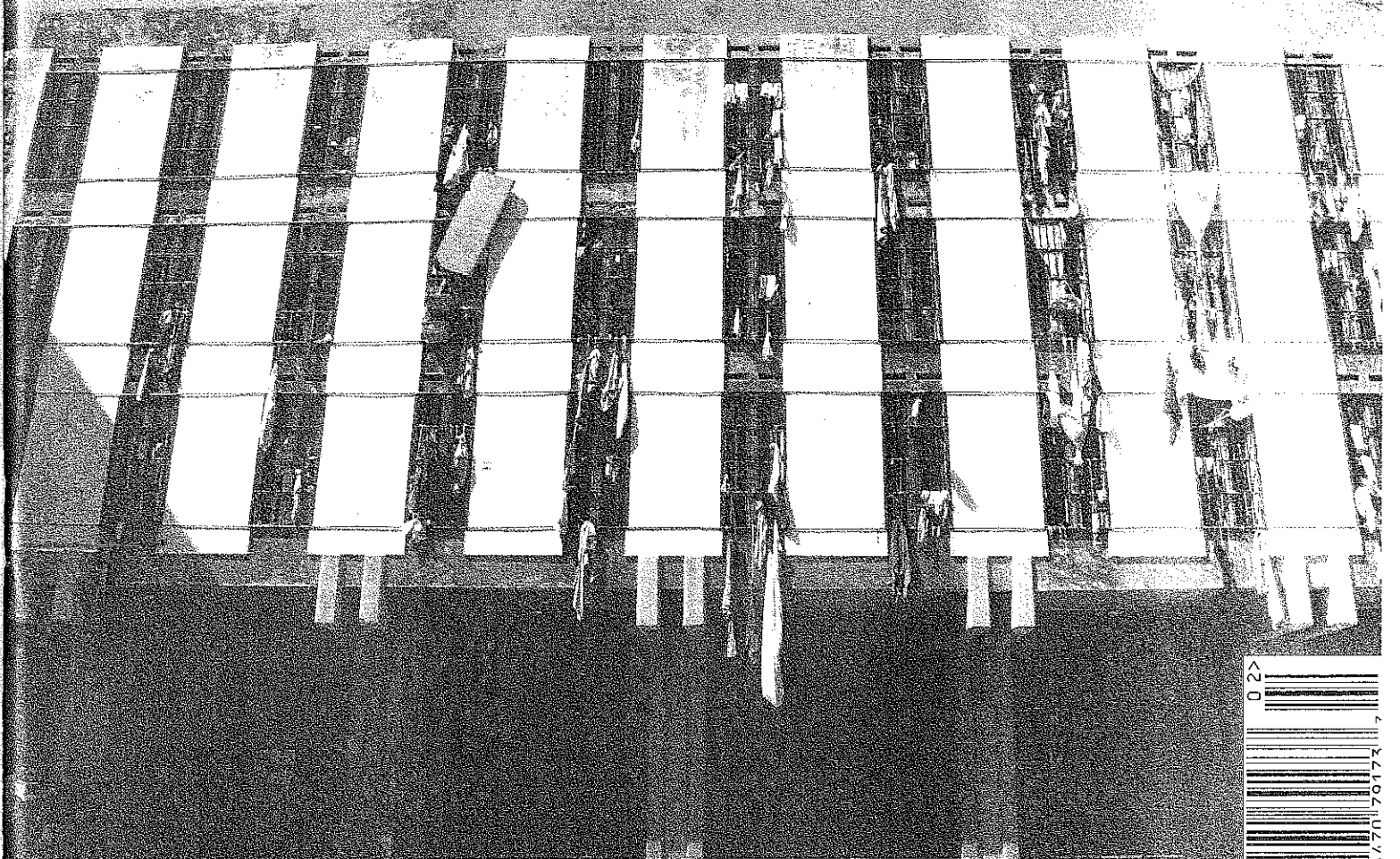


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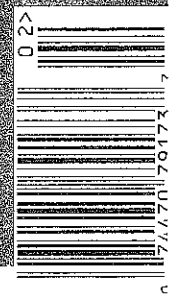
MEMBER



INSIDE THE INSIDE LIFE IN PRISON



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COVER A prison in Lebanon. (Anonymous)



Agdez prison in southern Morocco.

