H-France Forum

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 9, #2

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 Alma Rachel Heckman, University of California, Santa Cruz

I frequently teach an undergraduate seminar called “Exile, Diaspora, and Displacement: Jewish Lives from North Africa and the Middle East.” Over the course of ten weeks, we read a number of texts by or about Jewish figures from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that meditate on themes of Jewish exile from a lost homeland. We read such classics as Albert Memmi’s *The Pillar of Salt*, André Aciman’s *Out of Egypt: A Memoir*, Sasson Somekh’s *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew*, and Lucette Lagnado’s *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family’s Exodus from Cairo to the New World,* among several others*.* While these texts differ from one another in terms of geography, temporality, and specific events, they share a number of commonalities. They all circle around questions of linguistic separation and loss, the effects of European colonialism in the region, the alienating effects of local Arab nationalisms and, relatedly, the effects of Zionism and the reverberations of regional wars with Israel.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s 2023 French language volume, *La résistance des bijoux : Contre les géographies coloniales*, fits in well with these texts. The book opens with an essay concerning the loss of mother-tongues such as Judeo-Arabic and Ladino in Israel’s hegemonic Hebrew language context. There follows a long prose poem that touches on her family history between French Algeria, Palestine, and Israel, and the traces (indeed, “resistance”) of Jews that remain through jewelry in North Africa (a large number of jewelers in the Maghrib were Jewish). The text is rich with beautiful passages (for example, a notable passage comparing her father’s work in repairing radios and the tradition of making jewelry, pp. 182-194) and comparisons of the Zionist colonial project and that of French Algeria.[1]

Azoulay’s father, and his Algerian Jewish background, are at the heart of the book. Her father was born in Oran, Algeria, while it was still under French colonial rule. She recounts that when he arrived in Israel in 1949 (a less common trajectory for Algerian Jews, a point I will return to in a moment), he told immigration officials he was from Oran, France. At first, Azoulay writes that she thought he was knowingly “deceiving” them. However, she continues, “it took me several years to understand that my father wasn’t deceiving. In truth, he suffered from the internalization of the colonizer’s geographic and mental scam, in which he constructed his reality” (p. 33). When he arrives in Israel, he chooses not to associate with other North African immigrants, despite the common North African Jewish last name of “Azoulay” (p. 50). She writes of her father being “solitary,” avoiding Israeli assimilation (p. 50).

Her father’s trajectory was atypical for Algerian Jews. Most Algerian Jews were granted French citizenship through the 1870 Crémieux Decree (named for Adolphe Crémieux, a French Jewish jurist and founding figure of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, a French-Jewish educational philanthropy that set out to “regenerate” the Jews of the MENA, through the Balkans and to Iran). Though not all Jews embraced their new French identities, by the time of Algerian independence in 1962 following a long and bloody conflict, the vast majority of Algerian Jews were repatriated to France along with scores of European settlers. This resulted in a conceptualization of Algerian history that excluded Jews from the national narrative, despite their many-centuries long presence, for which Azoulay blames the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), the primary independence organization in Algeria and dominant political party “for whom the struggle for independence culminated with the creation of a nation-state reserved for a people presumed homogenous” (p. 13). However, she continues, the FLN would not have been able to do this “if Zionists hadn’t, for several decades, been empowered by the European imperial powers to establish in Palestine a nation-state for the ‘Jewish people’”(p. 13). I will return to this point about the FLN and Zionism below, but I would like to note here the use of quotes around “Jewish people” – I understand that Azoulay is referencing the modern Zionist ideological construction of a singular Jewish people that collapses Jewish differences and belonging in a variety of settings, but how does she account for the centuries of Jewish affinity and connection across contexts before the rise of nationalism? To return to the family story, Azoulay’s mother is of Sephardic origin, born in Palestine (she was 17 in 1948 when the state of Israel was established), who proudly reaffirms (“internalized”) Zionist and Israeli state propaganda and identities, despite being, as Azoulay calls her, a “Palestinian Jew” (p. 56). When Azoulay’s sister suggests Hebraicizing the family’s typically Maghribi Jewish surname, despite this embrace of Zionism and Israeli identity, the family firmly chooses not to do this (pp. 20-21).

This pride in the family name should not be mistaken for pride in *mizrahi* (literally “eastern,” an imprecise, catchall term used to refer to Jews from the MENA)identity. Azoulay explicitly rejects the term *mizrahi*, writing: “Even in its militant version, *mizrahi* identity erased our belonging to worlds that had existed for centuries and which had to be annihilated so that Zionism could triumph in Palestine” (p. 15). Azoulay writes that *mizrahi* identity was imposed on her, as was Israeli identity, in a manner of “regenerating” the Jews in Israel along similar lines to French “regeneration” of natives, including Jews, in their colonies, identities that became “internalized” (p. 15). Powerful as this comparison is, one crucial context is overlooked in this work. Other than a brief critique of the FLN (referenced above) for its construction of a “presumed homogenous” nation-state, which Azoulay ultimately blames on Zionism, *La résistance des bijoux* does not engage meaningfully with the question of Jews and Arab nationalism (p. 13). While indeed Zionism shares a focus on the creation of a nation-state for a singular people with other forms of ethno-centric nationalism, I have not seen any studies that suggest the FLN directly derived any of its policies from Zionist influences. Further, many forms of Arab nationalism in the region were predicated on a vision of Arabo-Islamic identity from which Jews felt excluded, in part because of the explicit anti-Zionism of most Arab nationalist parties. The FLN itself attempted to recruit Jewish support, but many Algerian Jews were fearful, for a variety of complex reasons, of life in an independent Algeria and had, as Azoulay points out about her father, internalized a French colonial identity.[2]

