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## **The Invisible Female – Notes from Tunis**

Myriam Amri and Malek Lakhal

These notes are a fragment of a longer project, that of a friendship that has been unfolding for a decade. We met in our last year high school, sat next to each other in philosophy class as our professor was untying the intricacies of theories of the state to us. That year was also the year of the Tunisian revolution and we began from then writing, thinking, scheming together, imagining in the radical breathlessness of the moment what other worlds could be conjured. In the decade that passed since, we wrote to each other, exchanged short stories, started a literary magazine. The conversation below is part of that body of work that forms a friendship; it is part of the paper trail and the written traces that speak to relationality. Similarly to how the abolitionist Mariame Kaba reminds us that “everything worthwhile is done with other people,” in a decade we have come to enmesh our thoughts together and with other people and to realize how to unsettle the frames we have internalized, whether colonial and patriarchal. We collectively thread what might have been and could be. The work of weaving meddles forms; when we started writing to each other we realized the forms of invisibility we spoke of could be apprehended discursively as much as visually. The multimodality helped us grasp the layers necessary when seeking to capture the depths of tentacles of power. Yet the work of weaving is never pure nor does it absolve us. It is corrupt and borne out of repeated and repeating frustrations of realizing how our feminist imaginaries have yet to be translated, how a decade after the revolution the patriarchy still speaks louder than anyone and endlessly responds to itself while the rest is relegated in corners. This conversation begins with the voices of loud men taking space. It does not resolve it. Yet it ends with friendships – radical female friendship as a method, a skeleton from which to organize, resist and care for.

## FILM

دار و شارع (Dar w Chara3/Home & Street)

Directed and shot by: Myriam Amri & Malek Lakhhal

This short film entitled دار و شارع (Home and Street) explores female invisibility and absence in the city of Tunis. In the period of Ramadan, as sunset is looming, women disappear from the streets. They are at home, cooking and preparing the Iftar. In contrast, masculine bodies fill the streets, walking, buying bread, exercising, alone, with their children or in groups, or just hanging in cafés, waiting for them to open. By juxtaposing visuals of men on the streets with the sounds of women in the kitchen, we explore the relations between public and private spaces and how they map onto to gendered dynamics, that crystallize in space, of the home in contrast to the street, and in time, during the particular period of Ramadan.

The title « دار و شارع » is an expression our mothers use to express the idea of the double burden: the fact that they work both at home (for free) and “in the streets” (for a salary).

**LINK:** <https://vimeo.com/553696326>

**Password:** bayraprod21

## CONVERSATION: Myriam & Malek, January-May 2021

### MYRIAM, January 25th 2021

I wonder why we never did this earlier. I think about all our Facebook conversations and how if we were to print them, the way in courts now entire pages of social media exchanges are printed for “judiciary evidence.” What kind of forensic materials do our conversations from afar hold as well? This friendship has been remote before many other things were.

I wonder about language too, English for the requirement of a deadline. But what would we use if we weren't inscribed a language on which to speak of gender, revolution, and the silences anything female is subsumed in? Of language thereof, or rather, let's not speak of languages because we both know it is a never-ending pit in which we have thrown every insecurity possible for the past decade.

I reckon this friendship is also celebrating its revolutionary decade.

But of women and 2020 nonetheless. I am grappling with the notion of “invisible female infrastructure” and the ways that the female (rather than women?) / females hold at the same time the sites of status quo and the sites of protests and revolutionary potentials too. Think about mothers as the gatekeepers of the patriarchy, the ones who conjure the “father figure” as a looming shadow in times of crisis. But I also think that mothers are revolutionary subjects in the sense that in the context we speak, mothers (and even sisters) are the ones conducting the labor, holding the household. Women work so that men can go protest. It's grossly simplifying but there are nodes and threads and cement made of female bodies that hold the burden of possibilities, the revolutionary, the status quo, the counter-revolutionary. To every path, an invisible female structure.

What I'm trying to suggest by using female, or maybe rather consciously strive toward, is avoid the binary women vs. men which hides the many bodies at stake here, covers them with sheer violence, and erases the multiple gendered experiences at play. I am also thinking in terms of translation and the slippages of translatability, as woman in French is “femme,” which evokes the English “femme” – a nod to a performance, at times subversive and at others compliant, of femininity. Finally, through female, I want to denounce the noun “la femme,” which here in Tunisia has been used in its singular form by state feminism and the nationalist project that produces a singular “femme tunisienne” as a social object for the patriarchy. Through using female, one might attempt to render visible the social representations and the forms of bodily control that power insidiously deploys. And because nouns have at times an immutable authority to them, an adjective sounded more capacious, like a container of possibilities of many other definitions.

So what happens when female bodies get invisibilized? When we attempt to “*décortiquer*” masculinity, broken young men in order to understand a protest, then we ironically assume that masculinity is only held in male bodies or synonyms to a fixed gender category called “the male.” I rather think that patriarchy hovers in the

air and that to inhabit a patriarchal space is also to be imbued in it, even when one is queer or surrounded by “females.” It would be dangerous to think that to separate oneself from the heteronormative cisbody is to actually to escape patriarchy.

