

EXCHANGES WITH ATALIA OMER: REORIENTING JEWISHNESS

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This introduction to the contributions of Atalia Omer, and to the commentators of her landmark book *Days of Awe*, starts with a question that might already be on the reader's mind. Why is *ReOrient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies* exploring the lessons from an ethnography of American Jews? For those well-acquainted with the journal, this should not come as a complete surprise. Since its inception, *ReOrient* has been challenging disciplinary and identity silos in order to both understand global hegemonies, and to contest them. One of the crucial contributions of *ReOrient* is to constitute a critical space in which to deeply interrogate the reified binaries created by scientific positivism and by secularist narratives. The intellectual project of this journal enables us to ReOrient epistemological interventions, so as to collaborate in bringing in a decolonial future beyond the omnipresent "redemptive" modern/colonial "telos of the West" (Sayyid 2014: 11–14; Editorial Board 2015: 5–7).

This forum seeks to explore how Omer's sophisticated and ground-breaking "critical caretaking" of the social movements emerging in one of the centers of the world, led by one of the most allegedly uniformly "successful" Westernized populations, can help us break down geopolitical barriers (Omer 2019: 122–42). After all, before reading Omer's innovative text, a reader may have difficulty disagreeing with the fact that Jews in North America (historically anteceded by British and Dutch Caribbean Jews [Rosenblatt, 2022]) have for centuries been a test case for an (often difficult) assimilation of normative Jewry into whiteness. In addition, since the Holocaust – when the center of Jewish normativity definitively left Europe – North America has become without question one of the leading spaces, along with occupied Palestine, of both Jewish Westernization and of the consolidation of a hegemonic model of Jewishness across the world. This is particularly important when many readers of *ReOrient* (including Omer, the commentators, Editorial Board members, and this writer) are deeply suspicious of theory that is universalized from centers of power/knowledge without considering geopolitical conditions.

This is precisely where one of the crucial contributions of Omer's book, subtitled *Re-Imagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*, emerges with

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www.plutojournals.com/reorient

DOI:10.13169/reorient.7.2.0182

clarity. The book is an in-depth exploration of a particular community – the diversity of which has only recently begun to be acknowledged – that is coming to terms with the privilege and power granted, reified, and ultimately naturalized by hegemonic discourses of Westernization. These complex, courageous, provocative – and, like all collectives, often incomplete and paradoxical – movements, examined by Omer, aim to radically challenge the political positionality that has been assigned to normative Jewish identity by processes of racial classification. It is precisely Omer’s exploration on this case study, after her extensive research on social movements and peace and conflict studies in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Omer 2011, 2013, 2015), that provides an innovative understanding of the possibilities and limitations of American Jewish proposals, going beyond superficial normativities and reified uniformities.

At the same time, the relevance of Omer’s contributions extends beyond the scope of this case and is not just about American Jews, nor even just about Jews. This book identifies theoretical potentialities that interrogate frameworks of analysis such as scientific positivisms and secularist narratives. Omer explores the potentialities of transnational solidarities that challenge secularizing theories by departing from a “prophetic pastiche” (Omer 219: 250–2). According to Shaul Magid, one of her most insightful interpreters, this multifaceted epistemology broadens our understanding of the “progressive Left” by spotlighting religion as a core part of these movements’ social and political agenda (Magid 2020). The so-called “prophetic pastiche” emerges from a self-acknowledgment that normative communities in the global North should take seriously the challenges presented by alternative genealogies, voices, experiences, and ideas of racialized communities-in-struggle beyond binary secularisms. By mobilizing religiously radical ideas in the acknowledgment of their own role in the perpetuation of this racialization (from land appropriation to socio-economical disfranchisement, ontological dehumanization, and epistemological superiority), Omer’s exploration of these movements can become a test-case for the implosion of the positivist split subject/object (or who can think and who can be thought, who is the researcher and who gets researched), then linking the study of processes and identities in a way that ultimately “push[es] the boundaries of current theories of religion and social movements” (Omer 2019: 13).

I contend here that *Days of Awe* is an excellent interlocutor for *ReOrient*, in two interconnected ways. In the first place, there is a clear assumption that modernity and coloniality cannot be studied separately, and that it is necessary to ReOrient our understanding by learning from communities which have been affected by the occlusion of coloniality. In particular, this refers to Palestinians who are enduring actual Jewish power in a self-proclaimed Jewish state that is part of a larger Western project, of both coloniality and settler-colonialism. (This is in opposition

to imagined antisemitic global conspiracy theories that ill-intentioned propagandists quickly and misleadingly confuse with sound social analysis.) At the same time, true solidarity requires more than flattening the political. It requires an epistemological ReOrientation that can help us generate different tools to understand and participate – breaking the positivist split between interpreter and participant – in social movements of resistance against global hegemonies. The epistemological ReOrientation confronts “disciplinary decadence” (Gordon 2016: 1–12) by delinking from Cold War geopolitical area-study silos (Mignolo 2017: 449–57) in order to recognize what social movements and socially committed intellectuals have been claiming for a very long time: that the constitutive relationality of ongoing epistemological and physical genocides of multiple populations around the world that are constructed as obstacles for the full realization of Western projects (Grosfoguel 2013: 78–89).

