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“Descending into Hell”:

Tazmamart, Civic Activism, and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Morocco

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Abstract

In the aftermath of two unsuccessful military coups (1971 and 1972) against the Moroccan King Hassan II (1961-1999), fifty-eight officials and soldiers were disappeared for eighteen years in what was then the secret prison of Tazmamart. Eventually released in 1991, some of the prisoners who survived madness, illness and death have been bearing public witness to the atrocities taking place in this desert prison. Concentrating, in particular, on the questions of place and “emplacement” of the memory of Tazmamart, in this article I explore the many enactments of memory by which survivors have challenged the state-imposed politics of silence and oblivion, and which today continue to counter the official narrative of democratic transition. Tracing memory’s transformative potential, I show that survivors’ orientation toward the past, but also, crucially, toward the present and future makes memory a crucial site of collective agency and political imagination.

Keywords

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Surrounded by the Atlas Mountains, Tazmamart is a small village situated in the pre-desert region of South-Eastern Morocco. In the popular imagination, Tazmamart evokes the terror and arbitrariness of the *makhzen*¹ (the governing institution centred on the palace) and its security apparatus during the “Years of Lead” (1961–1999).² In this remote location, the regime converted a military base built by the French Army into a notorious secret prison camp; here fifty-eight officials and soldiers accused of being involved in two unsuccessful coups d’état against King Hassan II (1971 and 1972) were “disappeared” for eighteen years (1973–1991). Thirty-two of them died in extreme pain.³ For a long time a shroud of silence hung over the Tazmamart prison camp, whose existence was officially denied by the Moroccan government until the early 1990s. Confronted by growing international pressure, in 1991 King Hassan II released both the Tazmamart prisoners and other prisoners of conscience throughout Morocco, and initiated a timid process of political transition. Until the late 1990s, when social and political life remained dominated by a climate of fear, Tazmamart was still unmentionable in public. Since the death of Hassan II in 1999 some of the prisoners who survived madness, illness and death have publicly shared their personal memories by bearing witness to the atrocities they have endured.

Some scholars have explored the memorialization of and the writing about Tazmamart in the broader context of the rich corpus of testimonial literature emerging from the Years of Lead, analysing developments, narrative styles, and common themes (Orlando, 2009; El Ouazzani, 2004; El Guabli, 2014). Brahim El Guabli (2014) has drawn attention to “the hidden transcript” of resistance infusing Tazmamart prison writings, while Naima Hachad (2018) has described the narrativization of Tazmamart as visceral contestations of state-promoted processes of transitional justice and reparation. In her seminal work on the emergence of a public space for human rights in Morocco, Susan Slyomovics (2005: 6–12) has approached prison writing and other public enactments of memory as social practices inspired by longstanding Moroccan traditions of storytelling and *halqa*, a circle of people in which stories are told and shared (see also Elinson, 2009). Slyomovics’ work powerfully brings to the fore the performativity of memory and its capacity to open public space for reconstructing the past and contesting the present in Morocco.

Building, but also expanding, these insights on memory’s potential for political transformation and social critique, in this article I reflect on questions of place and “emplacement” of the memory of Tazmamart. I draw on the oral and written testimonies of some survivors and on my participation in the 2013 pilgrimage to Tazmamart,⁴ and focus, in particular, on the voices of Ahmed Marzouki and Abdellah Aagaou. The personal trajectories of Marzouki and Aagaou have been deeply intertwined since they found themselves in cells opposite each other in Tazmamart. After their liberation, Marzouki and Aagaou, along with other survivors, tried to find a public voice in the face of the silence imposed by the *makhzen*. In 2001, Ahmed Marzouki published in French *Tazmamart: Cellule 10*, a poignant recollection of life inside and outside Tazmamart against the backdrop of the events before and after the military coups. When we met in 2013, Aagaou, too, was writing his memoirs. They have continued to use their personal



memories as a form of activism to denounce past and present state violence and to uncover how the state is trying to disengage from its commitments to transitional justice in Tazmamart. Tracing the “social life” of memory (Nikro and Hegasy, 2017), I examine the many enactments of memory by which Marzouki, Aagaou and the other survivors have challenged the state-imposed politics of silence and oblivion, and which today continue to counter the official narrative of democratic transition.

Conceived as a transformative social practice situated in specific cultural traditions and socio-political environments, memory is oriented not only toward the past but also toward the present and future. Discussing the *nakba* (the 1948 war in Palestine), Ahmed Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod (2007) have empathized the fundamental role of personal memories in the historical reconstruction of past events. However, more than focusing on what personal memories reveal about the past, their analysis shows “the work they do, and can do, in the present” (p. 6). Tazmamart survivors’ written testimonies and public performances show that it is precisely its complex temporal orientation that makes memory a crucial site of collective agency and political imagination. Drawing specific attention to their struggle to “emplace” the memory of Tazmamart I illuminate “the density of local temporalities, not just of the past but also in terms of an agency in shaping the future” (Andermann, 2015: 5).

