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ABSTRACT

In this text, I reflect and expand on three questions that I was invited to submit to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay on occasion of the publication of her book *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World*. In her book, Azoulay deploys the form of the open letter addressed to her actual and chosen kin, in an effort to revisit, examine, and repair the disruption of Jewish-Muslim life in the Maghreb and the Middle East by two interlaced colonial projects: the French rule of North Africa and the Zionist colonisation of Palestine. Book launch organiser and chair Nondumiso Msimanga requested that questions be submitted in the form of open letters to Azoulay, to reflect the author's own deployment of the open letter. By examining a range of experimentations with the epistolary form and specifically the open letter, and by writing open letters of my own that probe the intersections of Azoulay's and my preoccupations, namely obstacles and allies in the act of creation, and a migrant feminist politics of refusal, I propose the open letter as a method with rich decolonial feminist potential.

KEYWORDS: open letter; feminism; decolonial practice; epistolary form; politics of refusal

The open letter as decolonial feminist method: Observations and attempts

By Alexandra Kokoli

Pre-amble: RSVP

A shorter version of this text was generated in response to an invitation to participate in the launch of *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World (*2024) a book by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay consisting of open letters to her actual and chosen kin, from her great-grandmothers to fellow decolonial thinkers and activists, including Sylvia Wynter and Franz Fanon. The book revisits, examines, and begins to repair the disruption of Jewish-Muslim co-existence in the Maghreb and the Middle East by two interlaced colonial projects: the French rule of North Africa and the re-designation of its Jewish people as Europeans; and the Zionist colonisation of Palestine. The practice of writing these open letters developed side-by-side with another, jewelry-making, a typically Algerian Jewish craft in the ummah, the borderless community of Muslims: 'Alternating between writing letters and stringing beads onto different threads, I finally understood how I could have once believed that I had never seen an Arab Jewish artist' (Azoulay 2024, 13). By making jewelry, Azoulay awakened her inter-generational muscle-memory, reclaimed lost skills and a forbidden craft, and began to re-materialise the lost world of her foremothers. Not only the jewelry itself but its sounds, the clinking of women's bangles, that had long been censored by the project of making Africa's Jews European, flesh out worlds that words alone cannot bring forth, 'worlds in which the work of our blessed hands mends the world, daily' (Azoulay 2024, 572). In this sense at least, Azoulay's 'unlearn[ing] of imperialism' (3), her decolonial practice of writing and making, is no metaphor.[1]

Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga, an artist, activist, and researcher who works as Research Coordinator at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg, invited Jennifer Bajorek (Hampshire College, US), Emery Kalema (The Africa Institute, UAE) and myself on behalf of the RADICAL | OTHERS research stream of VIAD to act as (cor)respondents to Azoulay in more ways than one: riffing on the established convention of book launches to have fellow scholars respond to the book's author, Msimanga asked us to pose our questions to Azoulay in the form of correspondence, by addressing open letters to her, as she did in *The Jewelers of the Ummah*.[2]

Unlike Bajorek and Kalema, my scholarly expertise does not lie in the Levant, North Africa or their (anti-/de-)colonial histories. What I brought to the table instead was some

[1] I am here evoking one of the foundational and most cited examples of decolonial thinking that addresses a set of different settler colonial projects (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Since this article's original publication, 'decolonisation' has been further co-opted by institutions and individuals that in practice support colonial operations and is now already losing its currency, not least due to a sharper turn to the right by governments and institutions. I continue to believe in the capacity of scholarship to make change beyond rhetoric, in however small ways.

[2] A recording of the online book launch and discussion is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X0FZKNJI-8

experience with correspondence in art practice, notably my research into the Women's Postal Art Event, aka Feministo, 1975-1977 (Kokoli 2004) and my own collaborative scholarship that proceeded through (or in the form of) letter writing (Kokoli and Sliwinska 2021). As Basia Sliwinska and I wrote, our adoption of 'the epistolary form' was motivated by our search for a method for a 'practical and equitable record-keeping of our exchange' and in recognition of 'its rich tradition in feminist politics and thought', where 'correspondence both charted the emergence of a new consciousness and sisterly alliances, and became a lab for the development of alternative ways of thinking and engaging with one another' (cf. Jolly 2008; Kokoli and Sliwinska 2021, 113). We aspired to occupy the space between 'letter-writing as a formal convention' (Meskimmon, 2014, 31) and a dialogical critical feminist methodology of 'engaged essay-making' (ibid, 29).

