*H-France Forum*

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 9, #5

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.

# Author's Response by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Brown University

Response in the form of keywords which starts with gratitude and continues in alphabetical order.

**Gratitude.** I feel gratitude to the editor who summoned us here to speak about urgent matters during these times, and I am grateful to the different authors for the threads they pulled from my book as an invitation for me to further elaborate on some of the themes of *La résistance des bijoux*. I was moved by the intimate reading the reviewers offered and the depth of the conversations their essays opened. Keeping in mind readers who have not read the book before reading this Forum, I decided to shape my response to the questions, comments, observations raised in these essays, as a set of key terms. Writing potential histories of our worlds, ruined and shaped by imperialism, always pushed me to question the terms given to us to think with and reassemble them from anticolonial grounds. Perhaps this work of crafting terms is what Katarzyna Pieprzak describes as being an artisan in the archive. Pieprzak’s observation, for example, motivated me to elaborate on the term “artisan.” Thus, each of the keywords included in my response, aims to clarify and engage with some of the points raised in the review essays. I am grateful to their authors who pushed me to think further about what they drew from the book and to make explicit my assumptions when writing in the first person (autobiography), or writing anticolonial history through the figure of the artisan, or delving into the notion of mourning as a condition no less than an affect. In my response, I draw on the larger research I undertook for *The Jewelers of the Ummah – A Potential History of a Jewish Muslim World* (Verso, 2024) whose publication coincides with this exchange.[1]

**Artisan.** Artisans fabricate things. However, when it comes to the Jewish Muslim world that French colonialism aimed to destroy, they also had other roles. They knew how to repair and were trusted for the skilled work they did. It should not surprise us that in broken worlds like ours, those who oppose the outcome of different colonial enterprises, including scholars and artists, explore the reparative features of artisanal work. In her review essay, Katarzyna Pieprzak thinking about my work alongside Ahmed Bouanani, Sara Ouhaddou and Raïssa Leï, is attuned to this. For those artisans, who were part of guilds and provided for their communities’ needs, artisanal work laid the foundations for a shared world, for its political formation. My focus on artisanal work is a way to counter imperial and colonial narratives which normalized national narratives; I am drawing on Hannah Arendt’s well-known account of *vita activa* as consisting of three different and interrelated domains—labor, work and action.[2] With the understanding that the work of the artisan is entangled with labor and action, I explore the severe loss we suffered when colonial and imperial enterprises targeted and destroyed classes of artisans. Artisans are those who work and build what Arendt calls “world,” the world of durable things that people inhabit when they act and interact with each other. The role and the activity of artisans differ from what laborers who produce consumable goods needed for the maintenance of life pursue, as they are charged with building and sustaining a durable world. Alongside Arendt’s emphasis on the durability of artisans’ creations, I emphasize the intertwinement of this durability with different bodies of knowledge of which artisans were guardians before colonialism destroyed the infrastructure of artisanal work. The destruction of the artisans’ role resulted in them being replaced by institutions, classifications, and practices; this knowledge which combined artisanal know-how with spiritual traditions and ethics, formed over centuries. It included the knowledge that artisans gained and achieved when they resisted oppression as well as the taboos, regulations and limitations they inherited and as part of their role of caring for the shared world they were committed to transmit these taboos and regulations. Among the first steps French colonialism undertook was to destroy the infrastructure for artisanal work in the 1830s and ruin these bodies of knowledge and the modalities for their transmission. Reviving the muscle memory that my ancestors failed to transmit is thus an act of repair. It is part of a liberation project from the national identities which colonialism imposed. It resists the reduction of the artisan to the one who merely produces objects and claiming their/our indispensability for reversing the suicidal course of this world and for reversing what settler colonialism has normalized as a given.

