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Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *La résistance des bijoux: Contre les géographies coloniales*. Translated by Jean-Baptiste Naudy. Sète: Ròt-Bò-Krik, 2023. 240 pp. €15. ISBN 978-2-9580620-5-7.

# Review Essay by Jill Jarvis, Yale University

“Growing up in a settler-colonial state where lies are made facts,

one can either ignore the incongruities and endorse the fabricated reality

or opt to unlearn them.”[1]

Among other things, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s *La résistance des bijoux : Contre les géographies coloniales*,archives its author’s process of unlearning her mother tongue in order to make space for other languages. From her own mother—a Jew born in Palestine before Israel was founded in 1948—Azoulay writes that she received the voice of the nation-state in its official register. She resolutely refers to modern Hebrew as “the Israeli language,” rejects its Zionist grammar and temporality as justifying and naturalizing occupation, and notes that the language has been shorn of evidence of its historical intimacies with Arabic, Yiddish, Ladino, Turkish, Darija, Amazigh: “la nouvelle langue,” she writes, “fut amputée de la grande variété de ses racines étymologiques et de ses sphères de pollination croisée… il fallut renoncer à la mémoire de toutes les chorégraphies que ces magnifiques lettres hébraïques avaient dansées autrefois” (p. 44). Years ago, Azoulay stopped writing in her first language for these reasons.

*La résistance des bijoux*, translated by Jean-Baptiste Naudy, a founding editor of the newly-established independent French press Ròt-Bò-Krik, has only been published in French, not in English. It seems fitting that such a text should first circulate among readers in France and the Francophone Mediterranean, as it has, given that it was the accidental discovery of her father’s repressed Algérianité that prompted Azoulay to undertake this painstaking effort to conjure the lost world that he left behind when he emigrated to occupied Palestine in 1949, “victime de la propagande sioniste d’après la Nakba” (p. 32). Azoulay grew up in “the Zionist colony” believing her father, an Algerian Jew born in Oran who never spoke Hebrew without an accent, was in fact French. This was technically true, per the dictates of Algérie françaiseand the 1870 Crémieux decree (a law that set in motion what Jacques Derrida, in his autobiographical *Monolingualism of the Other*, has described as “the most extraordinary history of citizenship” in the world [2]), but it was not the whole truth. *La résistance des bijoux* also archives Azoulay’s effort to learn the truths repressed by the workings of settler colonial state ideology, and to reconstitute and reanimate the destroyed world of her Algerian ancestors to whom she has no other access.

This unsettling text joins Azoulay’s recent and forthcoming works in launching a sustained challenge to fabricated realities that have come to appear inevitable.[3] Many of Azoulay’s publications might be described, in her own words, as “theoretical articulations” of her “instinctive practice of unlearning.”[4] This palm-sized, aesthetically-pleasing book (Ròt-Bò-Krik, based in Sète, in southern France, has a distinctive and accessible style) is more verbal-visual experiment than it is theoretical articulation. *La résistance des bijoux* is not argument but gesture; not historiography but conjuration. It puts potential history into formal and poetic practice in order not only to narrate the author’s complex personal history but also to unsettle and provoke unlearning.

By the accident of her birth—in the year of Algeria’s independence, with a *Midnight’s Children*-like flair!—Azoulay inherited the incongruities and fabrications of two violent colonial projects: the expropriation of Algerianité from Algeria’s Jews, and the imposition of Israeli identity onto disparate diasporic Jews whose lives, communities, and languages had for so long been entangled with those of Muslims. Her opting out of these inheritances also exits the intractable logic of enmity that frames Jewish-Arab and Jewish-Muslims relations. She moves, searching, into the consequential void that was created by the mass departure of Jews from the Maghreb in the mid-twentieth century. It is striking that Azoulay does not here engage with the many other scholarly and creative works that share such convictions, but in a way this singular focus lends intensity to the militant and urgent first-person voice that guides the itinerary of *La* *résistance des bijoux.*[5]What is the impact of the author’s claiming for herself the repressed Arabic name of her Algerian father’s mother, Aïcha? What is the effect of her dis-identifying as *mizrahi* or “Israeli” to instead name herself “une juive musulmane” (and “Algérienne, Palestinienne, Andalousienne, Oranaise”), claiming anchorage in “le monde arabo-berbéro-judéo-musulman”? It might feel like fiction—until it does not.

