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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 Olivia C. Harrison, University of Southern California

The first of Ariella Azoulay’s books to be published in French, *La résistance des bijoux : Contre les géographies coloniales*, is part of a constellation of texts that touch on the Algerian childhood she never had. It is also the most autobiographical. Born in Netanya, Israel, in 1962, the year Algeria won independence from France, Azoulay knew almost nothing about her father’s life in Oran until she discovered a treasure chest of documents he had kept secret from her, including the French birth certificate revealing his mother’s Arabic name, Aïsha. “Le premier joyau incontestablement algérien / dont j’ai hérité / au moment où mon père est décédé,” comments Azoulay on the page facing a reproduction of the document, reframed to zoom in on this “jewel” of a name (p. 91). Positioned between her Hebrew given name, Ariella, and her Algerian Jewish surname, Azoulay, Aïsha is the author’s Arabic name, the mark of a loss and a caesura that her recent work seeks to restore and repair, for her and her descendants doubly removed from their Algerian and Palestinian pasts.

More intimate than her magisterial *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*[1], which was likewise inspired by her discovery and reclaiming of her Algerian grandmother’s name, *La résistance des bijoux* weaves personal visual archives and colonial iconography with poetic meditations and an essay on her relationship to her mother and father tongues. In doing so, she works against both the colonial assimilationist machine that turned her ancestors, *nolens volens*, into French citizens in 1870—the year of the Crémieux Decree granting citizenship to the vast majority of *indigènes israélites*, as indigenous Algerian Jews were dubbed in colonial bureaucratese—and the nationalist ideology that turned her mother—born in Mandate Palestine to Bulgarians who emigrated in the mid-nineteenth century—into an Israeli citizen in 1948. A companion to Azoulay’s essay-film *The World like a Jewel in the Hand: Unlearning Imperial Plunder II* (2022) and her book *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World* (Verso Press, 2023), *La résistance des bijoux* imagines “l’inversion de l’anéantissement impérial du monde juif musulman” through contrapuntal readings of imperial archives, revisionist autobiography, and what Azoulay calls “notre mémoire corporelle” and “leur mémoire musculaire” (pp. 59, 197, 206): the handicraft of her jeweler ancestors, transmitted to her father, a radio mechanic (pp. 182-95), and now to Azoulay through her writing, cinematography, curatorial work and, most recently, her forays into jewelry-making (pp. 221-25).

It is both fitting and ironic that this book should appear first in French, the language Azoulay’s father claimed as his, but which, according to Azoulay, robbed him of his mother tongue, Arabic. Translated from English to French by Jean-Baptiste Naudy, editor at the small publishing house Ròt-Bò-Krik, *La résistance des bijoux* begins with an essay that Azoulay first published in Hebrew in 2003, under the title “Mother Tongue, Father Tongue,” when she was still living in what she calls “la colonie sioniste” (p. 59).[2] She rewrote the text ten years later after her parents’ death and revised it again in 2021 for *The Boston Review*, under the title “Unlearning our Settler Colonial Tongues: On Language and Belonging.”[3] The essay that opens *La résistance des bijoux*, titled “Les langues des ancêtres,” supplements the *Boston Review* essay with several poetic meditations on Azoulay’s “exile de l’arabe” (p. 28). But it also opens up several intriguing questions through its translation into French, notably around the name of the political formation that turned Azoulay’s father into a Frenchman and her mother into an Israeli: settler colonialism.

Azoulay is very clear in naming her birthplace a settler colony. In “Unlearning our Settler Colonial Tongues,” she speaks of leaving “the settler-colonial state built to destroy Palestine,” “growing up in a settler-colonial state,” and of the time “when I still lived in the settlers’ colony.” The translation of these terms in “Les langues des ancêtres,” the essay that opens *La résistance des bijoux*, reveals a range of translational choices which in turn pose questions about the translatability of the expression *settler colonialism*—a question that is particularly pressing given that Azoulay is thinking relationally of settler colonialism in Algeria and Palestine. In the first case, Azoulay’s translator opts for “la colonie”: “Ce n’est que lorsque j’ai quitté la colonie, construite comme état pour détruire la Palestine” (p. 18). In the second and third, Naudy chooses a more literal and less idiomatic translation: in French, Azoulay speaks of “grandir dans un État colonial de peuplement” (p. 20); she recalls the time “quand je vivais encore dans la colonie de peuplement” (p. 34). What is at stake in these choices? Is there a difference between naming Israel a colony or a settler colony, in French or in English? And what of Hebrew, a language I do not speak, but invite Azoulay to comment on in her response?

