

Decolonizing the Moroccan Archive Transcript

Yasmine: Hi, my name is Yasmine Benabdallah. I am a filmmaker and visual artist from Morocco. I work mostly around questions of memory, history, archive, and rituals. I am really interested in exploring questions of body and intimacy in how we relate to historical dispossession.

Rim: Hi, my name is Rim Mejdj. I am a filmmaker, director, producer, and curator as well. I work around questions of collective memory and its disruption caused by modernity and colonialism in Moroccan cultural practices and thoughts.

Y: Rim and I are coworkers, but also friends, and we thought about having this conversation to discuss film practice through our experience in a space like Morocco where archive has been erased, and where we have been and continue to be dispossessed from our history. So most of this conversation will be explored and expressed through how we intimately and bodily feel ruptured from that archive that should be brought back into our possession. So this is an introduction to all of these ideas.

R: Yes, and through our work together, the question of archives was taking a big space in our personal practices, but also as we work collectively in different projects. It started with assessing the situation of archives in Morocco, and with that, we can give you an overview of the Moroccan institutions that are responsible of archives. We have the CCM, the Moroccan Cinematic Center, which is the main funding body for cinema, as well as the administrative body that gives permits for shootings, and so on. Some years ago, they tried but failed to create a Moroccan cinémathèque that would hold Moroccan audiovisual materials, and due to lack of funding, but also to various bureaucratic issues, the project has stopped. The second institution is the SNRT, which is a national TV station and radio, with all its regional antennas. They hold archives from the independence till now. We have Archives du Maroc, which was founded in 2012 and which is the main institution that is responsible of centralizing archives, not only audiovisual archives, but all kinds of archives. And we have independent institutions such as Cinémathèque de Tanger, which is actually one of its kind in Morocco, regarding audiovisual archives. Yasmine, you worked with the Cinémathèque de Tanger. Can you just tell us a little bit about this, the challenges, and their concerns?

Y: I think something that is interesting in the Moroccan archival landscape is that there is first the question of maintenance and making sure to have spaces for conservation of the archive, and then there is a question of access. Cinémathèque de Tanger, being the only independent cinema space in Morocco does ask themselves a lot of questions about this. So they have a pretty extensive filmic archive, and they also have private collections of images that were granted to them. So they are currently trying to understand how they give access to those, for them to be either consultable or even used as part of projects, but they are also facing a big maze of questions of legality, and legal texts that could govern questions of rights. And this is a big question that we've been discussing with you Rim, which is the question of access. There is very little information available online in general, in terms of institutions in Morocco, which doesn't fit a country where mobility is still an issue and most institutions happen to be in the capital city of Rabat. And the lack of access is not helped by the legal texts that we have, which happen to be very incomplete, whether that is about consulting or about even the status and the use of the archive in artistic or research works. Those legal texts have often been unchanged since colonization, and happen to be remnants of that system, where the status quo has been purposefully maintained by the powers in place, only worsening the alienation of the Moroccan people from our history, our knowledge, and our records. And topping all of this is the lack of communication and collaboration between the different institutions. So in terms of jurisdiction, their missions originally sort of overlap, which is very confusing, because then

when you reach out to an institution, they can say that it's not their jurisdiction but another one's, and they can play this sort of ping-pong kind of game, sending you from one to the other, and easily you can get lost and discouraged by the different bureaucratic systems that are at play. But we also wanted to recognize that decolonizing the archive doesn't go only through working with our institutions here, but also with western institutions and western private collectors that would be present here, and I know that you've had experiences with this, so maybe you want to explore that a little bit.

R: Through our conversation, one of the main things we have to do is really denouncing the lack of work in terms of first restituting our archives from European institutions, that most of the times refuse to give the archives back, or even give a copy. Lately, it happened with Archives du Maroc. They asked for archives belonging to Abdelkrim El Khettabi, a very important figure in the Moroccan resistance against the Spanish colonization, and they refused. The archives were held by France, and they refused to give them back, after three months of negotiations. The other problem is actually what you said, what I call archival tourism, where some western people create or inherit private collections of archives, or even get access to public archives and they consider these archives as their own property, forgetting that it belongs to the Moroccan people first of all, and that they are a public property and this problem in the status of the archive, what's the material property versus the ownership, the real ownership, the symbolic ownership, is very present. I'm going to give very briefly an example that we faced when we were working on Ch[a]rita program, which is a festival that takes place in the public space, and that tackles issues about collective memory, history, and our relationship with history. One of our artists in residence was looking for archival pictures around the question of slavery in Morocco from the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and when I contacted a man who's responsible of a big archival fund in Marrakech, a private collection, he refused to give access to us and to the artist, saying that it belonged to him, not to us, that it's his own property. So this led us for the next edition of Ch[a]rita in 2021, to create this cycle of decolonizing archive, where, with my colleagues Francesca Masoero and Nouha Ben Yebdri, we invited you Yasmine to this talk, with the director of Archives du Maroc, and the processes of decolonizing archives, and the role of institutions, of artists, problems of access. We really hoped that a potential horizontal collaboration between us artists and researchers and institutions could take place. But often our questions were dismissed and we were told that these questions are already taken in consideration. We had this frustration, and we kept it in mind, and that's why we started talking about a manifesto, about how we can take action and change things as artists and as researchers. This manifesto, Yasmine, we thought about it as really a call for action, right, rather than words.