What I find terrifying too is to think that revolutionary anything can happen outside of questioning the systems that rely on yet invisibilized females, that produce both the necessity for female infrastructure and the conditions for its silencing. It is wild that labor extraction in Tunisia and the Tunisian nation-state are based on female co-optation; they need a female body for work and a female ideal to thrive ideologically. Yet there is an entire system (from all parts, from the cop controlling the female body to the leftist analyst) that produces the invisibilization of females at the same time. And clearly the solution is not to acknowledge that women are the main agents of the household now and leave it all for capitalism to keep working. But how is that contradiction rendered possible and maintained? And more importantly why does self-proclaimed resistance to power refuses to resist patriarchal power, as if that wasn't the constitution of power itself? Why does resistance take as its universal currency “the man,” while when women resist, then it's something more particular (and peculiar)? It's feminist, it's gendered, and definitely not that socially relevant or even that urgent.

You wanted to speak of lockdown, space, and female bodies in public spaces, no?

**MALEK, Tuesday, January 28th 2021**

### **ORIGINAL VOICE**

Il y a ces jours où l'espoir reprend un peu vie, et avec lui, l'effervescence, l'excitation, l'envie de pousser plus loin ce qui s'agite, et puis, s'avouer au fond, que cette vie que l'on mène est beaucoup trop fermée, beaucoup trop petite, que ce n'est pas bon d'être aussi enfermé dans ce qu'on appelle sans illusions « notre bulle ». J'ai envie, mais aussi besoin de cet avenir plus ouvert, où les murs tombent. Car dans cette bulle, je me sens pourrir. Etouffée par la rage des défaites et celle des honneurs mal distribués, j'en oublie d'espérer, de me souvenir que certains jours, pendant ces dix dernières années, il y avait des choses qui étaient possibles, des horizons qui étaient saisissables et que l'espace s'ouvrait grand à nous et à nos excitations. Comme ce matin, où à peine réveillées, on s'envoie des vocaux pour s'avouer que la défaite avait peut-être bien commencé à nous empoisonner la cervelle, à renfermer l'air dans nos pensées, au point que la question « qui l'a dit ? » importe plus que « qu'est ce qui est dit ? ». Mais voilà, on le dit, et c'est déjà mieux, on respire déjà mieux. J'ai l'impression d'avoir une chance inouïe de pouvoir dire ça à quelqu'un sans peur d'être jugée. Tu écris “we have thrown every insecurity possible in the last decade”. Et je pense qu'on a fait ça, les unes dans les autres. Parfois sans même le savoir, blessant l'autre, mais aussi, sans peur, rassurées par la certitude douce que quelqu'un sera toujours là pour rattraper. Et il est temps, que ces liens prennent, s'inscrivent dans les mots, ceux d'une langue ou d'une autre. Peu importe.

Ce qui m'étonne le plus dans toute cette histoire que l'on vit en ce moment, c'est le silence. Des tonnes et des tonnes de silences, lourds, pesants, comme du ciment frais qui n'a qu'une hâte, qu'un but, étouffer ce qu'il recouvre. Bien sûr, celui de ceux qu'on appelle les « marginalisés » qui n'existent que par les petits postillons médiatiques au pire, et des analyses sociologiques bancales au mieux. Combien de sondages, de focus group destinés à traduire les aspirations et les désespoirs des « autres ». Parfois des documentaires, plus ou moins réussis, plus ou moins marquants, qui obligent à interroger sa place. A mesurer l'épaisseur des murs qui séparent nos pans de monde. Mais il manque toujours quelqu'un. Il faut apprendre à le dire aussi : j'en ai assez des hommes. J'en ai assez de lire des hommes, de voir des hommes, de penser aux hommes, de leur donner de mon temps et de mon attention. Des décennies durant, mon espace a été minutieusement bouffé par les hommes, par leurs pensées, par leurs solipsismes ennuyeux. Si bouffé que je ne me suis rendu compte que très tard de l'absence que ça a été pour moi d'avoir été privé des femmes, de leurs voix, de leurs paroles, de leurs peurs et de leurs rires. Je n'ai plus le temps d'écouter les hommes, je n'ai plus le temps de ménager les hommes. Eux oublient sans trembler qu'on existe, qu'on est là, qu'on porte leurs vies et qu'on se souvient où est-ce qu'ils ont laissé leurs pyjamas quand ils se sont habillés ce matin.

J'ai de l'espoir, donc, mais je ne négocierai pas espoir et silence. Ni le mien ni celui des autres femmes. Je n'ai plus le temps de ne pas attaquer quand un sociologue tout imbu de certitudes oublie la plus élémentaire de ses tâches : se positionner, se rappeler qu'il ne parle que de ses congénères. Je n'ai plus le temps de ne pas envoyer paître quelqu'un qui ne me compte pas, quand moi, je passe mon temps à calculer ses semblables. Je n'ai plus le temps de me taire, d'oublier les femmes, d'oublier ce qu'elles donnent et ce qu'elles cachent. Je n'ai plus la patience pour ménager les murs de nos enfermements, pour ne pas dépasser les lignes, je n'ai pas envie de me retenir. Je veux envahir l'espace de toute la surface de nos besoins.

