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Introduction:

The Making of “Archive and Gender in North African Societies”

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The idea to produce a special issue for *Hesperis-Tamuda* focusing on the thematic field of gender and history in the Maghreb goes back to a conversation started in 2015 between the journal’s editor in chief, Khalid Ben Srhir, and the authors of this introduction. Then followed a series of exchanges with Léon Buskens, Sonja Hegasy, Fadma Ait-Mous, and Yamina El Kirat that finally led to a collaborative effort to convene a joint workshop organized in Rabat in March 2019 on the topic of “Archive et Genre in North African Societies”. The main concern of this initiative was to launch a debate among specialists of North Africa on the history of women and gender. We wanted to bring together relevant, ongoing as well as newly emerging research organized around a specific and, at the same time, thematically open topic. The workshop that emerged out of these discussions took place in Rabat. We are very grateful for the generous financial and logistic support by the Faculté des Lettres of Mohammed V University, and by the Netherlands Institute Morocco (NIMAR), that both hosted the event. Our gratitude goes also to the Swiss-Arab Consortium of Research and Education PRO GED (*Promoting Gender Equality and Diversity Through Shared Knowledge Production*) headed by the Chair for Gender Studies and Islamic Studies at the University of Zurich, and to the Leibniz Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO), Berlin who also made funds available to organize the event. The authors of this introduction would like to use this occasion to also cordially thank their co-conveners of the workshop Khalid Ben-Srhir (Mohammed V University in Rabat/*Hesperis-Tamuda*), Léon Buskens (NIMAR-University of Leiden), Yamina El Kirat (Mohammed V University in Rabat) and more particularly Sarah Farag who coordinated the whole event (University of Zurich). Finally, we are also very much indebted to all the participants who accepted to share their thoughts with us during this workshop that lasted two days.

Starting from the observation that research on the Maghreb still figures poorly in the relatively well-established field of women’s and gender history in Middle East Studies as it crystallizes in major collective publications and reference works,¹ the special issue

¹ See for example the small number of contributions on the Maghreb in reference works in the field such as Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Amira El Azhary Sonbol, *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Lois Beck and Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Muslim World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

suggests to look more closely at questions of sources, methods, and dominant historiographical paradigms. More precisely, covering different thematic fields and periods of North African history, the articles critically inquire into how gender works through archive formation and usages of the archive. In doing so, they do not take the archive as a transparent source of information, but conceive of it as a set of gendered and gendering devices that need to be critically investigated in their own right. In order to grasp the complexity of the problems at hand, we decidedly opted for a multidisciplinary approach. This special issue explores the multiple dimensions of archive and gender from different perspectives by bringing together historians, sociologists, anthropologists and specialists from gender studies working with a variety of relevant (trans-)disciplinary approaches and methods. The contributions address in different ways how the making of archives – formally institutionalized as well as informal, private as well as public, written as well as oral ones – is structured by gender and how, in turn, archives contribute to producing gendered historiographies. Focusing on different moments of North African history and a broad variety of archives, the articles collected here shed light on specifically situated practices of archive building, on dominant methodological grids, on hegemonic narratives, as well as on broader issues of the politics of history and memory.

Engaging with recent trends in Middle East and North African studies,² the special issue systematically connects the issues of gender and archive that are often treated as two separate fields of research. It thereby speaks to a variety of present societal and intellectual concerns well beyond the academia. Especially since the 1990s, feminism and gender have started to be taken up in the MENA region by scholar activists involved in politics of memory – with a particularly strong interest in making women visible and documenting women’s voices or testimonies.³ In the context of post-2011 political upheavals, an increasing number of initiatives have begun to actively document women’s participation in the making of social and political change in the region – thereby joining earlier initiatives. The research and publishing done by the group of scholar-activists that launched and run the *Women and Memory Forum* in Egypt can be considered a beacon in the field of memory work and gender equality.⁴ More recently, along similar lines, young scholars started the project “Archives des luttes de femmes en Algérie” in 2019.⁵ These initiatives envision their work at the intersection of women’s rights activism, feminist archive building and questioning official historical accounts.