Discussing memory emplacement in post-dictatorial Latin America, Jeans Andermann (2015) has noted that the recovery of democracy through the creation of sites of memory and mourning often coexists with, and obscures, aspects of continuity of dictatorial regimes. Susan Draper’s work (2015) has highlighted the depoliticization of memory places in Argentina and Uruguay, and the ambiguities surrounding the state discourses on “architectural redemption,” the post-dictatorial transformation of former places of confinement for political prisoners. In Morocco, too, former prison sites have been the focus of national reconciliation policies since 2004, when King Mohammed VI created the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC; in French, Instance Équité et Réconciliation, in Arabic, Hay’at āl-īnṣāf wa āl-musālaḥa) to investigate past state abuses and rehabilitate its victims. One of the ERC’s recommendations was the transformation of the former illegal detention centres into memorials, community centres or museums. Although Tazmamart has become one socially and politically significant site for the national policies of reconciliation and reparation, its survivors still await architectural transformation of Tazmamart prison into a memorial site, and struggle to “emplace” their memories through a multiplicity of performative acts. With their memory practices, they have not only succeeded in carving out a public space for previously state-silenced histories; by making it a powerful symbol of the atrocities perpetrated by the *makhzen* during the Years of Lead, they have also turned Tazmamart into a site of contestation and social critique. Due to the ERC’s shortcomings, especially its failure to ensure the implementation of its recommendations around secret sites of incarceration and torture, Tazmamart has emerged as a powerful reminder of the contradictions surrounding transitional justice in Morocco. Today, Tazmamart remains a battleground where Morocco’s competing politics of memory can be investigated.



Marzouki and Aagaou

Two unpretentious men, each with a good sense of humour and a strong personality, Ahmed Marzouki and Abdellah Aagaou were in their late 60s when I met them in 2013 in Rabat and Mohammedia respectively. They were both born in 1947 to families with humble backgrounds. Marzouki grew up in Bouajoul, a rural village in the Rif, a region with a long history of opposition to colonial and postcolonial powers, and entered the Ahermoumou Royal Military Academy. Originally from an Amazigh family from Azilal (Central Morocco), Aagaou grew up in a village nearby Ben Slimane and became a pilot in the Royal Air Force. Their generation was deeply affected by the political developments that followed the end of the French Protectorate (1912–1956). After Morocco gained its independence, a power struggle took place between the royal palace and the political and military forces that had fought for national liberation (Vermeren, 2006: 19–30; Pennel, 2000: 297–316). The establishment of an authoritarian monarchy by Sultan Mohammed V, who took the title of King in 1957, and the despotic rule of his son Hassan II (1961–1999), generated a profound sense of frustration among those people who had struggled for a democratic Morocco.

Hassan’s dictatorial rule was threatened from the early 1960s by growing political radicalization and the leftist opposition. In the aftermath of the violent repression of the riot of Casablanca in 1965,⁵ Hassan II declared a state of emergency (1965–1970), which suspended all political and trade union activities. During this period, General Mohamed Oufkir and Colonel Ahmed Dlimi ruled the country with violence and repression. The *makhzen* and its security apparatus “disappeared,” illegally detained, and tortured thousands of students with varying political orientations, trade unionists, activists in oppositional parties and their family members, in secret detention centres. Although both Marzouki and Aagaou were not involved in opposition political groups, they were critical of the political system in Morocco. As Marzouki said,

I was very politicized, especially because I come from a region that had contributed to the independence of Morocco. The Liberation Army was with us, and many of my family members volunteered to bring the liberation forces to victory. Unfortunately, when Morocco gained its independence, this region was completely marginalized, so we felt frustrated. The whole region felt a deep sense of frustration. So, I was very conscious, very, very conscious; I knew that there was an iron dictatorship at the time and that in Morocco there were two possibilities: either you were integrated into the *makhzen*, or you were set aside, killed or executed. The *makhzen* was, and still is, very powerful.⁶

When he was a young man, Marzouki was not interested in a career in the Army. He said: “My most sublime dream was continuing my studies and writing. I dreamed of writing novels, screenplays for films.” Similarly, Aagaou described himself as a young man full of aspirations for his future: “People at my age were still hoping for a good life, a promising future. I was convicted when I was 24, the age at which one dreams of building a future; one expects the best from life.”⁷ When two failed coups d’état in 1971 and 1972 tried to overthrow the monarchy, Marzouki and Aagaou found themselves implicated in events that were to change the course of their lives radically. On July 10,



1971 the army, led by General Mohammed Medbouh and the cadets of the Ahermoumou Royal Military Academy, including Marzouki, entered the Royal Palace in Skhirat, where Hassan II was celebrating his birthday, guarded by the Lieutenant Colonel M'hammed Ababou. It was carnage, but Hassan II miraculously survived. Ten coup leaders were summarily executed and other officers were incarcerated for several months in the military prison of Kenitra. After the 1971 coup, the name of the Royal Military Academy was changed to Ribat Al-Khayr, to erase the memory and history of these events.⁸

In February 1972, seventy-four army officials were convicted and sentenced at a farcical military mass trial in Rabat. Marzouki was sentenced to three years. While they were serving their jail terms in the military prison in Kenitra, another coup occurred on August 16, 1972, when the Royal Air Force attacked the King's plane returning from France. This second coup had unexpected consequences for them. As a pilot in the Royal Air forces, Aagaou was responsible for the supply of munitions to the military aircraft. Recalling these events, Aagaou said:

I was not aware of it, few people knew. Only later, in the midst of the operation, we learned that it was a coup. I was in charge of the armaments, especially ammunitions, to refuel the aircraft. But even then, when we worked out it was a coup d'état, there was nothing we could do. It was a horrible moment [...] Almost 200 people were killed. It was a war.

The day after the second coup, the head of the Royal Army and Minister of Defence Mohammed Oukfir, believed to be its leader, together with Colonel Amokrane, was said to have committed suicide. Oukfir's wife and children were disappeared to different secret detention camps throughout Morocco (Oufkir and Fitoussi, 1999; Oufkir, 2000). Hassan II appointed Driss El-Basri chief of Morocco's security forces. Eleven coup leaders were sentenced to death in the November 1972 mass trial and executed, while, of the two hundred and twenty aviators involved, thirty-two were given prison sentences of between three years and life. Aagaou was given three years: "We were supposed to be civilians and to stay in Kenitra Central Prison, and to be freed at the age of 29," he said.