**Autobiography**. While I can see why Olivia Harrison considers *La résistance des bijoux* to be the most autobiographical text I have written, I want to take the opportunity to question the assumptions we often have in qualifying texts as autobiographical. All my work on Palestine has also always been autobiographical in the sense that it never only accounted for what was done to Palestinians but always also studied the position of the perpetrator, which I was born to inhabit—as I was born in Palestine and assigned “Israeli” as my identity—and against which I struggle in my work. Although most Israelis of Jewish origin would deny that they inhabit the position of the perpetrator, this position actually shapes their biographies and defines the trajectories that they experience as personal, no matter who they are or what they do. The “human factories” for Jewish children in the Zionist colony is what I refer to in *La résistance des bijoux* as the production or fashioning of children who by their mere existence, meaning without yet taking any action, both legitimize the sacrifice of Palestinians for their *bien-être* and prevent Palestinians expellees from returning to their homes. The betrayal of the mother tongue, which I discuss, is narrated in the first person with personal examples, but it is the autobiographical template of all the children who were fashioned in this human factory. Once we recognize this reality—that is, the shared nature of those presumably personal narratives of Jewish children born in destroyed Palestine, we should seek out the personal elsewhere. For example, at the moments of resistance to such a template, in the recognition of its contours, and in the disruption of the seamless ways we have been socialized to see these moments and personal narrative as personally ours. Thus, for example, realizing that Hebrew was not truly a mother tongue, and that it was actually invented for me—for us—at the expenses of my/our other possible mother tongues, is paradoxically an intimate thread of my biography. Being able to give words to this experience helped me stop ignoring the wound I so long sensed in my mouth. Thus, the assumed opposition or tension between historical writing and biographical writing has two implications. The first, the association of biographical writing with the realm of the personal (as opposed to the historical, which is imperial) legitimizes the writing of history *about us* but *without us*. The history of the Jews or of the Jewish people, for example, is an outrageous narrative which ignores the crimes perpetuated against us, diverse Jews who used to belong to diverse communities all over the world, in order to turn us into the very people for whom a single history was fabricated. This single history was crafted mainly by our perpetrators, and I include the Euro-Zionists among them; by “our” I’m speaking mostly about North Africans but also Jews from the Middle East. And by a single history I refer to what became the skeleton of Jewish history in the wake of European colonialisms, which physically and spiritually destroyed diverse Jewish life. Prior to this destruction, our histories could not converge into one and could have continued to evolve as part of the Jewish Muslim world. I obviously recognize those affinities between Jewish communities to which Alma Rachel Heckman refers, but I reject their priority over many other affinities with Muslim, Arab and Amazigh culture and spirituality, and the way they were instrumentalized to justify the destruction of those other affinities. The second implication is that after several centuries of imperialism, as our lives as children of our ancestral worlds were stolen from us, historical writing has come to supplant our knowledge of ourselves, leaving us doomed to live imperial trajectories as our biographies. Only in moments of grace, when we are ready to take a risk and refuse the imperial narratives provided to us, or, as Jill Jarvis terms it, to “[opt] out of these inheritances,” can we provoke a rupture and recognize the recoverability of the traces of a destroyed world.

In her review essay, Olivia Harrison speaks about what the two colonial projects I deal with in my text achieved through the prism of indigeneity: the French targeted Jewish indigeneity in the Maghreb and produced “Jewish non-indigeneity,” while Israel targeted Palestinian indigeneity in Palestine and produced “Jewish indigeneity.” We are speaking about a violence at the scale of science fiction; it is as if you were to tell a Swede not only that they have to become Chinese and forget about anything Swedish, you also create a situation where no Swede will remain in what used to be Sweden. Yet, absurd as it sounds, this became our reality: From a diversity of Jewish identities and histories, we were melded into one people with one history. From 1948 onward, millions of Jews, who lived outside of the state of Israel and outside of France, whose Jewish threads were often entangled with threads of other local identities, were shaped to believe that they were “Israelis” or “French,” respectively, and almost no Jews were left in all the world they were a part of; they have since come to narrate their biographies as such, complying with what they were also trained to believe was the course of history, not of violence. The moment I was able to say “I refuse to recognize myself in the identity that was forced on me at birth,” was a redemptive one, since at one and the same time I freed myself from the imperial trap of my “Israeli identity” and was able to claim that this Jewish Muslim world, which was made unimaginable, is ours to inhabit.