### TRANSLATION

There are days when hope comes back into being, and with it, the effervescence, the excitement, the desire to push further what is happening, and then, to admit deep down, that this life we are living is much too closed, much too small, that it is not good to be so locked in what we call without illusions "our bubble." I want, but also need, this more open future, where the walls come down. Because in this bubble, I feel rotten. Suffocated by the rage of defeats and badly distributed honors, I forget to hope, to remember that some days, during these last ten years, there were things that were possible, horizons that were graspable, and space that opened wide to us and to our excitements. This morning, we had just woken up and were sending each other vocals to admit that the defeat had perhaps started to poison our brains, to close the air in our thoughts, to the point that the question "who said it?" matters more than "what was said?" But here we are, we say it, and it's already better, we breathe better already. I feel very lucky to be able to say that to someone without fear of being judged. You write, "we have thrown every insecurity possible in the last decade." And I think we've done that, one into the other. Sometimes without even knowing it, we hurt the other, but also, without fear, reassured by the gentle certainty that there will always be someone there to catch up. And it's time for these bonds to take, to be inscribed in words, those of one language or another. It doesn't matter.

What amazes me the most in this whole story that we are living right now, is the silence. Tons and tons of silences, heavy, weighty, like fresh cement that has only one hurry, only one goal, to suffocate whatever it covers. Of course, that of the so-called “marginalized” who only exist through small media sputters at worst, and shaky sociological analyses at best. How many polls and focus groups intended to translate the aspirations and despairs of the “others.” Sometimes documentaries, more or less successful, more or less striking, force us to question our place. To measure the thickness of the walls that separate our parts of the world. But there is always someone missing. We must learn to say it too: I am tired of men. I am tired of reading about men, of seeing men, of thinking about men, of giving them my time and attention. For decades, my space has been thoroughly eaten up by men, by their thoughts, by their boring solipsisms. So eaten up that I didn't realize until very late that it was an absence for me to have been deprived of women, of their voices, their words, their fears and their laughter. I no longer have time to listen to men, I no longer have time to spare men. They forget all too well that we exist, that we are here, that we carry their lives, and that we remember where they left their pajamas when they got dressed this morning.

I have hope, then, but I will not negotiate hope and silence. Not mine, not other women's. I don't have time to not attack when a sociologist, full of certainties, forgets the most elementary of his tasks: to position himself, to remember that he is only talking about his fellow human beings. I don't have the time anymore not to tell off someone who doesn't count me, when I spend my time counting his fellow men. I don't have time to keep quiet, to forget about women, to forget what they give and what they hide. I don't have the patience to keep the walls of our confinements and not to cross the lines. I don't want to hold back. I want to invade space with all the surface of our needs.

**MALEK, February 1st 2021**

### **ORIGINAL VOICE**

Je repensais aux documentaires tout à l'heure, ceux qui ne mettent en scène et en image que la marginalité des hommes, et je me rappelais mes images. Mon père, qui a la fin de chacun de nos séjours à Kelibia donnait de l'argent de poche à ses sœurs chômeuses. Il les appelait par leurs prénoms pour qu'elles viennent, « Soumaya aya ! » « Fatma aya ! » et il leur donnait un peu d'argent. Puis on partait. Ma mère, pendant des années me disait « Ne soit pas comme elles, ne te met jamais dans une situation où tu es obligée de tendre la main à un homme. Travaille. Etudie. Réussi. ». Quand ma sœur était dépressive et qu'elle ne sortait plus du tout, ma mère hurlait « Jit l 3ametek » wala « T7eb twali kima 3amétek ? »

Et je me rends compte que je n'ai jamais vraiment pensé à ces scènes entre mon père et ses sœurs sans le sou. Des rituels de pouvoir. L'homme qui distribue, à moitié content de son pouvoir, à moitié mécontent de la situation de ses sœurs. Je me demande ce qu'elles devaient ressentir à chaque fois, je n'en ai aucune idée, je ne m'étais jamais posée la question. A quel point c'était humiliant, ou naturel pour elles de recevoir cet argent ? Est-ce qu'il est arrivé qu'elles se plaignent de la faiblesse de la somme ? Est-ce qu'il est arrivé que mon père oublie et qu'elles soient obligées de lui rappeler ? Comment c'était pour elles, toutes ces

années ? Comment c'était quand elles recevaient un billet pour avoir fait le ménage chez mon oncle ? Est-ce qu'elles sentaient que c'était un salaire ? De la charité ? ça faisait quoi de le voir ramener ses chaussettes sales à laver chaque semaine ? Toutes ces années de soins, de déménagements, de lavage de chaussettes sales quand les frères brillaient dans leurs costumes bien coupés. L'injustice, à couper le souffle, mais ne brisant au final que le dos de l'une des sœurs.

C'est à l'intérieur des murs des maisons que ces scènes se passent, adossées à l'immense mur patriarcal, qui rend toutes ces humiliations l'objet d'aucune interrogation. Juste un truc qu'on montre du doigt à des filles comme moi pour qu'elles ne finissent pas pareil.

Les hommes eux, dans les documentaires, ça les révolte, ça n'est pas comme ça qu'ils avaient prévu de vivre. Ils avaient des rêves. Des désirs immenses. Et il y a la rage de certains de voir leurs rêves partir loin d'eux. Cette rage-là, existe-t-elle chez les femmes ? J'ai l'impression que les femmes sont comme destinées, lentement mais sûrement à abandonner leurs rêves, à ne pas faire de bruit, à faire avec ce qu'elles ont. Jusqu'à ce qu'elles explosent, qu'elles deviennent furieuses d'avoir tout laisser en dedans. Et là, on les traitera de folles et on passera son chemin sans s'arrêter.