2006); Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); and Margaret Meriwether and Judith L. Tucker, *Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

² For one of the most recent comprehensive volumes on memory politics covering Morocco and Lebanon see Norman S. Nikro and Sonja Hegasy, *The Social Life of Memory: Violence, Trauma, and Testimony in Lebanon and Morocco*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

³ See for instance, Hoda Elsadda, “An Archive of Hope. Translating Memories of Revolution,” in *Critical Perspectives on Citizen Media*, ed. Mona Baker, (New York/London: Routledge, 2016), 148-160; Leyla Dakhli and Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Un autre regard sur les espaces de l’engagement: mouvements et figures féminines dans le Moyent-Orient contemporain,” in *Le Mouvement Social* 231, 2 (2010): 3-7. On the role of blogs as spaces for women’s autobiographical performances since 2011, see Sonali Pahwa, “Politics in the digital boudoir. Sentimentality and the Transformation of Civil Debate in Egyptian Women’s Blogs” in *Freedom without Permission. Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*, ed. Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2016), 25-50. On contemporary sociopolitical activism of female artists using their testimonies to disrupt dominant hierarchies, see Naïma Hachad, *Revisionary Narratives: Moroccan Women’s Auto/Biographical and Testimonial Acts*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019). And more generally on the importance of archival and digital activism in the region post-2011 see Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson and Sune Haugbolle, *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020).

⁴ Details on the *Women Memory Forum* can be found here: <http://www.wmf.org/en/>

⁵ For more details on the “Archives des luttes de femmes en Algérie” initiative, see <https://fotota.hypotheses.org/7281>

While being inspired by critical theoretical debates on archive,⁶ the articles assembled in this special issue primarily focus on concrete epistemological and methodological questions as they emerge according to the thematic fields and periods studied during the exploration of specific stocks of sources. Questioning received ideas about women's absence from archival material, the articles suggest to critically enquire into what archival lacuna might reveal about historical events as well as about historiography and historical memory while at the same time bringing into focus the abundance of so far un- or understudied sources from, for example, literature, local or informal archives, oral history as well as from the different genres of scholarly traditions in the region. Another strategy of critical enquiry adopted by the papers is to engage in the (co-)production of new kinds of archive in the course of ongoing research questioning dominant historiographical paradigms.

The more general problems we intend to address through the multitude of perspectives and topics assembled here are the following: What are the gendered matrices of power relations that inform procedures of archive building such as the selection and assembling of topical clusters of documents, the classification of sources and their (re-)transcription according to established schemes of relevance and intelligibility? How do these practices influence historical narratives and vice versa? What does this tell us about the power as well as the porousness of conventional distinctions such as between research and politics? What are the epistemological and the ethical issues involved in intervening into the archive through research? As a consequence, based on concrete topical enquiries, the contributions to this issue aim at contributing to the critique of "the archive" as a foundational reference for producing historical evidence. By treating archival authority as a specific discursive regime, we also aim at examining its connections to the construction and transformation of contested collective memories and identities.

This multidisciplinary special issue presents a selection of texts based on papers given at the workshop - all revised in light of our joint discussions - as well as of complementary requested articles. Covering different scientific languages and cultures, it explores diverse aspects of the *problématique* defined above. In terms of time and place, the articles cover the pre-protectorate period in Morocco (Bouhsini and Dennerlein), colonial Morocco (Aït Mous, El Adnani, Hoffman) and colonial Algeria (Belmessous), in addition to different moments of recent Moroccan political history (Berriane, Essaoudi, Rhani) and contemporary Egypt (Frag). In order to foreground the comparative insights emerging from the overarching concerns outlined above, we decided to put the contributions in the following systematic order that cuts across regional and periodic boundaries.