In the experiments that follow, I continue to explore the ways in which letter-writing of this kind is more than a literary device and whether it can be viewed as an intersectional feminist method that aspires to liberation. 'More than' does not mean 'other than': the letters below were written in close succession and without the expectation of a response, except for during Azoulay's book launch; the letters are not dated in acknowledgement of their artifice: their dates would only reveal when writing was accommodated in my diary, rather than punctuate a true exchange. In their present iteration, the letters 'practice' the ideas of this very text and are published in an academic journal as a form of practice-led research. Not to mention that letter-writing is a well-known writer's trick. I know from experience that a way to relieve writer's block is to imagine an addressee: what struggles to be expressed in abstraction and in absentia of a recipient, takes some kind of shape as soon as a virtual reader is conjured up in the writer's imagination. Tricks and processes are obviously not methods, but they can be, under conditions. According to the early work of my former colleagues Carole Gray and Julian Malins (1993), strong proponents of both the interdisciplinarity and disciplinary autonomy of practice-led research in art and design, what practice-led art and design research lacks in scientific rigour – generality, verifiability, replicability, universality – it can more than make up for in expressive vigour, by making explicit its implicit processes and communicating them effectively and impactfully. In other words, a method worthy of the name is judged by whether it does the trick.

Letter-writing has long been approached as a particularly active form of writing, or even a form of action, including notably as therapy (Davidson and Birmingham 2001). In Azoulay's hands (and I don't use this expression entirely metaphorically; see Letter 1), the writing of open letters is enlisted in the struggle against the colonial trauma of erasure, specifically the destruction of the Jewish Muslim world of her ancestors. Azoulay (2024b) describes the choice of letter-writing as an alternative to academic writing and an enabling discovery, 'a research tool to access and inhabit the debris of this destroyed world'. The writing of open letters, in particular, is known to 'surface during pivotal historical junctures' and has often used by marginalised groups in pursuit of justice and liberation, from James Baldwin's 1962 "A Letter to My Nephew" 'to Chanelle Miller's published victim impact statement addressed to her assailant, which provided vocabulary and was kindle for #MeToo' (Richards 2024, 10). The authority of authorship is at least shared by the addressee, which is why the choice of addressees matters: in the 'chain of sender-receiver

relations, power is conferred and directed and cannot be subject to interpretation' (Richards 2024, 22).

Compared to Azoulay's decolonial project, the stakes in my experiments are less high, but still pinpoint important intersections between global operations and personal consequences. Since 2008, I have found myself reclassified from a European availing of the freedom to travel, live, study and work across the European Union, to an immigrant, retracing the steps of many from the south northwards, due to two seismic events: the Eurozone debt crisis of 2009-2014(?), which was blamed on the high debts and 'slow' economic 'growth' of Southern European countries that then became known by the derogatory moniker P.I.G.S. (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain. Ireland, a former and, according to some, still partial colony of another European country was sometimes included: P.I.I.G.S); and the so-called 'Brexit' referendum of 2016, where a narrow majority of voters decided that the UK should leave the European Union. I arrived in the UK to study and then work in Higher Education, almost exclusively in art schools absorbed into 'post-92' universities, mostly former polytechnics with a focus on technical and vocational than purely academic education.[3] Although it is difficult and possibly ill-advised to generalise, such universities tend to place greater emphasis on teaching over the research (or practice; or practice-led research) of their academic staff. This meant that Virginia Woolf's (1929) famous search for 'the conditions most propitious to the act of creation' or, by extension, the undertaking and publication of research, was not merely a feminist beacon but also a pressing, live concern that I cannot afford to ever put to bed. Making time, stretching time, redistributing time from the less to the more worthy (and thereby also creating hierarchies of worthiness – 'priorities'!) became simultaneously a necessity, an aspiration, and an externally imposed imperative. I bristle at the memory of successive line managers advising me and others like me, highly mobile knowledge economy workers with caring responsibilities and support networks that are solely DIYed rather than inherited, to better manage our time – and therefore also ourselves.

Woolf's advocacy for women's right to the creative life is inevitably shaped by her class positioning and occupation as a writer. Where she imagines acts of creation as the result of a solitary practice at a desk, in silence, others have discovered and articulated a messier, collective terrain of feminist cultural production, where women's art is galvanised by women's liberation movements and borne out of collaboration and togetherness, tensions and disagreements (Tobin 2023). Letter writing pushes against the solitary orientation (cf. Ahmed 2010) of a writer's practice to redistribute its authority and responsibility between at least two; the open letter does the same, across many. Azoulay contrasts the standard academic mode of writing – signed by academic personas and addressed to 'everybody' (albeit a highly qualified 'everybody' with the requisite cultural capital to enter the text, and the economic capital to get through paywalls) and thus effectively nobody – with an open epistolary space where those who feel addressed can join

[3] The phrase 'post-92' refers to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which reclassified polytechnics (in England), central institutions (in Scotland) and higher education institutes as universities, giving them independence from local government and bringing them under the control of central government. 'Post-92' universities are also referred to as 'new' or 'modern universities'.

in, or not. The capacity and willingness to respond is not assumed but mobilised by the medium, in acknowledgement of the dynamics of call and response, the politics of (dis)identification, and different degrees and qualities of (non-)belonging. Perhaps such as response-ability is precisely where the decolonial potential of the open letter lies: every letter is an invitation to recognise oneself as an addressee or not, to respond or not, to (re)orient oneself towards the letters and objects that matter.