### TRANSLATION

I was thinking about the documentaries earlier, the ones that only show the marginality of men, and I remembered my images. At the end of each of our stays in Kelibia, my father would give pocket money to his unemployed sisters. He called them by their first names so that they would come, "Soumaya aya!" "Fatma aya!" and he would give them some money. Then we would leave. My mother, for years, used to tell me, "don't be like them, never put yourself in a situation where you need a man. Work. Study. Succeed." When my sister was depressed and didn't go out at all, my mother would yell, "jit l 3ametek" wala "t7eb twali kima 3amétek?"<sup>1</sup>

And I realize that I never really thought about those scenes between my father and his penniless sisters. Rituals of power. The man handing out, half happy with his power, half unhappy with his sisters' situation. I wonder how they must have felt each time. I have no idea; I never wondered. How humiliating or natural was it for them to receive this money? Did they ever complain about the amount? Did my father ever forget and they had to remind him? What was it like for them all those years? What was it like when they got banknotes for cleaning my uncle's house? Did it feel like a salary to them? Charity? How does it feel like to have him bring his dirty socks to be washed every week? All those years of caring, moving around, washing dirty socks, while the brothers shine in their well-cut suits. The unfairness is suffocating, yet it only broke a sister's back.

It is inside the walls of the houses that these scenes take place, leaning against the immense patriarchal wall, which makes all these humiliations the object of no questioning. It's just something that girls like me are shown so that they don't end up the same way.

<sup>1</sup> "You've turned up like your aunts" or "do you want to become like your aunts?"

The men, in the documentaries, are revolted by it, it's not the way they had planned to live. They had dreams. Immense desires. And there is the rage of some to see their dreams go away from them. Does this rage exist in women? I have the impression that women are destined, slowly but surely, to abandon their dreams, to keep quiet, to make do with what they have. Until they explode, until they become angry at having left everything inside. And then, they will be called crazy and people will pass by without stopping.

**MYRIAM, February 2nd 2021,**

A second email,

I read your words, once and then twice and then a few other times, and every time I end the paragraphs breathless, not in a metaphorical way but rather because my throat constricts during the process of reading. By the time I reach the next paragraph my body truly asks for more oxygen. Obviously, your beautiful writing is the reason for it and I'm happy (I couldn't find a better word though joy is a spectrum of intensity that these colonial languages of ours can never fully depict. Joy, in its multitudes, in its contradictions, in its bodily presence, closed throat or open arms, is not something French and English can even fathom to begin describing). But the closing of my throat brought me back to bodies and to the enclosure of the female body. I think enclosure is the perfect term here because to be enclosed is both to be physically smothered and metaphorically closed-off but also because enclosure reminds me of the French twist of the word "enclos." Women are domesticated creatures, enclosed in spaces (the home, the domestic, the street during the day but not at night, the factory, the university classroom). To be enclosed also means to deny one's bodily freedoms. There is little space to move one's arms and legs in queer ways in an enclosed space. This reminds me of the latest protest and how cops were infuriated that some women put make-up against the screen of their shields. The move was half ridiculous but also maybe interesting (I still don't know exactly how). For example, I saw posts on social media from the infamous other side, saying these were not real women (because they had short hair!) though they pretended to be with their lipstick and that most importantly, "how dare they ridicule the men of the nation?" What does it mean to occupy femalehood against gender binaries? What does it mean to claim the "female" and at the same time to disrupt the imposed definitions of what female ought to mean?

Therefore, to silences, we must add enclosures. You write about the fresh cement of walls and I think of walls, enclosings, cement structures, barriers, wooden fences... Actually, the multiplicity of these walls matter because we too often only focus on hard, thick, and rather ugly cement walls and clap around them with "women's liberation," "equality," "rights." Yet if a cement wall is a thick presence, a jurisdiction, a law, paperwork, then as it barely gets dismantled (remove two bricks, claim they have air, keep the wall up) it covers up or gets replaced by much more insidious walls. Walls of silence, walls of pretense, invisible walls, walls that do not even look like walls; they are doors that do not open anything or nets that wrap themselves around female bodies. In the exhausting labor of breaking walls, others get formed and fixed precisely because we are putting all of our energy on that single wall or that single brick while all the other constructions



can progress freely. Representations do that too well. It's a wall we focus on (put women in parliaments! In films! in protests! In capitalist institutions! Fill them with women; here you go, freedom!) to forget all the other insidious barricades and fences that cloak themselves around us.

What other labors are necessary to map all the walls, and make cracks into many of them? Something collective surely, structural, and enraged. Deeply deeply enraged. I know you worry about anger and resentment and the ways in which we have turned into creatures of contempt (let's name it even if it hurts). Yet I think rage itself is not given to all; it's a privilege. I think of your aunts and my dead aunt. After she was gone, my family said that it was better that way because she didn't have it in her to fight. She was never a fighter, an enraged one. It's horrible to even think that. What do they know about the rage(s) inside her, passing through her body, yet invisible on the outside? How immensely difficult it is for women to even claim rage, to refuse to keep their anger locked in, but instead burst it wide open for the world to see even if it's neither pretty, nor "feminine."