Contrary to their expectations, however, on August 7, 1973, Marzouki and Aagaou, along with fifty-six of the other officers, were woken up in the middle of the night and taken to an unknown destination. During our first meeting, Marzouki remembered that, during the flight, with handcuffs and blindfolds, "We felt terribly bad because we had heard that people were thrown into the sea. With such fear, we mulled over our lives. The aircraft landed. When I got out of the plane, I smelled the scent of the Sahara." Their arrival in Tazmamart was a traumatic descent into hell.

Into Hell

Both Aagaou and Marzouki evoked the moment when the darkness submerged their bodies and the petrifying noise of the closing doors of the single-person cells. Aagaou recalled: "The blindfold was taken off, I saw darkness ... the door was closed. I hear the sound of the cells closing, paf paf paf. That was the cell in which I was about to



spend 18 years and 45 days. It was an infernal place, there was only darkness.” Marzouki described the profound disorientation and panic that marked their arrival in Tazmamart as being thrown into a well, “Imagine, as if you were thrown into a well, the lid of the well is closed. It was a terrible shock.” After the long silence that followed the closure of the doors, Aagaou recalled, “We started talking because we were so terrified ... I felt a sense of relief when I heard the voice of someone I knew. In such moments, being with strangers is difficult.” Communication became a fundamental survival strategy: “talking or dying” as Aagaou summed it up, while Marzouki stressed the therapeutic quality of communication, but also its risks: “We had to talk, to talk always [...] but we realized that we had to organize ourselves to avoid making noise and to be able to communicate. We became a well-organized community. To fill the time, we started telling films, novels.”

The Tazmamart prison camp consisted of two 50 metre-long blocks surrounded by a six-metre high wall controlled by guards. Each block housed 29 people. Prisoners suffered extremely poor living conditions, being deprived of sunlight and fresh air and exposed to unbearable summer heat and harsh winter cold, and with minimal rations of food and water. In *bloc 1*, where Marzouki and Aagaou were placed, twenty-two people survived whereas in *bloc 2* twenty-two people died. For Marzouki (2001: 65) the difference could be explained partly by the contrasting climate conditions created by the particular positions of the two blocks and partly by the presence of senior officers in *bloc 1*, who helped to organize life inside and had money to bribe the guards and ensure medical supplies. Crossing the thin line between life and death was a daily challenge as they struggled to prevent themselves slipping into isolation and madness. “Personally,” Marzouki said, “I had to make a lot, a lot of effort to be able to hold on. Some comrades became mad on arrival. All was dark, no sun, nothing. I thought: ‘this is my last contact with life, I’ve been taken here to die’.” Crucially Marzouki, Aagaou and other survivors think that Hassan II disappeared them in Tazmamart intentionally to extinguish them through a slow death (see also Sellman, 2006: 71).

Initially, prisoners lived with the hope that a Committee led by Colonel Dilmi would come and regulate the prison according to military law. Aagaou emphasized that such hope helped the prisoners accept their situation as temporary, “Were I told that I was going to live eighteen years and two months in such conditions, I wouldn’t have ever accepted it. The fact of being told that there would be a Committee gave me hope. They made a mistake—this helped us survive.” Disappeared in a remote prison under the control of sadist guards, prisoners had to find ways to make an unliveable environment liveable, as Aagaou put it: “People who did not accept such life, with its positive and negative sides, died, stopped talking, isolated themselves.” Filling the time was central to their everyday acts of survival and resistance. As Marzouki detailed in his memoirs, and highlighted during our conversations, prisoners memorized the Qur’an smuggled into the prison by a compassionate guard along with paper, pencil and candles, batteries for a radio, and a mirror with which they were able to organize chess championships. Recalling this period, Marzouki said:

We did all this until the moment when we got bored. There was nothing left to tell, we had told everything to each other. It became difficult, very



difficult. At that very moment, people started dying one after the other. We couldn't endure the situation any longer, we were sick, awaiting the end through death.

Since nobody was allowed to approach the Tazmamart prison camp, creating and maintaining contacts with the outside world was an enormous challenge for the prisoners. "Once in Tazmamart," Marzouki said, "an iron curtain fell upon us. All connections with our families were cut. We were buried alive in the darkness." If, as Aagaou remarked, "Tazmamart had never been a secret" long before it became public knowledge, the *makhzen* officially denied its existence and prevented their families from reaching it. Those who dared to venture to this remote location were told never to return, and even the local population's movements and working lives were restricted and controlled. Initially, prisoners were able to establish contacts with their relatives thanks to the help of a few supportive guards, who risked harsh punishment to smuggle out information and letters and to bring in medicines, food, vitamins and other basic survival necessities. Because of the circulation of information, the prisoners' families were informed about their whereabouts, but, as Marzouki said, "They were terrified, a terrible fear. They found themselves facing a mountain, helpless, they couldn't do anything for us." To emphasize the tragic implications of their disappearance on the lives of their families, Marzouki added:

My dad was so unsettled by my kidnapping that he died a few months later. He could not bear it. He was diabetic and this really consumed him. My mother had never lost her hope over twenty years. She lived in mourning. Several family members told her: "Ahmed is dead, there is no need to wait, we must organize his funeral." But she had always refused. She had hope in her heart that she was going to see me again.