**Colony, settlers’ colony and settler colonialism.** I do alternate between these terms and some other terms, as Olivia Harrison noted. It is not because I ignore the differences or that they are not important, but rather since my emphasis is on their relationship to another term: the nation-state. In this case, the nation-state of Israel. I use these terms to question the fait accompli status of the state by insisting that it is a colonial enterprise and, as such, it cannot be perceived as a fait accompli, at least not by those who have been colonized nor by the many more who refuse to forget their exclusion from the state, their dispossession, and their subjection to its genocidal violence. Thus, in the case of settler colonialism within Palestine, before it is a theoretical consideration, it is a manifestation of those voices of the millions of members of the Palestinian body politic who were expelled in 1948 and have since refused to forget their belonging to the land. Their refusal manifests in such a way that it interferes in the violent efforts of the state both to erase its colonial nature and to eliminate those who remember it or serve, by their mere existence, as its reminder, as we see daily in Gaza. Using these terms for me is also a means to emphasize the violence that the state waged against the Jews who were made its citizens, those Jews who were forced to leave their worlds with a false promise of a state, which in reality was, from the moment of its proclamation, a settler colony. Despite the teleological inclinations we are trained to have, we should not forget that prior to the United Nations partition plan of 1947 many of the Jews who lived in Palestine did not share the settler colonial visions of the violent factions of the Zionist movement; it was only with the support of the Euro-American colonial enterprise that they could use extreme violence at the scale they did in 1948 and actually establish not a state but a settler-colony with state apparatuses. From that moment on, and as the Zionists began to expel Palestinians and replace them with Jews—many of whom were not Zionists until that moment—the heterogenous Jewish communities in Palestine could be positioned along one side of the genocidal vision of this settler-colonial state and could be described by the terms: colony, settlers’ colony and settler colonialism.

**Genocide**. Many are the definitions of a genocide, but there is one that I want to foreground now: when a group of people arrives at a certain consensus among its members and supporters that another group is exterminable. I remember being unsettled when I first read, in Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* that the Nazi leaders who had feared that the “final solution” they brought to the table of the Wannsee Conference would provoke resistance were surprised that it did not and that the participants immediately moved to propose pragmatic plans for its implementation.[3] Well, in the wake of October 7, even without a Wannsee Conference, an implicit immediate consensus in favor of genocide was achieved at once in Israel and among Western imperial countries, which, fairly early, offered support to the Israeli state with money, arms, international decisions, and media coverage. Engaging in this conversation now, when a genocide unfolds in front of our eyes, what could seem to be high-speed consensus among members of the group who approve the exercise of genocidal violence, emerges rather as part of a regime: genocide was already imposed in November 1947, when the West decided to sacrifice Palestine and the Jewish Muslim world as part of its efforts to absolve itself of its crimes against the Jews and find a solution for the hundreds of thousands who were still in displaced persons camps in Europe. Thus, though my book was written before the current genocide, it sheds light on some of the ways through which such a consensus was achieved and consolidated from 1948 onward. Here I’ve dwelled on one—the fabrication of imperial trajectories as our intimate, personal, or autobiographical stories in such a way that obliterates the colonial uses of, interests in, and potential benefits gained from them.