Historians of French imperialism make a distinction between *colonies de peuplement* (literally, “population colonies”) and *colonies d’exploitation*—a categorization that evades the overlapping forms of extraction, exploitation, displacement, and settlement that make up the great variety of Eurocolonial enterprises from the end of the fifteenth century to the present. In French historiography, Algeria is the exemplum of a *colonie de peuplement*; the rubber plantations of l’Oubangui-Chari (in l’Afrique Équatoriale Française, present-day Central African Republic) of a *colonie d’exploitation*. Translated back into English, this would obtain a distinction between “settler colonies” and “extractive colonies,” a distinction that is likewise reductive and might be thought more productively along a continuum where total settlement means the elimination of the indigenous population, whereas extraction, which relies at least in part on indigenous labor, does not. At the same time, the expression *colonie de peuplement* does not quite capture the nuances of the term settler colony in English. From a grammatical perspective, a settler colony is a colony of settlers: in French, *colons*. This is perhaps best captured in Azoulay’s somewhat idiosyncratic expression, “settlers’ colony,” the nuance of which is lost in the translation “colonie de peuplement.” Really, what Azoulay is evoking here is “la colonie des colons”—a polity that has been completely appropriated by the settlers, and from which the indigenous populations have been disappeared, rhetorically if not materially.[4] To complicate the pleonastic nature of the terminology of colonialism further, a *colonie*, in French, is a settlement—settlements in the West Bank are *colonies*.

It is important to retain the specificity of the term *settler colony*, which serves to distinguish a particular form of colonial rule that is based on the displacement and replacement of the indigenous populations present at the time of conquest—the U.S., Canada, Australia, apartheid South Africa, French Algeria, Israel—even if the methods, degrees, and temporalities of displacement and replacement are not identical. And yet the inadequacy of the French translation of this expression (the passive-voice *colonie de peuplement*, or *colonie* tout court) keys us into an argument that is central to *La résistance des bijoux* and Azoulay’s Algerian writings: (settler) colonialism is not a discrete event, it is a relational structure, one that depends upon adjacent imperial projects.[5] Although it is in some sense an accident of birth that Azoulay has links to both Algeria and Mandate Palestine, it is not a coincidence that she is the product of these two overlapping imperial histories: “[les] deux projets coloniaux par lesquels nous avons été façonnés,” she writes of her family (p. 56). Autobiography is a pretext to dismantle the exceptionalist narrative that forecloses what Azoulay calls “a potential history of the Jewish Muslim world,” a world that was torn asunder by French and Zionist-Israeli colonialism but can be reimagined through writing, filming, and “muscle memory.”[6] Although Azoulay does not name Algeria a settler colony in *La résistance des bijoux*—and this reader would like to know why—what she delivers is a crossed critique of French and Israeli settler colonialism, and their twinned production of Jewish exceptionality in the Maghreb and Palestine. But these exceptions are not equivalent. As I will suggest later in this review, what French settler colonialism achieved in the Maghreb was Jewish non-indigeneity; what Israeli settler colonialism achieved in Palestine was Jewish indigeneity. These, I argue, are the targets of Azoulay’s critique.

