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The Jewelers of the Ummah:
A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World,
by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. London/New York: Verso, 2024. 656 pp., ISBN: 978-1-80429-311-9.

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Book Review

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Within contemporary political theory and historiography, few works challenge the foundational categories of the modern nation-state with the remarkable ferocity and intimacy found in Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World*. This substantial 614-page volume constitutes a significant evolution in Azoulay's ambitious project of "unlearning imperialism." Situating her inquiry alongside foundational critiques by scholars such as Ella Shohat on the displaced figure of the "Arab-Jew" and Yehouda Shenhav on the epistemological trap of "methodological Zionism," Azoulay aligns with these intellectual traditions but radicalizes them. While she previously established this theoretical framework to critique the violence inherent in archival preservation and museum practices, she turns her gaze here toward the ruptured history of the Maghreb. With a specific focus on Algeria, she argues that colonial powers weaponized the categories of "Jew," "Arab," and "Muslim" to destroy a shared life-world that existed for many centuries. The text refuses a simple historical account of what transpired; instead, it purports to be a "potential history," a theoretical resurrection of the "Jewish Muslim" world that French colonialism and Zionist nationalism aggressively sought to extinguish and which Azoulay insists she continues to inhabit.

Azoulay's central thesis posits that the separation of Jews from their North African environment was neither natural nor inevitable. She contends that the transformation of the "Jewish Muslim"—a figure integral to the *Ummah* (the Islamic community)—into the "French citizen" or the "Israeli" constituted a violent "amputation." This powerful term suggests that the migration of Jews from the Maghreb involved a forcible dismemberment of the body politic of the region: "In 1962, … the Jews who 'formed an ummah with the believers [Muslims]'in Algeria, were severed from that ummah" (2). Azoulay explicitly refuses to accept this severance or to view it as a closed chapter of history. She claims to actively inhabit this world in the present, performing its continued existence through the very act of writing.

The ingenuity of *The Jewelers of the Ummah* resides in its bold rejection of standard academic exposition. Across sixteen open letters, Azoulay eschews the detached voice of the historian, choosing alternatively to address "elected kin" and deceased intellectuals directly. Such a deliberate choice collapses the imperial linear temporality that typically separates the researcher from the subject. The epistolary format summons the dead to create a provocative space where the past remains fluid and open to intervention. This methodology accounts for what Azoulay terms "unlearning the hermeneutic mode" (3) of engaging with canonical thinkers. She refuses to interpret their texts from a scholarly distance and brings them, instead, into conversation about the ongoing anticolonial struggle.

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The emotional anchor of the work lies in the opening letter to her father, Roger Lucien Azoulay, whose spectral presence dominates the early chapters and whose silence about Algeria shaped Azoulay's entire childhood. In a letter titled "Abba, Why Didn't You Call Me Algeria?" (33), Azoulay performs a posthumous diagnosis of her father's condition, which she terms "colonial aphasia" (39). His desperate assimilation into French culture and his subsequent migration to Israel manifest symptoms of profound displacement. Azoulay's father died an Israeli citizen, a French citizen, but without Algeria , a reality she considers a tragedy of colonial success. The letter draws on a booklet Azoulay prepared from an interview with her father before his death, stories he told "without emotion, as if … talking about someone else" (44), yet which contained fragments of a world he could not properly grieve.

It is here that Azoulay introduces the devastating impact of the Crémieux Decree of 1870. She considers the law, which imposed French citizenship on Algerian Jews, a "document of cultural genocide" (282). The formulation reframes what historians typically celebrate as emancipation into an act of violent erasure. The decree effectively seduced the indigenous Jewish population into accepting French citizenship as a granted gift, thereby omitting "the theft from Jews of their heritage, world, and traditions" (102), and forcing a wedge between them and their Muslim neighbors. Azoulay writes with piercing clarity about the linguistic silencing that accompanied this shift, noting particularly how the Arabic language, the mother tongue of her ancestors, was excised from their mouths to make room for the colonizer's French.

If her father's narrative represents the success of colonial erasure, Azoulay locates a powerful antidote in the "mass refusal of the colonial [citizenship] deal" (197) performed by the generation that preceded him. She contrasts her father's assimilation and shame regarding his Arab roots with the defiance of her great-grandmother, Marianne. Though Marianne was forced to bear a French name, she subverted the "colonial contract" (197) by naming her own daughter Aïcha, a choice Azoulay interprets as a declaration that "Islam is my culture, alongside my Jewish faith." (198) By reclaiming this name for herself— "*I call myself Aïsha*" (197)— Azoulay rejects the binary imposed by both French and Zionist projects. She effectively reverses her father's legacy; where he "*was ashamed of his family for still being shrouded in Arabness, for failing to be shed of all their* Jewishness (198)," she actively resurrects the Jewish-Muslim identity he was too paralyzed to pass down.

The discovery of a name that embodies the interfaith world she seeks to resurrect becomes emblematic of Azoulay's effort to reconstruct a genealogy of the anticolonial acts through which her ancestors resisted their forcible conversion. This genealogy is anchored in the material basis of the book's title. The "jewelers" in question were the Jewish artisans of the Maghreb, whose craft formed connective tissue within the broader Islamic society. Azoulay postulates that jewelry making was part and parcel of a "social and religious fabric of mutual care, [of] a world that artistry helped bind together" (9). It created objects that circulated between communities and bound them in networks of commerce, aesthetics, and mutual reliance. The artisans did not operate in a segregated Jewish vacuum; their diverse products, including amulets and talismans, were worn by Muslim women and were believed to possess a cosmological power that defied strict theological boundaries: "With their crafted amulets they brought rain" (8).