An alchemical dissolving of what settler occupation has naturalized as fact, and finding other language and terms to reconstitute reality, constitutes the core of this text’s work. The book is divided into two parts. The first is a first-person narrative prose essay entitled “Les langues des ancêtres.” The second part, about twice as long as the first, is a verbal-visual poem entitled “Les juifs sont encore là, dans chaque bracelet.” In this latter part, each spread is comprised of free verse on one page and a photograph on the facing page, so that the text itself performs as archival collection or trace. We observe photographs of Azoulay’s hands sifting through colonial postcards; we see photographs of women working in textile factories, and close-ups framing the intricate silver jewelry they wear around their necks and wrists; we observe store windows, mosques; Azoulay shows us taxonomic sketches that differentiate between Jewish and Muslim Algerian types, and displays to our eyes the pages of books about Algerian jewelry with drawings of earrings from Oran and Tlemcen (here we might also notice Azoulay’s own handwritten notes in Hebrew in the page margins). There are photographs of her father, of the tin fork he kept as a talisman, of the Maghrebi coins, mezuzot, and ketubot being peddled on eBay; and of the jewelry that Azoulay describes herself crafting, in her effort to reawaken inherited muscle memory and reenact gestures that would have been so familiar to her jewelry-making ancestors.

*La résistance* is difficult to pin down because it is so fluid by literary design. It seems to me to invite genealogical and archeological forms of puzzling and close reading and to generate new writing and thinking, rather than critique. For instance, a note at the conclusion of “Les langues des ancêtres” points to this text’s prehistory. What became *La résistance* in 2023 actually started as a ten-page essay that Azoulay published in Hebrew in Tel Aviv in 2003 entitled “Sefat em, seat av” (Mother tongue, father tongue).[6] In 2013, after her mother and father died, Azoulay returned to that essay to write it again. In 2021, nearly a decade after she left Tel Aviv and quit writing in Hebrew, she returned to the essay, publishing a new version, in English, as “Unlearning Our Settler Colonial Tongues,” in *The Boston Review*. “Je me suis rendu compte,” she writes, “que mon travail sur le monde de mes ancêtres produisait une perturbation qui ne permettait pas d’engager un processus de réécriture, mais menait plutôt à écrire à nouveau—à écrire un autre texte” (p. 59).

A transformed version of the earlier Hebrew and English text is woven into the first part of *La résistance,* a layering that prompts me to approach the text itself as an archive accreted and transformed through time, and across languages: from Hebrew (“Sefat em, seat av”), into English (“Unlearning Our Settler Colonial Tongues”), into French (“Les langues des ancêtres”), toward material objects—in particular, those exquisitely crafted filigreed earrings, bracelets, and necklaces that appear throughout the chapter entitled: “Les juifs sont encore là, dans chaque bracelet.” The process is not yet finished. Where is it going? In this record of Azoulay’s perpetual return to write her history again but differently, I see at once an act of mourning and a desire to unmake the ineluctability of teleological time in order to instantiate other temporal patterns and practices.

There are two points at which the narrative prose of “Les langues des ancêtres” breaks into free verse, as if the French in which this text is composed is trying to break open to allow space for those ancestral languages (ladino; judeo-darija) that Azoulay does not know, but longs to speak. The first syntactic break follows a paragraph about the 1870 Crémieux Decree that transformed Algerian Jews into French citizens and orchestrated their forgetting Arabic. Azoulay objects vehemently to Benjamin Stora’s deterministic sense that the French assimilation of Algerian Jews and their forgetting of Arabic was irreversible or inevitable. She insists that this assimilation was the calculated outcome of colonial policies that divided Jews from Muslims and differentially allocated citizenship rights. At this point, her French prose slips into two pages of free verse that begin with a question: “Pourquoi serait-il jusqu’à aujourd’hui nécessaire/ de perpétuer notre exile de l’arabe,/ de nous tenir éloignés de notre langue ancestrale ?” (p. 28). She wonders: what would become of French islamophobia if French Jews learned to let their vocal cords vibrate in Arabic, saying “*ana min al-yahoud*” (I am of the Jews)?[7]