If the name Aïsha enables Azoulay to recover her Algerianness, her trajectory to Palestinianness is more circuitous, and more confrontational. Centered around her father tongue—the Arabic that her father never taught her, and perhaps did not know—“Les langues des ancêtres” revolves around a second loss, one that her mother likewise never admitted: the loss of Jewish-Muslim intimacy before the foundation of “the settler-colonial state built to destroy Palestine.”[7] Echoing the Algerian writings of Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, who likewise wrote about lost Jewish-Muslim intimacies in their autobiographical works, Azoulay wonders about the devastation her mother must have felt when she was estranged from the Palestinian domestic worker who raised her, and imagines her saying, in her own mother tongue, Ladino, that she missed her “ojos negros” (black eyes) and gentle touch (p. 54).[8] *La résistance des bijoux* is an act of grieving for the questions she never asked her mother and father and the answers she never received. But it is also a gesture toward what Azoulay calls “potential history,” an act of imagining a past that is lost but can be reactivated in the present and future. For Algeria, this act of imagination takes tangible form in the jewelry Azoulay painstakingly recreates for her granddaughter (pp. 222-23). For Palestine, it is a more radical act of imagination still, one that seems ever more impossible with each day of devastation in Gaza and the West Bank, and perhaps for this reason, more urgent than ever. “Si je n’avais pas cerné les contours de son aliénation,” Azoulay writes of her mother, “je n’aurais pas pu désapprendre ma langue maternelle et me tourner vers la langue encore muette de mes ancêtres pour formuler une histoire potentielle de la Palestine reposant sur le retour inconditionnel des Palestiniens et de tous leurs descendants” (p. 54). Using her father’s lost tongue, Arabic, against her mother tongue, modern Hebrew, Azoulay proclaims herself “Juive palestinienne” and “Juive algérienne,” inhabiting two identities that are considered impossible, but that hold promise for a different relation to the past and to the future (pp. 56-57). What would a future in which these names become possible look like?

It's important to note that these identities are not symmetrical. The inadequacy of the names Algerian Jew and Palestinian Jew, as I suggested above, stems from competing claims to indigeneity in Algeria and Israel. In Algeria, Jews were made non-indigenous, first in French colonial law, which gave preferential treatment to Algerian Jews (albeit reluctantly and incompletely), and then by the postcolonial state, which reified Algerian identity as Muslim and Arab.[9] In Israel, non-indigenous Jews claimed indigeneity to Palestine in a move that is comparable to the “indigenization” of settlers across a range of settler colonial projects, from the U.S. to Algeria to South Africa.[10] Paradoxically, claiming Palestinian indigeneity is part and parcel of the Zionist project.

Azoulay’s provocation in calling herself a Palestinian Jew rubs against the settler’s claim to indigeneity. It is based, instead, on a double recognition of non-indigeneity, through her father’s Arabic and her mother’s Ladino, languages that were lost to her through the Zionist production of Jewish indigeneity in Palestine. If Azoulay calls herself a Palestinian Jew, then, it is not to claim indigeneity in the sense of native belonging to Israel, but to reclaim the colonial status of Algerian indigeneity (and perhaps Bulgarian indigeneity, although she does not dwell on her maternal ancestry) as the basis for a political relation to the indigenous of Palestine, the Palestinians.

Azoulay’s writings, curatorial projects, and film-essays about her relation to Algeria and to Palestine are incredibly moving on a personal level, but they also invite questions of a collective and political nature. What would a potential history of Palestine and Jewish Algeria look like at the collective level? Azoulay’s exhibitions, which are collaborative in their creation, circulation, and reception, offer one model for a collective reshaping of a future-oriented relation to the past that could not be.[11] Here I am reminded of Gil Hochberg’s readings of Palestinian art-making that is geared toward the future, rather than the past, and I imagine that had she written a review of *La résistance des bijoux*, she might gesture to the politics of potential history, particularly as they pertain to addressing the impasse of Palestinian futurity in the midst of Israel’s latest and most deadly war against the Palestinians.[12]