Azoulay’s text engages with a loss of languages, the ills of European colonialism and the alienating effects of Zionism in Arab homelands, however it does not engage with Arab nationalisms and the place of Jews within anti-colonial nationalist movements in the Arab world. In Azoulay’s text, Algerian Jews are the victims of a double colonialism. First, Jews are buffeted by the winds of French imperialism that legally divorced them from their Arab co-nationals through the Crémieux Decree of 1870 that granted most Algerian Jews French citizenship. Second, they are victimized as *mizrahim* by Zionism in an Ashkenazi-dominated Israel. Azoulay laments the loss of the “Jewish-Muslim world” (“le monde juif musulman,” p. 15) but finds solace in constructing necklaces and bracelets in the fashion of Jewish jewelers from North Africa. Even if the Jews themselves have disappeared, their handiwork still circulates in the region and in that way ensures there is no complete erasure of a Jewish presence.

Algerian Jews were, however, active participants in the history of their nation and the divorce from Algerian Arab Muslim political life and culture was not complete. As Pierre-Jean Le Foll Luciani points out in *Les juifs algériens dans la lutte anticoloniale : Trajectoires dissidentes (1954-1965),* a small-but-meaningful minority of Algerian Jews participated in Algeria’s struggle for independence, largely through leftist political parties and organizations. Further, as Christopher Silver highlights in *Recording History: Jews, Muslims and Music across Twentieth-Century North Africa*, Algerian Jews participated in Arabic language culture, in this case musical production and consumption, long after the Crémieux Decree had rendered them French citizens, and they maintained strong cultural connections to Algeria even upon their mass departure. Major Algerian Jewish pop stars such as Salim Halali remain well known in the country, another way Jewish presence has not disappeared in addition to jewelry and, as others such as anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul have pointed out, cuisine.[3] In Israel today there are several notable musical acts (here I am thinking of A-WA and Neta Elkayam) that embrace the Arabic language music of their origins, reclaiming Arab identity in an Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli society that, as Azoulay correctly points out, sought to render the notion of Arab-Jewishness oxymoronic.

European colonialism and Zionism are, to be sure, critical factors in the mass exodus of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa that took place in the 1950s and 60s. It is also important to note that anti-Zionism, as conflated with antisemitism, was a critical factor as well. Indeed, protest against Zionism could turn deadly for Jews in the MENA, and boycotts of Zionism and pressure against Zionists often resulted in boycotts and pressure against Jews, many of whom did not identify with the Zionist movement. Intriguingly, Azoulay uses the term “juif musulman” (“Muslim Jew”) rather than the more frequently employed “Arab Jew.”[4] I have a notion of what she means, especially in sections discussing the problematic bifurcation of Islamic and Jewish art in many museums, but I am interested in learning more about this terminology (p. 154). Additionally, the hegemony of Hebrew in Israel is less complete than Azoulay indicates. While Israeli policy and society have certainly strongly emphasized the need to assimilate to the Hebrew language over the decades, use of other languages persisted and persists among Jews in Israel (for example, the Iraqi Jewish writer Samir Naqqash who continued to publish in Arabic in Israel).[5]

Having said this, I wish very much that this text were available in English (I note with anticipation that Azoulay’s forthcoming *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World,* will come out in September of this year) so I could assign it to the undergraduate students in my seminar. In this politically fraught moment that is marked by so much Manichean thinking, a work that foregrounds the commonalities and continuities among Jews and Arabs, Jews *as* Arabs, and Jewish life in the Muslim world is welcome.

# NOTES

[1] Azoulay is not the only one to make this comparison. See for example Arthur Asseraf’s article: “‘A New Israel’: Colonial Comparisons and the Algerian Partition that Never Happened,” *French Historical Studies* (2018) 41 (1): 95-120; as well as Muriam Haleh Davis’s “Settler Entanglements from Citrus Production to Historical Memory” *MERIP (Middle East Research and Information Project)*, April 27, 2022 [https://merip.org/2022/04/settler-entanglements-from-citrus-production-to-historical-memory/], accessed June 26, 2024.

[2] There are several excellent works that treat this history. Benjamin Stora’s *Les trois exils juifs d’Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2006) is a classic starting point, as well as Ethan Katz’s *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[3] Joëlle Bahloul, *Le culte de la table dressée : rites et traditions de la table juive algérienne* (Paris: A. M. Métailié: Diffusion Presses universitaires de France, 1983).

[4] On the term “Arab Jew,” there are a number of helpful works, including: Emily Benichou Gottreich, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (2008-2009), Vol. 98 (4): 433-451; Lital Levy, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the ‘Mashriq,’” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (2008-2009), Vol. 98 (4): 452-269; and Yehouda Shenhav’s *The Arab Jews: a Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[5] For example, see Rachel Rojanski’s *Yiddish in Israel: A History* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2020); concerning Arabic specifically, see Lital Levy’s *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). Regarding the pre-state Yishuv period, see Liora Halperin’s *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920-1948* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Alma Heckman

University of California, Santa Cruz

aheckman@ucsc.edu

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Forum*

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 9, #2