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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 by Katarzyna Pieprzak, Williams College

Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass reaches up and pulls a box from the top of a tall armoire in the family house in Deir Hanna. In the box, she finds a bracelet that she removes and places on her wrist. Abbass’s return to her family’s apartment is being filmed by her daughter, documentary filmmaker Lina Soualem. Abbass looks into the camera, at her daughter perhaps, and says: I don’t know its story, but the bracelet is now mine.

Later, in the early months of 2024, as mother and daughter make the French media rounds to promote the film *Bye Bye Tiberias*, and as they are asked to respond to the newest deadly violence enacted by Israel against Palestinians in Gaza, the bracelet occasionally appears on the French-Palestinian-Algerian daughter’s wrist. The bracelet is perhaps a source of comfort or strength, a renewed object of transmission between four generations of women, a link to a people and a land, a material sign of belonging to a larger world than has been colonially defined and whose possibility continues to be attacked. The bracelet is still there.

In *La résistance des bijoux*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay writes: “C’est aux bijoutiers que j’appartiens” (p. 95), and in her beautiful Ròt-Bò-Krik book that rests squarely in the palm of one’s hand, Azoulay creates a portable object that is assembled from many fragments—official colonial documents, family histories, colonial postcards, jewelry catalogues, and author produced photographs. Part essay, part image, part poem, part memoir, part call to imagine potential histories and futures of belonging, the book-object’s ambition is to undo colonial machineries (both Zionist and French) and unsettle what is declared by colonialism to be settled identity, history, fact. The book-object is also a liberation of art and handiwork from dominant Western narratives and a return to the tactile. Through the touch of materials and the production of jewelry, Azoulay is able to strategically retrieve fragments of memory of her Jewish Algerian ancestors and reconnect to a wider pre-colonial patrimony. Through this act, Azoulay becomes an artisan in the archive.

In the interest of widening worlds, I propose to read Azoulay as an artist and artisan in the archive in conversation, or in a relational chain, with other French and North African artists who have turned to jewelry to respond to colonial erasure and trauma: notably the work of Ahmed Bouanani, Sara Ouhaddou, and Leïla Talhaoui, among others. All these artists, Azoulay included, work in indirect ways to answer the following question theorized by yet another contemporary artist (this time Afghani), Mariam Ghani:

What, then, is the task of an artist in an archive, as she or he balances between the roles of archivist, historian, translator, and narrator? [...] Perhaps it is to understand which of the archive’s preserved pasts relate to the present moment of danger, and find a way to translate and narrate that past into present; not casually, not haphazardly and not nostalgically, but just when and where it is most needed.[1]

Artisanal work in the archive thus emerges not only to right histories of the past, but as importantly in response to present moments of danger: the erasure of a people, the constriction of their world and the orchestrated forgetting of their arts and patrimony.

Through his film work and his 1963-1964 cataloging of rural Amazigh jewlery, Moroccan writer and filmmaker Ahmed Bouanani sought to document a moment in time, and a world that seemed to be on the brink of disappearing, first erased and refashioned by colonialism and then threatened by post-colonial redefinitions of modernity and so-called authentic national culture. He sought, in his own words “de participer avec ses petits moyens à la transformation radicale et systématique de sa société pour la construction d'un monde qui ne soit pas traumatisant.”[2]

How can attention to a bracelet or necklace help build a world that isn’t traumatic? How and what can it repair? As Azoulay writes, this work of imagination and liberation is a long and incomplete process, but it has the potential to be world changing in its reparative care towards objects, and by extension, towards histories and people, who have been discarded and whose value has been stripped through the technologies and machineries of colonial violence. As she writes:

Nous pouvons la nommer

Une manière de vivre avec les objets

De les garder en bon état

De les réparer en cas de besoin

De les remodeler et les réaffecter,

Puisque rien ne doit être jeté

S’il peut être réparé. (p. 213)

In this quote, I am struck by the verb “réaffecter.” While in its simplest definition réaffecter can mean repurpose, the verb carries within it the important root word “affect” which in turn brings us into a lexicon of relationality. The object is not only re-shaped but it is put anew into a matrix of relations that give it a certain capacity (to affect), to form new pathways of transmission and connection and to release affects: those shimmers or environments of pre-cognitive feeling. As such, I would argue that the work of creating jewelry from fragments of the archives creates new structures for the future that are ultimately tied to, and not isolated from, the future of others.