Azoulay’s critical response to Benjamin Stora’s report on the memory of the Algerian war of independence, to which she alludes in “Les langues des ancêtres,” might gesture to another possibility for moving from the personal to the collective (p. 27). In her open letter denouncing Stora’s failure to address “the destruction of Jewish cultures in the Maghreb”—particularly glaring, she argues, given how important his scholarship on this topic has been—Azoulay asks why Stora did not invite a “Muslim French Algerian” to co-write the report, commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron in 2020, in order to “reverse [the alienation of Jews] from Arabs and Muslims in the new world they found themselves sharing outside of their homeland, in France.”[13] Citing anticolonial activist Houria Bouteldja who has condemned the colonial production of Maghrebi Jews as “*dhimmis* of the Republic,” Azoulay likewise imagines a future in which North African Jews and Muslims can restore the relations that were sundered by colonial law in what I call the “settler postcolony.”[14]

That Stora has frequently collaborated with Muslim Algerians in his writings, teachings, and scholarly activities makes Azoulay’s critique somewhat ungenerous. In fact, Stora’s report departs from the expectations of a government-commissioned document in that it weaves together the Algerian memory of the revolution with the French memory of the war. But Azoulay is right that in his description of the so-called repatriation of Algerian Jews, Stora relegates the Jewish Algerian experience to the realm of French memory in a move that naturalizes Jewish non-indigeneity in Algeria, and the hardening of the colonial opposition between Jews and Muslims in postcolonial France.

And yet, Azoulay’s invitation to work across the colonial boundaries that continue to condition the field of the possible raises an important question about the impact and import of our scholarship, so often constrained by the demands of producing single-authored works and linked to professional and institutional prestige and recognition, not to mention identitarian categories that continue to be imposed upon us by forces that include the state. Whether or not working with those whose assigned identities were built against your own is a solution to the fragmentation and dislocation of histories that potential history seeks to repair is an open question. In some cases, this might in fact look like window-dressing. But the fact that Azoulay’s work invites collective action to decolonize inherited identities is a testament to the power of activist scholarship in an age of institutional complacency, if not complicity, with settler colonial violence.

# NOTES

[1] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso Press, 2019), p. 15.

[2] Ariella Azoulay, “Sefat em, seat av,” in *Hazut Misrahit*, edited by Yigal Nizri and Tel Ben Zvi (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2004), pp. 159-68.

[3] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, “Unlearning our Settler Colonial Tongues: On Language and Belonging,” *The Boston Review*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/unlearning-our-settler-colonial-tongues/>.

[4] For a haunting allegory of the discursive erasure of Palestinians from Israel, see Ibtisam Azem, *The Book of Disappearance*, translated by Sinaan Antoon (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

[5] I’m borrowing Patrick Wolfe’s well-known aphorism, “settler colonialism is a structure not an event.” Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 2.

[6] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World* (London: Verso Press, 2023).

[7] Azoulay, “Unlearning our Settler Colonial Tongues.”

[8] See for example Hélène Cixous, *Si près* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l’autre, ou La prothèse d’origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).

[9] Benjamin Stora gives a full account of the expedited assimilation of Algerian Jews, and their demotion to the status of *indigènes* during the Vichy era. Benjamin Stora, *Les trois exils : Juifs d’Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2006). For a careful reconstitution of the reluctant naturalization of *indigènes israélites* and attempts to reverse the Crémieux Decree, see Yerri Urban, *L’indigène dans le droit colonial français, 1865-1955* (Paris: Fondation Varenne, 2010), pp. 118-22. On the “politicization of indigeneity” in the postcolony, see Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 14.

[10] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, translated by Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 57.

[11] For an overview of Azoulay’s curatorial projects, see her website, <https://cargocollective.com/AriellaAzoulay/filter/Exhibitions>.

[12] Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

[13] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, “Algerian Jews Have Not Forgotten France’s Colonial Crimes,” *The Boston Review*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/ariella-aisha-azoulay-benjamin-stora-letter/>. Benjamin Stora, “Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d’Algérie,” *Vie publique*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/278186-rapport-stora-memoire-sur-la-colonisation-et-la-guerre-dalgerie>.

[14] Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, translated by Rachel Valinsky (Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016), p. 55. Olivia C. Harrison, “France, a Settler Postcolony?,” *Middle East Report* 302 (2022), <https://merip.org/2022/05/france-a-settler-postcolony-2/>.

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