The epistemological contributions of Omer, and the movements she is exploring, emerge from dialogues amongst Jews within and between broader communities and political coalitions which acknowledge and challenge responsibilities, complications, and asymmetries. This is why we find in Omer’s pages an engagement with intellectuals who have informed her work and provided her a provocative background to develop the most sophisticated frameworks to understand the depth of the movements she is critically “caretaking”. A first such companion is Marc Ellis, pioneer of Jewish Liberation Theology, who has engaged for decades in dialogues with Latin Americans such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, African-Americans such as James Cone or Cornel West, and Palestinians such as Edward Said or Naeem Ateek, to generate a “prophetic preferential option” for those suffering under the hegemony of the “ecumenical deal” between Christendom and “Constantinian Judaism” (Ellis 1987, 1990, 2004). A second is Judith Butler, undeniably a leading voice in the field of gender studies. Their engagements with often occluded diversities, and lately, with Jewish dissents from Walter Benjamin to Hannah Arendt, as well as Palestinian resistance such as Mahmoud Darwish and again Said, provide a distinct “matrix of discursivity” which shows its provocative potential for the movements to emphasize “gender trouble” and “intersectional” lessons we draw from African-American intellectuals, ranging from the Combahee Collective to Kimberlé Crenshaw (Butler 1990, 2012). A third is Michael Rothberg, the deeply influential literary scholar of Holocaust and memory studies, who draws from a diversity of global relational histories, ranging from Holocaust survivors struggling for Algerian anti-colonialism, to Afro-Caribbean intellectuals, such as Aimé Césaire, and Jews in the Caribbean such as André Schwarz-Bart, to provide a framework of memory that is not a zero-sum competitive game, but a fruitfully “multidirectional” project (Rothberg 2009). In his more recent work, he evaluates archives of the past,

drawing from radical Black Feminism among others to carefully balance a critique of “implicated” complicity and an “ethics” of relationality (Rothberg 2019).

Omer explores the words and actions of grassroots activists in more established spaces such as Jewish Voices for Peace, religious communities such as Tzedek Chicago, organizations with international reach such as the Center for Jewish Non-Violence, and grassroots urban spaces such as Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. She undertakes this work in order to show how the combination between the prophetic preferential option, gender and intersectional interrogation, and the multidirectional memory challenge our preconceptions of religiosity, social movements, and struggles for justice. A continuous thread in the book is Omer’s true challenge to positivism, through a “critical caretaking” that contests the binary between critic and activist; and, in the second place, to secularism by being attentive to the “regenerative role” religious discourses can have, making a true engagement with the self-constitution between the liberation of an oppressed group (Palestinians) and the radical ReOrientation of the tradition that has been justifying their socio-economical, epistemological, and ontological disenfranchisement (“their” being both Palestinians and non-European Jews, including Arab Jews, Beta Israel, and others) in Palestine.

As Omer’s work is ground-breaking, because it breaks down reified binaries through conversations, this forum intends to continue the spirit of her work by opening multidirectional dialogues. We have invited four scholars of diverse identities, disciplines, theoretical frameworks, and generations to engage with *Days of Awe*, reflect on the past, grapple with the present, and move us toward a decolonial horizon.

Our first response is from Sara Roy, senior research scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. A daughter of Holocaust survivors, Roy has been for almost four decades a key interlocutor for Palestinian studies in the US, specifically offering an in-depth critique of the colonial political economy in Gaza (Roy 1986, 2011). In a provocative and deeply personal text, Roy asks us to look backwards, so that we can genuinely move forward. Drawing from her own personal experience, both at her childhood dinner table and as a long-standing Jewish dissenter, she asks the new generation of activists to appreciate the lessons hailing from the struggle of earlier generations. These intellectuals, in the Gramscian broad organic definition of the term, have been vilified and exiled for questioning Jewish empowerment when these interrogations were not a permissible discourse, unlike the current acceptability of these discourses among a growing sector of the Jewish community (though many barriers still remain today in various other sectors). Roy carefully remarks on the pioneer work of Marc Ellis, also a grounding voice for Omer (and, I must proudly add, my own mentor), as a true forerunner who paid a high cost for breaking silences, interrogating the

secular/religious binary, and offering a true theology of solidarity with Palestinians. Only by reimagining the young activists as the true heirs of those exiled voices, as Omer adds reading Roy, can the movements avoid potential shortcomings (such as a vanguardist spirit, savior complexes, or parochial self-referentialism) – that may have not yet been realized – in order to offer what Roy, accurately voicing Ellis, calls the necessary and genuine “faithfulness” of the prophetic spirit.