Now I think of aunts and I just want to write about them. What a strange thing to be an aunt. Think of how spinsters are aunts for example. Of the differences between aunts from the father's side and sisters of mothers which are something else altogether. Let's just write about aunts.

Now that I think of aunts I think of grief too. Grief is a fuel too.

To mourn the loss of a present we long for, uncaged, holding people against national health requirements  
To mourn the loss of that tiny flicker of a different future we saw once a decade ago

Is there no turning back once you taste the alternative possibilities that can be conjured even if they are phantasmic in some ways, even if the labor they require extends beyond your body and that of many other female bodies? Or does grief and mourning cancel rage and enable resignation?

We are defeated and we have lost so much, yet I also think about our personal fights, for care, for queerness, to exist in chosen liminalities, to lose people and keep others and all the struggles that have to come. They too must count as victories. The Ministry of Interior still stands; men roam freely but think about how you looked down when you walked the streets a decade ago. A small and meaningless thing, yet for your body to stand straight, your neck to stop bending is surely a fight worth noting. Let's not celebrate it though. Celebrations often put up garlands and lights (*jeux de lumière* as a certain man would say) to hide walls. Let's maybe just remember what was, what there is, what could be and what should still be possible, what has to necessarily become possible.

Now I am thinking of roundabouts and what a terrible architectural scheme it is to have these round structures in the middle of streets. Roundabouts are only for cars; they are impossible to cross by foot, by bike, with a group of people, holding hands. So to put a statue, some flowers on a roundabout is also to cover up something hideous and grotesque. Roundabouts remind us that we can't inhabit places but just turn around them, pass by them. Bodies cannot exist close to the roundabout, instead, you have to be covered and hidden inside a car. Roundabouts are enclosures of spatial possibilities and freedom of crossings.

**MALEK, February 9th 2021**

### **ORIGINAL VOICE**

Je ne sais pas si je t'ai raconté qu'il y a quelques semaines, un vieil homme a susurré quelque chose en me croisant dans une rue du centre-ville, et sans trop y penser, je l'ai suivi. Je n'étais pas sûr s'il m'avait harcelée, je n'avais pas bien entendu ce qu'il avait dit, mais j'étais derrière lui, sur mon téléphone et je l'ai suivi. C'est quand j'ai vu qu'il se retournait vers moi l'air un peu perdu que j'ai compris qu'il m'avait bien harcelée, alors je me suis prise au jeu, et je l'ai suivie consciemment cette fois, exprès, à deux pas, toujours sur mon téléphone. Il se retournait de plus en plus, et au bout de quelques trente secondes à le suivre, il a changé de trottoir. J'ai adoré ce moment, adoré comme jamais je pense. Parce que j'ai senti sa peur, sa panique. Et ça m'a fait du bien de le mettre dans cet état. Je me suis sentie puissante. Donc oui, il y a des victoires, des victoires sur soi déjà, sur sa propre peur, des victoires aussi pour soi, quand on trouve les moyens de vivre pour soi et de guérir.

Mais il nous manque encore beaucoup de victoires. J'ai envie de vaincre la solitude, toi et moi, là, on essaye, on tâtonne, on construit. Depuis des années. Mais je veux plus, je veux être dans de vrais communautés, créer avec d'autres, de larges groupes d'autres. Je sais, tu sais, le poids de la solitude. Je sais et tu sais parce que toi comme moi tu as pu la sentir se lever avec nos amies, et tu as alors senti une légèreté toute neuve, à la fois un torrent de force et un enlacement de chaleur. Nos tantes, est-ce qu'elles ont pu s'offrir ça ? A la mort de ma tante divorcée et seule, on a dit « De toute façon, elle n'avait plus vraiment envie de vivre depuis qu'elle avait pris sa retraite, elle n'avait rien à faire ». La facilité avec laquelle on jette les femmes dans les tombes, dans les oubliettes, publiques et privées. Elle était une femme divorcée sans enfant, sa vie donc, après le travail rémunéré n'avait pas une grande valeur. Les femmes sont dans leurs maisons, invisibles, elles ne sortent pas la nuit, elles ne sortent que le matin, pour faire le tour des commissariats et des tribunaux, on peut alors oublier qu'elles existent, qu'elles participent.

Les idées s'emmêlent dans ma tête, il y a toujours trop. Il faut qu'on apprenne à finir ce qu'on commence toi et moi :).

### **TRANSLATION**

I don't know if I told you that a few weeks ago, an old man whispered something as he passed me on a downtown street, and without thinking too much about it, I followed him. I wasn't sure if he was harassing me, I didn't quite hear what he said, but I was behind him, on my phone, and I followed him. It was when I saw that he was turning towards me, looking a bit lost, that I understood that he had indeed harassed me, so I got into the game, and I consciously followed him this time, on purpose, two steps away, still on my phone. He kept turning around more and more, and after about thirty seconds of following him, he changed sidewalks. I loved that moment, loved it like never before I think. Because I felt his fear, his panic. And it felt

good to put him in that state. I felt powerful. So yes, there are victories, victories over ourselves already, over our own fear, victories also for ourselves, when we find the means to live for ourselves and to heal.

