

English **Christina Schultz, *El peso de mis vecinas. La poesía y el cante como dispositivos estratégicos*. Research. Barcelona Producció is an initiative of La Capella.**

“The only son is called Mesehout: the only son. My brother’s name is the same as the president’s: Mesehout. When I grow up, I’ll be president.” These are the lyrics of a song composed by Luiza, one of the women that Christina Schultz lived with in Morocco, staying at her home, helping her with the daily chores and encouraging her to make a song about her life. The verses, upon which she pondered among kitchen junk, uncomfortable public transport and heavy loads at the border, already hint at many of the subversive gestures that this project has interwoven.

The artist explains that these women, “who are involved in *alegal* trafficking at the Spanish-Moroccan border, don’t like being called *carriers*; they find it offensive. They say they are *trabando*—a combination of two Spanish words: *trabajar* (to work) and *contrabando* (contraband)—which means getting up very early, taking their place in the queue at the border, waiting hours for the gate to the Chinese neighbourhood to be opened, entering in single file, picking up their wares, queuing again and, finally, being pushed and shoved through a crowd and even being spat at on their way back to Morocco.”¹ And, with a bit of luck, not being crushed to death by the weight of the load itself, a terrible fate that has been reported in the papers. As Clara Garí explains in her published text on this project, this is the routine of women who move back and forth in a never-ending loop. Their movement is ancestral: those who emigrate and return every day are the grand-daughters and great grand-daughters of a nomadic people from the Maghreb, the Amazighs. And they too are our neighbours. Not only because we share the border of the

nation states that demarcate us, but also because they are the biggest group of migrant people in our city, and their language is the third most widely spoken mother tongue in Catalonia. However, the link goes back much further in time. How would it otherwise be possible to explain that one of the most emblematic words of Catalanness—the “*enxaneta*” or the young child that climbs to the top of Catalonia’s iconic human towers—has an Amazigh origin?

Indeed, Amazigh is an ancient language with its own alphabet: Tifinagh. Although it has not been used in publications for a long time, it has been maintained through the oral traditions of 20 million Africans from several geographical areas, and it has battled throughout history against French colonisation and the standardisation of Arabic. It only became a co-official language in Morocco a short while ago. In a beautiful essay about colonisation, Joseba Sarrionandia—the former member of the Basque separatist group ETA who escaped from prison (to whom the Basque ska punk band Kortatu devoted a song)—explains that, alongside the Basque language, Amazigh is the only western-Mediterranean language that can be considered “autochthonous”. In his attempt to track down who wrote the first grammar, the author demonstrates that there are some similarities between the Basque and Amazigh languages, thereby debunking the myth that minority languages are hermetic and underscoring the strength of the ties between the two, which is what this research defends: “Languages are neither born nor die, they have no mothers or children. Languages are

expressed or silenced in people’s mouths, and they evolve depending on the relationships that these people have among themselves and with their neighbours. [...] In his or her neighbour’s face, every Amazigh has a mirror and a window.”²

When a minority language is given dignity by recording it and subsequently using it—in its own alphabet—in the publication of this project, the subversiveness thereof is apparent. And when the artist returns the language to its essence through performative actions, it becomes intensified: orality is the power of its resistance. And it goes further, because what it publishes are not privileged, erudite words, but a word that is experienced and embodied in women who fight to live in a dignified way, taking on two jobs: the unpaid reproductive job of looking after homes and families, and the productive job of earning money by pushing their bodies to the limit, putting up with insults and carrying loads as heavy as their realities. A word that is also shouted out: *ululai* is the unbridled cry that they use to express sorrow or happiness among themselves. Amazigh women do not conform to the stereotype of Muslim women who are forbidden from the public sphere, subordinated to and dependent on men. They have always worked and taken part in public life through the composition of songs at wedding celebrations. As stated in an anthropological study undertaken in the 1980s, they use such songs as “weapons which can help women have a voice in their community and gain control over their lives”. Because the women perform their own songs and are the only ones who address the entire community, they skilfully use verses to justify and →