The Moroccan Prison in Literature and Architecture

Susan Slyomovics

In seventeenth-century Morocco, the scholar Abu 'Ali al-Hasan Ibn Mas'ud al-Yusi admonished the reigning Sultan Mawlay Isma'il in writing. His much quoted letter, the "short epistle" or *al-risala al-sughra*, instructed the ruler to avoid injustice and oppression. Mawlay Isma'il was second in line as sultan following the establishment in 1664 of the 'Alawi dynasty, whose descendants Hassan II (1961–1999) and his son Mohammed VI (1999–) have ruled as kings of Morocco.

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Al-Yusi's letter to Mawlay Isma'il begins by acknowledging limits to the epistolary form in which the genre of advising the ruler (*nasiha*) is couched: "We have written this letter for at the moment it is all we can do."¹

Letters speaking truth to the ruler have a long and influential history in Arabic, and the impact of al-Yusi's letter on Moroccans through the centuries to the present is immense. Anthropologist Henry Munson traces the myriad ways Moroccan historians and intellectuals perceive al-Yusi as a scholar and exemplar "distinguished from his



contemporaries by daring to speak the truth to the caliph of the time” and by his “frankness” in providing royal counsel; he concludes that “to praise al-Yusi is, in effect, to endorse [al-Yusi’s] view that a ruler’s legitimacy is contingent on his being just. Saying such things in Morocco has often been dangerous.”²

Twentieth-century Moroccan prison literature owes much to the letter, the actual and symbolic exchange among groups inside and outside Morocco. There are the letters smuggled from prison, the open letters addressed to the Moroccan government and the conscience of the outside world, the letter-writing campaigns to amass support, and the massive correspondence between external support groups and Moroccan prisoners of conscience. Human voices seemingly silenced behind bars narrate in personal writings key notions about human rights, the public sphere and prison reform. A letter may both channel the experience of an individual prisoner and capture the processes of resistance in its content, form and means of delivery.

Letters, communiqués, narratives, memoirs and even graphic novels about and from prison recounting forcible disappearance, imprisonment and torture have proliferated in the Arabic-speaking world especially in tandem with the rise of the novel in the early twentieth century. In Morocco, French colonial rule (1912–1956) was followed by home-grown tyranny in which various instruments of repression were “Moroccanized.” The legal system, the bureaucracy, the police, the prison system and, in fact, the entire apparatus built by the French protectorate to oppress Moroccans was carried over intact after independence. A first set of French-mandated decrees of 1915, 1927 and 1930 produced legislation to create the administration and construction of a penal system. A second set of decrees would create the category of political prisoner with which to populate the maximum-security establishment in Port Lyautey built in the 1930s. The decree of June 29, 1935 mandated prison for demonstrations and other actions that disturbed order, peace and security, and another, the decree of July 26, 1939, added sentences for making, distributing and selling any literature that threatened to do the same. The framework for French control in Morocco was the perpetual state of emergency (*état de siège*) lasting 42 years until the end of the protectorate.

These decrees set in place under the French provided post-independence Moroccan authorities with the necessary legal apparatus and a ready-made network of prisons first to condemn and then to house large numbers of Moroccan citizens. The judgment of the writer and former political prisoner Abdellatif Laabi remains relevant: “The post-colonial *ijtihad* (*ijtihad* being the renewal of institutions and laws) stopped short at the prison walls. It did not touch them. To be sure there were more urgent matters than the reorganization of the kingdom of the dead and the half-dead.”³ Abraham Serfaty (1926–2010), one of Morocco’s

longest-serving political prisoners, was first incarcerated by the French, and then re-imprisoned for an additional 20 years after independence. Finally released in 1992, Serfaty penned a memoir a year later that describes his two years of total isolation:

Evenings the prisoners were silenced except for prayers. Metal bedsteads were taken away and the water closet separated off. Most of all, [prison] construction was such that any ray of sunlight was prevented from penetrating the walls. [The prison] was built directly on the earth, separated from it by only a thin layer of cement. The humidity was extreme. They gave me four used blankets, and presented me, as a favor, with a bolster and a mat that I had to get rid of urgently because it had become a compost heap of bedbugs. I had the right to promenade a half-hour in the morning, and a half-hour in the evening, but because this was a regime of isolation, I was only permitted in the courtyard very early in the morning and at the end of the day, when the sun had passed beyond the high walls. Isolation is the most refined form of torture.⁴

What allowed the French to control, dispossess and oppress Moroccans would permit Moroccans to do the same to Moroccans.