But we still lack many victories. I want to overcome loneliness, you and I, we have been trying, fumbling, building. For years. But I want more; I want to be in real communities, create with others, large groups of others. I know, you know, the weight of loneliness. I know and you know because you and I have felt it lift with our friends, and you have felt a brand new lightness, both a torrent of strength and an embrace of warmth. Our aunts, could they afford this? When my divorced and lonely aunt died, we said, "she didn't really want to live anymore since she retired, she had nothing to do." The ease with which women are thrown into graves, into public and private oblivion. She was a divorced woman with no children, so her life after paid work was of little value. Women are in their homes, invisible; they don't go out at night, they only go out in the morning, to go around the police stations and the courts, then we can forget that they exist, that they participate.

The ideas get tangled up in my head, there's always too much. We have to learn to finish what we start :).

### **MYRIAM, May 1st 2021**

This text comes after a pause, a rather long one maybe. What have we been doing since the protests? Where have protests and politics gone? We can't speak of despair anymore. What we have now is more insidious, longer, a kind of subterranean defeat, poisoning air and water. More enduring too. I think of Tunis in a decade and all I see is gloom, privatized lands, electricity cuts, and doom. Defeat is truly when you can't even speculate about lighter horizons. When we lose the future we probably lose everything that might have been, and all too.

I still do want to write to you though. With guilt perhaps. Guilt of the bubble we ceaselessly occupy for a decade or a lifetime now. The bubble of art productions, poetic texts to friends, recorders catching bird sounds. A bubble mediated by the camera, creative words, zooms, and whatnot. It feels stingier these days. Everywhere I go, I am reminded of the bubble. When I catch a glimpse of the radio, "how can you cook for your husband on this Ramadan season?" "Can a woman wear mascara while fasting?" I didn't even know about the make-up rule; now it feels like a performative resistance every time I draw the eyeliner, walk into the Central Bank smelling of two forbidden things of this month: perfume and coffee. I find it absurd and infuriating, how they gaslight us into thinking this is where the fight is, who can drink and eat or not, modernity, cultural traditions, religion. This is why we retreat into the bubble. Because these are senseless conversations not even worthy anymore. I'll just eat and drink inside the building, inside the house with friends and pretend the rest does not exist. We perhaps lose something nonetheless. I don't know what exactly. Or perhaps the walls of the bubble become hardened. Like the previous walls we talked about, of invisibility, silence, adverse incorporation...

Everything becomes a performative resistance. Look at you on the street at 6pm and not frying briq for a husband, brother, father. The streets are always where the violence is more visible. Picture a female body an hour before the end of fast. In the streets there are only men, first men alone buying bread, getting the kids out of the kitchen so Madam can cook. Half an hour before breaking fast. 6.30 this time and downtown Tunis only has cops left and little hordes of young men, teenagers, younger adults, roaming out of boredom. I saw a few women: one was running to get water, the other had a tomato paste last-minute emergency. Not everyone is cooking though. I think of all the *bayras*,<sup>2</sup> bored on a terrace, a cigarette in hand, sighing at the sights of the street but with a little hum inside, the victory of not cooking for Mr that is hardly earned. It's that time of the month where these small meaningless things become enormously present because everywhere we are reminded and saturated by the weddings, the quests for husbands on TV shows, the cooking and cooking. It's like a yearly sting of the constitutive gaps between us and them and a yearly reminder of how little do we have all of us, females, even us *bayras*.

**MALEK, May 13th 2021**

### ORIGINAL VOICE

Je vois ce que tu veux dire. Pour la défaite. Mais tu sais, ce projet que l'on fait sur la mémoire de l'époque Ben Ali me rappelle une chose : on ne s'en voyait pas sortir. Personne n'en voyait la fin et pas une seconde, on ne s'est imaginé une fin pareille. Alors, je ne dis pas qu'il y a des raisons d'espérer, je dis simplement que personne n'a dit son dernier mot. Jamais. Et qu'il y a des idées à construire et des luttes à mener.

Tu me parles de la bulle. Combien de fois avons-nous parlé de la bulle ? Seulement, maintenant, ce n'est pas que je change d'avis mais je crois que je peux voir d'autres bulles que la mienne. Tout le monde est dans une bulle. C'est un des effets des bulles je crois de se penser les seules dans une bulle. Et la nôtre a le mérite d'être si grotesque, si grossière qu'on peut difficilement l'ignorer : elle ne parle même pas la même langue que ceux et celles qui l'entourent.

Mais toutes ces familles qui se réunissent les soirs de Ramadan, qui ne parlent que de braquages et d'insécurité et de mariage et d'enfants, tu ne crois pas qu'elles aussi vivent dans une bulle ? Quand, pour mon travail j'ai écumé les cafés du commerce objectivés (les focus group) j'ai entendu tellement de fois dire « Avant il n'y avait pas de violence, il n'y avait pas d'insécurité, il n'y avait pas de terrorisme, ce n'est apparu qu'après la chute de Ben Ali ». Et j'ai eu envie de rire d'eux et de leur bulle de présent et de leur nostalgie de bulle passée. On était si bien quand on ne savait rien, quand on ne nous disait rien, quand tout le monde avait l'air occupé à un seul et même destin : manger, digérer, mourir.