The second response is written by Sa’ed Atshan, a cutting-edge Palestinian associate professor of Anthropology at Emory University, who has made enduring and thoughtful contributions interrogating liberal discourses by crossing Queer, Palestinian, Social Conflict, and German studies (Atshan 2020a; 2020b). In his response, Atshan helps us to deepen the role of “critical caretaking” in challenging binary positivism. He notes the “clarity and courage” of Omer and other dissenters, who ground their scholarly research and practical activism in their Jewish identity, and take not only the arduous path of challenging the policing of the establishment, but also take on the role of companions of the Palestinian struggle. He emphasizes that one of the hopeful realities of current struggle (where finding hope can be daunting in the context of settler colonial structural violence) is the connection among intellectual and community organizers of (among others) Jewish, Palestinian, and Black communities who, from the acknowledgment of their positionality and beyond a positivist neutrality, are able to engage in a program of decolonization. This decolonization, for Omer correctly interpreted by her reviewers, is not just an academic exercise of imagination, but has deep implications for the pragmatic of the everyday life, in the ground making epistemological and socio-political justice “co-constitutive”. Omer, reading Atshan, invites us to come back to the last words of his response. He narrates how, as a Palestinian, he was able to find “genuine solidarity”, and Omer adds “relationality”, among the new generation of young Jews offering a deep endorsement of potential in the “prophetic pastiche” provocatively explored in *Days of Awe*.

The third response is written by David Landy, assistant professor of sociology at Trinity College-Dublin and a specialist in social movements, race and ethnicity (Landy, 2011; 2020) whose contributions to thinking Israel/Palestine were already noted by Omer in her own book (Omer 2019: 61–2, 115). Landy presents some critiques that the author of the book answers in her response at the end of this forum. He recognizes that the examination of these movements is “very timely”, and that the rearticulation of identity offers “vital resources” in disentangling Jews from “militarism” and interrogating the collective use of Judaism for the oppression of Palestinians. Yet, the author also reads Omer differently than our last commentator. While Atshan, following Omer, believes that the decolonization of epistemologies and land are mutually constitutive, Landy is concerned about the reduction of decolonization to metaphors. While the former emphasizes his

own experience as a Palestinian in the context of Jewish re-generation, the latter is concerned that the focus on Jews “sidelines” Palestinians. There is no reason to downplay the differences between, on the one hand, Atshan and Omer and, on the other, Landy. What is interesting is what these differences generate. Landy argues that Omer’s proposal to depart from “Jews of Color” to regenerate Jewish positionality should be relativized considering that, although the latter are growing in number, they are still a small demographic amongst American Jews. This difference is an opportunity to examine diverse approaches to “counting” populations, which have been invisibilized in general (“Jews of Color” as one test case), thus interrogating the role of strict positivism in our methodology, as is part of *ReOrient*’s intellectual mandate.

The problem of methodology has taken the Jewish community press in the United States by storm in the context of the 2020 Movement for Black Lives. While scholars employing cutting-edge methodologies, and associated with grassroots organizations, argue that the number of “Jews of Color” could account for 12–13% of American Jews and is rapidly growing (Kelman et al. 2020), traditional demographers have challenged this number, placing it at 6% (Sheskin and Dashefsky 2020). The latter methodology has been decried as reproducing frameworks that further invisibilize this population under the guise of neutral methodologies (Chernikoff 2020). While this discussion has only recently come into the mainstream, racialized Jews have been interrogating it for decades. In the past fifteen years, following a longstanding tradition, provocative intellectuals such as Lewis Gordon and Walter Isaac have started asking even deeper questions, such as how boundaries are constructed, how histories are being told, and how multiple identities are/not accounted for to produce a positivist quantitative analyses that reproduce preconceptions of what a Jew can or cannot be (Isaac 2006; Gordon 2016). In 2020–1, both authors – one a former founding director, and the other a former doctoral fellow at the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies at Temple University – and Amanda Mvubi, recently first “Jew of Color” Dean of a mainstream rabbinical seminary in the US, offered renewed challenges to longstanding epistemologies for *Contending Modernities*, the online forum that Omer co-directs for Notre Dame University (Mvubi 2020; Isaac 2021; Gordon 2021). The current debates interrogate the core of our discussion: how communities set boundaries, legitimize voices, and enable representation by reifying color or racial (and also gender, sexual, national, linguistic, and ableist) lines.