“Years of Lead”

King Hassan II’s reign of close to four decades overlapped with most of the period that has been characterized as the “years of lead” because of repression, thwarted uprisings, human rights abuses, a network of secret prisons and a vast population of known political prisoners. This era also produced a dark, painful category consisting of those forcibly disappeared whose fate was unknown. It is noteworthy that the metaphor of writing about the past of incarceration and the emphasis on the material qualities of the physical page in some vast book about Moroccan prison literature—one visible and legible to an entire nation—was highlighted by the foremost perpetrator of Moroccan carceral conditions. The king said in a famous 1994 speech:

We have therefore decided to turn definitively the page on what is called “political prisoners”.... I intend that this situation will be definitively clarified in order to put an end, on the one hand, to a situation of embarrassment and doubt inside the country and to tendentious criticisms by ill-willed people or enemies abroad. In this way Moroccans will be sincere and credible when they affirm that Morocco has the rule of law, that their words are corroborated by acts.

Since the secret detention centers throughout Morocco is a Moroccan story of disappearance and torture, how does writing work when the subject is the memory of torture? How may the writer translate past experience of torture into a present experience for listeners and readers? Writers,



The cover of a graphic novel by Abdelaziz Mouride.

especially former political prisoners, confront the lack of official documents to provide facts about the principal torture factories. Consequently, literary critic and former political prisoner Abdelali El Yazami asks readers to distinguish between literature produced while the authors were incarcerated and writings that emerged or were published after a prison release or when censorship was reduced since memory, time and exile are added literary features.⁵

In the 1970s and 1980s, many political prisoners belonged to the Moroccan left. A striking example of raw, emotional material was by Abdelaziz Mouride, a Marxist political detainee in 1974–1984, who laboriously smuggled out of prison his graphic novel page by page to expose horrific conditions under Morocco's repressive carceral regime. Originally written with Arabic titles and speech balloons, it was published pseudonymously in France in 1982 as *Fi Ahsha' Baladi* (In the Bowels of My Country) and subtitled "On Political Prison in Morocco" while its author was in Kenitra prison. A French translation by noted poet, translator and writer Abdellatif Laabi, Mouride's fellow inmate, appeared simultaneously with the equivalent French title, *Dans les entrailles de mon pays*. Its publication impossible to imagine under Hassan II, Mouride's greatly revised work was finally published in French almost 20 years later in March 2000 as *On affame bien les rats* (They Starve Rats, Don't They?) by

a transnational Paris-Casablanca publishing house.⁶ Laabi's own searing novel of his arrest, torture and imprisonment, published in Paris in 1982, was made available in Morocco only in 2000, thanks to Casablanca's Editions Eddif and financial support from the French embassy in Morocco. Laabi's 1982 title, *Les chemins des ordalie*, literally, "The Ways of Ordeal," and more approximately, perhaps, "Trial by Fire," would become its Moroccan subtitle, superseded by *Le fou d'espoir* (A Fool for Hope). Laabi's book is a rare example translated into English, published in 1989 by Readers International under the unfortunately unmarketable, all too foreign (at least to Americans) title *Rue de Retour* (Street of Return). Beginning in 1992, an exposé of Tazmamart, the notorious secret prison in the hinterlands of southeastern Morocco, first appeared in French, authored by Christine Daure-Serfaty, the French wife of Abraham Serfaty. But this work was only translated and published during the post-Hassan II era, beginning in December 1999, in serial excerpts by *al-Munazzama*, the Arabic-language newspaper of the Organization of Democratic and Popular Action, then an official political party. In many instances, the choice to publish in any of Morocco's languages was governed by histories of repression at home, thereby forcing publication abroad, which led to publication in translation.

Moroccan prison writings know no ideological boundaries and the flow of works by a variety of overlapping categories of Islamists, Marxists, feminists, Amazigh/Berber nationalists, union activists and the regime's own parliamentarians do not cease to emerge. For example, self-described Islamist detainees also chronicled their prison experiences in literary and artistic productions such as artwork, unpublished and published letters, and diaries. Both Mohamed Hakiki and Ahmed Haou chronicled prison experiences in various newspapers. Examples are Hakiki's "A Prisoner's Diary" describing his arrest, disappearance, trial and prison life, which appeared in the newspaper *al-Jisr* in 30 bimonthly installments (1995–2000) starting a year after the author's amnesty in contrast to Haou's prison memoirs, which were published while he was still incarcerated.⁷

Prior to the death of Hassan II in 1999 and underscored by a path-breaking series of Moroccan government initiatives of reparations and a truth commission, the burdens of expressing the pain of Moroccan prisons and enforced disappearance have long fallen to textual and visual representations. Nonetheless, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a harbinger of the changing political and cultural climate was *al-Aris* (The Bridegroom) published in 1998 to great acclaim and sales. Composed as a series of clandestine letters smuggled from prison by the poet Salah El-Ouadie to his mother, his book was based on memories of torture some 20 years earlier but with a pen dripping with sardonic humor:

Dear Mother: I am writing you a letter you will never receive. I will write it in my memory because I lack pen and paper—how wretched

a privation. I have many reasons to convince you that writing you now would be a grave imprudence even had I the means. I do not want—were I discovered, God forbid—to spend the night under a rain of abuse, of curses and gross insults, of beatings and random blows to my neck as if planned among them. I have already received today my share of offerings by the faithful who watch over our repose in this unique refuge. We eat, sleep, drink, keep silent, scream, bide our time, we cradle our hopes, praise God that we are still alive breathing the air of our country, and that our swollen bodies occupy space therein. When a well-trained prison guard arrives to call one of us ceremoniously for a high-level encounter with the agents that watch over our repose and those of our peers, he jumps for joy from his bed, leaves smartly in order not to miss the opportunity. Between you and me, how much time does it take an ordinary citizen to meet an official? Generally one year or two but here—long life to them—never is anyone left to wait.⁸

While key chronologies necessary to the production of Moroccan prison literature are French colonialism and post-independence decades of repression, the establishment of the Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation commission in 2004 unleashed public testimonies, official reports, memoirs, fictionalized accounts, graphic novels, truth commission websites and films about prison experiences. One of the political compromises of the commission was to grant a blanket amnesty to perpetrators with the result that they remain unnamed in public testimony although internal commission interviews and archives recorded who they are. Even before but certainly after Morocco's 2004 truth commission, the acts of naming perpetrators and torturers in articles, novels, films and memoirs, whether abroad or in Morocco, was and continues to be a familiar literary and political tactic; victims remain free to speak and write outside the confines of the commission rules.⁹ As a result, during and after the commission the numbers of such works increased exponentially. Indeed, the commission made available through its website as well as sponsored or secured wide dissemination for the large numbers of films, bibliographies, reports and scholarly studies about repression during the years from 1956 to 1999. For example, their 2015 bilingual French and Arabic publication entitled *al-I'tiqal, al-Taqasum, al-Fada'at wa al-Dhakira* (Imprisonment, Sharing: Places and Memory) available online chronicles the turn from memory to history to architecture.¹⁰

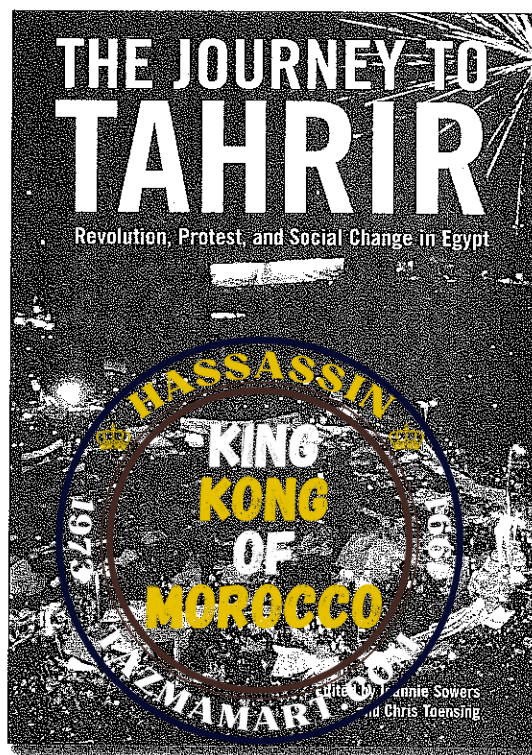
Prisons Into Museums?

Transforming prisons into museums, burying and marking the dead and the disappeared, indeed the entirety of documenting the painful past participate in a growing body of research emerging around notions that state-instigated, communal reparations in the form of traditional or modern human-rights-based site memorializations currently trace an alternate, sometimes parallel path. Acknowledging and