His mother's refusal to celebrate his funeral and her forceful hope of his return recollection captures the "catastrophe of enforced disappearance" (Gatti, 2014: 15-16), illustrate the painful existential condition of living in waiting for a disappeared son and the dilemmas running through their lives (see also Menin, 2017).

After the violent repercussions that swept away the guards involved, contacts with the outside world had been interrupted until 1978, and again between 1982 and 1989. In 1989 the re-establishment of contacts enabled some of the prisoners to access medicines and food, but money profoundly changed internal relationships. Both Marzouki and Aagaou emphasized that those who were able to establish contacts belonged to the richest families. Convinced that they would be liberated if they did not divulge their conditions in Tazmamart, the latter refused to expand the range of their contacts for security reasons. The majority believed that, on the contrary, their liberation depended on the involvement of the international public and this divergence stoked tensions among the prisoners. In the late 1980s, two brothers of Captain Touil were able to deliver a letter to Amnesty International and to Christine Daure-Serfaty, the French wife of the leftist former political prisoner Abraham Serfaty and an active member of the France-based Committee of Struggle against Repression in Morocco. Moreover, Captain Touil's American wife, Nancy Touil, denounced the situation to the US authorities. From December 1984, Touil



obtained some special treatment that contributed to the amelioration of prison conditions in general.

After Tazmamart

In spite of advocacy by Amnesty International, Moroccan human rights organizations⁹ and the families of prisoners, Hassan II continued to deny the existence of Tazmamart. In 1990 the campaign of Christine Daure-Serfaty¹⁰ and the publication of Gilles Perrault's book, *Notre ami le roi*, brought the massive violations of human rights in Morocco to international attention. Photocopies of Perrault's book circulated clandestinely in Morocco (Serhane, 2004: 77). Against the backdrop of the rapidly changing international climate after the fall of Berlin Wall and the increased insistence on human rights in the international community and in bilateral relations (see also El Guabli, 2017), the pressure on Morocco from a number of western governments and from the international press pushed Hassan II to release political prisoners and to initiate a process of political transition (1991–1999). As part of this process, in 1991 Hassan II established the Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l'Homme (in Arabic *Āl-majlis āl-īstishārī li-ḥuqūq āl-īnsān*), which later became the Conseil National des Droits de l'Homme in 2011, and, in 1993, he set up a short-lived Ministry for Human Rights.

Tazmamart was closed down and its survivors were released with a royal pardon in August 1991. The cells were immediately demolished. The prisoners were fed and given medical care for two months, in order to give them a human shape before being exposed to the world. Still traumatized and left without any material or psychological support from the state, survivors were ordered to forget the past and start life anew. In his memoir *Cellule 10*, Marzouki wrote that, along with the (unfulfilled) promises of giving them a house, a job and material aid, Colonel of the Moroccan Gendarmerie Feddoul,¹¹ who had been the head of the military operation transferring the prisoners to Tazmamart in 1973 and was the person in charge of the disappeared until 1991, hinted to him: “Our hand is long. We will be informed of your smallest indiscretion” (p. 237).

Aagaou recalled the intense, and contradictory, feelings that marked his liberation: “happiness, tears, shouting. It was a difficult moment, but an extraordinary one.” After almost twenty years of detention, embracing his family again was deeply joyful, but also an unsettling experience. Imprisoned as young men, remaking a life, returning to one's previous life, was full of challenges: from learning to walk again to dealing with deep societal transformations such as the changed morals and the increased presence of women in public. Marzouki found it extremely difficult to come to terms with his appearance—a middle-aged man who was called *el-hajj* (the pilgrim, the title given to those who went to Mecca and to the elderly) in the street—whom he could barely recognize. He said: “I was imprisoned for more than twenty years. [In the mirror] you see an old man looking at you. You think ‘it is not true. It's not me!’ It's hard to accept it.” Deprived of his youth and of twenty years of life experience, Marzouki stressed that he still felt young: “I don't get along well with old people. Most of my friends are young. My mind stopped in 1971... I always laugh, I love life, I laugh most of the time. I say to myself what I am living is a gift of God, I have to enjoy it.” While Marzouki said he had to struggle to re-appropriate his life in the aftermath of such a



traumatic experience, Aagaou said “I still haven’t remade it” thus highlighting the extent to which Tazmamart remains an unhealable wound in his body and mind. This open wound was intensified by the state-imposed silence, by unfulfilled promises and threats inflicted on those survivors who dared to challenge the imposition of silence and oblivion, but also by the unexpected lack of support by political parties. Unlike leftist political prisoners, the Tazmamart survivors felt they were forgotten by political parties during and after their imprisonment.

In a society where “Tazmamart was not over” (Marzouki, 2001: 280) and its survivors remained “the grand forgotten” (p. 285), Marzouki and Aagaou realized the importance of combining to make their voices heard. Socially stigmatized, and in poor health and financial circumstances, they got together with other survivors and established relationships with Moroccan human rights associations, former political prisoners, and national and foreign activists. With the support of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, the Moroccan Organization for Human Rights and a few newspapers, they initiated a press campaign to denounce their plight.¹²

Bearing Witness

Challenging the orders to forget the past, some survivors began writing about Tazmamart. After liberation, Marzouki passed his baccalaureate exams and earned a bachelor’s degree in law. Recollecting this period of his life, he said: “I wanted to be a lawyer to earn my living, they did not allow me to do it.¹³ So, what did I do? I wrote my book.” For Marzouki, writing a book was a moral duty, as he explained: “Initially, I started writing because I felt a mission. I felt the duty toward those who died in Tazmamart. I had to tell the world what we have lived through—the cries, the tears, the sufferings, I had to tell it all to the world. I felt a sense of responsibility on my shoulders.” Primo Levi and Paul Ricoeur defined “duty of memory” as an ethico-political question related not only to the past but also to the future. Vividly present in the ambivalence the survivors often feel about their own survival, the “duty of memory” runs through the oral and written testimonies of the victims of the Years of Lead both as a moral obligation to sustain the memory of those who did not make it and a need to share the burden of personal memories so as to render them public memory. It is precisely with this ambivalence that Marzouki had to deal when he was writing his memoirs. Writing had cathartic power, but it was also a painful process.