Azoulay’s poetic break with French prose—a language she knows through her father, who stopped speaking Arabic because of the policies of Algérie française—opens space on the page for this transliterated Arabic to appear, inviting the reader to speak the words aloud. A second such rupture appears a few pages further in the text, at a moment in which Azoulay evokes a memory that she had forgotten but that, she says, was recounted to her by her sister. Her sister asked their father directly—in the hospital on the eve of his death—why he did not speak Arabic, although his own sisters did. In her dying father’s indirect answer, Azoulay recognizes that it was neither French nor Arabic that he had withheld from his daughters, but Judeo-Darija, a particular form of Algerian Arabic inflected by Haketia (a dialectical Spanish that, like Ladino, traces to the fifteenth-century expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain) as well as Hebrew.

No words of this language appear in her text, but there is a deep chord of grief sounded by its absence. Likewise, a sense of sorrow emerges in Azoulay’s writing about her mother’s first language, Ladino. In this passage, Azoulay narrates a conversation that it seems she did not have—but imagines she might have had—with her staunchly Zionist mother. Despite her mother’s strong commitment to her Israeli identity, Azoulay explains, her mother’s first language was not “the Israeli language” but Ladino, which she held in secret and spoke only with her own mother. Azoulay contemplates what her mother might have said about the Palestinian woman who had once worked in her parents’ home, before the 1948 expulsion. To accent the shifts in this text over time, here I draw from the English version of the original essay published in 2021, and include my own translation of the changes that appear in the French version of *La résistance des bijoux,* in italics and brackets:

Had I not delineated the contours of her estrangement, I would not have been able to unlearn my mother tongue and turn to my ancestors’ tongue to utter a potential history of Palestine premised on the unconditional return of Palestinians including all their descendants. I *[could have heard]* my mother telling me in Ladino that she misses the *[Palestinian]* washerwoman’s “ojos negros” (black eyes), musical accent, and the special sound she produced when she rolled her name on her tongue as a child—*[calling her not “Zehava” (mon or*, in Hebrew), but in Arabic, *“Dhahaba.”]* She *[might have]* paused for a second and added, “I also miss the feel of her hand when she caressed my golden curls and gathered me up in her arms.” From that point on, the conversation would *[have started]* flowing and she would *[have regained]* vitality. *[Freed of a burden, she would have become]* a person no longer required to engage in the trying effort of covering up the deeds of the Zionists who betrayed her, too, when they destroyed Palestine—the place where her *[ancestors]* immigrated in the late nineteenth century, not as Zionists.

*[But this linguistic miracle never took place]* (p. 54).

The edits are subtle yet consequential. In the shift in tense from a simple present to past conditional, with the addition of the Arabic pronunciation (*Dhababa,* a word that repeats on the pages of books about Algerian gold jewelry that appear in photographs later in the text) of her mother’s Hebrew name, and with this bitter final sentence, I read the grammar of potential history doing its work. The past conditional activates what did not happen, but could have; here, fiction enacts a linguistic miracle that has not yet come to be.

These ruptures and impasses in the first part of *La résistance des bijoux* give way, then, to the free verse and sheaf of images that compose the second part. I take “Les juifs sont encore là, dans chaque bracelet” as a performative statement; the author/archivist/curator/researcher gathers up the detritus and relics of a destroyed world to create a new form from them that can allow for linguistic miracles to take place. For instance, on the spread that displays a photograph of the marriage certificate on which Azoulay first discovered her Algerian grandmother’s Arabic name (Aïcha Cohen), she spells out the letters, as if to sound it out, and to invite the reader to do so as well: “A, ï, c, h, a.... Aïe.....shaaaaa” (p. 91). It becomes clear that this written text doubles as a spoken one, characterized by Azoulay’s own vocal style, inviting the reader to replicate with her own tongue the gesture of learning to pronounce Arabic syllables aloud.