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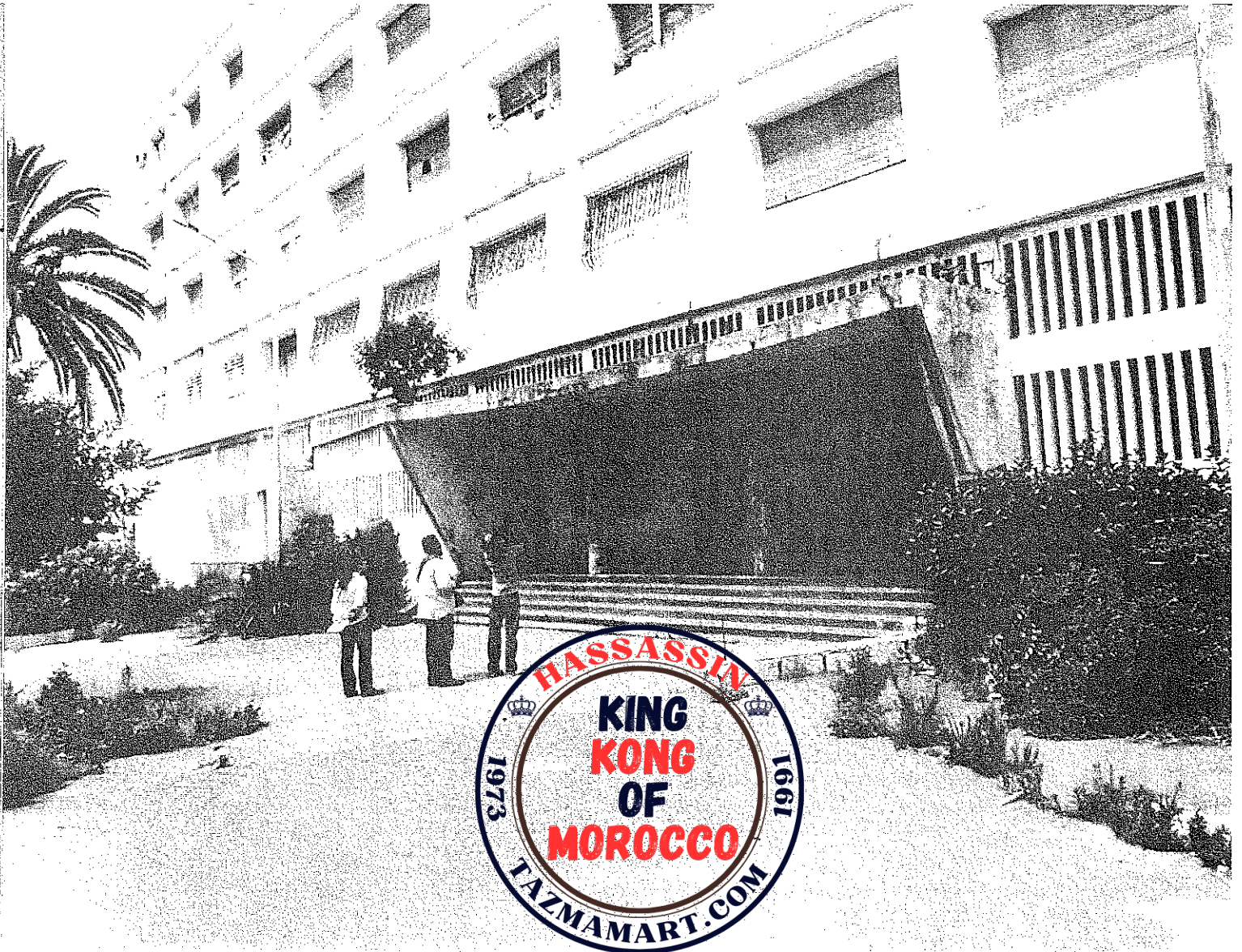
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Derb Moulay Cherif, a torture center in Casablanca, occupied the first floor and basement of a building housing employees of the police department.

SUSAN SLYOMOVICS

demarcating the architectural imprint of the carceral autocratic past is an ongoing process in Morocco. Moroccan human rights activists who were political prisoners have made it a priority to restore secret detention centers, citing for example Casablanca's preeminent torture facility Derb Moulay Cherif, and in southeastern Morocco, additional sites at Agdez, Kalaat MGouna and Tazmamart. Their intention is to create spaces that preserve historical memory through architectural restoration and to renovate detention centers as multi-purpose places (some but not all as museums as well as cultural centers, social complexes, documentation and citizenship centers). Until the projects to create material representations of suffering that were proposed from 2007 onward, it seemed as though architectural space had been made to speak through the primary interpreter of the entire Moroccan truth commission process, namely the victim or the relatives of the disappeared, those tortured and humiliated who were represented by means of a vast outpouring of prison literature and writings as well as oral testimonies by thousands of claimants (often videotaped, filmed, audiotaped).