Revisiting the archive

The first three contributions tackle the issue of women's (in-) visibility in Moroccan history or rather historiography. All of them critically enquire into the role played by the definition and selection of archives and the interpretative paradigms applied to available sources. Latifa El Bouhsini argues that while Moroccan biographical and historiographical sources from the centuries preceding colonization indeed contain various indications of the political and cultural roles played by individual women, Islamic

⁶ Just to mention three famous positions see Rey Chow, "Where Have all the Natives Gone," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, (New York/London: Routledge), 324-349; Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archival Fever: A Freudian Impression," in *Diacritics* 25, 2 (1995): 9-63; and Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

legal sources such as *nawāzil* or *ḥisba* documents give evidence of the various forms in which ordinary women participated in economic activities. In order to reconstitute the legal agency of women claimants before rural customary courts in the Anti-Atlas Mountain, Hoffman bases her contribution not only on official archives – that tend to make women invisible - but also on more informal daybooks or “draft registers” (*registres brouillards*) produced by scribes. These non-formalized traces produced by observers who were at the same time part of the make-up of colonial customary tribunals clearly document disputes involving female claimants from the 1930s to the 1950s. They thus help to question the supposedly self-contained givenness of colonial archival evidence by revealing the gendered schemes involved in its production. In his meticulous analysis of colonial reports on demonstrations that took place in Casablanca and other Moroccan cities in 1944, Jillali El Adnani inquires into the political over-determination of colonial readings of protest movements that systematically led to rendering women invisible in contemporaneous as well as in subsequent historiographical accounts of political events.

Reclaiming the archive

Drawing on insights from post-structural, de-colonial and feminist theories on the role played by power relations in establishing hegemonic master-narratives, another group of three articles explores new ways of reading the historically specific forms of intersectionally gendered positionalities in contemporary Morocco and Egypt. Berriane and Rhani focus on marginal or minor archives in order to gain new insights into recent political change. While revisiting the archive produced during her own field research on the role played by women in Moroccan grassroots organizations, Berriane follows the inconsistencies and diversions in the biographical accounts of her interlocutors in order to contextualize their narratives against the background of changing socio-political conditions. Hence, archiving from the margins becomes a way to read and document socio-political change at various levels of society. Rhani enquires into the epistemological and political complexities of reading women’s testimonies on political violence and explores their potential for pushing the limits of critique based on the perspective of marginalized groups. Exploring the complexity and the diverse itineraries of two women’s rights organizations in Egypt, Farag questions dominant accounts of feminist activism in the region that tend to draw a clear distinction between groups working with a transnationally informed human rights paradigm and those who engage in supposedly more “authentic” local rights languages.

Rereading the archive

A last group of four articles deals in diverse ways with gendered forms of marginalization in collective memory as well as in historiography. Looking at religious culture in pre-protectorate Morocco, Dennerlein suggests to move beyond attempts of simply adding women to existing accounts. Shifting the focus to the role played by configurations of gender in hagiography, she reads the different forms of gendered transgression conveyed in saintly behavior as an expression of socially specific types of (non-) conformity. Focusing on Moroccan late colonial and post-colonial political history, Aït Mous’ and Essaoudi’s contributions both speak to the vexing relationship between contested projections or images of “woman” and women as actors in politics and public debates. Aït Mous analyses the dissimilar ways of framing the right of girls and women to education by male and female participants in nationalist discourse under the French Protectorate. Based on a systematic study of “*Lamalif*”, the most important leftist periodical published between 1965 and 1985, Essaoudi enquires into the feminist

dimension of social critique in post-independence Morocco. Belmessous takes the issue of gender and political marginalization to a different terrain and a different thematic area to question simplistic binaries of resistance vs. collaboration in the interpretation of political agency of Algerian elites in the late colonial period. Her detailed examination of the itineraries of Algerian members of the French parliament raises important questions as to colonial, nationalist and postcolonial biases that underpin the formers' (mis-)portrayal in public discourse as well as historical research.

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