It was as if I lived through Tazmamart a second time. Remembering painful memories was very demanding, as if I tortured myself, as if I was my persecutor. Especially when I evoked the most difficult moments, my eyes got full of tears. I tried to write and I got out to breathe and got back again to continue my self-torture.

Embarking on such an endeavour was very dangerous in a context in which speaking in public or publishing a book on Tazmamart was unthinkable. As Marzouki explained, “During Hassan II’s regime it was terror.” Because of his collaboration with the French journalist Ignace Dalle to edit his book, in 1995 Marzouki was kidnapped and



interrogated in a prison-villa for 36 hours. Challenging the order to stay silent, after his release he informed the press of his ordeal. As a consequence, he was constantly surveyed and intimidated.

After Hassan II's death in 1999, his son, King Mohammed VI promoted major changes in freedom of expression and political activity (Vermeren, 2006). A tradition of cultural production on state violence¹⁴ had long been central to political prisoners' struggle against the *makhzen*, but it was especially the changed political climate promoted by Mohammed VI that encouraged the commemorative practices of the victims of the Years of Lead. As Slyomovics (2005) has shown, political prisoners' personal memories of state violence entered the public sphere through public testimonies, sit-ins and poetry recitals. Along with performative enactments of memory, literary production has documented prisoners' everyday lives and their acts of resistance in secret detention centres such as Derb Moulay Sherif in Casablanca, Agdez, Kalaat M'gouna, Skoura and Tazmamart.

The work of memory of Tazmamart survivors erupted publicly during the spring of 1999, when the Arabic-language newspaper *al-Ittihād al-Ishirākī* of the Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires¹⁵ published the serialized memoirs of Mohamed Raiss, capturing the attention of Moroccan audience in unprecedented ways (Slyomovics, 2005: 60). Raiss's memoirs were then published in Arabic in 2001 and in French in 2002 with the title *De Skhirat à Tazmamart: Retour du bout de l'enfer*. In the same years, Ahmed Marzouki's memoirs were published in French, and then Arabic in 2002. "It is only one testimony. One. Tazmamart through my cell," Marzouki made clear. Raiss's and Marzouki's books had enormous success and contributed to what then became a liberating flow of traumatic memory (El Ouazzani, 2004; Orlando, 2009). In 2009, Marzouki recounted his prison experience in an eleven-hour interview broadcast weekly on *al-Jazeera* as part of the "Shāhid 'ala al-'aṣr" (Witness on the Era) series; these programmes were watched by millions of people around the globe and established Marzouki's international reputation as the star witness of Tazmamart. For El Guabli (2017), this work of memory, carried out at the intersection of journalism and testimonial literature, has shaped current modes of mnemonic practices in Morocco.

Beyond detailing the atrocities the prisoners endured, the memorialization of Tazmamart bears witness to their everyday struggle for survival and resistance. In *Kabazal: Les emmurés de Tazmamart* (2004), Abdelhak Serhane collected the memories of Capitain Salah Hachad, a Royal Air Force pilot, and of his wife Aida, and the letters they exchanged over the years of detention. Hachad's memories testify to the struggle to inhabit, and give meaning to, an unliveable life, while his wife traces her efforts to provide material help to prisoners, keep contacts with other families and fight the wall of silence surrounding Tazmamart. In *Tazmamart côté femme: Témoignage* (2003), Rabea Bennouna, wife of Captain Abdelatif Belkebir, describes the consequences of her husband's disappearance and her struggle to learn his fate. In 2001 the Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun published *Cette aveuglante absence de lumière*, triggering heated debates. Drawing on the testimony of Aziz Binebine, sentenced to ten years for his participation in the second coup, Ben Jelloun was accused of exploiting his suffering for narrative purpose from his comfortable life in France, while failing to denounce state



violence during Hassan II's regime. However, as Brahim El Guabli (2016) has noted, Ben Jelloun's fictionalization has helped put Moroccan prison literature on the international scene. One of the few survivors of *bloc 2*, Binebine's memoir, *Tazmamort: Dix-huit ans dans le bagne de Hassan II*, was then published in 2009.

Memorialized, fictionalized and narrated on national and international television, the memory of Tazmamart became integral to the Years of Lead and acquired a life of its own. This work of memory contributed to the breaking of the "culture of fear" (MSA: *thaqafat al-khof*; Moroccan Arabic, *taqafa d-l-khof*) that had marked Hassan II's despotic rule. While Aagaou highlighted the crucial role of prison memoirs in changing Moroccan public culture, he also argued that the memorialization of Tazmamart remains unfinished. "There is still so much to say. Each one would dream in his own cell. There are common things, but each one had his own experience." Aagaou's memoirs hope to complicate the representation of prison life by showing its class dimension: "Life in Tazmamart was like in the outside world. Some people were seriously debilitated and others were not, as if I said 'the rich' of the cells. There were rich and poor people in Tazmamart." Aagaou's recollection reveals the extent to which imprisonment and remembering are affected by class. As well as evoking class divisions in Tazmamart, Aagaou stressed the financial and existential impact of his disappearance on the lives of his family.