This is not a first-person narrative that wishes to remain a monologue; it seems to actively be searching for interlocutors, and longing to conjugate into the first-person plural. To whom will *La résistance des bijoux*speak, and in what languages? Its opening dedication (“À mes ancêtres abandonné.e.s dans les cimetières d’Oran et d’ailleurs en Algérie”) conveys a wish to speak directly to the dead and lost—but how will this work be read by *living* Algerians, both in Algeria and in diaspora? What would it take for Azoulay’s text to find its way into Arabic, or Kabyle, or to be spoken of in Darija in contemporary Algiers and Oran and Constantine? These questions are yet to be answered, given the challenge posed by Algeria’s national borders.

However, a dialogue unfolding between Azoulay and the Algerian poet Samira Negrouche may offer a kind of passage. The two began their epistolary exchange between Algiers, Providence, and Cassis beginning in October 2022, as *La résistance des bijoux* was in production; their messages were published on Ròt-Bò-Krik’s website alongside the book’s publication. Azoulay and Negrouche met for the first time not in Algiers but in Paris, when *La résistance* was published in June 2023; they continued their dialogue in a public event in Marseille in April 2024, and Azoulay has yet to travel to Algiers, where Negrouche lives.

Their letters conclude with a wish for a future in which they can walk and talk together in Algeria. In her address to Azoulay, Negrouche writes a Hebrew word several times over (), noting that she does not know how to read it or pronounce it aloud, and can only transcribe it. She says that the internet tells her that it means “écoute” and that she will wait for Azoulay to teach her how to pronounce it. To this, Azoulay responds that the loss of Judeo-Arabic is not only hers, but also a loss to Algerians who no longer hear the voices of Jews speaking in their day-to-day worlds. She writes:

On se verra, inshallah, cet été, sur la terre de nos ancêtres, et on va écouter ensemble

נאזן

la danse des muscles du judéo-arabe.

The letter ends here, with a kind of prayer that conjugates the Hebrew verb for listening into the first-person plural form. This linguistic miracle may yet happen.

# NOTES

[1] Azoulay, “Unlearning Our Settler Colonial Tongues,” in *The Boston Review,* November 2021. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/unlearning-our-settler-colonial-tongues/>

[2] Derrida discusses this in a long footnote in his *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 78n9, where he refers to “the most extraordinary history of citizenship in Algeria, which has to my knowledge no equivalent, *stricto sensu*, in the world.”

[3] Specifically, *La résistance des bijoux* extends the concerns and practices displayed by Azoulay’s recent film essays, “The world like a jewel in the hand” (2021) and “Undocumented” (2019). It creates a bridge between *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019)and *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World* (Verso, forthcoming in September 2024). Notably, the black and white title screen from “The world like a jewel in the hand” appears among the many images included in *La résistance des bijoux,* the title written in Arabic and Hebrew (163), while the title of her forthcoming book appears in French (“aux bijoutiers de l’oumma”) on its closing page.

[4] Namely *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019) but also “Potential History: Thinking Through Violence,” in *Critical Inquiry,* 2013; the quotations here are from her essay “Unlearning Our Settler Colonial Tongues.”

[5] A short list from the past ten years: Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, 2013). Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (UChicago Press, 2014). Sarah Abrevaya Stein and Aomar Boum’s two edited volumes: *The Holocaust and North Africa* (Stanford UP 2018) and *Wartime North Africa: A Documentary History,* 1934-1950 (Stanford UP 2022). Sami Everett and Rebekah Vince, *Jewish-Muslim Interactions: Performing Cultures between North Africa and France* (Liverpool, 2020). Alice Kaplan’s novel *Maison Atlas*, in French (Le bruit du monde and Barzakh, 2022). Lia Brozgal and Rebecca Glasberg, editors and translators of Leïla Sebbar’s anthology *A Jewish Childhood in the Muslim Mediterranean* (University of California Press, 2023). Brahim El Guabli and Mostafa Hussein, *Remembering Jews in Maghrebi and Middle Eastern Media* (Penn State UP, forthcoming September 2024).

[6] In Yigal Nizri and Tal Ben Zvi, Hazut Mizrahit, Tel-Aviv, Babel, 2004, p. 159-168.

[7] The italicized Arabic sentence is also the title of a novella and film by Almog Behar, as she notes (Haaretz, 28 April 2005).

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