Azoulay provides concrete illustrations of this interdependence. She describes how the production of gold threads—essential to the elaborate embroidery that characterized Maghrebi textiles—required "one Jew and one Muslim" to sit on opposite sides of the same bench and work in "coordinated choreography" (p. 389). The image crystallizes her broader argument about the inseparability of Jewish and Muslim lives in the pre-colonial Maghreb. The craft itself physically necessitated collaboration, making the subsequent colonial project of separating

these communities a violent disruption of material production processes. The destruction of the artisan class was a clear prerequisite for the integration of North Africa into the global capitalist market. The influx of mass-produced European goods rendered the handcrafted jewelry obsolete and severed the economic ties that held the "Jewish Muslim" world together.

Azoulay's engagement with the intellectual giants of the twentieth century provides some of the book's most rigorous theoretical friction. She directs significant scrutiny toward Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and revolutionary whose writings on the Algerian War of Independence are foundational to postcolonial studies. In a letter addressed to him, Azoulay challenges Fanon for his "*democratic aphasia*" (151) vis-à-vis the Jewish population of Algeria. She interrogates his clinical work at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital, observing that Fanon frequently referred to Algerian Jews as "Europeans" in his medical notes. Such a categorization, Azoulay argues, reveals a significant blind spot in Fanon's revolutionary vision. "It is not clear to me how much you understood that this *Arab* that you were talking about was not necessarily Muslim but could be Jewish too" (119), she writes. The implications of her critique are substantial. If Fanon, the great theorist of decolonization, could not see the indigenous Jew beyond the categories of settler or European, then the anticolonial movement itself was complicit in the erasure of the "Jewish Muslim" identity. The National Liberation Front (FLN), in demanding that all Algerians choose between the French and the Algerian nation, left no space for those who were both Jewish and indigenous to the Maghreb.

Beyond Fanon, Azoulay applies a similarly rigorous critique to Hannah Arendt. She challenges Arendt's dependence on European political traditions, arguing that Arendt's vision of "human solidarity" was fatally "narrowed by relying only on "the words of statesmen, political theorists, and political philosophers" (429) rather than the ancestors of the colonized. Azoulay accuses this Western tradition of fabricating a "Judeo-Christian" alignment to conscript Jews into a civilizational war against the Islamic world. In a striking passage, she contends that the Zionist project transformed Jews into "neo-Jews, or perhaps more accurately neo-Christians" (422), forcing them to abandon their specific history in the Maghreb to become part of a "racial capitalist Christian project" (422). For Azoulay, the "repair" offered by Europe—the nation-state—did not solve the Jewish question but rather mutated it, turning the survivors of genocide into "conscience-less colonizers" (419) who perpetuate the very imperial violence they once fled.

A pivotal component of Azoulay's theoretical apparatus is her redefinition of citizenship as conversion. The terminology suggests that becoming a citizen of the republic demanded a spiritual and ontological transformation that implied the erasure of one's previous self. She extends this analysis to the State of Israel, considering the Israeli passport and citizenship regime mechanisms of entrapment. The acceptance of Israeli citizenship completes "the double project of conversion" (422), sealing the individual within a nationalist identity that requires permanent hostility toward the Arab world. Azoulay details her own rejection of this identity, describing her attempts to claim Algerian citizenship, in political rather than legal terms, as a reclamation of the amputated self. She challenges the nation-state's monopoly on granting rights, arguing that true decolonization needs the abolition of the borders that separate the "Jew" from the "Muslim." Her children and grandchildren, she insists, have "the right to be with our ancestors" (162), a right that imperial citizenship systematically denies.

Despite the sheer force of Azoulay's argumentation, the text presents certain analytical challenges. The reliance on the concept of "refusal" drives the narrative yet occasionally flattens the historical agency of the subjects involved. Azoulay explains the transition of North African Jews into French or Israeli society almost exclusively through manipulation and colonial syndrome. She writes, "I propose to call them converts" (1), a label that implies a loss of authenticity and agency. This framework struggles to account for the diverse motivations of

North African Jews, many of whom actively embraced French culture or Zionism for the sake of social mobility, safety, or modernity. To treat these historical actors in the victim role primarily of a colonial swindle is to deny them the complexity of their own political choices, however fraught those choices may appear in retrospect. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the "Jewish Muslim" world relies heavily on a potential that risks idealizing the pre-colonial past. Azoulay acknowledges that Jews in the Maghreb occupied a specific position within Islamic social hierarchy, one structured around religious difference distinct from racial ideology. However, her narrative occasionally glosses over the structural inequalities that existed under the *dhimmi* system. A more granular historical analysis might complicate the binary between the harmonious "Jewish Muslim" world and the fractured colonial present.

In the final analysis, *The Jewelers of the Ummah* erupts in the fields of Middle Eastern studies and postcolonial theory as a vital intervention. Excavating the figure of the "Jewish Muslim," Azoulay offers a powerful counter-narrative to the "clash of civilizations" model. The book demands a high degree of engagement, asking us to suspend our faith in the imperial archive and to listen instead to the silence of the amputated limb. Azoulay's work unfolds in a restorative mode. It seeks to repair the broken threads of a world where Jews and Muslims once lived within a single, complex political body. The book's uncompromising stance may indeed alienate some historians. Nevertheless, the text succeeds in its primary mission: to open a crack in the wall of history through which we might glimpse a different future.