For example, my mother was responsible for me because my father died when I was a little boy, she had to work. During my incarceration, she went to work as a domestic servant for some French people in Casablanca- the French, whom we considered colonizers... I want to talk about those things that make noise inside of me. I want to make them out to help myself.

Aagaou's memories reveal the tortured intimacy with the self that pervades his troubled relationship with past events: he has to live not only with the haunting memory of Tazmamart but also with the regret of having caused his mother to go out and work for people he considered the colonizers. Both Marzouki and Aagaou have continued to bear witness to the atrocities they endured in public meetings organized by the universities, private institutions and associations. Their work of memory and its transformative power, as I will discuss in the next section, is not only devoted to the past but crucially also to the present and future.

Memory, Reparation, and Reconciliation

On October 7, 2000, Marzouki, Aagaou and other former prisoners participated in the pilgrimage to Tazmamart organized by the Moroccan Forum for Truth and Justice (Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice), an association formed by former political prisoners in 1999. They were not allowed to enter the prison area, however. Not only had there been multiple disappearances in Tazmamart and of Tazmamart itself, but as Slyomovics (2005) notes, "By not allowing people to penetrate inside Tazmamart, in a sense the prison had been made to disappear, one more way to make disappearance continue" (p. 66). Marzouki's return to Tazmamart revived the embodied memories of



the atrocities they went through: “It was terrible when you see from outside the hell you were in, when you see that you’ve left your youth inside, in that little cell.”

Confined in a few square metres, the memory of Tazmamart survivors materialized itself in a public performance of commemoration with which participants wanted to keep memory alive, but also to call on the state to be answerable for the past violence. For Tazmamart survivors, indeed, the promise of state support has remained only partially fulfilled. Between 1995 and 1999, the Social Services of the Royal Armed Forces (*Œuvres sociales des forces armées royales*) granted them a monthly stipend of 5,000 dirhams, but as Marzouki said, “It was taken away without giving us any explanation, we’re given a handful of money.” When, in 1999, Mohammed VI established, within CCDH, the Indemnity Commission (*Instance d’arbitrage indépendante pour l’indemnisation des préjudices matériels et moraux subis par les victimes de la disparition et de la détention arbitraire et leurs ayants droits*), designed by Hassan II before his death to compensate the victims of state abuses, Tazmamart prisoners received lump sum indemnities. The Commission’s decisions couldn’t be appealed, forcing the victim to forsake their right to seek justice. Then, in 2000, on the occasion of the visit by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, Mohammed VI granted them a one million dirhams lump sum compensation. Activists of the Moroccan Forum for Truth and Justice contested the regime’s policy of monetary compensation without establishing historical truth and juridical accountability (Slyomovics, 2003, 2009). In response to the former prisoners’ demands, Mohammed VI established the ERC in 2004. Headed by Driss Benzekri (a former Marxist political prisoner from 1974 to 1991), the ERC was charged with investigating human rights violations between 1956 and 1999, compensating the victims, preventing the repetition of state violence and making recommendations on reparations and rehabilitation. With the creation of the ERC, Mohammed VI officially opened Morocco’s violent past to historical review and public debate, but the perpetrators remained protected by silence (Mohsen-Finan, 2007; Labdaoui, 2007; Vairel, 2008; Wilcox, 2009).

As in the case of the South African and Latin American Truth Commissions, which linked victims’ voices with the restoration of dignity and the recovery of their violated selfhood (Ross, 2003), the victims’ testimonies in public hearings were integral to the reconciliation process promoted by the ERC. The condition was imposed, however, that the perpetrators were not named. Whereas Aagaou testified in public sessions, Marzouki refused, convinced that the two parties should be involved in the process of reconciliation. As he said in this regard, “So testifying for whom? With whom? There weren’t two parties [involved] ... it’s a bizarre, meaningless reconciliation; no one has asked for forgiveness, nobody.” Despite their different choices regarding the public hearings, both Aagaou and Marzouki are critical of the process of national reconciliation initiated with the ERC. For Marzouki, its very premises—first of all the lack of involvement of civil society—are disputable: “It [the ERC] was made to ‘turn the page’ in their own way, without the participation of the civil society. It [the *makhzen*] made the mistake, and repairs it in its own way, while remaining the strongest.” One critical aspect is the question of the impunity and juridical accountability, and, in particular, the fact that those people who were responsible for Tazmamart are still in their positions. For Aagaou, this reveals the profound ambivalences surrounding the state policies of reconciliation.



“Listen: opening a societal debate is good, but the consequences of our enforced disappearance and the dossiers regarding the violations of human rights should be settled,” Aagaou said and promptly made added, “They do not want to settle them, they want to ‘turn the page’ without dealing with the consequences. First of all, those responsible for Tazmamart should leave their positions.”

Highlighting the limits to the capacity and the will of the initiatives of ERC and the CNDH to resolve the situations of the Tazmamart survivors, Aagaou remarked that they are still struggling to receive a pension and health care (see also Marzouki, 2013). He added that, unlike political prisoners, who could study during detention, and were reintegrated or inserted into state positions, Tazmamart survivors were forgotten by the political parties and the state continued to forget them. This is because, for Aagaou, “There is no *niyya* (intention). They don’t have the intention to resolve our situations. There is a blockage somewhere. Those people who are responsible for the Years of Lead don’t want to let the truth emerge, because we still have to reach something called the Truth.” The ERC’s Final Report (2009c: 100) listed the principles for assessing a shared compensation and stated, for example, that “the temporary compensation that the Tazmamart detainees received after release (5,000 Dh per month from the Social Services of the Royal Armed Forces) should not be stopped.”¹⁶ This has not happened so far.