Creating a shared future with fragmented archives of the past is something very important to the work of Franco-Moroccan artist Sara Ouhaddou. In her 2016 work *Igdad - Oiseaux - Birds*, she studied Bouanani’s drawings of jewelry and oral literature, and recast, or in her words “re-wrote” several examples of lesser-known jewelry forms to produce new sculptural works in collaboration with local artisans in Marrakesh.[3] In Ouhaddou’s work process, aesthetic forms and jewelry-making techniques reappeared through the telling of stories that were associated with them—stories unlocked deep memory in the bodies of the artisans, enabling them to figure out how to cast a piece. As Azoulay writes, “Notre mémoire corporelle/ est infusée de douleurs errantes,/ ainsi que d’interdits/ imposés à nos ancêtres” (p. 197). This re-awakening of memory through bodily gesture is a reparative moment: the re-establishment of a broken thread of transmission and also the collaborative actualization and placing into motion of forms, sounds and stories.

In companionship with this book-object, Azoulay has conducted a number of collaborative jewelry-making workshops (*ateliers de fabrication*), most recently documented in Emilie Goudal’s and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez’s 2024 curated exhibit “Ces voix qui m’assiègent…” at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris.[4] On display are a series of photographs taken at the 2024 workshop “Pratiquer avec les ancêtres” in which we see Azoulay and various participants (including Algerian artist Amina Menia) sitting around a circular wooden table that has the architectural plan of a neighborhood painted on it. The table is covered with jewelry, catalogues, photographs, texts and jewelry-making materials. These objects and materials seemingly reinhabit a space from which they were expelled. We also see participants tracing forms, threading necklaces and speaking together. The sheer material exuberance of that round table testifies to the power of material objects to hold emotional and affective charges.

Azoulay writes that attention to jewelry has the potential to unsettle colonial binaries: “Les artefacts, pourtant, / résistent aux identités coloniales” and “La résistance des bijoux à l’identité coloniale binaire en témoigne” (p. 72). While her work seeks to position Jewish Algerian patrimony as belonging to an integral part of a larger Algerian patrimony, artist, performer and cultural educator Raïssa Leï (Leïla Talhaoui) uses jewelry to reunite Amazigh women in the French diaspora with their marginalized cultures. Both Azoulay and Talhaoui activate the power of jewelry to resist erasure and create a more capacious future of belonging.

Through her project “Timazighin,” Talhaoui asks: “Comment faire quand notre culture orale ne nous a pas été transmise, ou du moins partiellement ? Comment ressusciter des pratiques qui ont disparu à jamais ?”[5] She proposes dressing (*habillage*) sessions and photo shoots for Amazigh women in which together they choose traditional or modern dresses and jewelry from their indigenous communities. In the spring of 2024, a granddaughter offered her grandmother such a session. The resulting photographs and video are intensely moving. We see the emotions of an older woman wearing the material traces of an indigenous culture from Aurès that has been marginalized in both Algeria and France. Dressed in jewelry that she no longer has access to, we see her smile, then ululate and then dance with pride and joy.[6]

Azoulay discovers her grandmother’s name in a box of documents; Abbass discovers her mother's bracelet in a forgotten box; Touda Bouanani discovers her father’s work in a box and saves it from a fire; a granddaughter named Sarah discovers her grandmother in a moment of reconnection and joy. This work of recovery and transmission passes through the material forms of jewelry and through the hands of women who hold, wear and make it. These women work to rethread fragments and put them into relation with others, enlarging the possibility of a shared future.

# NOTES

[1] Mariam Ghani, “What We Left Unfinished: The Artist and the Archive” in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, Edited by Anthony Downey (IB Tauris, 2015): 43-63. pp. 54 and 62.

[2] Cited in Mohammed Bakrim, “Une esthétique de l’errance Ahmed Bouanani, Portrait” *Afrociné* (Jan 31, 2008): <http://www.africine.org/critique/une-esthetique-de-lerrance/7282>.

[3] Elsa Guily, “The Artisan Holds the Knowledge: Interview with Sara Ouhaddou” *C&* (April 23, 2016): <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/the-artisan-holds-the-knowledge/>

[4] For more information about the exhibit, see [www.citedesartsparis.net/fr/ces-voix-qui-massiegent](http://www.citedesartsparis.net/fr/ces-voix-qui-massiegent)

[5] Leïla Talhaoui, *Timazighin: Réappropriation du matrimoine culturel amazigh* <https://www.timazighin.com/>

[6] To see photographs and videos of this session and others, see Talahoui’s Instagram account: @timazighin\_roots.

Katarzyna Pieprzak

Williams College

[kpieprza@williams.edu](mailto:kpieprza@williams.edu)

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