Y: Definitely, I feel like that talk with the director of Archives du Maroc was a catalyst for us, because we came in with high hopes, and as we said, a lot of it was dismissed. There was clearly, if not disagreement, clearly a lack of desire on the part of the institution to build something together. So I think in the long tradition of manifestos, there was this need to collaborate and also a sense that a lot of artists and researchers have a shared frustration in terms of what the institutions could be doing, so the manifesto came as this idea of a very concrete text that asks for action on the part of the institutions. The challenges that we are facing with this manifesto are actually echoed in this conversation we're having right now, because it is aimed for a platform that's based in the UK, and so we are also trying to understand how we can be talking about a decolonial act while seeking support from foreign institutions, or western institutions. That is mostly due to the lack of institutional support here in Morocco, but it is still a big question that we're asking ourselves, of how we can take ownership and ensure opacity, without feeding into neo-colonial perceptions of Morocco. So one of the things we've been thinking about is language. While this conversation we're having right now is in English, a big intention of ours is to produce a text, that the manifesto be in Darija or Arabic, and so for that, there's also an open call we're trying to put out to ensure the participation of artists and researchers, but also of other Moroccan citizens who are impacted on a visceral level by this rupture. So we plan to write the manifesto through collective workshops, for it to

be representative of our voices together, but for today and for this conversation, we thought that it would be a great opportunity to already talk about a few examples of requests that we have in mind for the manifesto. The first are requests that we thought to put forward to the CCM, the Centre Cinématographique Marocain, as two people who work in film. 1 minute of film, right now, costs 7500 MAD, which means that once you've actually gone over all the hurdles of access and consulting and being able to actually get to the archive, you need to pay an equivalent of about 700 €, to pay for one minute of film, which is insane. Just for reference, in France, at INA, which is their archival body, you pay 150 € per minute, so the cost in Morocco is five times the one in France, which makes no sense when you compare sources of income in Morocco, or funds even for films. So one of our suggestions was to make a scaled price for the minute depending on the budget of the film, with a reasonable minimum price in mind, knowing that conservation of archive is costly. So we understand that, but it should still be adapted to the budget of the film, especially coming from the body that gives funds to Moroccan films. We also thought about a special fund of archive that's available for free, and online, and then to consult the archive that is not available online, it should be available to everyone for free. Use is something to be talked about afterwards, but consulting should be free. And one last thing we were thinking about asking from them is to publish an online repertory of all archive available, because right now, it is very hard to know where to seek which archive, to know which is available, which is deteriorated or currently being restored, and this is information that should be available to all of us. The second thing we were thinking about is to ask to centralize all types of archival funds within one institution, and it would be great if it could be Archives du Maroc because that is the main aim and mission of that institution, and this is mostly to avoid bureaucratic mazes, or avoid conversations which, very similarly to the talk we had, were met with the answer "this is not our jurisdiction", and then that institution can have regional centers throughout Morocco to make it more accessible and available that could be all linked together. Then there are a few more thoughts that we had, and maybe Rim you want to talk about them.

R: Also one of the main things we thought would be important to ask in the manifesto and to demand are the creation of a fund of archives related to the lead years, which span from the late sixties to the beginning of the nineties, where the political regime in Morocco was quite violent and repressive towards freedoms in general, and l'Instance d'équité et de réconciliation demanded the creation of this point. The last point as well is really to think about our diplomatic relationships with ex-colonial countries, because we can't continue friendships and allyships when requests of getting back and restituting our own archives are not met. As long as there isn't an actual diplomatic pressure at play, either France or Spain or other countries alike won't return our archives, and we want to take this manifesto and take our voices in international organizations such as UNESCO to intervene in this process that seems to take years and years. We think these are all seeds for future thoughts and conversations to be had with the people who are concerned by this issue. Hopefully, as part of our workshops and even more, we can get inspired and inspire other communities in other countries that have been dispossessed of their archives.

Y: That's the hope. We hope that this was an informative conversation. This is really just the beginning of our process here, and we are trying to get more people involved in it, but we really do hope that it can, through this Screen Worlds platform, be not only inspiration, but be the start for actual calls for action. Thank you, Rim!

R: Thank you, Yasmine, it's been great!