A Struggle over Memory’s Emplacement

The erasure of the two main buildings of Tazmamart in 2005 exemplifies, for Marzouki and Aagaou, the government’s lack of *niyya*. Crucially, this happened at the time when the ERC’s (2009a) Final Report promoted the local development of marginalized regions in the frame of “communal reparations,” and “recommends transforming the former illegal detention centres (Tazmamart, Agdez, Derb Moulay Sherif in Casablanca)” (p. 92) into memorials, community centres or museums, as has happened in many post-dictatorial Latin American countries (Andermann, 2015). In Morocco, memory preservation through architectural restoration is one priority both for former political prisoners and for national reconciliation policies (Slyomovics, 2015), and community projects were launched in 2007. My interlocutors interpreted the erasure of Tazmamart as the expression of the state’s will to obliterate its memory by undermining its very “emplacement.” For Marzouki, this also reveals the continuity of state violence:

It was an act of violence because in Germany, and everywhere in Europe, such places have been restored for the memory of the future generations. We erased everything simply because the officials who are still in their positions don’t want the Moroccans to see Tazmamart from within, because they know that if people were given access to the cells they would feel threatened.

As Marzouki’s words suggest, the erasure of the cells of Tazmamart reveals the political will to domesticate the memory of the past while maintaining the status quo. Unlike post-dictatorial Latin America, no regime change happened in Morocco, and this helps to explain the state’s disengagement from Tazmamart and its attempts to prevent the public emplacement of its memory. However, the erasure of Tazmamart is not only a wound in



Moroccan public memory but also a trigger for the survivors' struggle. In 2006, Marzouki and Aagaou undertook a trip to Tazmamart to film a report, which was then censored. On this second trip, Marzouki was able to locate his cell. "A few square metres just in front of Aagaou ... in this corner of the earth, I spent the longest time of my life because I had been living there eighteen years and three months, minute after minute. There are no other places where you can spend such a long time. My youth is buried there," Marzouki commented.

In May 2013, Tazmamart was once again the destination of a pilgrimage, this time organized by the "Caravan Medicale: Contre l'oubli, l'impunité et pour la memoire," with numerous associations,¹⁷ to demand state accountability for its crimes. Between May 9 and 12, former prisoners and activists travelled from Rabat to Figuig (Eastern Morocco) to offer medical aid in a region historically marginalized by the state, before arriving at Tazmamart. Marzouki, Aagaou, and other Tazmamart survivors took part in the pilgrimage. On the way to Tazmamart, memories of the past were shared in the spirit of a *halqa* (a circle of people in which stories are told and shared). Upon arrival, the Caravan met some families of the disappeared and the local population, before entering the prison camp. An area of soil, with a dismissed military building and the stone tombs of those who died in the utmost suffering,¹⁸ was what remained.

Tazmamart's local population, too, expressed its disenchantment with national reparation policies. Although ERC communal projects¹⁹ had started at the time of my visit, some people complained that the dispensary opened in 2010 in an old military building was still lacking electricity. Other locals said that small development initiatives could not repair decades of strict police guarding, threats and torture, the restriction of movement and subsistence activity, and persistent marginalization and social stigma. The absence of state initiatives to rebuild the prison and transform it into a site of public memory is a form of "dismemory" (Nikro, 2012) that makes Tazmamart a highly contested site. For Marzouki, this peculiar "dismemory" reveals the continuity of the *makhzen*, "The *makhzen* is a continuation, the *makhzen* is always the *makhzen*; it only changes its skin. The *makhzen*: the power is centralized in the hands of the King, there is a circle that benefits from it, and voilà. There is no freedom, that is, the independence of justice," he concluded. The persistent power of the *makhzen* manifests itself, also, in the continuity of state violence in a multiplicity of transfigured forms.

The Unfinished Work of Memory

The political history of Morocco during the Years of Lead was deeply marked by brutal violence, repression and arbitrariness enacted by the *makhzen* and its security apparatus in order to silence opposition. This violent history—whose material, social, and emotional consequences are vividly present today—has been equally marked by memory practices by which the former political prisoners and activists have challenged the state-imposed politics of silence and oblivion. It is precisely within the enduring tensions—between silence and voice, oblivion and memory, between the erasure of memory and its



emplacement—that I have placed the Tazmamart survivors’ multifarious memory practices and their reflections on the present. The oral testimonies of Ahmed Marzouki and Abdellah Aagaou show the extent to which memory emerges as a transformative social practice oriented not only toward the past but, crucially, toward the present and the future. Through their public acts of memory, indeed, survivors have denounced the arbitrariness of the *makhzen* and have contributed to opening past state violence to historical review. Far from simply contributing to the historical reconstruction of the past events, they have also rendered Tazmamart a powerful symbol of the Years of Lead and a crucial site of agency and political imagination from which the ambiguities of national reconciliation policies can be exposed and struggled against. My interlocutors’ voices show that state violence did not end with the death of Hassan II and the creation of the ERC, but has continued in a host of transfigured forms—from the erasure of Tazmamart to the ambiguous treatment of its survivors. The continuity of power plays a crucial role in explaining the ambiguities surrounding transitional justice in Morocco. Unlike other post-dictatorial contexts, in Morocco, as Marzouki reminds us, there is a continuity of the monarchical system and the powers that surround it. In spite of that, initially, Morocco’s policies of reparation and reconciliation were valued by many Moroccan former political prisoners, human rights activists and scholars as viable attempts to transcend the mere pecuniary compensation offered by the Indemnity Commission. Together with the promotion of psychological healing through victim-centred testimony and rehabilitation, however, institutional memory politics have erased the perpetrators’ voices and imposed new silences. Similarly, the national policies of architectural transformation of former detention centres into memorial sites are laden with ambiguities, as Tazmamart demonstrates.