**Mourning.** What is mourning in a world where one genocide follows another? Wherein genocide is perpetual—only the victims and perpetrators change—and the technologies through which it is perpetrated are never dismantled, especially those that command people to move on, to forget and deny the violence, and to accept the post-genocide imperial solutions that further destroy fabrics of life? Alma Rachel Heckman describes *La résistance des bijoux* as a lamentation of loss and Jill Jarvis speaks of a “deep chord of grief” and acts of mourning, which both scholars associate with the book’s discussions of the loss and denial of access to languages. Languages are central objects and vehicles of mourning and grief. The loss created by the deliberate decimation of our ancestors’ languages made us also lose our ancestors’ testimonies, their stories and wisdom about the imperial violence to which they were exposed, aspects of which we may not even be aware, despite the fact that we inherited their effects as they have become, in different forms, part of our bodies, of ourselves. The lack of this type of knowledge can be extremely detrimental, especially for those who bear those wounds whose meanings are often avoided by the languages they do know. Seeing how intensely the machine of denial surrounding the ongoing genocide of Palestinians operates today enables us to understand why sometimes it can take generations for people to find or retrieve the language to describe what was done to them and that it will make sense to others, in shared languages. Until today, for example, the genocide of Algerians carried out by the French during the first years of the colonization was not inscribed in any language, as if it did not happen, and yet almost half of the population was decimated. Despite having read other authors’ accounts about the Jews in Algeria during the country’s colonization, I do not remember ever reading it simply and factually put that what the Jews experienced was a *culturecide*, similar to the one Native Americans went through when they were forced into boarding schools. Is that because what I read were only texts written in French or English rather than, for example, in Ladino or Judeo-Arabic? Or is it due to the fact that the end of our lives in the Jewish Muslim world was not seen as a tragedy but rather narrated as part of the post-final-solution solution that the West imposed on Jews—i.e., a state of their own—a solution through which Europe could escape its status as the enemy of the Jews (casting Palestinians in this role instead) and thereby turn Jews into peer-perpetrators? Had a genocidal state against the local heterogenous body politic not been proclaimed in Palestine, Jews would never have been converted into colonial cannon fodder; survivors of the Holocaust would have stayed in Europe, re-building their communities, and Muslim Jews would have stayed in North Africa or the Middle East, as they were not Zionist prior to WWII. That these arenas continue to be understood separately, mourning is shaped as if a response to an immediate event rather than as part of oppressed and repressed intergenerational wounds, trauma and resistance. Renewing intergenerational fabrics can sometimes function like “an alchemical dissolvent,” to use Jill Jarvis’s words, essential for articulating the reversibility of solid facts like the state.

**Muslim Jew (juif musulman)**. Identity is a problematic term in the world imperialism created, and often our identities betray us in a similar way, as do what we are raised to believe are our mother tongues. The term Arab Jew (a notion developed by Ella Shohat)[4] is a generative one to consider when thinking about Jewish identities beyond the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi binary created by the Zionist state and when trying to think against the relation of enmity the state created between Jews and Arabs. My response to Alma Rachel Heckman’s question as to why I do not continue to use it is related to the particular context of the Maghreb, where the term emerges as rather limiting since it operates mainly to designate identity rather than a belonging to a culture, and thus it excludes Berber Jews who were part of this destroyed world about which I have written, the Jewish Muslim world. Since the beginning of the French colonization of the Maghreb, this world was targeted, as the French sought to position European culture against the Muslim world, creating a binary which actively invisibilized the Jews in this region. There are several reasons why using this term, Muslim Jew, to describe a world, its inhabitants, and their shared history matters, today more than ever. First, since it was made unimaginable by the invention of a Judeo-Christian tradition and because it was deliberately destroyed by several European colonial projects, among which I count the Zionist one. Reintroducing it not only challenges the invented Judeo-Christian tradition but also traces a way out of it toward redress and return. Second, because it enables one to remember that Islam, since its inception, did not exist without Jews under its protection under the status of *dhimma*.[5]Third, because it revives a pre-national imaginary where Jews could have their own autonomy and community life alongside others, as opposed to the national imagination that was imposed on them at the expense of their rich diversity. Fourth, because when this term is used to designate a world, and is not used as an identity marker, it is easy to understand how the Zionist state was willing to sacrifice the Jewish Muslim world since this state was created against the Jews who were part of this Jewish Muslim world. Since its establishment, the Zionist state was invested in creating a conflation between anti-Zionism and antisemitism in continuity with the European project of inventing one people—out of diverse Jews—to whom “solutions” could be given. Assigning this people a shared destiny—i.e., to materialize into a state of its own—is the solution that was imposed in the wake of the “final” one.

# NOTES

[1] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *The Jewelers of the Ummah – A Potential History of a Jewish Muslim World* (NY: Verso, 2024).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[3] Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth England: Penguin, 2006).

[4] Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[5] On the Islamic nation see Katrin A. Jomaa, *Ummah: A New Paradigm for A Global World* (Albany, SUNY UP: 2021).

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

Brown University

ariellaazoulay@gmail.com

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, #5