Les bulles sont partout, omniprésentes. Je crois sincèrement que personne ne peut se targuer de ne pas vivre dans une bulle. D'être au fait des choses telles qu'elles sont. Ces hommes-chercheurs qui ne parlent

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<sup>2</sup> Spinsters

que d'hommes-cherchés, ne se languissent-ils pas dans une bulle qui sent la bite ? Les plus drôles pour moi, et ils sont nombreux, ce sont ces gens qui assènent des « C'est la réalité » comme un coup de marteau final à leur argumentation, pour te dire en sous-titre « Pauvre de toi et de ta déconnexion », comme si eux se frottaient religieusement tous les matins à une pierre nommée « réel » jusqu'à s'écorcher la peau de sa pesanteur.

Tout le monde est situé, et tout le monde est enfermé. Et le plus souvent, dans ces bulles, nos existences n'ont de place que marginale, comme ces existences-là ne trouvent pas de grande place dans la nôtre. Ce n'est pas une bonne chose, mais je crois qu'il est important pour lutter contre les bulles de cesser d'en faire un malaise nombriliste, d'accepter les limites comme une situation politique dont on peut s'éloigner, un peu.

### TRANSLATION

I know what you mean. About defeat. But you know, this project we're doing on the memory of the Ben Ali era reminds me of something: we couldn't see ourselves getting out of it. Nobody saw the end of it and not for a second did we imagine such an end. So I am not saying that there is reason to hope, I am simply saying that no one has said their last word. Not ever. And that there are ideas to build and struggles to wage.

You talk to me about the bubble. How many times have we talked about the bubble? Only now, it's not that I'm changing my mind, but I think I can see other bubbles than my own. Everyone is in a bubble. It's one of the effects of bubbles, I think, that we think we're the only ones in a bubble. And ours has the merit of being so grotesque, so crude that it's hard to ignore: it doesn't even speak the same language as those around it.

But all those families who get together on Ramadan evenings, who only talk about robberies and insecurity and marriage and children, don't you think they too live in a bubble? When, for my work, I went to the objectivized pub talk (focus groups) I heard so many times, "before, there was no violence, there was no insecurity, there was no terrorism. It only appeared after the fall of Ben Ali." And I felt like laughing at them and their present bubble and their nostalgia for the past bubble. We were so good when we didn't know anything, when we weren't told anything, when everyone seemed to be busy with one and the same destiny: to eat, digest, and die.

Bubbles are everywhere, omnipresent. I sincerely believe that no one can claim not to be living in a bubble. To be aware of things as they are. Don't these male-researchers who only talk about researched males, languish in a bubble that smells of cock? The funniest thing for me, and there are many of them, are those people who say "this is reality" as a final hammer blow to their argument, to tell you in subtitle, "poor you and your disconnection." It is as if they are religiously rubbing themselves to a stone called "reality" every morning until they skinned themselves with its heaviness.

Everyone is located, and everyone is locked up. And most of the time, in these bubbles, our existences have a marginal place, as these existences do not find a great place in ours. This is not a good thing, but I believe

that it is important to fight against bubbles to stop making them into a navel-gazing malaise, to accept the limits as a political situation from which we can distance ourselves, even if a little.

**MALEK, June 23rd 2021**

### **ORIGINAL VOICE**

Je ne sais pas très bien clore. Mais je crois que si je devais clore, ça serait avec un conseil de lecture comme on s'en donne presque quotidiennement. J'ai toujours l'impression que les livres sont une bonne manière de clore, de trouver sa route.

J'ai fini hier *Sur les Traces* d'Enayat Zayyat de la poétesse et chercheuse égyptienne Iman Mersal. C'est le récit que Mersal fait de ses recherches pour retrouver les traces de l'écrivaine Enayat Zayyat. Enayat n'a écrit qu'un roman, publié à titre posthume, puisqu'elle s'est suicidée à l'âge de 27 ans. On navigue avec elle dans les difficultés administratives, les non-dits des proches, les grandes joies des petites découvertes. Et puis à la fin, le livre se transforme en brûlot. Après toute la patience qu'elle a mise à retrouver des traces, comprendre, chercher (et on sent la sueur et les midis assommants de l'été dans son écriture), elle finit par laisser voir sa colère contre ce qu'elle qualifie de « nihilisme de l'archive », cette indifférence écrasante des autorités, cette négligence de sa propre histoire, mais aussi cette manière qu'ont les vivants de prendre toute la place, de brûler les carnets intimes pour échapper à la honte, de raconter les morts selon leurs propres critères, reléguant les mortes à l'invisible, à l'oubli. Et puis des fois, ce n'est même pas la famille, c'est l'amante elle-même qui se charge de brûler les archives de celle qu'elle a aimé des années durant, pour se soustraire à la honte.