Like other victims of the Years of Lead, Marzouki and Aagaou have experienced the continuity of state violence in many ways: in the silence of those responsible for the atrocities they endured, and their impunity (they still occupy their positions), in the erasure of Tazmamart as a site of memory and in the delays in its restoration, and in the denial of health care and pensions, which forces some of them into precarious financial situations. Impunity, lack of justice, economic marginalization and partial state support are all open wounds in the lives of my interlocutors, which continue to make Tazmamart a site of contestation between competing politics of memory: those of the victims (both the locals and the prisoners) and those of the state, those written down in the documents of the ERC and its follow-up body and those which manifest themselves in their partial actualization. The state’s assumption that it can erase Tazmamart and impede the “emplacement” of the memory of its survivors, however, has encountered the firm resistance of the families and the communities determined to preserve, and emplace, this memory. With their performative acts of memory, Tazmamart survivors and former political prisoners have continued to problematize the linearity of the transition from past dictatorship to the present democratic turn of Morocco, and to denounce the state’s wish to domesticate the evacuated memory of Tazmamart. Two characteristics of the memory of Tazmamart are its current openness and the impossibility of future closure, which makes its recuperation by other victims of the state both likely and necessary: now and in the future.



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Notes

¹ Terms and sentences in Arabic are transliterated following the IJMES system. To respect the sounds of Moroccan Arabic words I have transliterated /e/ instead of /a/ for / when necessary.

² The periodization of the “years of lead” is still debated among scholars and varies according to the ways it is historicized. Here, I follow the periodization adopted by the ERC.

³ The three political prisoners and brothers Ali, Midhat and Bayazid Bourequat and Miloudi Seddik, a soldier whose crime was not known and who died in detention, were also disappeared in Tazmamart for several years, along with some eighteen sub-Saharan African soldiers whose identities remain known. The Bourequat wrote their testimonies were published in France: Ali Bourequat, *Dix-huit ans de solitude* (1993 Paris: Miche Lafon) and *Dans les Jardins Secrets du Roi du Maroc*, (1998, Maurice Publishers, Midhat Bourequat, *Mort Vivant! Témoignage, Rabat 1973–Paris 1992* (1992, Paris: Pygmalion).

⁴ This paper draws on ethnographic research and interviews conducted in Rabat and Casablanca between 2012 and 2013 as part of the project “Transforming Memories: Cultural Production and Personal/Public Memory in Lebanon and Morocco” directed by Sonja Hegasy at the Zentrum Moderner Orient.

⁵ Students, unemployed youths and slum dwellers rioted in Casablanca in protest against the 1965 reform restricting access to secondary education on the basis of age. On March 23, the regime suppressed the riots and hundreds of protesters were injured, killed or disappeared.

⁶ Quotations from Marzouki are from a recorded interview conducted in French in Rabat on May, 1st 2013.

⁷ Quotations from Aagaou are from a recorded interview conducted in French in Mohammedia, April, 24 2013.

⁸ I am deeply thankful to Brahim El Guabli, who pointed out this aspect to me.

⁹ In Morocco in the 1970s and the 1980s, activists founded human rights associations, including the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, established in 1979, and the Moroccan Organization for Human Rights, established in 1988 (Rollinde 2002, ch. 10)



¹⁰ Together with her campaign on French radio, Daure-Serfaty wrote articles (e.g. 1991) and a book (1992) to bring Tazmamart to international attention.

¹¹ Feddoul's name came up frequently in the media and in the reports of the Moroccan Association for Human Right as one of the people to be brought to justice for crimes against humanity.

¹² In the last section of his book, when he describes life after Tazmamart, Marzouki critiques the former minister of human rights.

¹³ Driss Basri refused to allow him to become a lawyer, citing a Moroccan law that prevents people over 40 from starting a profession. See Marzouki (2001: 278).

¹⁴ Since the early 1980s, former political prisoners have published their poetry, fiction, cartoons, and personal accounts, prison memoirs, novels abroad to denounce arbitrary detention and torture.

¹⁵ In 1994 the newspaper published the accounts of former women prisoners, which were republished in El Bouih's memoirs (2001).

¹⁶ The ERC (Final Report 2009) also recommended: "Ensuring that the victims be given public employment at fixed income" (p. 109) and "[a]dding a lump sum in consideration of the treatment and monitoring that the health condition of each victim might require" (p. 110).

¹⁷ These include: Association médicale de réhabilitation des Victimes de la Torture, Association des Médecins de Figuig, le Forum Marocain pour la vérité et la justice, Alliance médicale itinérante France Maroc, Association des victimes du bagne de Tazmamart.

¹⁸ The ERC located the burial places of the people who died in Tazmamart and in its final report (2009b: 54) states: "In fact, the burial place along the wall was already prepared before the detainees and the guard unit arrived in Tazmamart. But as the holes were not deep enough, the guards had to deepen them, avoiding rock, and for this reason the graves were not aligned next to each other."

¹⁹ Four projects were devoted to Tazmamart's local population: "Constructing and equipping a clinic, and providing it with human resources," "Repaving the 3 km long road linking Tazmamart and Regional Highway No. 708," "Construction of a school for the benefit of the children of the region" and "Enabling the inhabitants to use the pastures near the former detention centre" (ERC 2009c: 98–99).



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