What is clear is that traditional methodologies and representations are unable to account for the new or occluded realities of a community that is increasingly (or increasingly recognized as) less uniform. More and more Jews are refusing to be represented by hegemonic frameworks which cannot account for diversity and offer resources to those who are willing (or are forced to accept) collaboration

with communal uniformization, racial structures, and colonial projects. This is precisely the ground-breaking contribution of Sophia Sobko to our forum, which portrays the promising ongoing reality that Omer explores in her book. Sobko, an immigrant from the former USSR to the US, is an up-and-coming scholar who just finished her PhD in Education at UC-Berkeley and a member of the *Kolektiv Goluboy Vagon*, a Queer liberationist Jewish collective (see: <https://www.kolektivgoluboyvagon.com/>). She argues that there is no question that as a Jew she suffered racialization in Eastern Europe. At the same time, she points out that American Jews have contributed and taken part in this barbarization in parallel. First, by imposing salvific Orientalist lenses in the “Save Soviet Jewry” movement that helped American Jews to universalize alleged post-war antisemitism and define themselves as liberationist in moments, through which they were fully integrated to the white and Western mainstream in the US and subsumed Judaism to a nationalist ideology. Secondly, by offering the racialized Soviet and post-Soviet Jews the possibility of escaping their tribulations by collaborating with settler colonialism, either in Palestine, or on Turtle Island. And finally, by occluding the Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish history of barbarism and reducing difference “to the same,” following a longstanding practice of coloniality. Sobko, who acknowledges occupying what is recognized as a white body in the US, draws from provocative ethnographic research parallel to Omer’s to show how alternative Jewish movements offer Jews who have been weaponized against Palestinians, Natives, Afro-Americans, Arabs, and Latinxs (some of the latter Jews, some not) the possibility of refusing this role, acknowledging structural asymmetry, and becoming a companion of racialized populations. Furthermore, this project of decolonization interrogates Americanized abstractions and assumptions in order to reclaim full solidarity with the oppressed worldwide by retrieving their occluded barbarism – different from and yet related to other barbarisms – toward a decolonial horizon.

This forum intends to encourage the reader to, precisely, think of decolonial futures. As no horizon can be conceived without conversations, we truly appreciate both the doors that *ReOrient* opened for these discussions and the efforts of Roy, Atshan, Landy, and Sobko for their distinct contributions. We want to keep building together by exploring further dialogues. Some of these dialogues are already present in Omer’s response at the end of this forum. For example, she envisions the possibility of following Gil Hochberg’s proposal to create an “archive of the future”. This archive, according to Hochberg’s provocative work, is not a positivist reservoir of legitimized resources, but a mobilization of resources for a future that breaks the monopoly of colonial impositions (Hochberg 2021: 1–30). Hochberg’s model connects Omer’s project with the ingenious proposal of Turkish Jew Dalia Kandiyoti, who invites us to revise historicist methodologies. Instead of emphasizing the strict positivism that limits truth to the narratives created from

sacralized selective archives, Kandiyoti encourages us to build “archives from narratives” present in intellectuals, artists, and activists such as those Omer explores in this book (Kandiyoti 2020: 6–15).

These resources can be, in the words of Puerto Rican Jewish intellectual and activist Aurora Levins Morales, true “medicine stories” that offer decolonial potentialities for Palestine occupied by Israel, and for Puerto Rico occupied by the US (Levins Morales 2019). They can also unveil occluded identities and coalitions in fields such as critical Mizrahi studies, pioneered by Ella Shohat’s interrogation of the “we” in Jewish experience, exploring the possibilities of an Arab (Palestinian and Jewish) radical non-Zionist project (Shohat 1988, 2017). Or they can facilitate – to return to an earlier text by Hochberg in *ReOrient* – the difficult dual retrieval of “the Semitic as a space of asymmetrical confluence” (Hochberg 2016). All in all, what is clear from Omer’s text is that the American Jewish community is changing. This change requires us to think beyond essentialisms. To that end, the proposal of Jane Gordon and Lewis Gordon, changing the “geography of reason” departing from Caribbean Jewish thinking, invites us to creolize social theory and action beyond reified binaries (J. Gordon 2014; L. Gordon 2016). We cannot abandon histories or positionalities. However, by exploring creolizations with the resources Omer is identifying, we may be reorienting our present toward a decolonial future. *Days of Awe* is a crucial contribution in this direction.

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