel, as if the departure of approximately 600,000 Jews from Africa has had no impact on Africa. The Judeo-Christian bargain has no place for the disappearance of the Jews from Africa to be thinkable. It was only because I have spent all this time undoing the Judeo-Christian reference that I encountered in a text I love, your 1492 text, that I could think about the centuries of Jewish life in Africa as also an African issue.

To recover this story through the labor and love of family recollection ought to underscore how naturalized this disappearance of Jews from Africa, and Africa from Jews, has been. Not all of us, descendants of Arab Jews, are fortunate enough to have a share in these memories, for many of the parents and grandparents held them privately as part of a disappeared world.

Let me say this bluntly now. I have no memories from centuries of Jewish life in Africa. At the same time I am not inclined to let this manufactured absence determine what I remember and what could and ought to be remembered. I continue to unlearn Man's false memories in the hope that recollections of shared Judeo-Arab and Euro-African life will become available — "life beyond Man," as you call it. Think about this series of imperial bargains: European citizenship to the Jews in Algeria for the price of differentiating them from their Muslim cocitizens; reparations to Jews at the end of World War II in place of the abolition of European imperialism which had destroyed their worlds and those of many others; citizenship for all Jews in Palestine as a weapon against the return of Arab and Jewish Palestinians to the homeland they had previously shared.

The right to undo political bargains of this kind is a right descendants in imperial regimes ought to claim to reject ongoing expansion, violence, growth and domination. We have the right to replace these with the principle of repair. In undoing these bargains, we can repair our shared worlds.

James Baldwin and Edward Said, without reading each other's accounts, describe almost verbatim the same experience. As children, they saw themselves as cinematic heroes from popular culture, chasing the "natives," and only years later they understood that they were actually running after themselves. Reading them, I could not avoid thinking about my father, who never ceased to run with these villains after himself, without ever realizing it. As you now already know, he was born in Algeria but as a French citizen, though always indigenous in the eyes of the French settlers. Unlike his grandparents, who were likely among those who didn't embrace the bargain (as I gather from the Arabic name they gave to their daughter, Aicha, a name that I have adopted), my father accepted the bargain. But he also experienced it as constantly under threat, a European citizenship that could be taken away — as indeed happened under the Vichy government, even before he was sent to a concentration camp. Imperial citizenship in itself is a bargain — it is "given" in exchange for loyalty, a bargain that asks the imperial citizen to differentiate themselves from their worldly co-citizens.

My father was born in a world in which the memories of being colonized — the destruction of the Jewish-Arab world of his grandparents and their own grandparents — could not be his, though Algeria was still colonized. He was still surrounded by them, but the imperial bait was already there, luring him to choose alienation from the world of his ancestors in place of a fictitious European identity. I believe that he started preparing himself to become "French" when he was 12 years old. Somehow, so his story goes, he collected a little money to pay for a French company's correspondence course, training him to become a radio technician and electrician. Radio was his modern time dream. He sought to distinguish himself from his mother and sisters who were still, in his eyes, backward people, while he was already committed to the globalized world transmitted to him through radio waves.

In his own eyes, perhaps, he was never the colonized. As a Frenchman, he had to deny the Arab world he still grew in,

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"ALMOST EVERYTHING ARAB IMMIGRANTS BROUGHT WITH THEM TO ISRAEL WAS DENIGRATED AND RIDICULED. THEY WERE ENCOURAGED TO UNLEARN THEIR HABITS, HERITAGE, MUCH OF THEIR FOOD AND MUSIC."

lest his Frenchness be proven inauthentic. I blamed him for that, in my heart, without ever confronting him about it. Why? It may be that I was as unready as he was to feel the pain of this void. Unlike many of the Jews from Arab countries who were forced to live in transit camps and used as human shields to take over Palestinian villages, my father volunteered to join the Jewish military force and came to Israel of his own accord in 1949, following Zionist propaganda that lured him to believe that the war against the Nazis to save Jews in Europe was continuing in Palestine against the Arabs. Almost everything Arab immigrants brought with them to Israel was denigrated and ridiculed. They were encouraged to unlearn their habits, heritage, much of their food and music, even as their "rescued" culture was preserved in museums and libraries. Imperial logic relies on disrupting intergenerational memories: the parents will die and the children will forget. Used against expelled Palestinians, this logic assume they will forget Palestine. Used against Arab-Jews, it meant that we would grow up to become "Israelis," cleansed of Arab-Jewish memories, alienated from Palestinian culture and learning to see Palestinians as enemies.

I too drank the imperial poison. I also turn my back against my parents. I refuse to share their compliance and identification with the state of Israel. Was it the same? No! My father turned his back against his ancestors and normalized the destruction of their world.

But when I turned my back against my parents, a path was opened toward my great-grandparents and their world. I seek repair. In writing to you, and to my father, I am still searching and researching my memories from Algeria, where I have never been.

The State of Israel is responsible for the destruction of centuries of Jewish life in Africa. It is also responsible for the destruction of Arab Jewish culture among those who migrated to Israel. Israel provided the immigrants with new memories and new origins, ones which disappeared Jews from Africa. For a long time, I could not blame the State because my father had always represented this as his choice. After all, I thought, it was my father who turned his back on Algeria of his own free will. And yet — despite all his efforts to be recognized as a French immigrant, all his acquaintances and friends knew he was Algerian. This was a kind of an open secret, an admission of the implicit racism of Israeli society — that is, being an Arab-Jew in a place built around the hatred of Arabs.