Pendant tout ce temps, toi et moi, nous avons cherché à dire ce manque-là, cette disparition implacable des femmes, de leurs histoires, de leurs luttes, de leurs corps, cette relégation qui ne cesse de se déployer sur elles. Et nous luttons contre l'invisibilité, mais savons-nous vraiment le faire ? Dans son livre, Mersal dénonce les chercheurs et chercheuses qui se contentent de l'oralité des témoignages, se refusent aux archives et aux difficultés à les trouver. Et j'ai pensé à ces quelques femmes que j'ai interviewées oralement, et qui dans les années 80 se sont mobilisées, ont lentement appris à se dire féministes. Toutes regrettaient la perte d'archive, le manque d'intérêt pour leurs archives. L'une d'elles me demandait « Pourquoi ce ne sont que des chercheuses occidentales qui s'y intéressent aux archives ? » et je ne pouvais pas répondre. Je ne suis pas allée chercher les archives. Je n'avais pas le temps et puis sans doute qu'il faisait chaud aussi. Mais il faudrait en faire quelque chose quand même. C'est trop précieux, comme ces livres écrits par des femmes qu'on pêche chez les bouquinistes dans les rues et qui sont totalement introuvables autrement. C'est comme ça qu'Enayat Zayyat a croisé la route d'Iman Mersal.

Alors il faut en trouver des moyens, de faire, de vaincre la paresse et le vol du temps institutionnalisé, vaincre le quotidien, l'immédiateté qui n'est qu'instantants impossibles à attraper, et puis vaincre enfin, nos propres petites d'esprit... Mais c'est une autre histoire à écrire ça.

## TRANSLATION

I'm not very good at closing. But I think if I were to close, it would be with a reading tip, like the ones we give ourselves almost daily. I always feel that books are a good way to close, to find your way.

I finished yesterday *In the Footsteps of Enayat Zayyat* by the Egyptian poet and researcher Iman Mersal. This is Mersal's account of her search for the traces of the writer Enayat Zayyat. Enayat, who wrote only one novel, published posthumously, since she committed suicide at the age of 27 in 1963. We navigate with her through the administrative difficulties, the unspoken words of her relatives, the great joys of small discoveries. And then at the end, the book turns into a rant. After all the patience she has put into finding traces, understanding, searching (and one can feel the sweat and the dull summer afternoons in her writing), she ends up letting us see her anger against what she qualifies as "the nihilism of the archive," this overwhelming indifference of the authorities, this neglect of one's own history, but also this way that the living have of taking all the room, of burning the diaries to escape the shame, of narrating the dead according to their own criteria, of relegating the dead to the invisible, to oblivion. And yet, sometimes it is not even the family; it is the lover who takes it upon herself to destroy the archives of the one she has loved for years, to escape the shame.

During all this time, you and I have been trying to recount this lack, this implacable disappearance of women, of their stories, of their struggles, of their bodies, this relegation that never ceases to be deployed on them. And we fight against invisibility, but do we really know how to do it? In her book, Mersal denounces the researchers who are content with the oral testimony, who refuse archives and the difficulties of finding them. And I thought of those few women I interviewed orally, who in the 1980s mobilized, who slowly learned to call themselves feminists. All of them regretted the loss of archives, the lack of interest in their archives. One of them asked me, "why are only Western researchers interested in the archives?" and I couldn't answer. I didn't go looking for the archives. I didn't have the time and it was probably hot too. But we should do something with it anyway. It's too precious, like those books written by women that you find in the bookstores on the street and that are otherwise totally unfindable. That's how Enayat Zayyat crossed paths with Iman Mersal.

So we have to find ways to do it, to overcome laziness and institutionalized waste of time, to overcome everyday life, the immediacy that is only moments impossible to catch, and then finally overcome our own small-mindedness... But that's another story to write.

**MYRIAM, June 29th 2021**

When we started this exchange we were reminiscing about the past decade, about revolution and disenchantment from Tunis under political lockdown, economic collapse, and health crisis. We were also reflecting on our friendship so entangled in the revolutionary temporalities. Yet amidst talk of invisibility, I keep thinking that we assumed this friendship without untangling its knots, rendering its structure more visible too. What I mean by this is, what of the ways we render each other (in)visible? What constitutes a

revolutionary female friendship? How does a decade come to structure our temporalities and that of the gendered subjects since 2011?

We have attempted to translate what we (I perhaps, though it often feels like a collective unpacking) mean by “female.” You often say “femme;” the state says “la femme” as if we were all a singular structure it could mold. By female, I was attempting to think of visibility, of feminized bodies (not only of women’s bodies) and how they exist in space, how they are seen to move and how they are read according to social perceptions of what constitute la femme (in the English/French sense). How do we render visible an experience of (in)visibility of a gendered body in space? Think of us filming the roundabouts, how in doing so we began to notice our own bodies uneasy in a public space (during the day, at sunset), the stories about how roundabouts are where men (not women) hang out, and the ways that women cross these spaces without ever lingering in them. Think of the short film and how the of the time and the year’s calendar determine the presence of women outside in the streets. Not in Ramadan, not at sunset.

It made me realize how the invisibility we started with, the female as the missing revolutionary subject always uncovered to be coopted or forgotten in the first space, is also spatial, ocular, and physical.

You end with archives and I want to end on that too. This conversation has many archives, texts and sounds, and images we sent each other for a decade. The female revolutionary subject in Tunisia has the longest archive, one manipulated and displayed for the performance of a “female-friendly” nation-state. The camera recording presence and absence constitutes an archival tool as well. Yet all these archives, misplaced and in fragments, ours and theirs, barely constitute scraps to uncover the layers of invisibility. How do we tie these archives in their different scale to unsettle invisibility? How do we disrupt the invisible without positing visibility as its mirror opposite, its elucidation? There are many more breaches, fissures, and cracks beyond (in)visibility from which to fight the next decade...



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