In contrast to witness testimonies and prison literature, the application of architectural analysis to international law through the examination of areas of violence and locations of human rights violations is defined as "forensic architecture." According to Eyal Weizman, one of its foremost theoreticians, the concept of forensic architecture "allows politics to be read by studying form"; by looking at ruins, for example, forensic architecture as an analytical method reconstructs scenes of violence as they are inscribed within spatial artifacts and environments. According to Weizman, forensic architecture represents a shift from victim testimony in the form of oral and written witnessing to a consideration of space and place:

There is a marked contrast here with the traditional culture of human rights, which has always relied to a great extent upon the posture of the witness, whose contribution is distinct in opening up the historical record to include those voices previously excluded. The era of the witness did not only treat the witness as a bearer of information, but also as an ethical opportunity (deserving of empathy and compassion). It was the fragility of the voice that mattered most. Testimony

was important for being delivered.... The speech of witnesses that human rights has always been identified with was the essence—the anti-totalitarian origin—of the human rights discourse itself: the idea of speaking truth to power, the individual against the state. It had an ethical and political place. The question is: What are the ethical and political meanings of the shift towards the object?¹¹

Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission attempted to provide concrete materialization of absence and forced disappearance through a communal reparation program launched in 2007 that would "enable citizens to appropriate their history and preserve a positive memory in order to ensure three parallel and complementary types of reconciliations: reconciliation of local people with the state, reconciliation of local people with place as secret detention centers, and reconciliation of the state with its painful and repressed histories." With some funding from the European Union distributed to NGOs throughout the country, plans were formulated to formalize commemoration sites. The first phase of the project consisted of headstones and cemeteries, a commemorative practice that follows globally recognized, perhaps standardized memorial scripts, to include proposals for mass graves as part of memorial gardens, an eternal flame, a wall or monument of victims' names, museum-quality exhibitions with glossy panels providing brief historical synopses, photos of victims, audiovisual testimony of survivors, and the importance of stating and visually highlighting the credo of "never again."¹² Local activists working in NGO associations in southeastern Morocco where so many secret prisons are located, for example in Agdez, Ouarzazate, Kalaat M'Gouna, Skoura and Tagounit, strongly recommend rehabilitating and preserving these structures in their Draa and Dades valleys. They plan to insert these imposing edifices into the existing, well-developed international circuits of oases and desert tourism, but they claim that the work of conservation is also for the inhabitants terrorized for decades by police presence guarding unknown numbers of inmates. For most, it is the prison of Agdez that remains the emotionally laden, key edifice. Since state-sponsored communal reparation policies began in 2007, multiple and well-thought out plans for a center, a museum, a place filled with visiting schoolchildren, locals becoming literate, women's programs, health care and international tourists have been produced for Agdez.

Agdez Secret Prison

The architecture of Agdez prison is a fascinating mélange of French colonial and local autochthonous pre-Saharan earthen construction techniques of mud and wood. Unlike nearby Ait Benhaddou, a UNESCO heritage site, Agdez prison incorporates extensive use of cement overlays and reinforcement. Throughout the southeast, French forts were constructed by Moroccans during the protectorate through the system of *corvée*, or conscripted labor levied on the tribes

via the intermediary of Pasha Thami Glaoui. Overseen by a corps of French army engineers, who had enormous admiration for their Amazigh/Berber adversaries as well as their immense and powerful citadels that deployed the techniques of rammed earth, southeastern Morocco's French colonial forts, military camps and civilian municipal structures were pale imitations in cement.

Agdez fortress was built by Glaoui, a despot of the south. He modeled Agdez after the traditional mud brick fortress at Tamnougalt but used French-style combinations of rammed earth reinforced with cement, an edifice easily transformed into a secret prison. It stands in the heart of the town of Agdez, not hidden in a remote location as with the regionally known prisons of Tagounit, Skoura, Kalaat M'Gouna and Tazmamart. Agdez is a multi-layered site of historical repression, first as a seat of power for Thami Glaoui wielding despotic authority over the Draa valley, thanks to the French, then as a site of repression Moroccanized in the post-independence era. Agdez prison presents itself in its suppurating state of closure as the black wound of secrecy and torture with which to terrorize continuously the population and on every level—emotionally in terms of memory, symbolically, historically, materially and structurally—in the heart of the town. In sum, as incubators of Moroccan nationalist resistance against the French in the colonial period, then subsequently as sites for human rights dissidence against the post-independence Moroccan monarchy, prisons in Morocco remain intact and carry forward their inherited historical discourse and mission: to "disappear" the existence of the dangerous individual in the struggle between discipline and its objects.

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