Under the spell of an imperial regime that fabricates people's identities and memories, for years I too felt that I was not truly Algerian. Just thinking about myself as Algerian,

felt like pretending to be who I am not. What kinship could I possibly claim if my father brought nothing with him from Algeria and did his best not to transmit to us, his daughters and grandchildren, anything that we could recognize as Algerian? Thinking with you, dear Sylvia, it became clear that the guilt I felt over being who I am is a feeling stemming from the imperial right bestowed on the descendants of the colonized: the right *not* to transmit earlier shared worlds to their children. The colonized — in this case, my father — are trained to accept this right, to believe that the shared world can become private, something for them to discard, rather than the shared work of a collective. Only because the Jewish communities in Algeria (like in all of North Africa, and across the Middle East), have disappeared, that my father, with his decision, could dissociate me, in an almost irreversible way, from the world of my ancestors, the world of Jews in North Africa, a world that is now believed to be gone.

In my criticism of his choices, though, I failed to appreciate how limited his options were, and the acute distress of being a Jew in a State where your identity was destroyed for the sake of becoming your neighbors' enemy. I had to reconstruct the timeline of his life in order to understand this, reconstruct his experience from books and memoirs, and adopt this as my memory. I came to understand my father's choices not as personal ones, but as choices offered to him from a narrowed imperial menu.

Only once, maybe, did my father ask me to mourn — would he agree with me to call it mourning? — this lost Algerian-African world with him, when he asked me to find him photos of the great synagogue in Oran. One of our family, he said with pride, was a *hazzan*, a cantor, there. After my father passed away, I started to mourn this world I had not been allowed to know. It was the first time I felt sympathy toward my father as an imperial subject. I finally was able to recognize in his life something that I always saw sharply vis-à-vis colonized Palestinians: under the imperial condition, no colonized person could be said to have left their world as they pleased, when they wished to, or in the way they might wish to.

If it were not for the way I was looked at whenever my family name was said — Azoulay, an unequivocally Arab-Jewish name in a Judeo-Christian state — I may have followed my father's path. But I chose to unlearn imperialism: unlearning Israel and acknowledging the existence of Palestine in its place, unlearning the manufactured Israeli identity and recovering the identity of an Arab-Jew, unlearning the disappearance of the Jews from Africa to see this world as disappeared, unlearning "Judeo-Christian" as a fixed term, and recently rejecting (though in this case I had nothing to unlearn) the white womanhood offered to me as a "Jew" in

"IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE WAY I WAS LOOKED AT WHENEVER MY FAMILY NAME WAS SAID — AZOULAY, AN UNEQUIVOCALLY ARAB-JEWISH NAME IN A JUDEO-CHRISTIAN STATE — I MAY HAVE FOLLOWED MY FATHER'S PATH. BUT I CHOSE TO UNLEARN IMPERIALISM."



exchange for being legible in a world in which an Arab-Jew, a Palestinian-Jew or an Algerian-Jew were illegible identities. I will not accept this bargain.

Relatively early in your 1492 text you ask:

"[C]an we therefore, while taking as our point of departure both the ecosystemic and global sociosystemic "interrelatedness" of our contemporary situation, put forward a new world view of 1492 from the perspective of the species, and with reference to the interests of its well-being, rather than from the partial perspectives, and with reference to the necessarily partial interests, of both celebrants and dissidents?"

and immediately reply that "the central thesis of this essay is that we can." ("1492: A New World View," 1995).

I share your conviction that "we can." I tried in my recent book, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019) to think about 1492 as both a historical moment and a configuration of imperial violence occurring at different moment in different places, which should be imagined as the horizon of return and repair. Thus, 1492 in Palestine is 1948, and in Algeria it is 1830.

In Palestine, the geographical imagination of return is not yet disrupted, and for millions of Palestinians — the expelled and their descendants alike — return means going back to Palestine, a place that for them has never ceased to exist, though they may live as Palestinian-Canadians,

Palestinian-Swedes, Palestinian-Americans. When a return is made reality — and it will be it must be — it is not clear how many Palestinians will physically return. The return though, is of Palestinians as a people and Palestine as a world from which no one should ever have been or be expelled. In this sense, return is the condition of repair, a condition under which justice is renewed as a principle. The return of Palestine and the demise of the Judeo-Christian regime called Israel, the undoing of the Judeo-Christian bargain, is the condition of repair for Arab-Jews, who will no longer have to keep their Arabness apart from their Jewishness. Memories of Arab-Jews of their origins in Africa are needed, in order to imagine Africa not only as a place from which people and resources are kidnapped and extracted, a place from which people emigrate away, but also as a place of hospitality that in 1492 opened its gates to welcome Jews and Arabs expelled from Spain and Portugal.

I hope this will be a beginning of a conversation and others will join us.

Yours,
Ariella Aisha Azoulay, May 2020. ■

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Postcard, School of embroidery, Algiers (1905). / Any of these Arab-looking girls, could have been my ancestor. In 1850, a British traveler who visited the school reported: "there were several little Jewesses squatting most amicably among the Mauresques, conspicuous only by their simpler robe of colored stuff and a conical cap of red velvet, tipped with gold lace." In the first decades of the 20th century, postcards of them were sent from to France and other European countries. The photographs I have of my grandmother in Algeria, taken a few decades later, show her already as a French-looking woman, a Jewish Arab who has learned the lesson of Frenchness this school was established to impart. Where did my great-great grandmother, who was a native Algerian and could have been one of these girls, disappear to?