LETTER 1

Dear Professor Azoulay,

On page 9 of your book *The Jewelers of Ummah* there is a picture of a handful of coins – a hand, full of coins – from Algeria that were gifted to you by Shamira Negrouche for the preparation of a breastplate. I imagine this to be your hand, busy 'between writing letters and stringing beads [and coins!] onto different threads' (p. 13). I think about the women's postal art project *Feministo* (1975-?), by which I felt addressed many decades after it began and possibly ended, and which set me on the road to becoming an art historian of women's movements (Kokoli 2004). Co-founder of the postal art network Phil Goodall described Feministo as consciousness-raising in material form, and her words profoundly shaped my understanding of both art and feminism.

Is your book then a textual iteration of a larger unlearning operation that also takes place in material form, specifically through the craft of jewellery-making, the embodied recovery of a censored skill? If so, what forms does this material iteration take? Is it a postal art network? Gift exchanges? An exhibition-in-progress?

At your book launch on 31 January, you reminded me/us that what you make is not art. Of course, I understand, but also feel disappointment and a share of the responsibility, as an educator, for how narrow and exclusive working definitions of art remain. I keep returning to Feministo as a source of feminist nourishment and defiance against an artworld built on heteropatriarchal privilege and capitalist commodification. Feministo was a network, first and foremost, that was principally sustained through the exchange of handmade objects through the post. The price of entry was deliberately low in every sense: materials were cheap and often upcycled, skills were passed on between women across generations, no studios were necessary, and works were made at the kitchen table, in-between other, more pressing tasks. Feministo was committed to the difficult but worthwhile process of unlearning art historical canons and recovering long marginalised practices usually performed by women and gendered accordingly. In a conversation with her mother Agnes, Feministo instigator Kate Walker (1987, 30) discusses rag rugs and 'the aesthetics of survival', to which she remains connected despite her art education, thanks to an intersectional feminist consciousness:

> Behind the questions to my mother was the tangle in my head of a childhood rooted in a different visual culture from the notions of 'art' in the world in which I now mostly live. In my own work, I have used knitting, embroidery and quilting in an ironic and semi-detached way, to try to say something about the tangle – this inter-relation of women's work with art, with class, with leisure.

Walker's irony is directed in equal measure to the art establishment, the media that did not comfortably fit in it at the time, as well as the institutions and discourses that uphold a hierarchical distinction between art and craft. Revisiting Walker's conversation with her mother helps me better understand your insistence on intergenerational knowledge as resource, not just towards a practice but for survival (as was Feministo), that your jewelry-making is life not art (as was Feministo) and that objects can be sites of resistance – by design, for both your jewelry and in the women's postal art network. So, respectfully, I still think of your practice as art, if Feministo is art, which it might or might not be, depending on definitions.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Kokoli

LETTER 2

Dear Ariella Aïsha,

I am delighted to have been given this opportunity to address you (thank you, Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga!) and was intrigued to read about how you chose your addressees. You write that you only address 'those with whom [you] share a certain commitment to pursue the anti-imperial struggle of our ancestors', and explain why you exclude others, such as Adolphe Crémieux, whose destructive influence is acknowledged (Azoulay 2024, 20). As you argue, the Crémieux Decree granted 'newly colonised Algerian Jews French citizenship' but in reality it 'was not the end of their colonization but its continuation in a different form' (115). As I read, I wondered, are there any worthy addressees that you haven't included in *The Jewelers of the Ummah*?

I also note that the role of addressee can be claimed for oneself and not only bestowed by the letter writer, as for example Achile Mbémbé did with your letter to Sylvia Wynter. I assume Mbémbé is most welcome to take this role for himself, thanks to his considerable credentials in anti-imperialism, but also because, interestingly, he chose a letter where you express ambivalence. In the section 'Addressee Biographies' of your book, you write of Sylvia Wynter that while her text on 1492 'appeared to [you] as a guide to the Americas', you were also 'troubled by her use of the category "Judaeo-Christian" (as she spells it), which seems to further, through language, the disappearance of the Jews from Africa and the destruction of the Jewish Muslim world' (Azoulay 2024, 31).