→ defend themselves, and to attack or seduce others; and “Even the most ordinary love song represents a form of social criticism”.³

The artist now invites these women to sing beyond the place and time allotted to them. No weddings. She encourages them to sing for no reason, to sing to accompany one another. Because, with them, she has learnt about the power and complexity of the most contemporary of feminist concepts: *sisterhood*. “A pact of solidarity and empowerment among women within a patriarchal context that sees me first and foremost as a woman like them, and that offers me and demands from me an unconditional devotion. Mutual support given in private and in community that, for a woman in a delicate situation, is as essential as breath. [...] Understanding such solidarity as something natural would not only be a falsehood, but also a lack of awareness of a patriarchal system that, above all, makes references to the rivalry between women.” That is how the artist lived with them, and they have shared recipes with one another because here, in the *trabandadoras*' home, the kitchen is everyone's kitchen. And finally there is laughter: “You need to be able laugh at others and yourself.”

Out-of-place laughing and singing, singing despite everything, singing off key, singing while cooking. The idea of not doing things well enough, of getting the tone and translation wrong,

is fundamental because the artist found herself in many situations where she would listen without knowing if she understood well. She describes it as a “dual situation between trust and a constant questioning of oneself”. Without accepting that in a dignified way and, within a context of closeness and privacy, contradicting the dichotomy of what is done well or badly, this project would not have got off the ground. Nor would the artist have known how to assimilate the paradox that the close ties she managed to forge with her female Moroccan neighbours have not yet been possible with her apparently closest female neighbours in her Barcelona neighbourhood. The idea of valuing mistakes in artistic practices is not unheard of. There are those who defend the need to get things wrong in order to ensure freedom and innovation, but in such a precarious sector, what are the consequences for an artist who fails? It would be a good idea to ask ourselves whether all artists are equal when it comes to mistakes.

The presentation of this research has been articulated in a decentred, vitalist way, drawing on the various formats of the derived works and occupying multiple spaces. Both the life paths and the spaces are key here, because Christina got married in Morocco some 14 years ago, wearing a tracksuit and cap, to a Moroccan man. She lived with him for two years within a large family that made a living from trafficking alcohol. All of the family

members occupied the same building on the outskirts of Casablanca. Even though their marriage did not have a happy ending, she appreciatively remembers her experience of living among the family's women. Particularly the women on the ground floor, which was set aside for single women, widows and divorcees, with whom she learnt Darija, or Moroccan Arabic, which has served her well now. I would therefore dare to say that this is a piece of research that, like the genuine ones, actually began a long time ago and is unlikely to finish. Because, when it comes to an end, maybe Luiza, while going about her work, will remember Christina and quietly start singing: “I pray to God for forgiveness or not. That's how I'll look after myself; I'll live here, between the border and my home.”

Mireia Sallarès

Public presentations of the project:

Saturday 19 May at 11.00 am
Venue: Fundació Comtal
collective kitchen
Sant Pere Mitjà, 81
Barcelona

Tuesday 22 May at 7.00 pm
Venue: Piramidón
Concili de Trento, 313, planta 16
Barcelona

Christina Schultz is an audiovisual artist and performer, a self-taught woman in continuous training, and a linguistic nomad. Many of her projects are developed through broad collaborations, and they include the research process as part of the desired outcome. She works with cinematographic, musical and graphic elements, but her main interest lies in relationships with people. Some of the best opportunities of her career have come from mistakes and clumsiness.

¹ The artist's quotes, which have been translated here to aid understanding, are part of the writing in progress for the final dissertation of the master's degree course on the Independent Studies Programme (ISP), MACBA, 2018.

² Sarrionandia, Joseba: *Som com moros dins la boira?*, Ed. Pol-len: Barcelona 2012.

³ Terri Brint, Joseph: *Poetry as a Strategy of Power: The Case of Riffian Berber Women*, Chicago, 1980.

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