OPEN LETTER TO SYLVIA WYNTER: UNLEARNING THE DISAPPEARANCE 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-Christian.”

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” (1985) 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 brought 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, erasing, 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 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 long 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 told me was not really mine alone. 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, “Men’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 Sylvie, of the substance of memories “we share, those memories of a white bourgeois mode of being as the way of being human, recover above all 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 Dlzexzen-infected home-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 conquest of Algeria.

Any of these Arab-looking girls, whose picture was taken in 1950, 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 lessons of Frenchness this school was established to impart. Where did my 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, “oriental” 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-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 understand that the entire world as manufactured out of 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.”

Your unmitigated use of the term — Judeo-Christian — assumes a readership that recognizes it as such. I 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 Jewish whiteness and welcomed them into the Christian-sacred world, and offered Christians a way out of their guilt, is respected. I’m Jewish, but I am not one of those 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
The creation of the State of Israel and the imposition of a system of differential citizenship made Arabism 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 Oriental 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 “intra-ethnic symbolic cospecificity” can be imagined anew.

What is “Judeo-Christian,” then? It is the name of a post-World War II into-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 conceptualized 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 strategies for one that in Palestine becomes not just a Christian but a Judeo-Christian enterprise. The temporal proximity between the invention of the Judeo-Christian (1492) 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 right to undo political bargains of this kind is a right descendants in imperial regimes ought to claim to reorder imperial violence, growth and domination. We have the right to reframe 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, Aïcha, 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 — as in the experience I have of being 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 Algeria, Jews were part of Judeo-Arab worlds and redundant them into quasi-European citizens, separating them and setting them against their Arab 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. Somewhat, 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 brothers 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,

As you can likely guess at this point of my letter. I am 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 and 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 1942 text, that I could think about the centuries of Jewish life in Africa as also an African story.

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 unearth Max’s false memories in the hope that recollections of shared Judeo-Arab and Euro-African life will become available — “left behind” 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 co-ethnics; 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.

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In his own eyes, perhaps, he was never the colonized. As a Frenchman, he had to deny the Arab world he still grew in,
lest his Frenchness be proven insufficient. 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 voluntarily joined the Jewish military force and came to Israel of his own accord in 1949, following Zionists propaganda that led 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 assures they will forget. 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. For a long time, I could not blame the State because my family, he said with pride, was a Jewish family, he said with pride, was a Jewish family, had come to Palestine from the.Top of Spain and Portugal. Any of these Arab-looking girls could have been a French-looking woman, a Jewish bride who has learned the lesson of Frenchness the school was established to impart. We don’t have any of those girls, I suppose?

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

Relatively early in your 1492 text you ask: “Can we therefore, while taking as our point of departure both the ecospheric and global sociopolitical “inseparability” 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 disinterested?” 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 reparations. 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 real — and it will have to 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 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 has welcomed people 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 real — and it will have to 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. 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