Your book is written in English (US spelling) and is occasionally punctuated with short passages, usually isolated words or short phrases, written in Hebrew and Arabic. These are sometimes translated, often not exactly, even if one can deduce their approximate meaning from context. It is significant that our access to these open letters is not uniform or universal but rather depends on our literacies, on which scripts we can each decipher: not everything is for everybody; some are granted greater access than others. The decolonial aspirations of your work are far removed from the neoliberal co-optation of inclusion (Hong 2024).

I am now rethinking my question: in addition to further worthy addressees, who are your bad faith interceptors and (mis)interpreters? And if this a constitutive risk to the open letter, what are its implications? Can we or should be mitigate against it?

Best,

Alexandra

LETTER 3

Dear Ariella Aïsha,

I am writing this not from my native Thessaloniki, once described as the Jerusalem of the Balkans, but from a North London suburb where I have settled as a knowledge economy migrant. I grew up mindful of Thessaloniki's rich historical hybridity and its subsequent destruction: in the mid-1990s, my father Xenophon A. Kokolis (1939-2012) translated into Modern Greek a collection of Sephardic songs by Jewish refugees from Spain (Yannatou 1995), and commissioned Savina Yannatou (2002) to record them. Savina has since performed them many times, often with the ensemble Primavera en Salonico, to great international acclaim. And yet here I am writing to you in English, on a laptop that belongs to my employer and where I never bothered installing a Greek keyboard. Even adding the requisite diaeresis over the 'i' in your middle name takes a few steps, which slows me down.

How can we resist monolingualism and the gravitational pull of Latin keyboards in daily life, with their tempting shortcuts and apparent simplicity? Can you please share your strategies?

At the book launch, your answer to my question put me in my place: you said that you always install the keyboards for the languages you use, but… You had notes, if not conditions: you spoke about your aversion to the process of installing the Hebrew script, which is represented by the Israeli flag. After all, you said, languages are not tied to scripts and to assume otherwise is an imperialist imposition.

My friend the art historian Alice Correia recently sent me a book that is also written in epistolary form. It is titled *Letters of Remembering* and it responds to *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*, an exhibition by artist Jasleen Kaur and her collaborators Alina Akbar, Nasrine Akhtar, Rizwana Ali, Shakra Butt, Rahela Khan, and Bushra Sultana. Alice writes to Jasleen, Jasleen shares excerpts of her work for Gut Feelings Meri Jaan with Alice, they converse beyond the book, Alice writes back. Jasleen (who studied jewellery and metals at the Royal College of Art, London) and Alice share much in common, including a South Asian heritage and a commitment to art, but they also exchange stories, each giving the other something she doesn't have. For Gut Feelings Meri Jaan, Kaur invited a group of women and gender non-conforming people from Rochdale's Pakistani, Bengali and Punjabi communities to join her in a series of online conversations examining and responding to the contents of the local history archives at Touchstones, where they and their ancestors were largely under/mis/unrepresented. The work interrogates how cultural heritage is preserved and considers human bodies as living archives and carriers of histories of colonisation, migration, and survival, offering a reinterpretation of Rochdale's cultural memory through films and installations where customs and rituals are recalled, (re)invented, and put to work towards collective healing. In another book emanating from engaging with another archive, Kaur (2019, 12) reflects: 'How do we research survival/ how does survival become research?' On her part, Alice offers her art historical scholarship into the work of British artists from the South Asian diaspora who've long grappled with similar concerns. Alice writes: 'You said something like, "Why don't I know about this?". That's the sort of question that is driving

my research' (Kaur and Correia 2021, 19). Alice sent me the book because I'm also researching Kaur's work (Kokoli 2025), considering in particular its correspondences with the artists' collective Sister Seven, who also targeted monuments and heritage sites in Rochdale during their residency *Triple Transformations* (1985), remapping onto them lesser-known stories of labour, deindustrialisation, and women workers.

I spent a lot of time with Kaur and Correia's book, which is printed in two languages, English and Urdu, the latter translated from English by Sabeen Shahid Rehmani. Alice, who'd been working in the archives of Touchstones herself, discovered that its posters and publicity during the 1980s and 1990s were all bi-lingual, English and Urdu. 'It seems that the gallery curators were very conscious of local audiences and were keen to bring South Asian communities into the gallery' (Kaur and Correia 2021, 51). I enjoy looking at the pages of Urdu script, acknowledging the radical politics that they reference and reactivate. Being unable to read them, these pages remind me of the origins of scripts as stylised drawings. Their opacity (to me) also bears significance: I am addressed as a reader of English, and not addressed as a non-reader of Urdu. In this book I've been gifted, half the pages are not for me.

Professor Azoulay, thank you for your words, those that I can read and the others: they've given me a lot to think about and hopefully do. I want to be your ally in the recovery of the Jewish Muslim world, or the Muslim Jewish world. First, Palestine must be free.

Signing off for now, for those who can read it.

Yours,

Αλεξάνδρα

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